One of Us

by kiwiOCD

Summary

What happens when Gates finds out about Beckett and Castle's relationship? How does Castle prove his worth to the Captain? Will he be able to stay at the 12th Precinct or will the partnership be broken?

Set sometime in mid/late Season 5 AU
Aftermath

12th Precinct, 6.35 pm, Thursday

She strode through the bullpen with her face locked tight and seemingly emotionless. Her stern expression brooking no questions or interruption. Barely stopping to open the door, she entered the room at pace, not looking behind she hit the handle to push the door closed, and barely waiting for the confirmation that ensured the door has clicked shut before she yanked the cords to release the blinds. Only then did she release the mask and suck air into her body.

Her hands were shaking. Nothing could stop that. Not the bitterly learnt previous experiences nor the relaxation techniques the departmental shrinks had given them as part of the necessary training they received as sworn officers of the NYPD. She quickly stripped the NYPD duster and vest from her body, depositing them unceremoniously on the long low filing cabinet.

She took far more care with her service weapon. Ensuring the safety was on and the weapon decocked, she deposited the SIG P226 with care into the middle drawer of her desk.

Gulping down mouthfuls of air, by instinct she reaches into the lowest drawer and pushes back the apparently haphazard papers and locates by touch the cool, slim, reassuring object. Checking once more that the door is shut and the blind down, she pulls forth the silver flask. It's masculine but not exclusively so. It's a statement especially in such male dominated profession. It says the owner has earned the right to possess it and when the occasion requires take what solace and comfort they can from its contents, regardless of gender.

Her thumb flicks the cap back in a familiar motion, free of conscious action, and her hand lifts the flask to her lips. She tilts the flat base towards the ceiling and the contents glide forth. The liquid is cool but the sensation is sharp almost burning, as it takes a path past her lips and down into her stomach. It doesn't settle the anxiety and hurt that pools in her gut and is flooding her body, but it has to be enough for now.

Replacing the cap, she slips the flask back into the draw, and stands. Taking a moment, she breathes in, no longer gulping, and composes herself.

Striding to the door, she opens the door and steps out into the bullpen. By now the news has reached the precinct and officers are pooling together and sharing the news with concern and shock writ-open across every face. Perhaps not actually hearing but certainly sensing the door open, almost all heads turn towards her.

She runs a steely gaze across the occupants of the room, her eyes and gentle shake of her head conveying the meaning that the news is hers alone to deliver. Having satisfied herself that all present will comply, she strides towards the secure conference room.

Opening the door without knocking, she starts to speak as she halts at the threshold. The four occupants of the room had all looked up from the document strewn table. Two males, two females – three lawyers from the District Attorney's office and one detective.

Holding a hand up to still any speech from the occupants her voice brooks no dissent but nevertheless her first words contain an apology "ADA Denoza, sorry for the interruption".

Before the graying ADA can respond, she turns to the sole cop in the room "Detective Beckett, I need you to come to my office now."
Two weekends previously

Finally summoning up courage to try again after their previous near misses with weekend breaks, they had planned a quiet weekend away in the Catskills at Kate's father's cabin. After the near debacle of the Hamptons some months ago they hoped that this time could truly be theirs alone with no interruptions of any kinds, especially homicidal. As the boys and Lanie knew about them, their only concern remained keeping Gates and the rest of the precinct unaware.

Their Friday night and Saturday had been secluded and comfortably alone. On their final day, they had headed into town before Castle drove Beckett stir crazy with his isolation (no Internet or cable TV) induced fidgeting. Dressed down, relaxed and casual, they had mingled with the locals and enjoyed the anonymity. Feeling themselves free of the constant need to play partners-only in public, they had held hands, fingers intertwined and thumbs softly rubbing and caressing, stolen kisses whilst perusing the local Sunday market stalls and stores, drinking coffee, and later sitting with legs and hands entwined outside at a local sidewalk café for a tapas lunch.

Unknown to them, their leisurely lunch, their quiet weekend, their jealously guard privacy, their Secret was about to be ripped from them.

They first heard the angry words but before they could unobtrusively check out the source, in a matter of seconds, 6 shots rang out only yards from them. Amidst the screams and general panic of the café customers, the two partners reacted.

Kate's training and instincts kicked in, and she had pulled Rick, whose much improved instincts already had him moving for cover, behind their suddenly vertical table (Kate must have flipped it Rick thought). When no more shots followed Beckett had quickly chanced a glance, and seeing the male shooter struggling to reload a revolver, she had quickly taped Rick's left shoulder, her raised eyebrows and subtle nod of head in the direction of the shooter conveying all they needed to share. Their eyes sought mutual confirmation and his right hand squeezed her left hand that rested on his shoulder, and he nodded towards the other side of the inverted table and together they rose unarmed to face the odds once more.

The shooter didn't have a speed loader and had only managed to get 2 loose rounds from their pocket and into the chamber before both Beckett and Castle (no longer just Kate and Rick) reached the shooter and moving in sync they had quickly subdued the shooter with Beckett sweeping the legs and Castle applying a wrist lock to force the gun from the suddenly limp grasp.

Whilst Beckett secured the shooter, Castle had then turned to the victim who had bleeding badly but was still alive, their breathe wheezing from at least one hit to their lungs. Pulling his jacket off, he folded it and carefully placed in below the victim's head.

"Beckett, what's the best position for this type of injury? She's hit in the chest …lungs I think". She shook her head, trying to recall anything relevant from her first aid training. Fortuitously there was a doctor in the nearby crowd, and she quickly takes over from a relieved and more than slightly bloody Rick Castle.

Almost an hour later the local police had taken custody of the shooter and completed their questions and witness statements. Kate's production of her gold shield had spared them a trip to the
local Sheriff's office along with the other prime witnesses. They were hopeful that they had avoided the prying eyes and especially the cameras of onlookers, as Rick had rapidly been whisked away to a second EMT vehicle due to the volume of blood on his clothes. These had duly been exchanged for a forensic bodysuit which had Kate smirking and observing how they didn't flatter his best feature.

Despite attempts by witnesses and a particularly awestruck deputy sheriff to paint them as heroes, the two were intent on playing down their actions. They asked if their involvement could be low-key and then had retreated back to the anonymity of her Dad's cabin to finish their weekend. Once more remarking that they couldn't catch a break, they had never-the-less celebrated the completion of their weekend before they had to return to the City and the precinct.

The sheriff was an ex-city cop, "retired" up state, and he still did things by the big city book. Unlike the Hamptons he wasn't used to keeping things *hush-hush* and *on the down-low*, and so he filed a report back with the NYPD regarding the involvement of a homicide detective and her male companion for their assistance in the detention of an attempted murderer. He thanked the department for the dedication and bravery of the unarmed detective and her male companion.
Thursday

Having somehow avoided any real explanation of how their weekend had gone, they had settled back into a routine of paperwork, Angry Birds, lunch breaks and a very slow week. No body drops – Castle was told he was in danger in being almost the only New Yorker saddened by the marked decline in murder numbers. By Thursday, he was no longer the only member of the homicide team wishing for a body drop, especially given rumours that some homicide detectives would be redeployed to other detective bureaus. Gates had disappeared to 1PP for a meeting and even the usual goof-offs and pranks were falling flat.

Gates was back. The only warning Beckett and Castle got was from the boys and it didn't help. As Esposito and Ryan were already facing Gate's office, they had caught sight of the Captain's face, and suddenly found an urgent need to closely review some paperwork from behind the relative safety of their computer terminals. Not wishing to leave Mom and Dad unprepared, Ryan was firing up his instant messaging client and Esposito was contemplating a SMS but they were beaten to the punch by the Captain.

"Detective Beckett and Mr Castle, MY OFFICE NOW!"

Beckett and Castle exchanged concerned looks but had no time for any discussion as the Captain' tone had clearly indicated their immediate presence.

Indeed Gates was standing by the door clearly anticipating their prompt arrival. Tremulously they entered the office and before the door had barely slammed shut Captain Gates let loose whilst striding back to her desk.

"Is there something the TWO of YOU want to tell ME?"

Beckett's head drops a little and she manages a gruff "No Sir" whilst Castle can only shake his head whilst inspecting a corner of Gate's office somewhere to side of her right shoulder, unable make eye contact or to trust himself to speak so sure it would emerge as some high-pitched girly squeal giving away his despair and fear pooling in his gut and the worst case scenarios already being written in his mind.

"Are you sure? Because I have here a report from the Greene County Sheriff thanking us for the involvement of a certain NYPD detective and her male companion in the detention of an attempted murder suspect last weekend".

"I will ask you again. And need I remind you Detective Beckett you were recently on probation and another disciplinary violation so close to the probation will likely result in termination of your service and loss of all benefits”.

Beckett's head snaps up to glare at Gates, her tongue subconsciously touches the edge of her dry lips, as she nervously seeks the words she needs to respond.

It's Castle who speaks and he's proud of the measured tone he manages.
"Sir, Detective Beckett and I are in a relationship."

Gate's eyebrows rise not so much in surprise at the news but at Castle's business like response with none of his usual irreverence. "How long?" falls from her lips, much of the previous anger already absence from the words.

"Since her suspension, almost 6 months ago, 176 days actually."

It's Kate's turn to raise her eye brows. She knew the exact date the marked the transformation of their partnership, that night when she had finally fully acknowledged what he meant to her, and how bedraggled and sodden she had forced her way through his wall of hurt to prove to him how her owns walls were gone and how much in love with him she was. But despite that, she couldn't tell you how many exactly days had passed – not without the aid of a calendar. Once more the man at her side, HER man, had proven what this relationship meant for the two of them, and how he treasured it.

"It's serious." He pauses, possibly for effect but more likely seeking the words and finding satisfactory answers he continues "it's not a simple office romance, this is long term, I love Kate and I won't give her up."

Gates nods, clearly taken back by the directness of Castle's words, and honesty.

Beckett finally finds her voice. "I feel exactly the same …Sir."

Gates nods and pauses. The next words Gate's surprises them. Instead of immediately kicking the writer out, possibly with Beckett in tow, she states:

"After consultation with the Chief of Detectives, the New York Police Department policy on co-worker fraternization may not apply here so long as your relationship does not adversely impact your new roles nor impair the exemplary closure rate of this Precinct, or reflect poorly on the NYPD."

"New roles?" this time Beckett speaks up. "….Sir?"

"Yes. New roles. And if you give me time, I'll explain." The Captain's acerbic tone makes it clear that further interruptions are not welcome.

"Detective Beckett, the Chief of Detectives and I have concluded that it is time that your exceptional record – barring your suspension – merits recognition and encouragement to achieve more in your profession. Accordingly you have been recommended for promotion to Sergeant—Supervisor Detective Squad, subject to passing the Sergeant's exam of course. You will assume a more supervisory role, and I will warn that this will result in less field work and more responsibility and paperwork."

Both the Detective and Writer had been left open mouthed by the Captain's words and once more both mirrored the other, winching at the mention of increased paperwork. Gates continues without further pause.

"It is a not a common rank amongst detectives, and as I said it has a formal supervisory role, and as such you would be the second-in-command of the 12th's detective team. Those selected as a SDS often find it is a pathway to further promotion and responsibility as I did. The next civil service exams are in less than three months and I expect you to be ready."

"In turn, the NYPD is prepared to offer Mr Castle permanent Consultant status as part of your team, subject to a review and assessment of his current role. This will include an evaluation of the
potential risk posed by his public image, creative works, and not least your romantic relationship."

Both Beckett and Castle appear struck dumb but Gate's pronouncement and the Captain continues on.

"Mr Castle, one absolute condition is that the consultant role is to be unpaid, otherwise as a City employee you would subject to the rules regarding co-worker fraternization. This would result in you being unable to work in the same squad as your partner." Gates pauses giving the Writer an opportunity to respond.

The man is clearly slightly giddy at the prospect of not being ejected from the Precinct and his reply is accompanied by a trademark, eyebrow waggle.

"No problem, Captain. I'll think we'll manage to get by."

Gates nods, "I expect so."

"So Mister Castle, I want to see firsthand how your consultancy assists the NYPD so I can determine for myself whether your continued presence in my Precinct is worth the potential issues that are certain to arise as you two are incapable of staying out of trouble even when on vacation."

"On the next homicide case, you will accompany Detectives Esposito & Ryan, and myself to the crime scene."

Beckett starts to speak, but Gates shuts her down with a raised hand before she can form a syllable.

"No, Detective, on the next case you'll remain here in the precinct and Mr Castle will accompany me into the field. You have your Sergeant's exam to study for, and the trial preparation for the mob case from 13 months ago and ADA Denoza will be very grateful for your ability to work with his team uninterrupted over the next days or weeks."

"Based upon the evidence and my experience I will assess Mr Castle's performance and determine whether he is able to remain with the 12th, and if so in what role."

"That will be all."

The pair are turning to leave when Gates speaks again.

"It light of our discussions, I suggest you take some time to discuss it amongst yourselves. I need to be clear that there are limited options if you do not accept the recommendations and no guarantees even if you do. Perhaps an early finish would be appropriate today". The last is clearly not a suggestion.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note

Sergeant—Supervisor Detective Squad is an actual rank in the NYPD. However, only a small number of detectives are ever appointed to this or the more senior Lieutenant—Commander Detective Squad. I liked the idea of Beckett being promoted to formalise her leadership but still having a gold shield and being a working detective which she excels at and loves.
Twelfth Precinct

Emerging from Gates' office, the partners need to escape the Precinct.

The Boys are doing their best to look busy but are clearly bursting with curiosity. They are their friends, but for now they need to be alone to process everything that has just happened and could happen before the possibilities overwhelm them.

Knowing that Kate doesn't want to, and can't deal with anyone else right now, Castle does not give the Boys a chance. "Beckett, let's get out of here" he says, shifting his arm round protectively around her shoulders and guiding her straight towards her desk.

Kate nods, not trusting herself to speak, and quickly completes the remaining strides to her desk. Unlocking her terminal, she saves the open report, and starts the shutdown of her computer, she sweeps up the case files on her desk and drops them into the bigger bottom draw of her desk and prepares to lock it.

Meantime, Castle has looked towards the Boys and carefully shakes his head to indicate they should hang back. Kate has grabbed her gun from her drawer, locked it, and swung her handbag over her shoulder.

"Your place" Castle confirms to Kate, he knows that she needs the absolute security of no chance of an interruption and her apartment offers that. She nods still seemingly lost in her thoughts and remaining mute.

"Can we swing by the Loft first? I'll grab some stuff and something to cook" this is as much a tacit acknowledgement that Kate spends most nights at the Loft as a statement of intent. Again Kate nods, eyes down, resolutely mute.

They are in the elevator and doors closing before Esposito and Ryan can move from their desks or say more than a desultory "Beckett?" and "Bro…Castle?!!"

"Bro, what the hell just happened" asks Esposito to a clearly perplexed Ryan. Before they can do more, Gates emerges from her office and makes clear that the matter is closed for now. "Back to work detectives."

Both drop their heads back to their screens but Esposito is already palming his phone and messaging Lanie.

Beckett's Apartment

They've barely made it through the door to Kate's apartment when Kate breaks free from Rick's supporting embrace, and throws herself onto her couch.

Rick moves past her towards the kitchen to deposit the cool bag containing the ingredients for dinner before swinging towards Kate's bedroom to hang up his overnight suit bag. Returning to the living room, Rick finds that Kate has shucked her boots, her body thrown back against one end of the couch, her knees pulled up to her chest, her arms encircling her folded legs, head tucked into her knees.
As Rick moves towards her, Kate's head comes up and Rick is almost heartbroken by the stream of tears falling from his lover's eyes and red face. Usually so expressive, her eyes too have misted over under the volume of the tears and he can tell she is breathing too quickly, too shallow, her chest rising and falling like a runner's.

Before he can reach her, Kate's desperate voice questions "What do we do?"

"What matters to me is that we are together." Rick makes his opening gambit. "If we are honest with ourselves, we knew this day would come. We discussed it earlier but I guess we got lulled into deceiving ourselves that we might somehow avoid it."

Rick has now reached the couch and without speaking further slides down beside Kate and lifts her legs to position them over his. In this position he can hug Kate's body but still see her face. The contact seems to help Kate and her breathing calms, her heaving chest movements slow. Rick reaches over and gently wipes the tears from her face with his thumbs. He's a big man but it is a deceptive bulk as Kate well knows. He can be the most gentle, loving, loyal, and humble person away from the cameras and the persona of playboy author Rick Castle or the humorous sidekick at the Precinct. Kate cants her head to follow the movement of his hands, and as they brush near her mouth she plants soft kisses upon them.

Before she knows it his hands have shifted and they lift her whole body into his lap. The author's body is no longer lean but beneath the first signs of middle-age is a surprising base of muscle. His arms encompass her body and he plants light kisses on her head. Kate leans back into his body and relaxes, slowing her breathing and the tears cease. Rick continues to plant kisses on her head whilst slowly rocking her in his arms.

They stay this way for some time, mutually supporting each other and mute for the moment. Eventually Rick speaks.

"How about I make us some dinner. You can shower, and once we've finished eating we can talk again?"

After a simple dinner of chicken and summer salad, they reluctantly decide it is time to resume their discussions, and so they return to the couch each with a glass of wine. Rick has checked in with Martha and Alexis and they have both muted their phones. In Kate's case ignoring 2 missed calls and 7 texts from Lanie.

Having flopped at opposite ends of the sofa, Kate swings her legs up to rest across Rick's thighs, and turns her head to Rick "I should be honored. I should feel proud. But I feel pressurized and unbalanced."

Rick knows she is talking principally about the promotion to Sergeant, and this is no surprise. This will be the easiest of the issues they face and it should be relatively straightforward to resolve compared to the others. He too would have made the same choice to begin with this topic.

Kate continues confident that her partner knows what she is referring to. "I don't want to give up field work, or investigating with the boys and you."

"You don't have to. Gates said you'll still be an investigator – just not as much. Surely there would be some leeway and interpretation on how much desk time and paperwork. You do lots of that anyway. Anyway, it would be so cool" and he pauses with a flash of blue mischief in his eyes, "and kinda hot too."
Kate rolls her eyes. "You don't obey my instructions now, and I don't think a promotion would change that." But she's smirking a little.

"I'd have to salute you more." Rick responds with a fake pout.

"Oh no! We've done the uniform thing a few times and I seem to remember your salute isn't regulation" Kate teases back her voice lower and slightly sultry with a gleam in her own eyes.

"Touché" acknowledges Rick satisfied that the tension has been released and now he presses Kate.

"You're already in charge of the team, and you've run point on multiple inter-team investigations before. Hell you deputized for Montgomery two years ago." Kate nods and Rick goes for the kill.

"Kate you're a fantastic cop. You bring closure to the victims' families and justice to their killers. I've often told you that I wished more people got to see you as I see you and how extraordinary you truly are. If you get this promotion it is acknowledgement and well-deserved recognition of everything you are."

"I still have to pass the civil service exam for Sergeant" points out Kate and Rick's only answer is a shrug and roll of his eyeballs as if that would be any obstacle for Kate.

"Okay but what if Gates' decides against you remaining….?" And now they're moving to more uncertain ground.

"I don't want to give up you as my partner."

"Please Kate, I'm not sure we need to worry too much about that yet."

"Firstly for some reason, I didn't think she was hostile or even opposed to us. She had done something proactive about us by discussing it with the Chief of Detectives and putting you forward for the promotion. She did both of these things before confronting us. She didn't kick me or you out straight away."

"I think we have a chance. More than a chance, and if you had asked me when we began this, I'd have jumped in with both feet and pulled you with me for Gates' offer."

Kate eye rolls and gentle laugh at the irrepressible enthusiasm of the man-child opposite her.

"Look at the positives."

"We don't have to try and keep our relationship secret anymore. We can arrive at the precinct together. We can hold hands on the street. Kiss. I can take you on a date here in the City and not have to hide."

Kate head shoots up in alarm, but Rick is already speaking again. "Relax Kate, I don't mean that we have to make a public announcement, paparazzi and Page 6."

"God Rick, we've been together less than 6 months….."

Rick counters gently "But it really has been longer than that, it simply that we've been able to enjoy ALL the benefits of a relationship. Now wasn't the time to slip in the innuendo and eyebrow waggle and his voice stays perfectly level.

Kate's eyebrow had started to lead ahead for a subconscious eye roll when she takes in his perfectly serious demeanor and in keeping with the honest open dialogue they are sharing Kate speaks again.
"But we haven't even discussed living together, or marriage, or kids…" and her voice trails off as she comprehends the words that have left her mouth.

Rick is already forming an answer, when his brain finally processes Kate's words, and his mouth drops open.

"Kate..." Rick starts but stumbles, searching for the words to respond before Kate can try to take them back or run.

"Kate....." he begins again but Kate interrupts him. Leaning forward she stretches out a long, graceful limb and with her hand cups and lifts his chin and brings his eyes into contact with hers.

"I'm not running Rick. I may have surprised myself as much as you. But believe me, I'm not running anymore."

"Good to know" acknowledges Rick and this time the words do come.

"I know we agreed not to discuss this" he waves his hands between them. "Us. Our relationship. Until later." He pauses as if contemplating whether it is safe to continue. Beckett loves the childlike Castle, but reveres Castle the father and serious man he becomes when necessary especially for family matters, and she nods.

"I can't regret my first marriage because of Alexis, even if the unfaithfulness and betrayal hurt so much at the time." He knows that his earlier explanation of his failed marriages had already done much to soothe Kate's insecurities, and he pauses briefly before continuing.

"The second, well yes I do regret it but I did learn from it. I was trying to fix things for Alexis more than myself and I thought it was okay to sacrifice my personal desires for her, after-all isn't that what parents do for their children? But by compromising and accepting less than I should have, it was not an equal partnership, and it doomed the marriage. I take full responsibility for that. Gina was not blameless but it was primarily my decision and it sucked."

"The marriage failures also hurt me deeply, and made me reluctant and scared to commit. I had started to become the playboy persona that Gina and Paula constructed. I'm not justifying the short term relationships and one-night stands but you're not the only one who has been in a relationship with one foot out the door - I barely got through the door in the first place - before us."

"You've told me that my books helped save you and give you purpose. Well, you have helped save me and given me new purpose. I was in danger of becoming that jackass playboy but you made me want to be more. Admittedly, it took a while, and I still screwed up plenty but here we are." Rick pauses for a breath, and ensuring he has Kate's green eyes locked on his, he presses homeward.

"But I need you to know that this is IT for me."

"I will only ever marry one more time in my life, and only if it is you."

Kate nods again, her eyes never leaving his.

"Castle….Rick…."

"You know I'm a 'One and Done' girl." She pauses, seeking the words.

"What I didn't know was than my One was not a number, but a person. You. You are my One."

The Writer is almost mesmerized by her words, but she knows he won't remain silent for long, and
she needs to press on quickly before he does something that can't be taken back. Something that she needs, wants, desires, but which she also needs to be later, not now, held in check, delayed for their future.

"I'm not ready to formalize things further just yet but I need you to know that I'm all in too."

"Soon" she says with voice deep with promise and emotion.

"Right now, I need you take me to bed and hold me."

"Always."

They move into the bedroom, shucking their clothes and climb under the covers. Their naked bodies react to the proximity, and natural pheromones, but there's no lust, only love and they simply hold each other, seeking balance and comfort. Something both know they find best in each other's arms.
Naturally Kate wakes before Rick, and rolling over she observes the man she loves. He's wrapped up in the covers, his hair mussed and falling back from the strangely peaceful face. It's not a child's face as it is clearly maturely masculine with rasping stubble, frown lines and what she thinks of a laughter creases around his eyes. His mouth is partially open and a gentle snore emanates from between his lips. She has often accused the Writer of being creepy with his frequent and excessive staring, but she takes secret delight in observing and staring at him but only when she is certain she is in no danger of being caught by her man.

She thinks back to last night. They had gone to sleep around 10.00 pm but both had awoken around 1.30 am shaken from their mutual slumber by restless thoughts. Rick had slid from the bed and fetched glasses of water, and then by the soft illumination of her reading light they had finished their discussion about the choices facing them. Strangely composed and decisive despite the hour, they had rapidly both articulated their position and reached a conclusion. Then they had curled up together and settled back into a much deeper sleep.

The partners need to rise early to and get a head-start on the day knowing full-well that there are still a large number of issues they need to address that day. But before they do that, Kate closes the distance in the bed, and with her easy grace and subtle strength wraps her lithe limbs around his even longer ones and pulls their naked torsos together. He'll be the first to admit – well maybe not first – that he's could do with losing a few pounds but beneath the apparent softness is a reassuring core of strength that Kate can't get enough of. It makes her feel safe, soothes her restless thoughts, and more than often enough heats her core. This morning she seeks the comfort not the carnal side of his body, and she knows he will grant it with a smile and snuggle.

"Hmmmmmmm" She hears and feels him come awake. "Good Morning Sweetheart."

"Good Morning, My Heart" Two can play that game, but before she can utter anything else, his hands sweep to her cheeks and he pulls her face to his for the sweetest kiss possible, and just as Kate is relaxing and letting her instinctive guard down, the 12-year old strikes as Rick whips the covers off and twisting their bodies they follow the covers down to the floor, dumping the two of them unceremoniously in a naked heap.

"Ass!" chides Kate as she wiggles free of his body. "I'm showering ALONE and you can sort breakfast as punishment". She sprints for the bathroom leaving the Writer smirking on the floor at the sight of her toned body and posterior. As she locks the door, she can hear his "Nice ass yourself" and he mutters more she can't decipher, and goes in search of clothes.

Once Kate has showered and dressed, she unlocks the bathroom door to be met by a somewhat desperate writer who pushes past her and within seconds is groaning in relief as he empties his morning bladder. Wandering into her kitchen, she can smell coffee but a stick-it note headed "IOU" explains the Writer didn't bring breakfast materials, so they would get it on the way to the Precinct. Looking round, Kate realizes that she can't remember when she last had breakfast here. It's been the Precinct or more often the Loft, and she can't think of any reason why that disturbs her. Lifting her caffeine pick-me-up to her lips, she sits on a stool and leans onto the breakfast bar lost in her thoughts.

Rick's emergence from the bathroom, brings Kate back from her own private recollection. She and Rick have agreed to tell their family and friends what is going on. As it is Friday, they know that the other side of the homicide roster is on call for the evening and weekend, and that both Alexis and Martha are free as the two Red Heads are planning a Girl's retreat to the Hamptons for the
weekend but not leaving until Saturday morning. Kate's Dad is most likely free as Kate knows that Friday is traditionally a quiet night for Jim Beckett with music and a book or a baseball game but it's not the season. So this means they can call all their extended family together to update them on recent developments, and their decisions.

Before leaving for the Precinct, Kate messages the Boys and Lanie to ask that they meet at Castle's loft at 7 pm that night. Rick does the same for Martha and Alexis but in his Mother's case it will be followed up with a phone call to confirm that she is coming as Martha is not renowned for using SMS. Kate will call her father later in the morning.

Stopping for coffee and a pastry, Beckett and Castle arrive at the precinct together. Despite Gates knowing there are no PDA's – no kisses, no hand holding, nor hugs, no pronouncements of togetherness. Although Castle does sport a slightly red ear and is still muttering "apples" under his breath after a trademark Beckett stern lecture regarding appearing professional and how tongues in the elevator isn't in keeping with that and the current no PDA policy.

They've beaten the Boys in, but not the Captain.

Gate calls both into her office.

"I appreciate that you were presented with a series of what are effectively ultimatums yesterday but time is short and the sooner your decisions are made, the sooner we can move forward." Gates pauses, expectation apparent in her posture and slight inclining of her head.

Kate looks across to Rick without speaking, and he nods.

"Captain, I'll be honest and say I have some major concerns and reservations about moving away from being primarily an investigator. Being a detective, the fieldwork and giving closure to the families of victims is what I live for professionally. I love it, and being a detective is what drew me back to the Precinct after my suspension."

As Gates is listening to Beckett, she realizes that there have been changes in Detective Kate Beckett. Changes she was slow to pick up on. Changes that the man standing beside Beckett is no doubt largely responsible for. The old Beckett would never have been so open with her thought process or feelings. Indeed, the old Beckett was a tightly buttoned-down professional. Roy's notes state as much. This new Beckett, is still professional but there is a lighter, brighter side to her, and Gates wonders if this isn't a glimpse of the Kate Beckett before her mother was murdered. Roy had hinted at the impact the Writer has on Beckett, but Victoria Gates mentally chastises herself for fully comprehending it sooner.

Turning from her thoughts, she decides it is time to speak, and she turns her attention to the Writer. "What about you Mr Castle?"

"Captain, I am here to support Kate in whatever capacity I can. I would very much love to continue as a consultant with the NYPD and the 12th. However, it shouldn't, and won't, be at the cost of Kate's career. Whilst we our mutually committed to a permanent relationship and won't give each other up, I am prepared to step aside and leave if that is required to ensure that Kate can continue." The Writer comes to a stop, clearly he's concerned about the potential ramifications of his declaration that he will leave if required, and given Victoria Gates previous attitude towards him, it is not a small risk.

"To be honest, I would prefer not to." The Writer concludes.
Gates has sat down again, and lifts her reading glasses to eye level and quickly scans the document before her. Finishing, she lowers the glasses to her desk and places her hands in front of her, fingers inter-meshed.

"If you don't make a decisions yourselves today, then I am afraid that the choice may be taken away from you and with it any chance of retaining your partnership here, Mr Castle."

At the Captain's words, Beckett and Castle both step forward, she takes Castle's hand, and wordlessly they look into each other's eyes. The very action makes Captain Gates nervous – what decision have they made?

Still no words are exchanged, but between the two the mutual decision made in the early hours of the morning is reconfirmed, and Beckett speaks.

"Sir, I would be honored and proud to accept your recommendation to apply for promotion to Sergeant."

Beside his partner Castle speaks. "Sir, I would like nothing better than to be able to continue to assist the NYPD, the 12th Precinct and soon to be Sergeant Beckett's team."

Gates nods, satisfied.

"Beckett, you need to go to HR this morning to commence the paperwork for promotion Sergeant which includes a complete service evaluation as well as the civil service exam. I expect that it will take most of the day, so you don't have to return to Precinct today. Take advantage of this as the ADA and his team will be at the Precinct from tomorrow to work on the case with you."

The two turn towards the door, but Gates speaks again.

"Mr Castle, a moment of your time, once Detective Beckett has left, please?"

Castle turns back towards the Captain as Kate touches his hand before striding out of the office a puzzled look on her face.

It only takes a few minutes with the Captain, and leaving the Captains office, Castle strides across the floor towards the break room where he knows he'll find Kate. Sure enough she's working the coffee machine.

"Hey" he greets her, and her arched eyebrow is question enough.

"I'll explain later" his answer carries the necessary implication of needing privacy, and Kate nods in understanding. She passes him a cup of coffee and they stand by the break room counter in silence.

Kate sighs and drains the last of her coffee. "I need to head to 1PP, and get the paperwork going. Meet you at the loft?" she asks as she quickly scans the vicinity and places a glancing kiss to his lips. Leaving her boyfriend somewhat bemused by the unexpected Precinct PDA, Detective Kate Beckett strides from the break room unable to entirely suppress the smile that wants to break free on her face.

With Beckett gone, Castle pulls his phone out and calls his agent, Paula Haas.

"Paula, its Rick. I need to set up a meeting today. If you can get Gina there as well it would be beneficial. We'll meet at Black Pawn if need be, I just want the meeting today and it has to be by 5
"I'm going to call Steve and have him join us" He pauses to listen to his publicist. "Yes, Steve Mathers, my lawyer."

"No I won't tell you what this is about now. It can wait to the meeting." Another pause for questions coming back down the phone, and the Writer responds "We may well need your witchy powers with the press, but that's all I'm saying for now."

Terminating the call, he hits speed dial and within seconds, the call is answered. "Steve, sorry for the short notice but we're going to have to move up the timetable on the matters we have been discussing. I'll need you at a meeting this afternoon. I'll text the details as soon as the meeting is arranged." Hearing the man's acknowledgement on the other end, he hangs up and decides to head home for some lunch whilst waiting for Paula to sort out the meeting.

Suddenly remembering this evening, he pulls up his messages. Confirmation and confused smiley face from Alexis. Nothing from his Mother – of course. Hitting speed dial, he is grateful when his Mother answers within seconds "Richard…" and then Rick Castle proceeds to ensure she will be at the loft by 7 pm tonight.
Black Pawn Offices - Friday Afternoon

Richard Castle meets Steve Mathers outside of the Black Pawn offices, and after a brief handshake they head into the offices.

Rick calls out a cheerful greeting to Tiffany, the PA cum receptionist, whose face breaks into a big smile and before Rick can move he is blindsided by a full body hug from the not-so diminutive woman.

"Again?!" he asks/confirm as he takes in the baby bump that wasn't present the last time he saw the smartly attired early middle-aged woman.

Tiffany head bobs up and down several times in an exaggerated nod. "Number 3 for me. The last one as the doctors say the risks are getting too great but that's the result of leaving it until so late to start a family. Vijay is ecstatic and really wants another girl."

Tiffany leads them into a mid-sized conference room with 12 seats arranged around a rectangular table. From the aromas, there is fresh coffee and pastries on the buffet bar at the end of the room. Helping themselves they sit down and make small talk.

"So what's her story?" inquires Steve as they settle into the conference room. He's been Rick's lawyer for more than fifteen years and his friend for almost as long. He's well aware of the improbable but real ability Richard Castle has to charm most people, not least women. He knows Rick's playboy days are behind him, and he was never really was the man his public persona painted him to be, but since working with the NYPD the changes had become more apparent and profound with the passage of time. Of course, Rick still somehow manages to both charm and irritate those closest to him.

"She's worked here forever, was single and probably destined to be spinster. Then a couple of years before I married Gina, I took Tiffany to a charity ball as a reward for all her help and kindness – she had been especially good with Alexis. I had paid for a nice dress, we took a limo and we were having a nice evening, dancing and eating. Then whilst we were dancing, a well dress guy politely cuts in and then I, Richard Castle, suddenly became dateless. Love at first sight. She married Vijay 3 months later and their first child was born 8 months later. Another one 2 years ago. And now this."

Steve smiles, and nods. He's once again made aware of how much of a gentleman Richard Castle is, and how he is on good terms with so many including his exes, although after today's meeting, perhaps the ex-Mrs Castle the Second (though she never took the name) wouldn't be quite so inclined.

Two minutes later Paula Haas sweeps into the conference room accompanied by Gina Cowell, his publisher and ex-wife. Both ladies epitomise the Manhattan female executive. They wear their designer business suits like a statement of authority and control. There was a time when Richard Castle would have been impressed, even seduced by such well attired women.

Steve and Rick rise from their seats and exchange greetings with the two women, handshakes for the most part, except for Paula's air kisses to Rick's cheeks. Gina settles for a handshake, and Rick can't help be reminded of Gina's comment during their divorce that she would rather put her hands round his neck than any other body part. He can't but help grin at that memory, and instantly Gina
"Richard, why are we here?" almost grates from her mouth as she sits.

Suddenly, Rick is all business and Richard Castle, multi-best-selling author and successful business man has the floor.

"As you know, I have been shadowing Detective Kate Beckett at the 12th Precinct for more than 4 years. She is the inspiration for Nikki Heat and the 4 best sellers. Those books are responsible for much of the income and success for Black Pawn and my associates as well." He lets that sink in with the women who haven't shown any sign of interrupting.

"Kate Beckett and I have been dating for almost six months, and we have been keeping it private from both her work and the public." Both women look surprised by the news, possibly by the duration and lack of public exposure rather than the actual act of dating.

"How long?" sneaks past Paula's lips indicating her surprise.

"Since May" responds Rick. Pausing for a moment, he then continues.

"There are NYPD regulations against co-workers on the same team being in a relationship. Whilst I am strictly not a co-worker due to my unpaid volunteer status, the NYPD now knows about our relationship, and needs to clarify it. Beckett and I are undergoing some assessment and evaluation which should resolve our partnership status officially. I can only assume that it will become public knowledge at some point too, most likely very soon."

Paula, can you please prepare a press statement? Something simple, factual and short. Suitable for print and electronic media with distribution from our websites, agencies and news desks. I will need to vet the statement, as will NYPD Public Affairs. I have contact details for the liaison at 1PP" he pauses, a smile of apology at his use of cop colloquialism "Sorry Police Plaza. You will need to work closely with them and Captain Gates at the 12th Precinct."

Paula Haas is a tough cookie, very successful, working hard for her clients and herself, and part of that success is due to her ability to know her limits and when to concede. This is one of the latter moments.

"Sure Rick. Won't be a problem at all. I'll have a draft for you by midday tomorrow. It might be a good idea to have a couple of stock photos that can be used as well."

Rick nods at the comments. "Good idea Paula. We'll see what we can do, and perhaps down the track we can get some professional shots done as well."

Gina had been silent until now.

"Richard, I am concerned. We worked very hard to create this public image to help sell your books. It depends on your playboy persona and being seen as available. You going steady with one women will have an impact." She delivers this in a calm, level tone but all in the room can sense the tension beneath her voice.

"Gina, that's all it is - a persona. You of all people should remember that." He didn't mean to raise their failed marriage, but they both know that he is far more family man than playboy.

"Gina, I am doing you're the courtesy of bringing you in on this. So long as I continue to produce the last two contracted books on schedule, you don't get a say in how I live my life."
"I do want a reduction in touring and publicity events outside of NYC, especially anything extended and national or international. I'm not saying no completely, just that there will be a scaling back to meet my new planned commitments. In compensation, I'm willing to do a little more in the tri-state area." This is not a question, it's phrased as a statement of intent.

"Look, I know I've been a handful in the past, but what I'm planning or have in motion are a number of things that will potentially work positively for all parties."

Gina shakes her head, but before she can interrupt, Rick speaks again in a flat, level tone that is unfamiliar to the two women.

"I'm serious, Kate and I we're both serious. This is beyond "going steady". We've done the talking, we've had THE TALK. Everything is on the table – where we live, marriage, kids. The financials are in progress, the legal stuff including wills, power of attorney, intellectual property, will be done within days, if it is not already." He says with a glance at Steve who nods in confirmation. Both Gina and Paula are silent in their seats taking in the profound impact of the Writer's sweeping statement.

Rick continues on.

"I am also serious about the work I do with the NYPD. Whatever my motives when I began almost 5 years ago, they are not the same now. If I pass the evaluation, I will be an official consultant."

"Steve, will be drawing up a new memorandum to cover my future appearances. Gina your team can coordinate with Steve. Paula please have that draft ready and we'll go from there."

"Now if there is nothing else, I need to go speak to my family."

Gina is up and out her seat and gone from the room before the two men can rise to complete the formalities. Paula leans forward and touches Rick's arm.

"Congratulations Rick. You got the girl. I guess you're not simply going to get it out of your system" the last is a reference to a comment she made at the launch for Heat Wave - the first Nikki Heat novel almost 4 years ago.

"Thanks Paula, I plan to never get her out of my system."

The Loft - Friday Evening

It's 6.56 pm and there is a non-too-soft hammering at the door, and Lanie Parish almost bursts through the door as Alexis is opening it in response to the clamor.

"Hi Sweetie" fires the ME, as she bustles past the frozen Red Head, and goes in search of Kate.

Entering the Kitchen she catches sight of Kate, Rick, Martha and Jim Beckett.

"Will someone please tell me what the hell is going on?"

Kate steps forward. "Hi Lanie, how are you?" the words carry a friendly rebuke for the less than polite entrance by her best (female) friend. Lanie doesn't look in the least bit embarrassed and continues to wait on an explanation, her arched eyebrow and hand on hip signalling her impatience.

Moving closer Kate near whispers "Gates Knows."
Lanie pulls Kate into a hug "Oh Sweetie, well it was bound to happen."

"I know. But it doesn't make it less of a shock"

"So what did Gates say or do?"

"Can we wait for the Boys to get here? We'd like to discuss it with you all together. You're all our family and the decisions we have to take will affect you all too."

There is another knock at the door and Alexis once more opens the door to find Detectives Esposito & Ryan standing on the other side. She is grateful that they at least have the decency to wait until she has to door fully open before entering.

"Little Castle" the two Detectives address the Red Head, who gives them her best Lanie stink-eye impersonation for use of her diminutive nickname as they saunter past. Secretly, Alexis loves it, and makes her feel like one of the extended cop family that has adopted her Father. Ryan actually looks slightly abashed but Esposito has experienced the real thing first hand and has greater immunity, especially from clones, no matter how good.

Rick and Kate are still in the kitchen chatting with Martha, Jim and Lanie, when Alexis arrives back with the two male detectives in tow.

Kate and Rick now have all their extended family present. There is a definite air or expectation from their guests, and aside from Kate's brief aside to Lanie, none of the other occupants know what this gathering is about. Sure there have been some wild guesses, rampant speculation and in some cases romantic developments imagined but they all know Kate Beckett and Richard Castle and their uncanny ability to make the simple complicated, so that is left unvoiced for the moment.

"Hey Guys" Rick acknowledges Esposito and Ryan. "We've ordered food, and it should arrive shortly."

There are several pitchers of what everyone knows to be non-alcoholic beverages on the bench and Kate indicates they should help themselves.

Meanwhile, Rick and Kate are setting out crockery, cutlery, condiments, napkins and more drinking glasses. They are working smoothly in sync, seeming without conscious thought as their mutual familiarity with the Loft's kitchen, and their uncanny symbiosis, and this makes them appear utterly domestic to their family and friends. For Martha and Alexis, this is not a new experience but for Jim Beckett, Lanie Parish and Javier Esposito and Kevin Ryan, it is like seeing a totally new side to their daughter/friends.

If sensing they are under observation, Kate comes to a halt, and tilts her head at her Father, who responds with a gentle smirk and dancing eyes. This alone triggers childhood memories of parental embarrassment but before she can prevent her Father reviving one of those moments, he speaks.

"Your look awfully comfortable here, Katie Bear" Oh God, he's gone for a full strike, deploying the childhood nickname as well. Rick knows better than to smirk, but she can see Lanie and Boys twitch in anticipation. And then he fires again "One could almost say you appear at home?" and this has a hint of a deeper question. Kate groans internally, and she is aware that beside her Rick has ceased all movement.

"He's right, you do look really comfortable here Beckett" adds Ryan. Kate gives him the Beckett glare which usually carries sufficient intimidation and prospect of unpopular assignment to work, but for some reason it has no impact tonight.
Huffing Kate turns to Rick for support, and hoping her boyfriend has a ready distraction.

Fortunately, the door phone sounds, and both Rick and Kate dart for the kitchen extension. It's Emilio, one of the doorman, announcing their food is on the way up. Going for the saved-by-the-bell routine, they too announce the imminent arrival of dinner, and the postponement of any more questions until after they have eaten.

Dinner was a surprisingly relaxed and jolly affair. There was distraction in the form of a mountain of food, and - by mutually unvoiced consent - casual conversation avoided the topic everyone really wanted addressed. Eventually everyone was stuffed to the point of near insensibility and a joint effort saw everything tidied away and the company reassembled in the living room.

Jim Beckett has found the evening particularly illuminating already. Whilst, he and Martha had most definitely got off on the wrong foot but had quickly established a mutual bond and respect based around their children. He and Martha caught up from time-to-time for a coffee and a chat – something which their children were as yet unaware of, and probably wouldn't welcome. He saw Katie frequently and occasionally with Rick, but here in the Loft, he got to see his daughter in a whole new light as she interacted so freely with her boyfriend, Alexis and her friends from the Precinct. The playful comments, gentle teasing, giggles and sometimes outright guffaws were something he could only really relate to a much younger Kate before the dreadful reality of his wife's murder stole so much. He has previously thanked Rick for all that he has done for his daughter, but now he knows he is seriously remiss in the gratitude stakes, and needs to ensure he conveys how deeply that debt goes.

Jim is pulled from his thoughts as Rick takes Kate's hand and they both stand and walk out in front of their family and friends. The air of expectation is back and is almost palpable. Rick is about to start speaking before he can, Esposito cuts in.

"Will someone please tell us what the hell is going on?"

Kate gives Espo a patented Beckett-glower and he raises his hands in defeat, and Kate speaks for both of them.

"Gates and the NYPD hierarchy knows about us." All in the room knew this was inevitable but it doesn't make the exposure of their romance beyond this circle of trust any easier to stomach given the potential consequences.

Rick breaks in to quickly recount how their relationship was exposed by the incident in the Catskills. This revelation is meet by incredulity and not a little dark humor mostly along the lines of no one wanting to accompany them on any trips as they seem to attract people with homicidal tendencies.

Kate resumes "Our partnership could be broken up or Rick kicked out. I could even be subject to further disciplinary action or discharged from service."

"However, we when we were called in to see Gates yesterday, she initially seemed really angry but then she dropped two bombshells."

"Firstly, I've been put forward for promotion to Sergeant Supervisor Detective Squad and I have to take the civil service exam and face a promotions board in less than three months. If I pass, I be effectively in charge of the whole homicide team on a day-to-day basis, and de facto second-in-charge for all the detectives at the 12th." Kate can see the surprise on the faces of their audience.
"Secondly, Rick's position at the 12th and the NYPD is under evaluation and if he passes he'll be offered a permanent consultancy role. Gates is personally conducting the evaluation." All the faces across from them mirror concern, especially at the last piece of information. None are more concerned than their three colleagues from the NYPD who look shell-shocked.

Kate grips Rick's hand and with a shared look she confirms to her family what they suspect.

"We told Gates this morning that we accept the offers"

"It's a trade-off, but one we can live with as we're never giving up on each other. I'll have more paperwork and less field work but at least Rick can stay part of the team if we can complete the necessary steps."

Rick adds one final point. "I asked Paula to prepare a press statement ready for when it goes public. It will be simple, factual and short and have one or two photos of us."

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Their family are busy discussing all the news mainly amongst themselves, and suddenly Kate remembers something.

"Rick"....."Rick" she calls quietly and he looks at her as she speaks only for his ears.

"When I was completing the paperwork today, under home address, I put the Loft's details" Carefully watching his face, she waits for a response.

Her Writer's face suddenly flashes with astonishment, and then one of his giddy smiles ignites both his mouth and cheeks which climb upwards but it is his blue eyes that light up and glow. Kate is sure at that very moment, she can see right into Richard Castle's heart.

"We're moving in together!?!" Perhaps it was meant to be quieter but it's loud enough to catch the attention again of their audience.

"Dad!?" "Richard?" "Kate!" "Beckett?!" "Girlfriend!?"

Still beaming Rick addresses his family and friends.

"Prompted by recent events, Kate and I have been discussing our relationship. We've been very honest and open and we've had everything on the table. How we reconcile our jobs with our relationship, where we live, and our hopes and plans for the future including marriage, kids, well everything. We're not ready to formalize anything else at the point but we are committed to each other. I love Kate with all my heart and whilst I can't regret the marriage that gave us Alexis, I am certain that we will go the distance. Starting by moving in together."

Kate affirms this with an emotion laced "Love You" to her boyfriend and new permanent housemate.

"Man this is serious" says Ryan, and Esposito adds addressing Rick.

"Castle, you know we consider you one of US."

"A cop." confirms Ryan

"Well except he doesn't have a badge" Ryan quickly clarifies.

"Or a gun" adds Esposito "for which we're all grateful" responds Kate to be met with pouting indignation from the Writer "Hey!"
"Didn't go to the Academy" add Esposito "For which they would all be grateful" adds Ryan.

"Didn't have to dumpster dive" notes Esposito "For which I'm grateful" responds Rick. "Me too" giggles Alexis.

"Doesn't keep cop hours" goes Lanie "Hey, I do almost cop hours" shoots back Castle.

"He eats the donuts like a cop" remarks Martha and then she corrects the statement "But he did that before he met you all anyway!" to the mutual laughter of his friends.

Kate adds "But more importantly you're my partner in everything. You have my back just like my fellow cops, and we've saved each other lives."

"Always" confirms Rick and he pulls Kate into his arms and they kiss.

"Awwww" from the ensemble turn to "Eewww" as Rick and Kate deepen what started and should have stayed a mostly chaste kiss. Instead of looking embarrassed Kate smirks and the look in her eyes challenges her friends and family. Lanie for one doesn't back down and issues a "You go Girl!" and steps across to give Kate a high-five.

Castle sweeps Espo & Ryan into a man-hug. Rick is certain there will be a brotherly chat in the future at time when the Boys know Beckett is not around to save him. Putting that aside, he breaks from their grasp and lunges, grabbing the diminutive ME, and swings Lanie round whilst hugging her.

The ME's best crime scene voice is heard to exclaim "Richard Castle, put me down now or I'll cut you!"

The Loft echoes with the laughter and joy of their family. It's enough, more than enough for now.
By common consent, Rick has been staying away from the Precinct until a case is assigned in a not-to-dissimilar manner to when Kate is leading the team. Left unsaid is the risk mitigation minimizing the potential distractions and pitfalls of a less-than-fully-occupied Writer under close observation from the Captain.

Kate worked a 12 hour day with the ADA’s team on Saturday prepping for the trial. She faces more of the same from Monday onwards but she's more than comfortable with the idea, arriving early each morning with a coffee from Rick, and going home to the Loft each night. She knows the Boys will keep Rick safe, and hopefully it's only for one case.

In the meantime, the pair enjoyed a lazy Sunday in the loft. Original plans to start the moving in process were abandoned when both observed that they were alone in the loft and that this presented opportunities for celebrating and christening the next phase of their relationship. Alexis and Martha had returned on Sunday evening to find the pair enjoying a relaxed meal on the balcony and a surprisingly clean kitchen and living room.

In the end, it takes 3 days since they had accepted the Captain's conditions before they get a body drop. Even then it's second hand via Robbery.

It so close to the Precinct that it's barely worth taking the cars but they travel the four blocks to the crime scene in two cars, suffering in the Monday morning gridlock. Castle is riding with Ryan and Esposito is shotgun with Gates after a brief round of scissors, paper, rock to determine the lucky detective.

As they reach their destination, they turn off into a vacant lot that is currently serving as a local car park. They can see a unit with lights rotating down one end so they pull in there and de-bus. As they exit the cars and look around at the older early 20th century apartment blocks, a uniform gives then a straight-arm direction to the body down a wide alleyway between two buildings. Gates notices how the team acknowledge the relatively junior uniform, and especially how Castle passes close by to shake hands and chat briefly before preparing to follow his team into the alley.

Gates doesn't take the lead as Beckett would, instead she waits for the team to re-orientate and to sort themselves out. It takes the two detectives and consultant a brief while to establish a rhythm. It's clear they are used to Beckett leading. They more than aware of the presence of their Captain and to be honest it's thrown them more than a little, but they're not completely off their game. Stepping up, Esposito takes command and leads the team into the alley way where the crime scene is located.

Based on the vehicles in attendance, there's no ME yet, only two more marked units, and two detective wagons – from Robbery. Once more the team acknowledge the uniforms which include the tall LT who grins and fist-bumps the Writer and they exchange words which has the whole team chuckling.

There are four Robbery detectives circled around what presumably is the body. Mumbling an expletive under his breath, that Gates almost catches, Esposito recognizes the lead Robbery detective, Tom Demming. This could be a wrinkle, and he hopes Castle can keep a lid on any inclination to provoke or respond to Demming.

Sensing the new occupants of the alley, the four turn and Demming catches sight of the three men,
his eyes widening in recognition of the homicide team.

"Where's Kate?" the Robbery lead inquires?

"Beckett's doing case prep" explains Esposito a scowl on his face at the use of Beckett's first name. "I'm running point on this one" and as Gates arrives behind them he adds with a twist "Oh, the Captain's along with our team as an observer."

Smirking slightly at Demming's discomfort of discovery Captain Victoria "Iron" Gates 'along for the ride', Castle acknowledges the Robbery Detective with a nod. "Demming"

"Writer-Monkey" breathes Demming, but not quite low enough for Gates to miss. She makes a note to follow up with Esposito and Ryan. If Castle has heard, he doesn't react.

Apparently Demming has now recovered from any surprise, and he is now giving the team an update on the victim and the connection to Robbery.

"We were called in after a series of bust-in's in the top floors of this and two adjacent apartment blocks in the last day and a bit. Same MO, door knock and then muscle their way in, or sledge hammer to handle and entry. Three suspects, masks, 2 armed with handguns. Take some cash and jewellery, but nothing reported that makes this high risk venture worth it."

"Intelligence has nothing, and we were doing door knocks when this" Demming gestures to the body "was reported by one of the building supers. Male, slim build, possible drug user, late twenties/early thirties, no ID, no wallet, no cash. ME is still en route, no ETA."

A first glance appears that may be a random 'pop and drop' and the Robbery detectives voice this opinion.

"Thanks for the briefing. How-about you leave that for the ME and Homicide to determine? Appreciate it Demming." As Esposito both corrects and dismisses the Robbery detective in few words. With that the Robbery team start to pack up and move back to their vehicles.

Castle is standing about 5 yards away. Gates takes note of how the Writer stays a little back from the officers, almost as if he deliberately staying apart from the detectives and collecting his own view of the crime scene. He takes no notes, and doesn't seem the usual constantly distracted and fidgety person she sees in the Precinct.

Eventually walking over to join the team, the Writer looks down at the body. Grimacing slightly – according to NYPD records Rick Castle has been to more than 70 homicide scenes over his 4 years at the 12th Precinct – the man never-the-less joins the other detectives in evaluating the body and surrounds.

"That's a shotgun blast isn't it? Not a typical weapon for a mugger or even a killer. NYC and Manhattan especially is a handgun kinda town. Not exactly concealable nor as quiet but certainly efficient as a killing weapon."

Esposito nods in confirmation making his own observation. "The B&E team were seen with handguns, no shotgun reported". Ryan makes a note on his pad.

The medical examiner arrives and whilst it's not Lanie, blessedly is it not Perlmutter for which all the team including Gates is grateful for the absence of the acerbic ME. Newly arrived in NYC, Dr Vincent Gello is young, keen, irrepressibly cheery and for some reason totally oblivious to normal social codes of conduct but in the opposite manner to the withdrawn surly Perlmutter. He's a little bit too touchy feely, more so even than Castle which has been the source of more than a few jokey
comparisons. However, it is his apparent almost near infatuation with Beckett that has almost provoked issues in the few weeks he has been on the staff.

"Good morning Detectives" the ME cheerfully offers the assembled team. The he notices the absence of Beckett. "Where's the lovely Detective Beckett today?"

"She's not with us today. However, Captain Gates is" Esposito shuts down the ME and hopefully fires a shot across his bows. Esposito is beginning to think that this whole thing is staged given the potential pitfalls and mouse traps that are appearing for Castle's evaluation.

The ME sets up and within minutes is back to the Detectives.

"He wasn't killed here. Not sign of any blood splatter, debris or shotgun pellets." The Detectives nod in acknowledgement but this is not exactly new information to them.

"He was dead before being deposited here – but I think he was dropped here" continues the ME.

"From a vehicle?" asks Ryan.

"No, from a height. There is extensive tissue damage, post mortem bruising, and fractures to the left side of his body." The team look at each other, and then glance up at the two apartment blocks to each side. ME Gello is oblivious to the team and continues on "I believe that the victim was dropped or thrown from the roof top of one of the surrounding buildings."

The team look back up at the two apartment blocks and acknowledge with resignation that an extended period of canvassing is required.

Moving out into the top level hallway, the team begin door knocking. There is another team of uniforms - led by LT – that are covering the canvas at the other building.

Gates notices how Castle compliments the police officers. He doesn't ask quite the same questions. He puts the residents and hopefully potential witnesses at ease with his manner. Talking to an elderly male resident and whilst making quick notes on a pad she hadn't seen him use before, the Writer reaches into his pocket for a NYPD business card, and pulling one out pauses.

"Excuse me a moment, Sir" he addresses the elderly man, before turning to the team "Hey Espo, can I get some of your business cards? I've only got Beckett's."

"Sure Bro" and Esposito quickly crosses the hallway and hands over a small stack of his cards.

"Thanks" and with that the Writer goes back and hands one to the resident with a pleasant "Thank you for your time and please don't hesitate to contact us if you remember anything else."

The team continue to move along the floor, patiently knocking on door, and handling the suspicion, oddballs and outright hostility that make up the usual mix of frustration when going door-to-door.

After 2 hours, the team wrap things up and head back to the precinct. The medical examiner, body and marked units are already absent from the alley and car park lot.

Once back at their desks the two cops begin to review their notes, Ryan already typing things up, Esposito updating the Murder Board. Castle has disappeared to the break room and returns with coffee for the team.
Gates is surprised to find he has one for her. "Thank you Mr Castle" and she sips from the break- room mug and discovers he has made it just like she would, half measure of plain creamer, 1 sugar, and temperature just a little below maximum. She's never told him this, never had a coffee from him (or any other precinct member for that matter). Roy's notes have indicated that Castle has very keen powers of observation regardless of the circumstances or his apparent distraction or inattentiveness.

Castle checks his watch and inquires if the team wants lunch. Hearing affirmatives the Writer states he'll be back in twenty and departs with no further comment or any suggestion as to what lunch will consist of.

Gates moves closer to the two male detectives.

"So what's the story with Demming and Castle?"

Esposito and Ryan can't but help look at each other in an unspoken question. Gates answers for the both of them "My office now!" in her best drill-sergeant tone.

"Let me clear this up for once and all, detectives. Nothing we say in the next 5 minutes leaves the room or goes on record". She pauses and is acknowledged by a crisp "Sir" from Esposito and a moderately more verbose "Understood" from Ryan.

The Captain tries again "So what's the story with Demming and Castle? Why did Demming act like someone kicked his puppy?"

It's Ryan who answers. "It more like who took his puppy so to speak. Beckett and Demming dated briefly during the second year Castle was on the team. Didn't last long and Beckett broke it off."

Esposito adds "She was going to go with Castle to the Hamptons, but then Castle went off with his ex-wife, and well it wasn't good for the whole summer."

Gates shakes her head. "Boy, when Roy left me briefing notes about them, he didn't quite cover how complicated these two make it!" The two male Detectives smirk a little, it may be that their Captain has a sense of humor.

Ryan can't but help himself. "Captain, how did you know Montgomery?"

Gates' answer floors the detectives – it's been a week of surprise announcements so far and looks set to continue.

"Roy & I worked Vice together when he was rookie D and I was still in uniform just out of the Academy."

Gates pauses, and rises her eyebrows as if to remind the Detectives that nothing leaves the room.

"There are no pictures before you even thing to go looking and can I remind that officers who served in IA have their personal files locked and monitored."

Both sets of male eyes are still wide in shock. Knowing full well what role female uniforms perform in Vice, especially rookies, the two detectives are frantically trying to ensure their subconscious doesn't visualize the Captain so attired. Once more they are grateful they don't have Castle's vivid writer's imagination.

"I trust that this piece of information really does not leave the room."
"It is clear to me that you have known about Beckett's and Castle's relationship for some time. However, I am choosing not to make an issue of this. I do understand the bonds of team loyalty and what extraordinary events are necessary to make most cops step outside that" As she speaks her eyes are on Ryan and he swallows nervously memories of last May still fresh in his mind. He unconsciously glances towards his partner.

"This is Richard Castle's best and probably only chance to secure a long term engagement with the NYPD. Also Beckett is not totally safe and her recent disciplinary matter could count heavily against her, as you well know." Gates' vision is clearly on the Hispanic detective this time, and Esposito nods. Message received.

"I trust I don't have to expand on the possibilities further. Especially if it goes adversely."

"Now not a word of this to anyone else. I really don't need to explain further do I?"

Both Detectives answer in the affirmative "Sir!"

Returning to the original topic "Do you think Demming knows they are together?"

"I think he may suspect but then again pretty much most of the NYPD and NYC thought they were together. He did make what he thought were subtle inquiries middle of last year after Castle came back but it was obvious he and Beckett weren't dating. But of course by then Beckett was dating Doctor-Motorcycle-Boy whilst Castle was initially still with his ex-wife." Esposito answers.

Gates rolls her eyes at this piece of information. Espo and Ryan share a "WFT Bro! Did Gates just roll her eyes?" look before squaring their faces.

Gates smirks at the two detectives. "You know I'm not Iron Gates all the time. You really don't think I raised two kids acting like a cop?!

"Now let's get back out there and on the case and do some more work before Castle returns with lunch.

Castle returns with lunch from a traditional Vietnamese place to find the Boys and Gates round the murder board. He has got the team an assortment of bánh mì (Vietnamese sandwiches) on wonderfully soft and crunchy baguettes. The most popular are the roast pork with fresh cucumber slices, fresh chillies, cilantro, pickled carrots and daikon. Most of the team break out in a cold sweat on their noses, except for Gates who picks at the left over chillies. What the team doesn't eat, Castle leaves in the break room where the fusion of classic French baking and fresh Asian tastes doesn't last long in the face of hungry cops and a free feed.

Heading back to work, they complete the write up of the notes and the transcription onto the Murder Board. However, they don't have ME's report and with no ID, they are stuck. Gates leaves the team at 5 pm to return to her office for paperwork and a conference call. By 7 pm the team are frustrated, and when Beckett emerges from the secure conference room where she's been locked away with the ADA and his assistants, the team take a mutual decision to wrap it up for the night, and resume in the morning. Esposito shoots Gates an email before ushering the team towards the exits, including a somewhat bemused Kate Beckett who is playing along with the change in roles.
Previously - With Beckett assisting the ADA, the team along with Gates have got a body drop courtesy of Robbery. With little information to go on, the onus will be on the team to get results, watched first hand by Captain Gates.

Tuesday

The following day, Beckett and Castle wander into the Precinct together at 8.00 am coffees in hand. Although there are as yet no public displays of affection, the two are clearly, observably closer than previously seen by their colleagues.

The ADA and his team haven't arrived yet so Beckett joins the team for recap and review of the case. There is precious little information beyond what was recorded at the crime scene as the Murder board attests. Without an ID, no witnesses and still pending forensics there doesn't look like there will be much progress, at least in the near term.

The ME's office is backed up and there will be nothing from them until later in the day if not tomorrow. For experienced detectives this is nothing new, and for Castle, he has learnt to accept the reality of slow pace of forensic examination and hasn't tried to use his influence or contacts to accelerate an investigation since his first year. There is of course one noticeable exception to that rule when it comes to Beckett and her mother's murder but this is that not personal case, and despite the stakes he won't use resources in such a manner.

Gates had started the morning with the team, but had soon retreated to her office with instructions to call her back if ANYTHING broke. The team are reviewing the canvas reports and evidence but are resigned to a day of treading water only interrupted by coffee, lunch and any theory Castle can concoct.

The ADA and his team had arrived at the Precinct around 10:00 am after attending a departmental meeting, and are now sequestered in a secure conference room along with a frustrated Detective Beckett. Her role is to ensure that the appropriate police records match the evidence and statements being collated by the ADA's team.

It's mind-numbingly boring and Beckett wishes she had Castle's power imagination to help pass the time. They don't break for lunch due to the late start, instead the sandwiches and terrible coffee are ordered in, and aside from essential comfort breaks, Beckett is going stir crazy and eventually after almost nine hours even the ADA concedes defeat and they call it a day.

Emerging from the conference room and returning to her desk, she smiles upon finding Castle reclined in his chair patiently waiting for his partner. Her had brushes his arm and his answering grin is all she needs to immediately start feeling better.

Having escaped the Precinct around 7 pm they have assembled at the Loft for a Castle Tuesday night tradition - Taco's. Alexis has made the trip over from her dorm at Columbia, and Martha is
also in attendance but eats sparsely – Mexican food is not her forte and anyway she has a late party with *buffet-to-die-for* to attend.

Conversation is fairly relaxed as they self-assemble their own food. Kate wisely refuses Rick's offer to make her a taco – she has seen his overloaded, flavor conflicted creations. Of course, the Red Heads are busy hunting for information on the moving-in status and how they can assist with the process.

Near 9 pm dinner is drifting to an end as leftovers are boxed up and put in the fridge and dishes loaded into the dishwasher. Kate wants nothing more than to retreat to the sofa or the bedroom with Rick but there is a knock at the door, and a surprise visitor in Jim Beckett, her Dad. Kate is surprised, it's not like him to turn up unannounced, but even more surprised when he asks to speak to Rick in private, and the two men she loves retreat to Rick's office.

If Martha or Alexis know what is going on, they're not giving anything away despite her best detective glare which is met by suspiciously sweet smiles back from the too. Alexis hadn't even blinked in the face of the glare that reduces her father to mush, clearly there were downsides to Little Castle working with Lanie. Martha of course simply had seen it all before.

Kate turns to find Rick and her father leaving the office and putting on jackets. It's only been a minute or two. Are they done? From the look on both their faces, she guesses not, and Rick confirms.

"We're heading out for a couple of hours, I'll be back around 11 pm I hope" and then sweeping both Alexis and Kate into bear hug, he bids Alexis good bye with a question "See you at the weekend, Sweetie?" and "Until later, Detective" to Kate who wants to glower at him, but is instead is rendered tongue-tied by the simplest brush of his lips across her cheeks.

**The Owner's Office, The Old Haunt, Tuesday Night**

Somewhere in his head, Rick knows that taking Kate's Father, the recovering alcoholic, to a bar should be wrong, but his office at The Old Haunt is secure – far more secure than anyone would suspect it should be – and away from inquisitive girlfriends, daughters and mothers.

Jim and Rick have coffees they picked up nearby before entering The Old Haunt, and are now sat around a small circular card table in the office.

"So you're not asking my permission to marry my daughter?" Jim queries. "To be honest, I half expected that to be the reason I was here in private tonight."

"Jim, I don't want you to take this the wrong way, but I know that the only person I can ask that question of – when the time is right – is Kate."

"Thank God. She would have killed the both of us! She has a gun you know" The younger man nods seriously despite the smile on his face.

"I know I will be asking the question, but not yet. We're not even moved in. Hell, until Friday night, I hadn't even envisaged us living together for some time yet. And we've still got a lot of logistics to sort out."

"So why am I here?" Jim inquires.

"Jim, as you know Kate and I have been seriously discussing everything about our relationship. We're in agreement, almost scarily so, about pretty much everything. Except, about the one thing
we didn't seriously cover or reach any form of agreement is money and associated legals." Rick runs his hands through his hair, perhaps in exasperation or it could be nerves.

"We've tried several times to have the conversation. But it always breaks down because Kate doesn't want to be seen as in anyway being a "kept" woman or after me for my money like many other women. I've explained to her that I know that isn't so, and they we are simply sharing everything.

Jim shifts forward in his seat and takes a sip of coffee "I can understand her position."

"I can't persuade her otherwise. But I need to know that Kate, like Alexis and my Mother, is provided for in the event of something happening.

Jim sympathizes with the Writer. "She gets that from her Mother. Winning an argument with a Beckett woman takes time, a lot of patience and a certain degree of luck, regardless of the logic and merits of your point."

"Jim, I am beyond serious and absolutely certain that this is it for me. I believe, Kate feels the same. I know I can come across as some lightweight, childish ass but when it comes to family and business I am wholeheartedly serious."

Rick pulls out a laptop and a document envelope and pass the envelope to Jim. "Please read the contents of the envelope and then we can talk further".

Jim nods and pulls out a sheaf of approximately 20 pages. Meanwhile Rick flips open the laptop, touches his finger to the reader near the track pad and then enters a password. Whilst Jim starts reading the documents, Rick goes to work using his laptop, and the office goes quiet except for the staccato rhythm of Rick's typing and the odd tap as a coffee mug is placed on a surface.

With decades of law and studies behind him, Jim Beckett can read and comprehend complex information efficiently and retain the key information. He also has a pretty mean poker face which he suddenly finds himself in need of as he starts to read and comprehend the information present concisely in front of him.

It takes him almost 30 minutes of reading and then skimming back through parts before he stops.

His eyebrows arched, and the poker face gone Jim Beckett looks at Rick Castle, or more correctly Richard Alexander Rodgers and sees not the author, nor the playboy, nor even the Police consultant in front him. Instead he is looking in the steely blue eyes of a very successful business man and multi-millionaire who just happens to be the best thing that has happened to his daughter since she was 19 years old.

"Rick, this is" Jim pauses stuck for the appropriate words "For what of a more appropriate word, incredible. I mean that literally. Pretty much unbelievable. Like out of your books. I presume Katie doesn't know anything about this?

"No. Neither does my Mother or Alexis. It's fair to say that whilst I have been very successful with my books, especially with the Nikki Heat series, there was period from early Derrick Storm onward when I made more money from my other investments and this has continued to be the base of my portfolio."

"So Jim, did you see the final two items?"

"I did." The lawyer's tone is level and neutral and Rick doesn't know if this is a good sign or not.
"I know it might be asking a lot of you, especially if Kate has issues or objections, but I would be honored if you choose to accept."

"Where do I sign?" responds Jim. Rick looks surprised, perhaps he expected more questions or reticence from the man who fathered Kate Beckett.

"Rick" Jim has his hand on Rick's arm but it is the quiver in his voice, something Rick wasn't used to hearing from the older man, even when he come begging for Rick's assistance almost 2 years ago.

"Please excuse an old man, hell a Father his emotions, his gratitude. But I can never thank you enough for bringing back Katie. Joanna and I had such hope for her as she grew up. She was so smart, driven but at the same time so beautiful and open. Sure she was difficult and a tad wild at times. But when we lost Jo, I lost Katie too. Kate Beckett was/is my daughter but she wasn't my little girl. You have given me back my daughter as she should have been."

Pulling Rick into a hug, he continues "How can I refuse. Regardless of anything else, what you have outlined and have requested I become involved with, will benefit my daughter, and her family and others….considerably. No father would want anything else."

"Although, I must admit I was surprised at your choice of some of the other members but I guess you have your own reasons. Regardless, count me in."

Rick pulls free of the hug and offers his hand to the man. Jim takes it and they shake hands.

"I'll have Steve Mathers, my lawyer, contact you tomorrow. Now it's time to get home. I've arranged for the town car service to take us home. It wouldn't do for either of us to get mugged on the way to our homes."

Jim hands back the envelope and contents, and Rick takes them and his laptop over near the desk and within a minute is back with Jim. "Let's go home."
Chapter Summary

Previously - Still no progress on their case, so it's time for Castle to come to the rescue.

Wednesday

It was past midnight when Rick arrived back at the Loft. Given his late arrival home, he had found the place dark and silent as expected, and as carefully as could he entered their bedroom and observed Kate already in bed, fast asleep. Undressing Rick had slipped in alongside her and quickly fallen asleep too.

Thursday Morning

Kate's alarm had shaken them both awake, and they had quickly prepared for another day at Precinct. As they prepared a quick breakfast of fruit, yoghurt and coffee, Rick could tell that Kate wanted to ask him about last night and why her father was involved. This wasn't a conversation to be held over breakfast or in the brief interval before work, and especially not at work, so he used his best deflection skills to redirect Kate's initial attempts at subtle questions, until in exasperation she was about to take a more direct line of questioning when Rick spoke up before she could glare through his skull.

"Kate, I will explain everything tomorrow night. I promise you that I am not doing anything irresponsible." She looks at Rick and nods. There is only a slight glare and no sign of a patented Beckett eye-roll. Rick knows it is a sign of how far they have come and how much she trusts him, mostly.

The commute from the Loft to the Precinct had gone smoothly, with even the notorious New York rush hour traffic cooperating for once. Despite the unresolved matter between them, both Kate and Rick felt in good spirits. For his part, Rick was optimistic that something would break on the case. Kate was less work focused but knew the evidence reconciliation was nearly complete and that alone was reason to be thankful. Although the questions from last night remained, Kate found herself at peace, and her usual mental gymnastics and anxiety were absent.

This shared bonhomie translated into their first clear public display of affection in the Precinct. Without discussing it, or even without their usual visual telepathy, their hands came together as they waited for the elevator from the Precinct garage, and so hand-in-hand Beckett and Castle arrived at work that Wednesday morning.

Standing at the back of the elevator as it made several stops on the way to the Homicide floor, they had shared the ride with several officers who had all done a double take, some openly staring, at the partners standing close with hands entwined but had said nothing. For their part Beckett and Castle didn't react – no blushing, no speaking, no change of position, simply stood there holding hands until they emerged onto the homicide floor and headed to the break room to refresh their coffees before splitting up for the day.
Homicide Bullpen, 12th Precinct

Coffee in hand, Castle joined the Boys and a surprisingly cheerful Gates. It transpires that the ME's office has finally delivered the preliminary autopsy report. And whilst, there is no definite ID for the victim, there are personal identification marks that might yield a good lead. Esposito as detective-of-record for the case wastes no time in leading the discussions.

"This guy had tattoos but they have been surgically removed. They have managed to get an image off and also an infra-red shot as well of one on his shoulder that could be gang related."

Ryan joins in "There is nothing in the records for this type of symbol but maybe Gangs' Intelligence can help?" Castle has to bite down on his tongue to avoid a quip about that name being a misnomer and somehow the Boys are looking at him expectantly, hell even Gates looks like she's waiting for something.

After second with no input, meaningful or otherwise, from the Consultant, the updates continue. Esposito and Ryan had been going through crime reports for the area, and are planning on heading out to an arranged meet up with the two units who act as beat cops in the vicinity.

So it's down to Gates and Castle take a road trip to the nearest Precinct with a Gang squad – the 11th. Castle is surprised when Gates chucks him the keys to her cruiser. He doesn't say anything but is aware of the Captain smirking. As they pull out of the Precinct garage, she finally speaks.

"I believe you own a Ferrari, Castle. Surely you can drive that without scratching it, you can do the same for NYPD property".

"Of course Captain" Rick replies and then before his better sense can intervene, he continues "Perhaps you can share that thought with Beckett Sir?"

"Oh No. I'll leave your partner to make that decision, if it necessary after the evaluation of course."

Castle can't but help shallow nervously. For a moment or two, lulled into false security by Gate's use of his surname only without the precursor "Mr", he had forgotten that his long term future was in the Captain's hands.

11th Precinct.

Arriving at the 11th, they go in search of the Gangs squad and the local Gangs Intelligence officer. Castle recognises the short plain clothes officer manning the office. "Angelo?"

"Hey Writer-Dude. Been a while. Still kicking with the 5-0 I see." Says the compact Hispanic as they shake hands.

"Don't you work with Slaughter anymore?" is the uncharacteristically blunt response from the Writer. Angelo is not at fault, but his mere presence is enough to remind Rick of one of his less proud moments of recent times.

"Nah, Man. Too dangerous, you'd know that, and anyway he got benched, sorta."

Gates is hanging back, watching, listening, and learning. She remembers the period when Castle was shadowing Detective Slaughter from Gangs. There was obviously more to the matter than she had picked up.
"So where is Slaughter by the way?" Castle asks.

"Joint FBI/NYPD Task Force on Mexican gangs. He's on research and information. No field work. In fact, they're not even allowed to carry in the secure location apparently. He's being tightly supervised by the G-Men." Angelo smiles and Castle can't but smirk at the thought of Slaughter emasculated without his hand cannon.

Suddenly, the writer turns back towards Gates, and gulps slightly and then apologises to both for his lack of manners.

"Angelo, this is Captain Gates from the 12th, my partner." Both Angelo and Gates are surprised by this announcement. Angelo obviously wasn't expecting a Homicide Captain, and Gates was caught out by Castle's reference to her as his partner.

"Captain, this is Detective Angelo, formerly a street operative, and now I guess our friendly, local Gangs' Intelligence Officer.

"So Angelo any chance you can help us out with something?" continues Castle as he removes the ME's evidence photos from the manila document wallet and hands them across.

12th Precinct, late morning.

"Morning again Captain, Castle" greets Ryan as the two arrive back from the 11th.

"Anything from the beat officers? Responds Castle.

Esposito is by the Murder board. "Nothing concrete but we need to get some more information from Robbery. What we have doesn't make sense."

"How so?" breaks in Gates.

"The local beat cops are reporting that robberies, in fact all crime is way down in that block area in the last 9 months. Interesting thing is that whilst we have all the indicators for crime decreasing dramatically but there is nothing to explain why. There are no special programs running, nor are they gang or enforcer presence, nothing on Organised Crimes' radar either."

"I hope you had more luck with Gangs?" queries Ryan.

Castle glances at the Captain, who nods for him to proceed.

"We did. The tattoo isn't a gang insignia. It's insignia from the New York Army National Guard. Fortunately, the Intelligence officer at the 11th recognized it because there are 2 army reservists from the same unit in the Precinct. A lucky break but we'll take it." The Consultant smiles, and the team return it. They are all aware that sometimes all you need is one of the fore-mentioned lucky breaks to make progress.

"The curiously thing is that the tattoo is upside down. That's what confused us when searching before. No idea why. But if the victim is ex-military, his DNA should be available to cross match."

Esposito will contact the Department of Defense and seek a DNA cross-match. That is if the DNA record had been taken for the victim. Whilst it was DoD policy to take DNA for all military personnel, the priority was given to those serving in active combat zones. It was possible, that their victim, being in the New York National Guard, may not have deployed and may not have had their DNA registered. Still it is worth checking.
Ryan needs to keep following up on the crime reports using the NYPD's records database. As Castle is not authorized for personal access to the network, this means the two male detectives are tied up. Gates needs to make some phone calls, and almost reluctantly leaves the team.

Esposito turns to Castle and raises an eyebrow in question.

"I can manage" responds Castle. Before muttering to himself "Wish me luck in Robbery."

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**Robbery, 12th Precinct, early afternoon.**

Taking the elevator down the floor that Robbery resides on introduces Castle to an unfamiliar environment and uncomfortably for a people-person like himself, a sea of unfamiliar faces.

"Who are you?" inquires one suspicious uniform and Castle is somewhat caught off guard having been used to the whole floor knowing him. He knows he doesn't have a badge, just his official unaccompanied visitor ID.

Fortunately, he is saved by Jeff Robinson, one of the Robbery D's from the crime scene two days ago. "Castle, from homicide" is the terse information from Robinson, and Castle nods in gratitude.

"How can we help?" asks the suddenly more relaxed uniform.

As Castle explains what they are looking for, the Robbery detectives and a few uniforms gravitate in to listen. Robinson has been around, has heard the tales from other cops in homicide and in the Precinct, but here and now, he realizes this is way better than the tales he's heard. Rick Castle, may not have a badge but he's got a cop's instincts and a hell of a quick mind. He's also got some non-standard skills, not least is his ability to spin a tale.

A couple of the audience start to volunteer information, and a white board is dragged over.

Sure enough, within 20 minutes the small cluster of detectives and uniforms, have a fairly basic model of the crime figures for the blocks surrounding the murder scene. The problem is that the information doesn't make sense.

There is no apparent gang activity, no enforcers. And yet general crime is down, and every cop and consultant knows that this is simply isn't how things work. Robinson is about to pull himself away and get back to his open case, when he notices Captain Gates observing from the corner of the Robbery bullpen. 'How long has she been there?' he wonders.

Just as things look to have reached a conclusion, Castle, speaks up again. "What about these reports of squatters on the top levels of two of the buildings? Robinson knows this one as it was one of his cases. "Investigated and nothing found. The landlords didn't report any further issues and the matter was dropped. Why?"

Castle, has phone out reading a web page. "According to the New York Historical Society, the top level of these old blocks was originally used as workshops and maintenance facilities. Access is through the end stairwells but these were often blocked up, and also through concealed entrances in some apartments. They'd make ideal drug labs or something similar. Clandestine drug labs have security and perhaps this is what is impacting the local crime figures."

Castle addresses the team around him. "I think that may be the information we need. Thank you all for your assistance. We'll keep you appraised on any developments." With that he uses his phone to snap from pictures of the board and sends them to Ryan and Esposito.
In the background, Captain Gates slips away and enters the elevator, past an exiting Tom Demming who has arrived as the impromptu task force is winding up.

"Writer-monkey" Demming snarls."Lost?"

"No, just seeking some assistance from Robbery. We've got the makings of a decent set of leads for our case" and with that the Writer turns and heads to elevator, unaware that he has picked up a tail.

Homicide Bullpen, 12th Precinct

As he's leaving the Robbery pen, Castle's phone vibrates with a message from Beckett. "On break. U about? Coffee?"

He's in the elevator and heading towards the homicide floor as he texts a simple "omw XX". He's emerging onto the Homicide floor, when he realizes that Demming is still trailing along behind him. Thinking it coincidence, Castle heads to the break room in search of his partner.

Beckett is already in the break room, battling with the coffee machine. On hearing familiar footsteps enter the room, she looks up and smiles at her boyfriend. However, the smile is truncated as she catches sight of her former boyfriend at Rick's shoulder.

"Kate?" Demming inquires. Castle half turns and swivels his head to scowl at Demming who steps past him towards Kate.

"Demming" acknowledges a clearly pissed off Beckett, her tone flat and her manner entirely professional even if it does look like the Robbery detective may be testing her limits, especially with the use of her first name.

"Demming" She starts again if only to try and maintain some diplomacy for future occasions when they might work together. She pauses, makes her tone more personable "Tom, I'm seeing someone. Its long term and serious." His eyes and face appear to confirm he know or at least suspects this. Kate doesn't give him an in to speak. "Lifetime serious." She clarifies. She can feel Castle almost preen at this public declaration.

Demming looks surprised, possibly not at the information but at her willingness to state something like this publicly. But he's not giving up.

"Regulations don't allow partners to be romantically involved." Lectures Demming. "Luckily, I'm not your partner" he adds his voice lowering and he starts to move closer.

Castle's eyes have gone wide. Did Demming just try to put the moves on Kate? He obviously realizes Kate and he are couple, Kate just explained how serious it was, and he still tried!?

"I know the regs" Beckett bites back with her left hand coming up to halt the male detective's progress into her personal space. "Captain Gates knows" she growls. She's really intent on not saying a lot more. She doesn't want, or need, to explain what they are doing to preserve their working relationship.

"Kate?" Demming tries again, his voice still pitched low. And this time, it there is a break in her professionalism but not in the way Demming could have expected.

Grimacing Kate "We're done Demming. Long-time done, more than 2 years, and there is no chance, never!" and with a clearly exasperated sign she turns to the still wide eyed and moderately angry Writer who is glaring at the Robbery Detective.
With her right hand she grabs Castle's left hand and pulls the Writer towards her. Their bodies meet and with her free left hand she cups Castle's chin and pulls him into a hot, wet, possessive kiss.

By the time they break for air, Demming has got the message and left. They do however have an audience and smattering of polite, possibly mocking applause can be heard from beyond the break room.

"Wow" acknowledges a somewhat breathless and aroused Writer. Despite her best efforts Detective Kate Beckett is smirking and internally doing a little victory dance. For some reason, her mind makes the leap to lap-dance with Castle the lucky recipient, and she blushes. Damn she is definitely spending way too much time with Mr Innuendo.

After the interesting developments in the break room, Beckett has returned to the conference room, and the team has reassembled around the Murder board which is being updated with gusto. Compared to yesterday there is significant progress with much more information even if they don't yet have a name for their murder victim. The developments have lifted the spirits of the whole team Gates included. It takes an hour or so to get the reminder of the information collated and to confirm their DNA match request with the DoD.

Castle offers to get lunch for the team, and pushing his luck slightly, knocks before respectfully sticking his head into the secure conference room where he repeats his offer, this time for the ADA and his team. After responses in the affirmative, he informs them to leave it to him, and winking at Beckett, who tried to hide a smile behind a hand, and then the Writer retreats out of the door way, and closed the door.

ADA Denoza, has caught the wink directed at Beckett, and he wonders if the rumors and gossip are true. Certainly, the two of them have palpable chemistry. Also, whilst he's been impressed by Detective Beckett contribution in the case preparation, she also not quite the cold, direct, professional other colleagues have described to him. She's certainly professional, but there is a lightness of being, and an unwavering bounce in her step, which increases noticeably when her famous shadow is around. He really should take time to talk to her, not least because his wife is a massive Rick Castle fan and an autograph or two would earn him plenty of brownie points.

After Castle's provided Chinese lunch for all where Beckett had managed to slip out to join her team, they had carried out writing up the new information and running theory. It will be tomorrow or the day after before the DoD gets back to them regarding the DNA. Gates comes and goes, seeking updates and providing encouragement to the team.

Castle misses Beckett's presence. Not only for her physical embodiment of all he desires but also because more often than not, they inspire each other to solve cases. He's thinking about what Kate means to him in both a personal and professional sense, and that's it. Castle has the break through.

"What if our victim, wasn't the victim but the perp, and he had the tables turned on him by his intended target or targets?"

Castle continues on. "We can't place him as a resident or visitor. What if he was one of the B&E gang?"

"He doesn't have the build for the hammer guy so he must have been one of the two pistoleers"

"We have no reports of shots fired" adds Ryan.
"We need the ME to run some more tests, they may have missed something"

"On it confirms" Esposito as he reaches for the phone.

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Manhattan Medical Examiners' Office. Late Wednesday Afternoon.

Entering the Morgue, the team can hear a familiar voice raised in approbation. Dr Perlmutter is schooling someone.

"Doctor Gello, do you know what I dislike more than sloppy forensic work?"

"Being told our work is so....." the acerbic ME pauses to catch and control his anger "substandard" he pauses again "by Detectives." He pauses again taking a breath. "But what really gets MY goat, is being told by the untrained Writer that perhaps we missed something and we should go back and check for not just for GSR but also gun oil on the hands of the victim!"

"Now we will have to mutely take our punishment as he insufferably gloats." The senior ME distains.

As the ME's rant completes, the homicide team, announce their presence with some strategically sounded coughs.

"Oh goody. No time like the present then."

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The Loft, Wednesday Night

Tonight the Loft was Red Head free, they had checked their Cop and Consultant personas at the door, and were simply Kate and Rick.

Bliss, is the only word Rick Castle can currently find to describe his present state. He's in his bathroom sharing a hot bath with his live-in, moving-in girlfriend. There is soft candle light, some soft mood music, and good wine and grapes to nibble upon.

They are both in an excellent mood and will enjoy the night together in their home with no distractions.
Building Theory

Chapter Summary

They have their break through but there is still investigations and work to be done.

12th Precinct, Thursday morning, 8.00 AM.

Beckett and Castle are a little late arriving at the precinct due to their morning routine getting side-tracked in the shower as their exhilarated mood from the previous evening carried over. As a result they were caught in rush hour traffic but it too failed to detract from their own private happy place. Once again they enter the Precinct hand-in-hand with coffees in their unconnected hands. And once again they attract attention, though few are brave enough to comment, from their colleagues.

Entering onto the homicide floor the attention escalated as Esposito and Ryan greet them with a chorus of "Look its Mom & Dad, holding hands and kissing". Trust those two to be brave/foolish enough to risk Beckett's wrath. However, instead of an angry rebuff, glare or even blushing, Beckett turns to the two male detectives and in her most level tone responds.

"I'm pretty sure you two were present when we announced we were moving into together." Then pausing for effect she continues "And I'm pretty sure that kids don't want to think about what Mom & Dad get up to after kissing, eh Boys?"

Ryan half-exclaims, stammering something unintelligible, and Esposito simply ducks his head. Beckett smirks as she moves off towards the secure conference room, as she passes Castle there are fist-bumps exchanged as she leans in to grab a quick kiss on the lips before separating for the day.

The makeshift homicide team has assembled round Ryan's and Esposito's desks. There is progress. The Department of Defense has processed the DNA sample they had sent in and Esposito has the results.

"No direct match. But they say it is a near match – full sibling match for a current serving member. However, as the DNA is not a direct match, the DoD will not release the information."

"This is a murder investigation, surely we can get that information?" questions Castle voicing what the team is surely all thinking. The petty bureaucracy and mindless rules of officialdom still amaze the Writer, who despite the years working alongside the civil servants of the NYPD, still occasionally hankers for his world of privilege where his name or a suitable gratuity usually resolves any problem. Of course he's not crass enough to raise it here fully aware that amongst these people, his friends, they value him for contribution and participation not his fame or wallet – although the free lunches no doubt help.

Esposito picks up the phone and calls the Department of Defense number and begins the bureaucratic process of going through channels to get the necessary information.

Two minutes later, and the person on the other end of the line is not cooperating with Esposito, and Gates simply walks up to Esposito and holds her hand out patiently.
"Good Morning, this Captain Victoria Gates of the NYPD's 12th Precinct. Can you please put your supervisor on immediately" This a command, not a question, nor a request.

The rest of the team grin, maybe having the Captain on the team has benefits. Not that any of them would ever mention it out loud and certainly not to Beckett.

**Homicide 9.30 AM Thursday.**

An hour later, they have the name of the serving soldier with the sibling match, James Flute – a full time Sergeant in the New York National Guard. This is enough to provide them with an ID for their victim.

Ryan pulls up the information.

"Meet Henry James Flute, aka Harry Trick, aka Mike Angeles."

Priors for B&E, mugging, dishonourable discharge from New York National Guard in 2009. Guess that's where the scrub tattoo is from. Brother is James Henry Flute, currently active as a full time NCO in the New York National Guard. He is currently deployed overseas and we are unable to contact him. The Army will handle the death notification.

"James Henry and Henry James. Their parents must have loved those names." Castle is reading over Ryan's shoulder and interjects again. "Oh look. Two known associates - Milos Jussic and Leroy Herron."

"Well that makes three. Just the right number for our robbery crew." Ryan continues. "Both have form for B&E, muggings." The team close in around Ryan's monitor as their interest and spirits rise. They're finally getting somewhere.

"If it/was them, then the question is, what were they doing in the buildings, and why only targeting the top floors?" asks Castle.

"I don't know" Says Gates "but let's get some uniforms to their last known addresses and see what shakes out. I'll organize that and I'm afraid Captain's duties call so I'll leave the rest of you to progress the investigation and I'll get back as soon as I can". A chorus of "Captain" acknowledges her.

As the Ryan and Esposito start on the more detailed research of the suspects' records, Castle has time to do some research of his own. As a property owner and investor he has access to real estate databases and other information and he has an idea he wants to pursue.

He hasn't mentioned it to the Boys and he misses having Beckett here to bounce and build theory with. Sighing, he pulls out an iPad from his bag, swipes his password, and launches the app. Logging into the website he starts to call up information on the properties and in particular any tenant changes in the last year.

After a few minutes her pulls a legal pad from Beckett's orderly stationary, and quickly starts making notes. If Esposito or Ryan were to look up they would have spotted Castle with a slightly smug smile on his face and he hummed whilst he searched for information and recorded information on the pad.

After 20 more minutes, he looks up and asks Ryan if he can request some files from Central Records. Ryan dials the number on his phone and passes the phone to Castle who makes his request and hands the phone back to Ryan so he can provide his badge number for authorization.
"Castle, what did I just request?"

"Coffee?" the Writer asks with a nifty redirection.

**12th Precinct, 2:30 PM.**

Gates has re-joined the team, and Ryan gives the update.

"Captain, units have checked the last known addresses for Flute, Jussic and Herron, and no-one has seen anyone of them since Sunday. However, phone traces put them in the vicinity of the apartments late on Sunday night. We may have to assume that they were with Flute when he was killed. They could be captive or have been injured or killed too."

Castle rises from the edge of the desk when he has been sitting. A number of faded evidence files are beside him, and he has one in his hands thumbing through the contents.

"Excuse me, Captain & Detectives". As they turn to look at him, Castle continues.

"I believe, I may identified the apartment the B&E team were trying to locate, and I may even know why they were so keen to locate it." The Boys perk up, waiting for another Rick Castle tale of mystery and deduction or potentially a complete wash out, either were equally entertaining, often the latter would be better but that was not something they would raise with the Captain present nor with so much at stake. Gates nods to the Writer.

"I researched all the tenancy leases for the two buildings in the last year trying to find any that lined up with the time the crime levels dropped. There were twenty-seven in all. "Only, four of those leases were for the top story of either of the two blocks. I also covered the surrounding blocks as a sample for elimination purposes. Of the four, only one fit the likely profile.

"Then using the lease agreement details, I deduced that the lease for Apartment 67 has been made with fake names on the rental agreements. The lease was started around the time the crime levels dropped off. The lease was in the name of Andrea di Cione. These is the real name of Verrocchio one of the most famous Florentine painters. Why this is of interest is related to a cold case – a theft, not a murder"

"On 17 November 17, 1969 art thieves stole seven paintings, including works by Cassatt, Monet, Pissarro and Rouault, from art dealer Stephen Hahn's Madison Avenue art gallery. The 1969 value was estimated value at $500,000. Who knows now. They have never been recovered and the police investigation never charged anyone. It was rare because it was reported – often art theft was not reported to keep insurance premiums down."

"Incidentally, Stephen Hahn had been discussing art theft with other art dealers as the theft was taking place at the Gallery. It was investigated as an inside job but nothing came of that line of inquiry."

Ryan jumps in. "What's the connection?"

"Ah, strange you ask." Castle's playing to the gallery, but the first signs of a frown on Gates' face is enough to get him moving right ahead". Milos Jussic's father was an employee of the building housing the gallery when the theft took place. He quit soon after. He was interviewed by the police but was ruled out despite circumstantial evidence pointing to him."

Gates obviously isn't a big fan of the slow reveal and the scowl on her face hurries the Writer along.
"Patic Jussic's family lived in Apartment 67 from 1967 until 1983. The father died in 1977 when Milos Patic was 2 years old. The father was killed by Dominic Delucca who as fate would have it was also an employee at the same building housing the Gallery until 2 months after the theft. Delucca was arrested, tried, convicted and sentenced to 35 years in 1978. He was released two months before the leases were taken out."

"When Delucca was asked why he killed Jussic he replied that 'Jussic was a thief and he did not share what was agreed' but he said nothing else. What was interesting about Delucca is that he is an immigrant from Italy and he came from Florence. Hence his use of a famous Florentine painter as an alias for the lease."

Gates lean in "So why lease apartment 67?"

"After leaving the gallery and until his death Jussic was the building handyman for the three apartment blocks. I think he may have hidden the pictures somewhere in the Apartment blocks and that is what Delucca is looking for."

"So how does tie in with the B&E gang?" Esposito asks.

"Turns out Jussic junior was keen to get revenge on Delucca according to Delucca's parole officer. However, it appears that Delucca had cultivated mob ties during his time inside according to the prison and his parole officer. So I reckon Jussic was run off or scared off the first time he tried. He has then recruited his friends and they attempted to track down Delucca again."

"They found him last Sunday?" queries Esposito.

"Could be. Worth investigating right?" Castle poses the question.

Gates looks at the Writer and nods. Now is time to take charge. "Right people, we don't need a warrant as we can work on the assumption that Jussic and Herron may be in imminent danger."

"Esposito place a priority request to ESU for an entry team". She waits whilst the male detective nods and reaches for the phone. "Get an ETA and tell them we'll meet on site."

Esposito dials ESU and sets the wheels in motion.
Knocking On Doors

Chapter Summary

Castle has found the links and now it is time to do that other side of the police work… knocking in doors.

12th Precinct, 3.10 pm, Thursday

Castle knocks on the door to the secure conference room and after a short wait it is opened by one of ADA Denoza's female assistants.

"I'm very sorry to interrupt, but could I possibly speak to Detective Beckett for a minute?"

"No problem Mr Castle" answers the ADA. "We could all do with a break, and now is as good a time as any". At his words, the team around the desk rise and make for the door and pass Castle as he moves into the room. All except the ADA and Beckett.

"Hey" Beckett greets Castle as she moves into his space, oblivious of the other occupant of the room.

"Mr Castle, a moment of your time if I could, please?" the ADA asks just as Beckett nears Castle.

"No problem Mr Denoza."

"Charles" corrects the spry, smartly dressed ADA as he holds out his hand which Castle shakes. "Rick" the Writer acknowledges in turn.

"I wonder if you could do me a tremendous favor and…" he's pointing to a not so small bag of books sitting incongruously in the corner, the top cover is visible with the familiar shape of a naked female holding a gun - Heat Wave.

"Sign some books? Sure." Confirms the author. "What's your wife's name?" He knows without asking that the ADA is not a fan, which by deduction means his wife is.

"Megan" the ADA offers. Castle nods, and with the practiced ease of years of signing rapidly autographs the small pile of novels. "You're a lifesaver, this case is a nightmare and this will at least get me in her good books – literally – I hope."

"There you go. Please pass on my thanks to your wife for being such a loyal reader." Beckett is always surprised at how humble the Writer is when signing for genuine fans and not simply those seeking reflected fame. Of course, the ego lurks not far below the surface and can easily emerge.

The author feels a pair of lean limbs surround him and hears "Hey again" in his ear and her turns towards his Detective. A quick, almost perfunctory kiss and Castle speaks.

"I was just coming to let you know we've got a pretty strong lead, and we're heading back to the crime scene to conduct an operation."

"Mmmm okay. You be safe and let the Boys and Gates take the lead."
"Of course. We've called in ESU and uniforms for this as well. By-the-book." The Writer assures his partner. He leans in for a quick return kiss with a whispered "Love you" directed to his Detective as he exits the room before she can respond.

Eyebrow raised, Beckett can't help wonder what could possibly make them consider such a deployment when the team normally does this alone.

Never-the-less, she needs to let her man go do his thing, even if this is role reversal and now she is the one tied to a desk. In the back of her mind, is the nagging feeling that this could be a far bigger part of her future once she is promoted to Sergeant? Her commitment to Rick is absolute but it doesn't stop her second guessing the method by which they are securing their future with the NYPD.

Crime Scene, 4.30 pm.

A small convoy of vehicles enters the car park. Three marked units, an ESU response team bus, and their two detective units.

They exit their vehicles and cluster round the trunks collecting their vests. Two marked units are providing local security, and the Third will pull round to the front on the main street to cover the front. The team had evaluated the risks and believed that ESU presence would be advisable given the probable presence of at least 1 shotgun and an unknown number of suspects. It never hurts to have a group of hard heads in black with automatic weapons to help persuade suspects of the correct course of action.

Gates watches as without speaking Esposito and Castle check each other's vests and gear in a practiced and familiar manner, simply patting each other on the shoulder to signify all is well.

Ryan has crossed over to Gates and performs the same duty for her and she repeats the slightly unfamiliar steps for him. Satisfied that all is good they assemble with the ESU team. The Sergeant leading the ESU squad – Fredericks - looks to Gates for permission and she nods her assent as the cops form up for a tactical briefing.

4.39 pm

It has been less than 10 minutes since they arrived but the briefing is complete, and ESU form up and move towards the rear door of the apartment block. The homicide team fall in behind ESU and Castle drops into the tail of their stack.

As they reach the door, the ESU Sergeant knocks and the door is opened and they file in. The tension rises as they make their way up the stairs towards the top level. They meet no other traffic on the stairs and it is eerily quiet except for the occasional squeak of boot rubber on the stairs.

There is a raised fist at the front, and the column halts. Gates is surprised how quiet it is. Even the usually immutable Writer is silent.

The ESU Sergeant beckons her detectives forward and then it is clear they are pausing whilst someone does a scan of the vicinity and ensure members of the public are out of the way. It is Ryan who detaches from the group, to scout ahead, his attire being deemed the least cop like.

Looking back between her Gates watches Castle watching. Well observing is a more appropriate term.
His eyes light upon the names on the back of the ESU vests. Sweeping forward through the team they settle on the front pair. This is the entry team, first in and most likely to be on the receiving end of anything or anyone waiting for them on the other side of the door. They are similar in dimension, both stocky, about 6 foot, one with a ballistic shield, the other a MP5 Submachine gun. Suddenly his eyes light up and Gates has begun to recognize the increasingly familiar twinkle.

His voice is low but it carries far enough to encompass the waiting cops. "So Johnson and Johnson. Twins? How do they tell you apart? Is it a size thing?" The voice is full of mischief and a touch of innuendo and it would be unimaginable not to mention unacceptable for a member of the public to address cops like this, especially the no-nonsense, and tightly coiled members of ESU. But the Writer isn't a member of the public. He's one of the team, the family of NYPD despite the lack of a badge and a dark blue uniform.

As his words seep through the assembled cops, there is a smirk here or shuttle shake of the head there, but no verbal acknowledgement or laugh. At the front, the forenamed Johnson twins, sigh and bump helmets as if to realize the Writer's quip is going to follow them around for a good while. All around, some of the tension and anxiety lifts from the team.

Gates realizes this has been the Writer's intention. He won't be in the team kicking down doors, nor most likely involved in detaining any suspects. But it his investigative skills that have bought them here today. He does what he can and she knows this often goes well beyond what a civilian consultant could or should do. Roy's notes and the formal records for a number of cases make it clear that Richard Castle has saved the lives of each one of this unique team, none more so or more often the Beckett. And they in turn have saved his. Yet, there has been nothing in the press or even in his novels about this. Her original image of a vainglorious, egotistical playboy are nothing like the reality of the man standing behind her.

Ryan returns and reports all clear. Then gazing at the group of cops in front of him, his eyes widen slightly. "I missed something didn't I?" he says forlornly.

"Bro, you always miss something" confirms Esposito earning a quick fist bump from the Writer.

4.51 pm

Emerging into the hallway, the column splits and the ESU team approaches the door of the target apartment stacking up either side. The homicide team takes position out of direct line of the doorway.

The Johnson twins position themselves in off center at the front of the door with Johnson Shield in front of Johnson Submachine gun. By their side two other ESU team members step forward with the Ram and prepare to swing.

The ESU Sergeant glances back to Gates, receives the nod, and he raises a hand with thumb and 2 fingers up. He nods to the team and begins a silent count down starting with the middle finger, and as his thumb folds into his still raised hand making a fist, there is a serious thud as the Ram impacts around the lock followed by a crash as the door lock shatters and the door flies open.

The Johnson twins move through the door, ballistic shield locked in front, MP5 sweeping from side to side.

"NYPD! NYPD!"
Officer Down

Chapter Summary

Having discovered the probable motive behind the murder, Castle joins the Homicide Team and ESU as they raid the suspect location.

Apartment 67, 4.55 pm

"Clear!" "Clear!" echoes from within Apartment 67. Less than four minutes since ECU knocked at the door and they have completed a sweep of the apartment finding no one.

Gradually the members of the ESU team emerge with weapons slung. The entry team of the Johnson twins separate and split to pass either side of the homicide team's stack and as they pass the tall form of Richard Castle, they lean in and sandwich the Writer with a firm but still friendly shoulder nudge. Saying nothing, they move on, leaving a somewhat surprised Writer and three grinning cops.

"Surely you didn't think they were going to let your comments pass?" Asks Gates as she smiles and shakes her head. Esposito and Ryan are smirking and Castle knows that Beckett will be hearing about this.

Franklin, the ESU Sergeant, appears and confirms that there is no one present inside, but the team will remain for another 20 to 30 minutes in case anything breaks.

Only then do the Detectives followed by Castle enter the apartment.

A quick glance around shows that there are definite signs of occupation with food and drink containers on a camping table in the main living area with a couple of folding chairs nearby. However, as the sweep by ESU of the apartment has revealed that none of their targets – neither the as-yet-unknown suspects nor the remainder of the presumed missing B&E team - are present.

The layout of the apartment is not symmetrical with the main living area 'L' shaped due to the intruding wall opposite the kitchen. Based on the unused fireplace and mantel this is part of the structure that houses the massive but now redundant chimney stack shared by all the apartments.

"Esposito, we'll need to get Crime Scenes here to investigate and collate any the evidence." Calls Ryan as he moves down the hallway to investigate the other rooms.

Apartment 67, 5.07 pm

The team have done a walk-through of the apartment. There are two bedrooms just off the hallway that leads from the main living area but they are empty except for a single, relatively new double mattresses in each room, lacking anything else except a couple of basic wool blankets. Further down is a toilet (empty except for a bag of cheap toilet rolls) and unsanitary odour hinting at years of neglect. The toilet and the separate bathroom are both decorated in a depressing resilient 70s styling with overly bold green tiles. Beyond the bathroom at the end of the hallway is the master bedroom. There is nothing in the master bedroom except with built-in wardrobes with dust and
spider webs.

The team have assembled back in the main living area, and are more closely examining the debris of occupation. It is clear that the apartment has been occupied recently. There are working light bulbs and there is a trash bag with the remains of takeout, a few water bottles as well as the previously noted food and drink containers on the camping table.

The Writer has paused and pulling out his phone, he has quickly swiped his finger a few times and is now looking round the room in puzzlement.

"Castle, you got something?" Ryan inquires as he notices the Writer's actions.

Holding up his hand as if for silence, Castle continues to frown. He's turning his phone round in his hand and then rotating on the spot and then pausing and tilting his head to one side slightly as if mentally trying to calculate something.

"This room should be bigger"

"What?" Esposito is not happy. Their leads have gone nowhere apparently, and the Hispanic detective lets his frustration seep into his tone.

"The room should be bigger. According to the floor plans this room is about 4 or 5 feet too short" as Castle indicates the wall forming the base of the L directly opposite the dilapidated open kitchen.

"ESU checked, we checked, it's just a storage space with shelves behind that two-thirds size door." Answers Esposito

"Maybe there is a false wall?"

"Bro, not everything has hidden passageways and secret chambers." Esposito is clearly exasperated.

To be fair they are all disheartened by the lack of bodies (alive, dead or in between) or even any particularly good evidence. The mood had soured and has dampened the team's previous good spirits and morale. They had come hoping for further breakthroughs or even possibly resolution on the case they appear to have nothing, or near as.

Gates has quietly stepped back, tempering her own disappointment, and observing her detectives going about their jobs.

The Writer persists "Something's not right."

"That wall shouldn't be there. Maybe it's something that Jussic senior built when he was working building maintenance here?"

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**Apartment 67, 5.11 pm**

Castle has opened the two-thirds size door that leads to the walled in storage space and is using a torch to search the enclosed space roughly 4 feet deep and 10 foot across with basic shelves on either side and two similar longer sets of shelves with a 3 foot gap in middle on the longer wall in front of him. As he swings the torch around he looks down and he frowns.

"Espo, Ryan!" there is a note of caution and urgency in his voice and the two detectives hasten to
join the Writer. Gates too moves forward towards the end of the living room where the rest of her team are clustered.

"Look at the floor. At the floor boards below the skirting board. What do you see?" He asks but continues straight on.

"The floor boards stop by the skirting board under the shelves but in the middle where there are no shelves, the floor boards clearly continue under the skirting board."

"I see what you're pointing out but I can't see a door or anything" Responds Ryan.

Castle shakes his head. "It will be simple visual redirection or disguise, like a magic trick".

"Wait, look at the edge of the shelves on this wall. See how there is a narrow fascia board running all the way down the wall. That could conceal the edges of a vertical rising door."

If there is a door is it still well hidden, but more importantly how does it open. There has to be a trigger in here somewhere?

Castle suddenly steps out from the storage room back into the main living area and looks around and then strides to the fire place.

"That's the old flue gate handle" remarks Gates as she remembers one from her childhood home.

Castle pulls the handle and it moves a little. He pulls it harder and an audible click and a mechanical sound not unlike an un-oiled bike chain can be heard from the corner of the room.

"Bro!" Esposito's call indicates something has clearly happened.

"Get ESU back in here" calls Ryan.

Gates echoes the request. "Sergeant Franklin, get your team back in here, we've found something."

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**Apartment 67, 5.13 pm**

Castle has returned from the fire place to join Esposito and Ryan in front of the two-thirds door to the storage room. Gates is now standing to his side. Looking in he can see the results of his actions. Between the shelves is now a 3 foot wide full height doorway which is blocked by a heavy dark red curtain.

"Wow." He can't help hazing Esposito. "No secret rooms?"

"Part of the wall just slid straight up and Hey Presto!" Confirms Ryan, also enjoying poking fun at his partner who is now glaring at him.

Castle is still looking forward at the freshly revealed doorway, when from behind a curtain emerges the blunt dark metallic barrel of a shotgun. With nothing more than instinct Castle shouts out "Gun" and with his long limbs shoves both Ryan and Esposito down and to the left side of the doorway and simultaneously he hip-checks the Captain pushing her away from the door and the lethal shotgun.

Miraculously Castle's actions have left them all them clear of the first shot which goes between the two detectives and the writer, the majority of the pellets shattering the ceramic tiles in the kitchen opposite. A few pellets catch at the clothing of the Detectives and Writer but in the adrenaline and
stress of the moment this is ignored, for now.

Already turning to confront the threat Castle grabs as far down as he can reach on the barrel of the already fired shotgun and uses it to pull the suspect from behind the curtain and through the doorway into the room where he can be tackled by his partners. He has also pulled the shotgun barrel past his body and it remains pointed at the empty but blasted kitchen with the ceramics already partially wrecked by the pellets. Despite the noise of the first shot, it is quiet enough to hear the metallic rasp of the slide being worked and another shell being chambered. The shotgun fires a second time, but again miraculously no one is hit but the ceramic tiles in the kitchen are now definitely history.

Gates has her service weapon is out and tracks the suspect but she can't shoot as Castle is now grappling with the man holding the shotgun. Suddenly, Castle turns his body and twists into the suspect. Using his not inconsiderable mass Castle slams his shoulder into the armed suspect who is launched into the wall and door frame, and the shotgun flies from the surprised suspect's grasp, and then with surprising speed the Writer drives one blow from his right hand to the exposed solar plexus of the suspect who doubles over and falls onto the floor of the main living area.

Castle part turns towards Gates, and grins, eyebrows raised in victory as the suspect completes his stunned collapse to the floor.

Only momentarily distracted, Castle turns back to focus on the suspect and he starts moving to secure the suspect until his partners and the other cops can assist when

BAAAMMM!

The report of another shotgun blast shakes the room which has just stopped echoing from the first two shots.

Castle's body spins back towards the doorway, his face losing all trace of the smile, now surprise, shock, and pain echoing on his handsome features. His jacket is whipped to the sides by the force of the impact of the shotgun blast almost center upon his chest.

Gates is turned towards the doorway, her pistol coming up, looking for a target. She is vaguely aware of the ESU team pouring back into the apartment, weapons up.

In those intervening second or so, another round has been chambered and the second shotgun fires again. BAAAMMM!

The force of this impact carries Castle well clear of the doorway far into room where his tall form shorn of all motor control is propelled back into the camp table and chairs, scattering the simple furniture on his bloody descent to the floor.

Despite policy about visual sighting of the target, at least two of the ESU team raise their weapons - a MP5 and a M4 carbine Gates notes from the periphery of her vision - and fire into the shadows of the store room and the now not-secret door and space beyond the curtain.

The brief fusillade of shots finishes in seconds. The remainder of the ESU team have assembled and voices are almost screaming commands.

"NYPD! NYPD!" "NYPD! Drop your weapons or we will fire again!"

Esposito and Ryan are pushing themselves off the floor where they landed after the Writer had shoved them to safety. Their faces are filled with shock and horror at the vision of their critically injured partner and friend shattered on the floor in front of them.
ESU are now streaming past the stunned Detective team and through the door way into the hidden space. The Homicide Detectives ignore what is now a sideshow for them, and they focus on their fallen team member.

Gates has holstered her pistol, and drops to her knees beside the Writer. His jacket which had been worn over the top of his vest is torn asunder and the dark blue material is even deeper in many places as his blood soaks into his clothing. The vest has taken the first shot full on and shattered and fragmented but it is the Writer's right shoulder that concerns her most. She can see shattered bone and flesh behind shredded skin and clothing and blood is hemorrhaging from multiple lacerations.

"Hang in there Castle, we'll get you help as fast as we can." She wishes she could wish the EMT's here.

"….Boys….okay?" Castle's voice is low and stuttering but he's asking after his partners. Clearly concerned for them despite his injuries.

"They're okay." Gates doesn't know for sure, but even if injured it will be far less serious than the man prone before her.

"Why?" the question comes unbidden to her lips.

"Because you're all cops and I could never let one of you …" He doesn't complete the sentence but the implications are clear.

"It's not just Kate I'd…." He is struggling to breathe and there is blood coming from his mouth. "I'm just the writer, the tag-along….."

Gates has his hand in hers – when did she do that? She is momentarily aware of the blood on her hands and clothes but she doesn't care as she grips his hand harder "No Castle, you're one of US too."

"Now I know you don't like following orders, especially mine." He grimaces and his eyes lose some more focus.

"But I would really appreciate it if you didn't die on us. I don't think Detective Beckett would like it either." A quick pause before the Captain continues. "And there's the paperwork to consider." A cop's black humor but something she knows the Writer would appreciate if he wasn't so terribly hurt.

The writer grimaces again, there is no answering smile, and his eyes are now rapidly losing their lustre but in a surprising steady but quiet voice he makes an effort to speak and replies.

"Yes Sir, you'll have to excuse the lack of a salute" and then in a much quieter tone which belays the shuddering of his body Gates can sense through their joined hands and see with her eyes.

"Please…Alexis…Kate promised take care" and pushing out one last gasp "Tell Kate, Always." With that final special word, the Writer's eyes suddenly close and he stills.

Gates is aware of two the ESU team pushing past her to attend to Castle, and beside her a large first aid kit is dropped to the floor with thud.

Still holding Castle's hand, she's doesn't risk glancing back to Esposito to ask where the hell the EMT's are, but she can hear his voice on the radio, the desperate tone and the awful words "Officer Down!"
Ambushed after raiding Apartment 67, Castle has saved the rest the team but been shot in the process. Gates has returned to Precinct to inform Beckett.

(see Chapter 1 – Aftermath).

12th Precinct, 6.48 pm.

Gates turns to stride back to her office, force of habit of course had made her start off without confirming that Beckett was actually following her. Checking her stride and half-turning, she can see Beckett rising from her conference room seat and starting to follow with a frown indicating her concern rising on her face.

Emerging into the bullpen, Beckett is immediately aware of the change in atmosphere. Uniforms and Detectives are clustered together, shock open on their faces, and what looks like tears. Whilst Gates is now back at the Precinct, there is no sign of her Boys – Ryan, Espo or Castle. Castle!? A dreadful sense of foreboding grips her very being, and her eyes go wide in as yet unspoken concern and fear. Her nervous tick of placing her lower gum under top teeth draws blood this time. In a matter of moments she is assailed by rational and irrational terrors. She can barely stand, and she doesn't want to hear Gates' next words so certain is she that they could destroy her.

"Beckett…" Gates' usually strident tone moderates as their eyes meet, and the next words bring the dreaded confirmation without the actual detail as her Captain uses her first name.

"Kate, please come into my office" and Gates shepherds the suddenly pliant Detective through the doorway, before Beckett can break down in full view of the bullpen.

Kate's last view of that bullpen is of her colleagues' eyes full of shock, sadness and - Oh God - she recognizes the other emotion present, sympathy. She never wanted that to be directed at her again, not after the same dreadfully familiar masks upon faces all those years ago when even her Father couldn't bring himself to look into her eyes for more than a second or two. Everyone else she knew and even strangers had shared that same look, the look that hurt so much she hid from it wherever and whenever she could. She had spent so much time lost in the depths of frustration, anguish, sadness, bitterness, guilt, and the desperate need for comfort that remained unrequited for so long. Could she survive it again? Did she need to?

The remorseless onslaught of memories leaves Beckett shaking, and despite her screaming desire to stay standing and exhibit some control, she almost falls into the chair opposite the Captain's desk. Gates had put her arms out to shepherd and steady the younger detective and Kate's hand brushes against the older woman's and come away stained with gummy, dark red marks.

Feeling the alien sensation against her skin, Beckett looks at the Captain, and exclaims "Sir, blood – you're injured!" Gates looks down at the dark jacket and notices for the first time, the deeper, darker stains on both sleeves but more readily apparent on her left arm and hand where a trail of congealing blood is barely moving. This was the hand that had grasped Castle's whilst they waited for the EMTs.
The Captain shakes her head, her face a near mask. "Kate, it's not my blood." The truth of the explanation is both necessary and yet unnecessarily brutal.

The temporary distraction of the blood on the Captain is gone as the reason for its presence rams home. "No…NO…NO…No…no…no" flees unimpeded from the younger woman's lips.

"Beckett, he's alive! Castle is ALIVE!" Gates breaks in. "They're ALL alive!"

Gates tries to reassure Beckett. She takes a moment and pauses so she can assess the woman before her. At this very instant, there is no trace of Detective Beckett, simply Kate, struggling to handle the news of her loved one being injured.

Then as the Captain's words sink in, the moment passes, and then Detective Beckett is back, however shakily. Victoria Gates cannot help but wonder at the strength of character of the young woman across from her. How much pain does one person need to suffer in a lifetime? How much can one person bear?

"How bad?" The question is almost inaudible as Beckett pulls her body upright to look directly at the Captain. "How bad" Louder this time "How bad is it?"

"Kate, he's in critical condition. He was shot twice. Took two shotgun blasts – one to the chest which the vest took most of, and the second to the right shoulder which was only partially protected by his vest."

Suddenly Gates feels the urgent need to explain more, to give Beckett the context and the story of how her boyfriend and partner ended up in hospital fighting for his life.

"We were ambushed. ESU had performed entry and swept and cleared the apartment. We were checking out the place and looking for evidence. Castle found a false wall and hidden door." Gates is trying to keep it succinct as she seeks to explain how the Writer had once again seemingly conjured up a breakthrough. "We had called back ESU when a shotgun opened fire on us."

"God, Beckett. He saved the whole team. Ryan, Esposito, Me. Pushed Ryan and Esposito out of the path of the first shot. Me too. A shotgun blast would have seriously injured or killed them and me. He then tackled the shooter as he was about to take a shot in my direction. He took down and disarmed the shooter. But there was a second shooter with another shotgun hidden from sight and they fired on Castle whilst he was moving to secure the first suspect."

"The first hit blast was mainly on the vest, but the second was against his shoulder."

"The ESU medic and then the EMTs stabilised him on scene, and he has been transferred to Bellevue." She has been watching Beckett as she passed on the details.

"We're going to get you to the Bellevue as fast as we can."

"I'll have LT and Hastings take you to the hospital and then collect Ms Rodgers and Mr Castle's daughter."

"Oh my GOD" Kate had nearly forgotten his family, so lost in her own self-pity and anguish. "Do they know?" The shake of the Captain's head signals not.

Beckett acknowledges "I need to call them." This time there is a nod of the head, and the Captain stands to leave her office and give Beckett some privacy.

"Please stay" Beckett's request is so quiet Gates almost misses it. The Captain once more nods, and
by the time she raises her eyes Beckett has her phone to her ear. Seconds pass, and almost a minute later Beckett voices her frustration.

"Damn it! Pickup Martha. Please?!"

Despite the Detective's pleas eventually the call goes to voice mail. She can't leave a message this important to be discovered on voicemail, so she hangs up. She knows from Castle's frequent complaints that Martha only really needs a 'dumb' phone as she does not text, MMS or anything else remotely 'smart'.

There no real choice open to her now. So it is with extreme reluctance that she selects Alexis' number from her phone's speed dials and hits the call button. It only takes a few seconds before the call is answered.

"Alexis?" She's trying to keep her tone neutral, but some part of her dispassionately knows she is failing badly. Hearing the young women's voice respond with her name thanks to Caller-ID, she continues.

"Where are you?" A pause as she listens to the response. "Your Dorm? Good, I need you to stay there please." She knows her voice is wavering and close to cracking, the emotion laced timbre of her words no doubt reaching her lover's daughter.

"Um, Alexis, do you have friends with you?" Gates can see Beckett visibly wince as she asks the question knowing that the younger Castle will certainly pick up on the as yet unsaid context if she hasn't done so yet.

"Alexis…Rick" she starts again "Alexis, your Dad has been hurt. He's at Bellevue. I'm heading there now." Kate knows it is insufficient explanation but it is all she can offer at this time.

"We're sending a marked unit to collect you and bring you to Bellevue. Please stay there and they will collect you as soon as possible."

There is a longer pause, and now the emotional shockwave has hit Beckett. Where previously there were no tears, her eyes are swollen red,

"Alexis, he's alive! I've been told he's badly hurt, but I'm still at the Precinct so I don't know any more. I've only just been told myself."

Her words sound like pathetic excuses to her own ears, and Heaven knows what they'll sound like to his daughter, as she tells her that the man they both love is near death. And who is she? She's only truly loved him for less than 2 years, whereas Alexis has loved him a lifetime. How does she deserve a place at his side, the man whose greatest trait – one that she adores almost above everything else - is Father to his Daughter? Hearing Alexis voice on the end of the connection, Kate snaps her thoughts back to now.

"Alexis, there's something else. I've haven't been able to reach Martha. I didn't want to leave voicemail. I know I have no right to ask you, but can you please try? If you can reach her, tell her to go the Bellevue Emergency Rooms. Please call or text me if you do."

"Do you have any questions?" And Kate can barely hear the almost silent negative from the other end.

"Alexis, I will see you at the hospital as soon as you get there. We're sending the car now. We'll all be there. Call me for anything. I'll see you as soon as we get the hospital."
She ends the call. She aware of Gates watching her, and the Captain speaks.

"I suggest you call your Father, and perhaps Doctor Parish."

Her Dad, what a great idea. Kate knows that her Father has been meeting up with Martha. Perhaps he can contact her whilst she and Alexis get to Bellevue.

"Excuse me Captain, I'll call my Father."

As Beckett once more raises her phone to her ear, Captain Gates rises from her chair and opens her office door. The action attracts the attention of the officers on the floor. Calling over the nearest uniform, Gates barks two quick orders.

"Velasquez, please ensure that Hastings has the unit ready to go once Detective Beckett leaves my office. Can you also get all remaining members of the watch and Detective teams to assemble in the bullpen at 7.30?"

Meanwhile Kate has reached her Father.

"Dad, It's Kate." She listens to her father's polite response but right now she can't deal with the inanities of the pleasantries.

"Dad!"

"Dad, Rick's been shot." She takes a deep breath, really sucking in a lungful. It is the first time she has said the actual term. "He's alive but it's really bad, he's at Bellevue ER, and I don't know more. I'm still at the Precinct but I've leaving very soon and going there. Alexis will be bought there too."

"Dad, can you please try and reach Martha? I can't reach her. Let me know if you do and get her to come to Bellevue ER."

Thank you Dad. I love you too. I'll tell Alexis that as well. I gotta go. Bye."

The phone almost drops from her hand as she ends the call. She take a moment to compose herself and looking she finds Captain Gates looking back at her, close enough to almost touch.

"Beckett, the unit is waiting to take you to the hospital. Go be with your family and friends."

Then to the surprise of both women a brief hug is exchanged and Kate murmurs "Thank you" as she breaks the short surprise embrace and turns for the door, once more biting down on her lip, the sensation of pain intended to help keep the tears at bay at least until she clears the bullpen.

As soon as Beckett has left her office, Gates picks up the phone and calls the Medical Examiner's office. "Can you please have Dr Parish call me at the 12th Precinct immediately! I will need her to report to Bellevue ER shortly. I'll explain once she calls back."

Victoria Gates has made her career by being in control and the beacon of calm compliance with the numerous laws and regulations in the chaos that is a NYPD Precinct. However, today she has been shaken to her core by the events that have unfolded. She would love nothing more to retreat home and seek the solace of her husband and her own family. However, she knows that is many hours away.

She needs to get back to work. She has a long list of phone calls she must make. There is the official chain of command to follow which means she will start with the Chief of Detective's, and
then possibly the Commissioner's office. Given Richard Castle's fame no doubt Public Affairs will be involved.

There will be press. There will be brass, lawyers, and bureaucrats. But as soon as she called the Chief of D's she promises herself she will call home and speak to her husband.

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**New York Ledger Website – Breaking News 7.00 pm**

Ambush in Midtown. Cops injured in shotgun attack.

*Officers from the 12th Precinct have been injured in a shoot out in a midtown Apartment block. Severity and number of injuries of the casualties are unknown at this time.*

*Eye Witnesses reported that ESU and plain clothes officers entered the building shortly before 5 pm and sometime around 5.15 a number of shots including 2 bursts of automatic gunfire were heard from the top floor. Four ambulances attended the scene and the EMT were seen treating at least two unconscious patients on gurneys before transporting them to Bellevue ER. At least two injured plain clothes detectives were seen being transport in a patrol car that left with the ambulances.*

*There are two Medical Examiner vans, as well NYPD Crime Scenes teams in attendance. One eye witness reported that there are "a bucket load of cops" with at least 10 units on scene.*

*There is presently no information forthcoming from either the crime scene or Police Plaza. We will update you as soon as we have more information.*

*Readers should remember that best selling crime author Richard Castle is a long term consultant with the 12th Precinct's homicide department where he shadows Detective Kate Beckett and her team.*
Aftershock I

Chapter Summary

Gates has told Beckett of Castle's injuries and now the shockwaves from the news begin to spread.

Unit TwelveCharlieFive

The journey from the 12th to Bellevue is completed under lights and sirens. Beckett is in the back of the marked unit as Hastings is riding shotgun with her new partner – Thomas? – driving. As they set off Hastings had mentioned that LT was originally meant to be driving but Gates had sent him back to the crime scene for something. She is grateful for the separation in the back of the unit as it gives her an excuse to minimize any likely fraught and painful conversations even with her fellow cops. In addition, it gives her time to think now that her initial terror at the news had abated a little.

"Beckett" Hastings' voice interrupts her thoughts. Damn she must have been really distracted to have lost track of time on the journey to the hospital. She cannot even remember what her thoughts had been aside from the one overriding objective of taking Rick's hand and never, ever letting go again. She's definitely not running, not now, not ever.

Looking forward through the mesh separating the rear of the cruiser from the front, she can see the entrance to Bellevue ER coming into view. At the front of the hospital is a fairly significant crowd including an array of TV cameras and photographers formed up covering the entrance area and surrounds. She can see hospital security putting up crowd management barriers and some uniforms assisting.

"Beckett, we can go round the back? No audience there." Hastings offers.

"No, I need you to get Alexis as soon as possible. I'll jump out in the drop-off zone. How scary can a bunch of cameras be, right?"

Who's she kidding? She's spent years avoiding the spotlight, it was one of the key reasons she had refused to contemplate dating Castle in the early years, and they had gone out of their way since May to avoid the limelight for this and other reasons too. Well, all those were irrelevant now, and she knew she would have to face the cameras and press eventually but doing so without Castle was something she had never considered.

The marked unit gives one more blast of the siren before Hastings mutes it, but leaves the lights flashing. This has certainly attracted the attention of the crowd and press. As the unit pulls to a stop in the drop off zone, the strobing of flash guns begins and the glare from the LED lights on the TV camera illuminates Beckett as she exits the vehicle and sprints for the ER entrance ignoring the calls and night-into-day lightshow from the assembled press and onlookers.

At the doors to A&E are a hospital security guard and a uniform from the 12th. The uniform, smiles at Beckett and they step aside allowing her to enter the ER department.
Bellevue Emergency Room, 7.33 pm Thursday.

Making her way to the Emergency Room reception area, she strides directly up to the desk and palms her Gold Shield from her belt. She feels the solid weight and hefting it in her palm derives familiar comfort as her skin traces over the pattern of the shield and her number. She lifts her hand with the Gold Shield up to make it visible and the receptionist blinks once, twice and goes to speak but before she can, Beckett fires a direct question

"Richard Castle and two Detectives from the 12th were bought in by EMT. Where are they?"

"Ma'am" begins the receptionist.

"Detective Beckett" she corrects, once again pushing her badge forward to confirm her title and authority.

"Can you please tell me what happened to Richard Castle, Kevin Ryan and Javier Esposito of the 12th Precinct?" Beckett is being a hard ass because it is the only thing stopping her from breaking down and she can't be another broken person stuck in the ER waiting room with no control. She needs control and focus.

The reception nods, and reaches for her phone "I'll see what information I can get you. Please take a seat for the moment Detective."

12th Precinct, 7.35 pm

With her door and internal windows shuttered, Gates had finally got off the phone conference with Chief of D's, Assistant Commissioner, Press Relations and Mayor's Office. There had been a lot of questions and very few answers.

Late for her own 7.30 pm bullpen meeting she had emerged from her office to find the bullpen full. Given that it was late evening, she was expecting a few detectives and perhaps a third of the watch roster of uniforms. Instead she is surprised to see pretty much the whole detective team for the Precinct, and almost half the precinct's total uniforms crowded into every space. Looking around she spies officers who were rostered off, even a couple who were meant to be on vacation, and at least one who was on medical leave.

She uses Castle's chair to step up onto Beckett's desk. The low murmur of conversation stills and she has the full attention of the Precinct.

"Thank you all for coming in.

In case you haven't heard, Richard Castle was critically injured today whilst assisting the 12th Precinct with an active homicide investigation. Detectives Esposito and Ryan received minor injuries. All are at Bellevue receiving treatment. Esposito and Ryan are expected to be released before morning. Castle is in surgery and we currently have no further information on his status. It is very serious, he was shot twice by a shotgun.

Castle's actions today prevented more serious injury to those detectives and to myself. I can only pray that it does not cost him and his loved ones more than it already has.

I have spoken to the Chief of Detectives and to the Commissioner who have made the full resources of the NYPD available to the 12th. The Mayor has assured the Commissioner that any necessary City resource will deployed as required.
I thanked them for their offers of support but told them that we have it. The 12th looks after its own, and make no doubt that Castle is one of us.

We will be providing officers at the hospital for security and also to escort and support Castle's family and Detective Beckett. This will be on a volunteer basis, please see Sergeant Adams who will manage the roster. We have already have coverage sorted until 08:00 am tomorrow. Those participating are requested to wear uniform. Detectives to wear NYPD dusters or similar attire as well.

There will undoubtedly be extensive media interest. Can I remind you that any press inquiry needs to be directed as normal to Press Relations or to myself.

One final point. The surviving suspects are under guard at Mount Sinai Hospital. It is expected that one will be released to our custody tomorrow and the other in a few days. The Commissioner has expressed his full confidence that the investigation will be handled professionally and dispassionately by the 12th. I trust I make myself clear on this matter?

Are there any questions?

After she had fielded one question regarding blood donations, she thanked and dismissed them and returned to her office to make more phone calls.

Bellevue ER Public Waiting Area, 7.40 pm

It's only some 5 minutes or so later, and Beckett has confirmed to herself that hospital waiting rooms are a terrible place to spend any time, even 5 minutes. There is a lot of noise and bustle - distressed people and distressing people. She is currently perched on a chair in one corner of the waiting from with her jacket pushed back so not only is her badge visible but also her Glock. This has at least made the other occupants shy away and keep their distance.

Giving in to her frustration, Kate stands and begins to pace looking for a corridor to walk off her tension but before she can exit the reception area, Lanie Parish bustles through the entrance hall and spotting Kate pulls her straight into a deep embrace, almost crushing Kate's chest.

"Lanie, thank you for coming. I can't get an answer from them about anything. I don't know where the Boys are? Or where Castle or how he is?" The unresolved questions flow from her as she struggles to hold back the tears.

The growing desperation colors her voice and she knows it must be apparent especially to someone like Lanie who has known her years. But she no longer cares. She will shout it from the roof tops, declare her love for Richard Castle on national TV, do anything to know more and to keep him safe.

Dr Lanie Parish pulls back a little from her best friend but with their arms are still connected, and she assesses the scared woman in front of her.

"Leave that to me Girl. I'll get us some answers and then we'll get you somewhere out of the way. I'll be right back."

With that Lanie has gone in search of answers and the Boys, and Kate decides to chance a vending machine coffee before resuming her occupation of the corner seat.

Columbia Dorms, 7.55 pm
Alexis Castle is huddled by the entrance porch of her dorm block. A protective posse led by her roommate, and several other students has her cocooned in a state of attempted distraction with conversations about anything and everything meaningless and trivial. It is so sweet, and well meaning, that Alexis accepts it without compliant even though she wrought through with fear and the emotion pounding her head – she really does have an awful headache too - and she wants to escape so desperately into the arms of her family.

Suddenly, the past-twilight is lit by the flashing lights of a police cruiser approaching. The group ceases their conversation and falls silent watching as the car comes to a halt and a compact but athletic female officer exits the car and dashes towards them. Within seconds, she is standing in front of them. Her name badge identifies her as Anne Hastings. Alexis knows the uniform who she has seen about the Precinct and chatted to briefly during her internship with the ME's office.

"Good Evening, Miss Castle. I'm Anne Hastings. We're here from the 12th to take you to your Father at Bellevue."

"Alexis" the girl corrects automatically.

"Please come with me Alexis and we'll get you to the hospital and your Dad as fast as possible."

Hastings turns back to the group of wide-eyes young women and men. "Thank you for waiting with and looking after Alexis. We appreciate it. The NYPD looks after its own and we'll take care of Alexis for now."

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**Bellevue ER Waiting Room 3, 7.57 pm**

Lanie had worked her magic and got a waiting room assigned for their use.

Kate Beckett is sat on one of a small couch with her feet up on the same chair Lanie had briefly sat in after guiding her to the room. Lanie has now disappeared in search of the Boys. The vending machine coffee is terrible and Rick's phrase of 'monkey-peed-in-battery-acid' springs to mind. She smiles despite the current desperation.

Her body is folded in with her head between her legs as she breathes deeply, momentarily losing herself in the control that the long inhalation of air offer her before slowly exhaling. She has no idea how long she has been doing this exercise that she learnt as part of her recovery from her shooting and again as part of PTSD management. She remains alone in the room waiting for news, for anything.

Hearing the sound of the door, she barely lifts her neck to raise her head to check who it is. Oh, it's Lanie and she has found her Boys.

Ryan has his jacket off, and upper left arm wrapped with bandages. Esposito has some cuts to his head, and his jacket is ripped and stained. But otherwise they are healthy though their faces are streaked with what like tear tracts.

As they both enter the room, they stop and stare at Beckett for a moment and then their heads drop.

"Beckett…Kate…" Are the only words that Kevin Ryan can force from his mouth.

Esposito can't say anything. There are tears pooled in his eyes and traversing his stricken face.

Without speaking the two approach her chair and them reach down together to pull Kate up and
into their bodies. No words are exchanged. None are needed.

Lanie has closed the door and stands guard, mutely witnessing the immense pain and shared love of her best friend and her partners.

Then Esposito speaks.

"Beckett, that man of yours...he saved all our lives today. He disarmed a suspect with a shotgun. None of us saw the second shooter."

Kate knows they will both be wracked with guilt but there is nothing to forgive and she needs to let them know this.

"Javi, Kevin. Thank you for being with Rick. It's not your fault. I don't blame you and I'm sure Rick doesn't blame you. It goes with the job."

Both try to raise protests but Kate continues.

"It was always his choice to stand with us. It means so much to him, and just like he would never ask me to give this up, I couldn't ask him to do the same. I want you to know how much Rick appreciates your friendship, and that it means the world to him, to have..." Kate hiccups through her tears "brothers after all these years."

They stand there wrapped in each others' arms and they are dimly aware of Lanie's comforting hands rubbing across each and every back.

Kate suddenly remembers that Lanie went out with two tasks. The first was to find the Boys.

"Lanie? Rick...?"

"Sweetie, they don't have any news yet. He's was received into the ER around 6.25 pm and they had to stabilize him before taking him straight to surgery around 6.55 pm. He's still in surgery since then and likely to be so for some time.

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Paula Haas & Associates LLC, 8.10 pm

"Thank you Captain Gates. I'm sure will be speaking again very soon." Hanging up, Paula Haas finds she is slumped in her home office seat. She often worked from home rather than her expensive serviced office in Manhattan simply because she could appear to be perpetually mobile and mobility in Manhattan meant being alive in the cut-throat market unless you were the top of the food chain and could make everyone else come to you.

Paula Haas has dealt with Rick Castle and Rick Castle's issues for many years. But never has she faced anything like this.

"Goddamn you Rick Castle! Don't you dare die on us!" She pauses to swipe at the tear that threatens her still fresh looking makeup. "Damn it Gurl, get your act together, we need to call the press and then the Dragon Lady."

Reaching for her desk phone, she dials her assistant.

"Hilary, we're going to need all the press release material we prepared for Rick." Pausing to take in the response at the end of the line.
"Yes, it is true. Rick is in critical condition at Bellevue. They don't know anything else at this time. Please get everything packaged up and ready for courier pickup. I'll let you know more when I do." She disconnects the call.

She really wished she hadn't given up smoking all those years ago. And now is not the time for alcohol as she needs the clearest of heads for what she is about to do.

She picks up the phone and hits a number on the speed dial panel.

"Ledger, City Desk Editor" echo's back down the line.

"Hi Mark. It's Paula Haas, I have a press release for you on behalf of Richard Castle's family. However, I need to obtain final approval for release and this may take some time. Probably not until after 10 pm. I know your print deadlines but this is breaking news and we're offering it to you as an exclusive. I think you'll want to wait on it."
As the shock waves from the news spread, Family and friends gather at the hospital and begin to deal with the aftermath.

Bellevue ER Waiting Room 3, 8.40 pm

There is a firm knock at the door and before anyone can respond Anne Hasting appears guiding a pale and tearful Alexis into the waiting room. Hastings nods to Beckett and the other Detectives and then retreats from the room.

Kate has started to rise from her seat to greet the teenager, when Alexis flies into Kate with virtually no time for Kate to open her arms.

"Oofft" grunts Kate at the surprise impact of the Red Head.

"Hi Alexis" greets Kate, once again feeling totally inadequate. "Kate" mumbles the teen as her head drops onto Kate's right shoulder.

"Hey Sweetie" is the more upbeat tone of Dr Lanie Parish as she greet her former intern.

Alexis remains in Kate's embrace but turns her head to smile wanly at Lanie Parish and mouths "Hi". As she does she catches sight of Ryan and Esposito who are sat at a small table nursing cups of aforementioned monkey acid coffee. They have their heads down, and although Alexis was not there to witness Kate's pep talk they are both still obviously distressed and feeling guilty.

Shaking her head, Alexis gently pulls free from Kate and approaches the table. Both Detectives look up sheepishly at her approach. Alexis comes to a stop in front of them, and puts both hands on her hips. With a huff she rolls her eyes and gestures with a raise of her head for them to stand. Wordlessly they follow her silent instruction, and as they rise her hands come up from her hips and with no warning the Red Head grabs each by one ear and pulls them into her. Releasing their ears she put an arm on each shoulder and leans into them.

"Dad, loves you both. I know you'd both do anything for him, and he's done the same for you. No one is allowed to feel guilty." As Alexis speaks she turns her head back towards Kate and fixes her with a direct stare.

Kate and Lanie are frozen in shock at the actions of the teenager. Of course the faces of the two male detectives are even more slack-jawed in amazement.

Lanie whispers to Kate. "Little Castle has some serious mojo going on. Are you sure you want to join this family?"

"Too late." Kate affirms and she can't help the small smile that illuminates her visage. But then she remembers something. Damn she really is off with the fairies today.

"Alexis, have you managed to reach Martha?" she asks. The girl shakes her head.
As if on cue, the door opens again and it's Martha being escorted in by LT. Martha half turns and touches her hand to forearm of the lanky uniform in gratitude. "Thank you for being so kind."

"My pleasure, Ms Rodgers. If you need anything just ask the officer on the door." LT nods to Beckett and the Boys before backing out of the room and closing the door.

The first thing both Kate and Alexis notice is that the usually composed and vibrant Martha Rodgers is pale and her face is tear streaked. Yet she carries herself almost regally, and gestures for Alexis and Kate to come to her.

"Hello my Dears. Is there any news yet?" At the shake of their heads she continues explaining how she got here.

"Victoria arranged for some officers to interrupt my class and then she spoke to me on the phone to inform me of what happened and arranged for the officers to get me here as fast as possible."

Somehow the three of them end up clustered together locked in an emphatic embrace of interconnected limbs, tears and half-sobs.

"Dad would have a field day if he could see this" observes Alexis through shaky half-breaths, half-sobs."

"Well, we won't share that with him, will we Ladies?" responds Martha, all her years of acting giving her voice more control than her emotions should otherwise allow.

"What do we do?" Kate is feeling truly lost at this moment.

"Darling, we do what Richard always intended for us to do, we look after each other." Responds the red-headed Diva. The younger red head nods in agreement.

Kate's eyes go wide, and then a very small smile appears, incongruous with the tears still streaming down her face.

"Always" she confirms as she too nods. Her voice is strong, rich, laced with emotion and flavored with the love that counters the desperation that bought them to this point. There in that moment, with that one word that encompasses everything about her life with Richard Castle, she eternally commits to this, his, and now her family.

Both Alexis and Martha still, both in tune with Kate meaning, and mutually realizing that this is one of those life defining moments. No words are spoken as both Martha and Alexis in turn place caste kisses upon her lips, sealing this permanent pact between them.

Family.

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**Bellevue ER Waiting Room 3, 9.50 pm.**

Their waiting room is getting crowded.

Paula had arrived a couple of minutes ago but other than waving in greeting to everyone she was still stuck with her phone to her ear and was leaning into the corner of the wall talking rapidly.

The doors open again and her Dad arrives in the company of a tallish, lean and grey haired man about Rick's age. They seem to know each other, still exchanging words as they are let in through the door. As her Dad makes his way towards her, the other man spots Paula and peels off.
Jim Beckett wraps his daughter in a tight hug.

"Sorry" he begins,

"What for?" Kate asks.

"Being late. Had trouble getting through the traffic and then the crowds out front. I couldn't get hold of Martha. But I see she made her way here anyway."

Jim spies Alexis and Martha on the couch behind Kate and he removes one hand from his daughter to wave at the two women who both give wan smiles and small waves back in acknowledgment.

"Any news?" he asks his daughter.

"Nothing yet. He's been in surgery since before 7 pm. It could be hours yet. Thank you for coming."

Alexis had almost forgotten about her phone when she spied it vibrating and swiping a finger her face falls as she sees the caller ID. It's her Mother. Meredith is calling from California. Sighing she picks up her phone and heads to the one unoccupied corner of the room before accepting the call.

"Hi Mom"

"We don't have any news yet. He's still in surgery."

"It was great of you to call. But you don't need to come out. I have a lot of support here. Gram, Kate, her Dad, and cops from the 12th."

"Mom, there is nowhere for you to stay – Kate and her Dad will be staying at the Loft." Alexis has no trouble with the little white lie. She couldn't handle the stress of dealing with her Mother now and definitely not staying for any length of time. God knows her Father drove her a little crazy but her Mother could seriously unhinge her and she often wondered how others had coped with both her Mother and Dad at the same time.

"I'll call you tomorrow with an update. I promise."

"Thank you for calling Mom. I really do appreciate it and I'll pass you best wishes on to everyone. Love you Mom."

Hanging up, she looked down at the status bar to see she has multiple emails, Facebook alerts and messages. She'll deal them later, for now she seeks the embrace and comfort of Grams and Kate.

Bellevue ER Waiting Room 3, 10.40 pm

Captain Victoria Gates has just stormed through the press corps and crowd outside the ER. But the stern mask falls from her face as she enters the waiting room and takes in the assembled cops and citizens anxiously waiting for news. She notes the three women with their arms across the shoulders of the adjacent person as they sit on the longer couch. A teary faced Kate Beckett is in the middle of the two Red Heads and has her head leaning against the older woman.

"Good Evening Ms Rodgers and Miss Castle" starts the Captain. She nods to Beckett who sits up a little straighter with her own nods in acknowledgement.

"My dear Captain, please call me Martha" interjects Martha. "Alexis" corrects the younger Castle.
"Martha, Alexis" Gates begins again. "I want you to know that everything possible is being done for Mr Castle. The Commissioner, Chief of Detectives, the team from the 12th Precinct stand ready to assist in any way possible."

"Detectives Esposito, Ryan and I owe our lives to him. What he did this evening was truly selfless and I need you to know that what he does is valued by all of the NYPD family. He does make a difference, and he is considered one of us."

"There will be a presence from the 12th Precinct outside this room, and your father's room once he comes out of surgery. Other officers will be available to escort you to your home or anywhere else. Simply speak to one of the officers on the door."

She takes business cards from her handbag.

"This is my personal number. Please call it anytime should you need anything."

"Detective Beckett, on the orders of the Chief of Detectives, you are stood down from duty on compassionate leave with immediate effect. Your focus should be on your partner and family."

Kate nods her head, unwilling to trust herself to speak.

"Now Detectives Esposito and Ryan, I need you to head home soon and get some rest as you will need to report to the 12th by 09:00 tomorrow morning. You will need to complete incident reports and have them ready for review by early afternoon. I will speak to you both outside in a minute."

Esposito and Ryan echo each other as they respond in the affirmative with a respectful "Sir."

Glancing over Paula Haas, the Captain continues.

"There will be a press conference at 08:00 am tomorrow. There will be official statements from the NYPD, and also from Richard Castle and Black Pawn. I believe Ms Haas has sought your approval and permission for the statements."

Nods from Kate, and Martha confirm this is so.

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**Corridor outside ER Waiting Room 3, 10.45 pm**

Detectives, I know you both want to stay but I am afraid duty come first.

"You are both off the case."

She raises her hands to still their protests. "You know the regulations. Once you became victims you can no longer remain the investigating officers."

"The 12th is keeping the case but we need to ensure that it is handled strictly by the numbers."

Ryan pipes up, "I spoke to Jenny a couple of hours ago. I managed to persuade her to stay home. It's probably time I headed home and gave her more proof I'm alive."

"Good idea Detective. See you tomorrow."

"Good Night Captain. I'll just say my goodbyes and then head off. Espo."

Esposito turns to the Captain. "I'll stay a little longer but will leave soon. Thank you for all your support it means a lot to the team Sir."
Gates Residence, 00:05 am Friday.

Victoria Gates had arrived home just before midnight. After securing her pistol in the gun safe in her office, she retrieved her phone charger so she can plug it beside her bed to charge her phone and have it on hand in case of overnight calls. Before she heads upstairs ensures the alarm is set for 5.30 am as she has an 8:00 am press conference and she is sure there will prep work as well.

Creeping into the bedroom, she hears the bed clothes rustle.

"Vicky?" comes the familiar reassurance of her husband's voice.

"Hi DM. I'll just get changed and be there in a minute." She wants nothing more than to fall into his arms now, but she can keep it together long enough to remove some of the grime of this long and emotional day.

After changing and a perfunctory make up removal and teeth brush, she had slipped into bed.

He husband has the covers turned down waiting for her and as she sinks into bed, he pulls them back over her body and turns his body into hers. No longer able or needing to bottle things up, Victoria Gates bursts into tears and her husband holds her tighter until her sobs cease and she falls asleep.

New York Ledger Offices, 2 am Friday morning.

Mark Bright, City Desk editor of the New York Ledger, has made a very costly decision without the input of his boss, Larry Hartz the editor or more importantly the owner and money – Lindy Welch III. At 11 pm he had pulled the first edition of the paper from the presses. It will need to be pulped. All to make way for the breaking news that has the whole of New York talking.

It's now gone 2 am and they have less than 60 minutes to get the revised layout to press. The Ledger's office is busier than a normal working day. It's certainly lit up brighter than day. The night desk and daytime teams are both here, and certainly looks like every staffer is present. They are working in teams producing specific topics and stories whilst the senior news desk team pulls all the output together and resets the layouts ready for electronic distribution to the print works.

A new front page is being worked up by his team. Hell entire pages had been ripped apart and a whole new 4 page section is being added.

The Page 6 team are in a major quandary. They have definitive confirmation from Rick Castle's publicist that he and his Detective muse are a very serious couple and have been for some time. And yet how do they break this whilst at the same man fights for his life in Bellevue.

He is surprised to see some of his team in tears. He has met Richard Castle several times. He had assumed the man played up the Playboy image a bit but had seemed comfortable in that role. Donna especially was very upset but had pulled herself together and her team was putting together a first class profile for the special pullout section. He just hoped it didn't need to make its way to the obits.

New York Ledger Website – Main Page

'Richard Castle Fighting for Life'
Best selling author and NYPD civilian consultant Richard Castle is at Bellevue Hospital undergoing lifesaving surgery. He was admitted shortly before 6.30 pm after being shot whilst participating in a police operation. He has been in surgery for more than 7 hours.

His family, girlfriend Detective Kate Beckett, and colleagues from the NYPD are maintaining vigil for him at the hospital.

'Author Saves Cops.'

During a raid by ESU and 12th Precinct detectives, a number of shots were fired at police suspects armed with shotguns. Sources confirm that unarmed civilian consultant Richard Castle disarmed one shotgun wielding assailant but was shot twice when a second shooter opened fire on the police team from an ambush position.

One suspect was declared dead at the scene, and two others were transported to Mt Sinai with non-life threatening injuries and are under police guard.

As well as Richard Castle injuries, two officers received minor wounds, and a civilian was suffering moderate injuries were all transported to Bellevue.

NYPD have confirmed that an official statement will be released tomorrow morning with a press conference at 08:00 am.

New York Ledger Website – "Page Six - City Life and Lowdown" column.

'More than a Muse.'

Sources have confirmed that the relationship between Richard Castle and NYPD Homicide Detective Kate Beckett has been more than purely professional for some time.

Detective Beckett was observed arriving in a police cruiser at Bellevue not long after critically injured Richard Castle was admitted this evening. His family – Mother Actress Martha Rodgers and daughter Alexis Castle – arrived shortly after and all are currently awaiting the results of the emergency surgery.

We are told that Richard Castle and Detective Beckett have been dating since May of this year, and that may well be living together.

His agent and publicists have informed us that there will be a press conference at 8 am tomorrow morning.

Detective Beckett who is the inspiration for the character of Nikki Heat, is the youngest ever female detective in NYPD. Her team of homicide detectives at the 12th Precinct have the highest clearance rate in the City.

The City Life team has its fingers crossed and wishes Richard Castle a speedy recovery.
Chapter Summary

Castle remains in surgery at Bellevue and so Kate and his family continue to wait for news.

Bellevue ER Waiting Room 3, 1.50 am Friday.

Kate Beckett couldn't sleep. She had tried, really tried, and now she was simply really tired but awake. On one level she was physically exhausted, drained by the whirlpool of emotions over the last seven hours. Regardless, she couldn't mentally switch off. Closing her eyes simply made the furore and fears more intense. She wondered if this was what Rick experienced when his writer's mind dreamt, fuelled by all their near misses or her shooting. She knew he still had occasional nightmares, just as she did. Certainly there were less occurrences for both of them since they had begun to share a bed together, but sometimes one or the other would find themselves holding and gently crooning to their partner as they came down from a nightmare.

Opening her eyes again, she could see Alexis curled up on the couch opposite, snuggled into a small pile of pillows, a blanket half-covering her. She finally seemed to have settled after an initial period of near silent sobbing for which she had declined comfort from the other two women. Martha, was reclined in a chair, her legs tucked under her, her head supported by a couple of hospital pillows. Like Rick, the senior Red Head appeared much younger in her sleep, even when her face still bore evidence of the hours of tears.

Somehow both had managed to actually get to sleep. It wasn't a deep sleep for either, as both shifted and murmured in their sleep, but sleep they did. Unlike her.

Huffing to herself, she decided she needed a drink, and the hospital's cafeteria was open 24 hours. Pulling her boots back on, she reached into bag and grabbed her phone, badge and gun, clipping the latter two to her belt. She started to stand, and then sheepishly reached back into her bag and grabbed a fistful of change. She quietly let herself out of the Waiting Room and found her herself looking at the sitting form of Chris Hernandez from the 12th. The rookie uniform had helped out on a recent canvas and had been left almost mute and awestruck when the Richard Castle had attempted to strike up a conversation with him. Castle has gradually got the kid to say complete sentences without freezing up, and unlike some of the cops hadn't mocked the rookie and his initial stuttering responses.

He started to rise. "Can I help you Detective Beckett?"

Kate put a hand out to halt his ascent and guide him back to his seat. "I'm just going to get a coffee. Please watch Castle's family."

Hernandez nods but then calls out. "Tony"

Turning Kate recognises the familiar form of Tony Koulouris, a veteran uniform famous in the Precinct for his huge heart and not dissimilar appetite. He rises from the chair he had been occupying further down the corridor, and patiently waits for Beckett to head to the cafeteria. He catches site of Kate's face but simply shrugs and waits.
Sighing Kate, realises she is stuck with the uniform escort regardless, and set off for the cafeteria.

Earlier ~ Bellevue ER Waiting Room 3, 11.00 pm Thursday.

Lanie and Esposito had departed not long after the Boys had spoken to Gates. Esposito was trying to tough it out but it was obvious he was hurting and Lanie was clearly going to take him home. They promised to return tomorrow and at any time if Kate needed them.

Earlier, and prior to Gates arriving, Kate had joined Alexis and Martha in agreeing the wording of the press release to be issued by Black Pawn alongside the NYPD's own statement tomorrow morning.

The grey haired man who had arrived with her Father had turned out to be Steve Mathers, Rick's attorney, and he and Paula had guided the three 'Castle' women through the proposed wording of the short statement. Steve and Paula had left with a comment that they would see them in the morning as there were further matters to be discussed.

Kate had found the whole matter surreal – they still had no idea on Rick's surgery and his status, and yet they were calmly – well mostly bar a few interjections from Martha – discussing telling the World that she and Rick we together. She knew she should feel more but it took all her self-control and years of experience as a detective to not break down.

Kate's Dad had stayed in the background during the press release discussions but had joined her once Steve and Paula had left. Kate had kept things together until her Dad had hugged her and at that moment she choose to let go of every fear that she had held inside of Detective Beckett. Kate had sobbed in his arms for a good 5 minutes before devoid of any further tears she had finally let go and allowed Alexis to wipe her face. After exchanging more words of comfort between them, her Dad had left with assurances that he would see them all tomorrow.

Bellevue ER Waiting Room 3, 11.35 pm Thursday.

Gates had left and they were just attempting to settle down on the furniture – Kate and Alexis each on couches and Martha nobly choosing a padded chair - when there was a knock at the door, and two people entered.

"Good Evening. I am very sorry for the interruption and for the delay in being able to bring you information on Mr Castle's status." The calm, female voice had them all upright and paying full attention, though none dared speak.

"I am Karen Wright, from the Hospitals management team, and this is Thomas Berling, Bellevue's Head of Surgery."

"Mr Castle is being operated on by a team led by surgeon Doctor Paul Creswell. He is a former Army surgeon and has extensive experience dealing with gunshot trauma." The administrator pauses, and the Head of Surgery picks up.

"Mr Castle is still in surgery and he will be probably in theatre another 3 or so hours. After that it he will be moved to the intensive care unit. It is likely that he will be there for a number of days." His voice is authoritative and has a calming quality.

By now Alexis and Martha had joined Kate on her couch and all were squeezing hands.

"Mr Castle arrived at Bellevue in an extremely critical state. He crashed – sorry I'm not sure if you
understand the terminology, but essentially Mr Castle's heart stop and he went into respiratory arrest. He crashed twice – once en route in the ambulance and once again in ER. We were able to stabilize him before taking him to surgery."

"He has extensive injuries to his right shoulder and there were a series of internal injuries. These are all being addressed by surgery. It is the collective impact and stress of the injuries that has left Mr Castle is such poor health. However, he does appear to have survived the worst moments, and his prognosis is sound." With this the Head of Surgery falls silent.

Their grips had tightened and then relaxed as they soaked in the news.

The hospital administrator picks up again. "As soon as Mr Castle leaves surgery we will be back to brief you again. This should be in three to four hours. Once again we apologise for any delay in bringing news. If there is anything Bellevue can do for you please do not hesitate to contact me or my team." With that she passes across a business card to each of the,

Martha had spoken for all "Thank you for bring us news of Richard." as the two exited the room.

Left alone again, they had cried happy tears before Martha had shooed them all to their beds with instruction to sleep.

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**Bellevue Hospital Cafeteria, 2.08 am Friday.**

Since arriving at the hospital, Kate Beckett has gained a growing appreciation of what it must have been like for her friends and family some eighteen months ago when she was in the operating theatre fate unknown.

By 2 am, she was in danger of being overwhelmed by guilt about her actions starting some 18 months ago. So she has slipped from the waiting room, and headed to find a drink. The uniform – Tony Koulouris- had followed along at a discreet distance. Kate had bought two coffees – one for her, and one for the veteran uniform.

So now she's in the hospital cafeteria, alone but not quite. Keeping watch a respectful distance away stands the sentinel from the 12th. The uniform is ensuring her privacy, well freeing her from interruptions, and although the very presence of a protector for the obviously upset woman attracts attention of itself.

Turning her thoughts back to herself, Kate sighs.

She had never really discussed the events of 18 months ago in any detail with anyone except Dr Burke. Hell she had even avoided dealing with them herself until the therapy, and sometime after. Such a coward where her emotions were concerned.

She had known her avoidance, hell let's be honest here, her lies, had hurt her friends, the people who loved her. But until this evening, she hadn't dared to contemplate the scope and impact of the decisions she had made then.

She needed to speak to someone who was there, to get their perspective. To understand. She couldn't ask Rick, perhaps she might never have enough courage to ask for him to tell her of the damage, done by what she now sees as her betrayal of the man she loved and her friends. She knew who to ask. Picking up her phone, she hit the speed dial and lifted the phone to her ear.

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**Parish Residence, 2.28 am Friday**
Lanie Parish blinked awake. She heard the dull thrum of her mobile phone's vibration setting as it shimmied on her dresser. Pushing the arm off her, she grabbed her phone and glancing at the caller ID, answered the call before the ring tone went audible. Moving from the bed she headed into the living area so as to not disturb the owner of the arm.

"Kate?" and hearing her best friend's voice respond she broke in. "Is there news?"

"Well we had a visit from the Head of Surgery and an administrator about 3 hours ago. Rick was in surgery and still is. They did tell us that he has a lot of damage to his right shoulder and internal injuries as well. But they said his prognosis was good. But that's not why I'm calling."

"Then what's up Sweetie? I would have thought that the news about Rick was good."

"It is, but….." Kate's voice trails off.

"I'm so, so sorry. I'm sitting in the cafeteria drinking coffee because my mind can't rest and won't let me sleep."

"Well the coffee ain't gonna help Girl!"

"I know but I have something to ask. I'm not sure I should, but I need to. Please forgive me?"

Lanie's voice echo's the concern she suddenly feels intensely. "Kate, you don't have to be afraid. Please ask."

"Was this what it was like for you 18 months ago?" Kate's question is terse and blunt but Lanie understands the context.

"Kate, I won't lie to you Girl. It was tough. Beyond tough. We didn't know if you were going to live or die. Hell we're pretty sure you died twice on the way to hospital but we got you back somehow."

"Lanie, I need more, I need to understand."

"Javi said that it is probably a good thing at least that you weren't there today. I know that sounds cruel, but Kate you didn't see Rick when you were shot. The man looked like he had lost everything. We would have taken the bullet for you. He looked like he would have willingly followed you into your grave if you had died." She pauses uncertain how much more to tell her best friend.

"We rode with you to hospital in the bus. Hell I was on top of you most of the way. Rick held me steady for corners and bumps. When they took you into theatre, took you away from us, Castle and I were left there covered in your blood. He held me, we held each other, and sobbed like babies."

"It took us a while to recover but it wasn't quite so bad in the hospital after that. Everyone else arrived, even the Montgomery's. It took a long time before we got an update. Then most of us went home. Except for Rick and your Dad. They were there all the time until you woke up. The Boys had to kidnap Castle and take him home once he was certain you were alive." Lanie decides to skip any mention of the confrontations between Castle and Kate's then boyfriend, Josh Davidson.

"We had each other at the hospital and that got us through, especially those first forty-eight hours."

Lanie tails off for a second seeking the courage of her convictions. She is Kate's best (female) friend and they are usually completely honest with each other. Now was not the time to change.
"What was worse was you hiding all those months from us, especially Castle."

"It took me some time to forgive you for that. It hurt the Boys and me so much. Still does. But how Castle has managed to forgive you, I have no idea. Little Castle and Martha too."

"Never doubt it Sweetie. That man was put here on this earth for YOU, Kate Beckett. And you alone. Forget all the dumb arse mistakes you have both made, and make sure he knows this is it for you."

Kate tries to explain "But the hiding away was so that I didn't hurt you all. At least that was how I convinced myself to go to my Dad's cabin and recover away from the City and everyone."

"Oh God! I was such a coward." Lanie Parish doesn't disagree but knows her friend doesn't need to hear that.

"I'm not running Lanie, not now, not ever. I need to you to understand that I think I have finally got the necessary perspective on all this."

"I need to tell Rick this, and to apologise, and to hope will accept it. I'm still so afraid, such a coward a lot of the time."

"Kate, it was good that the two of you finally got you heads out of your arses after all those years, but seriously you two need to have a very long talk and but put this to bed once and for all. This is definitely something the grandkids, or your friends, never have to know about."

"Chica?" A male voice echo's in her living room, seeking her out as she is curled on her couch, illuminated only by her phone screen.

"Lanie, is that Espo?"

"Well, he needed comforting. Hell we both needed comforting."

"Comforting huh?" comes back the gentle teasing of her best friend and the hint of a smile and lightness in her tone. Before Lanie can respond, Kate speaks again her voice suddenly less settled, more anxious.

"Oh, Martha and Alexis are here. I need to go. Thank you so much. Love you." The last words rush from Kate Beckett as her focus moves elsewhere.

"Anytime Girl, love you too. Call us if there's news." She hangs up.

Turning her attention back to the man standing in front of her in boxer shorts, Lanie Parish adopts her best crime scene voice.

"Javier Esposito, I don't know how much you heard, but you are never to repeat any of it. Understood?" She pauses whilst the still sleepy Hispanic nods his head in compliance and wisely says nothing. The former soldier knows how and when to follow orders without question.

"Rick's still in surgery. His injuries are bad but it looks hopeful."

Taking his hand she tugs him back towards her bed.

"Now back to bed, we need more sleep."

Bellevue Hospital Cafeteria
Across the other side of the cafeteria, a surgery team are relaxing after they had been at it for more than 10 hours straight on a successful double transplant. Now having completed their work, and after shedding scrubs, showering and changing, they have headed to the Cafeteria to wind down with some food, web browsing, and idle chatter and gossip. Amongst the group there is a tall dark haired surgeon, reclining back against the unsurprising uncomfortable chair and yet too tired to alter his position. He's tanned, lean, having not long returned from overseas.

The solitary uniformed police officer across the cafeteria attracts his attention, and then glancing past the uniform, he spots what looks like a familiar silhouette. At first he is uncertain, but then the silhouette turns her head and her familiar profile and brunette hair confirms his initial suspicion despite the longer hair. Her name comes unbidden to his lips, as she still does to his dreams and waking thoughts sometimes. Her name uttered aloud startles his colleagues, who look at him in askance.

"Someone I used to know" he both explains and dismisses.

Somewhere in his subconscious he wants to go to her, just as part of his instinct tells him not to but just as his feet start to move, he catches sight of two vaguely familiar women approaching the Brunette. The uniformed cop nods in acknowledgement to the pair who respond and then move past him to the Brunette.

The two Red Heads are speaking and then they lean down and wrap the Brunette in hugs, and pull her to her feet and start to lead her out of the cafeteria.

He wonders what is going on when he hears part of the tableside conversation"…cops shot. Two with minor GS, one critical major GS trauma to chest, ICU, coma."

A nurse from the adjoining table adds "The one in the coma in ICU isn't a cop, well not a proper one anyway. He's that writer who wrote those Heat books. Richard…"

"Castle" finishes Dr Josh Davidson. He colleagues are new like the hospital, and know nothing of his past with Kate Beckett and the man she choose over him.

"They coded him twice – once on the way in, and again whilst in ER. Got him stable and then to OR. Surgery was more than 8 hours with major shoulder reconstruction and some pretty major internal injuries. He just came out of surgery but he's in a coma in ICU."

Pausing she continues on "It's a madhouse downstairs. Dozens of press, TV crews, fans, a load of cops."

"They say his girlfriend is here. Apparently she's a cop, the one the books are based on."

His colleagues move on to other topics, and he remains silent staring at the space vacated by his former girlfriend.

Bellevue ER Waiting Room 3, 3.06 am Friday

Kate's phone call with Lanie had been interrupted by the arrival of Alexis and Martha and their news that Rick's surgeon was coming to see them. They had hastened back to Waiting Room 3 and Alexis and Martha lead Kate back into the room.

Once inside the waiting room with Martha and Alexis, Kate sees two figures there. One is in clearly soiled medical scrubs and the other a rumpled utilitarian business suit. Both look extremely tired. She recognises the woman – Karen Wright, the hospital administrator who was here just a
few hours ago. The male in scrubs appears to be in his early forties with a close cropped hair cut and military bearing.

Instinctively Kate, Alexis and Martha move together and placing their arms around each other they await the news.

Once again the female administrator makes the introduction.

"Hello again. As promised we are back with an update on Mr Castle's surgery. Can I introduce Doctor Paul Creswell? He is a former Army doctor with extensive combat trauma experience. He led the team operating on Mr Castle."

Despite the obvious tiredness the Surgeon's voice is controlled and precise but touched with warmth and humanity.

"Good Morning. I am pleased to say that Mr Castle is out of surgery and is currently being settled into ICU. You should be able to see him in the morning, sometime after 9 am."

All three squeeze each other in excitement and anticipation and the surgeon continues on.

"Well Mr Castle was extremely lucky."

"In a large part his survival is due to his ballistic vest. I believe he is a civilian consultant and had provided his own body armour. Well he made a very good choice. This is the first IOTV or Improved Outer Tactical Vest I have seen outside the Army. I didn't even know they came in Blue."

"It played a critical part in saving his life."

"The shooters were using a mix of 00 "double-aught" and 000 "triple-aught" shells. Whilst the latter type of shell have a smaller number of pellets, the pellets themselves are larger. The vest did a good job with preventing penetration from the first shot – which had the larger pellets - that hit Mr Castle directly on his chest. However, despite the lack of penetration it did do a considerable amount of internal damage including fracturing three ribs, a collapsed right lung, and muscular damage around the heart. This causes an abnormal cardiac rhythm which added complications when treating him."

At this information, all three women gasp, but the Surgeon continues on.

"The second shot hit Mr Castle on the right shoulder and was only partially absorbed by the vest. This resulted in a shattered humerus and two fractures to his clavicle. There was extensive tissue and muscle damage. Due to the multiple pellets there was numerous penetrators beyond the significant muscle damage and this resulted in almost fatal blood loss."

Alexis gasps and both older women hold her closer.

"We were able to successfully repair the damaged ribs and the collapsed lung. Given the nature of the pneumothorax, a chest tube was placed between the ribs into the space around the lungs to help drain the air and allows the lung to re-expand. It may be several days before we are able to remove the tube."

"The shoulder injury was the messiest and resulted in considerable blood loss, although fortunately there was no major blood vessel damage. If there had been it may well have been fatal."

Kate doesn't know how Alexis and Martha are managing to remain so calm as her emotions are
being whipped around by the reality of truly how close they had come to losing him.

"The surgery to repair the bone damage was successful with a number of pins added to assist with the healing as well providing additional strengthening. He was fortunate in that there also appears to be minimal nerve damage but we probably won't know more until we are able to commence physical therapy which will be a few weeks at least, possibly a month."

"We are going to keep him in a medically induced coma for at least 24 hours, possibly closer to 48 hours to minimise the discomfort from his injuries."

"He will have an extended period of debilitation and recovery. Rehabilitation will take at least three months, likely longer given the scope of his injuries. But all the indications are - so long as he does not experience any major complications- for a good recovery of most or possibly all of the mobility in his shoulder."

"Thank God!" Martha exclaims, once more assuming the mantle of spokesperson for their family, rises to shake the hands of the two and thank them. Alexis and Kate remain locked together the awful detail of Rick's injuries slowly sheeting home and tempering their profound relief at the news that he is alive and out of surgery.


'Writer Shot Saving Cops! Richard Castle Fighting for Life'

Best Selling author and NYPD civilian consultant was still undergoing life-saving surgery at Bellevue Hospital, after being shot during a police operation on Thursday night. He was admitted to Bellevue ER shortly before 6.30 pm. At time of press, he had been in surgery for more than 7 hours.

Following the violent end to the operation by NYPD Emergency Services Unit and detectives from the 12th Precinct, one suspect was declared dead at the scene, and two others were transported to Mt Sinai with non-life threatening injuries and are under police guard. Two officers received minor wounds, and they and a civilian suffering moderate injuries were all transported to Bellevue.

The author was participating in an active homicide investigation and was shot during a raid by ESU and 12th Precinct detectives. At least 4 shots were fired at police by suspects armed with shotguns. Sources have confirmed that despite being unarmed Richard Castle disarmed one shotgun wielding assailant who had fired on 12th Precinct detectives. He was in the process of detaining him when he was shot at least twice by a second shooter and received extensive injuries despite his ballistic vest. It is understood the second shooter is the deceased suspect. Another two suspects are in custody.

Amongst those keeping vigil at Bellevue is Richard Castle's mother, actress Martha Rodgers, his daughter, a student at Columbia, and his girlfriend, NYPD Homicide Detective Kate Beckett.

Sources indicate that despite the lack of publicity, Richard Castle and Detective Beckett have been dating since May of this year, and are living together. Richard Castle has been shadowing, and now apparently working with, Detective Beckett's team for 5 years. She is the inspiration for the Nikki Heat, central character for Richard Castles most recent, and most popular, four best sellers. She is the youngest ever female detective in NYPD. Her team of homicide detectives at the 12th Precinct have the highest clearance rate in the City.

We have heard from both the NYPD and Mr Castle's Representatives that they will issue
statements at 8:00 am this morning.

Bellevue Hospital issued a brief statement at midnight.

'Richard Castle is currently undergoing surgery after being shot. His family and colleagues from the NYPD are at the hospital. Mr Castle is expected to be in surgery until the early hours of Friday morning. A further statement will be issued at 8:00 Friday morning.'

See more including reaction and comments, on Pages 3-4, Page 6, Editorial and the 4 page Special Edition Pull-out.
Saying It Out Loud

Chapter Summary

Castle has survived surgery but is in a coma and faces a long road to recovery. Meanwhile, his family, and friends must deal with the continuing ramifications.

Bellevue Hospital Press Room, 8.00 AM Friday

They are crowded in the moderately sized conference room. More than a few had to be asked and some forced to wait outside for printed copies of the statements, but the assembled press corps that are inside the room are focused on the small podium festooned with microphones and the four individuals standing there.

"Good Morning Ladies and Gentlemen of the Press."

"I am Karen Wright from Bellevue Hospital. I would like to introduce Thomas Berling - Bellevue's Head of Surgery, Captain Victoria Gates of the New York Police Department's 12th Precinct, and Paula Haas - Richard Castle's Agent.

"They will all be making statements for you. I must ask that you reserve any questions until the end of all statements.

"The hospital has already issued an updated statement to media this morning. We will not be adding to it beyond the information that Doctor Berling is about to provide. I am sure that Captain Gates and Ms Haas will clarify their position during their statements.

"Now I would like to hand you over to Doctor Berling to give you an update on Mr Castle's status."

"Thank you Karen. Mr Castle was admitted to Bellevue ER last night in critical condition." The Surgeon goes on to provide the detail of Richard Castle's injuries and treatment.

"Mr Castle is still in a medically induced coma, but he is out of danger. We anticipate he should regain consciousness within 24 hours. From there he will spend at least a few more days in the Intensive Care Unit before being transferred to a normal bed. We expect he should be able to leave hospital in two to three weeks but it will require three or more months of extensive rehabilitation for his recovery."

"Thank you." With this the Doctor steps back from the array of microphones.

Karen steps forward briefly. "Thank you Thomas. I would now like to hand over to Captain Victoria Gates of the NYPD's 12th Precinct."

Captain Gates attired in her full NYPD Captain's dress Blues steps up to the podium where despite her relative lack of stature she has an undoubted presence and an aura of authority.

"Good Morning." Her tone is deliberate and measured, and as any 12th Precinct cop would tell you, it's time to shut up and listen.

"Firstly, the New York Police Department, and especially his colleagues from the 12th Precinct,
are immensely relieved to know that Mr Castle is out of danger although he still faces an extended period of hospitalization and rehabilitation. We send our best wishes and prayers to his family and partner, as we all anxiously await his recovery.

"He is highly respected and liked by his colleagues, and is considered one of the police family, nowhere more so than by his partners Detectives Esposito, Ryan and Beckett.

"Richard Castle has been involved with the New York Police Department for five years and during that time he has become a valued member of our team at the 12th Precinct. When he first joined us he began shadowing the homicide team led by Detective Beckett purely for information for inclusion in his books. However, that role and his participation has evolved over the years as Mr Castle has made the transition to civilian consultant. He has made an important contribution working along his police partners, as together they achieved the highest homicide case closure rate in the City. This has resulted in the arrest and conviction of a large number of murderers and other serious criminals.

"Regardless of his contribution, he is a civilian and the NYPD, and especially his partners have always done their utmost to shield him from the dangers they face every day. Unfortunately, on Thursday, despite everyone's best efforts, Mr Castle was shot twice when a team of detectives was ambushed. He was wearing a protective vest and this undoubtedly helped save his life.

"Prior to being shot, Mr Castle had pushed Detectives Esposito and Ryan to safety out of the path of a shotgun and also prevent a further shot being taken at myself. We are all immensely grateful for his actions, and devastated by the injuries he received whilst saving us.

"I am afraid I can't provide more information as it is still the subject of an active homicide investigation, and attempted murder investigation as well as review by the Chief of Detectives and NYPD's Ethical Standards division.

"Any questions can be directed to the NYPD Department of Public Information. Thank you."

As Gates steps back, Karen is straight in with the final introduction.

"I would now like to invite Mr Castle's agent, Paula Haas to speak."

Paula has chosen her jet black power suit and offset with a simple silver chain and bangles. Attired thus and with her face rimmed by her dark hair she appears entirely business like.

"I have the following statement on behalf of Richard Castle, his family, and his friends and colleagues at Black Pawn."

"Firstly, it has always entirely been Rick's own choice to participate in the police operations. His family place no blame on the NYPD nor the officers on the scene. They have always taken the utmost steps to ensure Richard's safety. We are confident this will be borne out by the investigation.

"His family respect his decisions relating to assisting the NYPD. We ask that the press and public please do the same.

"Richard Castle began shadowing Detective Kate Beckett's team at the 12th Precinct five years ago in an effort to learn more to add to the authenticity of the new series of books he planned. This provided the inspiration for his most popular best sellers to date, the Heat series.

"However, it quickly became more as he was inspired by seeing how committed they are, and the risks they take to protect the citizens of New York, and deliver justice to the families of victims.
"Richard will always considers himself a writer first and foremost, but he has found another calling in working alongside the team at the 12th Precinct. He has been genuinely humbled by being permitted to join with them and is his own small way make a contribution to their work.

"As his good friend and colleague, Detective Esposito has noted 'It is no longer about the books', nor has it been for a long time."

Paula knows she has the assembled press eating from her hand, and can almost feel them lean forward in anticipation.

"In addition to his role as a consultant, the long partnership and friendship with Detective Kate Beckett has become much more for both them. Earlier this year, Richard Castle and Kate Beckett began a romantic relationship. This has been kept private to allow Detective Beckett and her colleagues to perform their duties unimpeded by additional scrutiny.

"Obviously this is no longer the case. However, we ask that the press and public continue to not interfere with police investigations.

"We would also like request that the privacy of his family and friends is respected at this difficult time.

"There will be further statements in due course. But there will be no further information today."

As Paula steps back, Karen moves forward to wind up the press conference, but is assailed by a barrage of questions from the unsatisfied media pack. Two particular questions, often combined into one are fired from multiple lips.

It looks to be unanswered, but then Gates, who is about to step off the podium, stops and turns back. She holds up her and hand this and the steel in her eyes, hushes the rising clamor of the press.

"Richard Castle is a valued member of the 12th Precinct's detective team, and if he wishes – once he is recovered - to continue to generously offer his time in the service of the citizens of the New York, we will welcome him back as one of us without hesitation.

"His personal relationship with Detective Beckett does not breach NYPD guidelines and they have proven able to work effectively whilst in this relationship. The life of a NYPD officer, especially a homicide detective is hard and it takes a big toil on those who wear the badge and those who cherish and support them. Please, never begrudge those who are lucky enough to find such unconditional love and support."

With that she turns and leaves the podium, shepherding the others ahead of her.

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Bellevue ER Waiting Room 3, 9.25 am Friday.

After they had been told that Rick was alive and the surgery successful, Kate had finally succumbed and slept undisturbed. She is still curled up under a hospital blanket on a short couch in the small private waiting room.

There is a small disturbance as the officer from the 12th opens the door to allow someone to enter, and this is enough to trigger her cop senses and she comes awake.

Kate blinks and shifts, almost instantly awake if not yet fully alert. Spotting the 'intruder' she smiles.
"Good Morning Alexis."

"Good Morning Kate. I've got you coffee and breakfast - a bear claw."

"Oh Alexis, you didn't have to. Thank you."

"Dad says that is the duty of a Castle to provide Beckett with her morning coffee." There is a little pause, and Kate can see Alexis swallow, but the young woman continues.

"So I'm here in his place ….. until he can do it himself."

It is such a simple thing with so much unsaid, but the depth of meaning and syntax behind the gesture, reduces Kate to tears. Alexis soon follows, and it is only the arrival of Martha that restores some calm to their collective nerves.

Kate quickly finishes her coffee and the pastry and heads to the nearby toilet to freshen up. Returning she realizes that they all need to get fresh clothes, toiletries and other essentials if they are going to remain at the hospital.

However, Martha is already ahead of her.

"I have arranged for a pair of One Bedroom Suites at the Affinia Dumont hotel on 34th Street for the short term. There is a small kitchen and the two suites have been stocked with food and other essentials including toiletries. We will use one, and everyone, including the team from the 12th, can use the other. I know we can use the loft but this leaves us all much closer to the hospital. We can clean up and take a break and sleep on a proper bed.

"I have a town car available to shuttle back and forward and the Hospital have kindly allocated a parking space temporarily with access via a service entrance so we don't have to face the press. Unfortunately we have a 10 o'clock meeting which we must all attend, but after that we will go to the hotel and get cleaned up properly. I have taken the liberty of arranging for fresh clothes and other essentials for all of us."

**Admin Meeting Room 2, Bellevue, 10:00 am**

The hospital has made a small meeting room several levels up in the administrative area well away from the bustle of ER and ICU, available to them. They had navigated their way there with the assistance of a hospital porter.

Entering the room with Martha and Alexis, Kate was relieved to find that waiting for them was essentially the same group as last night. There was Steve Mather's - Rick's lawyer, Paula, and one new person.

According to Alexis and Martha, Steve was a good friend of Rick's. But Kate had a little trouble reconciling her '9-year old on a sugar rush' with the extremely professional lawyer who was about Rick's age but seemed more like her Dad in his attitude and demeanor.

Kate couldn't but help like Paula Haas. On the surface, she was almost the epitome of the pushy business woman but she had an earthy nature to her – not dissimilar to Martha – and after talking to Paula last night, Kate had come to understand the curious friendship between the writer and his agent. She secretly suspected that in the past there may have been something between the two but this didn't bother her, and she was hardly in a position to judge.
The new addition is someone about her age, maybe a little older. Martha introduces him as Harry Dove – Rick's Business Manager and responsible for day-to-day operations of the Rick's companies. He's slightly chubby but his face is one of those open, welcoming ones that is somehow familiar and comfortable. One glance at the dancing eyes and you knew this is a kindred spirit for Rick, even before he speaks.

Martha turns to Kate.

"Kate Dear, I think you should sit down. Steve and Harry need to explain a few things, and I think it will best if you are sitting for this news, I know I needed to be when Richard told Alexis & I a few months ago of his plans and we learnt some of what you are about to hear now."

Firstly, Steve asked her if she wanted her own lawyer rather than having the one appointed by Rick in case of any concerns or potential conflict. Kate had declined, she could always ask her Dad for help. This decided, Steve waits for Kate to sit between Martha and Alexis, each Red Head takes a hand and Kate's coffee is forgotten, discarded on the table for the moment.

"Miss Beckett, Alexis and Martha, I am about to read a summary of Rick's legal instructions for a contingency such as now." Somehow Kate is not surprised that Mr Paranoia had thought of what to do in the event of an emergency, although normally it would be a zombie holocaust or national whipped cream shortage.

"In the event of the unavailability through absence or incapacitation" there is a slight pause and all present understand the painfully unsaid words "of Richard Alexander Rodgers, power of attorney is granted jointly to Ms Martha Rodgers and Ms Katherine Houghton Beckett. This is subject to the provisions of a recent rider."

"Medical proxy is granted to the above to persons who are authorized to make all decisions relating to the health and welfare of Mr Castle. Again this is subject to the recent rider."

"In the event of a deadlock, a casting vote may be made by Miss Alexis Castle."

"Ms Rodgers and Ms Beckett are appointed guardians for Miss Castle." Kate feels the hand joined with Alexis squeezed as the younger Red Head hand tightens on hers. Kate says nothing nor gives any indication of discomfort, she simply squeezes back.

"Immediately upon activation of the incapacitation clause, interim funds are made available to Ms Rodgers, Miss Castle and Ms Beckett in the tune of a half million dollars each in advance of any other distribution from their personal trusts. Furthermore, any legitimate expenses will reimbursed via Storm Incorporated."

Kate starts at this announcement. She had been very determined, in fact outright stubborn about money matters to the point of avoiding discussions with Rick about it. Apparently, he had found a way round that, the insufferable man.

"Ms Rodgers and Miss Castle already have accounts and cards activated. Ms Beckett, this envelope contains a credit card, a bank card and secure banking token. A representative from the New Amsterdam bank's Privileged Client team will be available to walk you through the details at your convenience. There is also a business card for Melanie French, who is your personal banker."

Kate takes the envelope but immediately lets it fall to table in front of her.

"If required any media liaison can be handled through Paula Haas." Paula nods but doesn't say anything. Kate knows she had recently fronted the press and read the statement they had agreed
last night but hasn't had a chance to ask Paula how it went.

"Harry, would you care to continue please?" Steve concedes to his younger colleague.

"Ladies, I think at this time, it would be best if I explained a bit about Rick's business and financials." With this he passes out a single piece of paper to each of the women.

"On the paper is a summary of the organisation and operations for Richard Castle Enterprises'.

"Richard Castle Enterprises is the parent company. It is a shell holding company and the real operations of Richard Castle Enterprises is divided into four distinct business entities, and two charitable trusts. In addition there are six personal trusts currently active."

Harry begins to reel off the information which becomes increasingly fantastic to Kate Beckett. She looks down at the paper in front of her seeing the same information in written form.

RAR Holdings – which is the personal fund and includes current accounts, savings, pensions, credit cards, personal property, and vehicles. After liabilities and taxes the current value is estimated at close to $28 million. The distribution of assets is to be split equally between Ms Rodgers, Miss Castle and Ms Beckett. There are a number of condition mainly related to property distribution but the primary one is that neither the Loft nor the Hamptons house would be disposed of without the agreement of all beneficiaries.

Storm Incorporated is the operating business which receives income from all Richard's work prior to Nikki Heat and this includes all secondary mediums such as movies, comics. Current net value is $4 million dollars not including future income. The majority of the earnings from Mr Castle's previous work is been assigned out of Storm Inc. to the investment fund or charitable concerns on a quarterly basis. In the event of Mr Castle's death this and future income would be directed to charitable concerns as per his will.

Rook Trust – this is all the direct income from the Nikki Heat novels and associated mediums. Current net value is in excess of $17 million dollars. This is the total sum of the earnings from the Heat books and movie rights to date net of taxes and charitable donations, and there has been no reallocation of funds to other entities. Distribution of these assets is confidential and will only be disclosed on Mr Castle's demise as per his will.

Chevalier Futures – which contains Richard's investments including properties other than the Loft and the Hamptons house. Listed assets include a Ski Lodge, Lake Cabin and of course The Old Haunt and other building assets. Most recent audited net worth was $63 million.

Harry pauses and takes a quick sip of water before continuing.

"As well as the four operating vehicles there are two charitable trusts and 6 personal trusts."

Joanna Beckett Endowment – we match dollar for dollar all other donations to the public trust.

Brighter Blue Futures Trust – this is an endowment trust for the education of children of NYPD officers.

Six personal trusts held for the following individuals or parties – Ms Martha Rodgers, Miss Alexis Castle, Ms Katherine Beckett, Dr Lanie Parish, Mr Javier Esposito, Mr & Mrs Kevin Ryan. There were several other trusts which have matured and been discharged over the years including most recently for the family of Roy Montgomery.

As Harry concludes, Kate had just finished skimming through the document in front of her – years
of paperwork and investigations make her almost as fast as Rick – and she was finishing her mental tally of the figures presented.

Shut. The. Front. Door! Her eyes go wide, but seemingly oblivious Harry is continuing on.

"At this time, day-to-day control is handled by myself with governance by Steve Mathers, and Terrence Dor – Mr Castle's business accountant.

"The Joanna Beckett Endowment is now managed by James Beckett, who is also a board member and trustee for Brighter Blue. Other board members are Richard Castle, Diana Cavanagh - Dean of Columbia Law School), Michael Duvall – Emeritus Professor of Law at Columbia, and Judge Markaway.

"The Brighter Blue trustees are Captain Victoria Gates, James Beckett, Robert Wheldon, Diana Cavanagh, and Judge Markaway."

Kate is simply gobsmacked. Her dad was central to Rick's charitable works. When did this happen? Why hadn't she been told? Was this what the late night meeting was about the other night? She needed to speak to her father.

Harry finally notices her discomfort.

"Ms Beckett...." "Are you okay?"

Oh she's not. But she doesn't want to address her central fear and insecurity around the money so instead she asks.

"You made reference to conditions that were 'subject to the rider'?"

Steve Mathers looks at Harry who nods, and then hands over a piece of paper. She recognizes Rick's signature on the bottom. It is dated 3 days ago.

'The incapacity and death clauses are subject to the following rider. Power of Attorney and Medical proxy will be the sole authority of Ms Katherine Houghton Beckett (nee) if she is engaged or married to Richard Castle'.

Oh God. She needs to speak to her Dad now.

Rising from her seat, she makes sure she looks both Martha and Alexis in the eye so as to convey that she isn't running.

"I just need a few minutes. I'm going to call my dad. Please excuse me."

Kate has exited the conference room and turns into the corridor frantically selecting the speed dial for her Dad.

Hearing her father's voice, she begins.

"Dad" Suddenly she doesn't know how to start this conversation but it is probably easy over the phone than face-to-face.

"Hi Katie." Jim Beckett was expecting a call from his daughter, and he suspected in may well be related to the matters Rick had been organizing before he was injured. However, there is silence from the other end of the line.

"Ummm sorry Dad, Rick's okay. Well unchanged. I'm just trying to work out how to start this conversation."

"Oh, I take it you've meet with Rick's lawyer and business manager then? Was there an issue? Did Steve or Harry not explain it clearly?"

"It's all too much Dad. I don't want Rick for his money. I don't want any of it. I don't want to be seen as one of them!"

"You knew he was rich long before you met him, let alone dated him. So what's the problem?"

"He's worth more than a hundred million Dad!" She's sure she hears her father huff, suppressing a guffaw.

"Kate, do you intend to marry Rick?"

"Of course I do! You know that."

"Do you plan to have children?" Oh, she's really sure he is laughing at her now whilst he teases her down the phone.

"Yes…..um well we have talked…yes Dad...you know that we plan, well hope to have kids. Where is this going?"

"And how did you intend to support them?"

"Dad….."

"Look, there is no doubt that Rick and by extension his family, which now pretty much legally includes you by the way, is rich. But he doesn't go overboard – well no where as much as he could. You know he gives away about a quarter of his income now?"

"Yes, they just told me. It's quite frankly astounding – not that he does it, but the actual amount." Damn, her dad is doing a good job of deflecting her and talking her down.

"About that Dad. What is all you involvement in this?" Detective Beckett fires the question which is adeptly handled by the lawyer.

"Most of what Rick asked me to do is related to the charity side of the business. I didn't agree with some of his initial proposals but we worked it out. The man negotiates really well and has a very level head and strong business acumen, and he is extremely serious when it comes to his family and friends."

"I'm nearing retirement, and Rick and I talked through ideas for how I could keep busy and also be in your lives. To be honest, I was really reluctant; you know how much I am private person like you. However, Rick persuaded me, especially with regards to your Mother's trust. I never knew he matched dollar for dollar every donation.

"I just found out myself."

"Katie, the man is so in love with you. But he also cares for all his friends and their families. He has established trust funds for all your colleagues. He had funded one for Captain Montgomery's family and the education trust is funding the Montgomery children's' college educations."
"But he's worth more than a hundred million!" Kate exclaims. Then suddenly conscious that she is in a hospital corridor, she lowers her voice.

"I knew he bought The Old Haunt but that was okay. Cops retire and buy bars, well not outright often, but still. But Dad, he bought the whole building!"

"I know. Apparently the landlord was being difficult." There is a touch of humour in his voice and more than a touch of teasing too.

"Dad! Wait….you're laughing at me aren't you? Who are you and what have you done with James Beckett?" There is a laugh at the end of the line and then the James Beckett the Lawyer puts his closing argument.

"Katie it doesn't change who you are or who he is, or more importantly how much you love each other."

"I know Dad. I love him always. But it doesn't mean I won't be uncomfortable about all the wealth for a while."

"So you're okay now Katie?"

"Yes Dad. Thank you, but I'm still not entirely sure it is you and not some clone Rick has replaced you with!"

"That sounds like one of his theories." teases her Dad.

"Oh God, it does. Thank you. I got to go. Love you Dad."

"Love you too Katie, and I'll be at the hospital after work. Bye."

Kate hangs up after a quite surreal conversation, possibly only of the strangest she's ever had with her father. She hasn't realized it but she has covered the entire length of the corridor whilst on the phone oblivious to her surroundings. Shaking her head in disbelief, she turns to head back and suddenly finds herself face-to-face with Josh Davidson.

"J..Josh?" To say she's surprised at almost colliding with her former boyfriend is an understatement. "Hi, what are you doing here?" she responds somewhat lamely as she takes in his clean scrubs and a sports sweater over the top. He looks tanned and lean with hair largely unchanged. Kate is suddenly aware of how drawn out she must look in the same clothes as yesterday with so little sleep and so many tears shed.

"Hi Kate….." Josh wants to reach out and touch his so obviously emotional former girlfriend, but sixth sense tells him this is not a good idea.

"I work here Kate. Started on the staff a few weeks ago after returning from overseas."

"Look, now is not really the time." Kate almost snaps at him. Well when would it ever be given the way she had ended it?

"I heard. I checked this morning. Once out of the coma, he should be okay after rehab." Then Josh can't help himself and pushes.

"What is he, Kate?" Despite the brevity of the question Kate understands the context.

"He's everything to me. Everything!"
"OHH!" Josh probably didn't mean for the exclamation to be so forceful but it is.

"He's my One, Josh."

Josh looks back blankly at her. Kate suddenly realizes that despite the almost year they were together, they had never had the marriage conversation, among many others. Josh didn't know she was a 'One and Done' kinda girl. Something Castle knew within a month of shadowing her. Before she can explain further Josh speaks again.

"I saw you last night, well this morning. In the cafeteria. We had just finished a long operation and were taking a break."

"You were in the corner with a police officer nearby like a guard. I was going to come over when I recognized you when the two red heads came in and collected you. Where they…"

Kate finishes the question for him with an answer.

"His Mother and Daughter. His Family. Our family."

"Oh, are you …..?" Josh face falls and his voice trails off.

"No. Not yet. But we will be."

"How long?"

Beckett huffs not quite to herself. She's getting a little tired of answering the question. Perhaps she should carry a few copies of the press release around to hand out instead of twenty-questions.

"May. This year." She can see Josh's face as he processes the information and the question 'well what the hell took you so long?' appears on his face but he doesn't ask it. Instead he takes another approach.

"You know you always described him to me as annoying, exasperating and childish."

"Oh he is. You have no idea. You should try living with him!" Way to over share Kate she chastises herself as Josh's face falls further. They were together almost a year and never got past a few basics at each other's places and a key for emergencies and spent only a few nights together.

Before Josh can speak again, she interrupts. Kate needs to end this before it gets too uncomfortable.

"Josh, I love him. We live together. He is the one I'm going to marry."

She sees Josh make an effort to smile and he raises his head to look at her full on.

"Kate, you really are special" For a second Kate thought he was going to use Rick's word 'extraordinary'.

"And whilst I am still sorry that it ended, I think I can be happy for you knowing that you are so certain of what you want."

"Josh, I am so sorry for what I put you through. Those last months, I knew that it wouldn't last and that I was lying to you and myself. I was such a coward, and still was for a long time afterwards. You do deserve someone special in your life. It was just never really meant to be me."

Well damn, despite being intimate with the man for nearly 12 months, supposedly in an exclusive relationship, that had just been the deepest most meaningful conversation they have ever had, just
they were having it more than 18 months after they actually broke up.

"I need to go. It was good to see you Josh. Please take care. You are such a good person, don't hide in your work for so long like I did, you deserve your happiness too." With that Kate reached out to touch Josh's arm and then she turned back towards the conference room at the other end of the corridor.

Doctor Josh Davidson watched Kate Beckett walk away. It was strange seeing her so certain and determined about her future. She was right though. They were over, and he did need to stop hiding in his work. He nips into a nearby stairwell and pulls out his phone.

"Hey Sis, its Josh." There is a pause whilst his sister greets him and pokes fun at his typically irregular communications.

"Yes, I know it's been a while. Are you still trying to hook me up with that mad biker friend of yours with the tattoos you won't tell me anymore about? To be honest, I'm kinda intrigued."

"Oh really, great. I'll check my roster but I should be off shift and not on call. Hell I could even swap shifts." There is a laugh at the end of the line and an acerbic comment.

"Really 'Josh Davidson, have you hit your head or suffered a stroke?' is the only thing you can say? I can have other priorities than work. I can hear you silently mocking me from here'. There is laughter and more sass from the other end of the phone.

"Oh not so silently mocking me, huh. Please set it up. It would be really good to see you anyway."

Kate returned back to the conference room to find Alexis and Martha waiting outside for her.

"Come along dear, we're going back to the hotel to freshen up. I have taken the liberty of asking Doctor Parish to fetch you some clothes and toiletries and she will meet us at the hotel and she will then come and wait at the hospital until you return."
Rick is out of surgery but the wait continues for Kate, Alexis and Martha to finally see him. In the meantime, Kate has been dealing with a barrage of new information but is finding reassurance and calm from both the most familiar and unlikely of sources.

11.15 AM Friday

Whilst it is only a few blocks from the hospital to the hotel, New York traffic has typically conspired to make the journey take quite a bit longer than the distance would otherwise imply. The couple of blocks are certainly faster to walk but given the extensive media presence, the chance of discovery and pursuit by the voracious press pack is too much for the three women. Kate is only beginning to grasp the full implications of what the media attention might mean. She knows both Martha and Alexis already have first-hand experience of such attention even though Rick has done his best to shield them, especially Alexis.

Her thoughts are snapped away from potential paparazzi panic by the news Martha had waited until they were in the car to pass on. The meeting with Rick's lawyer and business manager had ended shortly after Kate had left to speak to her father, but more importantly the hospital had informed Martha that Rick was being moved from the surgical intensive care unit to the hospital's general ICU and they would be able to see him sometime after 1.30 pm today.

"Of course he will still be unconscious but … it will be wonderful to see him." The elder women concluded as they had all smiled and nodded.

Finally arriving at the hotel, they exited the town car and were whisked through the lobby by an anxious concierge. Martha stepped ahead with the concierge to collect the room keys and they are about to get in the elevator when Lanie enters the hotel lobby and spies them.

She dashes over to join the three of them, and together they step inside the elevator. Once inside Lanie drops the medium sized holdall she is carrying and wraps Kate in a tight hug.

"Oof! Easy there Lanie!"

"It's just good to see you. Have you heard anything about Rick?"

"No medical update since I text-ed you but Martha has been told we can see him when he moves to the ICU early this afternoon"

"That's great Sweetie. Here's some essentials for you." Lanie gestures down at the holdall.

"Well I'll head to the hospital after this and find out what I can and meet up with you when you go see Writer Boy."

"Man, Lanie" Kate corrects automatically, but Lanie is already speaking again.

"Fortunately I'm even closer to the hospital than the hotel as OCME is just two blocks away. If nothing else I can get a status update from someone who doesn't speak medical bureaucrata..."
give you a proper update as soon as you get back there."

"Take the town car Doctor Parish." Martha offers and as Lanie nods, Martha continues "Just please ask them to come back to the hotel to collect us shortly after 1 pm."

As they elevator dings to single arrival at their floor, they exit except for Lanie who hits the button for the Lobby.

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**Bellevue Intensive Care Unit, 11.40 am Friday**

Doctor Lanie Parish is about to pull rank, or at least try again. In front of her is a receptionist and an ICU nurse and they don't want to cooperate.

"Good Afternoon, how about we start again." Her eyebrow twitches but not knowing the compact and fiery ME, the pair opposite don't cave immediately. Pulling her OCME id out, she places it on the reception counter for them to see.

"I am Doctor Lanie Parish of the OCME and I work with Mr Castle and Detective Beckett of the 12th Precinct. I am trying to get an update on his condition as a professional courtesy."

Blank faces indicate she's not getting anywhere.

"Lanie?" Her name brings her attention away from the intransigent pair to a doctor who has just walked into the ICU entrance.

"Phil Connaught as I live and breathe". It's a former med school classmate, and possible savior for this situation. They had bumped into each other occasionally over the years since and roughly knew where each other was professionally.

"You here drumming up business?" There was Phil, 'No Philter' as he was known back in med school, one of the class clowns but a surprisingly serious doctor who was originally intending to be a general surgeon.

"I definitely hope not. My best friend's boyfriend has just be transferred here and I'm trying to get the no bulldust details for his family."

"The only new patient we have in Richard Castle." He pauses for a second whilst he mentally checks off Lanie's statement against his. "Ohh, you mean your best friend is the Detective Muse?"

"Don't call her that unless you want to be your own next patient!" Lanie half barks, but smiles and winks at Phil.

"So can you give me the rundown, so I can tell my friends?" she says reaching across with one hand to take his elbow, and with the other she retrieves her id from the counter and somehow controls the urge to glare at the human roadblocks behind it.

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They had headed away from the ICU reception and into a small staff room inside the ICU with a mix of medical suppliers and a small table and several chairs intended for short timeouts – ICU staff worked hard with little time for breaks.

Phil has sat opposite Lanie and motions for her to sit.

"Mr Castle is still in the Surgical Intensive Care Unit but due to be moved to general ICU
anytime."

"So why was he kept in the SICU?" Lanie is concerned, and hopes there have been no complications.

"Simply, there was no private room available, only a bed in one of the shared rooms. Hospital admin didn't want to move him into the shared room. Too disruptive for all." Phil's response puts her at ease.

"So what is his status?" Doctor Parish is in the house and taking names apparently. Phil doesn't so much as blink, he was one of the few to ever stare her down at med school.

"Surgery went well and there have been no issues since he was transferred into SICU.

"The chest tube will be left in place for several days. As Mr Castle will be staying in hospital for some time this shouldn't be an issue.

"At the moment we are assisting his breathing, and once he wakes we will probably continue that for a while. As you know, quite a few patients with a collapsed lung need extra oxygen for extended periods, so we'll see how we go there.

"The surgeon noted that follow up lung surgery will likely be needed to treat the pneumothorax and especially to assist with recovery, and also help prevent future episodes. This procedure is called pleurodesis and is a quite straight forward operation and minimally invasive. It will repair the area where the leak occurred. The only downside is that recovery is slower that other techniques but it's felt that given the rehabilitation time for his shoulder, this isn't really an issue.

"Seriously Lanie, this guy is really lucky. I've seen people die from those sort of shooting injuries even with vests. His physiology is pretty good though. Whilst not an athlete his body was in pretty good shape apart from a little middle-age spread. Certainly will help with rehab.

"He's due up here in half an hour or so around 12.30 pm and we'll settle him in before his family are due around 1.30 pm."

"Thanks Phil. You're a lifesaver, those two at reception should work for the NSA, definitely not giving anything away that pair." The male doctor laughs and looks at her and Lanie knows *that* look.

"So Lanie, single or taken?" There's 'No Philter' back again.

"Kinda taken. A cop, ex-special forces but with a sweet side."

"You always did like them intense. Shame, I always enjoyed our dates."

"I know you did Sugar, so did I. But that was then and it was never meant to be." She resists the temptation to pat his cheek and starts to rise.

"I'll go grab some lunch and I'll be back here around 1.15 pm to wait for my friend and Castle's family. You'll be here?"

"Yep, I got this shift. See you then Lanie."

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**Homicide, 12th Precinct, Midday, Friday**
Kevin Ryan is staring at the empty desk with the two unoccupied chairs. He's been doing so periodically since coming in this morning. Espo had given up trying to stop him doing it. Of course it was easier for him as he had his back to the desk in question.

Ryan had arrived slightly late, mostly due to Jenny's extreme reluctance to let him out of her sight after the events of yesterday. He had stammered an apology to Espo, whose simple response of 'de nada' made it clear he understood. Nothing was said about who was comforting him last night.

"The sooner you finish the paperwork Detective, the sooner we can all check on Castle and Beckett." Captain Gates' usual tone is moderated, the imperative is still there but there is some warmth. She's not alone – there are two officers from Ethical Standards as well as two members of the District Attorney's office as well keeping watch and ensuring the paperwork is completed by the book.

"Sir." Ryan acknowledges as he instinctively reaches up to rub at the bandages on his upper left arm.

Ryan looks back down at the paperwork he is accumulating in front of him. The NYPD has many levels of bureaucratic hell, so he should not have been surprised to discover that there was a special level just for those officers who almost got shot. Though he reckons that they paper-pushers wouldn't have thought of the need for a category to cover a civilian consultant getting shot. No doubt they would have that one covered too in future.

He tried not to think about Castle in the hospital. He had been buoyed by Lanie's text message with the positive prognosis but it would be a long road ahead for Castle and Beckett too. Well at least Castle was usually lucky when in the precinct as he didn't have to do paperwork. Even Beckett hated paperwork, and she was the most dedicated cop he had ever met.

"Hey Kev, coffee?" Espo has finished his paperwork, and is trying to assist his partner.

"Sure. Thanks Espo. I'm almost done, give me a few minutes and I'll meet you in the break room."

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**Affinia Dumont Hotel, Suite 605, 12:30 pm, Friday**

Kate had taken a quick shower and together they had rustled up a quick lunch from the copious supplies that had been provided in the suite. She had changed outfits and applied a little make-up. These simple tasks had made her feel a lot better. Looking in the mirror she impartially noted that she did indeed look a little better than earlier. Bless Martha for organizing this and getting Lanie to bring her clothes and toiletries. She had noted that there were bags for Martha and Alexis too.

Their mood was the lightest it had been for almost twenty-four hours, and by intuitive consensus their conversation steered away from more serious matters whilst they had eaten. Once finished eating, Kate and Martha cleaned up whilst Alexis took a quick shower.

Martha put her hand on Kate's arm.

"How are you, Darling?"

"Tired, impatient for Rick to wake up from the coma. But I am feeling better, more confident. I'll be a lot better when I can talk to him."

"I'm concerned about Alexis. She is bottling it all up. Can you help her? Talk to her?" Martha sounds uncertain, although about what Kate doesn't know.
"Martha, I will if she wants to and will let me. Things can still be a bit hesitant between us, especially if it is just the two of us."

"Oh Kate, I don't think you have anything to worry about. Alexis is very supportive of the two of you but whilst she has never had a problem being honest and frank with her father, she also struggles talking to you. But only because she admires you so much. She did initially and has done again since you and Richard have finally seen the light." With that final sentence Martha glosses over all the issues that had impacted not only her and Rick but his family too.

"Kate, I almost forgot. Here is your bank cards. I picked them up from the meeting earlier. I suggest you hold on to them." Pausing the older woman looks at her intently.

"You are going to accept and user them aren't you?"

"Yes, I will. My I spoke to my father when I left the meeting earlier. He helped me, umm, see sense. I know Rick means well, but it will take a little time to get used to all of this." She waves her hand at the hotel room, and the envelope containing the bank cards, all symbolism of the rewards Rick's hard work and dedication had bought his family.

Kate finishes, and looks back at Martha. The elder woman is clearly tired but she carries herself proudly, just as Kate imagines she has through her life as a single parent to Rick. Rick's parental skills and unequivocal commitment to his daughter has always moved her, even long before she could feel sufficient attraction for the man, but Kate can only marvel Martha's strength in fulfilling the role in a more difficult earlier time as a single mother.

All this is central to one of her remaining secret fears, one that had played a tremendous part in her unwillingness to make the final leap through her walls and commit, and one that she keeps to this day. She resolves that when she had this discussion with Rick, this fear will be secret no more. Turning aside from her thoughts, she speaks again.

"How are you Martha?"

"Like yourself I can't wait until Richard is awake. But these last few hours have bought some measure of relief and I'm sure we will all feel better when we see him. Even if he is still unconscious."

"Gram, Kate" Alexis' voice intrudes from the bathroom. "I forgot my bag, can one of you please grab it, and I'll finish getting ready so we can go see Dad?"

Smiling Kate turns to pick up the bag Martha has just pointed to. Picking it up she heads towards the bathroom, and hears Martha remark quietly.

"Just occasionally Alexis displays one of her father's less impressive traits, like single-minded forgetfulness."

Bellevue Hospital, 1.15 pm, Friday

The town car had whisked them back to the hospital and the three of them are met at the rear loading bay by a security guard and Bjorn Johannson, a robbery detective who has sensibly taken off his NYPD duster to avoid attracting attention when meeting them.

They are quickly escorted though the impressive public atrium with its space and light, and up onto the second floor of the hospital's West wing. They find themselves passing through the entrance of the Bellevue Hospital's Intensive Care Unit into a modern looking facility with a surprisingly
welcoming ambiance, especially for a medical facility.

As they enter, the familiar figure of Karen Wright appears accompanied by Lanie and a male doctor.

"Good Afternoon, Ms Rodgers, Miss Castle and Detective Beckett."

"I will take you through to Mr Castle's room very shortly. He arrived up here 25 minutes ago and has been settled in. He is still in a medically induced coma.

"This is Doctor Phil Connaught. He will give you an update before we take you to the room. A little later, at approximately 6 pm, he or one of the ICU doctor's will be round again and will give you a further update then.

"If you would allow me, I would like to just run through some information and some other things you may find useful.

"The Bellevue Hospital Intensive Care Unit is a ten-bed unit with six private rooms and two semi-private rooms. As you know we are located on the second floor of the hospital's West wing. We provide highly skilled and qualified nursing care for the critically ill or injured patient.

"Mr Castle is in a private room at the end of the ICU complex. The hospital will have a guard stationed at the ICU entrance to verify visitors. I am told the NYPD will be providing additional security and there will be at least one officer closer to the room.

"General visiting hours are 8 am until 8 pm. However, visiting outside of these hours is permitted depending on the patient and family needs. I am afraid we don't really have facilities for visitors to stay overnight, but if one of you does wish to stay we will see what can be arranged.

"The normal policy is to allow only two visitors at a time but in the case of Mr Castle, we will allow three and up to an additional two visitors for short periods.

"We appreciate and encourage family members to visit our patients because you play an important role in supporting your loved one's physical, mental, and spiritual recovery. To assist you and your family these information leaflets cover many points of information, and I will highlight a few key ones."

"For your convenience there is a private ICU waiting room at the top of the atrium stairs and to your left. This room is near to the ICU and coffee and a phone are available for your use. There is the Main Station Café off the Atrium which is open 7 am to 6.30 pm. There are vending machines and I believe last night you used the Staff Cafeteria which is normally off limits.

"We have shift changes between seven and eight, morning and night and would appreciate if there was no arrivals or calls during that period to allow staff to hand over to the next shift.

"Ideally we would a single point of contact. What we term a Family Spokesperson. Each family is requested to designate one spokesperson who will call us for updates. Other family members and friends can then call this spokesperson to update them on the patient's condition.

"Please feel free to ask us any question while you are here and we will do our best to explain. We understand that this is a stressful time not only for our patients, but for their families as well.

"All the key phone numbers are in the leaflet but I have also written them on the back of my business cards. The numbers include the ICU Nursing Station phone and the ICU Waiting Room."
"I am going to hand you over to Doctor Connaught who will bring you up-to-date with Mr Castle's status.

"Please don't hesitate to contact me if you need anything. Good Afternoon."

With this Karen passes over the information leaflets and newer business cards, before exiting the ICU.

_Bellevue ICU Room 5, 1.33 pm, Friday_

The status update from Doctor Connaught and Lanie had been very positive, and had reassured them. But this was before they got to see Rick.

Kate can feel her heart pounding. It has been more than 20 hours since she and Rick had said goodbye to each other outside the conference room at the Precinct, expecting to see each other again in only a few hours.

As her eyes adjust to subdued lighting in the room, she takes in her first sight of her partner. He's covered in the accouterments of medical science - wires, sensors, probes, drips and tubes. There is an oxygen mask on his face and his eyes are closed. Beyond on the other side of his bed, she spies the battery of machines and monitors, and she also knows that side, his right, is where his most profound injuries lie. But for the moment, she stops a little short of the bed whilst she regathers herself.

"Oh Rick." She doesn't mean to say it, well not out loud anyway, but she does. She doesn't mean for it to sound so forlorn and some clingy, but she does and she is.

Behind her, she is dimly aware of Martha and Alexis pausing outside the door and giving her a moment alone with Rick.

It makes her self-conscious and guilty, but she won't put aside her momentary selfishness and desire to have her man to herself for a few seconds. Not before she shares him again with the other women in his life who love him so. As much as her. Unequivocally, and without reservation.

No more doubts. Where in the past there was hesitation and second guessing, elements and indications of uncertainty, now there is none. She knows she loves him completely. And he her. There is no escaping this knowledge and the implications. That all-encompassing and enveloping emotion that she had last felt for mother and the very reason why until now she had spent the last thirteen years running at the first sign of it.

There a small gasp behind her, and Kate instinctively knows it is Alexis as she gets her first view of her father. She can hear Lanie's gentle encouragement for the younger Red Head to continue entering the room.

She doesn't look behind her but feels the young woman's presence before Alexis slips a cool hand into her left hand and squeezes gently.

"Oh Richard" Martha's voice comes from behind her right shoulder and she feels the older woman pull into her right side. Together the three of them look across the small distance to the man they love.

They approach the bed together. He's slightly inclined and the far side of the bed is surrounded by a number of machines so they have to approach his left side.
Kate tremulously reaches out with her right hand to stroke his left forearm. Feeling the warmth and the familiar texture of his skin, she steps further in towards the bed, and mindful of all the wires and monitors, leans forward to place her lips to his forehead. Her kiss is gentle, revered, and so heartfelt.

"I love you Rick. Never doubt that." She voices her emotions so quietly the two women behind cannot hear her.

"When you are awake I am going to tell and show you how much you mean to me. How much I need to treasure you, not just to repay what you have done for me, but for our future together." She pauses for a moment, and she speaks again.

"And then we are going to have a talk." There is purpose and commitment in her voice, and if Rick was awake to hear her, he would probably be a little wary.

She kisses his forehead again, and steps back to let Alexis approach her father.

"Daddy?" Alexis' voice is so fragile, in that one word that encompasses everything Kate knows Rick means to his daughter, and her for him, the true agony of the events of the last day for the young woman. Alexis reaches out to stroke her father's arm, tears streaming down her face. She too leans forward to kiss his face just beside his eye socket.

Kate's almost breaks apart at that first word. She has to draw deep of herself to not let her emotions overwhelm her. She can't be so selfish now. This is Alexis' turn to commune with her father.

Kate knows first-hand what it is to feel all those sensations and emotions simultaneously and to have them fight for dominance. In the past she has let the wrong emotions win, especially fear, and she is determined not let this happen again, even if means fighting every instinct to remain at his daughter's side whilst she breaks down.

Martha stood silently behind the two younger women, giving thanks for her son's survival. She is also so proud of the man. He's not had the easiest or most conventional upbringing, and yet he has been the perfect father to his daughter (even if Meredith was diametrically the opposite as far as parenting), and now in Kate he has found his future. Martha wants to picture it all for them – Kate the wife, step-mom and mother of more grand-children, but with these two she has learnt that they make it complicated, unnecessarily so, and accordingly she will wait patiently and where she can prod them along the right path.

Outside the room, Lanie Parish watches her best friend and her new family deal with the profound emotions of seeing a loved one in a coma, wired up to a battery of monitors, pumps and IV's. Whilst they have been assured that Rick will be bought out of the coma within a day or so and will eventually make a good if not full recovery, the irrational uncertainty lies heavy across them all.

She quickly presses send on the message she had composed earlier to Esposito, Ryan and Captain Gates to inform them that Rick has been moved to ICU and his status. She could have sent this earlier, once Phil had briefed her, but she knew that giving the news first to his family trumped everything else.

Deciding it is time, Lanie enters the ICU room to say her goodbyes and leave them to their private viewing.
Marking Time

Chapter Summary

Rick has been transferred to Intensive Care and everyone is waiting for the writer to wake up.

Break Room, Homicide, 12th Precinct, 2 pm Friday

They're in the break room, surrounded by the remnants of a less than stellar takeaway which had at least assuaged the hunger pangs and distracted them for a while.

"You know I miss Castle already." Esposito's tone was somewhat whiny near needy, not a natural state for the ex-military man. Ryan knows that yesterday's incident has shaken them both, and not just because Castle is currently unconscious in intensive care.

"Javi, you miss Castle 'cause we had to buy our own lunch for once." Ryan corrected his partner whilst once again scratching at his upper left arm, another reminder of the traumatic events of less than twenty-four hours ago.

"How's Jenny?" Esposito finally starts on the topic both of them have been skirting round all morning. Last night their focus – after treatment for their minor injuries – had naturally been on Castle and by automatic extension Beckett.

"After I got home, Jenny was sitting on the couch, waiting up of me. She just held me all night. She didn't say much other than to ask after Castle, Beckett and you." Ryan pauses, clearly considering what he should share, but then apparently satisfied with his internal debate, he continues.

"She didn't cry once I got home, but I can tell she must have done before I got home. She helped undress me, and threw the ruined shirt in the rubbish, cleaned me up and took me to bed. I think she may have cried again this morning before I got up. She asked, well pretty much demanded that I stay and have breakfast with her. It was nice though. I think it will take few days. We'll talk about it eventually. How about you Javi?"

"So last night you and Jenny didn't have a reaffirmation of life then?" Espo teases his partner whilst deflecting Ryan's question.

He'll play along with his partner's customary reluctance to discuss his own personal thoughts and emotions. It has always been that way and he doesn't feel slighted by Javi's decision, he knows they look out for each other regardless. Javi would tell him when he was ready, and only then. It was a trait he shared with Beckett and what made them such kindred spirits, even though they weren't direct partners. It was why Javi had backed Beckett to the hilt when chasing Maddox. The loyalty was worthy of respect and admiration but taken to their almost fanatical extremes, defying logic had been the hardest moment for Ryan. It had taken some time to re-establish their partnership after those events.

Ryan shakes his head to clear those thoughts and counters his partner's avoidance.
"Nah, we just held each other close. What about you Javi? A little bird may have hinted that you left the hospital with a certain medical examiner."

"Well we may have just held each other ….. later." Esposito's statement is flat and deadpan, challenging his partner to make more of it.

"Bro!" Ryan's response was accompanied by a gentle punch to Espo's right shoulder.

"So are you two back on again?"

"I don't know Kev. But if we are, we're definitely not double dating again."

"Cold Bro, cold." Ryan fires back, acknowledging the memories of the train-wreck double date that had played a part in Lanie and Javi splitting up the first time.

"I think we should clean up and get back out there. Captain says the Chief of D's and a bunch of suits from 1PP are coming in this afternoon and we should be ready." Espo is clearly not going to say more at this time.

"Yeah. Anyway, before we go back, I just wanted to say I'm glad we made it. Too many close calls. We owe Castle big-time for this."

"Damn Straight." Esposito concludes and offers up his hand to feed the birds with his partner.

New York Ledger Website

Castle Fan Club to sue NYPD

The 'Richard E Castle Fan Club' – note this is not an officially sanctioned fan organisation – has announced its' intention to sue the NYPD for failing to ensure safety of Richard Castle whilst involved in police operations.

There has been no statement as yet from the NYPD nor the family or Mr Castle representatives but sources confirm that the earlier statements from this morning's press conference still stand and that there is no intention from either Mr Castle's family or his publishers to sue the NYPD.

Update – Castle Still In Coma

The best-selling author remains in an induced coma in the intensive care ward at Bellevue. The hospital has stated that it expects Mr Castle to remain in a coma for up to 48 hours after his operation and it may be several days before he is fully conscious.

His family and his girlfriend Detective Kate Beckett have been observed visiting the ICU. Security at the ICU has been increased and there is a strong police presence. Visitors to the ICU are being checked and several attempts by unauthorized parties have already been dealt with.

His publicist, Paula Haas, has thanked the public for their support and best wishes. She requested no flowers or gifts and asked that instead anyone wishing could make donations to the NYC PBA Widows and Children's Fund, or alternatively the Brighter Blue Futures Trust or Joanna Beckett Endowment.

Secure Conference Room, Homicide 12 th Precinct, 4.30 pm Friday
Thomas Delaney, NYPD's Chief of Detectives was a straight-talking, reputedly former hard drinking, old-school street detective with stints in Homicide, Vice and Organised Crime as well as a number of desk jobs before earning the ultimate position for a working detective. He was currently losing a three sided argument with his former protégé and friend Vicky Gates and a Paula Haas, some form of hard-core power suited banshee.

Hilary Davies, Assistant Commissioner Press Relations, looks on in scarcely disguised amusement. Any potential clean-up work arising from this was worth it simply to see the usually bombastic Chief of D's rendered incoherent and powerless. She recognized a carefully crafted ambush when she saw one.

Their argument was simple enough. She was inclined to favor the approach that the two women were pitching. Moreover, it was obvious that Paula Haas has formed an alliance with Gates, and they were adamant in advancing their case that the entire event can be positive for NYPD as well as for Rick Castle and Detective Kate Beckett.

Thomas tries again.

"Miss Haas"

"Paula" she corrects him, almost challenging.

"Paula" he concedes, and turns to the Precinct Captain. "Vicky" he almost implores.

"Victoria" another correction, it is not his day and deciding then that he may as well concede as gracefully as possible, least word get out about this.

"Okay. I'll let you run with your idea. I am still not happy, but I do trust you Victoria and seemingly now you as well Paula."

"Right now we have that settled, let's review where we are at, and how we make this work for everyone including Mr Castle, his publisher, the NYPD and the City of New York." Gates is all business, and starts to outline the basics of their media plan.

Thomas listens with growing incredulity and then respect as Paula Haas and Gates lays out possibly the most simple, yet brilliant plan to make sure that the initial good press is built upon.

"I think we can work with that." Paula confirms with a smile. But then her mood swings and she has a deadly serious look.

"However, I am concerned about what happens once the honeymoon period is over. The press will stop soft pedaling them and come looking for stories with a different angle. Exes and previous relationships of course, but also previous cases and investigations, and work issues especially anything legal or disciplinary. I know Rick's skeletons but I understand there may be issues and events with Detective Beckett that may need to be managed.

"We've been lucky with Rick for a few years, he's basically done the book promotions as well as the Nikki Heat movie and managed to otherwise stay off the radar. This won't be the case for a little while."

"Here's what I think might be a good approach" With this she pulls out her iPad and starts to reel off a number of points whilst her audience listens with growing appreciation for Paula Haas' mastery of the dark arts of media management.
Bellevue Intensive Care Unit, Friday 6.00 pm

They had sat with Castle through the remainder of the day. Lanie had popped in briefly and Kate's father had visited around 4 pm after finishing a client meeting. He had stayed for half-an-hour and had provided a nice distraction from their increasing introspection, even Martha was showing the strain.

Aside from the odd phone call or text message exchanged with Gates, the Boys and Paula there was really nothing to report until an hour or so ago when two doctors had come round and after checking Rick's charts had announced that the medication keeping him sedated were being stopped and that he should gradually start to regain consciousness. They did warn that it would be some time and most likely tomorrow or later before he would be awake properly.

Buoyed by the news, they had all sent out new updates and briefly shared a mutual hug.

It is an hour or so after the doctors have left, and Martha rises from her seat and approaches Alexis and Kate who have been playing cards.

"I'm heading back to the loft to get changed. My class is holding final rehearsal tonight followed by a little soiree and I think it will be just the thing.

"Please call me if there is any change" she finishes as she leans down to embrace and kiss each of the younger women.

"Good night Martha."

"Good night Grams."

After watching Martha imperiously sail out of ICU, Kate turns to Alexis.

"What did you want to do tonight? And before you go, do you want to talk? About anything." She clarifies for the younger woman.

"Kate" Alexis is hesitant. She knows that the relationship between her father and Kate had moved far beyond the boyfriend/girlfriend stage. Moreover, that it had never been that simple from the beginning. She does like, even loves, Kate and understands why her father is so smitten but she still has her concerns and fears that have been magnified so powerfully by the events of the last 24 hours.

"I've always been worried about Dad.

"When he started shadowing you, it was fine. I was younger, a bit naive, didn't really understand what it was like and what the risks were. I knew in the second and third years you had some close calls but Dad was always good at making light of serious matters and to protect us. Having met you and seen how serious you were as a professional, I trusted you to protect him.

"Later after I had interned with Doctor Parish, I had a new perspective of what you did, and a much better view of how you really were partners. How he worked so well with your team, but also how in love with you he was. But you were with that doctor, and after he ended the mistake with Gina, I still didn't understand how Dad could still be hopelessly smitten. I also understood more about the risks you faced, and that scared me, no matter how much he and Grams tried to reassure me.

"When he was with you, I was afraid that he would be hurt, and sometimes that he wouldn't come home. I knew he would do anything to protect you."
"There have been times when I've wanted him to stop. Two years ago, when Dad sent me and Grams out of the city for the weekend – it took him weeks to be himself again and he was so sad as well and he was missing his joie de vivre was gone for ages. He never did explain fully why, and Grams would only say that it was some national security issue and it was hushed up. And then, after you were shot."

Alexis has to stop and take several depth breaths to compose herself. Although still in her teens, the young woman is looking directly at Kate. Her eyes are slightly red, and she is blinking back tears, but she is still looking directly at Kate, and Kate meets her determination with her own. No more hiding.

"He tried to save you and he was so close to the bullet. He was so devastated in the cemetery. Grams helped him get into the ambulance and she has never told me what they said. He was covered in your blood, and I was so afraid of losing him."

Kate has heard the same thing recently from Lanie, and her guilt is magnified once more as she truly begins to comprehend what all her actions, instinctive and deliberate decisions combined have done to this family she now feels part of, and so badly wants to remain joined with for the rest of her life.

"When we got to the hospital, we found Dad and Doctor Parish in tears in the ER. I, we, all initially thought you were dead. Then the waiting was horrible. Mr Beckett was really pale but he was really composed, so was Grams. Then that doctor came and accused Dad of being responsible and tried to attack him."

Kate's eyes fly open at this point. No one had told her that. She feels residual anger at Josh for doing that, but more is directed at herself, for making the decisions that put all those who obviously care about her into those situations.

Alexis has seen Kate's surprise but presses on, fearful of losing her own determination.

"Then when you were away with no contact for all those months after leaving hospital. First Dad was at the precinct all the time working with Detectives Esposito and Ryan, and when he kicked out investigating on his own. He didn't take care of himself, didn't sleep or eat, he drank too much. Withdrew from all us. He wasn't my Dad."

Kate feels each hammer blow of guilt as the impact of her choices upon the man she loves and his family becomes clearer.

"Gram never told me but I think your Dad came to see him one day when I was at school, and after that he stopped drinking, ate, slept a little, started writing again. He still wasn't all there but he was better."

Kate wonders how many more surprises she can take. Her Dad had never told her this. He had tried to encourage her to reach out and communicate with her friends, and with Rick especially, but she had been more than stubborn wallowing in the self-pity and recrimination of yet another failed relationship, the recovery and the trauma of her shooting.

"Then when you came back and slowly things go better, I asked Dad about your relationship. I asked if he was happy and whether what you had was enough, when he clearly wanted so much more. He said it was enough for now."

"Then earlier this year, just when things seemed better between you, there was the bombing and then you two were arguing or whatever that was. Dad was so hurt then. He reverted to the
stereotype he never really was. Gram obviously knew more once again but wasn't sharing and Doctor Parish wouldn't tell me.

"But I always knew Dad would try to come back to you. It has always been so clear to Gram and I how much he loves you. How hopelessly he loved you. What I never understood is why you didn't seem to reciprocate? Why wasn't my Dad worthy of the same love back?"

Kate is in tears now. The guilt is too much and she breaks eye contact with Alexis. Her head dropping in shame and sorrow at the anguish she had caused to people who care, who LOVE her.

"We knew you loved Dad at some level, but not until recently did we dare believe it was to the same degree."

Alexis stops speaking, and Kate can feel her eyes on her. She knows she had to respond. She raised her head so she can look her partners daughter in the eyes and give her as much of the truth as she, even though it is much less than she deserves.

"Alexis, the reason I was so cautious is because I love you Dad so much, almost too much. I know that doesn't make sense." Alexis starts and stares at Kate curiosity peaked by the conflicting statement.

"This is it for me, I am totally committed now and forever. I can never take back those selfish and scared mistakes I made over the years, but I will try to atone for them for the rest of my life with your father and our family.

"I don't know how else I can do to explain things to you but I want to try. There will be some things - a lot of things - I won't say to you or anyone else before I say them to Rick, but I will try to explain as much as I can if you are willing to listen."

The red head nods her acceptance, and Kate begins.

"I can't deny I have treated your father so badly at times. I've made some really stupid and inexcusable decisions. Yet somehow we find our way back to each other and Rick has always forgiven me, even when I didn't think I deserved to be.

"Now your father has also done things which hurt me, sometimes knowingly but not because they would hurt but because he believed that the outcome outweighed the pain they caused. I can't say I have always thought the same, but I accept his intentions were honest and well-meaning. I have forgiven him and told and tried to show him as much, especially since May.

"You asked why I didn't show you father the love her deserved." Alexis nods.

"It is because I felt, have done for so long, that I didn't deserve that love. I wasn't worthy of his commitment, his sacrifice, his worship and his family. I was so broken with so much baggage, my scars and unresolved issues that I would hurt him and his family when all they deserved was happiness and a life less encumbered by tragedy and heartache."

"But he was already committed and hurting. We all were." Alexis corrects.

"I know that now. But for so many years, the devastation of my mother's murder has ruled my life and burnt and tarnished everything including my father, our relationship, my attempts at relationships, my work, everything.

"Your Dad, was the first person that ever managed to fix more than a little bit of that. The first person that didn't give up or learn to accept it. Even then I fought him all of the way, but your Dad
is so stubborn that eventually he even wore me down. He was the one that stayed. Always.

"Lanie told me that I need to show Rick, how much he means to me, and I fully intend to do that for the rest of our lives." Kate trails off, she is drained and incapable of giving more just now.

"Kate. Thank you. I thing I understand more now. Doctor Parish was right when she said you both make it complicated. But I think we are in a good place and getting better." Alexis too falls silent.

Their quiet shared introspection after the talk is disturbed by a short beep from one of the machines. Alexis looks over at her father and satisfied that he is still asleep she turns to Kate.

"Do you know what would be funny?" She almost teases Kate.

"No, what?"

"That he is awake and listened to all that."

"Oh that would be so typically Castle. But you know what 'Lex, it ain't happening now as there is no way you dad is that good an actor nor could he keep quiet for that long."

They smile and remain sitting for some time in reflective silence.

Glancing at her watch, Kate suddenly comes to life.

Picking up her phone, Kate hits a speed dial. Hearing an answering voice on the other end, she fires off.

"Hi Lanie, its Kate. No news on Castle except they've stopped the meds keeping him under and will wait for him to wake."

"Can you do us a favor tonight?"

"Sure Girl"

"I'm staying at the hospital, and Martha is going out. I need someone to stay with Alexis ideally at the Loft or your place perhaps, or otherwise at the hotel."

"Not my place…..umm….it's still a bit messy after Javi was there last night." Lanie responds with minimal clarity.

"Oh something you not sharing then? Teases Kate.

"He stayed at my place last night, we both didn't want to be alone. He can manage on his own for one night – or at least I think so, I will check with him, but it should be good."

"Oh great. Can you swing by and pick her up from here and then you can head to the Loft or the hotel. There is parking in the Loft basement garage. Well the Loft has 4 spaces and Rick generally only keeps 2 or 3 cars there, and mine is still at the Precinct. Alexis can ring ahead and arrange access. Alexis will wait for you by the loading bay in 20 minutes".

Hearing Lanie's acknowledgement Kate hangs up.

The medication keeping Richard Castle in a medically induced coma had been ceased on Friday evening.
There had been moments in the night when Castle was no longer simply unconscious but hovering between deeply under and fitful resting.

Around 3 am Kate had been startled from her near-awake slumber, by a louder beeping noise, shortly followed a short burst of coughing, almost choking sounds from Rick. Automatically she had hit the call button whilst crossing to the bed and taking Rick's left hand in hers. With her right hand she had brushed his brow, muttering words of comfort which immediately seemed to help him settle.

Eyes adjusting to the twilight state of the room, she quickly assessed Rick's state. His eyes were firmly closed. Two ICU nurses had arrived inside a minute and made some adjustments and he had settled again, and reluctantly Kate had drifted back to sleep.

Saturday morning had come and gone with a constant stream of visitors. Kate had become used to the regular shift change of 12th Precinct personnel who always made a point of checking in and out with however was in Rick's room and asking after him. They had also expressed gratitude for the facilities offered at the hotel, and in turn the shift changes would bring coffee and snacks for the room occupants as well.

The early morning Doctor's rounds had simply confirmed that Rick was slowly coming out of the induced sedation and at the moment it was just as likely to be his own bodies natural recuperation needs keeping him from waking. He did seem more comfortable and that doctors were talking of removing the chest tube once he was awake and they could be certain he was breathing better on the collapsed lung.

Ryan and Espo had called in on their way to the Precinct and had refused to tell her more about the case. Later they promised and she intended to hold them to that. Never-the-less it had been good to see them and feel their brotherly love and concern for both her and Rick.

Lanie had dropped Alexis in on her way to work. Then Martha had arrived and they had forced Kate to take a break and go back to the hotel to shower, eat and change before returning. On her return, Martha had announced she was taking Alexis out for the afternoon, and for Kate take good care of 'our boy'.

**Bellevue Intensive Care Unit, Saturday 4.00 pm**

Kate is beside his bed in ICU. She's nothing like Detective Beckett. Her hair is down and she's wearing a long flowing top, yoga pants, and her feet are bare, her ballet flats kicked off under the chair. It's a bohemian look that Rick not so secretly calls 'Carefree Kate'. There is a scarf thrown over the back of the chair beside the hanging satchel bag containing her things.

The height of the ICU bed and the relative size of the visitor chairs means that Kate has long ago abandoned trying to maintain continuous contact with Rick by holding his left hand or simply touching his arm whilst sitting. Instead Kate had continued to maintain a conversation with Rick along with periodically standing and moving to the bed to squeeze his hand or arm, kiss him, to simply be there for him.

She has an e-book reader in one hand – a non-gift from Rick who typically refused to steadfastly follow her instructions regarding gifts – but she can't concentrate even on the familiar words of his own novels that unsurprisingly came pre-loaded. She won't use her iPod as she wants all her senses available to listen for any sign of Rick waking.
They had been warned that waking up from a coma – even a short medically induced one - can be a slow process that can start with a twitch of a finger or a squeeze of a hand. The various stages of recovery could take days or longer, and whilst the staff were hopeful it could be quick given the relatively short length of time he had been sedated, ultimately it was down to Rick.

After the unsettled period in the night, Rick had been calm and except for a few involuntary movements, and a couple of initially hopeful but ultimately incoherent noises, there had been no sign of him waking though the day. The ICU nurses had stated they the drugs had now worn off and now it was all down to him.

Kate puts the e-book reader down and steps over the bed. Placing her hand in his, she leans forward to kiss his brow as she has done without count through the long hours. Gazing down at his surprisingly peaceful face, she suddenly can't help herself.

With her left hand still in his left hand, their warm palms joined. She takes her right hand and quickly glancing out of the ICU room to ensure no one is watching, she leans down until her mouth is so close to his ear lobe she can feel her own warm breath reflect back, and she twists his ear lobe and in as seductive tone as possible whispers to him

"Ricky, time to wake up Kitten."

Her voice breaks, and the seductive tone is lost, her voice suddenly raw.

"Please Rick. Come back to us."

She gives one last gentle tweak and let's go and prepares to step back.

Then she feels it.

His left hand squeezes hers, softly at first, and then tighter, his strong digits grasping her and not letting go.

He coughs, and one of the monitors starts to beep. He is still coughing and it in between the beeping and the coughs she strains to hear him. And then she catches the word coming from his mouth.

"Apples."

She had hit the call button, and summoned the ICU staff. Now there are two nurses and Lanie's Doctor friend in the room. They have dimmed the lights to ease the discomfort for when he actually opens his eyes, and they had moistened his throat which had eased the coughing whilst they examined him. She could clearly see his chest rise and fall further and his arms were moving a little.

She had to fight the instinct to be right there with him, holding him. She knew the medical staff needed space and time to check him out. Watching from as close as possible, with tears streaming down her face, she palms her phone and quickly calls Alexis, an incongruous smile upon her face.

Unit TwelveCharlieFive

Officer Anne Hasting is looking at the in car computer, watching the latest status reports, when suddenly she leans forward and grins, and slaps the dashboard in celebration with a joyous 'About Time!'
"Hey Hastings, what's up?" inquires her partner, trying to concentrate on navigating the cruiser through Manhattan traffic.

"Central has just announced Castle is out of the coma."

"He's awake!"
**Chapter Summary**

Rick has woken from his induced coma. There is a long path ahead for him and his family. Meanwhile, some actual police work is taking place…..

**Observation Room 1, Homicide, 12th Precinct, Saturday morning.**

Javier Esposito watched as his partner, Kevin Ryan, continued to fidget with the bandage on his left arm where 2 shotgun pellets and shrapnel fragments had left their mark. He was still grateful they both escaped with a couple of minor wounds compared to their friend and partner.

On the way to the Precinct, they had stopped in at Bellevue to see Beckett and check on Castle. Officially visitors were still restricted to family, but hell they were 'family' and a little bit of badge abuse got them in. They had been surprised to see Beckett dressed down and patiently waiting with the still unconscious author to wake up. Despite her best efforts, they had refused to update her on the case and promised her to do later. They had both hugged Beckett and left the hospital feeling more positive.

Gates had removed them from the case, and then she too had been stood down by the Chief of Detectives. So now they had another homicide team – at least it was Karpowski’s from the 12th – as the lead, and a precinct due to be full of brass and strangers observing and interfering in their case.

However, being off the case, didn't stop them observing from behind the glass, and watching with Gates as Karpowski & Jones began to interrogate Leroy Herron. He was the first shooter at Apartment 67 and the one who had so effectively been disarmed and disabled by Castle.

Herron had been transferred over from the hospital late first thing this morning. There was a strong degree of satisfaction in the Precinct when it was learnt that Herron's stay at the hospital had been extended after it was discovered he had a dislocated shoulder, severely bruised ribs and a minor concussion all courtesy of Castle. The Boys had made a note to ensure they let Beckett know what Castle had done.

Herron was now the current occupant of Interrogation Room 1 at the 12th Precinct facing off against Karpowski and Jones. He had waived his right for an attorney, which was either a very smart or an equally dumb decision but the watching cops hadn't yet worked out which applied. The dynamic of Karpowski and her partner Jones was different to how either Espo and Ryan or Beckett and Castle worked, and if nothing else it was interesting to watch an alternative interrogation style in action.

They were taking a break, and Herron had been hauled off to an isolated corner of holding for a comfort and food break whilst Karpowski's team and the observers assessed the results of their first round of interrogation.

They had learnt Leroy Herron was a plant by Delucca into Jussie's circle of acquaintances to see if
he could discover more on the location of the missing paintings. He was tasked with establishing a rapport with Jussic and Flute which he had done so, duping the two admittedly no so smart almost small-time criminals into bringing him into their circle.

He didn't know much about the second shooter. He had been referred as 'Lucas' and had come with Delucca. Herron assumed he was from whoever was really calling the shots, but knew better than to ask about who that was.

Fortunately, the NYPD knew much more about the second shooter. He was a mid-level mob enforcer for the Silva crime family named Luca Tromma with a rap sheet for pretty much everything except murder. He currently occupying a slab at the NY Office of the Chief Medical Examiner's Morgue courtesy of five rounds from ESU. Espo and Ryan had already contacted Franklin, the ESU team leader, and made it clear they owned them a few beers.

Delucca had been captured by uniforms after trying to flee down the fire escape and falling and breaking a collar bone, and sustaining a number of other injuries. In light of the events inside Apartment 67 there had been minimal sympathy from the cops who had redirected the arriving EMT's to be prioritized on Castle and then the unconscious Jussic.

Delucca was still under guard at Mount Sinai, and would eventually be interview by both the 12th and also Organised Crime who had been after the Silva family for years. Ominously, one of the Silva family lawyers had already paid a visit to register his representation of Delucca. No such courtesy had been extended to Herron.

They now knew from released DoD records that James Flute had been dishonorably discharged from New York State National Guard for suspected involvement in weapons theft. In an act of ultimate ironic justice he had been killed with one of the weapons he stole.

The shotguns used by Herron and Tromma were amongst almost one hundred weapons – pistols, shotguns and obsolete but still deadly M3 sub machineguns - stolen from the NY National Guard. After a thorough investigation by the Military Police, ATF and NYPD, Flute's brother – the serving soldier - had been absolved of any involvement and whilst they had circumstantial evidence the authorities did not have enough to charge Flute. The army had seen fit to dismiss him dishonorably, making him next to unemployable in many jobs. A career in petty crime had followed. Strangely enough none of his crimes involved firearms, especially the ones stolen from the National Guard.

According to Herron, Flute was killed by 'Lucas' because he had nothing useful to offer. He had obviously provided some of the stolen weapons - at least the two shotguns and venerable M1911A1 service of approximately 1950's vintage recovered with Delucca. The whereabouts of the rest remained a mystery.

Jussic on the other hand was still alive but he had been tortured to see if had more information on the location of the paintings, despite the fact he was only a young child when this all happened. ESU had found Jussic unconscious in the maintenance loft accessible beyond the hidden door and curtain when they performed a new full sweep after the shooting. Jussic was currently in Mount Sinai Hospital under police protection.

Herron was trying to cut a deal given he was facing attempted murder charges, but his options were limited as they had plenty of physical evidence as well as all the eye witnesses – all cops.

He was the first gunman, and despite having been so coolly disarmed and disabled by Castle, he had fired twice with a stolen shotgun at police and been party to Flute's murder, the torture of
Jussic, theft and possession of stolen military weapons. This was all in addition to his other offenses committed at the behest of Delucca or the Silva crime family.

However, they doubted his information would be much good to OC and their pursuit of the Silva family. Clearly the Silva family thought so too, as no lawyer had arrived to represent Herron. Given his low hanging fruit status for the crime family, they would simply let him be swept off and imprisoned as he had no incriminating evidence against them.

About the only leverage he had was with the missing weapons, but it turns out that Flute had never revealed that before he died and if Jussic knew Delucca had been more concerned about the paintings than the weapons. So Leroy Herron was sweet out of luck, and once all processed and charged will be lucky to avoid anything less than twenty plus to life.

The ADA who had been prepping with Beckett is back. It turns out that ADA Charles Denoza has been chasing the Silva crime family for years and inadvertently may have a break via the 12th Precinct's case.

The Silva crime family are relatively small fish in terms of overall criminality in New York but Organised Crime had never managed to get much of a purchase on them as they generally recruited directly from Italian immigrants.

The ADA agrees that Herron is of no value and accordingly he'll get the harshest treatment reserved for attempted cop-killers. The irony that often the lowest members of the criminal food-chain get the worst sentences doesn't escape them, nor does it illicit any sympathy.

The ADA will be back once Delucca is fit to be interviewed.

All the bigwigs have departed and the 12th is back to normal, well as normal as Homicide can be without their heartbeat of Beckett and Castle there.

Suddenly Esposito's, Ryan's and Gates' mobiles all beep at once with an incoming message. None of them disguise the haste with they pick up their phones and check.

'Castle out of coma. Woke briefly, now asleep. KB' reads the message with a smiley face to finish..

"About time." Remarked Gates as Ryan and Esposito fed the birds.

"Go home detectives. Take a couple of days, and report back Wednesday unless you hear from me. Maybe I'll see you at the hospital? Probably best to visit Mr Castle before he fully regains all his powers of speech."

And with that Captain Gates leaves the two bemused detectives gaping before they suddenly recover and dash to clear up and head out.

The Old Haunt, Saturday 09:45 pm.

Javier Esposito and Kevin Ryan have had a long day and on any other day, walking into a bar at the end of a day like this would be marked by downing of beer and spirits. Especially on a weekend.

But not tonight. It is hours after they had originally left the Precinct and went their own ways but now they are back together. Tonight they are here covering for a friend. Anxious to help repay any
part they can of a life debt.

Brian, The Old Haunt's long term bartender, acknowledges their arrival and waves them over.

"Detectives Esposito and Ryan. Thank you for coming. I didn't know what to do." He nods towards a familiar corner of the bar. Towards their booth.

Walking over to the corner of the bar, to the booth with the small plaque neatly signed "Reserved for Members of Homicide, 12th Precinct, NYPD", they look down at the solitary figure slumped against the seat back. A small armada of empty or almost empty glasses adorns the table in front of the clearly drunk individual.

A beer-stained copy of today's Inquirer lies on the table. The Headlines are still visible. "Castle in Coma, Shot Saving Cops" "Hero gets the Detective". The last sits above a picture of Beckett and Castle with their arms round each other and a shared mutual expressions of love beyond anything words can convey.

Suddenly aware of their presence the slouching figure speaks.

"What ya want?" slurs from the somewhat disheveled form of Detective Tom Demming. Looking up at the new arrivals, he recognizes the pair of battle weary detectives.

"Oh, why you here and not at 'spital paying homage to Writer-Monkey." Then in even more bitter and sarcastic tone. "The Hero."

Both detectives start at this.

"You don't get it do you, Demming?" this is as much a rhetorical statement from Esposito as Demming obviously didn't get nor did her really stand much chance of doing so as drunk as he was. Never-the-less the Hispanic detective continues on.

"Castle's one of US. He and Beckett have saved each other more times than we can count, they've saved our lives and we've done the same. Partners. He may not have the badge but he's got the heart and soul. He's put his life on the line and damn near paid full price for it. That's no more or less than we expect or ask of anyone in Blue."

Demming lurches, staggering to his feet "Why you bothering me, just want to drink and be left alone! It's a cop bar and the drink's cheap."

Normally it is the Latino detective who exhibits the most emotion, but this evening it is the compact and usually calm Ryan who breaks. With considerable efficiency and no warning he swings to drive his fist into Demmings' gut, but his blow is caught at the last moment by his partner who simply shakes his head.

As it is the blow is not needed, as suddenly Demming pales significantly drops to his knees and vomits on to the floor in the corner of the booth. It takes a minute or two for his heaving to stop watched dispassionately by the two detectives.

Brian has been observing and comes over with a pitcher of water and some glasses and another staff member brings a bucket and mop.

"We got this Brian" states Esposito.

Brian nods and he and the other staff member retreat back towards the bar.
Ryan takes the pitcher and pours a couple of glasses of water, and then grinning viciously suddenly dumps the rest of the pitchers contents, ice cubes and all over the head of the still kneeling Demming.

"Oh, for the record, the reason cops drink cheap here is that it's Castle's bar. He's the boss and you'd be best remembering that before you go bad mouthing him to his staff and friends."

"Ohh" is about the best the suddenly slightly more sober detective can manage.

"Now let's get you tidied up and if you're sober enough it's time to go home."

With that the two detectives pick him up under either arm and deposit him back on the bench. Almost miraculously he appears to have missed his own clothing with his vomit so it is only the pitcher contents have Demming more than slightly damp and unkempt.

Espo grabs the mops and starts to clean up the worst of the vomit, as Ryan hands Demming the first of several glasses of water.

"Why?" Ryan questions Demming. Apparently even drunk, Demming gets the full context of the question.

"We were only together a less than a month. Only went out a couple of times 'cause of work. We were going to go away for the weekend, you know 'seal-the-deal'. I'd booked a nice B'n'B."

They do know but would rather not think about their boss like that. It was bad enough with Castle, especially now with the two of them actually together. When the two of them were in full swing they were totally oblivious to their interactions, infamous eye-sex and palpable sexual tension. Demmings voice snaps them back to present.

"Instead, she breaks up with me, tells me I am nice guy but not what she is looking for." Demming swears profusely but somehow manages to avoid calling Beckett any disrespectful names that would have obliged her *brothers* to intervene to defend her honor.

"I thought I could deal with it, especially when it became clear she wasn't with *HIM*. Then she started up with the doctor, some surgeon, sure, I hurt but I could understand. At least it wasn't that playboy!"

"After more than two years, why now?" Now Espo is curious but also want to move the conversation along before they have to defend Castle too.

"I was on a stakeout a few weeks back, and she and that hot ME came into the place we were watching. She was always so attractive but that night she seemed so alive, happy and carefree. It bought back desires and memories of what I had only seen a glimpse of. I wanted more. To try again. I asked around, did some checking and no one knew anything about her dating. Of course, *HE* was still tagging along."

It is Ryan who responds.

"This is the last word and the matter is closed. Understand?"

Demming nods, suddenly aware of Ryan's proximity and the fire in the Irish detective's eyes and barely repressed menace in his tone.

"They've been together 6 months. Beckett is like that because of Castle. He is responsible for that happiness and joy. Him and his family. Their love. They are our partners so we have their backs."
Ryan steps back from Demming.

"The bar staff are going to get you a coffee and then call you a cab. This matter is closed." Esposito states.

He and Ryan turn to head back to the bar where they can see Brian setting up two beers for them. Esposito suddenly turns back.

"One final thing." He says pointing to the plaque. "Never sit in our seats again."
Awakening from his induced coma, Rick faces a long path to recover. But first he needs to reconnect with his girls.

Oh Frack! Ouch! Hurts! Really Hurts! Just breathing – if that is what he is doing - hurt. A lot. His head hurts. His shoulder hurts. His chest hurts. But he felt numb as if his body parts weren't connected. Each part hurting in isolation. Brain didn't want to work. Even in his subconscious his words fail to flow. Damn, he hopes he wasn't/isn't brain damaged. Needs to think clearly...nope not happening.

He is vaguely aware he's drifting off.

A machine is beeping. Loudly.

Chest hurts. Feels like someone was standing on his chest. Hammering down and compressing it, forcing all the air from him as he tries to breathe. Not playing fair.

Oh he's back again. But he can't open his eyes. And it hurts. Shouldn't he have drugs? Maybe he does.

Nothing seemed to be working. He can't open his eyes, speak, move his head or arms. Is he even awake? Alive?

He can feel – must be alive then - constant but not intense pain. Even with his senses dulled by medication something or possibly someone was touching him. He could possibly hear – although he did concede that he may well be delusional. In any case......didn't matter......as he couldn't understand what the voices – if that is what they were - are saying. His brain steadfastly refusing to translate.

Hopefully he wasn't dead, 'cause based on the pain level, his general crap state and the lack of nirvana like facilities, if this was death it would suck badly.

He slept again.

He's awake – but it feels different than before. Better.

He is aware now that he is alive. The pain confirmed it.

On the upside, things didn't hurt quite so much. Breathing still hurt, but it wasn't the hammer blows when his chest moved that it was previously. He could feel his body – no longer a bunch of disconnected pain points.

He still couldn't open his eyes. But he knew who he was and where he was. Richard Castle and he was in hospital, or at least assumed so based on his memories and the pain. Apartment 67, stolen paintings, the Johnson twins, shotguns. Thunder and hammer to his chest, the push and
constriction of his vest feeling even tighter as he fell. Gates. The Captain was at his side telling him not to die...too much paperwork. Not that funny if you were the shot one.

He also knew now who he needed.....three women. His three special women. His girls.

M. A. K.

Martha/Mother.

Alexis.

Kate.

He knew that they would be worried. He hoped they were looking after each other and particularly that Kate was included so she didn't pull back, put the wall back up or worse RUN. She had promised not to run but that was before he so stupidly got shot. He was worried that without him to anchor her she would run. He had promised her always, and hadn't even lasted six months before nearly dying. Oh he was going to be in trouble at some point in the near future.

He slept again.

Oh he's back and things are looking up. He can sense a dull illumination but can't force his eyes to open or focus better.

Otherwise, this time was definitely an improvement and he was certain he could hear voices. Was it Kate or Alexis or Mother? He couldn't tell but he definitely felt better, and the pain was less.

But he still drifted off before he could do or say something to whoever was there.

He was back. Definitely less pain too.

That was Kate. Her voice!

KATE!

He needs to tell her. He had to tell her before it was too late again. Almost was too late.

"Ricky, time to wake up Kitten."

Oh God, that was her bedroom voice. Even partially awake, it did things to him. Made his soul light up and his spirit leap (and maybe other parts too).

He needs to speak!

He heard Kate speak again. Sadder this time. Scared. He can't be responsible for that, not when his purpose in life is to bring her to the light, laugh and keep away the dark.

He needed to do something.

He tried to move his limbs but the lethargy was almost absolute. Then he could feel her fingers on his hand. His left hand. He concentrated. Put every ounce of his will into his left arm and hand. He wanted so much more. To demonstrate how much he wanted and needed her.

He squeezed her hand in response.
It must have worked. He heard her gasp.

This gave him more strength, and summoning everything from within him he was able to speak. Uttering just one word.

"Apples"

Fracking idiot! He can barely find the energy for one word, and he says 'Apples'?!

Disappointed with himself, he surrenders to the exhaustion and siren call of the remnants of the drugs.

Bellevue Intensive Care Unit, Saturday 5.00 pm

Martha and Alexis had dashed back to the hospital on receiving Kate's phone call. It had taken them almost an hour, and their excitement and anxiety hadn't diminished at all.

Acknowledging the uniform and security at the entrance they had dashed through ICU until they reached the room. They found Kate once more seated across from the silent and sleeping form of Richard Castle.

He's unconscious again. Alexis feels the disappointment hammer her gut, and not even acknowledging Kate she rushes to her father's side. Halting by the bed her first impression is that he appears to be the same, but looking closer at his still form, she sees the changes, the improvements. He's not unconscious rather asleep. He does look better. There is more color in his face. His features are relaxed and Alexis sighs in relief at seeing his comparatively childlike innocence. His breathing is less labored and calmer, his chest rising and falling in a regular and settled rhythm.

Taking a moment to compose herself she turns back towards Kate to apologize for her rudeness. Martha is just finishing greeting Kate. She meets Kate's eyes and sees understanding, and compassion. It is a shared bond, their mutual love of her father. And yet it is more, somehow it has grown beyond her father and now there is a relationship between herself and Kate that is both part of and separate from Dad. The intensity of the moment is too much and they both look away.

Martha catches the end of the exchange and atypically simply smiles as she moves to take a seat in the corner of the room leaving the two to sort themselves out.

When Alexis looks up again, she can see the difference. Unlike their previous meetings in this room, Kate still has the residual traces of a massive smile and profound relief in transparent on her face. Childishly she had wanted to be jealous and feel cheated for Kate having usurped her sole spot at the top of her father's affections but seeing the transparent emotions on her father's partner's face defeats any inclination to pettiness.

"You said he spoke?" Finally finding her voice, Alexis is surprised by the terseness of her own voice. Maybe there is still a little bit of jealousy there?

"Ummm, yes he did. Just one word." Kate can be equally terse, and not a little oblique back.

Alexis put her hands on hips, inclined her head to the left, and with the arch of eyebrow, intimated that she really wanted to know the word.

"Apples" Kate spoke so quietly, so much so that neither woman could quite make it out.
"Apples" this time louder.

"Apples?" Echo both Alexis and Martha. Kate has the decency to look slightly embarrassed.

"Well, it's kinda one of our words. He says it a lot." Oh she's blushing and Kate doesn't say anymore. Alexis doesn't want to ask, and Grams is smirking and so clearly wants to but if there is one good thing about having Dad in a hospital bed, it is that Grams more vocal tendency to provide and request too much information was suppressed.

"Well if you got a fruit for a word. I want the next word to be a vegetable." States Alexis happy to deflect attention away from the suddenly crimson detective.

Both Martha and Kate looked at Alexis in bemusement. Then it suddenly dawned on them.

"Pumpkin!" The two women exclaim together.

Alexis absolutely refused to leave the hospital that night. She dug her heals in and nothing Martha said could make her change her mind. Alexis was insistent that she was staying so she could speak with her father when he next awoke.

Kate said nothing. She didn't want this to be an issue but Kate didn't want to leave either. However the hospital had been adamant about only one person staying in the room overnight. If Alexis needed to stay, then Kate wouldn't deny her. She would concede and step back and let Rick's daughter stay with her father.

If she was honest with herself, she could do with a night's sleep in a proper bed. The hospital had provided a portable cot for her and the term adequate was the best thing that could be said about it. The last two days had left her drained, fraught and increasingly volatile. She recognized the warning signs and she would do something about it as soon as she could but not if it meant leaving Rick alone.

The impasse had lasted some minutes before the arrival of the evening Doctors' rounds interrupted them and also provided a solution. It was Lanie's doctor friend who was leading the rounds. He completed his checks of Rick and giving a very positive prognosis for him being far more alert for longer periods within the next 12 hours. But before he could leave Martha had quickly stepped up to the doctor and spoken to him in a low tone that neither Alexis nor Kate could hear.

So it was that Doctor Phil Connaught came to the rescue and had found a spare mattress, sheets and blanket from the ICU spares that could be dropped beside the portable cot without attracting the attention of the hospital administration. He did make it clear that it was a 'One Night Only' special and was dependent on them having cleared away before the morning shift conducted their rounds.

With Martha here as well as Alexis, Kate decided to take a little break, and go get some food and freshen up. Martha had said nothing further to either Alexis or Kate and had simply dialed the car service and arranged for a pickup and a later return for Kate.

Kate had been joined in the town car by Hastings who was just finishing her 'shift' at the ICU entrance. They rode back to the hotel and Kate invited Anne to join her for room service. Kate had excused herself to shower whilst waiting for the food to arrive and Hastings had pulled out her phone and called Paul, her comic book artist boyfriend.

After a rapid shower and change of clothes Kate had emerged from the bathroom with her still damp hair in a simple braid. Finding Hastings channel hoping, she had dropped onto the couch
beside the younger female officer, and they made idle chatter about everything and nothing until the food arrived.

As luck would have it, the TV was left on a local station and as Anne and Kate sat down again in front of the TV with their plates of food, there was a news item running about Rick and the shooting.

"Beckett. Sorry. Do you want me to change the channel?" Officer Hastings was mortified, and clearly apologetic.

Kate had simply shaken her head, and reassured the junior officer.

"It's okay Hastings. Its time I got use to it. It is going to be part of my life now."

After Hastings had thanked Kate for the food and left, Kate had rung her dad, and also Lanie to give them updates and just to hear some friendly voices. She wasn't overly concerned by Alexis' attitude in ICU, and in-fact she could totally emphasize with her. But a little positive reinforcement was always a boon. As she was getting her gear together to head back to the hospital, she reflected on this and how much her life and more critically she had personally changed. For the better.

Once Kate had left, Martha wastes no time in rounding on her granddaughter.

"Alexis Castle, care to explain what that was?"

If the younger red head was surprised by the interrogation from the elder red head, she doesn't show it.

"Gram. I spoke with Kate last night. Whilst it did help me to understand why, I was- am - still frustrated with her and I guess a little bit angry. And scared. And then Dad wakes up with just her here, says one word and nothing about us." She trails off, her indignation easing, as she hears her own justification, and how hollow it seems balanced against all that they have in common. Her head drops as her own-self assessment determines that she had overstepped.

"Alexis. I do understand the frustration and hurt caused by all of this, but at the end of the day it is for your father and Kate to sort out.

"I know you father has struggled to adjust to letting you go. Lord knows he does a terrible job of covering it up. But you too are also struggling to let go, and whilst I can understand the jealousy, it really isn't becoming. I thought you were more mature than that."

By now Martha has reached her granddaughter and pulls the startled girl into a deep embrace.

"But I am sure that Kate understands, and won't make an issue of it. She loves you too, you know." She reassures the young woman.

"She loves you too Gram. All of us Castle/Rodgers." Alexis adds.

"Well, we'll just have to make sure she becomes one of us too." Martha concludes.

Bellevue Intensive Care Unit, Saturday 7.40 pm

He was awake. This time it was different.

Is it night time?
He can open his eyes a little, and fortunately the lights are low so he adjust relatively quickly but with his lack of head movement he is reliant on his hearing to find out who is in the room.

He can hear voices.

He knows the voices. Mother and Alexis! His mouth is dry and his throat sore, but he rasps out her name. His daughter.

"Alexis" His voice is slightly hoarse, but relatively normal volume but overflowing with emotion, frustration and thirst for information.

"Dad!" Alexis cries out and she flies to her father's bedside and cups his face with both hands and leans forward to kiss his forehead.

"Hey Pumpkin." He can feel his daughter's tears on his face, and he is pretty sure his own tears are sliding down his cheeks to merge with those of his only – so far – child. If she wasn't so close to his face, he would have been able to see the huge smile that lit up at the use of that familiar endearment.

"Dad. Dad. I was so worried. We all were. You can't leave us. We need you. We love you. So Much." All this came from Alexis in one fast burst of words that only her education and upbringing ensured were intelligible. That she could only manage the shortest of sentences spoke volumes about her emotions.

"Oh Richard!" Martha joins Alexis at the bedside and with both hands grasps his left hand and squeezes firmly, tears streaking her makeup.

"Mother." His favorite term of endearment but also teasing, is entirely missing the usual latter sentiment. Rick has never called her 'Mom' and suddenly Martha is transported back thirty years to memories of a much younger son, who had so seriously promised her that no matter what he would be there and protect her, regardless of his own anonymous and absent father. He had been so determined that day, but also so full of the compassion and love that she knew he hid from everyone except family to protect himself and his family.

Shaking the memory away Martha moves forward, and Alexis shuffles sideways to allow her 'Grams to squeeze in beside her, and then Martha kisses his cheeks and eyes, wetting his face with her tears.

"Thanking you for coming back to us." Then knowing his next question, she answers before her son can speak.

"Kate is just out having a short break. She'll be back within 30 minutes. She has been here all the time waiting for you to come back to us." Martha pauses, wondering how much more she should say, but not interfering was never her strong suite.

"Richard. Kate has never wavered. She's been so strong for all of us. She didn't run, not once. She's the One, but you knew that anyway. It's time for you to marry that extraordinary girl before something else terrible happens."

Fortunately for her father, Alexis has managed to taper the overwhelming emotion of her father's waking, to deal with the practicalities. She hits the call button, and then searches for the small covered ice bucket, the staff had left in the room since his first word hours ago. Hunting around in the cold liquid she locates a couple of large slivers of ice that remain. Stepping forward, she reaches round her Gram to deposit the first of the ice into his mouth.
"Here Dad, suck on these. They should help with your throat. I've called the staff and someone should be here soon."

Bellevue Intensive Care Unit, Saturday 8.05 pm

He must have dozed off. Again. Damn drugs.

He tried to move his right arm but it appears to be locked in place and the muscles hurt like hell.

The Doctor – Phil something – had given him the run down on his injuries, and he should consider himself lucky. The Doc was a funny guy, and there was obviously something else there as both Alexis and Mother seemed to treat him with some familiarity. He would have to remember to ask.

Then suddenly, he is aware of another presence in the room. Although he can't turn his head, he knows who it is.

Kate has returned.

Alexis steps back a little, and then suddenly a full pace, to make way for Kate who has suddenly flown across the room to the bed. Despite her haste, Kate trails a hand briefly over Alexis' right arm and shoulder in thanks even as she concentrates and focus her vision and being on the man in the hospital bed in front of her.

"Hey." She barely manages to get the short greeting out her mouth as she caresses his face and left arm. Tears are falling freely. She doesn't care.

"Kate" Rick can barely manage her name. His eyes are locked on her face.

"Oh God Rick. You scared us. Me." Kate leans forward

"Sorry. So sorry. I didn't … "Kate's fingers on his lips silence them, so he settles for pulling them towards his mouth and pushing his oxygen mask to one side, kissing them.


"Kate I'm so proud of you. Didn't run." He's looking directly into her eyes now. His red rimmed but still electric blue eyes are locked on her. That connection between them. The one that needs no words. That conveys everything they need. That renders the writer's grasp of language superfluous, and the detective's reticence verbose.

"Kinda thought about it for a little bit, but too much too to give up. Never gonna." And there's her smile beaming back at him. His own lifts his face, starting at the mouth and rising through the cheeks and reaching his eyes.

Martha and Alexis watch as in silence the two reaffirm their love and commitment, tears of happiness streaming down faces of everyone in the room.

Bellevue Intensive Care Unit, Sunday 00.30 am

Alexis was asleep and so was Rick. He had lasted almost another 15 minutes after Kate had arrived back before falling asleep again. Martha had eventually bid them goodnight and left Alexis and Kate to settle down and try and sleep themselves. After the events of last night and earlier today, it
was by unspoken mutual agreement that the two would retreat to their own thoughts and their exchanges had been minimal with barely a 'goodnight' spoken.

Kate couldn't sleep. Reaching into her satchel she had retrieved several sheets of paper and a pen. Pressing a button on the pen, had illuminated the small ring LED round near the tip, giving her enough light to read the contents of the sheets of paper. She had to shake her head at the fact that here she was employing one of Rick's notoriously geeky toys in a practical manner.

She held the paper in her hand. She knew Rick had a bucket list but had never seen it. He had mentioned it a few times but she had deliberately avoided engaging him in conversation about it. Being honest with herself, she hadn't until very recently considered herself capable of dealing with what she might find listed.

Kate had 2 lists. One was very recent. In fact started that first night in the hospital. She had started after her conversation with Lanie. She fully intended to share that list and its contents to Rick at the earliest opportunity once he was awake and alert for long enough. Perhaps tomorrow.

The other list was…. well it wasn't really hers, or rather not hers alone. The other list was started by her mother. It was a list that had been untouched since well before she left for Stanford and later after that dreadful night in January, Kate had never thought she would want or need, let alone contemplate adding to, or possibly even completing it to anywhere near fulfillment. This other list is so carefully contained within the documentary evidence folder in her bag.

Returning her attention to the more current list in her hand, she once again reads through the bullet points, and occasionally makes a short note or correction. Humming softly to herself she works on in the twilight of the room.

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**Bellevue Intensive Care Unit, Sunday 02.30 am**

She had dozed off. Looking down at the mattress beside her bed, she could see the outline of Alexis curled up in the blankets, the smaller shape of Monkey-Bunky clutched to her chest. Kate understood this. She had memories of Charlie, her plush black cat from her childhood, sodden with teenage tears anchored against her as she fought the nightmares and cruel realities following her mother's murder.

Kate knew that she would never be Mother to Alexis. She had once – a long time ago, long before she and Rick could ever had been a viable relationship – dreamt of being so. But she was realistic enough to know that the self-contained and smart young woman didn't need mothering – at least not very often. What Kate could and would be, she hoped, was a good friend and confidant for Alexis. She didn't need the title. Certainly didn't want the 'step-mom' title that would accompany their marriage.

There was a time when this would have panicked her. Firstly, the certainty of knowing she was going to marry him. Secondly, any possibility of not being able to fully connect to his family would inevitably mean not connecting permanently to the man himself. Kate had known for a long time that the playboy persona was a false bravado, and among the pantheon of Richard Castle's virtues nothing came higher than love and protection of his family.

Kate accepted this. She welcomed it now, mostly because she knew with certainty that she was part of that family. Probably had been for a long time, long before the legal documents and the shared address. Perhaps one day she would have that earned title 'mother' and more from her own children with Rick. Perhaps one day, she could be more than step-mom to Alexis.
Rick started coughing gently, and Kate rolled to rise but before she could react, Alexis was off the mattress and at his side, pushing Kate back down to her cot with a gentle and trailing hand. Kate smiled and settled back down. She could share Rick with his daughter, and she drifted back off to sleep imagining her future life with Rick and their sharing each other with their own children.
Sunday Morning

Chapter Summary

Rick is awake and beginning his slow road to recovery. The ramifications of his near fatal injuries continue to be felt, especially by those closest to him.

Bellevue Intensive Care Unit, Sunday 6.00 am

Kate had set the alarm on her phone, and sure enough she and Alexis had been summoned from their slumber by the Wonder Woman theme. Dammit, Rick had been playing with her phone again. Time to change the PIN again. Insufferable Man!

She and Alexis has worked efficiently to clear away any evidence of an extra bedding in the room. They had an able co-conspirator in Sarah, one of the ICU night shift nurses, who as well as being a Rick Castle fan, had a crush on Lanie's friend, Dr Phil, and so had been inducted into their little 'game'. Sarah had disposed on all the linens and blankets into the laundry and magic-ed the mattress away to whichever storeroom it had come from.

After finishing their clean-up tasks, Kate and Alexis has sunk into the chairs, still too tired to consider breakfast or even a hot drink. They had grabbed bottles of water and were sipping these whilst easing themselves into the day.

"Kate." Alexis breaks the silence and reaches across to touch Kate's left hand.

"I'm sorry about last night. It was inexcusable, and whilst I don't expect you to forgive me, I do want you to know I am sorry. I was immature, rude and jealous."

"Alexis there is nothing to forgive. Believe me, I know pretty much all there is to know about how concern and fear for a parent can override all other factors and constraints. It happened with my Mom and with my Dad. I feel the same with your Dad. It is the unavoidable flipside of love."

"Anyway, we both managed to stay the night with him, and to be honest, I needed that break yesterday evening. I hung out with Anne Hastings for a bit and we just ate and chatted. It was good to take my mind off everything here.

"Sweetie, he is your father, and you'll always be his first priority."

"Please give me some time to adjust Kate. I'll be happy to share him with you, and any children you have. Of course, I'll be the cool sister."

Kate squeezes Alexis' hand back, and then hearing her stomach gurgle, she laughs and Alexis does too.

"So breakfast? If we are quick we can dash to the staff cafeteria and get something to bring back." Kate realizes as she speaks, that she has just offered for them to leave Rick alone for the first time since the shooting. The first time since arriving in ICU without one or more family members in the room. Instinctively she knows this a good sign.

"You go. Get me something please. I can't leave him yet." Alexis has yet to vanquish all her
insecurities and Kate really does understand this.

Kate simply nods, stands and then steps forward to Alexis’ chair and leans down to wrap the young woman in a hug. Kissing her forehead, Kate murmurs "I'll be right back."

Grabbing her bag - she realized she still has her service weapon in there and cannot leave it unattended and she should drop it back to the Loft sometime and put into Rick's weapon safe as she is on leave - and she detours to the bed and leans down to kiss the still sleeping Rick on her way out.

Suddenly feeling positive, despite the task she has planned for the day, she begins to hum and she exits the ICU and pulls her phone from the bag and dials Lanie's number.

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**Bellevue Intensive Care Unit, Sunday 7.15 am**

With the start of a new day, the medication that had kept Richard Castle under sedation has finally worn off completely. He had awakened shortly after Kate and Alexis had finished their perfunctory breakfast. In comparison to last night, he is far more alert and naturally far more talkative.

Although awake and no longer suffering the lingering side effects of the anesthetic the trade-off is that his pain levels are elevated. Especially for his breathing, and the chest tube remains and with it the oxygen mask. These issues are compounded by Rick's natural inclination to want to talk which places further strain on his lungs.

Both Kate and Alexis have moved their chairs as close to the bed as possible to ensure he has to exert himself as little as possible to converse with them.

"Rick a few things have changed since your shooting.

"Well, we've gone public with our relationship. Or rather Paula and Gates did the announcing on our behalf as you were unconscious. Gates actually defended us when more than one reporter questioned the appropriateness of our relationship.

"And you're okay with that?" Kate knows Rick is afraid of consequences of going public with their relationship and no amount of logic can defeat his primal fears about it being too much for her.

"I'm getting used to it." She pauses then continues. "No more running, remember?"

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Much as Kate wants some privacy with Rick, there is a constant stream of people in and out of the room through the morning.

First there had been the morning checks from the ICU nurses. For the first time too, they were able to speak to their patient, and whilst remaining professional, at least one was clearly star struck by the famous author.

Then the breakfast trolley had actually stopped buy for the first time. Only for the apologetic staff to initially offer Rick only water, and then on receiving what was admittedly not his best pout, what appeared to the world's most diluted grape juice. Whilst he honestly didn't feel up to eating, his disappointment was exacerbated when his complaint of only being offered a child's drink was met with almost simultaneous confirmation from his daughter and girlfriend of 'if the drink fits!' Then the doctors' rounds but they learnt very little new then but Rick had received some additional pain medication which had eased his discomfort but had initially made him drowsy. Somehow the
steady stream of interruptions continued on and off through the morning even though it was a Sunday.

Mid morning they had been pleasantly surprised by the arrival of the surgeon who originally treated Rick. Doctor Paul Creswell still looked tired. Kate understood this. The demands that a job such as this took of a person, even when they willingly made that commitment. The surgeon was very upbeat about Rick's condition and had skilfully deflected any attempts at gratitude from both the writer and his girls. If his condition continued to improve, then he had perhaps another day, possibly two, in ICU and then he would be transferred into a general surgical ward. The chest tube would remain for until they were satisfied that his breathing was sufficiently recovered. The good news was tempered with frank advice that the rehabilitation and recovery would be long and painful.

After the surgeon's news, Rick's demeanor had improved markedly despite the long pathway to recovery. His improved humor apparent to all, but with the new medication finally taking its toll he had slipped back to sleep for a nap.

Shortly after this Alexis' phone had vibrated – they both had them on silent – and she had looked down at the missed call and Kate was certain that the normally well-mannered red heat had sworn under her breath. Feeling Kate's eyes on her, Alexis has looked up and apologetically confirmed that she had forgotten to call her mother last night, and that Meredith was looking for, well demanding, an update. Alexis had slipped out of ICU to make the call and had said nothing to Kate on her return but with her tightly pursed lips and fiery eyes, Kate didn't need to guess how the call had gone. Since the first call, Alexis had been fielding increasingly strident requests from Meredith to visit and support her daughter. Alexis had initially skilfully and diplomatically deflected those but Kate was sure that was now slipping and she worried that there may be a blow up from it. Of course, she and Alexis were still finding their feet and Kate didn't want to get into the middle of the complex and sometimes fraught relationship between Alexis and her perennially absent mother.

Martha of course had rocked in late in the morning, and if you hadn't been watching closely, her seemingly routine greeting of her son and her family would have left you wondering if she acknowledged the life-threatening nature of her son's hospitalization. Kate knows better, recognizing the signs from her own bitter experience, she sees through Martha's almost perfunctory greeting and kiss for her son. She knows it is a defensive coping mechanism to help the older woman manage the stress and emotions of the last three days. She makes a mental note to ensure that she speaks to Martha alone and that she gets Rick's mother the assistance she is desperately trying to hide the need for.

Kate had taken Martha aside and requested that she take Alexis out for lunch once Lanie arrived. Martha had simply assessed the determined woman opposite her, and nodded whilst inquiring whether a short post lunch shopping trip might also be suitable. Kate had nodded her own confirmation and pulled the surprised older woman into a wordless hug.

Bellevue Intensive Care Unit, Sunday 1.00 pm

It is early afternoon, and Rick has slept for several hours. Lanie has arrived bringing Kate a sandwich and whilst Kate wolfed down her lunch, Lanie Parish had shepherded Martha and Alexis out of the room and the hospital and into a waiting town car for their extended lunch date.

Her Girl needs some alone time with her man with no interruptions or distractions. She had caught up with Phil Connaught on her way in and asked that they be given some privacy for a couple of hours.
Lanie had also arranged for a change of shift for the 12th Precinct's guardians, and LT who had been stationed near the ICU room, and Officer Shepherd at the ICU entrance have been summarily relieved and sent back to the Affinia Dumont Hotel for an extended lunch break by their replacements - two homicide detectives. Esposito and Ryan had taken up position at the ICU entrance, entrusting security of the ICU room to the very determined and somewhat scary ME.

Rick looks shattered unsurprisingly, but he is awake and still alert. His blue eyes still slightly red but there is a spark, some light dancing in them,

He has noticed the room has cleared except for Kate. He hasn't said anything but he can't help being concerned by her apparent restless state. Her previous joy and relief has been replaced by what appears to be a strange, well for her anyway, combination of nerves and icy demeanor. Even medicated and still recovering from his brush with death, he can read Kate Beckett like an open book. What he sees now scares him a little. But he trusts her above all else, and he knows he needs to demonstrate that by patiently waiting for her. Waiting as for her and he has learnt to do over the five years.

Kate is still nervous. She had been outside hospital for a short walk to clear her head and try and calm her nerves whilst Lanie had gone to work to ensure they had the privacy she needed. She had seen Espo and Ryan at the ICU entrance but after many years the partners knew that a simple nod of greeting was sufficient to convey their support and confirm that they had her back should she need it.

Swearing to herself, she had marshaled her own thoughts trying to calm her emotions.

She rarely swore, and almost never swore when working, even in her own head – it was a discipline thing. She didn't want to come across as trying to be like the 'boys'. It was part of her façade – the clothes, the heels, and the tight emotional control – the persona of Detective Kate Beckett. Espo was ex-military and certainly knew how to swear but it was Ryan who was the team master of the F-bomb or rather expletives way beyond the F-bomb. Kate secretly found it amusing how incongruous it was for the boyish, neatly turned out detective to have a potty mouth.

Focus Kate. Focus.

"Rick." The ocean of his blue eyes stare back at her, and she almost breaks then. Steeling herself she begins again.

"Rick. I was so scared. It was so like my Mom. Not being there. Having a cop – Gates – call me aside to break the news.

"All my fears they came back, old ones and new ones. Some I didn't even know I had.

"But somehow they didn't overwhelm me like before.

"So here I am, in front of the one man I love more than my life. I need so much to apologize for all the things I have done to hurt you. Especially after my shooting, the three months without any contact, the year it took to get past my walls, insecurities, selfish lies and fear.

"Rick, I am not running. Not now. I am NEVER running. I'm yours now and forever. Always.

The author nods, tears forming in his eyes, and she can see his mouth start to shape to speak, but she reaches out to gently still his lips and speaks again.
"But in turn, I need you to do something for me. I need you to listen to me without interruption.

"I need to tell you some things. Things I have never told or shared in their entirety with another living person. This is me spilling my heart, mind and soul to you. Only you."

His eyes wide in concern but also understanding, she sees something else there. The excitement of a mystery, and suffusing everything, love. Unconditional love.

Kate reaches into her bag and her hand touches the folder containing the list started by her mother. She caressed the folder and its almost sacred contents. That is for another time. Today she needs her new list. The one she began that first night in the hospital. The one that feels so raw and keen she wonders if she doesn't somehow bleed from cuts deeper than paper.

Pulling out the handful of sheets of paper, she quickly glances through them to ensure that all the pages are present and correctly ordered. Satisfied, she begins to mentally review her writing, assessing the facts, intent and marshaling her arguments. She had always been this way, through school, and university. Being a police officer and detective had only served to hone her natural analytic and logic processes. Although right now, she is so far away from the calm and comfort, that it is only years of repetition that have become instinct that is guiding her. Somehow she feels that maybe it was all in preparation for now. For this day, and this coming moment. Her test of her truth and her Self. Laying it all on the line with the one person she cannot lose, cannot replace, can no longer run from.

The handwriting had begun shaky and untidy. She can see the remnants of tear stains on the first page. She had pulled herself together after that but had refused to rewrite that first page, the prospect of doing so, too close to actually taking back what she had written. Something she wasn't willing to do, couldn't do.

Then it had got neater – she had found a flat surface and taken her time.

It had concluded with a mishmash of careful calligraphy, scrawl and bold block capitals as she had reviewed and recomposed her thoughts.

There are plenty of words, sentences and even the odd paragraph, crossed out. Some are struck through with intent to obliterate those words, the emotions, and the darkness that had propelled them from her mind onto the page.

In contrast, more numerous than the former, are those circled or underlined. Or both. No stupid highlighters or different colors. Just simple, effective emphasis on the words, emotions, thoughts pulled haphazardly from the jumble of her mind and coalesced and confined into a confession, and promises of atonement and forever.

Today, she was going to repay her writer, with words of her own. Not in a book or shared with others even family. Her confession was for him and him alone. With Alexis, Lanie, hell even Josh, she may have shared one or two of pieces of what she intends to tell Rick today, but those individual pieces are nowhere near the totality of the confession she needs to make to him.

With her list in her right hand, she takes Rick's left hand in hers. She begins.
Lost

Chapter Summary

Kate has decided it is time to come clean to Rick and so she has enlisted help to ensure their privacy whilst she seeks absolution.

Bellevue Intensive Care Unit, Sunday 1.15 pm

Despite his innate curiosity regarding the content of the paper in her right hand, Rick has locked eyes with Kate.

Kate eyes are almost luminous, and Rick can't resist their pull. He couldn't - not from the very beginning, the very first time he remembers them – he's still disappointed, almost devastated, that he can't remember any of the book signings she's told him she attended. Only now his very existence hangs on those eyes, the face, the person, the woman behind those eyes. Has done for a long time, quite how long he can no longer remember or care. It used to be almost unbearable, the explosive mix of longing and lust. When he thought it was unrequited it almost destroyed him, and even now the sheer power it holds over him is only tolerable because he knows it is reciprocated in equal measure.

He thinks she may be nervous, something he catches painted briefly in her eyes but then when she speaks her voice carries no evidence of nerves. Pushing all else aside he focuses now on her words.

"I had a really good childhood. My mom and dad loved each other, and me too. They ensured that I never doubted that. Even when I was acting out as a teenager. For a while I desperately wanted a sibling, especially a sister. But as I got older and I came to understand the reasons why I was a single child, I accepted that, just as my parents had learnt to.

"My parents, especially my mom had always supported my dreams. Encouraged me to make the most of my life. I used to spend a lot of time with my mom sharing those dreams, making plans. We even started a scrap book for them. Pages and pages of my dreams, ambitions, thoughts. Some of hers too, not always just me, sometimes shared dreams. But especially her dreams for me too. Some were only a few words or even simply a picture. Others were more detailed, almost meticulous in their planning and detail. At the front of the book, we kept a list of the more significant dreams. I hadn't even looked at it since before her death until the other night. Initially I couldn't face it, and after a while it drifted from my memories. Turns out that my dad had been keeping it for me and from me. He gave it to me after the last meal at the loft.

"Even when I was rebelling – and no Castle, I was not the eponymous wild child despite the stories or rumours you may have heard – my home was my safe haven, where I could always find love and myself." There is a mini Beckett glare to ensure the writer behaves. Message received.

"But nothing prepared me for what was to come. For what I was going to lose. How lost I became." Her voice has dropped a little, and woven in her voice is the pain and loss she has carried for so many years.

"When my mom was murdered, my world shifted, I lost the map of my life. Where I came from and where I was going. I lost my childhood, lost my adolescence, lost my innocence, and lost my
future. I lost my safe place. Lost all those plans I made with my mom in the scrapbook. I lost my dreams.

"I was a wreck for months. Dad and I barely made it through the funeral but we did. Then things got worse. Dad started drinking, and I did act out a bit. I missed a semester of college. I tried to return to Stanford but I didn't even make it on the plane. I took summer school to earn enough credits and eventually I able to transfer from Stanford to NYU and start my second year there. I changed courses too.

"All the time I was retreating into myself. At the same time my dad was still retreating too. We were losing each other, but somehow despite recognizing this, we were both too busy running, being cowards to face up to that for years.

"My dad's failure to deal with Mom's death took a different path to mine. Whilst he became an alcoholic, he remained faithful to her. I know it might seem so petty of me – his remaining committed to someone who was dead - but in a way it helped me to still love him, even when in the worst of his alcoholism. Also, he was a sad drunk. Never violent. Just maudlin. He always sort of remembered who he was, who we were and who was missing. We tried so many times to get him sober. It never worked until we had help.

"After all the heartache, I didn't just retreat. I hid, and when running and hiding wasn't enough I constructed a wall around my heart. Once I was safely behind that wall, then I locked away my dreams too. I was so determined that I wasn't going to let anyone else in. I couldn't stomach the fear of that degree of loss again. Whoever it was, I was mortified that they would eventually leave me, and the certainty that once more I would be hurt like that. Like my mom.

"Somehow I made it through college. I managed to find some equilibrium, even if it was only by running and hiding. I had a semester on exchange in the Ukraine. It was different and better. I made some friends there. People who didn't know, or wonder. I opened up a bit, learnt to interact with people again, and found a little bit of joy in life then.

"I kept relationships simple. No deep attachments, sometimes, well often, purely physical and most barely mutual. Sometimes I almost dared to hope and allowed a friendship to grow. But never love. Not love like I had lost. Not even close. I couldn't handle that again.

"Even then, some of the breakups I did have were bad enough. Especially with Will Sorenson. We met on a case, and he didn't push. We were together six months, and we took things slow, and we were good together, seemed to suit each other. He seemed to understand me, or at least I thought he did. I began to hope. I knew he would have to move for his career but I never expected it so soon, and for him to be so cold and calculating about it. Looking back I came to realize that Will recognized what we had wouldn't last and simply took the expedient way out.

"I couldn't move away from New York. I'm not sure I'll ever be able to. Being a New York cop was only the second thing since my mom's death that gave me any real purpose. I had decided upon joining the NYPD after I returned from the Ukraine. Back at NYU, I choose units that matched the entrance requirements for the Academy. I also started to work on my physical skills and found that I was good at that too.

"I was at peace with my decision but my dad wasn't. It drove him back to the bottle and things between us – it would have been farcical to call it a relationship at that time – got difficult. Barely monosyllabic. It took almost another three years before we started to fix things for good.

"I did really well at the Academy. Surprised myself I guess. Graduated near the top of my cohort. Bring a street cop was different, more difficult. I struggled initially and I got moved through a
couple of precincts in the early days as rookie, got a bit of a reputation for being more than trouble than I should be, perhaps more than I was worth. I was good at my job but didn't socialize real well, and my first two training officers were arseholes. I was given a final chance, and I got Mike Royce as my training officer. He gave me hell my first week. Pulled every prank a rookie should ever face and more. He was testing me. Somehow I passed but we never discussed it again. Then he took me under his wing, and showed me the ropes. Taught me to be a street cop, and more.

"Turns out that Mike had plenty of experience with alcoholism – he never explained how. When he asked and then learnt about my dad, he told me we were going fix it. It wasn't a question. He was the first one to care about what was left of my family. I think you know that I loved, still in a way love, Michael Royce. But I never explained to you why.

"Mike cared about me, but more importantly he respected me and ensured that I started to respect myself. Then he helped me start my father on the road to recovering his self-respect and more of mine. Because of this, because he - more than anyone else before you - helped fix me and my dad, I was so drawn to him. I would have offered him my body. I did offer him my body. But he never took it. Oh we got so close and got closer each time, but each time he drew away before we crossed that line. Then he left.

"He gave me no warning and he never explained why. Just said I was 'ready to be more' and he was gone. Retired. I was always guilty, afraid that I drove him to leave the force. Another person I trusted left me, and my walls became that bit higher. That stood me in good stead because they transferred me to vice, and despite my detached professionalism, walls and improved self-confidence, it almost broke me. But eventually I made it out of there and to homicide.

"When I said being a cop was the second thing that gave me purpose, it is because before anything else, and more than anything else, the first and for a long time, the only thing that gave me purpose was your books.

Rick nods. He has suspected, probably even known for near certain that his books have been important to Kate Beckett long before they were introduced via the near copycat murders.

"My Mom loved your books, but I was at times a contrary teenager and wouldn't take her reading recommendations or advice on many other things as well.

"Then she was murdered. My Dad fell apart and I was spiraling out of control too. I was clearing up in her study and found one of your books with some comments from my Mom on a post-it-note. I was intrigued and I opened the book. The next thing I know it was the early hours of the morning and I had finished the novel.

"I quickly read all the books Mom had, and bought the few she didn't have, and then collected every one you published. I even came to some signings.

"Your stories saved me after my mother's murder, my Dad alcoholism. Your tales of justice sought and found gave me a purpose and a hope.

"But then you came into my life in person, and I got first-hand unfiltered Richard Castle.

"When I first met you – other than at a book signing - I was still slightly star struck. Okay more than slightly. But I was also so disappointed. You were such an ass. But I was still attracted to you. I could feel the pull then. There was clearly sexual chemistry there. But it was the bad-boy you. If you had been less of an ass then I may have, no probably would have slept with you. But now I'm grateful you weren't and we didn't. It would have been great sex but that's all it would have been.
"My walls were well up then. I could handle the physicality and meeting my body's needs but my heart, my soul, my dreams were well off limits. They had been for years. Would be for a lot longer.

"Your reading of me, deducing my background was also scary. I wasn't used to people trying to understand me, or at least not to that level. Chatting me up for drinks, a meal, even sex. I could deal with. But trying to learn what I didn't and couldn't share, that really scared me.

"After that first case, I thought that was it, and I could retreat back to having you in the written form in your books, but somehow you decided you wanted more."

"I need to acknowledge now how grateful I am now that you did that. You came back for the first time. And you have been coming back to me ever since. Regardless of whatever or whoever was the cause of our separation."

Rick was loathe to interrupt Kate but he needs to respond to her now.

"Always".

Kate simply smiles and squeezes his hand.

"Then at the end of that first period shadowing me, just when I thought I could trust you, you so totally undid everything I was starting to feel for you. By going behind my back on my mother's case, despite my own personal request to you not to.

"God I was so angry.

"At you.

"At Esposito – did you know I kicked his arse in the gym twice for giving you access to her file? Ryan had to pull me off him the second time. Lanie didn't talk to me for a week 'cause I had fractured his cheek.

"At Montgomery. When he tried to calm me down. To make me see sense. I think he actually tried to confess some part of his involvement but I was so angry that I didn't want to listen and it was only after his death and my shooting that I had the courage to revisit that time and try and understand.

"At myself.

"My Mom's case. This is my personal hell. My rabbit hole that I can get lost down. So far down that I could easily get lost forever.

"I had nearly succumbed three times as a cop before I had even met you, but had been pulled back each time.

"First when I was still at the academy when we were given the option of a cold case to study – they quickly took it off me once they realized it was my Mom. The second by Royce when I was still a rookie and later for a third time by Montgomery when I was newly minted homicide detective. Roy sent me to therapy and made it clear what it would do to me. Somehow I managed to resist until you came along and decided to help me by opening my own private hell.

"You opened that rabbit hole again. Initially I hated you for it. Despised my own weakness in getting sucked back in. Will had wanted to charge you but Montgomery was the one who calmed everything down and guided me away from that dark place."
"By then you left for that first summer. I know I told you to go, and you had to write the book, but you left anyway. I persuaded myself that it didn't matter, that you didn't care. Didn't care about the lost girl that I was.

"Then you came back for our second round. Yes, I did liken it to sparring. That's what we did. Still do, although slightly differently. But I liked that. You didn't just try and sweet talk me. You teased, challenged, annoyed, exasperated, irritated, confused, attracted, disappointed, intrigued and excited me.

"Initially it still felt like you were shadowing me but slowly that year, you started to become one of the team, make more than the occasional contribution. More than anything, you started to become someone I could trust. First as the plucky sidekick with the ready jokes, light touch and wacky theories, but then later I started to view you as my partner. You got better at reading me, judging my moods. No one else had ever tried.

"When my mother's case came back to haunt us by chance you were there. You spent $100,000 just to try and get me closer to an answer, closer to a reason. No one else ever did that. Then when I killed Dick Coonan and I lost possibly the best lead I'd ever had, I didn't regret it. I couldn't. I'd take the same decision every time. Choose your life over my mom's case.

"You were changing me. Slowly but you were drawing me out of my walls. Making me live a bit, see the sunshine and not just the death. It was after you screwed that actress – Ellie Monroe who was after the part in Heat Wave - that I decided that I wanted to be with someone. To be more. To share more of me. I was tired of being alone. I was attracted to you, but you had seemingly gone back to your playboy ways.

"Tom Demming seemed like a safe step to take. We had a few dates but even then I wanted to take a chance. When you asked me to join you in the Hamptons, I was terrified. But I did something amazing for me, I decided to take a chance. To open myself up. I broke up with Tom. I was going to come to the Hamptons with you.

"God Rick your turning up with your ex-wife was a hammer blow. Set me back and had me behind my walls again. So fast.

"And with that you left me again. This time it hurt me more than the first year. I had thought we had a friendship, the start of a partnership. I felt betrayed. Humiliated by your show at the party."

He can't actually speak. The guilt had frozen his voice. His stupidity, selfish, petty male pride. His insecurities. Goddamn himself. Now he has tears of shame on his cheeks, and yet Kate Beckett is looking at him with understanding and love in her eyes.

"After breaking up with Demming, and you leaving, I did some stupid stuff. Some one-night stands. Drinking. Riding my bike hard. Sorta revisited the dark days after my Mom. It went on for some weeks until Lanie had decided she needed to get me sorted out.

"She spoke to Montgomery and got me two weeks off and we took off to the countryside. Lots of walking, fresh air. Not so much drinking and no men. Wasn't really Lanie's scene either but she did it for me. I felt a lot better at the end of it. I didn't hate you or myself so much by the end.

"I think my dad has tried to explain you how lost I became after my mom's death and how you slowly drew me and helped me find a pathway back towards the lost girl and her dreams."

Kate stops. She isn't finished but she needs a moment to compose herself. She looks down at the paper in her hands and letting go of his hand, she places the first sheet behind the others.
Rick nods. He doesn't speak. There are no words sufficient to cover the breadth of his love and debt to the incredible woman who lets him share her life now.

Kate rises from the seat and strides to the small table, and grabbing a bottle of water takes a few mouthfuls before returning back to the beside and slips her fingers into his as she takes Rick's hand again. Satisfied, she glances at his face, smiles and resumes.
Kate is baring her soul to Rick. Trying to explain how they hurt each other and seeking his forgiveness for her past actions.

Bellevue Intensive Care Unit, Sunday 1.32 pm

Rick has observed that Kate doesn't so much as glance down at the pages in her hand. They are clearly more of an aide memoir than a script or checklist. Her voice begins again, and as ever her even, certain tone draws his attention and focus once more onto her words.

"Then you came back again and you returned to the Precinct – although it was in handcuffs this time. I had arrested you and Ryan almost shot you. Somehow despite that inauspicious renewal, we teamed up again. It didn't take long for us to seemingly pick up from where were before that long summer. Some things came back quickly and for the rest we slowly rebuilt the other things we had lost. And more.

"Rick, what you did for me, no matter how badly screwed up we were at expressing whatever it was between us, was so good for me. Whilst my walls were up and I still felt lost, you gave me light and strength enough to try for more again. By now I was looking for a relationship that I could start to be myself in. A part of me still hoped that it would be with you.

"I realized not long after your return that I didn't and couldn't blame you for the events of the summer. We were both so bad at communicating and articulating our honest feelings and desires. It felt as if we were fated to never be anything more than friends and partners.

"You were still with Gina, and there was a blaze of publicity and Page 6. I was so lonely outside the Precinct. Just wanted someone to come home to. To share things with.

"Then shortly after your return I met Josh. We met in a coffee shop – not sure why he was there as he doesn't drink it – but we got talking and he was fun, and didn't push. We discovered shared interests in motorbikes and we both had busy lives. Initially it worked well and at least we conversed in the beginning. Then as the relationship became more physical some of the talking stopped or rather didn't develop further. Our busy work life meant I didn't have to commit nor did Josh. But it was beginning to feel like we were little more that friends with benefits, and sometimes it seemed more like acquaintances.

"After the initial rosy period of dating, Josh was rarely there. Working or overseas. I was coming to realize I need someone who wouldn't leave but who also offered more. Someone who would be available, especially when I really needed someone. Someone I could talk to and who understood me. God, I know that sounds so selfish and it was, and still is. But my mom had always insisted that that was what true relationships, friendships and especially love should be about. I guess I never realized how much I took her words, and advice that she gave me as a teenager to heart until I was alone with thoughts in the hospital whilst you were in surgery and then the first twenty four hours in ICU.

"And there you always were. My constant. My supporter. My friend. My caffeine addiction fixer.
My partner. It was that third year that I really began to understand how much I needed you. You had become my best friend. I told you things I never shared with anyone else. I could talk to you about pretty much anything – except us."

Rick wants to give himself an uppercut. How much time did they waste because they were both too afraid to take the next step? It probably wouldn't have even required a big moment, simply talking should have been enough. No wonder his family and their friends had been so exasperated."

"Somehow without my consciously acknowledging you had become more than my partner. But in becoming my best friend, you also made it harder for me to deal with the attraction I still felt for you. An attraction that kept growing, especially with all the close calls we had and our shared saving of each other. But you made it too easy for me. I was safe with the flirting. The innuendo. And you never crossed the line. You were always the gentleman. God, sometimes I so wished that the playboy, the womanizer Rick Castle would surface and just take me. But by then I knew that the cad was an illusion, something to protect the real man."

"Then you broke up with Gina during the magician case. I started to have hope that maybe one day….well it would be really corny when I say it…but find our magic. Don't you dare say anything now!" Uh Oh. Trademark Beckett Glare."

"You knew I didn't believe in magic or fate or the 'verse. But you did, and somehow you were starting to convince me or at least accept the possibility. You never stopped trying to prove it to me. To make sense of what we do with our job, to lighten my life, help me find my path, and recover my lost dreams."

"That year we faced some real challenges and almost died a number of times. The worst was those very close escapes during the terrorist bomb case. We almost died three times in forty-eight hours. Throughout it all you were there for me. Holding you hand as the countdown timer neared the end, I wasn't afraid of death. But if I was going to die, then I was full of regrets for what we hadn't done, for your family who didn't deserve to lose you, especially for someone with as many issues as me."

"Back at the Precinct you were about to say something to me, perhaps even invite me for drinks or a meal, when Josh turned up. I saw your face as the elevator doors closed. God, I was responsible for that look. I remembered that look, carried it in my heart and my mind. I promised myself that I wouldn't be with you, until I was sure that I couldn't be responsible for that look again. I know how screwed up that is but that was my thinking then."

"Rick, I would have gone for drinks or dinner with you. Nothing more, but I like to image that maybe we might have finally been honest enough with each other."

"Then we hit the downward spiral and the events that ultimately led to my shooting. Throughout that time you always had my back, were the constant partner, even when I said I didn't want you. Just before my shooting, Montgomery made it clear to me that if I wanted you gone, you could be, regardless of the mayor. But instead you proved yourself to me many times over."

"The Kiss. We never talked about it. Like we didn't for almost all the things that really mattered between us. I thought about it a lot. And I mean a lot. For me, it is one of the pivotal events that led us to here. To Always."

"Not purely because of our mutual physical response to the kiss. Although that was phenomenal. You surprised me but then I reacted instinctively. I know I moaned, and I'm pretty sure you did, and there was another indicator of your reaction brushing against my thigh. I was the same, so much so I almost forgot why we were there.
"However, when I thought about it the lead up to the kiss was equally if not more important. It was a life or death situation for us, for our partners and friends, and I trusted you totally. Not one shred of doubt or second guessing, even though I had said I was open to stupid ideas. I knew you would help get the boys out alive and have my back. I knew also that you really cared for me as more than a friend and partner.

I knew for certain after that kiss, that what I was doing with Josh was more than hiding or even running away. I was being a coward and it was so unfair to you, him, even myself. Despite that I still couldn't make the decision.

But you know what? I'm not a cheater never have been. And I know you're not. Somehow, the kiss didn't feel like cheating, no matter how much I tried to rationalize it like that later.

"You know how logical I am when figuring things out. I actually had a murder board with a matrix table listing all the facts and the pro's and con's of each action I could take. I scrubbed it after less than an hour. I decided that it should be emotions not logic that ruled.

"Then Michael Royce was murdered and I went rogue. But not solo as you followed me to LA and gave me the loyalty and support that I needed. More importantly it wasn't unquestioning. At the same time you challenged me to stay true to justice and not seek my revenge on Gantz.

"Royce wrote me a letter before he was killed. Lanie found in it his possessions and passed to me once she saw it was addressed to me. Maybe I can show to you sometime but essentially, in true Royce style told me I needed to stop hiding and that I needed to risk my heart.

"So it was in LA, that I did come so close to cheating. I came back into the room after we separated. Before my shooting, before the case pulled me back down, I had pretty much made the decision that I wanted to take a chance with you. I didn't know how to go about it, but we were inching towards it. That night I was probably mere seconds away from it.

"Then my mom's case struck with a vengeance. Montgomery's betrayal and death shattered me. He had been one of my anchors before you. He had been a substitute father for me for years. But through it all you were there."

Almost imperceptibly her voice had been subtly losing that familiar even tone, and now it clearly wavers, awash with emotion. Her eyes too are awash with the same emotions. Red rimmed and blinking rapidly they remained locked on him.

"The truth is that I remembered everything about that day that I was conscious for. I remember you being there, standing with me as always. Your shouted the warning, and you stupidly trying to save me at the risk of your own life. The pain. More than anything I remember your words as I faded out. The first time you told me you loved me."

The tears start to fall, and the writer's mirror hers. But she keeps speaking.

"Somehow I lived. Came back. Then seeing you that first time since I awoke my heart leapt with so much joy. But then I did what I always did. Ran. Metaphorically of course.

"Lying to you in the hospital that day was classic Beckett. Deny. Run. Hide. I am so ashamed of that. But at the time, it was all I could do. I never apologized to you for that. Even my attempted explanation when we finally saw each other was a mere fraction of what I owed, owe, you.

"I don't think, I didn't truly understand what I had done. The magnitude of it. How much damage I had done until now. How I betrayed you and everyone else. Until your shooting. In a sudden
moment of insight, I asked Lanie about my shooting. In true best friend manner she pulled no punches and Lanie told me how bad it was. What the impact truly was to the people I love and who love me. My family, my friends, your family and above all, you.

"She wondered how your family and you could have forgiven me. I know the answer to that now. Love. The same love I have been so afraid of. So determine to hide from. The love I hold you for you. For your family.

"I can't presume that I have that forgiveness, so every day I will try to ensure I continue to earn it.

"I can tell you that I convinced myself that leaving the city and hiding was best for everyone. So you all wouldn't be at risk. Especially you. That summer I spent hiding at my Dad's cabin was possibly the biggest mistake I have ever made.

"Being in therapy has been good for me, but it was certainly a lot harder and a lot longer than I ever imagined. In some ways worse than the physical therapy. It has been a long journey for me. You may have a similar journey too. But it won't be alone. Never alone. It will never be enough, but I can atone in part by ensuring that we do it together. No hiding. No running.

"I wanted to explain to you why. But I don't think I can do it properly not today. I had promised myself that I would, but seeing you here, I don't think I have the words to do so. So instead I promise myself to you. Commit to you. I will be at your side through every step of your recovery, and we will do it together. Always."
Absolution

Chapter Summary

Kate is baring her soul to Rick. Trying to explain how they hurt each other and seeking his forgiveness for her past actions.

Bellevue Intensive Care Unit, Sunday 1.40 pm

Kate releases Rick's hand to take another drink of water. And uses the opportunity to break eye contact if only briefly.

This is much more intense that she ever imagined. This is compounded by Rick's comparative silence and lack of feedback. He seems supportive, understanding. No signs of anger. But he hasn't said much at all. She can't but help wonder if this was the best time to do this. But time to screw her courage to the sticking post and finish her confession.

She once again swaps the front sheet to the back and taking his hand resumes.

"The time after the shooting was such a struggle. I don't think I'll ever share – even with you – all the hell I went through. I was responsible for a lot of that because I refused to seek help from those who would have freely offered it. So stubborn, I only let my dad assist at the beginning and even then I banished him as soon as I was capable of being self-sufficient. I didn't leave the cabin except for medical appointments. My dad bought supplies and checked up on me. He gave me hell several times for not contacting my friends, especially you.

I know I should have at the very least called but every time I tried to pick up the phone I was so afraid of what I might hear or not. And every time I didn't call made it worse the next time I wanted to. In the end I returned to city after three months not because I was ready for everything but because I passed the physical and mental reviews and the NYPD wound back my insurance and benefits. To be honest, I wasn't ready, but it forced me to start to confront some of my demons. I don't know how long I would have hidden out if I hadn't had to go back.

"Although it was a reluctant return, when I came back at least I knew what I wanted to try for. You. I tried to tell you as much that day on the swings. I guess I failed to make myself clear enough. God we were so useless at being honest with each other, ourselves.

"The therapy was hard and a lot longer than I expected. I surprised myself by going beyond the mandatory sessions. The PTSD contributed to that. But it helped a lot and the eventually I began to get better. Better so I could be with you.

"All while we investigated costumed vigilantes, headless victims, ghosts, banks and bombs, tigers, the CIA and traitorous muses, more bombs, and zombies. It was like every single one of your crazy theories coming true."

She takes a chance and rolls her eyes and is rewarded by a twinkle in his eyes and a smile that stretches upwards and animates his face, and reaches the laughter lines around those eyes.

"At least we didn't have other relationships to complicate matters. Probably a good thing because
we made it complicated enough. For smart people, we sure sucked at communicating. We still danced around each other. We certainly we not helped by other parties, who often seemed to block or interrupt us just we one or both of us might have finally had the courage to express our feelings.

*Rick can't but help smirk gently as the phrase 'cock-block' springs to mind as he remembers several less than timely interruptions by Esposito or Ryan. He also remembers a certain British cop with a terrible accent, the hot insurance investigator, and the lie. He's surprised by that. He thought he had moved past that. Forgiven her. He had, hadn't he?*

"I was so close to kissing you in the bank before Martha interrupted. I love your mother Rick but her timing was so terrible that day. But this summed up our year. Slowly inching towards something before my lies and our terrible inability to be honest came unravelled from the bombing.

"Then just when we were making progress towards together my mom's case returned. And I went straight down the rabbit hole. This one time we were finally honest with each other, well certainly you were. Much more than me. You told me you loved me, and I still didn't respond appropriately."

"Once again we separated and I was clearly at fault. I was so angry at your choice to walk away. I thought you were betraying me. At the time I didn't understand it my own self-betrayal that was denying me a shot at happiness with you.

"I didn't respect myself, didn't protect my partners, or honor the job and the law. It took another near death experience to knock the stupid out of me and wake me up to losing the best thing in my life."

She's crying now. Hot wet tears of guilt, happiness, and adoration open on her cheeks.

"I will never be able to express how much it meant for you to let me in that night and to love me. I didn't deserve that, I sometimes feel I don't.

"The last six months have been my happiest since I was nineteen. Since my mom.

"Somehow we've found our feet and kept going. How we managed to keep us from going public for so long I have no idea. Thank you for doing that for me. But I am not afraid and certainly not ashamed of our relationship. Do you remember me telling you yesterday that we're fully public now? Press releases, photos the works.

"Lanie knew the moment she saw me. Her interrogation was merciless. I'm afraid you have no secrets left as far as Lanie is concerned." Kate is almost shrugging her shoulders as if to say, 'well what choice did I have?'

"Martha was of course adamant she was responsible somehow and Alexis came around eventually. It was fun teasing the boys, especially using Lanie to help as well. And they're meant to be detectives. Then when my Dad guessed and punk'd you about living in sin, God that was good. I hadn't see him so happy for years. Then when you got him back with the fake pregnancy."

She's smiling now. The big toothy grin, just like the ones he's seen in the scrap books. Totally unguarded, honest.

"I'm glad we didn't try and fake date anyone else to hide us – God that was a really bad idea to even contemplate doing that. You turned down that reporter, and you refused to let Meredith stay at the loft the when she was visiting Alexis. Oh God, her face when she realised we were serious. I'm surprise she never leaked our story in revenge."

"Alexis stopped her. Caught Meredith on the phone to her publicist. Threatened to excommunicate
her own mom if she told. Of course, I don't actually know any of this." Rick's voice surprises her.

"Martha?" Kate asks by way of confirmation. He nods.

"Rick, I have never gone further in a relationship than I have with you. Not even close. Will was the only relationship where I even had a conversation about living together, and we never moved in, just swapped keys and kept a few clothes at each other's place. With Josh, whilst we exchanged keys that was more a practicality due to our hours than a sign of commitment. There was never a conversation about living together except towards the end and it was all single-sided on his behalf.

"I never went further with anyone. No one else has ever given me the reasons to. The desire to. The need to." She pauses, seemingly frustrated with herself.

"I need to make this next point absolutely clear."

She pauses and letting the papers fall to her lap she places her right hand on his cheek, and reverently strokes at the contrasting skin and stubble.

"No one else has ever been in a position to contemplate forever with me. No man has ever got close enough to be entitled to offer me an engagement ring. To plan a lifetime together. To contemplate bringing new life from our union. I have never had the conversation with any man. Except you."

Her voice stills and for a long moment Rick visualises a younger Kate Beckett opposite him. Still full of dreams and hope and a vision of forever with her One.

"Despite of similarities and working well in many facets of our lives, I think I understood instinctively that Will wouldn't be the one. He was the only person since Royce, and before you, who knew more than a snippet of my past. But unlike you and Royce, I believe Will still saw me in part as a victim, and this more than anything else meant I would never fully trust him or give myself to him. Being independent and not dependent on others was one of my props I first developed to protect myself. But it became more than that. It became an intrinsic part of who I am. You and Royce, are the only two men who didn't treat me as a victim. Sure you supported me when I let you and sometimes when I didn't, but you left me my independence and didn't judge me or try to reshape me.

"Josh, well he never really knew me. Early on he hit my walls, bounced and never seriously tried again. Settled for what he thought was enough. It never was. Not for me. Towards the end of the relationship before the shooting, when we both knew that we were drifting towards an ending – but we never talked or acknowledged it – he tried single-handedly to raise the prospect of a future together. Talk of moving in, and hinting at rings. But I did what I did so well, ran and hid, and I guess I thought he was getting the message before the shooting.

"Then that day in the hospital. After I sent you away. Josh came to see me. He blamed you despite my explanation and insistence that it wasn't your fault. He demanded you gone. He had always had issues with our friendship, especially outside of work despite my word that we doing nothing more."

"After all that and ignoring anything I tried to say, he tried to raise the issue of moving in and longer term, possibly even marriage. God he was dense. Josh was the only one to even try, and I shut it down before he even got a fraction of the word out of his mouth. It was the final confirmation of the end of our doomed relationship. He really knew so little about me, and yet he wanted to raise the topic of marriage. Of a life time commitment. He didn't know me. He didn't know I was a 'one and done' person and he was definitely not it."
"Fortunately my dad arrived for a visit and pretty much threw him out.

"We only spoke twice more after that. The first was the same evening when he tried to come back. To apologize I think, but he certainly didn't sound like he meant. Regardless of whether he did or nor, I refused it and told him we were over. The second was just before I left hospital when he returned my key. Lanie had collected his stuff and his key from my place, and returned them to him on my behalf but Josh decided to turn up and deliver mine personally. He told me that you were bad for me, dangerous, that you didn't love me, were only some rich playboy.

"I told him I knew you. The real you. I didn't – don't - care about your money. Although we will be having words about that sometime soon.

"I just want you."

"I told you this once before, on that night not so long ago. Just You. Always You. You."

She's in his space, leaning in and peppering his face with kisses.

"I used to dream of us a lot. Together. On a date, at the Hamptons, in bed, not in bed. I don't so much anymore. Well maybe the odd daydream. I have plenty of physical evidence to fuel my dreams."

She pauses after that correction and she smirks, her eyebrows raising in conjunction with dirty smile. It is quite salacious and the recipient can feel himself respond.

**Well that's a relief. Something down there is working. Another thing to help him rest easier, although he'll want a thorough workout before he's completely satisfied.**

Kate looks at him quizzically, and smirks again, almost as if she knows what he is thinking. She starts speaking again, and Rick forces himself to concentrate.

"What I dream of now is different. But better. Much better! It does vary but I see us together and I see one or more children. There is always one constant aside from us. The same one child. Always a young girl with blue green eyes and flowing chestnut locks. We're at the Hamptons or Central Park or ice skating, or at home. She calls me Mama and you Dad. More of Us. Ours.

Rick lets the surprise show on his face. Although they had covered the topic of children just a week or so ago, he hadn't ever dreamed or dared to think that Kate had put so much consideration, thought and desire into children. Their children. Children with him.

"Ours?" Whoops that slipped out.

"Rick, most of my fears, the foundations of my wall were built around my fears of abandonment. After almost five years, I know you. I trust you implicitly. Like no one else since my mother. You are the one that always comes back, who stays. Always.

"Rick, I am ready for the next step. I want to make it. Take it with you. Only you."

His eyes light at this, and the sheer joy that her words evoke is written everywhere on his face.

"But you are not ready."

His eyes go wide, well wider given the amount of information he had already received today. She can sense the disappointment instantly pooling within him. The uncertainty and meaning of her words, and the fear she now knows that being anything less than unequivocal can provoke from
within his own insecurities and fears. Perhaps she had never truly understood until today how much he hid beyond the exterior that the public and even good acquaintances' saw.

She doesn't give him time. Kate is up from the seat and moving even closer to him. It breaks their eye contact but for the moment Kate doesn't care. Her own eyes are still luminous and yet there is a distinct darkening of the pupils, she almost purrs as her mouth approaches his ear. It is her best bedroom voice.

"No Rick, I need you to be back in top physical shape. Because when you ask me THE question, and I give you THE answer, we are going to have the best, mind-blowing engagement sex. Ever! Because we will only do this once and never need to again."

She doesn't say 'One and Done' but she doesn't need to, as she observes her writer's head firmly nod in acknowledgement. She steps back slightly so she can once more see his face and more crucially his eyes.

She is in time. Time to see the writer's own eyes dilate and still darkening amidst the swift return of the joy she had just evoked and so nearly, so frightening easily, shattered. He licks his lips, and the words that come from those lips are pure Castle. His voice is deep, the resonance and timbre of a storyteller. She may have confessed many things today but she'll never confess just how much that voice undoes her or how complete the seduction is. She suspects he knows but a girl needs secrets and this is one she can pretend to keep and not risk anything in their relationship. There is so much encompassed by his words. So much more meaning layered in even a simple sentence from him. His desire, carnal lust, humour, commitment, challenge, certainty, comfort, and love.

"So when can I start rehab?"

She starts at the words, and at the same time as a huge smiles breaks on her face, she can barely hold in the guffaw. She knows what to expect from him, but even so the simplest of sentences with the most innocent of meaning for most so exemplifies her writer man.

Somehow fighting back the laughter, she swiftly closes the distance to the man, and seizing his face with both hands, pushes his oxygen mask aside with her nose, and kisses him so soundly that it triggers one of the monitors.

They break apart both laughing.

"We keep this to ourselves?" Rick asks. Like the events of May, they will try and keep another significant step in their lives secret at least for a while. Unsaid it is the inevitability of the public disclosure, paparazzi, Page 6 and the fans.

Kate nods. "I suspect our door guardian out there may have more than a clue about what is going on, but she'll keep a secret. I think Martha suspects too, and whilst I don't think Alexis does yet, I know she expects us to at some point. But outside of them, I think it will be safe until it is time to share."
Cleaning House

Chapter Summary

Kate has bared her soul to Rick. Still recovering from his injuries and surgery Rick will need a time out responding. Meanwhile…

Bellevue Intensive Care Unit, Sunday 1.58 pm

They have been silent for a few minutes, enjoying each other's proximity but Kate is also aware that Rick is flagging. She glances down at her watch and realised that they have been in here for almost an hour. The intensity of her confession and purging of many of her more personal thoughts had made it seem like longer.

Kate is aware that Rick has managed to stay awake for a little bit longer but he is clearly in need of a break. Her thoughts are interrupted by the man himself.

"Kate." She turns her body towards him and engages his eyes. She is rewarded by his dancing blue eyes piercing her soul.

"Thank you for your honesty. You didn't have to do it for me." He pauses and looks directly at her, into her.

"I love you. I trust you. Your actions and words before now are more than enough. But I am honoured to be trusted with so much of your being.

"You remember how I told you that you are a mystery I will never solve. Even after today, especially after today, there are so many more layers of the Beckett onion to peel.

"I want to reciprocate. Need to be honest with you about my past. Have my own confessions. Good for the soul you know? But I need a nap before I will be able to respond."

Kate nods and squeezes his hand.

"I'll be here waiting. Always."

Rick acknowledges with smile and closes his eyes. It takes less than a minute before he is asleep.

She dare not step outside the room or even open the door. So she pulls out her phone, and taps a message.

Lanie Parish is standing guard outside the door to Castle's ICU room. The sentinels from the 12th has been sent for lunch at the hotel in no uncertain terms, and Kate's partners have the duty at the ICU entrance. Whilst many officers would question the authority of a medical examiner, none from the 12th are willing to take a chance with Doctor Parish, especially is respect of who her best friend was.

She's been here more than an hour.
Despite the glass behind her, she hasn't turned round once. Her best friend had entrusted her with this sacred task, and she would fulfil it. Over all the years she has known Kate Beckett, she has never known Kate to be as happy as she had been in the last six months. On learning Kate's tale, Lanie has surprised herself and Kate by simply absorbing it and carrying on as before. Somehow it has been right, and whilst over the years, she had learnt things from Kate as she slowly shared, she knows that her knowledge is a faction of what the man inside that room knows about Kate Beckett and her demons.

Her phone beeps and there is a message from Kate. Frowning in surprise at why she is being messaged by someone less than 5 yards away, she swipes and quickly reads the message.

The timing is right as just that minute Martha and Alexis have returned from wherever they had gone to when dismissed from the room.

Lanie rises from her seat and steps across the door, crossing her arms in her best bodyguard impersonation. Her body language of 'No Entrance' does not go unnoticed by the approaching duo.

"Oh My" Martha's eyes go wide in understanding, and she takes Alexis by the elbow and commences to steer her into as graceful a turn as possible.

"Come along Alexis, your Father and Kate need some more time"

"But Grams" Alexis protests.

"I'm sure Doctor Parish will let us know when it is appropriate to return" Martha cuts off her granddaughter and turns and winks back at Lanie.

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**Eric M. Taylor Center, Rikers Island, Sunday 2.15 pm**

Leaving the food hall, Leroy Herron was a very nervous man.

Not because of his legal situation. He knew he had little to offer the DA, and accordingly was facing a long harsh sentence. More importantly he was too junior to rate his own attorney from the Family. He knew nothing of value to be of value to the DA or a threat to the Family.

However, none of this was the reason for his enhanced state of anxiety.

He had been moved so quickly into general populace at Rikers without so much as an assessment or check. A veteran of previous stays more than once in more than one of the ten jails on the Island, he knew how the process worked. His treatment this time wasn't typical but nor was it special. Non routine without reason made experienced men nervous. Herron was now very nervous.

After being charged by the cops at the 12th Precinct, he had been transferred to the Manhattan Detention Complex better known as The Tombs but his stay had been extremely brief - less than four hours on a Saturday afternoon. Nothing happened on a Saturday afternoon for the Department of Corrections. Yet the same day he found himself on the way to 'The Boat' in the Bronx.

So Saturday night, he was the sole overnight occupant of a shared a cell on the floating jail known as 'The Boat' less of a mouthful than the official title - the Vernon C. Bain Correctional Center. Before he could even settle he was picked up again and shunted to Riker's proper early Sunday morning straight after the first breakfast call. Just like Saturday afternoons, nothing happened on a Sunday morning for the Department of Corrections, and yet he had found himself on a van to the Island. Administrative error he had been told.
Now he classified himself as officially freaking nervous and not a little scared.

The ride from the Bronx and round the bay was long and it was some time before they were across the bridge to the Island. All the way it had been eerily silent. He had shared the Corrections van with 2 others who had not said a thing. This was not uncommon, and he had learnt on previous stays to keep his mouth shut. He knew how to survive in the system, and avoid the gangs, and definitely to not owe anyone shit.

He didn't know much regarding the Silva family and he had never said anything to the cops or the DA. On the face of it, he should be safe but he didn't feel it.

Returning to his bunk in one of the large dorm areas, he did his best to relax and let prison life float by. Previous stays had taught the one truth – doing time meant just that.

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**Gates Residence, 2.30 pm**

One of the few privileges worth enjoying as the Homicide Captain in the NYPD was the higher than average chance (for a cop) of being at home on a Sunday. And so it had come to be in the Gates Residence, that Sundays were a day for going slow.

A big part of Slow Sundays was the late brunch. A fixture through the kids' teenage years, it has been a tad happen-stance affair after both had left home to stay in dorms at NYU. Never-the-less when David and Victoria could they sat down together late Sunday mornings for brunch. The menu options were never fixed and frequently seasonal or sometimes simply pot luck from the larder.

After the last week, Victoria Gates was happy to be nestled into a comfortable recliner with a book waiting for the brunch to settle. Her husband was opposite her in his own favourite recliner, pretending to read the paper. She was happy to indulge him his little charade. He was almost as transparent as Richard Castle. She was tempted to roll her eyes, but this would give her away. Plus David not so secretly loved her eye roll. She had notice Beckett using the same expression numerous times.

She had to admit that Beckett and Castle made an uncanny team. Their unique partnership obviously had very personal bonds, so much so that she assumed that the two had or were sleeping together not long after she arrived to replace Roy. She had been surprised to learn that they weren't and also of the numerous pools circulating regarding their prospects.

There was a noise from upstairs, and initially alert she settled back down as she remembered their brunch 'guests'. Their two children – Natasha and Francis – had come over and joined them. She suspected her husband had 'policed' them up to attend. Now just like their teenage years they had retreated upstairs once the table was cleared.

She had been more than a little surprised to find David's daughter, Serena, from his previous marriage there as well. Serena was very much an independent spirit and had floated between her mother and their home throughout her teenage years. Now approaching thirty, Serena was an analyst for a government agency. Details beyond that were hazy and after more than two decades of inconclusive fencing, were likely to stay that way. Serena was outside having a cigarette. She must have taken it up again despite giving up 'for good' almost a decade ago. She wondered if her job was stressful and if the smoking was method of tension management.

David Reynolds was watching his wife of 24 years as she read. He was well aware she knew he was watching but it was a familiar, comfortable game between them. As a cop, his wife was
perfectly capable of taking care of herself.

He loved Sundays with his family. But he missed his longer running Sunday vice and his absent friend. Last played some 18 months ago before Roy was killed, their Sunday morning dawn golf was the stuff of legend, having started when they were in services. Both were middling to awful but didn't care. Vicky had indulged him, well both of them. She said she considered it a small price to pay for the introduction all those years ago.

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**O'Sullivan's Cake & Coffee, 2.45 pm**

Martha guided Alexis into the shop. They had narrowly avoided a pair of photographers when exiting the hospital.

"Gram why are we here?"

"Did you really want to go shopping again? You didn't buy anything this morning and barely ate lunch."

Alexis shakes her head and lets her Gram guide her towards a booth at the rear of the shop. It is already occupied but Martha goes ahead and slides in opposite the occupant.

Sitting in the booth was Jim Beckett, Kate's dad.

"Oh Hello Mr Beckett" Alexis blurs out, years of good manners instilled by her dad and grandmother, instinctively guiding her greeting and handshake.

He takes her hand and shakes it whilst correcting her. "I'd really prefer if you called me Jim. Being called Mr Beckett gets me on edge. A bit like someone is going to ask to marry my daughter." There is a light in his eyes and he is teasing her. Martha is laughing and Alexis smiles but can't but help think how her dad would react to such as pronouncement.

"Gram?" Alexis reaches across to touch the elder red head. "Gram, have you been meeting with Jim behind their backs? Dad you can handle but Detective Beckett can be scary. They won't like this."

"Pish. I know what I'm doing." Alexis rolls her eyes in response to Martha's dismissal of the matter.

"One of the responsibilities of parenthood is making sure that your children don't screw up too badly. Heaven knows how complicated Kate and your father make things. Jim and I have simply trying to un-complicate things.

Alexis' phone beeps with an incoming text message. Barely glancing down she swipes and reads. Her face drops and she mutters something under breath.

"Alexis?! Is everything okay?"

"I forgot to call mom last night."

"Oh. And?"

"According to her text she's just landed at JFK and wants a town car to take her to the Loft."

"Oh damnation, that harpy isn't staying there." This from Martha. Alexis nods visualizing a confrontation between her mom and Kate.
"That isn't good I take it?" This from Jim Beckett, the only member of the party yet to experience the delights of Meredith.

"I'll call Eduardo and ensure he know they are not to let her up unannounced and definitely not into the Loft."

At this moment, Martha's phone rings. Caller id flashes 'Paula'.

"Hello dear." Martha greets her and listens as the agent strident and noticeably elevated tone delivers quick fire sentences down the line.

"She WHAT? What on earth made her think she had any right? Oh hang on I said 'think' didn't I?"

"Right damage control is the order of the day. We'll head back out to the hospital. Richard and Kate will need to be told."

Hanging up the showbiz Diva looks at her shell-shocked audience of two. She looks fairly shaken too.

"Your mother held an impromptu press conference at the airport surrounded by what looked like enough baggage for months."

Alexis felt her heart sink and a headache and possible heartache come on.

Jim simply looked shocked.

"She" Martha practically spat the word out as her eyes flashed.

"She announced that in light of the NYPD's inability to protect her husband, she is temporarily moving back to New York, abandoning her career, to care for him and his daughter.

"FUCK!"

This time it is Jim and Martha's turn to look shocked. Alexis Castle had dropped the f-bomb and looks set to follow through, when Jim chooses that moment to speak.

"I have to agree with Alexis' accurate summation." He grins.

"Kate is going to kill her. She won't even need her gun, I imagine her little finger should be enough."

"Do you think we can sell tickets?" Jim asks. He does deadpan extremely well.

Noting Jim's coffee on the table, Martha reaches into her handbag and pulls a couple of notes from her purse, waving away Jim's attempts to reach for his wallet.

"Nonsense, you're not paying. I'll apologize to the waitress and we'll call a cab and get back to the hospital. Meredith can wait at the airport for all I care. At least until we have told your father and Kate."

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Toilet Block 4A, Eric M. Taylor Center, Rikers Island, Sunday 3.18 pm

Leroy Herron was about to die. Or rather be killed. Murdered. To silence him, most likely on the orders of the Silva Family. Even though he knew jack-shit. He wished he'd listened to his gut instinct on this one. Too late now.
Strange enough, he was relatively calm about it. There was nothing he could do. He was going to go down fighting.

Across the room, six men advance towards him each wielding a dangerous homemade weapon. This wasn't going to take long.

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**Gates Residence 4.08 pm**

With the kids departed, any hope of ending their lazy Sunday with some alone time, is dashed when her phone rings. Caller ID blocked.

"Gates."

"Sir." A pause.

"I'm listening."

"Very good. I'll get my team together and increase security for the Castles and Detective Beckett as well. I'll be ready for the FBI. Good Afternoon Sir."

David looks at her in question. He is used to her short, terse answers when stressed.

"Chief of D's. Someone's cleaning house. The first shooter, Herron, and the victim Jussic have both been killed in the last hour. Two cops guarding Jussic were injured, one badly."

"We're increasing security for the Castles and Detective Beckett."

"I need to get dressed and head in."

She walks over to her husband and leans down to kiss first his forehead and then his lips.

"Be safe Vicky."

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**Downtown Manhattan. 4.27 pm.**

Barely pausing the limo had collected its single passenger and pulled smoothly away for the curb without even disrupting the traffic flow.

Inside and surrounding the car, electronic surveillance counter measures better than anything the US government outside of the NSA were in action. The full triple crown of detectors, jammers and a white noise generator.

The passenger settles into the seat opposite the two other occupants.

A slim hard is extended and the late middle-age man takes it and shakes it reverently. Their discussion however is entirely businesslike to the point of terseness.

"Is it done?"

"Yes. Confirmed." The passenger is renowned for his direct nature both with an economy of words and in his application of violence.

"Good."
"What about the cops and the Writer?" The passenger wonders what options are on the table.

"Don't matter. This was a side show with little at stake. We need not concern ourselves with them. We will provide surety another way."

"Si."

The slim hand presses the intercom button. "Per favore." Two small words convey instruction enough and the limo glides into the curb.

The passenger nods his head and takes his leave.

"A domani!"
Precautions

Chapter Summary

Someone is cleaning up from the crime. So far only the criminals have been victims but are the team and their families in danger. Perhaps it is wise to take precautions and seek additional assistance.

New York Ledger Website – Main Page

'Richard Castle – Author Improving. Ex-Wife Returns to NYC - Blames NYPD'

Sources report that whilst the author remains in ICU he continues to improve and should shortly be able to leave the ICU. A constant presence at his side is his girlfriend – NYPD Detective Kate Beckett – and his family.

However, a coma may well be the safest place for the author as his current improving health may be compromised by the possibility of an impending showdown between his girlfriend and muse Kate Beckett and Meredith Lee Castle, his first ex-wife. Ms Lee, freshly arrived from Los Angeles, gave a press conference at JFK this afternoon stating that the NYPD was at fault for failing to protect Mr Castle. Ms Lee who is 'between projects' has announced her intention to put her career on hold whilst she cares for the injured author and their daughter.

After calling Martha to warn Rick's family of the already calamitous arrival in NYC of Meredith Paula had started to put together the necessary information and resources to deal with the troublesome ex-wife. First call had been to Rick's lawyer, Steve Mathers, who had conferenced in Harry Dove, the business manager. Together they had agreed it was time to bring in some additional expertise but that would require clearance from Martha.

Before that Paula has a solo mission of her own. After giving the West Coast and especially Hollywood enough time to recover from a late Sunday brunch, Paula calls Harry Rokkman – Meredith's agent.

"Harry Rokkman – with a double KK – Talent Agency! How…"

"Harry, I know how you allegedly spell your name." Paula breaks into the intro spiel.

"Paula?"

"Damn Straight."

"Oh Shit. I guess you're calling about Meredith?"

"And people say you're not smart. You need to get your client under control."

"She's not my client …. anymore."

"What?" Paula's mouth falls open. This was unexpected.
"I had to let her go."

"Why?"

"She is an impending train wreck. Strictly B-grade of course. But train wreck none-the-less.

"We had always managed to get by. Enough recurring roles on TV and guest spots plus the odd movie.

"Problem is that Mere always wanted more, to be more. Last six months she gained some new 'friends' who told her this was her last chance to make it big. I suspect she was being set up by this new reality outfit that follows the lives of the nearly famous and their implosions.

"Anyway, she's being throwing parties and promoting herself trying to get some attention and interest. They don't come cheap. Catering. Clean-up. Gifts. Hospitality." Harry stresses the final word and then trails off. Clearly not keen to extrapolate further.

"Drugs?" Paula is suddenly hit by a moment of insight.

"Yep. I don't think she is doing anything – well nothing more than usual. But she made sure stuff was there. Available. Good quality and lots of it. Not cheap. Also the catering and booze was certainly more than Mere's budget would have ever allowed.

"Now she's in deep to some scary people. Mexicales. They paid me a visit to see if they could collect via me. I made it clear that our arrangement is terminated. Shit Paula, I even refunded the last six months fees to her. Not that it would help much.

"She tried to re-mortgage the Bel-air house. I swear she forgets that her ex owns the place not her. She's in way over her head, and there's nothing I could do."

"When?" Paula needs to know how long this has been going on.

"Came to a head just last week. I don't think she really understands how bad the position is. How much trouble she is in."

Paula nods to herself. **It is no surprise to her that Meredith is desperate for cash. This was not the first time in the years since the divorce. But it is the first time Alexis left home, and she and Rick's team had been expecting it as Rick had stopped providing any additional funds to Meredith once Alexis went to college. Maybe that explained was she desperate enough to try her madhouse scheme? Why did she think she could even pull it off?**

Harry's voice interrupts her thoughts with an answer to her unvoiced question.

"TMX and a bunch of entertainment dailies and sites are reporting that her ex hit his head and is suffering amnesia."

"I can assure you that he isn't. He's conscious with full faculties and getting better." Oh, so that's why she thinks she can.

"Good. I always liked Mr Castle and that girl of his."

"Harry, how much does she owe?"

"The capital was $400,000 but with interest and fees they're asking for $1.2 mil."

Paula is taking notes and doing calculations in her head.
Harry interrupts again.

"Paula, they did offer her a payment plan."

"What?!" Paula dreads what is coming next.

"As bad as you're thinking. Two options. Run drugs from Mexico, or" Harry hesitates but continues "or video." He doesn't detail what the video would entail but Paula knows.

"Thanks for the info. Anything else?"

"Nada."

"Take care Harry. You're a scum-sucking parasite, but an honest one."

"You too Paula."

Paula looked down at her notes and the scribbled numbers. It was time to call Steve back and update the lawyer and then get Martha on the line to approve access to some additional specialist resources so they could get this potential train wreck sorted.

Bellevue Intensive Care Unit, Sunday 4.35 pm

Kate started awake.

Damn she had nodded off. She knew she was tired, worn down by a lack of proper sleep and stress.

Her first reaction to look at Castle, but he was still asleep. His breathing regular, if still a little shallow. It almost appeared as if he was smiling. Her own face mirrored his. After more than twenty-four hours of seeing his face set in a mask trying to hide his discomfort it was good to see her man feeling better especially in this unguarded state asleep with no artifice to try and hide the pain and turmoil.

She knew all about that. Pain. Hiding. Walls. Denial. Running. She shook the negative thoughts off and focused on the positives. He was going to be okay. Eventually.

So why did she instinctively wake up?

She turned behind her. Through the glass walls of the ICU room she could see Lanie talking animatedly with Ryan.

Something was up. Suddenly alarmed she reached into her bag and located the familiar grip of her backup piece. Satisfied that it was there, she rose from her seat and walked to the room entrance and tapped on the other side of the glass.

Lanie quickly turned her head and using it motioned for Kate to join them outside.

"Hey Beckett. How's our boy doing?" There is concern, gratitude, a touch of fear and more of pride in the greeting and question from Ryan.

"Good. Resting. Longer periods of wakefulness but still gets tired easily. The pain is easing and his breathing is better.

"So what's going on?" Detective Beckett is back.
She listens with growing consternation and not a little fear as her friends fill her in on events.

Twelfth Precinct officers and those from several other precincts were flooding into the hospital in response to both the murder of Jussic inside the hospital and instructions from command to increase security.

The first responders had made their way to the area where Jussic was being treated and which was now a crime scene. Most of the hospital security had been drawn there when a nurse's aide had discovered the two unconscious officers in the hallway. This had left security within the hospital complex compromised for some time before additional reinforcements began arriving.

Elsewhere the hospital was being secured. LT lead one team into the general entrance area his radio crackling. He could hear Sergeant Campbell, the old warhorse back at the Precinct, snapping commands over the channel, and demanding updates. Temporarily dropping the volume feeding his earpiece, LT pulled his mobile phone and called Esposito. He knew the detective was covering the entrance to the ICU with his partner, and he wanted to ensure the detectives along with their protectees Beckett and Castle were okay.

The Loft, 5.00 pm

After leaving O'Sullivan's Cake & Coffee Martha had called for the car service, and they were whisked from the kerbside back to the Loft to collect some items for Kate and Rick. Jim was also dropping off his bag as he would be actually staying in the guest room for a few nights.

They were almost ready to head to the hospital, when her phone rang.

Pulling it from her handbag she looks down but she doesn't recognise the number, so she answers with her full name.

"Martha Rodgers."

"Ms Rodgers, it is Victoria Gates."

"Good afternoon Victoria, I trust there is nothing wrong." Using the Captain's first name makes it implicit that the senior expects the same.

"Martha, I don't want to alarm you but there have been incidents involving two of the individuals involved in the case, and we are simply taking precautions to ensure the safety of the officers and their families.

"Are you able to locate Miss Castle and have you heard from Mr Beckett at all? He is not answering his phone."

"Both of them are with me." Martha can almost feel the Captain relax at the over end of the line.

"Incidents?"

"Martha, there have been murders. Now we don't believe your families or any officers are in danger but we want to take sensible precautions. Where are you?"

"At the Loft, we were picking up some items for Kate and Richard. Just leaving for the hospital in a few minutes. I already have the car service on the way"
"Please return to the hospital. We have additional officers there now and will be able to assess and
determine our next actions. I hope to be able to get away and if so I will meet you there. Otherwise,
I will liaise via some of my team. Good afternoon Martha."

"Thank you Victoria."

She turns to once again find her audience of two frozen to the spot waiting for the other side of the
conversation to be revealed. For once Martha repeats the information pretty much verbatim as no
additional melodrama is required.

Alexis instinctively found herself hugging Jim Beckett's arm. He does nothing to break that grip
and instead places one of his hands on hers and squeezes gently. He's becoming very attached to
this fine young woman, and whilst he never thought he would meet his first granddaughter aged
eighteen this was more than tempered but the likelihood of actually having one with the prospect of
more grandchildren to follow.

No sooner had Martha finished than her phone rang again

"Paula." She announces to the room before hitting the answer button.

"Hello Dear" and the diva falls silent as Paula divulges her information.

"Yes, I agree I think it is time to call Taylor Matthews and have some assistance here in New York
and in LA too as well. Thank you Paula. I'm sure we'll speak again shortly. Goodbye."

"Gram, who is Taylor Matthews?" On occasion Alexis is reminded that she doesn't know pretty
much everything about her father. It's not that he doesn't share, but he is definitely a more
complicated person than she or pretty much anyone else sees or imagines.

Martha looks at Alexis and shakes her head gently.

"It's a 'what' is Taylor Matthews not 'who'. It is a company that your father uses for security matters
from time to time. They are consummate professionals, very discreet and highly effective.
Fortunately we don't have to call on their services very often."

Secure Conference Room, Homicide, 12th Precinct, 5.15 pm

Victoria Gates was pissed. Her Sunday was interrupted, ruined. She had made plans with DM and
now she would be lucky to home before midnight. DM would forgive her. He always did with
never a recrimination. Quite frankly it used to puzzle her, grate at her detective instincts. He's a
man and yet he rarely ever raised the issue about missed opportunities for well, sex to be blunt. Her
aunt had observed simply when staying with them once after Francis was born 'he loves you
completely' and loathe as she was to admit it, she did believe it. She knew from her own
observations that Beckett and Castle were likely the same, if not more so, especially if the rumours
of the infamous playboy going dateless for more than a year waiting for Beckett were true.

The C of D's- Thomas Delaney - was siting opposite looking equally disharmonious. No doubt his
Sunday has been disrupted too. So much so that there had barely been a grunt out of him. With
good reason. No doubt the Commissioner had been called, and he in turn called the C of D's, who
had called Gates, and so on. But given the recent bad crime stats and a couple of scandals involving
corrupt or incompetent detectives, the C of D's would be feeling the heat from the Commissioner a
lot. Came with the territory but wasn't welcomed either way.

"The officers at Bellevue have been reinforced." Gates is updating the other occupants of the room
- The C of D's, ADA Denoza, Captain Mike Ford of the 15th, and a Public Information suit from the Mayor's office.

"Fortunately the two officers guarding Jussic will recover, although Officer Leaver will be out of action for a while. From what we understand, they were each hit from different directions by rubber bullets. Neither projectile was recovered but from the bruising pattern it appears to be either 37mm or 40mm.

"They took a lot of care to ensure the cops weren't killed. Carl Leaver's injuries came from his fall to the ground where his right arm twisted and fractured in multiple places from his body weight and impact on the floor.

"Jussic was killed with two shots, one shot to chest and a second to the head. Not point blank. No casings recovered. No gunshots heard. Possible silencer. Looks professional. Preliminary sweep is showing nothing.

The Chief of D's nods.

"Took a lot of balls. Daylight hit. Taking down cops but deliberately not killing them. Whoever is behind this doesn't want the NYPD breathing fire at them. They know there is a world of difference between investigating cop killers and two dead criminals.

This is definitely someone cleaning house.

Charles Denoza leans forward. The ADA had been quiet up to this point, leaving the policing to the police. This is his area of expertise.

"I may be able to shed some light if I may." At the affirming nods he continues.

"The Silva crime family is relatively small by comparison with other Italian crime families. Different roots too. The came from northern Italy. Industrial, modern, wealthy. Not the rural, poor like the traditional mafia. Given that their opposition was a bit more organised and professional, the Silva family built a reputation on smarter, largely white collar crimes and relatively minimal involvement in drugs, prostitution, gambling. This in turn has largely kept them out of the sights of other crime groups and for the most part the law enforcement agencies as well.

"They have been careful to stay neutral in disputes between families and also outside of the Italian diaspora. However, some twenty-five years ago there was a schism within the Silva family and the Italian and America families split and went their separate ways.

"Initially the US based family thrived but in the last five years it has stagnated and like most old-school crime families come under intense pressure from the new waves of crime syndicates especially from Central and South America. In contrast the Italian side of the family has boomed in recent years. We believe they have powerful political connections which have aided the growth back in Europe.

"Francisco Silva, the head of the American clan is old, eighty-nine. It is rumoured that his daughter, Sophia, is effectively running the show. She is trying for reproachment with Italy. We believe the intention was that the paintings were to be a gift, perhaps a payment in penance for the quarter century of separation.

Obviously they felt the need to clean up following the failure of their team. For some reason or reasons Delucca is important enough to be spared – for the moment. He has counsel provided by the family. Based on his previous history they obviously expect him to be loyal, stay silent and do
any time he gets.

"In terms of threats outside the criminal element, I personally don't think your people are at risk
Captain. But naturally precautions are always wise.

"Now as for the killing of Jussic, it does bear all the hallmarks of a simple, cleanly executed hit.
The Silva family is small scale and also appears to want to keep things tight. They have a small
pool of trusted enforcers – these are the guys above street thug level who can be given direct orders
and relied upon to carry them out.

"There are four regular enforcers who are known to law enforcement and have records. Some
murders amongst them, but generally they shift that stuff off to the next level.

"Then there is one specialist enforcer. I think this recent activity is the specialist at work. His name
is Mario Stanza. He's 51 years old. No criminal record, but suspected in two dozen killings.
Nothing ever proven and he is both smart and loyal. I would recommend we focus our attentions on
him, but I am not hopeful that we will get anything. Certainly we've never been able to in the past.
If nothing else we will distract him and keep him from other activities.

They meeting was breaking up, and as Gates rose from her seat the ADA also rising addressed her.

"Captain. If you would be so kind please pass on my regards to David."

"I didn't know you knew David?"

"Yes we worked together many years ago in the old city Prosecutors Office. Around the time,
David ran for DA. I never did understand why he dropped out. The professional attorney with a
proven track record of service and success against that politician. The polls all indicated he was a
strong chance."

"We decided that having one family member in active law enforcement was enough. David's
teaching gave him the flexibility to be there when our family was growing up. Something jobs like
ours don't always allow." After so many years, the tale seems familiar, comfortable, and the lie less
blatant.

"I will pass on your regards and perhaps you can catch up. I know David does like to move outside
the stuffy confines of his ivory tower from time to time.

"But before you go, can I ask a question?" They are close enough to touch and Gates places a hand
kindly on his arm and the ADA gives a small smile and nod of encouragement for her to continue.

"You seem to know a lot about this comparatively small crime family. How is that?"

"My family is originally from Milan and I am third generation. My grandfather was a cabinet
maker but he was obliged to become part of a Silva scheme many years ago in Italy. He came to
America to escape that despite leaving behind everything except my Nona and my mother. They
started with nothing but there was no escape. The Silva's came here too and eventually found him.
They destroyed his hands when he refused his obligations. So I will pursue them within the law so
much as I can for as long as I can." His tone is measured and calm, but with her hand still on his
arm, Victoria Gates can feel it tremble with emotion.

"It would be nice to meet up with David again. Good Evening Captain." With this the ADA holds
his hand out to Gates and they exchange handshakes before parting.
Bellevue Hospital, 5.40 pm

Esposito and Ryan are returning to the ICU after grabbing a quick bite before the cafeteria closed. There are two teams from the 12th at the ICU as well as teams roaming the hospital.

Ryan taps his partner's arm. Esposito looks up and follows Ryan's line of sight. He clocks the two smartly dressed men heading towards the ICU. Given it's a Sunday their ubiquitous smart attire appears slightly out of place compared to a weekday but is it the measured gait and subtle alertness that triggers the cops instincts more.

Without a word the two detectives increase their pace and fall in some twenty yards behind the pair. As they near the ICU entrance, it is time to act.

Reaching to grasp their Glocks both Esposito and Ryan call out

"NYPD! NYPD! Freeze!"

"Stay where you are and keep your hands in the open." Commands Esposito.

Both of the suspects halt still facing away from the detectives, and purposely move their hands away from their bodies. The taller one on the left speaks.

"Easy detectives. We're here to assist. When you're ready I'll provide some ID." It is a flat neutral American accent with perfect pronunciation.

But before the ID can be produced they are interrupted.

"You two must be out of practice" An obviously female voice damn near purrs from close behind them as a finger jabs each in the back of the head.

Startled, both detectives are immediately twisting their bodies to keep eyes on the two men ahead of them, whilst they try to spot the speaker and presumably finger prodder. Their first view is the sight of a grinning face. The grin's owner is about 5'6" and clearly female with practical short brunette hair framing an attractive almost handsome face with minimal makeup. Further examination – entirely professional and impartial of course – reveals practical footwear, chino's and white blouse with a mid blue jacket hiding a clearly lean and fit body, and the butt of a parkerized pistol just visible on her right hip. She appears to be late thirties possibly forties but it is hard to pin down due to her obvious good physical health.

"Clare Dunne, New York Ops Lead for Taylor Matthews" she pauses for a moment and then nods past the pair "and the two in front of you are Mike O'Leary and Pietr Evritt." At their names, each of the men waves one hand slightly starting with the taller one on the left.

"Holy Shit" voices Espo.

Ryan looks at his partner is askance. Beckett and Castle aren't the only ones to do non-verbal communication.

"Dude, Taylor Matthews are top drawer. Very best in private security. Discreet and extremely efficient. Absolutely best operators. You don't apply to them. They choose you."

"We all have NYC concealed carry permits for the SIG 229's on our belts." Continues the confident and obviously in command woman seemingly oblivious to Esposito's side explanation to Ryan.
"We're here at the request of Ms Rodgers who had requested our assistance with some matters for the family. If it is okay with you, we'll wait in the ICU reception until Ms Rodgers arrives. She will be able to confirm our identities."

With that she reaches into her jacket to the side opposite the gun and pulls an ID wallet and flips it open for the two to inspect.

Satisfied for the moment, the two detectives accompany the three representatives from Taylor Matthews to the ICU entrance.

ICU Reception Area, Bellevue Hospital, 5.44 pm

Some ten minutes later Martha, Alexis and Jim arrive at the ICU. Clare Dunne moves quickly to make introductions.

"Ms Rodgers. And you must be Miss Castle". Clare Dunne is all business, shaking both hands offered. Alexis wears an aura of intense curiosity. Jim Beckett has stepped back, not for the first time feeling a little out of place in this world the Castles inhabit.

"Hello Clare. How are you darling? And don't you dare not call me Martha."

"Very well Martha." It is not clear whether she is confirming her health or acknowledging the instruction to use the client's first name.

Martha nods, and almost yanks Jim Beckett forward.

"Clare this is Jim Beckett. Kate Beckett's father. One of the family."

Clare steps over and offers her hand which Jim Beckett shakes instinctively. Martha's last four words are still resounding through him. He thinks he is beginning to understand some of Kate's tales about this family. One he is apparently being adopted into, free will or not.

"Nice to meet you Sir.

"My colleagues are Mike O'Leary and Pietr Evritt." This time the men step forward to offer their right hand to shake with each person in turn.

"Before I go further, Derek and Tim send their regards. Mr Castle only needs to ask and we will do what we can to resolve the issue."

Before Clare can continue one of the ICU nurses comes over.

"Excuse me, Ms Rodgers?"

"Oh certainly. It's Helen isn't it?"

"Yes Ms Rodgers. Can I ask if all these people are necessary? This is the ICU and visitor numbers are meant to be restricted." She leaves unsaid the relaxations already secured by the Castle name.

Before Martha can respond Esposito moves over and joins in.

"I'm sorry for the additional people. It will only be for a short while, maybe one or two hours max, and then we will reduce our presence. You do understand why we are here?"

The nurse nods. No doubt the execution of a man under police guard in the same hospital has been
the main topic of conversation since the news broke.

"Well it is probably a good thing that the evening rounds have just completed. But please ensure as many of you leave as soon as possible. Whilst we appreciate Mr Castle's service with the NYPD, we have had some complaints from other ICU visitors regarding the disruptions."

The group acknowledge the request and move down the corridor.

In deference to the increased scrutiny from the ICU nurses, the Two Taylor Matthews operatives wait outside the ICU room and remain in the corridor. Martha, Alexis and Jim have entered the ICU room accompanied by Clare Dunne and an extremely curious Lanie Parish who is trying to non-verbally interrogate the Boys.

Kate had exchange hugs with the Castle clan and her Dad before being introduced to the newcomer.

Minutes later Kate Beckett is still sizing up the new female presence in the room who in turn is returning the favour with a mutuially frank appraisal, slightly disturbing and intimidating in its intensity.

Pretty much everyone in the room is mesmerized by the moment. Silence reigns and the Boys are so caught up they forget to smirk. Not so for the females and Kate spies both Lanie and Martha sharing a knowing smile. Alexis looks confused and surprised. Her Dad has retreated to the back of the room near the windows with the blinds still drawn.

She can see the two new men outside the room. Both are poker faced. Professionals but obviously not cops or even Feds. Sensing her gaze they both nod in acknowledgement before turning their attention back out to the ICU.

It is Martha who breaks the silence. She moves closer to Kate and in a voice probably intended only for the two of them she speaks.

"You know Kate, you don't have to worry about Rick with Clare". The elder Rodger is smirking, clearly in possession of relevant information perhaps prior history. Unfortunately for Kate, Martha's dramatic training means that even when pitched low her voice has carried and every occupant of the room hears. Then it gets worse.

"But you on the other hand...." As the diva trails off her insinuation, Alexis goes moderately red faced and Lanie is struggling to hold in her laughter. The boys appear caught between pseudo adolescent male fantasy and the reality of a really annoyed Beckett glare. Lanie gives both the evil eye just in case. Oh God, her dad looks like a deer caught in hunting lights.

"Oh, damn you Martha. But before Kate can respond to Martha's teasing, she is aware of movement behind her from the bed. Is Rick waking up? It was supposed to just be the two of them we he woke up. Not this coterie of distractions and bad news.

"Kate?" Yep, he's awake. At least he said her name first. That's not petty and possessive oh no, not at all. She rewards herself with an internal eye roll.

She turns and smiles at her still slightly sleep befuddled boyfriend. "I'm here Rick."

He's looks past her and spots the newcomer.

"Clare? What are you doing here?" And how does he manage it? Seriously bedroom voice straight
off the bat. Wait he called her by her first name. Okay regardless of Martha's inference and assurance, Kate wants the story.

"Oh God, what's happened. Alexis?!

And straight to worst case scenario – damn his author's imagination some times.

"I'm here Dad, so is Grams. We're all okay. Everyone is okay." With this Alexis, Martha, Jim, the Boys and Lanie all move into his direct line of sight.

"Thank God." The relief is palpable on his voice.

"Not that I'm not glad to see you all but someone please tell me why you including one - and presumably more outside - of Taylor Matthew's best operatives are all here in my hospital room?"

During the course of the next ten minutes the most apt observation came from Jim Beckett who simply commented on understanding where Alexis learnt some of her language from. Rick's creative instincts and excessive research meant that pretty much every occupant of the room learnt at least one new profanity during the course of the information updates regarding both the case and his not-so private life centred on ex-wife numero uno.

After one quick conference call with Paula and Steve, the Taylor Matthews team took their leave. Satisfied that the NYPD had the immediate security needs covered they were going to focus on the issues Meredith had left back in L.A. They were followed out the door by the Boys who were going to check with the next shift and then head out. Ryan was heading home to Jenny and Esposito was muttering something in Spanish under his breath.

Now the numbers in the room had diminished to a more acceptable level, conversations had turned practicalities such as overnight arrangements – Martha, Alexis and Jim all staying at the loft – and when Rick might leave ICU.

After fifteen minutes or so, Kate had become almost desperate. The unfinished confessional between Rick and herself needed to be done today. They both knew from painful experience how the inability to communicate especially through interruptions had hamstrung their relationship. It spoke directly to their commitment that they were determined to resolve a number of outstanding issues now, so soon after Rick had cheated death. Or perhaps because of it. They didn't want a repeat of eighteen months ago.

Kate had turned her eyes to her best (female) friend and pleaded wordlessly.

She gets a wink and a nod in response and before anyone can settle Doctor Lanie Parish takes charge and starts hustling everyone out.

"Right everyone clear the room. Now! Go home. Have some food and come back in the morning."

Two minutes later Kate is alone in the room with Rick. She has both hands on his left hand and forearm as his right side is still immobilized. Rick is smiling gently at her, and his eyes haven't left her face since his family and her dad left. She knows he will pick up the tension, fatigue and barely restraining emotions she has been riding and fighting since Thursday. She also knows that the man before her, the one she trusts above all others, will not make an issue of it unless necessary. She smiles back and half-stands to lean in to kiss his cheek and forehead before sitting back down.

"Kate."
Reciprocity

Chapter Summary

After Kate had bared her soul to Rick earlier, after some interruptions, Rick finally has an opportunity to reciprocate.

"Kate"

What if she runs? She says she's all in. That she's not running. I believe her. I trust her. But she doesn't know yet. When I tell her will she run? I think anyone else would run at the merest hint. I've never been willing or able to tell anyone else. But if I share this, my Shames, what will she do?

She's strong, I've never doubted that. But she has her own burdens to carry and that has almost broken her. We share that and it makes it bearable. She doesn't deserve to carry more. She doesn't deserve my sins too.

"Rick?" He doesn't know how long he has been lost inside but her voice calls him back. Home. She sounds like Home, and this decides him.

"People look at me and they see many things, often what they want or imagine, or the false persona of the playboy author. They don't try to look any deeper, don't expect anything more. For a lot of my life that was fine. But they don't see the real me. Who I am. What I treasure. What I Dream of. I don't show that part of me, or share with many people. Mother and Alexis of course. A few people know parts, some friends a bit more. A handful quite a bit more. But no one else has ever had or I felt deserved all of me until now. Until you."

"For a long time, it has never my intention to be anything less than totally honest with you. Since we've been together I've tried to be. It's not easy for me, and hell we still have communications issues sometimes. I've shared more with you than with anyone else except Mother and Alexis and much of their knowledge is because it is first hand by being there. I would love for us to build a lifetime of memories that way. Together.

"We've had serious discussions about our future. Us. You make me happier than I have been in years. You have been such a positive influence on me. You have changed me, improved me, and in most importantly helped me redeem some of my faults. It hasn't been without its moments and issues, and in some cases severe trauma. But I can't regret that it has bought us to now. Here – well not the ICU. That wasn't exactly what I had in mind, in fact I'd be happy to never see the inside on an ICU again if at all possible. But together, our lives intertwined and a shared future.

"But there are moments of my life of which I am not proud. Dark chapters, character defects, decisions and actions that have hurt others. Often through the inexperience and naivety of youth, pettiness, or stupidity but some, a few, through more or rather far less noble traits. For a handful of those times there have been consequences so dark that it still sears my soul to contemplate them. I wish to God I could claim them as accidental mistakes but they weren't. And that shames me. I used to worry that it could break me, but it's far worse because it could harm those close to me. Those I love.

"I have never been in a relationship where I could feel I could trust another person with all of me.
"But I have ask if you would be willing to listen. To hear my confession and know all of me. Share my weaknesses and darkness. Know my Shames. I'm sorry if this is a surprise or worse for you. If you now feel that I have hidden things from you, I apologise, but I swear I have been moving towards telling you. But even tonight I can't, won't, be able to tell you everything. There is not enough time nor do I have the strength and courage to do so. But I feel I must reciprocate, and return your honesty. It deserves as much, not least because I know it took so much for you to say those words. How difficult it must have been when you much prefer to have your actions speak for you.

"Kate, are you ready? Will you listen to me?" His question floats between them for only the briefest moment, before she responds in a clear voice.

"Rick, you can tell me anything. You should know by now that it won't make me feel or think differently about you."

"Thank you. I believe you. I can't but help apprehensive about some of things I am about to reveal. Afraid they could hurt us, especially now I know where were are going. I trust you totally and know you are committed. But in the beginning and for a lot of those first few years, hell until six months ago I thought I knew and definitely feared the opposite."

He slips his hand from hers for a moment, bring it to his face, and rubbing his palm across his forehead.

"I haven't prepared this, so I may jump around a bit, possibly even repeat myself a bit."

He places his hand back down and Kate takes it again, gently threading their fingers together as she nods in understanding and anticipation.

"I've been angry for so much of my life. I can't tell you for sure when it began - around my mid teenage years - or what really triggered it. A cumulative series of events and circumstances I think. But for many years I really struggled with it. I tried to hide it, often by acting the fool or at least the lightweight. You'd be amazed how many people dismiss the class clown or playboy author without a second thought. The serious, brooding guy at the back of the class, or ensconced in his room or office, writing about death, murder in detail. That guy they suspected, mocked, bullied, and shunned.

"Only when I met Kyra did I begin to feel I could face the issues and try and master it. Have someone to share with." Kate nods, and begins to perhaps have a hint of understanding about the importance of the woman to Rick.

"As I got older, I have learnt to control the extreme emotions, and redirect them. Channel towards something else. Something positive, or at least I tried to. But it hasn't always been the successful, even now. As I got older, I got better at projecting a persona to protect myself and others. And it worked mostly except for those times rare times of rage when the emotions behind the anger were so overwhelming I couldn't or didn't want to.

"I was so very angry after you sent me away from the hospital eighteen months ago saying you would call but you didn't. Like the worst moments in my life, it wasn't a fast rage, it was cumulative, leeching through me and subsuming my very thoughts and control. Makes so much harder to come back from. To control your thoughts and make good decisions."
"I wasn't just angry at you. But I was, angry at you, and it took a long time to work through it. You never called. You said you would and you lied."

His eyes are no longer blue, they are almost lost in black, slating the emotions he still bears. She doesn't pull from his gaze. She deserves this, to see, feel, burn from the residual anger of her own failures. The truth of his words stings, she's so frustrating self-centred and weak but her disappointment in herself is countered by the knowledge that despite her failings, and his very natural reaction to them, somehow they are here. She knows that it is entirely due to this beautiful man. His forgiveness, his patience, and most importantly his love that more than anything has made this possible.

"I was angry at Josh, for not being worthy of you. For not being there for you. For being with you. God I had been angry and jealous about that long before you were shot. I would have been there for you every time. In every way, anyway. However you needed me."

She doesn't wipe the tears pooling in her eyes. She mouths the words silently 'You were Rick. You were there. Always'. He answers with his own tears which are left unchecked as he continues.

"Angry at the shooter, and the Dragon behind him. Angry that you never deserved any moment of the pain that the chain of tragedy from your mother's murder has inflicted on you.

"Angry at myself. For lots of reasons.

"I had a significant part in the events leading up to you almost dying and leaving you injured and alone. To this day I struggle to forgive myself for that. To rationalize how such a self-centred egotistical arsehole could deserve you. I reopened you mother's case. I pushed. I will always carry guilt for that. It started that chain that hurt the people you and I care for the most. Montgomery died because of it. He was far braver than I. He made his stand. You were shot yet here I am still alive."

She shake her head vigorously but doesn't speak. She hopes her eyes and face carry enough conviction to tell Castle his is wrong.

"Anger at my cowardice for not declaring my love sooner, for waiting until you were dying in front of me. Angry for all those missed opportunities. Even after you came back and we were getting closer, there were all those near misses and miscommunications. Each one gave me hope that we could be more but at the same time each failure to move forward reinforced my fears that we never would.

"After the shooting and not hearing from you I went to a very dark place. A place I had been to before but had managed to avoid for many years, since Alexis was young around five years old. I owe you father, the Boys, Lanie, Alexis and my mother a lifelong debt for helping me find my way back from that.

"I have been a coward when it comes to you for longer that I wish I could remember. That second year, when Demming turned up, he asked me indirectly whether we were together and if I would object to him asking you out. To my permanent shame, I was a coward, and I told him there was 'no flag on the play' and green-lighted his asking you out. To this day, I regret it. I regretted the words the moment they left my mouth. Not only because I wanted to the one to ask you out – which I did so much - but because it was never my place. I never had the right to speak on your behalf. Especially when we were not together.

"Which leads to on to why I left that summer. I was too much of a coward then to see you be happy with someone else. I know now that I misread the situation, but then I do that often when my anger
clouds my judgement and sensibility. Gina didn't stay with me long that summer. She couldn't deal with me if I wasn't the Playboy of the Western World. Hell that was no surprise, it was why we got divorced. That we lasted so far beyond my return to the Precinct in the third year – possibly ruining another chance for us to be together – was entirely down to my cowardice. I wouldn't confront my own feelings regarding her or you. I was afraid that if I told Gina to go, that you would reject me and I would be alone. I was so tired and afraid of being alone."

"But at least I did get to come back to work with you, although the beginning wasn't so auspicious. Back it an interrogation room, arrested as a murder suspect. Strangely enough in hindsight I think it was an important moment, like a reboot of us. I felt we became friends, best friends over that third year. Even though you were with Josh, I began to see the possibilities, began to hope. But I was still the coward about us so many more times. Others could see what we had, they could feel it, speak about it. But I couldn't. You couldn't. Or at least never together at the same time. I'm a writer and with you my words fail me so many times. Even near death we couldn't.

"I was angry after I overheard you in interrogation during the bombing case. I thought you didn't return the adoration of my heart. I believed that it was unrequited. My anger encouraged my paranoia and I jumped to the worst possible conclusion. But I was also coward. I ran from you. Hid. Put my shield up. Hid in the shadow of the false construct of the playboy. Instead of having the courage. I should confronted you. Confessed my love again. Instead I did stupid again – I'm good at stupid as I think you've noticed. God shadowing Slaughter was a bad fucking mistake on so many levels. It forced you to risk you job for me. I never meant that. Then somehow we started to find enough words to overcome the communications issues and I began to really hope about our future. When you accepted my invite to watch John Woo, I was so excited. It felt like a date to me. Or the expectation before a date at least. And then it go so fucked up.

"I was so angry again when you rejected me and choose your mother's case of me for the final time. It certainly felt like the final time to me. Ending us before we had really begun was the hardest thing I have ever done. I never expected to see you alive again. When you came to the Loft that night, I was initially determined to shut the door on you. Shut you out of my life. I couldn't deal with that level of heartbreak again. My demons were writhing so close to the surface. Mother had been so concerned prior to that day, that she had already started to make arrangements for me to go away to get help again."

He can see her eyes go wide at the understanding of his words and implications.

"Yes, I said again. Kate, you're not the only one who has been in therapy. In fact it's probably fair to say I beat you through that door too. Many times."

His voice has moderated in his last few sentences, and there is no trace of bitterness or loathing for her or himself. Kate doesn't know what to say this latest revelation. She was still amazed that he could still love her despite all her failings and how badly she had hurt him.

"Kate. Please remember that I love you. I still did through all that anger, I guess that is what made it so visceral. Hurt so much. I think it is time for me to explain some about the background before we met, and this isn't stuff you can find on the web. The unwritten history of Richard Rodgers so to speak. Some key moments that shaped my life before I met you."

She squeezes his hand, but doesn't say anything. She doesn't want to interrupt him, but there is also the impact of his previous words. The intensity of the emotions has left her physically shaken.

"As the child of an actress and single parent to boot, I had an unconventional upbringing, but I wasn't unhappy. Quite the opposite in fact. I was a happy child with an extreme curiosity about all
things. Mother says I could often get quite serious when I wanted to know something, and right from an early age would often attempt to charm the answers out people.

"We were constantly surrounded by people who used words in the most magical way, and some who did more, who created the stories and wove the words into tales and wonder. Like all children I was curious. I guess you can attribute my love of language and wordplay to that early exposure. We moved a lot, wherever the work was, and I never really settled into school. I got a lot of my early education from mother's friends and colleagues or the local libraries – best free child-minder my mother called them. I don't always remember too much about the early years, not the detail anyway. But I remember books, backstages and observing at parties from my bedroom or wherever I was sleeping.

"Then when I was nine, mother was invited to participate in this summer festival down at a small Gulf town. The money wasn't great and the guest artistes stayed with locals. We lodged with the local Sheriff and his family on their farm. They had one child near my age. The others were much younger – around four years old I think. Her name was Rebecca Annalise Johansson, she was eleven, and I idolised her. She was so graceful where I was already clumsy and uncoordinated, popular, smart, so beautiful. But most importantly she became my friend. She talked to me, took me places, showed me things. We shared secrets. She encouraged me to write, to try things, to look at the world, see not only the obvious but to observe the smallest things, to seek the story behind what I saw. When the summer was over, I was so much more than sad. It was like I had lost a part of me. She had become the sister, the missing sibling I never had.

"That year our mothers' encouraged us to write to each other and we stayed in touch as best we could. Often I would have to write the first letter to reconnect each time we moved and changed address. I didn't know or appreciate at the time but mother arranged to go back to the same summer festival the following year despite having a better offer. It is often the case that you never realise the sacrifices your parents make for their children. I'm sure I've never thanked my mother enough for the wonder and magic of my early years.

"The second summer was better than the first. This middle summer was full of joy. Apart from when necessary I don't think we were apart for five weeks. Sometimes if I close my eyes, I can almost feel her hand in mine, her palm pressed against mine, our fingers interlocked. Hear her voice and her laughter. Sometimes her dad, the Sheriff, took us out in his patrol car. It was then I saw my first dead body. Only from a distance. Car accident not murder. But I was curious boy and everyone had always encouraged me to ask questions. He indulged me. Rebecca thought it was funny but she was my best friend and she indulged me too. Saying goodbye was worse that year but we wrote so much. We started chain stories. She would set the outline and I would fill in the detail and she would critique, challenge, cajole and encourage me. I guess you could call her my first muse.

"We went back the next year too. The last time. I was twelve and Rebecca was still two years older than me, but so much more beautiful with her body changing. I was only vaguely aware of that as she had always been so beautiful to me, and I never thought of her in that way. She was my sister. We took right up where we left off from the previous year and the five weeks of the festival flew by. But then mother got an offer to take the play on tour for four weeks. Rather than pull me away, she arranged with Rebecca's mother, Aleska, for me to remain behind and stay with the Johansson's. Two weeks into the month, Rebecca had to go to music camp for a week. It was the last time I saw her. We didn't even say goodbye properly as she would be back for my last week. Whilst she was away her dad took me out on patrol with him a lot. I got to see my first murder victim. It resonated with me and for some reason, I began to write a very dark murder tale.

"Then Rebecca disappeared from the music camp just before she was due to come home. They
found her body in an estuary a few days later. Her death was never explained. Forensics weren't the science they are now.

"I know it must seem obvious but those events during that time changed me. It was until recently the worst summer of my life. I never got to say goodbye. To tell her how much she meant to me. Mother wasn't back yet and I stood with her family at the funeral. I grieved like one of them too. I retreated into myself, into the dark story I was writing. I didn't know how to cope. Her family were shattered and there was no one for me to turn to. I tried writing my thoughts down. But they were so dark, so angry. I burnt them.

"But bad as things had been I thought I would get better once I was back with my Mom. I was right and wrong. She always had a way to comfort me and she did. But something was different too. She had met the financial backers for her travelling play. She was with one of them. This man – Philip Davenport – was a widower with two young children. She did her best to comfort me, but she was distracted by her new suitor and the kids. They stayed at the local hotel. I spent the last few days with the Johansson's. We were all shattered but her mother was unmade by it. Aleska never really recovered. She died two years later, and the Sheriff moved away and remarried. That was the last we heard of them. I never found out what happened to Rebecca's brother and sister."

He pauses, whether to taper down the emotions, organise this thoughts or simply hear the silence, she doesn't know.

"Eventually we headed back to New York. Mother had a role in a Broadway play. It was also home to the Davenport family.

"It was then I was sent away to boarding school. I wasn't told why. Not properly. I thought it was because my mother was making happy families with this new man, his kids. Without me. Paid for by her boyfriend's mother. Oh I didn't like her and she didn't like me. The withdrawn, surly teenager with dark thoughts.

"Mother's relationship with Philip ran almost three years, and got as far as engagement. But it didn't last, they never did. However, for some reason my schools fees were paid through until the end of high-school. It has never been explained why. Mother has never said, I have never asked. Ironically I liked him the most of all my mother's boyfriends growing up. He treated me well and with respect when I was with them.

I hated boarding school, I was so lonely. I was also so vulnerable because of the events of that summer. Without a parent, or someone I could trust, to talk to, I channelled my emotions the wrong way. Initially I became introspective, withdrawn, but I quickly discovered that in an environment like that it only drew attention to you. Teenage boys are so cruel. So I figured out that being the opposite, the class clown, would at least deflect attention from anyone trying to get anything deeper from me. But in moments, I became the angry young man. Started more than a few fights, may have even won a handful. I didn't care, it was the release I sought not the transient illusion of victory. Needless to say I got kicked out of my first boarding school, and then a second where I was encouraged not to return. Finally a third. It was made clear to me that the next time was the last opportunity.

"When I was fourteen I was transferred to Edgewyck Academy. By the time I arrived I was well versed in the art of subterfuge and false personas. It had become second nature. I was struggling academically as well. Mother despaired of me and for me. She took me out of school one weekend and away – just the two of us. She begged me to make one last effort. She played her trump card. What would Rebecca want me to do? God I cried for the whole weekend, but by the time I returned to classes, I had a purpose.
"It was there I encountered Damian Westlake and with his encouragement my writing began to flourish. But I did have a lot of learning and work to do. I learnt there were no short cuts. My so-called first ‘break’ at school was false. A lie. Fraudulent. A term paper written by someone else to get my grades up on a failing class. It got published in the school magazine which Damian edited. The author wasn't willing to do another and all of a sudden I found the weight of expectation on me to equal or surpass my first piece. Somehow I did it. I was almost caught out because the writing styles were so different. I always suspected that Damian knew but didn't say anything. It was the last time I faked anything written. I could happily project a false persona but my words had to be real, to be my truth. I was often still solitary. But I wasn't as lonely. I had a few friends, Damian foremost in that group. Also I had my ideas and my writing. To this day, I often work through issues and excise and de-stress by writing.

"It was because of my experiences at boarding school and long absences from my mother, that I vowed when Alexis was born that I would never be an absent parent. Never send my kid away. I've done my best to meet that promise over the years for Alexis. Of course I never dreamed I would be doing it as a single parent.

"I would be so lucky and blessed to be able to do it for our children. But together with a life partner." She's watching him intently, and notices as the light in his eyes flashes. She'll believe that like her he has been imagining their children.

"Somehow I got through school with good enough grades to go to University. I knew I wanted to be a writer. I did need money for university and in a moment of madness, I signed up to the ROTC as they were providing scholarships and you could earn money during the holidays too.

I have to admit I did like the guns and blowing shit up bit, but the whole officer and a gentleman ethos didn't sit well with me. In the end, the Army and I reached a mutual understanding and parted ways after two semesters. I think we both got the best end of that deal. It was there I first learnt to handle guns and did some shooting. It was also there that I met another student who became one of my first trusted friends. Unlike me, Tim Matthews was born to be a soldier. After graduating her joined the regulars and eventually served in the Rangers and did some black ops stuff before he retired. He partnered up with another mutual friend to found Taylor Matthews, the private security and risk management firm.

"So there you have it. Rick Castle was in uniform ahead of you Beckett! In fact there should be a few pictures at home somewhere. I have to say I was quite dashing. Even ruggedly so. Mother came to a couple of parades. I think it was to see me, but of course she liked men in uniform and did go on a date with my Commanding Officer!" He's grinning at her, and she can almost see the humor dancing in his eyes.

"Late in my first year at college, I was at a party, hiding in the corner when this woman joined me. I think we discussed a number of topics intensely – she claimed argued and was probably right – for hours. This was Kyra. She was the best thing to happen to me since I was twelve.

"Kyra – this was my first real relationship. An adult relationship where sex was not the primary purpose. I thought for a time that it might be the one. We weren't without our challenges given we were students. Her parents disliked me – well her mother detested me to be more accurate – and reduced the allowance they gave Kyra. But this brought us closer, we struggled together but had a great time. I wrote my first successful novel, got some money, and started on others. I had so many ideas. So many dreams.

"Probably because of this, I began to dream of a lifetime together and I told her as much. She didn't run straight away. But then shortly after Kyra asked for space and time and I was lost. I had no
experience of dealing with this. We were together three years and all of a sudden she was gone. I was willing to go all in with her. A lifetime.

"Just like that my demons were coming back. Being with her had changed me. Good things mostly, but I was not able to deal with the loss. I need company, loneliness is major phobia of mine. She going eventually felt like betrayal and I got angry. For a while I was in a dark place. Alcohol, drugs – my only time for with something harder than marijuana, fortunately I didn't like it. The casual sex came later surprisingly enough.

"After the break up, some friends - well acquaintances and hangers on is more accurate - from university & I headed to Florida. I guess they thought a diet of drink, drugs and girls would be just the tonic. They hired a big motor yacht and we partied up there. Took a few day trips for fishing but I just sunk lower. Too much alone time with my memories. One night, I tried heroin – fortunately I was too cowardly to inject and after just one toke I was violently ill. Never again after that. But I still got worse, darker, deeper." He doesn't pause for long but there a momentary lapse in his words as he takes a deep breath and re-engages with her eyes.

"But I didn't show it. I guess you could say that this was the first time I began to project my party-animal, womanizing, playboy persona. In the past I may have alluded that it was creation of Black Pawn's, perfected by Gina. It isn't. Its mine. My own invention. My shield against closer examination, questions from others. Of course my frat boy companions never thought to look deeper, Accepted it at face value.

"My friends continued dragging me to parties, although by now I was less reluctant. Then one night we got back to the boat and then I decided to take it for a cruise out. Sure we were all young and stupid, but it was my urging, cajoling that swung the decision to head out of harbour that night.

"The worst thing is that I wasn't drunk. I simply didn't care.

"The weather turned bad, and we got into real trouble. Then in the darkness hit a reef, and the boat began sinking.

"Fortunately we were rescued. But two of us got hurt seriously enough to leave permanent injuries. David Swift. He was twenty-two. A chemistry major. Major track runner. Long distance. He fell awkwardly. Twisted his spine. A month after the boat wreck he was sentenced to life in a wheelchair. Three years later he killed himself. That is on me. My fault. My decision, my selfish decision, born of my own anger, and lack of compassion, and empathy did that.

"The other injured person was Thomas Mathers, brother of Steve. He lost his hearing in one ear. Tom died in the North Tower on 9/11. To this day, I don't know if his hearing played in part in him not getting out.

"One of our rescuers was Derek Taylor, a Navy Seal on leave, guest crewing with his brother on the Coast Guard cutter that rescued us. He had some form of sixth sense, and singled me out and on the boat ride back gave me a crash course in dealing with some of my mental health issues which he likened to PTSD. Gave me his number and we began to keep it touch. Still do.

"After Florida, I knew I needed help and it came from my Mother. We had slowly been working our way back together as a small family. She had quite a few successes in that period. TV Soaps, a couple of supporting movie roles and a lot of stage work including Broadway. I was proud of her. Still am.

"My mother recognised the symptoms and got me help. We couldn't afford therapy so she self-
helped me. It did work. Got me out of the dark place and temporarily back into her world. It also helped assuage pretty much all the anger I felt towards her through my teenage years.

"It was then that I tried writing for the stage. It was terrible stuff, really bad. A complete failure. If you ever want to read it you'll need to get me drunk or sex me up good. Or both." There is a sparkle in his eye, and Kate holds on to that recognition, that amongst all the revelations she is hearing for the first time, the man she loves is still there. Waiting.

"But perversely it was the best result for me. It motivated me to get back to what I knew I could be good at - writing crime novels. With that desire to work and produce completed books, I began to live again.

"Or at least live how you do when you're a young successful media darling. There was a reasonable amount of casual sex there. And no Beckett you're not getting my number." He gives her a wan grin that doesn't quite reach his eyes.

"But then I met Meredith. She was one of Mother's colleagues in a short run play in LA, and we hit it off right away. She appeared different, at least I thought she was. We didn't even have sex until our fifth date." At Beckett's scowl Rick halts and swallows visibly.

"Oh. Too much non relevant information. Okay, moving swiftly on." Recovery mode Rick, keep sex – well ex-sex info to minimum.

"It was kinda sweet. I don't think it was meant to go anywhere but we were young and didn't care. We'd been together a couple of months and we weren't seeing anyone else – well at least I wasn't and Meredith said she wasn't and at that time I had no reason not to trust her.

"Then she got pregnant. She was going to get an abortion. She hadn't even told me she was pregnant and stupid I didn't know the signs. It was Meredith's mother who called me to berate me for getting her daughter pregnant. So we had our very first serious discussion as couple and had to reach a decision because of the pregnancy. Meredith was just starting out and apart from a handful of TV guest spots hadn't made much impact as an actress. I had money, and although I had never previously thought seriously about having a family and raising kids, I found that it was suddenly something I wanted to do. I think inside of me I instinctively realised that perhaps this was an opportunity to be better than I was. To have in my own small and selfish way, to fight my demons, and perhaps have a legacy I could be proud of.

"It wasn't a romantic proposal. We were naked in bed. She was crying before I asked. I married Meredith because I thought it was the right thing, the best thing to do once we decided to keep the baby. Well when I say keep the baby, I had to basically bribe her to not abort. Had to promise to keep in the lifestyle she was accustomed to until Alexis was old enough to attend college. Those were pretty much her exact words. I never gave them much thought until the divorce when her lawyer quoted them back to me verbatim.

"After Meredith, I was always concerned for Alexis when it came to my relationships. She was always my first and final consideration. I never bought my dates home or introduced them until Gina and only then after I was sure I wanted the relationship to go further. You were different, I trusted you from the beginning, perhaps because you clearly weren't my girlfriend or looking to be – at least in the beginning. But I think it was probably more that you were a challenge and the antithesis of my pretty much everyone else. Plus you didn't want the money or the press attention.

"Protecting Alexis has always been of the utmost importance for a number of reasons. Not least was bond we built. The two of us against the World. We were each other's best friends – well at least until she reached her teenage years, and then suddenly I didn't quite cut it.
"Secondly, having Alexis saved me. Forced me to turn away from the darkness. God I really sound like bad Star Wars dialog." Rick shakes his head and clenches his fist in frustration. Kate gives him a silent smile of encouragement, wry amusement crinkling around her eyes.

"When Alexis was born I felt my universe tilt on its axis. She became its center and everything I did was for her. It forced me to care for someone other than myself. To take better care of myself. I quit smoking, drugs, and cut back on drinking and going out. This helped with my mental health too. Over time, the residual anger I carried faded, and the guilt too was assuaged. I was nurturing new life, hope and joy. I made it my mission to fill her days with fun and happiness and to show her the wonder of life. Mother told me it was my legacy from Rebecca. I would like to believe that. That her gifts could overcome the darkness inside me.

"Being an everyday dad, and having fun quickly became more than an act. I enjoyed it, I thrived on it, so did Alexis and over the years it became a part of me. I don't think I'll ever let it go, but I would love to be able to practise those skills with more kids, and I'm not talking about grandchildren. Alexis is banned from having kids until I'm at least old and distinguished enough!"

"That will be never then, if she has to wait until you're distinguished!" Kate bites, well more of a nip. She gets a fake pout and silent 'ouch' back from her more-than-boyfriend.

"I don't know what I would do without Alexis. It is no joke that she is the more mature one. I didn't force it on her, but somehow she is the level headed one. I love you with all of me, but I can't tell you that you are my first priority. That will always be Alexis. Well Alexis and any children we make together.

"Both Mother and I had children before we were ready. We also found ourselves raising our offspring as single parents. I am hopeful that this is one family tradition Alexis won't follow. I love that she has you to come to for advice, inspiration, friendship. Doctor Parish and Jenny too. You make a pretty great set of cool 'aunts', although I want more than that with you, for you. I know Alexis does too. So often through the years I was desperate for a mother for her. As desperate as Alexis was for a sibling.

"Alexis is everything. If you were to die – for whatever reason, and it is often in my thoughts because of your job and our experiences – Alexis is the only thing that would keep me in this world. If I had to choose, it would be her. I couldn't ever apologize for it. As a father I would do it every time. I'd give my life, everything I owe for her. I hope every day that it never comes to that again."

Kate nods. "Rick, it's one of the reasons I love you so much. You don't have to explain or excuse your love for your daughter. I wouldn't want any other way. I love her too, and I'd do the same in a heartbeat for your family." Rick squeezes her hand and falls silent for a brief moment. His brow furrows deeply and any trace of the entertainer is gone.

"I think you have heard me recount the tale of Alexis going missing in the shopping mall aged five. There is some basis in fact to the tale but Alexis didn't simply go missing. The reality is much worse. She was kidnapped."

Kate gasps at this information. Nothing she has ever read in the press, on fansites, or in police records has any hint of this. Nothing previously from Rick or Martha or Alexis.

"Well it did start at the shopping mall. We were going dress shopping for a party and I was distracted momentarily by a fan, or rather someone acting like a fan. Then when I turned round Alexis was gone. Just her Explorer backpack and a note beside me.
"They asked for money, way more money than I was worth. Later we attributed that was the fault of press article that made me out to be some tycoon rather than a moderately successful author. I was warned not to involve the police. In desperation I turned to two friends - Derek Taylor and Tim Matthews. They were both in still service with the Seals and Rangers. We met up from time to time when their deployments allowed. They had played poker with me the night before. They came immediately and agreed to help. Both were working of Washington DC at the time and had access to intelligence and resources that helped.

"We basically fast talked the mall security into giving us access to the security tapes – made the issue a National Security one. Somehow we lucked out and we managed to get enough information to ID and track one of the kidnappers – the getaway driver. He wouldn't talk. Derek and Tim are both very moral and disciplined. They couldn't break him quickly enough. So I got them to leave me alone in the room with the driver. I came out of that room with enough information to find where they had taken Alexis.

"By the time we got there, they had assembled a small team of seven including myself. We stormed the place. I don't know where they got the stun grenades but somehow we took the three kidnappers down without shooting anyone. Alexis was unharmed. They had drugged her to keep her passive. In a way this was perhaps a saving grace. She was oblivious to almost everything that happened.

"We left and called the police. The kidnappers weren't amateurs but it turned out it was an activity unsanctioned by their mob bosses. They didn't talk to the police and without our illegally obtained evidence they were released. About a week later their bosses cleaned up. The kidnappers simply vanished off the face of the earth, including the one I had questioned in the room. A while after I was visited by a mob representative who apologised. One of the most disconcerting things that ever happened to me.

"Kate, I need to ask you to not investigate this. I know you must be curious but I swear nothing good can come from dredging it up. Especially after all these years. Believe me, I know now about the ramifications of looking into something best left alone."

Kate nods. "Okay, I promise. But if I have questions can I ask you?" Rick nods in confirmation.

"Once we got Alexis home, I got her the best care possible. Fortunately she was young enough to rebound quickly and I don't believe she remembers much or anything. Hopefully, nothing more than a recollection of a scary childhood nightmare.

"I barely let Alexis out of my sight for the next twelve months. Eventually it freaked her out, not to mention her friends and their parents. And I crashed. I had a PTSD relapse. Got more treatment.

"Decided to get my life in order properly. I had visited Thomas Mathers – he was a financial consultant now, and he hooked me up with his brother, Steve, and this wiz-kid Harry. We started investing my book earnings. Before long, I was making more than if I was writing.

"Based on tales told to me by Derek and Tim, I started to develop the Storm character.

"Some time after came Sophia Turner. Yes she was a Muse. Also lover for a short while. But closed off. Hardly surprising as she was CIA. Suited me at the time, I was pretty much the same. I didn't let her meet Alexis. When Sophia deliberately engineered an encounter that was pretty much the final straw. Shows you how poor a judge of women I was, especially when she turns out to be a traitor. My past life almost got you killed Kate. Something else for me to atone for.

"Her mention of my father was the first time in years, I had even thought about the mystery of my
entirely absent progenerator.

'I've never known my father. 'Famously Fatherless' as the press say. Mother says she doesn't remember or certainly want reveal any more information. And if you want to know where I first learnt to deflect questions I didn't want to answer, start with her.

'I've learnt to adapt, and all I ever wanted for my children was to offer them a stable home. Of course I failed in that too. I feel I have betrayed Alexis is some way by not providing her with the mother she deserved and needed.

'I tried to fix that absent mother with Gina. But I neglected to actually ensure all the women in my life actually liked each other. Alexis didn't like Gina much and now she particularly dislikes Gina. And well Martha detests Meredith. It's mutual which always makes for entertainment if the two can stay in the same room for any length of time.

"Gina, I thought was an open book. No subterfuge. Probably why I was attracted to her beyond the physical level. She edited and published my books – she's very good at that. She certainly used me a cheque book. I'm forever grateful to Steve and Harry for the pre-nup. Even so, Gina would never have to work again if she choose to.

"Both my marriages were failures. I choose the wrong women. For different reasons. But the wrong reason.

"Worse than that they both cheated. Although to be fair to Gina it was never until we were all but legally over. And she was honest about it. To my face actually. Meredith on the other hand was a serial philanderer. Can you label a woman that?

"After Sophia, to prevent myself and Alexis being hurt anymore, I simply didn't seek a long term relationship. Or even short term ones.

"Then I met you."
"Having a homicide detective, especially one as striking as you, burst into my book launch party was the last thing I expected. It turns it was everything I needed even if I didn't know it at the time.

"I still remember your words, the enunciation, the commanding tone. I thought it was hot. Still do. Of course I was an ass then so you could be forgiven for your first impressions."

He pauses and gazes straight at her, into her. Serious. She holds her ground. Returns the attention and sentiment.

"But that wasn't truly the first time you had met me. You had come to book signings – not that I have been able to remember - but it took a long time before I could get that confirmation from you. Oh and your dad who turns out to have a veritable scrapbook and a gold mine of information. You were actually a fan. Are a big fan."

"But that's not what I wanted to say. Excuse my rambling but I'm tired and I hurt, and the drugs make me numb, my mind mushy. And apparently my vocabulary diminished."

He shakes his head and automatically starts to shrug his shoulders. Bad move. Shrug aborted with the stab of pain clear on his face and the way his fingers instinctively tighten on hers. Sometimes they are so caught up in their words they are sharing, this new truth of them, that the place and the why are almost forgotten, or at least pushed away.

"I had reached a cross-roads in my life. My daughter was growing up. My newly divorced, broke mother was living with us. I had killed off Derrick Storm with no idea of what to do next. Made ex-Wife No2 even more irritable. Not exactly a master plan for life. In fact I had no idea of what I wanted to do, or even be then.

"Alexis was now seriously a teenager and spending time at school and her friends. Cool dads only stay cool if the dosage is correct, and the teenage tolerance is not high believe you me.

"I had few close friends, my poker buddies, but they all had their own lives to lead. I was lonely. I wanted an equal to share my life with. Something I hadn't truly felt since Kyra. God knows Meredith wasn't it, and Gina was a mistake of my own making.

"I was good at my cover image, the playboy persona, I felt I sometimes convinced myself. Certainly convinced others, even some detectives. And mother thinks I can't act.

"Writing had been a major part of my life, who I am, for so long. But it wasn't enough anymore when we first met. I had written Storm to its conclusion and had nothing else I felt I wanted to tell.

"Meeting you and becoming involved in those first few cases opened my eyes. I came for the story, but I've stayed for you, our friends, for Roy, to honor the dead, and help is some small way their
families. Being a NYPD consultant has given me a lot of joy, satisfaction and a renewed sense of purpose. I also got a kickass character and sidekicks out it too. And eventually you.

"The last five years of my life, our lives, have been the most exhilarating, fulfilling, terrifying, emotional, heartbreaking, passionate, challenging and extraordinary.

"In short what I am saying is that I can't do this without you Kate. I don't want to. So whatever we do, we do it together." He seems to reach a natural stop, and Kate takes the opportunity to lean into his face and kiss him, pushing the oxygen mask briefly to one side.

"Me too Rick. Me too." She whispers the words and he can feel her breath ghost across his face. Kate sits back into the chair and waits.

"I'm glad Gates found out about us. It made me – and maybe you as well – look at ourselves and address the issues of what we want. Both of us. Honestly and openly.

"To be honest I could have settled for what we already have. For a while anyway, longer even. I would have been very happy to coast along as a couple with no other definition for as long as we both wanted."

"Why?" Kate can't help herself and her question interrupts him but he takes in his stride.

"For lots of reasons.

"Firstly I was, am, happy and I believe you were, are, too. It was all so new, and after taking so long to get here, I didn't think it would hurt to take some time to get used to things. Some things just gel between us but others take a bit of work, and I thought we had time. Work out the kinks so to speak." Obligatory Castle eyebrow waggle meets Beckett glacial stare – still disconcerting how menacing it is after all these years.

"And if we're not at it like rabbits all the time, well anymore. Okay mostly not." He manages this with only a slight blush and not one ounce of a leer. Kate is impressed but she won't show it or tell him. She knows him – her Manchild - better than to feed his ego or worse his inner or outer child. Naturally the Beckett eye-roll responds. Double barrelled. He grins back. He was totally fishing for that.

"But that isn't an indictment of our relationship having issues. We're best friends, work partners, as well as lovers. We spend a lot of time together, and we do need some down time. Private time." Kate nods in understanding. She has found it necessary to retreat on occasion including rare moments of solitude in her own apartment. Not that will be an option in the future.

"I am comfortable being myself with you, and hopefully you are too. We're both used to being on our own for periods. In some ways we like that and even find it necessary." Wow only a slight eye-roll.

"We have singular activities that we will still like to do. You retreat into my bathroom - or yours - with candles, a book and some wine. Or go running or to the gym, punch something or some unlucky person. Or those girl's night's with Lanie. Shopping with Alexis or worse, my mother. I write, or play games or other forms of procrastination. I meet up with the Boys from time to time. Poker nights, though you come to some of those.

"Then there is the fear of failure. My previous marriages both ended and are a matter of public record – well the events at least if not the real reasons why they failed.
"I'm also afraid of going too fast, too far. For you. Scaring you off. Making another mistake that sends you running. I've been desperate to avoid doing that. So yes, I have been tiptoeing through some of this."

He holds her gaze and she can see the fear in his eyes. The dire prospect of losing her that drives this unique and unconventional man to play safe.

"Aside from Alexis, I have never been this invested in another person. I can't lose you Kate. It would break me for good. This is the most important relationship of my life. I'm desperate for it, for us, to work.

"But how do you judge a successful relationship? Well by one definition, it must be one that lasts. But if it isn't over how can it really be measured? I didn't have an answer to that. Not until the last few days. What happened to me, and has happened to you, and so nearly happened to both of us too many times. I've been giving it some thought. We both deserve more Kate.

"So now I do know how to address it. This." He squeezes her hand, and moves their conjoined arms to indicate her and him in turn.

"This is how we address that question. Together. Permanently. No more holding back. All In. Your 'One' and my 'Done'. Everything else we can work on."

His face is so serious stripped of all other emotion. Kate secretly loves this side of him. It doesn't surface too often but it is the bedrock of her trust and faith in him. She knows the humor and innuendo are a distraction, a magician's misdirection from the man who loves so deeply and will give everything for those her loves.

"I'll follow you wherever we need to go. For a job. For family. Whatever reason."

"Sounds good to me. But you don't need to follow me anywhere Rick. All I need is here in this room, sleeping at the Loft, or at the Precinct. New York is our home and I have no plans to go anywhere else." She squeezes his hand and feels his responding grip engulf her fingers further. It gives her the bravery to ask the questions she and he had so far dodged.

"Rick can you tell me why your marriages failed?" He nods almost as if he had been expecting the question.

"I married Meredith because she was pregnant. It was the right thing to do, or at least I thought so. Mother advised against it. Told me that you didn't need to be married to raise a child, or even have a partner. In my infinite wisdom and desire for a conventional family I didn't give her enough credence or credit. First mistake.

"Second was that without the baby we didn't have a lot going for us. We didn't really know each other. We didn't share many common interests beyond a love of a good time and sex.

"Thirdly we were too young. I think I loved the romantic concept of being married and having a child more than the actuality. Certainly more than the reality.

"Meredith never even signed up for that. When Alexis was born I threw myself into being a father and almost sole parent. This left barely any time to be a husband. Meredith needs lots of time and attention. I didn't have that and eventually she sought others who would give her that no matter how ephemeral and temporary that was. She cheated and for a while I was a coward. I knew and did nothing for fear it would get worse. Of course it never got better."
"Kate, what I tell you now, no one else outside of Meredith and her now dead parents knows. In her early teens Meredith was abused for a number of years by a close family friend. The sort that was close enough to be called 'Uncle' despite the lack of blood ties. I believe the way she handles relationships, uses her body so carelessly that is the direct result of that trauma. She had some therapy when younger but then refused it. I guess her coping mechanism is to devalue her body so that the hurt is less. I don't honestly know though because we have never discussed it. I only found out towards the end from her Dad and never knew all the details. The one time I tried she threatened suicide. So I can't hate Meredith. I do pity her."

Kate nods and squeezes his hand in understanding and acceptance of the secret. She still can't help disliking the first Mrs Castle especially after her recent drama filled press conference. Meredith was sorely mistaken if she thought she could simply waltz back into Alexis' and Rick's lives.

"Not long before Alexis was three, I came home one day to find Alexis shut in her room crying and Meredith in bed with a mutual friend. I could tolerate the cheating but neglecting our daughter, my daughter never. It turns out it wasn't the first time." His voice wavers, and no matter how long a go, Kate knows that the burn from that still lingers.

"It was surreal we didn't even really argue or some much as raise our voices. She left that night and moved to LA. Divorce papers followed. I didn't care so long as I had Alexis. End of my first marriage.

"It wasn't until many years later that I even dared to try again. Once more I screwed up. My marriage to Gina was, or at least appeared to me, brilliant on paper. But unworkable in real life.

"She was this hot-shot editor and had joined Black Pawn specifically to be assigned to me. We worked together, on the Derrick Storm books. She is an extremely talented editor and I do owe a lot of the success of the books to her. We were both very busy – I had Alexis and she had other authors as well as me - and we had no time for romantic partners. Initially we started out as fuck buddies I guess you could say. It was about the time that Paula was starting to push the playboy author as a marketing tool and Gina was keen to do her part.

"She started accompanying me on dates, and we slowly progressed from there. We did have a reasonable number of common interests and Gina is smart, professional, and attractive. Certainly in the beginning she was very attentive. I wanted a mother for Alexis. Gina was initially happy to be the mother figure but not the actual mother too much as it turns out. She never hid that. I simply didn't see it for the honesty it was.

"More importantly in trying to find a mother for Alexis, I forgot to actually consult Alexis. To find out what she really wanted. It turns out she was perfectly happy to play nice with Girlfriend Gina but was not at all enamoured of her married to me and as a mother. Despite this I can't fault Alexis or even Gina. The main blame lies with me. Once again I had screwed up and I doubted I would ever marry again.

"We separated and once we had been apart long enough we had agreed to a no-fault divorce. As low-key and quiet as being dissected on Page 6 could be. Before the divorce Gina started dating again. I couldn't and didn't want to. When the divorce came through fortunately there was pre-nup. Even so Gina got enough that she doesn't really need to work ever again.

"So that in a nutshell is my two failed marriages. Failures I largely attributable to myself. Strangely enough I still like my former wives. Not love them. Curious. I don't know why. Well I'm not sure I even like Gina when she is chasing chapters or press appearances or tours. Or Meredith when she's acting out. Which she does often.
"So between the marriages I had only a handful of girlfriends and in a few periods a few one-night or very short term relationship built around physical satisfaction.

"Mother had raised me to be respectful to women and I have always endeavoured to be a gentleman and to try and offer romance even if it was only for a night. To make it about more than just sex. To be honest it didn't always work out. I loved sex. I love sex."

Kate actually snorts at this point. Rick schools his face into an indignant scowl.

"Oh I have lots of evidence that you too like, indeed love sex, Dee-Tec-TiVe." Accentuating the syllables, the timbre of his voice pulls her, and even here in hospital, she or at least her body instinctively responds to him.

"I thought I had a well-rounded sex education but in our time together I have certainly learnt a thing or two from you. That trick you do with the…."

"Rick" Kate interrupts with her hand moving up his arm and squeezing firmly. "Not now." Best cop voice. This is an instruction. A command. He obeys as best he can.

"Okay." Then in a micro pause she sees the eyes light with glee and an eyebrow may have just waggled. "Later?"

"Beg much, Writer Boy?" Oh sassy Kate.

"When necessary, yes. You didn't answer my question." Single minded when he wants or needs to be. She wouldn't change that for the world.

"Yes. Later I promise." There is a firmness in her tone that signifies that this little detour is over – for the moment. Satisfied he continues on.

"If we had hooked up the first year it would have been primarily about the sex. Even the second year, although by then you were well on the way to becoming my best friend as well as the embodiment of my carnal desires.

"I can't deny that those times you choose someone, not me, hurt. And they hurt worse each time. I was running at the end of our second year thinking you were with Demming. I was so desperate I reunited with Gina, and I know now that it must have hurt you badly. Set us back.

"It took us another two years, Josh, more close calls with death, and you being shot and almost never making it. That finally forced me to face up to the reality of how much I loved you and how much I would fight. I don't think I could or would want to survive that. Losing you Kate. Whatever way, however, it were to happen."

He stops, his voice hoarse from the talking and Kate reaches onto the side table and lifts the cup and straw to his mouth so he can drinks some water.

"I'm a dreamer at heart, almost always hoping for the best, and when there is a relationship that went beyond a night, I did want the romance, the wooing, the first dates, the excitement and anticipation of the first kiss. I'll admit that I probably would have settled for sex with you that first year, but after that I began to want more until I wanted everything. So in the end, I am glad that for whatever reason we didn't get to debrief each other that first case.

"Mother recently told me that I was intrinsically lazy, and that extended to my relationships. I needed to be challenged, and that the most important women in my life did that. Mother of course, Alexis, Rebecca, Kyra and you, Kate.
"I wasn't exaggerating when I told you you're the most challenging and exasperating person I know. I took the challenge on, even without knowing how much it would require of me. To grow, to change, to commit. Even so I almost didn't make it to us.

"That summer after you were shot almost did for me. The first hours in the hospital were goddamn awful. But once I knew you were alive, I was finally able to leave the hospital. The Boys had tried to kidnap me out of the waiting room on the second day. I may have punched Ryan but Espo swept my legs and sat me down. They gave me a good talking to but we reached an agreement what I would go home when you woke up. So I did. Briefly. Got cleaned up. Threw away the clothes from the funeral. Spent a long time in the shower. Fresh clothes, flowers and then came to see you.

"Josh was there. We barely spoke. I knew something was wrong but you sent me away. Didn't let me help you. Almost instantly I lost the joy of your survival. I meant Always, for everything, with all my heart. Apparently you didn't. At least I thought so at the time. I thought you were with Josh. That you choose him over me.

"Initially I coped or mimicked coping. I kept busy. Helping the Boys with the investigation. Then I was kicked out of the Precinct by Gates. She had arrived one evening. After the long days and nights, little sleep and we were all tired. I didn't even try to charm or smooth talk her. Well let's just say our first impressions of each other were mutually disagreeable. I was gone. I didn't even have the heart to try the Mayor. To fight for you.

"I continued on investigating on my own but that tapered off due to a lack of leads. I had somehow finished the book on autopilot. I was so hostile that even Gina kept her distance and Paula did business by phone, but that last one could have been due to a deficiency in showering on my part. The dedication to Roy was heartfelt but also because I couldn't make one to you. It simply hurt too much.

"Eventually I crashed. A lack of sleep or proper food, too much alcohol, my constantly negative and dark thoughts. The darkness returned with a vengeance. Alexis had never experienced it. It scared her. I scared her. And she ran, retreated for self-preservation. I did that. I frightened my little girl so much that she ran from me."

Even now it brings tears of shame from him. Kate reciprocates with her own. The visceral guilt assails her.

"Mother recognised it of course. She'd seen it before, but never as bad as this. Worse than Kyra she told me. The kidnapping too. But even then I refused help. Wallowed in grief, self-pity and denied everything. Or worse imagined everything. Especially you with him. Him nursing you to health. Not me. I was spiralling down, everything felt out of control.

"Then something unexpected happened. Alexis and Mother went to your dad. They persuaded him to come visit. He spent most of a day with me. He wouldn't tell me too much about you directly, but enough that I knew you were on your own. Your choice he told me. Sounded pretty much like the independent, kickass detective I knew.

"I know it seems so petty but I got satisfaction from knowing Josh wasn't there but more than that I wanted to be there. Or someone so you weren't so alone. But your Dad was worried about someone trying to finish the job. I was too but it wasn't my place, and your decision had hit me so hard, for once I didn't even feel like breaking the rules. But with your Dad's permission, I had Taylor Matthews provide some discreet security for the vicinity around the cabin.

"Rick?!" Kate's voice conveys her surprise, dismay, and a touch of anger at this revelation. But
Kate leans her body into his and gives him as much of an embrace as his position and injuries allow.

"But I'm not without my own fears and insecurities.

"I'm a forty-something now Kate. I'm not a young man. Heading into middle age. My body is sagging and bulging where it shouldn't. To be frank you do wear me out on occasion. You're almost a decade younger.

"So I do sometimes worry about the age difference. Sometimes it feels like nothing but other days it seems more than a generation's gulf between us.

"You're a stunning woman, you turn heads, light up rooms and that's before you even smile. Or they understand how smart you are. I see the way other men look at you. I can't deny I get jealous sometimes. Even though I am your boyfriend. I guess those insecurities derive from all the times
you choose someone who wasn't me.

I'm afraid of being alone. Growing old without people to love and cherish and have that returned. I know eventually Alexis will leave and start a life totally of her own. I'll miss her but would never hold her back. It is part of the reason I let mother stay. She provides companionship, admittedly often of the unconventional kind. It is also in acknowledgement of all the sacrifices she made for me. She and Meredith are both red-headed actresses but there the similarity ends. Mother never gave up, always tried to do her best for me, even if I didn't see it, acknowledge it, or even resented it.

"I know there are lots more things we need to discuss. Money is one of them. I know you've met with Steve and Harry and I know you Kate. You will have been freaked out. I promise to discuss and listen to your concerns about that and other things. But I'm really tired and don't think I can last too much longer. So I'll finish with this.

"We're both been broken, and still are, Kate. Both of us. In different ways, but the same also. We are fantastic together, and do help each other heal and get better. And now you have stopped running, I want to take this opportunity to catch hold of you and hold on for the rest of our lives."

"I love you Kate, and I know now that nothing will ever change that. So I guess the only solution is to marry you and make it last."

Kate has rocked backed into her chair for the moment. Her eyes are down but she is clearly contemplating something as her tell of a lip trapped between teeth gives her away.

"Rick I was wrong before when I said nothing you say can make me change my mind about you. Sorry but I was wrong." She leans forward and reaches up to caress his face, her eyes fixed on his. Still full of unshed tears.

"You're beautiful." Oh she may have actually shocked him. He's certainly dumbstruck.

"You are such a beautiful person, Richard Castle.

"Rick, what you have shared with me tonight has changed how I think of you. But only for the better. To know in spite of your own battles and issues, you were steadfast in your loyalty and you were there for me always. Even when I hid in a relationship with someone else. Your friendship has always meant a lot to me. Somehow it has become everything. It is still so surreal. Some days I can't help myself squealing that I am in the most serious sort of relationship with Richard Castle!

"I won't ever be able to apologise enough for what I have been responsible for. For the hurt, pain, the damage I have inflicted on you. On your family. Our family. Foolishly I believed that what I knew first hand was the extent of it. I was so wrong, and I am so sorry.

"But I told you before I am not running. A while ago my dad once observed that it was about this time or earlier in the handful of serious relationships that I ran. Broke it off. Hid in my work. I'm not doing that to you. For us. Never running. Not from you. I am all in and this is it for me too.

"Rick, when you helped break down my wall, you restored my liberty, and gave me freedom I didn't believe I could ever have again. You've opened up my life. For the first time in so long I've thought about what else I could do with my life. I love being a cop, but it wasn't what I ever conceived or dreamt of growing up. First female Chief Justice. A lawyer. Maybe a professor. I was mad keen on Russian literature and not so much on American crime thrillers no matter how handsome the author was – my mom was though. There are options for me now.
"But regardless of what else I do with my life, with that freedom you gifted me, I am choosing you. I choose you over my mom's case. I'll choose you over any job. I choose a lifetime with you. Always you."

"I know we agreed not to get engaged just yet. But there is a step, I want to take now with you."

Her voice wavers slightly. The emotions and stress of the last few days are dragging down on all of them, and she has never been comfortable at being, appearing anything other than strong, not since the year after her mother died. But he can see how exhausted she is, how desperately in need of respite she has become. But this observance is pushed away by the words that follow as she moves into the bedside and almost whispers to him. Her voice so strong yet intimate.

"Richard Alexander Rodgers, you are the love of my life, my heart, my soul, my shield, my best friend, and partner. I Katherine Houghton Beckett promise myself to you, for us, for my lifetime and always."

As she recites these words, she turns their hands over so his left palm faces up and lets go. With those words still resounding with him, she reaches into her top and pulls her necklace with her mother's ring on it out. Undoing the clasp, she takes it from around her, recloses the clasp and then she carefully pools that chain and ring into the cavernous palm of his left hand.

"This is a token of my commitment to you. Of my promise for our future together. I am entrusting this to you as a sign of our bond."

Then pressing his hand shut, she squeezes his enclosed fist with her two hands, once again marveling in the size of his hand and the recollections of just how measured and magnificent they are when they worship and protect her.

"Kate." His voice is broken, conveying every ounce of the surprise and shock with which her declaration has caught him. Despite being blindsided the writer rapidly finds the words he needs and she deserves.

"Katherine Houghton Beckett, you are my one true love, the center of my universe, my keeper, my best friend and partner. I Richard Alexander Rodgers promise myself to you, together, for all our lifetimes and always."

Unable to do much more than look at her, his face has taken on the most serious countenance she has ever seen. Absolute. That what it is. Such a serious expression. It is equal to his words, part of his pledge given with absolute commitment and sincerity.

"I'm sorry I have nothing here to give to you except that promise. For now. Give me a chance and I will have something appropriate for you."

There are tears flowing unimpeded from both sets of eyes. They say nothing else. Nothing more needs to be said.

The door to the ICU room opens and a raw-faced Kate Beckett snatches a caught-off guard Best Friend into the room.

Rick is asleep. Drained by the long day and the emotional turmoil of the last hours, this and the drugs have finally dragged him into a deep slumber.

"Thank you" Kate says simply. She doubts she has the energy or willpower to do more with her
"body or her words."

"Did you?" Her best friend is curious. She's been guarding the door but facing away all the time despite the temptation.

Kate nods, and a smile breaks onto her face and through her eyes despite her physical and mental exhaustion.

"Everything" A one word response from Kate.

"Everything?" Lanie queries.

"Everything" Kate confirms. Lanie deserves more but somehow Kate knows that this is enough for now. The interrogation will be done on another day, in another place more conducive for girl talk.

"Oh Sweetie" As Lanie moves forward to take her best friend in a hug. Her keen senses have noted how exhausted her friend is, and how despite her apparent outward elation, she is close to breaking. She needs to get Kate out of the hospital and somewhere for a good night's rest with no interruptions. And Lanie Parish knows exactly who she can entrust this to.

About an hour later Lanie is back and escorts Jim Beckett into the room. Kate is collapsed in the chair by the bed. Asleep sitting mostly upright. Beside her sleeps her man, and he at least appears more comfortable. Her medical training knows better. There is a long road ahead for him and she hopes he won't be anywhere near as stubborn as her best friend was.

Jim Beckett crotches down by his only child, and carefully strokes the side of her face.

Kate starts a little, eyes flickering, and then wakes slowly.

"Dad?" Uncertain recognition greets her sole remaining parent as the sleep slips away. Years of cop hours kick in and she sits upright more awake now. He holds her in place with a father's embrace.

"Hi Katie Bear. I've come to take you home for the night."

"Don't want to. Stay with Rick."

"Katie, you need to sleep and rest properly." She shakes her head, adamant in her position.

"It will do neither Rick nor yourself any good if you collapse and breakdown."

"Someone has to stay."

Lanie steps forward.

"I got this girlfriend. Now go sleep in a proper bed and don't come back until you have caught up on some of that lost sleep and had a good shower or even better bath, and some food."

"Okay."
Richard Castle is recovering in hospital with the comfort of his family and friends. However, not all visitors are welcome.

"You have got to be fucking kidding? The Oriental Suite!"

Paula Haas is showing her roots and she doesn't fucking care. Meredith Lee, aka the first ex-Mrs Castle has always managed to annoy her but she has gone beyond the pale in the last twelve hours.

Not only has her team and Black Pawn's spent their Sunday trying to unravel the almighty cluster-fuck that Meredith's impromptu press conference at JFK caused but now she discovers the Fucking Bitch has somehow finagled her way out of a very nice and expensive Park Avenue suite at the Mandarin Oriental. The very suite they (her firm and Black Pawn) were paying for and had moved into the only slightly more astronomically priced Oriental Suite.

A check of the room charges had already indicated over seven hundred dollars – no doubt Meredith was ordering the most expensive champagne on the wine list - in room service in less four hours. Her only victories so far were to block any non-room service or restaurant charges being made. So no boutique bill-backs especially from The Shops at Columbus Circle which connected onto the hotel. Paula was actually half-inclined to see if Meredith would actually try it. She could almost visualise the scream of frustration when Meredith discovered in a shop that she couldn't charge it to the room.

Times like these make her wish she had never given up smoking. Or that Rick's friendship with certain mobsters didn't only go as far as show and tell and didn't include the ability to request the sort of favour that the Godfather would call for repayment on some time in the future.

Snapping back to reality she took some satisfaction that Meredith was about to receive a couple of visits that would certainly sour her evening.

The Oriental Suite, Mandarin Oriental, New York.

Watching the hotel server remove the dinner trolley from her suite, Meredith smiled to herself, and sipped more of the Veuve Clicquot that she had ordered to accompany her meal. What had been a spur of the moment act of desperation less than twenty-four hours ago may just work out better than she could have hoped.

Perhaps she was a little disappointed not to be at the Loft but that would have left her facing Martha and without Ricky there to act as interference she knew the old Battle-axe would pull no punches. Mind you neither would she if she didn't have to worry about being seen in her true nature by her ex-husband. Anyway, she had been whisked here by limo from the airport by his publishers and agent desperate to get her away from the press. Meredith was happy to comply so long as she ultimately got what she wanted. She already had a march on them by upgrading to one of the best suites in the hotel. That and the room service with the five hundred dollar bottle of champagne whose name she couldn't pronounce. Also a quick word and a hundred to the bellboy had sorted
out some very mellow smoke as well.

She knew it was a long shot coming here to New York. But she was running out of options back in LA since Alexis had reached college age and Rick had ceased paying the palimony just like he had promised. She had dismissed this as an idle threat for so many years. Usually a few quick bouts of ex-sex – which given his talents was not exactly a chore – would ensure the payment often with a little or sometimes – especially after some heavy duty action - quite a bit extra. But he had made it clear more than three years ago that the sex wasn't happening again, ever, and that the payments would cease on the legal deadline. And they had.

Despite her rent free home, her own meagre earnings as an actress were not enough to meet her lifestyle needs, especially as she was in the midst of mounting a campaign to raise her profile and get more mainstream work. Whilst she occasionally had doubts about that decision, she knew there was no going back and she was committed.

She had no doubts that his association with the female detective was behind his cutting her off. Kate Beckett had seemed so insignificant when she first met her. She had initially dismissed the admittedly attractive detective as one of Rick's flings or one of his short-term fascinations but she knew now she had been mistaken. Very mistaken. Sure he had kept following her in his typically enchanting puppy manner, but he had relinked with Gina for months and Alexis has told her of two boyfriends at least for the Detective. Whatever the nature of their romantic lives, in those intervening years, Rick had changed. So too had the younger woman.

A few months ago she had arrived in New York for one of her surprise visits she had been shocked to have her arrival at the Loft ruined in seconds when the door was opened by the now stunning and clearly happy Detective who had politely let her enter. Less than ten minutes later her plans were in disarray and she was summarily shipped off to the Plaza and she was obliged to meet Alexis away from the Loft for the remainder of the visit. It was only then did she find out from her daughter that the two of them had been together and keeping it out of the press for some months. Alexis has told her nothing of this beforehand despite their regular calls. Furthermore her own daughter had gone so far as to threaten not to visit in the summer if she leaked the news to the press. There was no way Meredith would put that at risk given that Alexis always came with one or more of Ricky's credit cards.

She was here now and she needed to make this work. No doubt she would face opposition from the usual suspects – Martha, Paula Haas, Gina and his lawyers. However, it was clear to her that Kate Beckett may also be an issue as well as Ricky himself. He was clearly in thrall to the woman. And that simply wouldn't do. Plus there was the issue of him be in hospital.

She was a little concerned about how Alexis would react. Normally Alexis would at least give her some leeway and chance to explain or apologise. But the extremely terse phone call this afternoon had reeked of anger.

Even now she still found it hard to think of Alexis as her daughter. Certainly she tried to love her but like everyone since she could never make that emotional bond. Sure she put on the Mom act when she visited but she had never felt the deep connection even during pregnancy and after giving birth. All those years ago the psychiatrist had classified it as dissociative disorder unspecified and had suggested counselling to address the trauma that had caused this but Meredith had refused after the second session. When first her parents and then Ricky tried to get her to have treatment she had got them to back down by threatening to take her own life.

Ricky's desperation to keep the child had played into her hands in terms of the settlement, money and lifestyle. Not to mention the gorgeous Bel-air house. But all that was in danger, at risk. She
was a survivor, and she would win, or close enough. Perhaps she did feel a little guilty about taking Ricky's money but not very. He had plenty of it. Lots more than she had ever known about until recently if her source was correct. She didn't really want too much of it.

She already had the numbers of more than a dozen law firms willing to represent her. Things were looking up.

Meredith was just about to retire to the bath to relax further when the doorbell rang. Pulling the robe around her she strolled to the door, curious as to who it was given she had not ordered room service again and it was gone eight, almost nine in the evening.

She opened the door to find a smartly dressed woman with short brunette hair and piercing eyes.

"Good Evening Ms Lee. I am Clare Dunne from Taylor Matthews."

Meredith stared at the vaguely familiar woman trying to place her. Her gaze conveyed her initial surprise but then she unashamedly checked her out.

"I remember you." Meredith has met people from Taylor Matthews before and then she remembers where she recognizes the woman from. Alexis' vacation visit three summers ago. Ricky had been paranoid about some stalker and had arranged for personal security. This Clare has stayed with them for two weeks that year.

"Good. May I come in?" The request is met with a nod and wave of the hand as Meredith steps back.

"As you remember me, it should be sufficient for you to realise that I mean business, and that I require your cooperation.

"I represent Taylor Matthews. We have been engaged to help resolve your financial and security situation to enable you to return to LA and resume your acting career."

"What if I don't want to go back right now? Or ever?"

"That's not within my brief. I am simply here to get the necessary information to enable resolution of the issue back in LA.

"Please let's take a seat. This may take a while."

Entering the lounge room, they sit at the coffee table, Meredith on the chaise lounge, and Clare opposite in a single seat chair. Meredith's robe slipped open but she made no move to cover the body hugging pale green silk and lace nightdress underneath. The woman opposite though didn't miss a beat and didn't appear to be letting the display affect her.

Meredith waves a hand at the bottle of Veuve Clicquot and somehow wordlessly offers her visitor a drink. Which is declined with a deliberate half twist of the neck.

"No thank you. I'm on duty."

"Meredith, I need information on the people who loaned you the money and who are now making the demands. Plus details of the money, how it was paid, any paper or electronic exchanges."

Meredith pales. She clearly wasn't expecting such a blunt demand.

"I really don't have all the details. I can't...."
"Meredith!" Clare's voice snaps as she interrupts the flailing woman.

"You don't have time to waffle your way around this. Or disassemble, give me half-truths or self-serving omissions."

"So cut the crap Meredith. I know you're not stupid. So why did you take a loan from an obvious loan shark?"

"You should treat me with respect. You.." Meredith starts to protests before being shut down

"You need to earn the respect Meredith. At the moment you don't get any because you got yourself in a major hole of your own making, and if you expect us to help you out of it, you cooperate fully." Clare makes no threat, just simple demands, stripped bare of all emotion.

Meredith sits back, her hands clasping the robe closed. With a sigh she swallows and closes her eyes. Composing herself.

"It was through the producer of this show that's being following me for XtmX – this new cable entertainment channel. The show is about up and coming personalities in their chosen profession."

Clare hears the other end of the channel in her ear open up briefly for a guttural snort and a 'Yeah right' full of sarcasm. She quickly executes two double tap on her wrist pad – STFU. A single click acknowledges. She refocuses on Meredith.

"They call him 'Ángel Dulce'. Mexican but not at all like those street guys or gangta's. No tattoos, well dressed and well spoken. Smart, he has a degree from SoCal in Media. He was so nice, giving advice and introductions to some new casting agents."

Clare has already translated the handle in her head – Taylor Matthews insisted all operatives were at least passible in Spanish reflecting the growing reality of the ethnic makeup especially in many of the areas they operated. Her live feed back to the NYC office would see what intel was to be had for this 'Sweet Angel'.

"Does he have a name, Meredith?" The 'real' is omitted from the request but even the actress can read between the lines.

"Jesus 'Agrass' I think. It was on his Studio pass. I think."

Clare knew the office – listening in - would be checking all the similar Spanish surnames - most likely 'Agras' or 'Agraz'. But they would handle that.

"So who suggested the amount of the loan and how it would be repaid?"

"That was Angel's friend. Toya, Wilson I think was her surname. She came to a shoot, and had a talk to me. She seemed so nice and genuine."

"They offered Four hundred thousand dollars at five percent. It seemed like a good deal."

Clare was used to calling on her military training but this is almost the first time she had ever used her learnt self-discipline to stop herself launching a withering fusillade of sarcasm on the actress. Instead she settled for something slightly less debilitating.

"The interest term Meredith? Did they tell you that it was weekly?"

"No." Clare had a fine appreciation for actors, and had learnt during time with the military and
afterwards how to read people, even those practised in the art of projecting falsehoods be it for entertainment or more nefarious purposes. Meredith Lee had none of that skill. Either innate or learnt. It was a wonder that she had made as many appearances as she had done.

"And when it came time and they came to collect what did they do?"

"They gave me three options. Pay including interest – but it was too much. One point two million. Alternatively I could make some cross border trips for them. Look I know what that meant. Or the third alternative. More movies."

"Why didn't you seek help? The Police. Or from Mister Castle." Clare is pretty sure she knows what is coming next.

"They have collateral."

"What sort?"

"Pictures and video."

"Have you seen it? Has anyone else sent it?" Meredith is nodding.

"Yes. I mean I've seen it. I don't know who else they have shown it to."

"What is the nature of the content?"

"Me doing some coke with some friends and partying."

"What sort of partying?"

"The naked kind."

Clare leans forward, her eyebrow arching in expectation of more. This movement makes her jacket fall open and the Parkerized grip of her Sig Sauer P229 is directly in line of sight of Meredith. It is a cheap ploy. Simple, base intimidation but it works.

"Group sex." There is no sign of any apprehension or shame in her voice or on her face.

"This is the 'more movies' third option?"

Meredith nods.

Do you have a copy?" Meredith nods again.

"Good – give it to me."

"But…"

"Just give it over and I suggest you delete any other copies."

Meredith goes to her purse and retrieved her phone. Pushing the cover back she pulls a micro-SD card from the phone and hands it to Clare who rather that touch it lets it fall into the small clear evidence bag she has produced from a pocket.

"Thank you Meredith." Clare rises from the seat.

"I'm done here for the moment." She turns and strides towards the door and the prospect of fresh
air. Pausing by the still closed door Clare leaves one parting shot.

"Oh Meredith? Don't smoke marijuana in the hotel again or anywhere near our principals. We'll turn you over to the hotel management and cops without hesitation."

"You never said who you are working for. Who are you working for?"

"Richard Castle and his family."

"His family?"

"Yes. His mother, daughter and Detective Beckett. They are our client.

"She's not family." Meredith doesn't need to identify further who she is talking about.

"Whatever you think Meredith but the way they act, the legal authority, and our brief – they are all family. Think about that carefully before you make you next or any move."

"I'll let myself out."

"Goodnight."

Entering the lobby Clare finishes her brief check-in with Paula and nods to two figures sitting by the bar drinking coffee. One is Steve Mathers, Rick Lawyer. Next to him is somewhat non-descript average middle-aged woman in a nice suite. Suzanne White is Steve's partner in the firm of Mathers & White and by reputation and results an extremely accomplished multi-discipline lawyer. Barely acknowledging the nod from the Taylor Matthews operative, the two lawyers rise from their seats and head to the elevator.

Meredith was still slumped on the chaise lounge when the doorbell went again.

Staggering up she opened the door to see one of her least favourite members of Rick's inner circle. Steve Mathers and a woman who could only be his partner, Suzanne White.

There is no exchange of formalities.

The female lawyer addresses the red-headed actress.

"Meredith Lee."

"You are hereby prohibited from any further use of or perpetuation of claim to surname 'Castle'. Either by representation or oversight. There are court orders for New York State and California."

"To put it simply, if someone calls you Meredith Castle, Mrs Castle, Ms Castle or even simply Castle, you must correct them. You cannot call yourself that either. No hyphenation either, so Lee-Castle is out just so you are sure.

"Any breech of this conditions will be dealt with by further legal action, potentially seeking damages. Punitive actions including eviction from the Bel-air property are options.

"We have a number of documents for you. My understanding is that you don't currently have a lawyer. I recommend you get one at your earliest convenience."

She passes a legal document folder over.
"These are your copies of the court orders for name enforcement in New York State and California. Please don't make us seek federal court orders.

"This document is the updated lease for the Bel-air house. You will note that the owner and your landlord has amended the occupancy terms to include the name prohibition under the breech terms."

"But how can Ricky do this? He's in intensive care in hospital?" Meredith finally finds her voice.

"Quite simply he hasn't. He's not the owner or landlord. He hasn't been for more than three years."

"What! Well who is?"

"Alexis Harper Rodgers." Meredith's face falls. Three years. She lives in her daughter's house. She never said anything. She can't mask the sudden pain of betrayal she feels.

"And before you even go there Meredith, she's no push over. She's owned the property since she was fifteen. It was fully managed by a trust until her eighteenth birthday, and now Alexis has assumed the trustee role. But she's never told you anything has she? Don't make the mistake of assuming you can somehow get her to relax the terms let alone sign it over. The trust has strict terms that prevent that happening."

Suzanne finishes speaking and Steve finally joins in. His tone is equally cold and certain.

"Meredith, we are issuing a press release to all media outlets regarding your legal status and the use of the 'Castle' name. Please don't be foolish enough to try and circumvent it.

"Taylor Matthews will be conducting an operation in Los Angeles and they estimate the matter will be cleared up inside a week. We will settle the debt and have any blackmail material swept up. You need to be prepared in case the law enforcement agencies require a statement or more from you.

"In the meantime, your accommodation back in a Park View suite and reasonable room charges will be picked up until next Saturday. You're in this room overnight but don't try the room upgrade or five hundred dollar champagne again. There is a first class ticket single ticket booked for Saturday afternoon.

"You would be best advised to keep a low profile. Something I am sure you will ignore."

Steve pauses and then steps in closer to the woman who automatically steps back.

"Stay away from the hospital. You won't be permitted access whilst Rick is in ICU. Once he is moved to a general room a visit may be arranged but it will be done from our side.

"Goodnight Ms Lee."

With that both lawyers retreat and pull the door closed behind them.

Once the door closed, Meredith actually wanted to howl in frustration but instead found herself laughing manically. She had been completely played by the Paula's team, out classed and boxed in. Double teamed and yet despite that, she was still going to survive.
Breakfasts and Breakdowns

Chapter Summary

After a momentous day of disclosures both Beckett and Castle are out for the count.

Monday Morning.

Yawning she rolled over and grabbed hold of CB and snuggled back down under the covers. She felt a lot better for an uninterrupted night's sleep in a proper bed. It was almost eight o'clock and she needed to get up and make a move soon. Her mind is a jumble of thoughts, jumping from one track to the next. She wonders if this what it is like inside Rick's brain.

Kate had awoken about thirty minutes ago in a bed she hadn't slept in for years. Not since leaving for college. This was her childhood through teenage year's bed, the one she slept in every night until she left for Stanford. She hadn't slept here since she was a rookie and her dad was still an alcoholic.

She was at her dad's. She remembers falling asleep in the ICU room and then Lanie and her dad waking her. The rest was a haze.

CB. Charlie Bear, almost all threadbare and slightly mouldy had been sat by her feet when she woke up. Her dad's work obviously. After her Mum, CB had given the best hugs especially in her teenage years. CB had been loyal and steadfast through her breakups, breakdowns, arguments and teenage angst.

She was wearing one of Rick's t-shirts. It still smelt of him – musky, rich, homely, safe, strength. That delightful contrast of flavours and emotions that her complex man embodied.

Out of habit and instinct she had checked her phone. One message from Lanie about 7.15 am.

'Ur Boy all good. Slpt well. DR rds okay. Mybe leave ICU nxt 48 hrs. He sleep now. Txt and I call u back. xLPx'

Satisfied that she had a little more time she had sunk back into bed and dozed and comfortably contemplated some more.

Thinking back to yesterday she is still in awe – that shouldn't be the correct term but it is. She is so in awe of the honesty and communication they shared. They are usually so terrible at this. Using subtext or actions as a substitute. Or nothing at all. She has been an expert at it for so long. But yesterday they used words and the truth. No hidden meanings and she is still surprised at herself and him.

She knows she needs to change. To share more. To be more open. So does he, if only to a lesser extent. She is an intensely private person and so it turns out is the real Richard Rodgers. Even so over the last five years Rick has been far more open to her. She knows she needs to reciprocate but isn't looking forward to sharing some parts of her life with him, but if he digs she will tell him. Perhaps she can reward him with snippets of her past. Surprise him. She likes the idea. Leaves her some control. She dare not think about what secrets her father might impart if Rick starts poking
around. Her dad had more than once confirmed to her that one of the delights of parenthood was embarrassing you child when they were older.

She hadn't planned to make her promise to him. It has been almost spur of the moment driven by the whirlwind of emotions. But it was the right thing to do. She surprised him. She loves doing that. She who hates surprises but she loves the honest excitement one his face and voice, the boyish enthusiasm, and the optimism. The very joy of life that he shares with her.

She wonders how Rick will acknowledge and respond to her promise. There is no doubt he will. His current incarceration in ICU is probably the only thing preventing him from some over-the-top response.

It was time to get up and move. She had things to do today.

There was a bag by the bed. Open. A change of clothes. Toiletries in a wash bag. Hers.

A note sits folded on top. She opens it to find Martha's handwriting, that curious contrast of elegant cursive script with excitable capitals and punctuation.

'Dear Kate,
Lanie called to say you needed a break. [Next to this line in Alexis' careful script 'We totally understand – babysitting is draining! :-) ']
So your Dad will take you home and look after you overnight.
We packed some things. Hopefully these will help to make You Feel Better. Until Tomorrow!
Love M & A. XX xx'

The smile that breaks across her face is at odds with the tears that form in her eyes. She really struggled to understand what she had done to deserve such unequivocal love once more in her life. She had lost that so many years ago but through the graces of Rick it had found her despite her sometimes desperate denials and repeated rejections.

Parking that thought she grabs the wash bag and some basics and opens the door to head for the bathroom.

Entering the hallway she could hear loud humming, and snippets of words and phrases being spoken. No that was wrong. Sung. Her dad was singing.

He hadn't sung since. She left the rest of that thought alone. It was surprising how easy that was now.

But her dad was singing. He had been into Barber Shop music for some years and although he hadn't participated for many years before Kate left home she was used to both her parents singing or humming around the house. It was part of the soundtrack of her childhood. She missed those moments but it wasn't lost on her that perhaps now she had the opportunity to create some of her own.

"Good Morning Dad."

She came round the corner and into the kitchen, hair still slightly damp after her shower.

"Good Morning Katie. How was the shower?"

"The pressure still plays up but at least the temperature was good." She can remember complaining
about the shower long before she left home for college.

Her dad shrugs.

"I fixed the thermostat but the pump. Well I never got round to replacing it. Guess I've learnt to live with it." The logic behind his acceptance of more than fifteen years of fluctuating showers leaves a sour taste. He's been alone for so long.

"Coffee?"

He's holding a mug, it looks past its prime but Kate recognises it. It really is a day for revisiting her past life. Ben's Bike Shop. She had bought her Harley from Ben's Bike Shop and over time had made many visits to learn how to maintain it. So much so that the staff had given her one of their coffee mugs and adopted her. It carried with it memories of caffeine spiked with whiskey. Of night time rides. Her first spill and her concern for her bike not her cuts and bruises. Tight leather on her and someone else.

"Actually I don't know why I've even asking." Her Dad's voice snaps her back as he pushes the mug to her and she carefully takes a sip from the steaming mug.

"Hmmm, this is good, really good. Dad when did you start drinking this stuff?"

Looking up she spots the source of this black gold on the bench. That's a new coffee machine. Expensive. Next to it a jar with a familiar logo. One she sees in the Loft. Her eyebrow arches in an unspoken question.

"Well Martha and I started meeting up to chat about our children she would sometimes come here and the well the old French Press didn't really cut it.

"We went Dutch on it. So you better not split up with Martha's boy, 'cause I don't want to have to fight for the coffee machine. Or pay for my own beans. That stuff is expensive!"

He's grinning at her. Teasing like he would before. Her Mom's absence hurts less now, but it is in rediscovering times like this that it is most bittersweet.

"Dad!" She felt like a teenager again.

Breakfast was a simple affair. Her dad had always preferred less fuss, but had deferred to her mom for many domestic matters, especially meals. So hot oats and some sliced fruit.

There was toast if she wanted it but her appetite still wasn't back to normal. Her normal as Rick would so aptly tag it. She's nursing a partial refill of Ben's Bike Shop. She wonders if it is still there. Perhaps she could pay a visit. Take Rick. He'd love that. He'd insist on the leather gear of course. So would she. Perhaps they wouldn't even make it to the bike the first time. She shakes off the thought and hopes her dad can't see any of that on her face.

"Are you heading to the hospital now Katie?"

"I will do but I wanted to drop into the Loft first and check on Alexis and Martha. Especially Martha. I'm worried about her."

"Me too. She is an incredibly resilient person. To have raised a son as a single mother in those times and with her job, not easy. And I know firsthand what it is like to have a child shot and near death."
Kate feels herself tense with that instinctive tincture of grief and anger but she forces it away. Instead she reaches across and squeezes his hand gently.

"They have been so good for me." She gently nudges the course of the conversation back towards less fraught territory.

"For us Katie." Her father corrects her.

"I'll admit Marsha and I didn't really hit it off right away. We are so different in many ways. But the things we have in common bind us more." He leaves so much unsaid there but they both know what is unvoiced.

"Not long after that first meal, we were meeting for lunch and someone recognised Marsha. I think I was about to be outed as one of Marsha's conquests. Rick's agent managed to get the story killed. But it was scary. I think I understand now a little about why you have been reluctant about the press and the publicity. Martha knows and understands how private I am which is why we started meeting here or at the Loft more than in public."

Kate nods. She's grateful for the years of experience and training that enable her to school face and not show the shock at her father's behaviour and demeanour. It was like she had caught a glimpse of the man from before. Just as Rick had done with her. Once again she finds herself needing to steer the conversation back to safer territory.

"But I love him, and the press is part of his life. So it will be part of mine – hopefully to a lesser extent.

"So you'll be taking Marsha to a game sometime then Dad?"

She has a smile but wicked grin on her face. She's teasing him.

"Not so sure about that. But Marsha has invited me round to the Loft to sign show tunes with her. She was most interested to learn of my Barber Shop past."

Ouch touché. Rick would be mortified. Guess he would have to come to hers. No wait they won't be able to do that because was moving in with him. Oh this was getting complicated. Too early for this. Time to retreat.

"Okay and on that high note, I'm gonna go finish getting ready and then head out. What about you Dad?"

"Got a deposition later. One of the benefits of working at the one place for so long is that they give me some latitude especially as I am nearing retirement."

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**The Loft**

Using her key Kate opened the door and slipped into the Loft. She had messaged Alexis to know she would be there by 10 and they could head to the hospital together.

She felt somewhat tremulous about entering on her own. Without Rick. As if she wasn't justified being here without him.

She had scarcely had time to compose that thought when it was dislodged from her by the sudden arrival of Little Castle. The impact of Alexis' arms pulling her into a hug shook all her plans into disarray.
"Good Morning Alexis."

"Hi Kate."

They didn't play the game of asking how each other how they were. Both steer around that minefield.

"Where's you Grams?" Kate had unconsciously used Alexis' familiar name for her.

"Upstairs in her room. She's not good Kate. I am worried about her. She hasn't been sleeping. She's not eating. She's not drinking. I think I smelt cigarettes on her last night. She hasn't smoked for years. Not since the cancer scare."

"Is it okay if I go see her, and you get ready to head to the hospital?"

Alexis nods and Kate turns and heads for the stairs and Martha's room.

Martha looked, well for want a better word, old. It was not a term Kate normally associated with the vivacious actress not matter her actual age.

"He's my boy. My only child and for much of our lives it was just the two of us.

"Kate, you must know that over the years I have come to consider you, and love you like a daughter. Even before you and Richard finally saw sense.

"But there have been times over those years that I wished he wasn't shadowing you. Wasn't so in love with you that he would risk his life on multiple occasions."

Kate found herself pulling Martha into her body. Ignoring the tears, the running mascara, and the weak protests of the woman.

"Oh dear, don't! You'll, or rather I will, make a mess of you." Martha protests.

"Doesn't matter. Not important."

Kate rebuffs her protests and tightens her grip. Then Martha lets go. It is almost silent. Sobbing and shaking but nothing except for the harsh intake of breath fighting against the rolling wave of emotion trying to escape out of the lungs.

She wasn't embarrassed or uncomfortable. This felt natural. She was comforting someone she loved. Family.

It takes some minutes before Martha calms. Kate is eerily familiar with the pattern. She relaxes her grip on Martha who steps back a little and Kate speaks.

"I've been so selfish with him. I almost physically need him."

Martha arches an eyebrow at her, and she had the grace to blush and doesn't bother to deny the implication. That too.

"I know he won't ask but I would give it up for him. If he asked or needed it." She had made the decision once before and gone back on it. She could make it again. The only choice was him.

"Oh no my Dear, he, I, we could never ask that of you. That is a decision only you can take. Maybe there will be a time when it is the right decision."
"But what do you need of me Martha? For so long this has been my family even if I wasn't willing to see it or acknowledge it. So it is my turn to contribute and repay."

"Shush. We never talk of what we do for love as payment." Martha steps a little further back but places a hand on her forearm and squeezes. There is steel in Martha's gaze.

"I want you to take care of my son. He has tried so hard to take care of you over the years. It is what he does. It is his greatest gift and strength but also his greatest weakness.

"He invests so much in one or two people, and trusts them with everything. But you especially. More than anyone. Certainly romantically." Martha pauses and her face takes on a wistful expression.

"Maybe he would have been different if Rebecca had lived, but just as your loss is part of what brings you both to this moment, so is his. And despite everything, all the challenges and heartbreak, I know he, well we are so immensely happy that you two are finally together."

"He told me. About the therapy. His past. Rebecca and Kyra and his marriages. I didn't honestly know. I was so wrapped up in my own issues I never really considered his. What he needed. What his family needs."

"Darling, Richard has forgiven you, not that there was anything to really forgive, you are together and that is all that matters.

"Now please give me some time to patch myself up." She runs her gaze over Kate's outfit and continues. "No lasting damage done for you. I will be out in a minute."

Kate had retreated from Martha's room and as she reaches the landing, her phone pings. A message from Lanie Parish.

'Call me. Rick fine. But need to go soon – wrk this PM'

Kate almost feels guilty for abandoning Rick and Lanie in ICU but she knows all of Rick's ladies needed this downtime.

Kate calls down the stairs to Alexis to arrange for the car service in ten. She hears the affirmative and she hits the return call icon and within seconds there is an answering connection.

"Hey Lanie. Good Morning."

"Good Morning too you too sleepy head. Sorry to chase you along but I need to go home and shower and change as I am on shift from 2pm.

"Your boy is awake and bored. He is semi enchanting and demoralising the nursing staff as I speak."

"We're just leaving the loft in a few minutes. I can't thank you enough. We all needed a break. I promise to catch up with you soon."

"No thanks required. But Gurl, we certainly will be having words. Girls night and no attendees from the other Castle ladies either. The topic of conversation is definitely not for their ears.

"Oh that sounds ominous. I don't think it is for mine either."

"Uhh Uhh. You don't get to escape that easily. You have been holding out on me. Big time. And I
do mean BIG time."

"What?"

"Because Me-Oh-My it is true. You've landed the White Whale." There is decided element of teasing but also an undercurrent of something else. Jealousy?

"What Lanie?" Kate's voice is rising in frustration and she instinctively knows what is coming.

"Big Hands, Big PACKAGE!" The glee is her best friend's voice is disconcerting.

"Lanie Parish what have you been doing?!" Even though her friend can't see her, Kate feels herself blushing. Embarrassment overcoming irritation.

"This morning before rounds, the nurse messed up the catheter during a swap out and I stepped in to save the situation. During the rescue I may have seen under the *hides-nothing- anyway* hospital gown."

"Lanie!"

"Oh please girl. It's not like Mr Happy was out to play. And you would rather have your best friend do it than some blonde fan girl nurse who made the mess in the first place probably because she was trying to check him out."

"And with good reason too."

"I'm still not happy about. This isn't over Lanie."

"Oh definitely not. There will be details required. Lotsa details. Starting with….

Kate interrupts forcibly.

"We'll be there soon. Bye!"

Kate hung up. Suddenly the desire to get to the hospital had become a pressing need.
Coast to Coast

Chapter Summary

Somehow Meredith has managed to occupy more attention that she deserves but ultimately it will pay off for everyone. Well maybe not everyone.

Taylor Matthews Operations - Los Angeles.

Although headquartered in New York, Taylor Matthews' largest operations were currently on the West Coast and they maintained two locations in Los Angeles.

One was downtime in nice gleaming managed offices with a couple of meeting suites, be-suited smiling receptionist and corporate branding. The public face of the most ethical and efficient private security firm in the country.

The other location was further south on the outskirts of Orange County. It included space on private airfield with their own hangar. A large converted warehouse just outside housed the West Coast team's operations centre. No signage. Just lots of privacy and enough obvious security to discourage the casual thief but not enough to arouse suspicion. Inside the building one section had been converted into double storied office space. Alongside was a sound proof indoor weapons range. Filling out the space was a motor pool and several secure storage facilities housing equipment.

Former Treasury agent Stacey Steiber spun round in her chair and shouted through the doorway of her office.

"Marty!"

Less than a minute later a surprisingly tall Latino entered the office. Coffee in one hand and the remnants of a Danish in the other.

"Hey Sass. You got something for me?"

"Firstly where's mine?" The half inquiry half command is met with an indifferent shrug that could mean any number of things but mostly likely meant 'get your own'.

"Oh be like that Marty." The slightly guttural snarl makes it clear that play time is over.

"Yes I do. Job out of New York. Extortion shutdown. Kick off with an eyes-on job. Six has asked for a rapid turnaround with resolution inside five days max. Everything we have to-date is in the usual place. I'll be getting some info from the DEA this morning."

"So I take it you'll be needing a team with my color scheme then?" Marty knows this likely means one of the Latino suburbs and a possible operation on gangs or worse Mexicales.

"Don't want them to stand out against the rest of the décor where you'll be going. But like I said eyes-on only tonight."

"I'm about to call New York and get the latest. The files will be refreshed when have new
information. Update at 16:00."

There might not be a dismissed in there but the former Marine doesn't mind. Taylor Matthews' third in command does make an issue of the chain of command unless she really has to.

"You got it Sass."

No one called her by her given names here. Strangely enough she didn't mind. Senior Agent Steiber had been forced into retirement by injuries received in the line of duty that rendered her unable to perform her job. Sass was her reincarnated version that did her new job damn well despite her physical impairments.

Using her foot she push her chair back and grabbing the rails she wheeled herself across the floor and picked up the Bluetooth headset from the desk where she had dropped it earlier.

Using voice commands she activated a secure line and waited for dial tone, a growing grin on her face. Time to call Calamity.

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**Manhattan Fitness Center, New York**

Clare groaned into her towel. She was getting old. There was a time when a 90 minute workout would have been a warm up. Now all she wanted was a long soak and some painkillers.

Emerging from the shower cubicle she could feel the eyes on her in the locker room. It was a damn fine facility, one of the best corporate fitness centers in Manhattan but it did mean that most of the clientele were there more for social reasons than real training.

There was time she would have considered this prime hunting ground. The problem was that whilst many of them looked fine, attractive, stunning even, they were all so young. Another thing that made her feel old. Dismissing the impulse to even contemplate a hook up, she grabbed her clothes, dropped her towel and began to dress.

If anything the staring would have increased now, not so much because she was naked, but because of the scars especially the burns along her right rib cage and lower back. She knew there would be gasps, murmurs and pointing but she had learnt to filter that all out now.

She wished she could find someone who would challenge her. Accept her. Make her smile and get her to spend less time working and more time living.

Rick Castle was one but with the major deficiency that he was male. She laughed to herself remembering the first time she had pointed this out to him. Quickly recovering from stuttered faux outage, his puppy dog pout should have been instantly dismissible but somehow he carried it off.

He had been doing research for a new book, and for reasons only apparent later Tim and Derek had given him permission to follow her. She was relatively new to Taylor Matthews then. Not long out of the military. Still angry over an almost stellar career terminated abruptly because she wouldn't lie about her sexual preference.

He had shadowed her for a month on and off on a couple of jobs. They had become comfortable, friendly often risqué banter, and had got so far along that when on surveillance they would mutually check out the female talent and score them for each other. They had hung out together few times in the months after and Rick had even wingman-ed for her on a pickup – who had been really, vocally disappointed he wasn't part of the deal.
Then she had met Briannon and Rick dropped off the radar as things had gotten serious for a few years before the job broke them up. She had done the close protector detail for his daughter and the ex-Mrs Castle in California. Since then she caught up with him a couple of times mainly when he was visiting the offices and meeting with Tim or Derek.

But it had been at almost two years until she saw him in the ICU yesterday. He had played it cool and she had been happy to comply with her client's unspoken request, although she was sure that Detective Kate Beckett had seen through that little charade and wanted to know more.

Pushing that thought aside she continued to dress and started to stow her training gear into her holdall. Hell she needed a break. Perhaps once this job was over she could take some of the time owing her and head over to California and catch up with Sass. Hang out at her ranch.

Just as she finished dressing she heard the rhythmic vibration of her phone. Grinning before she even checked for a blocked caller-id she knew who it was. Grabbing the NFC enabled earpiece she pressed pickup whilst she finished stowing her gear.

"Hey Sass!"

Emerging to meet the town car, Martha had smiled broadly and greeted the driver, a short-set man in his fifties with a dark grey jacket over blue slacks and white polo.

"Tommy!"

"How r youse Mrs R?" The driver clearly knew Martha as surely as he was from New Jersey.

"I am doing okay thank you Dear."

Waving towards the copy of today's Ledger on the back seat, the compact figure continues.

"I see you son is going to be okay. The boys and girls, well, we were all very sorry to hear about it. We know you don't like a fuss but there won't be any charge for the service whilst Mr C is in the hospital. We may not be that fancy-smacy Russian mob with the flash stretch limos but we look after our regulars."

"Thank you Tommy." Martha's voice wavers slightly before she regains control and enters the rear of the town car.

Kate is surprised when Alexis steps into a mutual hug from the driver and as she does she pulls Kate along with her. No hug for Kate but her own assessment of the man is returned with interest.

"Tommy, this Detective Kate Beckett my Dad's partner." Somehow this is the best explanation for their status, as Alexis continues the introductions.

"Kate, Tommy is one of the owners of 'Time and Motion' one of the best livery services in town. They have been looking after Gram since she came to New York."

"Pleasure to meet youse, Detective." Tommy sticks out a hand and a firm handshake is exchanged.

"Likewise."

She joins Alexis in the car and they pull off from the curb and head for the hospital.

They haven't been in motion for long when Martha's cell rings and she answers.
"Oh good morning, Karen."

"The hospital administration are calling." Martha informs them. A slight pool of anxiety grips Kate and she knows Alexis too as the younger woman grips her hand.

Martha side of the conversation is mainly monosyllabic responses but Martha’s cheerful demeanour and voice mean that they are soon able to sense that it is not concerning Rick's health directly.

Martha hangs up the call.

"It would appear that Richard's time in ICU draws to a close." This news is met by smiles from the other ladies as Martha continues.

"Which is probably a good thing as the constant stream and number of visitors in ICU is causing issues for the hospital. Even whilst in hospital it appears my son can't be anything but disruptive. Kate and I will need to go see the Hospital Administrator on arrival." Kate nods at this.

Turning to the youngest member of their family group, Martha asks:

"Alexis will you be okay to go see your father straight away?"

Kate suddenly sees how this could work out for her and avoid a conversation with Lanie Parish that is best postponed if not completely avoided.

"Alexis why don't you go to your Dad and let Lanie go and get ready for work and we'll be there as soon as we can? You can have some time with him on your own." That was somewhat mean of her but she knows it will work, as the very same argument would work on her.

Oh Lanie will be spitting chips at being played and missing her conversation cum interrogation with Kate. It will almost be worth the payback later.

Bellevue Hospital

Alexis has arrived at the ICU to find Lanie Parish standing outside her Dad's room looking anxious.

"Hi Sweetie, your Dad's napping again. Apparently antagonizing all the staff and me takes it out of him! So where's Kate?"

Alexis takes a moment recover from the verbal onslaught.

"Good Morning to you Doctor Parish." She pauses to accentuate her mild displeasure at the older woman's rapid fire greeting.

"Thank you for looking after Dad. He can be a real handful when he's bored."

"And Kate?" Lanie Parish demands again. Before Alexis can explain, she carries on.

"Can you please pass on a message for your future step-mom?"

Alexis finds herself nodding in acceptence before the full implications of the ME's sentence hits her and eyes burst wise open and her mouth drops noticeably.

"Please tell Detective Beckett, that this is simply a matter of delaying the inevitable. And Honey what I want to know will be given up willingly or not!" With that the ME waves again and heads
towards the ICU entrance.

Alexis is pretty sure she doesn't want to know what Kate's best friend is so determined to find out. She remains forever grateful that she is in dorms most of the time and her visits back home to the Loft are generally arranged beforehand. She does know that Grams has interrupted them more than once. Of course her Grams has no shame, and neither do her Dad and Kate Beckett from her Gram's accounts.

Pushing that thought to one side she enters the ICU room. Right away she can see that her Dad is definitely getting better. His face looks more relaxed and there is more color in his cheeks. The oxygen mask is absent. Also some of the battery of machines are missing. A sure sign that there is reduced dependencies and less monitoring required.

Alexis' phone blinged with the sound of a Tie Fighter – damn Dad had been messing with her phone too! It was a message from Paula. She open the message and found a short URL link. Clicking the link took her to the mobile version of the New York Ledger Website.

*Page Six Online - Out and About on the Town with Terri.*

One of my team of roving raconteurs caught up with Meredith Lee, the former Mrs Castle, whilst she was shopping at the exclusive boutiques at Columbus Circle. Meredith had this to say about her presence in New York.

"Whilst I am a busy actress, nothing is more important than family. So of course I am here to support Ricky and Alexis in whatever way I can. I will be staying as long as possible, certainly until he is out of Intensive Care and feeling much better. As a mother I will be here to support my daughter absolutely."

Ms Lee's was happy to answer questions until she asked about Detective Kate Beckett's relationship with her ex-husband. When asked if she thought Detective Beckett – the inspiration for Nikki Heat – would be Wife Number Three, Ex-wife Number One had stated:

"I have personally seen them together whilst visiting with Ricky and daughter at home. This is simply a fling, one of Ricky's infatuations. He will move on, he always does."

When our reporter noted that this was in complete contrast to the other information from the NYPD, and Mister Castle's representatives the friendly discussion was terminated and Ms Lee stormed off.

"Garrrhh!"

The cry of frustration is much louder than she intended. Biting down on the frustration, she half-smiles whilst frowning at the insight that presents itself to her even though it hurts deeply. She had long suspected that her mother was far more manipulative and conniving than her Dad and Gram let on. She is seeing her true nature here. Total self-interest and lies.

Alexis is quietly proud that she resisted the temptation to hurtle the phone at the nearest hard object. She knows more than one of her Dad's phones have met their end that way.

"Hey Pumpkin." That's her Dad, awake now. She probably woke him. But the guilt is assuaged when she sees his face. A much rosier demeanour and those dancing eyes. He's coming back to her.

"Hey Dad. I hear you've been driving the locals crazy." A big smile on her face, she's teasing him already. And from the look on his face he's loving it too.
The meeting with Karen Wright from the hospital administration had taken about twenty minutes and had incorporated a conference call to Paula to put the wheels in motion for the next press conference and public statement as Rick was to be moved from ICU in the next twenty-four hours. Buoyed by the good news, both Kate and Martha were partially mollified when Paula’s brief mention of Meredith’s latest foray into the press. Paula had simply told them to check their phones, speak to Rick and then call back.

After leaving the hospital admin area, Martha had waited whilst Kate bought up the link from the Ledger.

Entering the ICU, Martha and Kate had both greeted the uniforms keeping guard. Kate had noted the styrene food boxes and coffee cups labelled with Affinia Dumont Hotel logo.

Kate hefted the carryall in her right hand. She had taken time to grab some books from Rick’s office before they left the Loft. No electronic gadgets were allowed in ICU and Kate knew from experience that Rick would be getting bored. A bored Rick could be very interesting when they were alone and he had full use of his faculties. A bored Rick confined to a hospital bed was punishment for all parties. Lanie had already warned Kate about his behaviour that morning.

Speaking of Lanie, Kate could only hope her best friend had left and would delay the inevitable questioning until much later.

As they reached the Rick’s ICU room, Martha and Kate were bought to a halt by the sound of laughter and joy emanating from the room. Looking in they can see Rick sitting higher up in the bed with no oxygen mask, his face flushed with joy as his daughter cants her body in to lean against him.

Between the two of them, Kate and Martha share a smile and then step into the room to participate and partake of the joy.

It is some time later and Rick has once again dropped off to sleep. He is awake for longer and his general health and demeanour are a blessed relief for all but the reality that still sheaths home is that he is recovering from a near death situation and is blessed to be as healthy as he is.

Whilst Rick dozes, the conversation has turned to the former Mrs Castle. Martha and Alexis could only stand there with disbelief on their faces when Kate had not joined in their cathartic demolition of her character.

"Why don’t you want to shoot her? Or at least arrest her?" The question comes from Alexis.

"I find her to be pitiful. She poses no real threat to us. Rick has explained enough for me to be totally at ease with strength our relationship and the history of his ex-wives. Of course it doesn’t mean that I won’t get a little angry or annoyed by her actions.” Kate knows that whilst she is calm about this, Alexis is not. Discovering, or perhaps more accurately finally acknowledging the human weaknesses and faults of a parent is not pleasant. Lord knows her father’s rapid and prolonged descent into alcoholism had scared her badly for years.

Taking Alexis to one side, Kate had pulled her into a hug before stepping back and cupping Alexis’ head in her hands.

"My Mom told me that we were never given anything in life that we couldn’t handle. This is a test of you. How you were raised. Your values. Your strength and beliefs. Alexis, I don’t ever want you
to face some of the events and choices I have, but nor do I want you to incapable of rising to the challenges you will face. Your Dad has done a fantastic of being your parent. But you are an adult now. Admittedly a new one, but we all have faith in you.

"But try to remember she is you mother. Always will be. I would give anything to have more time with mine. Don't burn your bridges completely. But."

Kate pauses and a mischievous look appears on her face before she continues, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial tone.

"It probably wouldn't hurt to mess with her a bit. She deserves it after all. And Martha says you have quite a lot of her acting ability."

"Thank you Kate. I think I will. But there will be absolutely no acting required."

\[Taylor Matthews Operations - Los Angeles.\]

Sass terminated the call from her liaison at the DEA. The information from them along with Clare's updates were giving her team a good background and some possible resolution scenario's to run with it. If they could progress a couple of other elements in what remained of the afternoon, their night time observation job might be ramped up.

Time to get Marty and his team caught up on the latest.

"Yo Marty! School time." Her voice carried through the office space.
Chapter Summary

Meredith's uninvited arrival in New York has caused ripples and problems. Rick's team get to work to set things straight. First up is the Darling Daughter Dearest (drum roll)…..Alexis.

Outside the Loft, Monday 6.30 pm

Exiting through the lobby, Alexis is fashionably but conservatively attired in a white and dark grey chequered suit with a light overcoat acknowledging the cooler weather of a New York autumn. A couple of press and blessedly only a single cameraman move towards her from their perch some 10 feet or so from the entrance. Before they can close the distance the tall lean man two steps behind Alexis moves across them blocking their approach. In the meantime he guides his charge towards the idling town car that is waiting at pavement directly outside the Loft. The driver is patiently waiting by the already open passenger door. He's taller but still bears more than a passing resemblance to Tommy, the driver from earlier in the day. Tommy and Michael. Two New Jersey brothers made good. Co-owners of Time & Motion.

"Hey Michael."

"Good Evening Miss Alexis." The younger brother has always been more reticent and formal with the Castles, with the exception of Martha who had informally adopted both the co-owners of Time & Motion and they her.

Alexis pauses as she remembers her manners.

"I'm sorry Michael. I should have introduced you. This is Mike O'Leary. He's my….well..bodyguard." Alexis trails off as she indicated towards the man standing two or three paces behind her. Probably two paces she decides.

"Personal protective detail." Corrects the tall Taylor Matthews operative as he guides his charge into the rear of the town car and closes the door.

As he passes the driver to move to the front passenger door he adds "People tend to think Kevin Costner when the phrase 'bodyguard' is used. We're not that." A wry smile concludes the brief explanation.

"Pleased to meet you." The two Michaels exchange handshakes as they separate and head for their seats.

Once behind the wheel, the driver turns his right and looks over his shoulder.

"Where to Miss Alexis?"

"Mandarin Oriental please Michael."

"Oh, that's where you mother is, right?" Alexis starts at the driver's knowledge, but she should be used to it. Before she can determine how the younger brother knows, he beats her to the punch.
"It was one of our cars that took her from the airport to there at the request of Paula."

Alexis nods and purses her lips, a sudden thought bubbles up and prompts a spontaneous question.

"Hey Michael how come you never call Paula, Ms Haas? You're always very polite with us."

"Paula's a proper Jursy gurl. She'd take offense or worse think we were after somethin'. Plus she's got a wicked temper and a worse right hook." Michael has slipped back into his native vernacular for a moment as her continues.

"Mrs R hooked ous up on a blind date a few years back. Didn't work out so well." He concluded without further explanation as he turned away from his passenger and buckled up. Alexis can only deduce that the knowledge of the right hook came from that experience. You had to hand it to her dad, he certainly didn't attract normal, boring folk.

As Alexis thinks on this the town car pulls out smoothly into the traffic and away from the strobe of what now seems to be at least two cameras' flashes.

The ride didn't take too long, but it did give Alexis time to reflect on what she was doing tonight.

That she was meeting her mother was something she had grown accustomed to. She still struggled from time-to-time to deal with the enormity of the fact that seeing her mother, even talking to her on the phone, was often akin to a chore and not simply a pleasure. Not like interacting with her dad, Grams, and now Kate. Or how most of her friends were with their parents. This response had grown over the years as she got older and understood and learnt more about her parents. She knew that the extremely close relationship with her dad was partly in compensation for the lack of a permanent and reliable maternal figure in her life. Conversely her relationship with her mother had become increasingly distant as she matured and began to understand more about the type of person her mother really was.

Once she was old enough, with her father's natural curiosity, she had done her own research independent of her dad or Grams. She knew they would try to protect her, and by extension her mother. However, Alexis knew far more about Meredith Lee than anyone suspected.

However, tonight was more than that. Tonight, it would not be her mother attempting to deceive and manipulate. Tonight, it was her who would be turning the tables on her mother. And not simply like any teenager would do to trick a parent or parents into something they wanted. This was out and out deceit with a specific outcome in mind. Only a few hours earlier they had all been surprised when she so readily agreed to do it. The only thing she asked was that no one told her dad, and that if it was ever to be bought up then it was to be her that told her dad about her role in this evening's events.

Alexis often marvelled at how positively she was perceived by most of those that knew her. Naturally her dad saw her as near perfect. But she had been surprised by how Kate treated her and the high opinion she seemed to hold of her. Only her Grams really called her on some of her antics. Truth-be-told she generally was pretty-well behaved even if it was not quite to the Miss-Goody-Two-Shoes standard that many seemed to hold her.

There was no way she was ever divulging some of the things she had got up to. Mind you having heard tales of her father's daring and wild days – some of them not so long ago – she knew she was certainly much better behaved than that but it did leave a lot of leeway and wiggle room.

She knew a couple of things about Kate's past too. A certain medical examiner had succumbed to
some of her dad's best liquor at a party at the Loft some months ago and whilst under the influence had divulged a few tales that had made her blush, wide-eyed and not a little interested. She had even done some Internet research. Again not something she would ever disclosure to any one especially her dad or Kate. She had already experimented with one thing learnt that evening and both she and Max had been more than happy with the outcome.

Fortunately there were no obvious press outside the Mandarin Oriental when the town car pulled up nevertheless Alexis hastily exited the car accompanied by her Taylor Matthews shadow still two steps behind.

Entering the hotel lobby they made a bee line directly for the elevators. Mike hit the button for the Function and Meeting Space on the 36th Floor. The ride up was uninterrupted and they emerged onto the 36th floor foyer where Clare Dunne was already waiting for them and greeted them with tight nods to each.

Turning one-eighty degrees Clare wordlessly led them directly across the foyer, through double swing doors into a small lobby and directly into the room labelled boardroom. Inside the elegant but compact space was an oblong conference table and eight chairs. One was occupied by thirty-ish male in what Alexis was beginning to recognize as the near de-facto Taylor Matthews corporate dress of chinos and a polo shirt.

"Alexis this is Ely Davies. He is one of our technicians and he is going to provide the 'wire' for you and also the recording devices you will need to plant in the suite."

"Hi." Suddenly Alexis' gut clenches and nerves hit. The transition from implication to actuality of what she is doing is now all too real.

"Did you get the warrant?" Alexis may be about to betray her mother's trust but she is doing it as legally as possible.

"Yes, the observation and monitoring warrant was signed by a New York Supreme Court judge an hour ago." Clare confirms. Left unsaid is who signed that warrant, but Alexis knows in all probability that it was signed by Judge Markaway. Once again her father's network of 'knows a guy' hits a home run.

"Hello Ms Castle. I have a personal transmitter to go on your person." The Taylor Matthews technician speaks up.

"The other item is more complicated."

Alexis interrupts.

"I know. It needs to be placed away from other electrical and especially transmitting devices. Out of the line of sight but not blocked by large solid objects. Remember where I put them and tell you once I am out. So you can mark them on the floor plan and recover them later."

At the look of surprise from all three of the room occupants, Alexis huffs and rolls her eyes Beckett style. Of course none of the room's occupants have witnessed one of Beckett's eye rolls so the whole experience is somewhat disconcerting as the wrong woman in front of them momentarily takes on the demeanour of an older and more cynical person.

"My dad is a best-selling crime novelist. He does serious research for his novels to make them as real as possible. Who do you think he runs a lot of his ideas across? Who proofs his books?"
Clare nods and smiles in reassurance.

"Hopefully we will have the necessary information from this evening and overnight so we can wrap everything up in New York and have a clear action plan for LA soon."

As the suite opens Alexis sings out with more enthusiasm than she feels.

"Hi Mom."

Her mother is dressed in a silver cocktail dress than shows some cleavage but surprisingly not too much. Certainly Alexis has seen her mother showing much more flesh. The length is also more conservative than her mother usually wore, although this is almost Autumn in New York not LA. Overall this is almost demure look for her mom. But not quite as the silver lame is too showy, but that's her mom in a word.

"Alexis Darling please come in." Her mother waves her forward but before Alexis can reach her mom and give her a hug and kiss, she speaks again.

"Oh who that with you?" Trust her mom to spot the fit man waiting down the corridor.

"Mike will be waiting outside. He's here to protect me." Then for clarification she continues. "And not for you."

"Ohh". Definitely disappointed Mom. Alexis fights the urge to roll her eyes.

They hug and briefly kiss each other's cheeks. Entering the suite Alexis shucks her coat onto the chair by the door, noting the wrap and handbag already waiting there, and heads straight for the sofa, forcing her mother to turn and follow.

Then as if she remembers why she is in New York her mother finally asks after her dad as she sits opposite Alexis in the chair.

"How is your father Sweetie?"

"He is improving. They hope he can be moved from ICU overnight or most likely tomorrow. They still expect him to be hospital for up to two weeks and then there is months of physiotherapy to try and regain use of his shoulder and arms.

"But given that he almost died, this is quite a good outcome. I was really worried. We all were. Grams, Kate, all Dad's friends, and all the officers, especially at the Twelfth." Alexis is surprised at the emotion behind her words and the tear she can feel sliding down her left cheek.

"Really? Why would they all care so much about your father?" Her mother's artless question leaves her flabbergasted. Probably the best result this early in the evening.

Alexis feels more tears come and she bites back a small sob. The sort of emotion that would normally see someone wrap her up in a hug and offer words of comfort and reassurance. But not here. Not with her birth mother.

Meredith still doesn't move to hold or otherwise comfort the teenager or rather young woman opposite her. Alexis can't help compare this passiveness with the way her Dad, Grams or Kate would react. Moreover Lanie, and the Boys, and even Captain Gates wouldn't hold back in holding and reassuring her.
"Do you think I would be able to go visit him?"

Her own introspection broken, Alexis ponders her mother's question for a moment.

"I don't see why not once he is moved out of ICU and into a private room. I will need to check with Dad and Kate but I am sure we can work something out." Alexis catches a glimpse of her mother's grimace at her mention of checking with Kate which is almost hidden by smile.

"So where would you like to go? I made reservations but we can go elsewhere if you want." Alexis knew this was coming when she saw what her mother was wearing and the wrap and handbag ready to go near the door were another sign.

"Mom, I was expecting to eat here." Alexis counters.

"But Sweetie."

"No Mom we're not going out. We'll eat in the suite. There is a dining table and I know the hotel food is good.

"Sweetie, I need to get out."

"No Mom. We're not going out so that I can be snapped playing happy families with you."

Before Meredith can transform her expression from pleading to indignant shock, Alexis shuts her down.

"I've already ordered for us. Before I got here."

"But Alexis Dear you don't know what I want to eat."

"Mom, you always order from the same five dishes, and I took the liberty of ordering a couple of your favourites."

"Alexis, you don't understand." Meredith begins her pitch only to be comprehensively shutdown by her daughter.

"Don't! Just don't Mom. I'm not going to be used as a pawn in your desperate media show you as the caring mother and ex-wife in some attempt to try and gain sympathy and more coverage."

'And to get more money from us' she adds mentally.

"Paula got wind that you had lined up a couple of photographers and a tame gossip columnist to wait for us to turn up at Balthazar."

"What?!" Meredith splutters as she schools her face. Or rather tries to. At times like these, exasperated and with minimal tolerance for anything less than the truth that Alexis sees the true nature of her mother. Her rather average acting abilities. Her almost entirely predictable responses. Her lack of empathy or sympathy unless it directly impacts her. In short how selfish she is, and how unlike her father her mother is.

"Oh don't try that. It's quite frankly pathetic."

Then Alexis mollifies her tone.

"Look Mom, can we just have dinner, and chat?" 'First' she adds silently.
As if on cue there is a knock at the door signalling the arrival of the room service. Alexis silently thanks the Universe for the timely interruption and rises to let the waiter in.

It only takes a few minutes for things to be setup. The waiter leaves the trolley by the small table near the window and turns to leave but with the usual expectant pause. This is a marginally excruciating moment when the waiter looks to her mom for the tip, and when she simply blanks him, it requires Alexis to step forward and press a bill into his hand with a polite thank you.

After the waiter leaves Alexis looks at her mother with a scowl on her face. This is exasperating. Her dad may occasionally embarrass by over tipping, over communicating or simply over trying but he is certainly never petty nor mean to service staff. As for Grams she would no doubt simply remark that this sort of action merely confirms what she knew all along. Alexis wouldn't disagree with her. But Alexis bites down the urge to chide her mother who would no doubt take the reverse parenting badly. This is so different from her father who enjoyed the teasing and banter and interplay of words between them even when there was a serious topic under discussion.

Somehow they make it through the dinner without any more drama. Well nothing more than the usual dining with Mom experience. Alexis vows to never-again complain about her father's mealtimes antics. Well not for a little while anyway. Whilst her mother had nattered and inquired almost non-stop through the meal Alexis has found herself with plenty of time for some introspection whilst not rising to her mother's often near rancid bait.

She's fended off a series of constant questions regarding her own love life including the direct one from her mother about whether she is still a virgin. She was so not answering that one just as she had refused to since she was sixteen. She had provided Max's Christian name but nothing else other than he was 'cute' and 'nice' and certainly nothing about what they got up to.

Alexis was still slightly traumatized by her mother's statement that it was only sex and it didn't matter. She believed she sat in the middle ground somewhere between locked up tight until marriage and given away like a freebie. She was comfortable with that, and had even discussed a few things with Kate whom she had found to be empathetic and not pushy. She had tried Lanie first but the ME's advice tended to be a little blunt and perhaps overly focused on the physical elements. She also knew from the lack of intervention from her father that Kate had not broken her confidence. This too was refreshing.

However her mother's probing about Alexis' sex life had been nothing as to how Alexis had then forced herself to remain calm and collected so as to not respond to some of her mom's barbs poorly disguised as queries and other near provocations regarding her father's relationship with Kate Beckett. Or him playing at cop. Or how it was all Kate Beckett's fault.

Her mom had still tried to get Alexis to drink alcohol with her as she has done since Alexis was about fifteen. Alexis still refuses despite her own experimentation and infrequent drinking whilst in college. She knows no-one has shared with her mom of her first family witnessed hangover following her high school graduation. Of course this wasn't her first hangover, simply the first one her dad and Grams knew about first hand.

Alexis wonders if her mother would ever offer her marijuana. Alexis knows her mother infrequently smokes cigarettes ('the role requires it Darling') but over the last three years she had become aware that her mother liked to smoke marijuana. She probably thought she was hiding it from her daughter but Alexis was familiar with the smell and the after effects. She had tried it once at a party and aside from the coughing much like when she had tried a cigarette, she had merely got a headache and now tried to stay away from the pot smokers and other drug users at parties. Fortunately most of her friends abstained. She knew her dad used to smoke but gave up when she
was born. He still smoked the occasional celebratory cigar but that was the sum of it. During several of their father-daughter talks he had hinted that he had consumed drugs when younger but aside from saying that it was fraught with risk he had left it to her to ask questions or seek guidance.

Surviving dinner, Alexis had cleared the table and moved the trolley outside the room over her mom's protests that the service staff can do that.

Then when her mom takes time to freshen up and this gives her an opportunity. Alexis seizes her chance and in moments she has planted the two listening devices in the room and is back in her seat before her mother emerges from the bathroom.

Then when her mother returns to the room, the careful détente over dinner is only moments away from fracturing. Or so she hopes. Or more accurately needs as there were people relying on her.

"Mom, why did you come to New York?" *And we're off.*

"Sweetie, what sort of question is that to ask your mother. I came to look after you and your father of course."

"But neither of us, actually requested that. Dad certainly wasn't in a fit state to and your marriage has been over for fifteen years. He's remarried and divorced since and is now extremely happy with Kate. So he didn't, doesn't, need you here. I don't need you here."

Alexis powers on before her mother can intervene.

"Look Mom, it's not that you are unwelcome but now isn't the best time for a visit. Dad has a strong support network round him. So do I. Also he has made provision and plans for such an event. Between Grams, Kate and myself we have it all in hand. And if there is anything we can't handle we have the Twelfth and the rest of the NYPD, all of RCE, Black Pawn and if there is anything else Dad knows a lotta guys.

"Mom at the airport and then in the later street interview you implied, no actually pretty much stated to the press that I wanted you here. But I didn't actually ask you to come. In fact I remember specifically requesting you to stay in LA and that I would call and give you updates."

"Sweetie, you didn't call and I was worried."

"I didn't mean to forget to call Mom, it has been a pretty traumatic five days, especially at the beginning. Less than two weeks ago we were celebrating Kate's forthcoming promotion and her moving in. And then Dad was shot. I missed one call. You never called back and then you just turn up in New York." *First poke. Will she respond?*

"But Sweetie, that's why I wanted to be there for you. The media at the airport was entirely a chance encounter." *Bullshit!*

"Mom, I don't believe you. I've had training from Dad, Grams, Paula, even Gina in handling the media. The interview at the airport was totally pre-arranged. That many news outlets don't hang around waiting on the off-chance of some breaking news." *Another prod. This may take longer to provoke her. Oh well.*

And so it goes with Alexis trying to gently provoke her mother with little success until Alexis remembers the point raised by Steve and Suzanne from their visit the other night. The Bel-Air
"So you know that dad has been teaching me about finances and being responsible for managing wealth?"

Her mother regards her as if she had just announced she was running for the White House.

"What for?"

"Well to teach me how deal with all the money and assets. He started by making me the owner of the Bel-Air house when I was fifteen. Under a trust of course." There. She has to bite on that.

"Your father gave you MY house!" Hit!

"Mom it is not YOUR house." Pushing now.

Alexis knows she needs to keep calm and steer the conversation in the correct direction, but only relatively so. Whilst she is here to provoke her mother to divulge more information and the possibly contact whoever has been providing her with information on her dad's finances and other matters, what she is saying and doing is grounded in her true feelings and there is definite strong element of reality and truth running through her arguments.

"As I said it was planned as part of my life education. More specifically this is part of my financial training. Dad wanted me to experience owning and managing a large capital asset with all the complexities around leases, maintenance, inter-state issues, taxes and legal matters."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Oh shit Mom, try not to whine.

"Why should I? It makes no material difference to you. You still get to live there rent free for as long as you want to."

"But it does Sweetie." Oh oh here it comes.

"You could come and live with me in your house. We could be roomies." Eww, definitely not happening Mom!

"Mom you know I go to college in New York not LA. Remember I am going to Columbia right here on Manhattan. I live in the dorms this year. Next year I don't know what I am doing but I'm not moving to LA. I don't want to come and live with you Mom." Plus there is no way I would choose you over dad if I had to live with a parent.

"You could give it to me."

"Give what Mom?" Alexis' stomach fell. She suspected as much but had secretly hoped that she wouldn't be brazen enough, shameless enough to do it. To ask for it.

"The house of course, Silly."

"Why would I do that?"

"So I can live in it."

"Mom, you already live in it. You are not charged rent. You don't pay maintenance, local taxes, and for the last few years you've not even paid utilities. You have nothing to complain about. Certainly no right to either."
"But it's not mine. Not a proper home."

"If you feel like that then buy one of your own."

"I can't afford it." No shit. Really?

"Mom excluding the house and other non-cash items, Dad gave several million dollars at the time of divorce plus he has provided money every year since." Alexis knows exactly how much her mother got - three million (half of the cash back then) in the divorce, and since then she had received a further four point eight million from Dad over fifteen years. This was not including ex-gratia payments and ad-hoc requests or money provided for Alexis. All up it was close to ten million dollars.

"I can manage my own affairs."

Her Mom is almost irate. Alexis smiles internally at the inopportune use of the term 'affairs' by her mother. She knows it is petty and judgemental but her mother deserves it. She should be at her Dad's beside or with Grams and Kate, or even back in the Dorms studying. Instead she is here playing mind games with her birth mother.

"Mom, there is an armed guard outside the door because you can't manage your own finances and 'affairs' and it has intruded into our lives at the worst possible time." Alexis can't keep the sarcasm out of her voice and decides not to bother. She ramps it up further.

"And when you try to manage your affairs you go and do something stupid, irresponsible and in all probability illegal."

"I do not." Alexis turned on her best ME death glare and raised one eyebrow. Her Mom actually shrunk back from her.

"You've tried to re-mortgage the house twice in the last three years."

"The most recent time, they – sorry the Californian authorities - wanted to charge you with attempted embezzlement. I personally had to sign an affidavit refusing to press changes. Alternatively they wanted to send you for an assessment in respect of your mental health."

Her mother remains silent in the face of those pieces of information. And Alexis shifts the focus of their conversation, satisfied that she has planted some seeds there.

"Well I don't want you trying to hurt Dad or especially his relationship with Kate. Not that you have any chance of that. They are more than rock solid. Some of the things they have faced would break relationships. They've grown together from them."

"Oh Sweetie, I'm not trying to do that. Why would I? Hard as it is for you to hear this you need to know that your father won't stay the course. He'll get bored. He's done it before."

Alexis has often wondered if her mother actually believes the tripe she spouts. Tripe – that's a good term, nicely dancing around the truth of what they were – self serving lies.

"He won't this is it for him. They have both said so. Grams and I can feel it, see it. Anyway you're in no position to talk or judge Mom. You left us. Not the other way round."

"You can't possibly remember. But I'm not trying to break them up." Yeah right.
"Yeah, like you didn't try to sabotage Dad's marriage to Gina? I was there. I was old enough to notice."

"I never!"

"Mom, I was upstairs when you tried to get Dad to go for a 'Top Ten' moment.

"So?"

"At his engagement party!"

"I don't see what that has to do with anything."

"Mom, Dad was getting married to someone else and you crash his engagement party. And don't deny it because even dad isn't stupid enough to invite his ex-wife to the engagement party for his future wife.

"You rock up and effectively proposition dad in public. Gram almost choked on the cherry in her drink. You rendered Dad speechless – not something that is easily done." Although Alexis will acknowledge that she has witnesses Kate leave her dad incapable of speech on a number of occasions and may have taken some hints to try out on Max.

"I am surprised Gina didn't have you thrown out."

This is met with dead silence from her mother who appears to be having trouble with her features again.

"She did?" Then it dawns on Alexis what actually happened and why her mother is so silent.

"Ha. Oh God I bet that was a come down." Alexis can't help herself. Her mother's embarrassment and humiliation is beyond amusing.

"Fuck Mom, how could you?" Alexis finds that the profanity simply leapt from lips automatically. Alexis lifts her right hand to prevent her mother replying.

"Second thoughts don't answer that. I don't actually want an answer. You deserved that."

Somehow Alexis has gone from being mortified and angry over her mother's behaviour to being more amused and bemused by it. The epiphany is almost instant.

All those years she has tried to make excuses for, and to accept and tolerate her mother's weaknesses and defects. All the stress and making nice. It was pointless. Nothing would actually change her mother's ingrained character. Nothing she could do could motivate her mother to be different to be better. Not like dad and Kate had done for each other.

Her mother is blissfully ignorant of the thoughts in her daughter's head.

"Look Alexis, I won't deny that I have grown used to, even dependent to a certain extent upon your father's generosity over the years." No shit Sherlock!

"I know that Gina got a lot more than I did. Even with her pre-nup her divorce settlement was very generous. I don't even know why she works, I wouldn't if I had that much money. Something like that would be more than sufficient for me to never need to bother your father again."

She knew just enough about Dad's finances to be dangerous. She wasn't even that greedy or at least that's what her mom seemed to be thinking and saying. Alexis knows she needs to push her mother
now and get her to divulge that little bit more.

"Mom, I don't know how much Gina got. Anyway surely over the years you have got more than enough from him."

"Ten million. That's what Gina got plus a percentage. That would be enough. The cash would be enough. For everything," Bingo. Who is giving her this information?

"But I need funds now. Not only to pay off some loans and debts but to ensure my future. Look Alexis truth is my career is not doing well and a gamble I took isn't paying off. I need some help."

"Well your timing is terrible. Dad almost dies and you turn up looking for money. Lots of money. More than you have any right to. I don't know where you got your information from or why you think you are entitled to anything. You're so clearly wrong.

"Dad clearly told you that once I reached college age the money would stop. He's given you more than enough over the years. More than he legally had to I am sure. Especially as I lived with him. I don't know how you can be so shameless and selfish to do this. Especially now." Alexis suddenly finds she isn't acting at all. The anger, the disappointment, the heartbreak are all real, as are the tears she fights before they fall.

"Mom, you should consider yourself lucky that you got me here tonight. You could have got Grams in this room. Or Paula or Gina. Or Steve and Suzanne. Or the people from Taylor Matthews or the Police. Or Kate.

"She doesn't scare me."

"Well she should. She takes down murders and thugs for her job. Single handed if required. She loves Dad more than her own life, just like he does for her. She would do anything to keep him and our family safe and happy.

"She's not your family Darling. I am. Like your father too."

"You forgot Grams." Pausing for effect Alexis goes again.

"And Kate."

"She's not your family." Her mother counters again.

"Oh but she will be. Legally she already has a lot of authority and anyway we already consider her and her dad de-facto members of the Castle Clan." She'll be his last wife. My step-mom.

"Anyway, one of the key reasons I came here tonight was to ask you to cooperate with Taylor Matthews and dad's other representatives." Alexis fixes her mother with a hard stare.

"They are going to fix your latest fuck up Mom. Not for you. But for Dad. For Grams. For Kate. For Me. You need to understand that this will be the last time. No more feeding from the Castle trough."

Alexis pauses. Her eyes remain locked onto to her still startled mother who is recovering from the shock of being so completely chastised by her own daughter. The surprised expression on her face is being replaced by one of anger escalating to feigned, or even possibly real, outrage.

"How dare you!" she splutters.
"How dare I!!" Alexis mimics back.

"Quite simply. You've worn out your welcome Mom. Overplayed your hand and destroyed what increasingly diminished trust and tolerance we had for your antics. Betrayed the love and trust we have shown you. All those years that dad and Grams never really held you accountable for your actions and the hurt you caused. But you know what perhaps it is better that way. For me to have one parent who loved and supported me so unequivocally and completely. Who has been there for everything.

"After this you are on your own. You still get to live in the Bel Air house – for the moment. I will keep in touch but it is going to take me a long time to recover and begin to feel like I want to have any involvement with you. Certainly some time before I come and visit. You are not to turn up in New York to visit us without prior approval and if so you'll be in a hotel at your own expense."

Her mother's face is mottled with rage and she has actually risen from her seat, and is up on her feet and now within touching distance of Alexis who returns the glower with interest. Neither appear willing or ready to back down but Alexis has no intention of it escalating.

"Don't even think about slapping me like you did two years ago. You are beyond lucky I never told dad. He would never forgive you. Plus Kate has been teaching me some self-defence techniques. Believe you me it wouldn't end up the way you wanted." Alexis can feel the tension in her facial muscles and her body. The adrenaline is pumping but it is time to turn away not push any more.

"I'm going now Mom. I will speak to you before you leave. If you are invited to see dad it will be on our terms and that means no press conferences. No showboating. No provoking others. Do not embarrass us or yourself." She turns to go but pauses and faces her mother again.

"Don't forget any assistance is conditional on your cooperation.

"Good night Mom."

There is no hug or kiss. Both are too wound up for a hackneyed and false exchange of affection. With her farewell delivered Alexis moves towards the door and collects her coat and purse.

Leaving the hotel room, she slams the door for extra effect and the satisfaction it gives. Not even the slightest bit embarrassed by her pettiness, Alexis strides off and heads straight for the elevator collecting Mike on the way. Together they head back to the 36th floor. The taciturn Taylor Matthews operative sensibly says nothing during the brief elevator journey.

Clare Dunne meets them in the lobby on the 36th and leads them quickly to the Boardroom.

Once inside, Alexis found Ely waiting with a marker and a floor plan of the room. She quickly marked off the location of the two listening devices she had planted. Only then did she speak.

"Someone is definitely using my mom to get at Dad or Kate or both of them. Or us. To be honest I don't know or understand what the motive might be. But clearly Mom knows way too much about Dad's finances. She's never known or shown as much interest before. She knows what Gina's confidential divorce settlement is and pretty much outright asked for the same deal to go away."

Clare nods, and steps in close to the still visibly emotional young woman. Gently touching her forearm she looks at her directly.

"You did great Alexis. Leave the rest to us. If Meredith Lee is in some form of partnership or arrangement hopefully the bugs and the phone tap should help us uncover it. Mike will escort you
back to the Loft now unless you want to go elsewhere."

Less than ten minutes later, Alexis exits the lobby of the hotel, Mike two paces behind her and nods to Michael as he holds the town car passenger door open for her. She'll be home soon. She'll need as many hugs as she can from people she knows love her and who she can trust with her heart.
Chapter Summary

Alexis has confronted Meredith in the hope of learning who or what is behind her unexpected appearance in New York. Elsewhere, other members of 'Team Castle' are in action.

New York Ledger Website – Front Page

Bellevue Hospital has announced that author and Police Consultant Richard Castle's condition has been upgraded from critical to stable. His status has improved sufficiently for him to be scheduled to be transferred from the hospital's dedicated Intensive Care Unit to a general surgical ward tomorrow (Tuesday).

His family, publishers and the NYPD are yet to comment publicly. His representatives were unavailable for comment when we reached out to them.

New York Ledger Website Page Six Online - Out and About on the Town with Terri.

Meredith Lee, the former Mrs Castle the First, has gone to ground since her previous encounter with one of our roving reporters. Sources claim she has been holed up in her hotel suite at the Mandarin Oriental and failed to make a dinner booking at Balthazar last night. Why the previously publicity hungry actress has suddenly become averse to media exposure is unknown but there is speculation that legal intervention from Richard Castle's family and business interests may have played a part.

Alexis Castle, Meredith Lee's daughter with Richard Castle, was seen arriving at the Mandarin Oriental by town car this evening and leaving less than two hours later. Speculation is that she dined with her mother in the hotel suite. Quite what the Miss Castle's take on her mother's pronouncements regarding her father's health and relationship with NYPD Homicide Detective Kate Beckett is unknown.

There has been no comment from any of the Castle family and it is understood that Ms Lee is currently unrepresented.

17.58 PDT, Taylor Matthews West Coast Operations Centre, Orange County, California

Paul 'Marty' Martinez looked out from the team room at the rest of his crew working in the loading bay. All were Hispanics and dressed down to blend in. But importantly they did not look like gang members, wearing none of the possible gang colors that might provoke or escalate any chance encounter. It was a careful line but a necessary one. He noted with wry irony and not a little sadness that his home town could be as dangerous a place as Afghanistan or Iraq for the unwary in the wrong place.

Only a careful observer would see past the outer layers and discern the physiques and trained alertness of his fellow Taylor Matthews operatives. Tonight's op was intel gathering in one of LA's many Latino centric suburbs. They would merge in and hopefully remain completely
inconspicuous amongst the hundreds of thousands of other Hispanics in LA.

Two vehicles were parked near the warehouse doors – a pickup and a hatch. Both were cleanskins. Bought second hand and registered to two different shell companies. It would take a clever or determined person to trace the vehicles back to Taylor Matthews. More importantly the attempt to trace them would raise flags and let them know someone was digging.

The TOE for tonight was simple. Teams of two. One team per vehicle. One male (Roberto 'Rob' Smith a half-Spanish/half-Scottish naturalized American with eight years in the UK's Parachute Regiment and 4 tours of Iraq and Afghanistan) and one female (Constantia 'Connie' Aguilar – fourteen years Military Police) in the hatch. He and one other male (Tomas Cortez – nine years Rangers) in the pickup. Personal weapons only. Vests on the floor just in case. Encrypted tactical radios and phones with secure Bluetooth. Bottled water and a few sweets to keep them going.

They already had a few leads from Clare Dunne back in New York as well as the information from the DEA, but they like all good operators knew nothing beat eyes on the target. No better way to carry out an accurate threat assessment and plan the next phase of the mission.

However as of now they were still short of much of what they needed to be able to wrap this job up. Head office were watching intently. Marty was unused to such close supervision from their bosses. Taylor Matthews' MO was to trust the teams in the field. Not in this case as this task involved Client Zero. Marty had to admit that he was curious about what sort of history the supposed Party Boy author had with their straight as rails bosses that had a hell of a lot of company resources dedicated to it. It had resulted in him asking for an explanation from Sass but she had not made it particularly clearer.

Turning away from the final preparations outside he looks down at his computer's LCD screens. It had turned out that there was a DEA intelligence file on Jesus Agraz aka 'Sweet Angel'. The un-redacted version was on screen at this minute.

He had never had this sort of access to law enforcement data and intelligence in his previous jobs. But since joining Taylor Matthews almost three years ago after leaving the Marine Corps he had become accustomed to it.

Taylor Matthews has a unique arrangement with the Federal Government and quite a few state and local law enforcement organisations. They work in partnership and provide mutual assistance in a range of scenarios. All this was possible because of three simple things.

Firstly there was the Taylor Matthews Charter than all employees from top to bottom had to sign off and follow without fail. The Charter was simple. They only operated domestically within the defined borders of the United States. They complied with all laws at Federal, State and local level. Any employee could recuse themselves from an operation if they believed any law was being broken but they had to notify their Operational Lead and copy in the Head Office. They could not publish or otherwise divulge any information regarding the firm or their clients whilst employed or upon leaving.

The next reason was simple. They were damn effective and efficient. They had an extremely high success rate and their rates more than fair given that aforementioned efficiency. This not only attracted good clients (well the ones that were accepted) but also good employees as there was nothing more appealing for ex-service types that working where the outcomes were almost universally positive. Success is a mighty powerful motivation.

The final reason was down to the two men who lead the organisation. Derek Taylor was a retired Navy SEAL and Tim Matthews ex-US Army Ranger. Both exuded integrity and enforced it.
without fear nor favour. The standard company joke was that of the top hundred companies in the US – 25% were clients, another 25% wanted to be but their lawyers won't agree to Taylor Matthews' non-negotiable conditions and the remaining 50% Taylor Matthews won't touch. There was more than an element of truth to it.

For this particular operation the deal for the intel from the DEA was simple. They shared everything they learnt with the DEA and if they didn't risk compromising the evidence, they could complete their assignment before letting the Fed's run with it.

The information contained in the file was both detailed and sparse. A not usual contradiction when dealing with drug related matters even with relatively unknown suspects. On the surface Jesus Agraz appeared to be one of those celebrated success stories – juvenile gangbanger made good with a college degree. Turns out he was simply better at adapting and blending into mainstream Los Angeles. In other words, show business. He started as a 'runner' whilst at college and now less than five years after graduating he's an assistant producer for up and coming cable channel XtmX.

It was apparent that he was able to mix his legal and illegal activities without attracting suspicion. Certainly on the periphery of the glitz and glamor was the sordid and corrupt including drugs, sex-trade and worse, and often the line between both was blurred. Where Agraz was ahead of the game was by staying out of the limelight and not attracting attention from law enforcement. But quite what his motive with Meredith Lee was remained unknown and the subject of multiple investigations on the East and West coasts. Suspicion was turning towards Agraz being commissioned by an unknown third party to act against the Castle/Rodgers. The who, the why and the what were all major questions for them.

Marty's review of the suspect was interrupted when Mitchell Belmont, the West Coast Operations Lead, taped Marty on the shoulder. He was one of the few odd ones out inside Taylor Matthews with no military experience. Instead he had almost thirty years in law enforcement first with the Los Angeles County Sheriff and then as local prosecutor. Despite the supposed desk job he was among the fittest here still running Marathons and leading one of the many Tough Mudder teams Taylor Matthews fielded.

"Good to go Marty?"

Mitchell liked Marty. The ex-Marine Captain was seventh generation Hispanic-American and damn proud of his mixed heritage. Five generations of his family had served in the Marine Corps from the Philippines onwards and two had paid the ultimate price. He was smart, a good planner and careful. The last was not something you necessarily associated with ex-military even from the more elite end of the spectrum. In three years Marty had bounced quickly up the ranks to be a team leader and generally left to run his own ops. But not this one given the interest coming from the top.

"Hey Mitch. Just about ready." Marty pauses then voices his concerns.

"Something doesn't add up here. The suspect feels off, and I still don't see a motive or reason behind the operation. It's not worth the effort or risk on their side to recruit another drug mule or minor celebrity porn film. The suspect has almost perfect cover which is worth much more than what he is apparently risking it for. There's something else here but no one seems to know what it is." Running his hands through his hair he continues.

"Maybe we'll find something tonight."

9.05 pm EDT, Bellevue Hospital, Intensive Care Unit.
Kate Beckett slipped quietly through the door to Rick's ICU room. She hadn't meant to be quite this late. She had nipped back to the Loft to get some food and freshen up. She had been kicked out earlier around 5.30 pm when the surgical attending as well as the ICU doctors and number of hangers on had turned up and told her to come back in a couple of hours..

Clad in dark leggings, a long brown sweater and tennis shoes, her hair lose around her almost makeup-free face she bore little resemblance to her Detective alter-ego. Something that she found pleased her more than she had thought it would. Her different appearance had certainly slowed recognition from the officers from the 12th outside the ICU.

Smiling wryly she turned her thoughts back to Rick. This should be his last night in ICU. Was it only Thursday he was fighting for his life. So much can change in only five days.

She scanned the room. There was now only one machine on far side of the bed. There were fewer wires and sensors on his body. The oxygen mask was gone. More progress. Good progress.

He was asleep. Still on the flat of his back. Not a natural position for Rick and one that had been giving him some trouble. His handsome features were twisted in a slight grimace. The doctors had warned of some discomfort after they withdraw the chest tube and change in medications to less powerful ones. The transition could be difficult and not a little troublesome especially regarding pain management.

As she padded softly towards the bed, she pauses to move the chair closer but one leg snags on the floor and the noise of the scrape as the leg drags is enough to wake him.

"Hey." If she's brutally honest with herself that monotone voice with the timbre of sleep flavouring it is one of her favorites. Not just the aural qualities but the memories and emotions that accompany it. Of waking naked. Bodies intertwined. Perspiration earned or imminent. Of how she'll secretly lie there and stare at him shamelessly and wait for him to drift into consciousness. Compulsion, comfort, challenge and cherished. So many overwhelming sensations that previously left her so conflicted and things between them so complicated.

"Hey yourself."

With the obvious question on cusp of her lips about his health, her boyfriend and nearly fiancé – wow that still takes getting used to – beats her to the punch.

"Hurts a bit. Having the chest tube removed was a little bit, umm, sensitive. Still adjusting to breathing without it and the oxygen. But" Then his face breaks into a big grin. The one that Kate knows he only shares with his close friends and family. Shorn of the need to pretend and protect. "The less hooked up and entangled I am the closer to home I feel."

She can't but help respond with an equally good grin of her own. The sort she knows makes his heart simultaneously stutter to a near stop and soar. He had confided that to her one evening, and she had made it a little task of hers to try and given him at least one of those moments every day if she could.

"I'll be glad to get out of here. Even if it only to a general ward bed. One step closer to home."

"The doctors said I would probably be a bit unsettled and disturbed for up to forty-eight hours as I adjust to being off the chest vent and the change in medication. You don't have to stay." He makes the opportunity for her to go whilst all the time wanting nothing more than her presence near him, with him.
"You're here." It is both a statement of fact and an answer. The only answer she needs to give. She reaches down to stroke his cheeks with both hands. They're smooth, he must have been shaved today by one of the staff. She'll take advantage of that and the absence of the oxygen mask. First with teasing kisses across his face until she reaches his lips. Then she's not teasing anymore. Neither is he. She remembers to reluctantly pull back before his diminished lung power is put to the test but its more than enough to have both of them slightly rosy cheeked and breathing faster and deeper.

Suddenly the desire to be closer to him is too much for her to resist. He seems to feel the same. Somehow he contorts his body enough to make a space on the left side of the bed. Kate slips the tennis shoes from her feet and clammers onto the bed squeezing her lean body into the small pocket of space he has made. His left arm is beneath her shoulder and so she cants her body into his so the arm hooks round her shoulders, her left leg hooking over his leg, pushing her pelvis forward bumping against the solid mass of his hip, her head against his left shoulder. Face to face in a proximity not experienced by them for five long days.

"Kate." His voice is full of desire, need, pain, fear, lust and love and she can no longer control her own entirely instinctive and automatic response to that. Biting her lower lip in frustration, a habit she knows Rick finds utterly compelling, she stares into the ocean of his eyes. All she has ever needed is there and the honesty of his devotion is almost too much. But she is done with the game, the dance, the flirting, the running. She's his in every way that matters.

"Rick." She answers his magic with her own spell wrapped around his name. She's never had the words, always relied on actions to stretch beyond the comfort of her walls, but she's trying for him. To reciprocate and respond to the lure of his language with lyrics of her own.

She smiles at him and he returns it. Somehow they know. Their mutual bond means they need no more words for now. Both shake their heads in acknowledgement of the curious but heady mixture of frustration, passion and acceptance knowing they can go no further tonight and perhaps for quite a while longer. They nuzzle each other one last time.

Rick starts to drift off and before Kate follows him she murmurs into his neck. "Never mind, we can always cuddle Castle."

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20.33 PDT, Somewhere in East LA.

Marty keys his throat mike.

"Charlie One back off maybe another twenty yards." Traffic is too light and despite their choice of low profile cars they do not have enough vehicles in the operation to safely tail the target. With only two tracking vehicles, Marty is sure that they have been detected. The questions are what will their target do and what should they do?"
Before he can make a decision the dark grey Escalade they are following turns right again into a street it has already travelled. As the team's hatch approaches the junction and starts to indicate right Marty makes the call from his vantage point in the pickup.

"Charlie One abort."

The indicator blinks off and the car proceeds ahead across the junction. Following some four cars and approximately thirty yards behind the pickup just makes it across as the lights change.

From the corner of right peripheral vision Marty spots the Escalade coming back onto the road. Instinctively he reaches down and secures his right hand on the parkerized grip of his Sig 226. Tapping the wrist pad against his left thigh twice, he warns his team to stand to.

Switching to another pre-set channel he notifies East Coast Operations.

"Whiskey this is Michael. Busted. Action Imminent."

"Acknowledged Michael. Abort."

"Roger" Marty confirms the order but before he can do anything else he spots two minivans pulling out from the next junction. Their side doors are open and each vehicle has two gunmen with what appear to be compact submachine guns similar to Uzi's, magazines in the pistol grips.

Instinctively he hammers the comms for the team channel and sets them lose. "Weapons Free. Evade!" The team will only fire if their lives are threatened.

The hatch accelerates and without warning cuts across a gap in the left hand lanes of oncoming traffic heading off at 9 o'clock from the pickup. Both minivans accelerate after the car and they make a hole to pursue the car, forcing the oncoming traffic to slam to a stop.

Marty's driver, is staying cool holding his speed and doing nothing to arouse suspicion. The Escalade pulls alongside and seems to hang there for a few seconds before accelerating away and moving into the left hand lane.

"Hang a left at the next junction."

"Charlie One status?"

"Two tango's in pursuit. Negative gunfire." The 'yet' is unsaid. No doubt their adrenalin is pumping but Taylor Matthews didn't hire newbies. The team were all veterans of multiple conflicts and no strangers to gunfire. Even back home in the United States.

The hatch only makes it two more blocks before the shooting begins. Connie reports the shots in a neutral tone and holds her own fire but has her Sig out and ready. Rob has managed to gain a slight edge but the two minivans appear to have more powerful engines and within seconds one of them is almost parallel. Nine millimetre rounds may not be especially effective but enough of them will do damage and well the cheap car had never been intended for any sort of combat or soaking up punishment. The shooter is using short bursts aimed low at the engine and front wheels.

This in itself is fortunate for the team, their opponents appear to be trying to disable the car and not kill them. The main passenger compartment offers next to no protection even from 9mm rounds. Why they aren't shooting to kill is another question that can wait until later.

The pickup has turned off the main strip and they are now on a road parallel to the other team, but at least a couple of blocks back. The pickup accelerates quickly. Much faster than the forty mile
per hour speed limit but they are moving to catch up with their other team and intercept the pursuers.

Less than a minute later and the hatch has executed two sharp turns and bought them back into range of their backup.

Rob brakes hard and slams the smaller vehicle against the bigger van and whilst physics are not in their favour the surprise is enough to make the driver of the van miscalculate and shy away enough to collide with a large garbage bin on the side of the road. With the van's momentum lost, the smaller car accelerates away again heading for the main road and the nearby freeway ramp.

As they complete this manoeuvre it is only seconds later that the pickup enters the same junction from the right left side clips the rear of the second van spinning it out. Despite the bumps from the collision and the less than even road surface Marty has his gun up and steady with the perfect angle on the occupants but he holds his fire. Not tonight.

The pickup accelerates after the smaller car heading for the designated assembly point.

Sure enough the hatch is pulled over in whatever cover the nearest building offers. The crew of two have weapons up scanning for targets. As they approach Marty spots the Escalade stopped on the flyover. The heavily tinted windows are still up but he knows there are eyes on them. Regardless of this the crew quickly switch out of the immobilized car into the rear bench of the pickup. No sooner than the rear door closed do they accelerate away abandoning the shot-up vehicle. Rob and Connie confirm some minor scratches and cuts from glass and few bruises but no bullet wounds. No one in the team is foolish enough to believe it was anything other than dumb luck that prevented worse injuries.

It has taken less than three minutes from first contact with the minivans. This short by sharp action has the advantage of being over before any news helicopters can make it into the area.

"Whiskey this is Michael."

Marty reports in that the Taylor Matthews team have extracted themselves with no return fire on their own and only minor injuries. But all-in-all the evening is a wash.

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21.03 PDT, Taylor Matthews West Coast Operations Centre, Orange County, California

By the time Mitch Belmont had arrived back in the office several news stations were covering the shooting. Mitch sped to his desk and began calling the LAPD and LA County Sheriff’s office to disclose their involvement in the incident.

Sass hadn't left the office. She had been bunking down on her cot, when she was woken by the duty officer with news of the incident. She had got the enough of a debrief from Marty to call Clare back in New York.

"Hey Calamity our observation went to shit. The bad guys got some ninja skills and made the team. We got them out without casualties but lost a car. They won’t get anything off the car but this was not the issue.

"Our intel is seriously lacking and the bad guys have some trained muscle and are not afraid to use it. But more importantly this is far more serious than any of us previous considered. I recommend you increase protection and start working as many angles as you can.

"I'll get you a full report by midday tomorrow. Take it easy Babe."
Sass had hung up and Clare was frustrated and not a little concerned.

Who are these guys?

They have specific skills and firepower. These aren't simply gang-bangers or drug smugglers. They had been trying to disable the car and possibly grab a team member or more.

That they had made the OB team who were no smucks themselves showed a concerning level of skill. Tomorrow she would check with Sass and the Team Leader, Marty, to see if there were any red flags or if there were any gaps in their planning or execution.

The DEA and ATF have no known links from their suspect to the Zetas or any other cartel or group with paramilitary background.

She was grateful the OB team in LA had escaped with no injuries. It must have been a close run thing as one of the vehicles was a write-off.

Turning to the technician, she snaps a question at him.

"Ely. What have we got?"

"No outgoing or incoming calls but she did send a pre-saved message from her drafts to a local number. Database shows it as unregistered burner on AT&T network. Purchased in New York State but nothing else at the moment."

"What was the message content?"

"It appears to be encrypted. I've passed it on to our team for immediate action. It could take some time or even be impossible to crack."

"Thanks Ely." Clare pauses. The newcomer obviously has a question or perhaps more. She nods her permission.

"This is in-house right? No external agencies. We've got a lot of manpower deployed on this and Headquarters are watching everything." Ely pauses and looks at Clare uncertain whether he should continue.

"Who is this guy and his family?" He pauses again, definitely uncertain as Clare maintains an unchanged demeanour but with one eyebrow raised in question.

"I mean I know who he is. Richard Castle, big time crime writer, part-time cop. Shot in the line of duty. Apparently hooked up with his muse."

Clare stares at him as if to ask if he has finished.

"Ely, I'll cut you some slack because you're relatively new here.

"Richard Castle, his family and by extension Detective Kate Beckett of the NYPD are our most important client." The younger man's eyes go a little wider at that but he sensibly says nothing. Clare knows that the person opposite her has been vetted so she continues.

"You understand our internal references for clients don't you." Ely nods in acknowledgement.
"How our VIP Clients have a sequential number. Based on when they first engaged with us. Well Richard Castle and family are Client Zero. Richard Castle is a personal friend of both Derek and Tim. They go back before Taylor Matthews and in fact it is safe to say that Taylor Matthews wouldn't exist if it wasn't for Richard Castle."

"So this organisation currently has their safety and resolution of this matter as the number one priority." She looks the man squarely in the eyes.

"Understood?" It is not a question she expects to ask of most colleagues but Ely is not a full field operative in addition to being new to the company.

"One hundred percent. I'll get straight on the decryption. The lab reports analysis of the movie you provided should be complete later today. They'll be able to give you a fair amount of intelligence on both the technical and human fronts."

Clare is impressed by the deadpan delivery from the younger man. He was after all discussing a movie contain naked or effectively naked people having sex and yet made it sound like a routine intelligence discovery.

Turning her mind back to more immediate matter she decides it is time to beef up security around the Castles. This won't be an issue for most family members but her instincts tell her that Kate Beckett may be less than amenable to being protected. As a professional Clare knows the feeling and the constant and sometimes desperate need to prove not only that you are an equal but better than the men.

She messages Pietr Evritt, one half of the pair that originally went to the hospital with her. With Mike O'Leary on close protection detail for Alexis and Martha, she wanted his equally competent partner running the show at the hospital.

Less than two minutes later her phone rings.

"Good Evening Pietr. We're concerned about the level of opposition we're facing. Pull together a squad and reinforce the NYPD at Bellevue starting tomorrow morning. Two on each shift and for God's sake make sure the cops from the 12th and any others know you. No mistakes or over-excited cops please."

She hears his nearly grunted acknowledgement.

"I'll be getting backup for Mike too and once we've got some more bodies, I'll rotate you back to your partner."

Another grunt in response terminates the conversation.

She turns to Ely.

"I've got you a room on the 24th floor. Move your gear down there and try not to go over the top with the room service.

"I'll see you in the morning. And take care - we've already had too many things go bump in the night." With that she jogged to the elevator suddenly keen to get home and catch at least six hours good sleep before the new day bought her more challenges.
Rick has finally been cleared to be released from ICU. The day of his transfer to a general surgical ward dawns.

Bellevue Intensive Care Unit, Tuesday 3.01 am

Kate finally gave up and admitted defeat. It was impossible to sleep through the night on Rick's hospital bed. For a start he was alternating between deep sleep complete with minimal movement and a near wakeful state with whimpers of discomfort as the reduced medications and removal of the vent took effect. She imagined Rick's dreams were not of the pleasant kind much as her had been eighteen months ago. Secondly there simply wasn't enough space for her on the bed. That she had managed pretty much five hours of near-sleep was a tribute to their now seamless relationship and the utmost comfort they took from each other's presence. But proximity be damned she needed to stretch out and also needed uninterrupted sleep.

She dropped into the temporary cot with a huff. No doubt the night-duty nurses would enjoy their 'told you so' moment later. She needed to be home in their bed. With him. She was too tired to even acknowledge her total acceptance of that statement - even before she has moved out of her apartment. Nope not running. Certainly not right now with a crick in her back, muscles throbbing bearing witness to her commitment. She snarled into the pillow, and attempted to pound the hospital provided object into a supporting shape, all the time aware it was not one of the glorious down filled pillows that so complemented the smooth cotton sheets that lined their bed.

Gates Residence, 6.50 am

Victoria Gates was finishing getting dressed for another day in the service of the citizens of New York. There was a time that the sentiment may have seemed false, a platitude, mere lip service so to speak. But now after more than twenty-five years, two stabbings, six hospitalizations, and well a few more near misses - it was not only Beckett and Castle who dodged the literal bullet too often - it was simply the truth. There were the personal costs too. So many hours not home with missed moments with family, relationships with her children that had fluctuated and nearly fractured especially during their mid-teens, and two separations from the man standing in the room with her.

"Vicky, did you want breakfast before you go?" Her husband inquired as he padded around in his pyjamas and robe, feet bare and slapping the wooden floor. He has nothing on at college until late morning and is taking the laid back approach to the start of his day. She envies him some days, until she remembers he has to manage an unruly mob without the authority and discipline that captaincy in the NYPD endows her with. Not to mention her gun.

"That would be lovely, thanks DM." her voice rougher and unable to disguise her sudden emotions as she turns back to apply her makeup.

As if he understood her need, he quickly leant in to brush his lips over the back of her neck and he turns and heads downstairs to the kitchen. As he proceeds down the hall he passes the black ribbed photo frame containing the picture of Roy Montgomery sitting atop the delicate antique
drum table passed onto them by Vicky's grandmother. His wife's introspection is contagious and here with the image of his friend of more than three decades there is so much to still think about.

"Hey Roy" he voice low as if they were whispering together in a corner at a barbeque, beers in hand and one eye out for their wives or children. Reaching out to brush the edge of the heavy gilt frame he continues. "Your girl finally got her arse in gear and got her man. You were right about them. Complicated doesn't begin to cover it and nothing is easy with those two. Fated to be tested I reckon. But they're together" Starting to move, he can't help the next words that slip from his mouth. "I miss you Roy." With that he continued on to the kitchen. Vicky wouldn't want anything more than a simple muffin and some coffee and he best not screw that up.

He owed Roy so much. Surviving and thriving together in the army, meeting up in New York with Roy the rookie cop, and him the barrack lawyer made good, the introduction to Vicky, and the advice to change careers to the safer confines of the halls of academia rather than continue in the hotly contested and political halls of justice. David Reynolds loves his job. Tenured Professor of Law at NYU. He wondered if he would have been as happy as a prosecutor or more likely Assistant DA or possibly even DA.

What he did know for certain was that he truly missed his best friend.

He wondered what Roy would have been doing right now. It has been no secret that Roy had planned to retire, and was close to pulling the pin early. He had wanted to hold on until Kate Beckett was senior enough to be promoted up to Captain but the reality was that she had been at least five if not closer to ten years short of that when Roy had died.

Roy had never said where the money was coming from to retire early but David had his suspicions. He was sure it was legit – Roy had been meticulous about that after his short but tragic mistakes when a rookie. Furthermore, he had no doubt who had helped Roy build some financial security for Evelyn and the kids. After Roy had died, he had been his executor of his will. The trust funds had been a surprise to everyone and then when in addition Roy's kids' education was fully paid for from a low-key charity he had his suspicions confirmed. The result was that Roy's family was financially secure even if Roy's NYPD pension wasn't available should IA have found against him. In the end the silence from Kate Beckett's team had neutered even that real threat. Richard Castle was not just the party playboy the press made him out to be, if he was at all. Roy had never told him how they met, simply that from time to time Roy had joined Richard Castle, the Mayor, the odd judge or two and sometime other mystery writers for poker.

And now he had an extremely personal reason to thank the author. Last Thursday could easily have been him opening the door to their home to see the uniforms, probably the Chief of Detectives and the Service Chaplain. He had seen from the other side when he stood with Vicky on Evelyn's doorstep and watched how Roy's wife's face and world collapsed even before the words of condolence and comfort could begin.

Snapping back to it, he realised he need to have his wife's breakfast ready. A disrupted morning routine could make Vicky irritable and somehow he didn't want the responsibility of dozens of cops suffering because he messed up breakfast, especially a simple one.

Homicide, 12th Precinct, 9.05 am.

Detectives Esposito and Ryan were currently desk deep in cold case paperwork. This was Gates' way of keeping them out of trouble until IA cleared them for a return to full duty. She had let them keep their guns and badges, something IA had been reluctant to do until Gates had made them back down. She let also them participate in providing security for Castle and Beckett. She wasn't
Montgomery but Gates was their Captain.

Since arriving at the precinct two hours ago frequent coffee breaks and the odd game of wastepaper basketball had helped keep them sane. Partly, Ryan was also messaging his wife frequently, probably more than his partner believed was becoming. Ryan's phone once again vibrated accompanied by the familiar tune signifying a message from his beloved wife. Swiping the screen he read the message and pursed his lips as if holding something in.

"Fuck. Fuckitty, Fuck, Fuck!"

Esposito looked up in surprise, half expecting to see his partner in pain, or at least some obvious reason for the unexpected onslaught of profanity. Not that the profanity bothered him, although it still seems so discordant and uncharacteristic from the otherwise urbane detective. Javi knew better. Kevin Ryan was the undisputed f-bomb king of Homicide if not the entire 12th Precinct but was smart enough to do it away from major audiences. For him to let fly so publicly meant something was really amiss.

"Kev?"

"Oh shit, sorry Javi." Apologising with another profanity, his partner smiles wryly and then continuing on Kevin Ryan revealed the reason for his expletive explosion.

"You realise we haven't said thank you to Castle for saving our lives?" It is not much of a question because they both know the simple truth of the near confession.

"Oh shit." This from the Hispanic detective as it is his turn to swear.

"How did we forget?"

"Well were busy protecting his arse after the Silva family started their little clean up operation. And then there was that hot Taylor Matthew's operative. And her face-off with Beckett, and um, then Lanie threw us out." Ryan summarises. They both look fairly embarrassed by the excuses. Castle was one of them. More so since he was shot saving them and Gates. There was a code for this, and they were seriously remiss.

"Well my mama didn't bring me up to be rude. So you reckon we need to take a road trip Bro?"

"Damn straight. Best to check in with Beckett though and see how he's doing and where he is. Her text last night said he was due to moved out of ICU this morning."

After reversing his wrist to check his watch Esposito notes that it is still early.

"How-about we give them some more time and then check in. That will give us time to reduce this cold case stack to a level where Gates might cut us some slack to go visit Castle." Lowering his voice so only his partner can hear he continues. "I don't know if I'm entirely comfortable around this new version of Gates. Who knew she was human?"

"I know Bro. But your plan sounds good. I'll let Jenny know. She's said she wants to go say thank you firsthand when it is suitable. Plus we know Castle. If we don't get to him soon, who knows how big his ego will be. He relies on us to keep him grounded. God knows Beckett's no good at it now she's gone all girlie over him."

Grinning at the comment the partners settle back into their chairs and attack the stacked paperwork with new enthusiasm.
Kate had been kicked out from the ICU room around 8.30 am when the staff had come in to prepare for Rick's transfer to a private room on a general ward. She had held Rick's hand whilst the portable cot was packed away and the staff bustled through initial preparatory work marking the end of this stage of Rick's treatment and the window into the next.

In a matter of minutes she was in the way and despite her aura of authority and determination she had been requested to leave. So after a perfunctory and too brief kiss she had left with her bag and the tote that contained Rick’s portable possessions. She had instructions which ward to report to in about three hours. Apparently Rick's transfer would include a diversion to Imaging for some scans to check on the internal repair job to his shoulder and the state of his lung.

Exiting ICU Kate had called the Loft and spoke to Alexis – it was too early for Martha - and she updated the young woman about the temporary expulsion and the planned change of venue for Rick. She had expected them to wait in the privacy of the Loft before coming to Bellevue once the all clear was given. Instead Alexis has asked if they could talk privately.

Kate suggested the Affinia hotel when the two suites are still reserved for them and the cops protecting Rick. Alexis had agreed and said she would be there. As it was still early and the press presence was low she took the opportunity to walk from the hospital over to 34th Street. She hadn't spent much time outside since the shooting and the public exposure of their relationship. She didn't know how she would react when facing the press. The paparazzi would be easy, counting their aggression with her own. However, she was pretty sure that when confronted for the first time with the camera and microphone posing polite questions she would freeze or do something embarrassing. She had known it was inevitable but it was something they had never really discussed in detail. Kate resolved to speak to Paula Haas and get some expert advice on how to handle the situation without the experience of her partner to guide her.

Fortuitously Kate had avoided any press and what was meant to be brisk walk of a few blocks to the hotel had evolved into an extended stroll down to the river and a longer route in the chill of an autumn morning. She hadn't excised since Wednesday and extra exertion had helped clear her head. Nearing the hotel she stopped at a local deli to grab some tea and pastries before making her way through the lobby and to the suite. Alexis had arrived about ten minutes later with a new Taylor Matthews shadow who had simply nodded to Beckett and gone into the second suite where a shift change of cops was sharing coffee and bagels.

After shucking her jacket Alexis had sat at the table with Kate and sipped at her tea which Kate had decanted into a hotel cup accompanied by a plate covered in the pastries, some of which Kate had cut into pieces.

"Hmm good. I like the citrus twang. Good morning Kate." Alexis eases her way into the conversation.

"Hmmmm, me too. Not that I can get Rick to drink tea. Good morning Alexis."

"No Dad is definitely the java caffeinated type. Plus sugar and full-fat cream off course." They both smile at that.

Kate decides that that a pregnant pause would be inadvisable and so she begins. "So Alexis why did you want to talk?"

Kate already has a suspicion. Having only just started at college and part way through her first semester, Alexis may well be torn over she should do. Kate doesn't doubt Alexis will spend all the
time she has with Rick, but also that she wants to go back to college into the comfort and challenge of college life. But she needs the young woman to take control and make the decisions, and also ask the questions, however much she wants to advise and guide her.

Alexis gently teases a segment of Danish from the plate and into her mouth, postponing the conversation for a moment longer. Swallowing the morsel, she locates her courage.

"Kate, can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

Alexis sits there, in silence obviously stumped on how to go further, well to begin the conversation. Kate is surprised, the young woman has not been tongue-tied around her for a number of years. She has her father's way with words, albeit with a more thoughtful and cautious manner.

"Alexis, you don't have to worry. It is nice, sorry no that's not enough, it is wonderful that you may be concerned about possibly hurting my feelings but there is nothing to be afraid of. I would be more than happy to answer your questions if I can. I'm your friend. Well I hope that I'm you friend. I'd certainly like to be considered your friend." No didn't stumble on that at all Kate!

"Oh No, it's not that Kate. Of course you're my friend. Possibly, well probably more given that you will be living with Dad permanently.

"It's just that I'm not sure how to ask this. I'm afraid I might" Alexis pauses clearly stuck for how to enunciate her thoughts. She steals another small piece of pastry and then despite her usual social graces she starts to speak before the last of the food has been swallowed, unable to keep the words in. "Offend or upset you."

Kate simply keeps her eyes fixed on the young woman and gives her a comforting smile and nod, and Alexis continues.

"At the moment I can still catch up on the missed classes as friends have been recording lectures for me but if I leave it a few weeks longer then it might be difficult or worse. Then this semester, my first, will be a wash out and I'll have to start again. I don't want to start again. I don't want to have lose time. There is so much I have to do, want to do and experience. Not just college, but extra-curriculum activities, interning – Doctor Parish said I could apply to come back and she wrote me this fantastic referral if I wanted to try something else" Alexis barely pauses for breath "Plans for the summer break – friends and I have been researching volunteering in Costa Rica. I don't want to miss all the opportunities."

"But then I'm being so selfish. Dad almost died, I mean I know he's alive but it hurt so much. It scared me more than since I was a little girl, more than anything else he has done. I'm so afraid that if I am at college, I might miss something at the hospital. If he suddenly has an issue and then...." Kate leans across the table to grip both Alexis' hands. Alexis doesn't finish the sentence and all the implications but jumps straight on, deeper into her fears. "But it's not just now, what if I go away and something happens, and I can't get back in time."

"I really don't know what to do. So I wanted to ask you what to do. What you did. But at the same time I don't want to be responsible for bringing up such painful memories. Dad told me of all the regret he had and still carries for re-opening your mother's case and how even to this day there are ramifications from his choice. And well I don't want to hurt you. We've all suffered enough. Too much."

Still holding Alexis's hands Kate rises and comes round the table to pull the teenager into tight
embrace. Releasing their hands Kate strokes the long red locks and slowly rocks their bodies in comfort. This is what my mom did. I'm not Alexis' mom but I do care for her. Not just because she is Rick's but also for who she and what she means to me. I can do this. I want to do this.

Alexis speaks again. Her voice so low Kate can barely make out the words despite their proximity.

"Kate. When you were at Stanford and you had to come home after your mother's death. How did you cope? What decided your actions? I don't want to make the wrong choices, and regret things.

Kate gently sits the teenager back down, and resumes her own seat. Taking a sip of the now tepid tea, she once more looks Alexis directly in the eyes.

"I was on Christmas break after my first semester at Stanford and back home. I had such a wonderful time at college I almost didn't go home. I was going to stay in California, have a warm Christmas, but my dad called me and told me how much they both missed me, especially my mom, so I went home. It was the right choice. I caught up with friends back from college too but mainly spent time with my family – well as much as their work allowed. As an only child I was close to both my parent's but especially my mom.

"We were going to meet up for a meal, the night my mom was murdered. Dad and I left from home but mom was going to come straight from work. She never got there.

"To be honest, initially there wasn't a lot of choice or options so the decisions were pretty much out of our hands, my hands. At first my dad and I coped but once the initial shock and all the duties were gone, things changed, seemingly out of our control. My dad turned to alcohol, and in my own grief I didn't fully take that in. I coped differently." Kate stops there. Alexis doesn't need to know how she coped. Certainly not right now.

"I returned to Stanford but I couldn't concentrate, had no enjoyment, and couldn't deal with the sympathy and concern. I made it through much of the next semester but my grades were down and the phone calls from dad slowly stopped. Then I was called to be told my dad was in hospital injured after an accident. He had been drunk. He wasn't driving but he was hurt and the police were involved. So I went home. Never went back. Friends packed up my stuff and sent it home.

"I spend months getting my dad's life back together enough so that he didn't follow my mom. During that time I made decisions about college and my future, enrolling at NYU and doing summer school to get enough credits to start the next year.

"I had felt guilty for a long time that I hadn't stayed with my dad. Hadn't seen the warning signs. But I was caught up in my own sorrow.

"But Alexis you are not me. This, what has happened with your dad may be similar in some ways especially emotionally but it is not the same. Thank God.

"Your dad loves you so much, and naturally wants you close to him. But secretly though, I think your dad would like nothing more for you to go back to college and live your life. After all you're still here in Manhattan, never more than a taxi or subway ride away. The decision is yours, but I think you should go back to school." Kate sees the affirmative nod from Alexis who clearly can't speak at the moment.

"Don't worry too much about your dad." Kate squeezes Alexis's hands.

"I am going to take care of him for us, for you, for Martha, for me. Everything I denied you, my friends, my dad and myself when I was shot. I've learnt from it. From that three months of isolation
and the rest of the year that followed. I can't say it was wasted because there were important steps to be taken, so much more that your father and I learnt about each other and ourselves during that time. I do know it was frustrating and there were missteps and especially communication and trust issues that haunt us still, but we are doing better. We've learnt not to communicate almost solely by subtext. I love him and his family so much."

"Kate, I do trust you with him. With us too. There was time when I didn't when we were hurt so badly by your actions. I know dad tries to keep things from me, but I'm no fool, and I know how badly affected he was. I know about the therapy."

She continues anger clear in her voice. "It's not fair. Why do I have a mother who only seems to want me for cheque book access to dad, and yet you." Alexis halts suddenly aware of what she was about to say and clearly uncertain whether to continue. Kate nods gently to her and Alexis continues but in a significantly more moderate tone of voice, shorn of the anger. "And you, you had a wonderful mom who was there for you and she was ripped from you. It's not fair!"

"I did, my mom was my biggest supporter and confidante, and I can't tell you in words how blessed I feel about that. But this is only a feeling I have be able to nurture and let free in the last few years. Because of Rick. Your dad has done so much for me. He was able to push away all those years of anguish and hurt. To free me, and allow me to access my good memories of my mom from before her murder. I want to share those again. I want to be them too. To be someone's memories of their mother. I want that privilege, the responsibility, the joy and stress of being a mom myself. So long, I never thought I would be able to. But with Rick I can.

"One of the things I love most about your dad, is how great a father he is. Even before I loved him, I couldn't help but acknowledge the wonderful relationship you have. How unconditional his love is for you. How he would move heaven and earth for you. And now where we are, I want him to be that again. Some day. Not yet. But soon. We've spoken about it together, but we did want to speak to you as it concerns you too. Alexis today is not that time. Rick needs to be here too to participate, and out of hospital and healthy. But I need you to understand that as far as I am concerned the only thing your family is going to do is grow.

"There will be more occasions where there is stress, fear, tension, sadness. But not by choice. I know how much concern my job and your father's participation can be Alexis. But I want you to know I would give up my job for him. I did it once already, last year. That decision didn't stick because of circumstances not because I made the decision to go back. But I did return and Rick supported that. But I won't choose between the job and him. Or his family too. Not anymore. I need you to know this so that you can feel that your father is safe with me. That I only have his and your best interests at heart. I won't choose my career over him." Not like Meredith did. Like Gina did as well. Kate doesn't voice those thoughts but Alexis seems to understand. This family does subtext so well, perhaps because of rather than instead of their command of language.

Alexis nods and a shy smile lifts her face. It looks disconcerting against the mess of her face. Red rimmed eyes and smudged makeup.

"So how is Max?" Time to change subject to lighter matters.

"He's good. He's been really sweet. Organising with my roomie to get my lectures covered. Texting a lot. Calling. Comforting." She pauses again, once more uncertain how much to share.

"He came to visit the other night. Gram made a big deal out of it of course – I think she was trying to substitute for dad. I made him stay over. He didn't want to. Well he kinda did but thought it would be intruding, insensitive, selfish. I had to explain to him that I wanted the comfort, the warmth of someone else close to you, the beating of two hearts, the touch of skin and "Alexis trails
off, her face flushing and attempting to match her hair.

"It's alright I won't tell your father. Martha on the other hand….who knows? Although Alexis, I think he knows. He trusts you know. It's just that parents will always worry about their children, and dads especially about their daughters.

"How are you coping with the security and the rest of the situation Alexis?"

"The people from Taylor Matthews are very nice. I remember the woman, Clare, from a few years ago. She was security for me when I was in California for an extended stay with Mom. There had been problems with a stalker. The ones here in New York are nice and polite. They do make me feel safe but I wish we didn't need them."

"I wish I knew what my mom was doing. I know she is self-centred and can come across as purely focused on herself but never like this. Something is very wrong. Last night, I wasn't acting when I was so angry at her. But the more I think about it, the more I know something else is terribly wrong for her to do this. I just wish I knew what it was.

Kate squeezes Alexis' hand one final time before letting go.

"Alexis, I need to go soon. I want to be at the hospital as soon as your father is relocated and Lanie wants me to stop by the morgue on the way there." Like I am looking forward to that inquisition!

"That's okay Kate. Thank you for listening to me and helping. I am going back to the Loft to help Grams. She's been a lot better and she had some friends come over last night for a few hours. Please don't tell Dad. They didn't make too much mess and they did clear up mostly. I did the rest this morning. We'll come over to the hospital after lunch."

With this Alexis rises to her feet and takes the crockery to the kitchenette. Returning she picks up her jacket and shrugs it on. Walking to Kate she wraps her in a hug and presses a kiss to her cheek.

"Thank you. Sometimes having someone else's view on your introspection is very useful. See you this afternoon Kate."
Appreciation - Part I

Chapter Summary

Rick is finally checking out of ICU and preparing to begin the next phase of his long road to recovery.

Room 22, Ward 16 East, Bellevue Hospital

After Beckett had been bossed out of his ICU room, the nursing team had prepared him for relocation to a general surgical ward. However, the transfer also involved an assessment of his condition by the surgical team and other specialists. He had wished Beckett was there to keep track of all the names he failed to take in, and the detailed updates from the unwittingly anonymous talking heads.

The doctors had wanted to confirm that their repair work was good so despite the fact his shoulder injury was meant to be immobilized he had been prodded and inspected. Worse, far worse, a slight articulation of his right arm was made. Somehow he had avoided swearing but only because the residual pain medication continued to dull the worst of the agony. Unhappy with something they had conferred and he had then made an extended trip to the hospital's imaging department. The MRI had confirmed that pretty much everything was in place but that there was more muscular damage than originally estimated. Most likely missed due to the excessive trauma to the region. Additional recovery time, more physiotherapy, more pain, more disappointment. It's never like this in the books. Even his books.

Desperate, he had distracted himself by asking after the prognosis and what happened next. The talking heads had taken time to explain things to him and most of it stuck.

The worst of it was that the state of his musculature in his shoulder and upper right arm was worse than hoped. Even the most careful examination which had involved minimal contact, the lightest of touches and slight movement of his shoulder and the pain had been barely manageable. God knows how physical therapy was going to go when he began that.

The good news was that his chest injury including the collapsed right lung were responding positively. Whilst he no longer needed oxygen he now knows that whilst it could be weeks even a month or so before his breathing is perfectly normal, the worst of it should be gone within a week to ten days.

They had held up a mirror to show him the results of the shotgun blasts. Whilst his vest had saved his life, there had been more than enough damage done. The first impact on the right centre of his chest had left a deep bruise, so dark it appeared near black. It spread out across his stomach and chest like shockwaves from a tsunami. Heading up his right chest it merged into the smaller but no less dark bruising that crabbed out from under the dressings covering his shoulder from the second shot's impact point. He tried not to look too closely at those dressings which were also stained a different dark with some seepage from his wounds as they healed. Whilst the bleeding had been stopped the simple fact was that the skin and flesh around his right shoulder had been shredded in several places and the surgeons had concentrated on saving his life, and repairing the worst of the injuries. He was already aware he faced the possibility of a skin transplant to assist with the
healing on his shoulder. Maybe even plastic surgery.

Amazingly his first thought at seeing his bruised and broken body was that he was in so much trouble with Kate when she saw it. His second is that he didn't want Alexis or his mother to see this. Kate would see them, he had no doubt about it. Plus they had committed to each other that there would be no more secrets. And he knew she would have experienced much worse with her own injuries. But he desperately wanted to protect Alexis from seeing in such excruciating and vivid detail the consequences of him 'playing' cop.

Pushing the introspection aside he surveys his new accommodation. Actually slightly smaller than the ICU room it does have a TV, a private en-suite bathroom with toilet and shower. A two and a half person sofa and a couple of chairs for visitors.

There was more privacy as there was no glass wall and blinds for the windows. But even better he would be allowed electronics here. His phone and tablet were coming with Kate today. He wasn't so sure how he would operate things with only one hand currently available. Hence he had told Kate not to bother with his laptop for the moment. He wasn't so sure how he would operate things with only one hand currently available. Hence he had told Kate not to bother with his laptop for the moment. He was really looking forward to Kate's arrival. Whilst he watched TV for entertainment he relied on the Internet and his smart devices to keep him in touch with news, finances and how his business under the RCE banner fared. After almost a week off-line he had a lot of catching up to do. He was sure Steve and Harry had everything under control but he liked to observe and occasionally issue a directive. At least his enforced isolation from the rest of the world would be lifted.

He has no patience for it.

Hates hospitals.

Did so long before Beckett was shot.

But his choice of a second career, especially with his luck, certainly doesn't help the odds of avoiding these places. For now he certainly had a new appreciation of his injuries. Not to mention his pain threshold. A part of himself – admittedly a small part - is secretly impressed by the degree of pain he can accept whereas the rest of him never wants to experience that again.

Worse than the current pain levels - which really were settling down to discomfort now - was the certainty that he had a long and painful road to recovery. Something he had only just come to appreciate. He now acknowledged in his own mind that perhaps Beckett wasn't so wrong in seeking solitude for her recovery those eighteen months ago. There were bound to be a lot of moments or even extended periods over the coming months when he was going to be tested and maybe sharing those with others, especially friends and family would be harder because of the impact on them. He suspects he is going to have even greater respect for Beckett's strength and determination. He can only hope that he meets the challenges with half as much character.

He wants Kate. Being honest it feels more like need. Constant need. The emotion has been there a lot over the years. The embers never-dying out, often flaring up and sometimes white-hot. Long before they were more than partners. All this despite their missteps and miscommunication and wrong choice of companions. Once he thought that when – the possibly of if or never had hurt so much - they were together the sensation and tumult would ease. Of course it was the opposite.

Over the six months the need had grown, and at first he had fought it. Afraid to push to fast or too much. To make her run. But she hasn't. He's come to appreciate since Gates' ultimatum that she has it just as bad as him. It should comfort him and make him confident in their relationship but the truth is the knotted need that pools within him demands more. Everything. He needs to respond to
Kate's promise and her mother's ring with something of his own. He has a plan and he hopes willing agents to assist him. For that he needs his phone. Kate should be bringing that this morning now that he is out of the electronic Bermuda Triangle that was ICU.

Breaking from his thoughts for a moment he lifts the drink tube to his mouth and takes a sip of the liquid. Some of it splashes against the inside of his throat and he coughs, chest and shoulders spiking with pain at the excessive movement. Sucking breath back in, he can hear the wheeze of the passage of air into him and feel his diagram expand and then begin to contract as his muscles flare with spikes the intensity of muted hot pokers. He is grateful for the pain relief that makes the ache of breathing bearable but the medications that dull and steal the edge of this hurt are also fogging his head. He dislikes all of it intensely and wonders how long this will last.

Of course telling time was an issue with no watch, no phone, and for some asinine reason the clock in room is above his head and unreadable! The earlier continuous merry-go-round of hospital staff don't help. He knows it is Tuesday. He remembers being told that. It's late morning at least but beyond that he has nothing except a dull sensation in his stomach indicating he might be hungry but not so much that he would fail to pick, choose and reject most from the hospital food.

Now more than anything he wants out of this place. Especially when he is alone like now. Too easy for his mind to wander down dark paths and alleys that form the twilight of his consciousness. The curse of the writer's imagination. More so for the 'Master of the Macabre.'

Not that he's ever really liked Gina's creation. He's a crime and thriller writer not the horror genre. Sure some of victim's meet their ends in deranged and well, macabre manner. Still the public liked it and Gina was happy. He had not argued too much, a product of time when making Gina happy or at least trying to was a priority. Before shaking the thought off he did at least acknowledge the near genius of marketing the playboy author slash 'Master of the Macabre'. He had never thought it would work but it had boosted sales significantly and made both of them rich - well richer in his case - and for a while happy together. Or at least he thought so. But just like his public persona there was undeniable truth. He didn't love her enough or for the right reasons. This last time he wouldn't repeat the same mistakes.

Where's Kate?

**New York Coroner's Office**

Kate reached the Morgue on foot having stopped off briefly on the way from the hotel. She was now in possession of a tall hot chocolate with extra marshmallows and a piece of rich dark Black Forrest gateaux. Not so much a peace offering as a desperate attempt to distract and deflect. The realist in her knew that the ME would accept the offering and then proceed with the interrogation regardless.

Waving to the security guard, she had been buzzed through. Heading down to the set of labs where Lanie had her office she had passed Perlmutter and the new ME whose name she struggled to remember. Jello. No. Gello – that was it. Oh he kinda liked her. Rick hadn't been concerned at all. Such was the strength of their relationship. His response was simply to joke about another one of her fanboys. She notices as the younger ME momentarily straightens and attempts a smile at her before the cantankerous senior doctor expeditiously grabbed an ear and hauled him along directing a terse, simple greeting of "Detective Beckett." A greeting to which Kate had automatically responded "Medical Examiner's Perlmutter and Gello." Crap what was that? That was almost Castle-like. He really is rubbing off on her.

She has no more time to think on it as she has reached Lanie's workspace and has already been
"Girlfriend!" Lanie sounds excessively happy to see her. This is going to be bad.

"Hi Lanie." She responds as she waves the full takeaway cup and boxed desert and enters Lanie's office, nonchalantly pushing the door closed behind her and listening for the confirming click.

Pleasantries exchange, Dr Parish was straight down to business.

"For me?" Lanie's question is a formality and she swiftly relieved Kate of her cargo.

"Hmmm. Taste's good." The smaller woman's tone is one of intense enjoyment as she samples the rich, sugary hot chocolate. "Cake will have to wait." She says as she puts the container on her desk grinning as a quick peak confirms her suspicions about the content.

It is clear to Kate that her gifts were well received but equally ineffective.

"Girl, I don't know whether to hug you or smack you. Both probably to be on the safe side."

"What?!" Kate is perplexed by her best friend's opening statement.

"You have been holding out on me, Girl!"

"What?" Quieter this time.


_Oh God she wants to discuss this now. I know I told Castle he had no more secrets where Lanie was concerned, I hadn't actually gone into that level of specific detail. I had simply told her he was 'gifted'._

I have a new found appreciation for why you are so happy with Writer Boy. No strike that! Definitely Writer MAN! You neglected to give me this vital bit of information when we have talked before. I am not happy with you. I'm thinking this is a breach of the girlfriend code." Only her best friend can sound so happy whilst lecturing her and threatening her.

_Oh well probably best to just go with the truth. But the abridged version today. She didn't need Lanie's exuberant celebrations sharing her personal life with the entire NYC Coroner's office._

"Lanie, firstly can I just say that I am not entirely happy with you having observed Rick in such detail. Now I get that it was a medical emergency but even so. Also I don't ask you about Javier's gift." But she's not going down without some resistance.

"What's more I'm not just with Rick for the sex. I love him. Completely. And the yes we do have sex. A lot."

Her best friend tilts her head and raises an eyebrow in unspoken question.

"Which is great. Really good. Lots of really good sex. But I've already told you that Lanieeee."

Oh here comes the stare.

"Okay, nature was kind to him. Well he is a big guy and it's probably in proportion." _Oh God she didn't just say that did she?_
Lanie Parish stares back at her best friend. Hard. There might be a smirk under there but it's well disguised.

"Well okay, I'll admit that it is a pleasant bonus."

The stare intensifies but Kate thinks she can definitely see the twitch of a smile in there too.

"Okay. It's really pleasant, often in an earth moving, seeing stars, can't move or speak afterwards, sometimes not walking straight the following day sort of pleasant way."

"So he's good in bed then?" Lanie finally speaks.

"I've told you this before Lanie. But yes." Pausing she continues. "He's good everywhere Lanie."

"Oh my God Katherine Beckett! I gonna need details. Lots of details, technique, how often?" OMFG her best friend is like the entire female cast of Sex in the City.

"Lanieee!" She shouldn't whine but she needs her friend to back off a little, and take the volume down, especially in the workplace. People here know her.

"Not here for a start!"

Lanie nods at that. "Girlfriend. You know the code. Girl's night. Alcohol, indulgences and man-talk." Goddamn girlfriends code. It was great emotional support for breakups and crushes, outfit selection and therapy shopping, but a little onerous for Kate when it came to her relationship with Rick. Especially as she intended to never leave Rick, and didn't really want to share the most intimate details of their love life including how well he was endowed. Or quite how boneless and discombobulated he left her more often than not. Or that she did the same to him. Or how they got to that state. Or how frequently.

"I'll consider it. But you will have to swear that you are not to repeat any of it. Understand? Certainly not when there is a chance Alexis is around. We promised she wouldn't be traumatized any further."

"Oh please girl, you can't say that and not give me the story. Because it sounds like there is a story behind that."

"More than one. If Alexis wasn't in dorms she probably would have moved out anyway. I think we've even left Martha struck dumb. Although she did leave score cards one time."

Lanie's guffaw was disconcerting. Kate made a note to keep her best friend away from Martha. Or at least try to anyway.

"Girl, you are so telling me the full story behind those comments."

"Okay Lanie. We'll have girl's night some time. But if you carry on like this I'll have to think about having an injunction taken out against you."

"Sure you will. Just 'cause your best girlfriend knows your man is packing!" Lanie lowers her voice and leans in towards her best friend.

"Fuck Kate. Even limp it was bigger than most I've umm encountered. I have no idea how you accommodate….""}

Kate cuts her off.
"Shit Lanie! Which bit of NOT NOW don't you get? I promise we will talk girlfriend to girlfriend about this sometime. But it needs to be done privately and not to be repeated or shared." Kate has moved forward into the diminutive ME's space and jabs a lean finger into Lanie's right shoulder who flinches. Satisfied Kate withdraws her finger and steps back.

"Now if you don't have anything else I'm going to the hospital to see my MAN-friend." Oh she can have some fun with this. If she is going to have to give up the details there will be payback.

"I'll text you later with details about visiting hours. I know Rick would love to see the gang from the Twelfth now that he's out of ICU." With that Kate turns and strides to the door, pulls it open and flees the Morgue.

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**Approaching Bellevue Hospital.**

Approaching the hospital on foot was a bad mistake. There are not as many press and fans outside the main entrance as there were in the first few days but there are more than enough. Too many for her comfort. Never-the-less Kate continues on towards the hospital's main entrance. She's made the decision that she is with Rick come hell or high water, and dealing with publicity pretty much falls into that category.

Steeling her features, she wishes it was summer and she had sun glasses to cover her eyes. Instead she pushes on and steadfastly ignores the questions and the flashes from the cameras. The cries of 'Nikki' are surprisingly less common than 'Detective Beckett' or 'Kate'. Then there is one name that throws her, stutters her stride and almost makes her break her disciplined face-forward, zero engagement with the crowd or the 'enemy' paparazzi. 'Mrs Castle!' the voice calls. Despite the hullabaloo and clamour of other calls she hears this one clearly and unexpectedly it cleaves her heart open. The uncontrollable speed with which the near catastrophic wave of emotion hammers her is barely manageable. Dropping her head, she picks up the pace, fighting the instinct to sprint, it takes less than thirty seconds before Kate's long limbs have carried her into the Bellevue lobby leaving the pack behind.

Her head still crowded with the almost overwhelming cacophony of conflicting and contrasting emotions that throb inside, she automatically starts towards the ICU before she finally remembers that Rick would no longer be there. Mrs Castle. She can't shake it.

Where was he now? 16E, 22 – Ward 16 East, Room 22. She'll head there in a minute but first she needs time to compose herself.

Glancing around she spies a vacant space in the lobby with unoccupied seats and no one in proximity. Suddenly grateful for the space she strides over and sinks into the middle seat, her shoulders slump and her face tilts forward as she fights to get control of her head and her heart. She focuses on her feet and slows her breathing and forces the silent, deeper inhales through her nose and on the count of two breathes out for three exhaling through her mouth. After three repeat sets she is satisfied and turns her mind to what just occurred outside and that name.

'Mrs Castle'.

Lanie had teased her with the title once in the early days. Taunted is probably more accurate. But since they had really been together it had never been uttered as her name. Hell even Rick hadn't said it. During their discussions about their future it had never been raised. Lanie was right about one thing. Title is more appropriate than name. Something she could appreciate now. Much more in keeping with the powerful symbolism that becoming, being, embodying Mrs Castle would be. It encompasses everything. What she desires, and needs. But more what she feared she would never
be so many times. Most recently less than a week ago. But also what she once feared she could be if she gave and took the chance. Just another ex-Mrs Castle. She knows better now. Much better. Certain and safe. Always.

Whatever it was about the title, they had not even got as far as having that particular discussion. Kate had figured it would keep at least until after they had become engaged. Events of last Thursday have shaken that confidence and complacency about their future. They, and she especially, had wasted too much time already. It was time to pick up the pace. But how would Rick respond?

Approaching the ward she knows she is in the right place when she spots Hastings and Fredericks from the Twelfth. She is grateful when they simply nod to her in acknowledgement and resume their chatting whilst covering both directions on the access corridor.

**Room 22.**

She knocks and enters the room. Her cop's eye notices the differences between ICU and this general surgical ward room. It is still a private room. It's smaller, just a little perhaps because of the en-suite bathroom she can see on the far side, catching a glimpse through the partially open door of the shower. The room is much less open than the ICU room and she likes the privacy this affords. She was tired of feeling like an occupant of a fishbowl in ICU.

"Hey" Rick's voice snaps her attention from the surroundings and onto her man.

"Hey yourself." She meets his eyes and drinks in the sight of him. He is reclined in bed but more upright than previously. His right arm is strapped into his side immobilizing the shoulder.

"I come bearing gifts of communication." She hefts her bag.

"Fantastic! It's been too fucking long." He doesn't mean to let his frustrations show but if Kate is put off by his expletive she doesn't show it.

"Rick?" His name poses a posse of questions that she will get answered. But first.

She crosses quickly to him and placing her bag down she hooks his left arm and leans down to kiss him. Firmly. Possibly harder than she originally intended. But he is pushing back. His tongue is demanding entrance to her mouth and for the first time in a week she needs it. And what began as relatively chaste is certainly more. It won't escalate from that but it assuages the need in both of them. At least temporarily.

"I missed you." Kate can't respond except to grip both his hands and kiss him again until she finds her voice.

"Why don't you tell me what happened after I left you this morning in ICU until you ended up here. So he does. And he hardly embellishes it at all.

Story time had been interrupted by lunch which Rick barely touched. Before heading for a comfort break Kate had delivered his electronic bounty. So whilst Kate is in the bathroom, Rick caresses his technology and fires his phone and tablet up.

His injuries are going to be an issue for some time. This is going to be interesting. He can hold a
device in his right hand and use his left to swipe and type. A reversal of his usual technique. Inefficient and time consuming. No doubt frustrating as well. He wishes he had spent more time trying to perfect even-handedness when he researched it for Derrick Storm.

On the front of his iPad is a post-it note. Rick looks at the writing. Two distinct handwriting forms cover the yellow paper. The first is Alexis' and the second looks alarming like Paula's.

Alexis's message is simple. 'Love you Daddy. See you this afternoon. XxXxX'

The second is Paula's and it is almost as simple but certainly more direct. 'Stay off Twitter for moment. We're still cleaning it up. Will come visit soon. Luv PH. ps Don't fucking scare me like that again!'

Lost in the renewed familiarity of the technology he missed Kate emerging from the bathroom.

"Rick" It is the plaintive tone that makes him cease all involvement and look up immediately.

"I need you to listen for a minute."

He nods and finds his voice. Kate?"

She can hear the concern in his voice.

"I met, or rather bumped into Josh the other day – you were just coming out of surgery and still in recovery. He works here at Bellevue – just started apparently. I didn't know he was back in New York. I bumped into him – almost literally – in a hospital corridor. We talked for a bit, probably helped with closure for both of us. I told him about us – about our plans. I don't know why. Well perhaps because I wanted to make clear to him that I choose you. I just forgot to mention it before. I'm sorry.

"I trust you Kate. Please tell me that you know that? He squeezes her hands.

"We have never cheated in our relationships. Before us, no matter how close we got, no matter the temptation. Especially when one or both of us were with others. I can't say it didn't hurt but the honourable things we did helped bring us to this. I trust you now just the same as in the past. More so because we are together, and we are sharing, talking."

"Thank you Rick. I know I've kept things to myself in the past. Things that matter between us. I'm trying to be more open. I hadn't seen or spoken to Josh since he returned my keys before I left hospital. He had accused you of being a danger to me, of simply using me. He also gloated that your absence meant that I believed you guilty and responsible for my shooting, for Roy's death, for the danger. I never believed that. Just I wasn't ready for you. I wasn't ready for anything. I've told you this and admitted that I now know I handled it so utterly badly. Shutting you out was the wrong decision. But I did know then that you were and are the right man for me. Even if I wasn't ready then. But I am now.

"Then today. Something else happened.

"I was entering the hospital through the front entrance and the press and crowds were there. Calling my name. Names." She can't help the involuntary eye roll and she's Rick's delightfully compromised smirk is infused with guilt as he acknowledges that she is still not always the greatest fan of her literary alter ego and particularly the name. But she's not going to let him off so easily. She glares back at him and gets the result she wanted. She loves the guilty boy look on him. Best she not tell him how much she truly loves that look and what it can do the normally serious career
"That name doesn't bother me so much now. Still not happy with it Castle. No, someone called out 'Mrs Castle.' It threw me completely. Confused and scared me and…"

"Kate does this mean…?"

"Shhhh. Please Rick. Please let me finish." She pleads with her voice and her eyes and her body turned to his in supplication.

"It means I want to marry you. I want to be Mrs Castle. I know I have told you this and we have talked and promised each other. And I mean it with all my heart. It was just that it caught me off guard. My future name. But it didn't scare me. It sounded right. Like it suited me. I want so much to be worthy of it. And to keep it. One of my deepest fears – one that held me back for so long - is that it - no I mean we – we won't last. We won't last. That I'll just be another ex-Mrs Castle." She has sunk down on the chair close enough for him to reach out and touch her. He strokes her face gently.

"The reason I was so thrown and scared today is not because I could be Mrs Castle but because there is always a chance I won't be. Too many actually. Last Thursday and for so many hours I thought we'd lost the chance. Missed another opportunity again. This time permanently. I was scared. I still am. There is so much that could go wrong. The détente with the Dragon may break. Tyson. Any number of whack jobs. Our jobs carry risk. Not everyday but too often. I thought at one time that I could get you to step back and not share the risks. But I need you too much. All the time – at home and at work. And I know there will come a time when we have to choose and one or both of us will need to step back from that but I'm being selfish now.

"But what it means more than anything is that I want a life with you for as long as we last. Both our lifetimes. It means I want to marry you Rick. I will marry you. I will take your name for the rest of our lives. At work I think I would like to still be Beckett – if only for my parents. But everywhere else and where it matters in our hearts and legally it will Castle. Or Rodgers.

"If you'll have me?" Why is she even posing this question now? Is she that uncertain, fearful when he promised them Always?

"Beckett? Umm Kate? Are you proposing? Right now?" Rick's doing his best not to sound incredulous but this is not what he expected.

"What! Umm. No!" Damn she's tongue-tied. "Maybe?"

"You don't sound sure, Love. I want you to be sure."

"Oh I'm sure." She's taken a breath and got her emotions if not under control, at least checked from their unplanned diversion. She speaks again.

"But this isn't a proposal. Not today. But not because I don't want to. I do more than anything."

"Damn!" He sounds disappointed but there is an element of the showman and the child in his exclamation.

"I want our proposal not to be born out of desperation or extreme circumstances. I want it to be a happy event. Celebrating our love and our destiny. Not fear or pain. Can we do that? Wait?"

"Kate. Of course we can." I can be patient, even if you can't." He teases.
She pushes him a little, fires up the Beckett glare and then leans in to snatch a kiss from his lips.

"Best non-proposal ever!" She loves that he can take the positive from this. She's never good with words but for as long as she has known him, and before, his words rescue her, fix her. Tie them together.

"I just wanted to tell you that I want nothing more. Just you. Only you. You in my heart, our home, our bed, between my legs."

"Really know how to sweet talk a guy, Beckett. Just a damn shame I can't do the last three right now."
Chapter Summary

Rick’s moved out of ICU and ready to settle into his new location complete with gadgets and lots more visitors. Meanwhile outside the hospital...

The Loft

Tidying away the few breakfast dishes, something felt out of place. No that wasn't quite it. Missing. Something was missing.

Ah, it was too quiet in here. The Loft was Home and that meant familial warmth, familiar sounds and endless conversation. After all living with two larger than life personalities in the form of her Dad and Grams was never quiet. One alone was enough to fill the space with life.

"Gram?" she calls loud enough to carry upstairs.

Alexis had called twice before with no answer.

Heading back upstairs, she approached her grandmother's room. Knocking, she waited for the acknowledgement.

After hearing nothing, Alexis reaches for the handle but pauses not wishing to enter her grandmother's room uninvited. Last time she did Gram was getting ready for date night and hadn't progressed past the lingerie stage – eewwww!

Summoning some courage and with eyes averted she cautiously opens the door.

"Gram?" Nothing. "Gram?" As she repeats her inquiry she spots the light in the en-suite come on.

"Just a minute Alexis."

Sure enough her Gram emerges from the bathroom. Her makeup is in place but the face beneath is still raw. Tear tracts glisten on her cheeks, and the eyes are red and puffing.

"Oh Gram!" Alexis doesn't need to voice her concern further.

"Oh Darling, it's nothing."

"It's not 'nothing' Gram. You're crying. Or you've been crying. That's not nothing. You're the first person to tell us not to hide our emotions."

"I'm sorry dear. I woke up this morning feeling so morbid and nothing I do seems to be able to shake that feeling."

"But Dad's getting better. He's out of ICU and will be hospital maybe another ten days, maybe a fortnight. Then he'll be able to come home. Sure he's got a lot of recovery after that but he'll do it. We'll all help him."
Martha sniffed, finally getting the tears under control.

"Look at me, my perfect granddaughter is more in touch with her feelings regarding her father than I am." The tears pool again at the elder red head's eyes. Alexis has hustles into her and wraps her up in a hug.

"Well that's because you're his Mom. That's a pretty big responsibility and let's face it Dad's never quite grown up."

Martha nods.

"Alexis, how did you make peace with your father's choice?"

Alexis paused. Chewing her lower lip, another Beckett trait she had subconsciously adopted.

It wasn't easy. I'm not sure I have entirely." Still chewing at that lower lip she adds "Yet."

"She has hurt him before. Many times. And I know he's hurt her too. But ultimately I came to accept their choice to be in this relationship because he's happy. So happy. That's all he's ever really wanted for me, and I guess that's what I want for him."

"I've thought it through quite a few times over the years they have been together either as colleagues or now as a couple. Not so much before Kate was shot, but especially after. And then when they finally acknowledged what they wanted. A lot of it was me being selfish. Not wanting to share him. And an element of that is fine, good even. But I'm an adult, I'm going to college, living outside of home for most of the year. I don't want him to be lonely. He deserves to be happy.

"Gram, just growing up, all that time when it was just the two of us. After Gina, he told me. Told me how growing up it was like that with you and him. Just the two of you against the world. About how you made sure he understood he was the most important thing in the world to you. Even when times were tough, or rather especially when times were not so good. He promised me he would always be that for me.

"And he has been. I know it. Gram, I know you and Dad don't talk about it but I have few memories of being taken from a mall and locked away in dark room for days. I don't remember much else except the loud bangs, light and then my Dad was there and I was safe. I know he'd do anything for me. Give up anything including Kate if it was what I told him I needed. I've been tempted. But it wouldn't make him happy.

Martha pulled Alexis in tighter and then releasing her granddaughter kissed Alexis' forehead.

"Oh my dear. We're all so terribly grateful that you've turned out so well. We all think the world of you and I don't think there is a single thing any one of us – your father, myself or Kate wouldn't do for you.

"Now I think this little tête-à-tête has helped considerably. Why don't you go relax for a few minutes whilst I fix myself up properly? Then perhaps we can go get an earlier lunch before visiting your father in his new room. Disturb the lovebirds too. That's always fun."

With that she shoos Alexis from the room, and heads back into the bathroom to make good her repairs. She loves her hair and complexion but it is awful for covering up emotional outbursts.

Clare Dunne ended her session into the video conference call between Taylor Matthews in LA and New York, the DEA field office in LA, and the LA County Sheriff's office.
'Ouch!' They had just been ripped a metaphorical new one by the Senior DEA agent. Apparently this operation of Jesus Agraz's was on the radar for a new task force from DEA, and Homeland Security and some bureaucratic snafu in the DEA hadn't flagged Taylor Matthew's interest fast enough. The blown observation from Sunday had nearly derailed an ongoing investigation.

Sass and Mitchell Belmont had taken the heat directly on the chin. The mouth from the DEA – Hillary Huston, a definite career desk jockey if ever Clare had seen one – had seemed satisfied by that, and had even indirectly credited them with not opening fire despite the imminent danger. She made great play of reluctantly letting them remain on the case.

Aside from not being kicked to touch about their only win was the footage from Marty's weapon cam – still freaking amazing that a small wireless camera could capture such detail. It had enabled them to identify at least one of the shooters positively and possibly hook in some known associates.

Still it had not been a good couple of days and with investigations in New York drawing a blank too, Sass had not been her usual upbeat self. Clare shared her good friend's disappointment and planned to go work off her frustrations in the gym and possibly in bed.

**Park View Suite, Mandarin Oriental.**

Bleary eyed and not a little hung over, she didn't feel like going out today. The chances of being ambushed by the increasingly hostile press or worse some of Rick and Kate Beckett's fans was more than sufficient deterrent. New Yorkers were proud of their local heroes - which was exactly how Rick and Detective Beckett were being portrayed by most of the local media. She was well aware that she was being portrayed as the interloper from the West Coast. Plus a quick check of her available finances the other night had made it clear to her that shopping, especially in the haute couture boutiques, was an indulgence she couldn't afford right now.

There were the remains of the late breakfast on the trolley awaiting collection. Toast and pastries untouched, the omelette half-eaten. Beside them was a copy of today's New York Ledger with Page two and Page Six coverage of Ricky. He was coming out Intensive Care and onto a general surgical ward.

She didn't even bother to wonder if she could visit. Alexis and the lawyers had made it perfectly clear when she should remain. She'd get herself presentable and arrange another in-room massage. The therapist from the other day had magic hands and she really had been quite relaxed afterwards.

What had started with a chance of securing her financial future looked distinctly dim right now. She had known it was a gamble but she hadn't appreciated until after Alexis' stormed out of the suite that night just how much of a risk the gamble was.

She wasn't stupid. She knew now she had been played by several parties. The cable channel to get her fixated on her career and publicity. Well more than normal. Harry Rokkman, her agent - ex-agent she corrected herself – had warned her against getting involved with them.

Then there were the drug runners and loan sharks who had moved when she was in need. The more she reviewed the events the more she realised it was a setup form the beginning. However, her puppeteers didn't know her. They might think she was under their thumb but she hadn't survived as long as she had by being mere passive road-kill.

She had known for some time that there was no way back to Rick for her. Their last ex-sex session was five years ago not long after he started at his involvement with the Police and HER. She had merely offered her body after that because it made Rick all the more eager to give her the agreed
money and sometimes extra. Also the off chance that he might agree was not disagreeable. After all he was extremely gifted and talented.

She had also taken some perverse delight in teasing him about his continued history of failed relationships and repeated mistakes. But for the last three years nothing. He had even hooked up again with his other ex-wife, that fake blonde publisher. She and Gina had met accidentally at a party in LA not long after Gina's divorce from Rick. She had seemed disappointed but more so at a professional level than a personal one. Meredith tried to convince herself that she was only envious because of the big pile of loot Gina had received for being married to him, and she didn't even have to bear him a child.

She wanted to ask Harry, her agent – sorry ex-agent - his advice. He had been a steady and reliable presence in her life – one of the few - for more than a decade. She did actually feel regret that their professional relationship appeared to be over.

She wonders if she should try and contact Alexis. Her daughter was amazing. She didn't tell her this often enough but she truly was, and she had to give credit to Ricky for that. Of course her genes were a significant factor as well!

No Alexis wouldn't do. She needed a way out of this and she needed to do it fast. She also needed an impartial party that wouldn't be judgemental. Also some of what she had to tell wasn't really suitable for a teenager no matter how mature.

Making a decision she picked up the business card that Clare Dunne had left. She had more information than her shadowy manipulators had suspected. It was time to trade that in for some credit from the people she should have trusted in the first place.

Beesley, Wax & Drummond Lawyers

Jim Beckett carefully replaced the receiver of his office phone. Except it wasn't really a phone, actually some IT telecommunications integrated device with VOIP – whatever that was. He could cope with computers and the legal software and Office, hell even email and the Internet. But the social media and chat stuff was beyond him. He had no interest. It all seemed so vacuous and shallow. He preferred face-to-face as did most of his regular, loyal clients.

With that thought in mind he wondered why Jeff Beesley, Chief Operations Officer, wanted a word, and whatever it was about, it was serious enough that Jeff was coming to him rather than he being summoned to the younger man's office.

Jim missed Max Drummond, the former head partner who had retired almost a year ago. A near contemporary he and Max had shared their hopes, aspirations and fears for their children. After Katie had been shot Max Drummond had called him and told him to take as much time as he needed and to not worry about the job. Jim was forever grateful to the man who had taken a chance on a recovering alcoholic giving him a job, purpose and an opportunity to earn back some measure of self-respect. He had finally made it into an office of his own some five years ago. To celebrate the event, Max had thrown a small party and even invited Katie who surprisingly had turned up muttering something about needing to escape from the attentions of nine-year old on a sugar rush. Jim chuckled to himself and with a wry smile realised that it was almost the first, but definitely by no means the last, time his daughter had talked, usually without prompting, about Richard Castle to him. He had left out the 'told you so' - that was always Jo's department with Katie - when they had finally seen sense and started what looked like a lifelong relationship.

Since Jeff had taken the reigns, announcing that he was now the COO and not Head Partner, a
number of the staff had left including some senior associates. The partners hung in there as the economy continued to drag and the buy-out terms lagged too. Jim was sure that was part of the plan to *revitalise* and *remake* this mid-sized law firm into something it wasn't. He was glad he wouldn't be here to experience whatever it was. He simply carried on with his job, dealing with his long term clients and assisting with others where requested. He had no need to showboat or strive for extra attention. He was nearing retirement but regardless of that fact, the offers from Richard Castle of as much involvement as he wanted in the charities and other trusts meant he could afford to ignore the office politics. Except of course when it was about to confront him directly.

The meeting with Jeff had been short and to the point. BWD as Jeff liked to call the firm would be taking on political work. Jeff wanted the firm's senior lawyers to step up and assist with the transformation. Jim had declined. He had a suspicion a large number of the others had too. He knew of at least one partner who would have opposed the move too.

"I don't think so Jeff. I'm a commercial lawyer. I'm too old to change and I know my strengths. If I leave plenty of the clients - well enough certainly – may follow."

Jeff had blustered and bullshitted but had not advanced any positive points. How could such an ineffective individual lead the firm especially in challenging times like now? Rick's lawyer - Steve Mathers - apparently knew Jeff from grad school. It had been the solitary occasion Steve had sworn in his presence when Jim mentioned his boss's name. 'Wanker' was term the younger lawyer had used. He liked Steve. Refreshingly direct and without the element of juvenile demeanour that could potentially make Richard Castle grate on you.

His thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the edge of his open door. Glancing up he spots his colleague and friend, Val.

Valerie Woods was a senior partner at the firm. Just two years younger than Jim she had been married to Hennie Wax before divorcing him four years ago but despite that her ex-husband had left his share of the firm to her in his will when he died suddenly from pancreatic cancer a year later. She was one of the few who consistently and vocally opposed Jeff Beesley's plans for the firm.

"So I understand Jeff made his way down here to pitch his master plan to you. Looks like they're getting pretty desperate." She's smirking as her earthy, husky voice lilts and teases.

"Gee thanks Val! You know how to make a guy feel special."

"Yes, I do." Oh she's looking at him and there's nothing but honesty and affection. He feels it too. Wishes he could do more, be more for her.

In the last two years they had been on several nearly-dates as they called them. Then earlier this year one work party left both comfortably inebriated – her by alcohol and him simply from the endorphins - sufficiently enough to overcome their mutual mental objections to their mutual attraction. They had gone to her place and it was the furthest he had been since, well since. Until he half moaned "Jo" into Val's mouth as they were kissing and disrobing. Mortified he had stammered an apology and immediately broken down in tears of pain, humiliation and contrition. Half-naked Val had held Jim whilst he cried bitter tears of regret and loss. Neither had wanted to be alone and they had slept in the same bed. Since then things had been a curious détente between them. Neither was willing to risk another nearly date yet but they met for coffee and were gradually finding their way forward and discussing things openly.

"So coffee later, say around 5?" He propositions her and she nods her agreement. "Before I leave
for the hospital and go see Rick."

"So how is your future son-in-law?" Oh God, for once in his life could he possibly not be attracted
to a woman with a sharp mind and equally sharp tongue?
Chapter Summary

Now out of ICU, Rick can now officially receive visitors from outside his immediate family.

Room 22, Ward 16 East, Bellevue Hospital

It is six days since NYPD Consultant Richard Castle was shot. It is the fourth day since he came out of the induced coma, and it is the first day out of the Intensive Care Unit. It is also the first day that he is officially able to receive any visitors other than his close family. Obviously his status as a celebrity and also the manner in which he received his injuries has seen that rule somewhat flexed.

Right now though, Kate Beckett doesn't particularly want to share her boyfriend/near fiancé with anyone, even perhaps his daughter and mother. She remembers her own time in hospital and even if Rick's isn't as badly hurt as she was, his health is still compromised and less than an hour ago they had just had a reminder of it. One minute he was fine, almost totally lost in his online world using tablet and phone frantically catching up on five days of events, the next he was throwing up what little of lunch he had eaten. His temperature spiked and the pain too. Kate had hit the call button.

A doctor and two nurses had arrived in short measure. Checking his temperature and other vitals the Doctor had provisionally diagnosed a minor post-operative infection. It had been previously suppressed by the battery of drugs in ICU but now that he was being weaned off those there was an elevated risk of infection and fevers. After the doctor left, the two nurses had cleaned the mess and the bed-clothes changed along with the shoulder bandages and then re-strapped his right arm to his side. Before leaving they had issued calm instructions about appropriate food intake and the need to keep up fluid intake.

As the nurses had changed his dressings, Kate was for the first time able to clearly view the impact areas on his chest and shoulder where the shotgun blasts had hit. She had momentarily had to swallow back as bile rose up her throat in response to the dark purple mottling across his torso. Worse was the ugly wounds to his shoulder where the pellets had ripped through his skin and muscle, rending flesh and requiring a lot of repair work. She could clearly understand how plastic surgery might be considered for the injuries.

It wasn't the scars that concerned her, she had long moved past needing the purely physical attraction with Rick. He was the complete package and it was that metaphysical embodiment, her mind's eye mental composite of the person that focused the basis for her unshakeable love of the man before her. After all Rick had never let her scars, physical and mental, detract from his love of her. She was merely returning the sentiment from a position of complete understanding and acceptance.

What concerned her was how Rick would mentally respond to the trauma of his shooting and the challenges ahead. Her own mental wounds had festered long after her physical recovery had been assured. She knew Rick well enough, especially now in light of their mutual disclosures of recent days, to be concerned about how vulnerable he could be to a range of issues including potentially
post-traumatic stress disorder. His admission that he has sought therapy after some of their more extreme situations in the past shouldn't have surprised her but it did and with that came the guilt of how selfish and wrapped up in her own world she had been.

She had been unaware quite how long she had been single-minded inspecting Rick's injuries and lost in her thoughts but when she looked up she found his cerulean eyes locked on her. His gaze was direct and yet conveyed acceptance and submission. He was hiding nothing. Here was the brutal truth of it. How close they had come, once again, to losing each other. But also how there was no more hiding, no more subtext, no more running, no more chasing. He was all in.

And so was she. But with the nurses still in the room she couldn't tell him as much directly – she was still uncomfortable showing her devotion, especially spoken, outside of their immediate family and friends - so in best Beckett style she showed him. Her own eyes, blinking back uninvited tears, stayed sharply focused on his, and with both her hands she squeezed his free left hand. Then partially dipping her body down but with eyes still locked on his, she lifted his hand to her mouth and kissed it. Mutely murmuring their word into his skin.

Martha naturally makes a fuss over her son, and they all indulge her. Rick even bites his tongue and offers not one of his library of sarcastic retorts as the senior red-head unintentionally tries his patience. Through it all, the subtext of their love, and the debilitating fear of losing that which they hold dearest, is writ large across their faces and actions. Kate finds herself crying again, and is joined by Alexis and Martha. Rick blinks back his tears, an unnecessary apology unspoken on his lips but accepted by all without the need to say it aloud.

Eventually, even the dynamo that is Martha Rodgers, diva, and matriarch of this family, needs to relent. It doesn't take long before they are all settled in and a casual air of domesticity pervades the room.

Alexis is perched on her father's bed, snug up against his left side navigating his tablet for him as they trawl through the Internet for highlights of the last five days. Frequently exclamation's from the room's sole male mark more discoveries, and the women in the room can't help smile at the glee and delight that bubbles from Rick's mouth on reading certain articles and posts.

Martha is skimming through some scripts occasionally muttering lines and wielding a pink highlighter with theatrical grace with interment stabbing of the document to highlight some terrible theatrical crime that needs re-writing.

Kate has taken the sofa and is curled up on one end with a book – not one of his. That would be too much. Too intense. Too close. She loses herself in the words periodically, escaping the moment. When her attention returns to the room, she can't help but catch Rick looking at her with such honest devotion she can't contain the slight blush that heats her face. She escalates and challenges with a flutter of her eyelids, gazing back at him before fixing him with a seductive stare all her own and biting her bottom lip. 'Evil woman' she lip reads before Rick turns his full attention back to his daughter.

If she thinks these exchanges pass unnoticed, she would be quickly disabused were she to see Martha Rodgers face and wry smile that lights upon her lips and for the first time in days the joie de vivre slowly creep back into her eyes.

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**Dunne Residence**

Clare pushed her half-eaten late lunch away from her. The spinach and ricotta cannelloni had
seemed appetizing when had opened her fridge in search of sustenance and energy for the afternoon, but now sitting in the kitchen of her bachelorette apartment, she had lost the enthusiasm for the rich tomato sauce and pasta not long after the microwave had pinged. She had eaten enough to meet her immediate needs. Swigging from the water bottle, she washed her mouth out and spat in the sink.

Despite the lost appetite, she did feel better. The work out at the gym had left the pleasant burn of muscles confirming she was alive. Her impromptu house guest had declined the offer of lunch but also left some different but pleasant sensations that had left a smile to her face. It was clearly a one-time thing though with no phone numbers or last names exchanged. Still she didn't mind the honesty. No awkward moments, fumbled excuses and barefaced lies dressed up to be broken and discarded. Just two consenting adults fulfilling mutual needs.

Looking back towards her bedroom she would need to wash the sheets that sprawled from the end of her bed across the carpet. Her gym gear was still in there somewhere discarded carelessly in the drive to get naked. She thought she could spy her sport's top peeking out from under the fine cotton, most likely uncovered when her guest had gone in search of her own clothes at the conclusion.

She needs another shower. Wash the sweat and musk from her before she heads out either to the office or perhaps to follow-up another pointless lead. And just like that her frustrations with the lack of progress on her assignment are back.

Here in New York Meredith Lee had not provided much information worth evaluating let alone following up. The bugs were a wash out, the text message an obvious misdirect, although did raise questions about why the actress had done that. The LA team were currently hamstrung by over-the-top DEA supervision and also had a pressing need for their own actionable intel.

The thrum of her phone on vibrate breaks her from introspection and she strides to the kitchen bench and checks caller the ID. Hmmm, blocked. She'll take the call anyway.

"Hello." A female voice.

"This is Clare Dunne. Who is this?"

"Clare, this is Meredith." Ah.

"Good afternoon Ms Lee."

A brief period of silence reigns before Clare fills the vacuum.

"How can I help you Ms Lee?" Professional. Detached. No hint of curiosity. She'll play it deadpan.

"Well, I think it is more how I can help you." Almost teasing but an undercurrent of need.

"What makes you think you have something that might help?" Oh she's going to make the women work for anything.

"Look can we meet?"

"Why?" Deadpan again.

"Look I know I made a mess of things, but I haven't been entirely truthful with you about how much I know. I believe I have information that may help." Oh we're getting somewhere. At last!
"I'm a victim too." Oh that's rich.

"But one of my girlfriends well she's more deeply involved." Of course she is.

"What do you mean?"

"She's…" The voice on the end of the line pauses.

"She's providing sexual services for them. She got sucked in. She's hooked on coke. Really good stuff. Expensive. But she's got photos and names and dates. Even some recordings – sound and video. I've seen some."

"Meredith this is useful information for a gossip mag or the Internet. How does it help the matter we are managing for the Castles and yourself?"

"She knows who the bosses are, the players and perhaps even some of the reasons why." Meredith pauses and then continues clearly concerned that she needs to sell it more.

"Look she really knows who's behind it. Who has been providing the information on Ricky's wealth, his divorce settlement from Goldilocks. Why I'm not so sure. But you're clever people. I'm sure you could work it out."

"Look Meredith I'll meet you today but this better be on the level." Direct, even tone. Clare is direct to the point of humiliation for the other woman.

"I'll come to your hotel. You better not be screwing us around." She almost said 'again' but managed to stop herself.

"We don't appreciate it and it won't help you and your increasingly dire situation."

"I understand. I really do." Meredith sounds sincere, even for an actress of moderate ability.

"Shall we say 7.30 pm then Clare."

"That will be fine Ms Lee. See you then."

Plenty of time to clean-up, make the bed, shower, find something appetizing to eat and check in with local and LA field offices. Before she had to go and face Meredith Lee again.

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**Room 22, Ward 16 East, Bellevue Hospital, 6.15 pm**

Rick had made it through the rest of the afternoon with no more apparent nausea or at least that he shared with Kate. The pain had spiked a bit but the nurse, a chirpy senior named Wendy, had advised him to try to last beyond the dinner that was due shortly before having more pain relief so that he might actually eat some of it.

Sure enough his dinner had arrived and been tasted but barely touched beyond a few mouthfuls reluctantly swallowed down at the unspoken behest of his posse of women. It had actually not been too bad. Baked chicken breast with a faint tang of herbs and steamed vegetables – no potato – followed by a rice and diary pudding with mango. He had done better with the isotonic sports drink. Watching him chug the bottle down all three observers independently noted to buy him some more of his own.

The dinner tray had not long been cleared away and the pain medication – in liquid state as Rick
still had issues swallowing - delivered but not yet imbibed when Jim Beckett arrived.

He had greeted all three woman and had of course been hugged by all three. Jim had even managed doing a half-decent job of not appearing too gun-shy during the experience. Still it didn't stop him moving out of reach as soon as he could.

After chatting briefly to Kate, he had approached the bed to somewhat awkwardly shake the left hand of the man. After that Jim had relaxed and with his tension eased it hadn't taken long before he and Rick fall into an easy conversation about anything and everything unimportant.

Kate secretly loves the burgeoning relationship between the two. They appear totally contrasting. Her serious, guarded father but with a sly, dry humor, and occasionally self-deprecating wit, not to mention his – now – stoic love for Joanna Beckett. And her writer, the giddy, larger-than-life man-child whose words have entranced and entrapped her for so long, first on the page and now in person.

But now than this it is their shared traits that ties and bind them – how much they love their daughters, and their shared love of her. That she can even acknowledge the latter without hours or introspection and anguish shows how deeply in love she is.

Now the Rick has drawn her dad into his business affairs, or at least the charity side of them. That reminded her that they had a long overdue conversation about finances to cover. She smiled wryly. Not long ago she would have delivered a lecture on how she didn't want any of it, that was of course if they had discussed it at all, or she was running away from the issues. Now she was willing to discuss and negotiate. Even with the infuriating man she had chosen to spend her life with. Gently shaking her head in bemusement at herself, Kate decided to settle herself back into her book for a few minutes and so she pushed any serious thoughts away and once more lost herself in the mystery on the pages in her hand.

6.40 pm

Jim announces to the room that he is leaving. Alexis and Martha pipe up at the same time that they should go too.

Kate inserts the bookmaker by her page – she values books too much to ever turn the page down, a trait she learnt from her mom, and one she was pleased to discover she shares with Rick and Alexis - and puts her book down and rises from the couch to hug her dad. Martha and Alexis are saying their good-night's to Rick. Kate can't help but watch the three together and feel the pull to join them. She even takes a half-step, her body stuttering, but she doesn't encroach further.

"You should. You know." Her father's words are quiet in her ear.

"They're his family and yours too." She wonders what it costs him to say that.

"You're mine too, and they can be yours as well." She responds equal volume but just as deliberate with just the hint of challenge for her dad.

"Well perhaps you can give me some time to get used to that Katie. They can be quite overwhelming."

"I know that, but somehow I wouldn't change a thing."

"Goodnight Katie. I'll around tomorrow to visit but it may be several days before I can come visit again. We're busy at work and I need to help Val with something." Kate nods in acknowledgement.
Whilst not keeping the hours he used to, she had grown up in a household where both parents had a strong work ethic and commitment to seeing their jobs done. She's also aware of the gentle, cautious friendship her father has with Valerie Woods.

"Thanks Dad. I'll let Rick know." She leans in to kiss his cheek and then as her father steps back she is briefly engulfed in a red maelstrom of farewells.

It's almost 7 pm and she is expecting a text anytime from the Boys to confirm their arrival at the hospital.

7.06 pm

There is a knock at the door but it doesn't open.

"Hi, you can come in." responds Kate. But there is no movement from the door.

"Enter" louder this time. Still nothing.

Huffing mostly to herself, Kate rises from the edge of bed where she had been talking to Rick and strides to the door.

She opens the door to see her partners and friends in a cluster seemingly arguing about something. Rolling her eyes she coughs loudly to attract their attention and then proceeds to invite them in.

"Guys, it's really good to see you all. Come on in. Rick will be really pleased to see you all." Then firming up her glare she hardens her tone. "Look you don't need to hang around in the hall for NO good reason."

"Please come on in." This in a more conciliatory tone.

Busted the four troop in led by Lanie Parish, followed by a seemingly subdued pairing of Detective's Esposito and Ryan with quite determined looking Jenny Ryan bring up the rear or more accurately shepherding the two sheepish looking men in before her.

Seeing his good friends file into the room Rick perks up, the increasing tiredness of the long day temporarily put aside. Kate knows Rick will take considerable pleasure in the new company. Whilst he is perfectly capable of being alone, especially when writing, he much prefers the company of others. His gregarious nature and inquisitiveness make him predisposed to want to seek out people to converse with. In turn he charms those he interacts with. Mainly through his attentive nature, his all-too-apparent honesty – sometimes just a little too truthful - and the knack he has for making people at ease whilst he is patently listening to them talk, are key tenets of the man.

Seeing his friends and partners enter the room is a welcome boon for the author whose stamina was indeed flagging after a busy day. He knows they won't stay long – official visitor hours ended at eight o'clock - but the mere fact that they are here visiting is more than enough to re-energize him.

"Um sorry we're a little late. We had trouble parking. Guess there must be lots of visitors." This excuse from Esposito as they come through the door.

Once they are all in the room and Kate is closing the door again, there is a pregnant silence.

Lanie breaks the muted atmosphere by cross over to hug and kiss Rick on the cheek.
"Castle, I have to say you are looking considerably better than the other day. More color, and more awake too. I won't ask you how the pain is. But I will check out your charts before I go tonight." Her direct look to both Rick and Kate leaves them in doubt that the ME will be pushy if necessary.

"Thank you Lanie. It's good to see you too." Rick is more than gracious in reply and as he finishes speaking he turns his gaze to his two best (male) friends and partners.

Oh Christ they're embarrassed. They shouldn't be. It's just them in a room, no need for falsehood or bravado, although the latter is always a strong possibility especially with the machismo former soldier.

Castle had saved their lives five days ago and they are only now coming to say thank you. Whilst it is not the first time the Boys or Lanie has seen Castle the previous visits had been under adverse conditions either with Castle still heavily medicated or the possible threat from the Silva family clean-up operation. Still it makes for a strangely obstinate barrier to overcome.

So silence reigns.

Jenny Ryan is staring furiously at her husband. Kevin Ryan knows what is good for him. He opens his mouth to speak. Of course at this moment so does Esposito wilting under the physical intimidation of the resident ME who appears to have his left forearm in some form of death grip.

"Umm. Castle." Ryan's voice collides with Esposito's "Look Bro."

With that they crash to an ungraceful stop their words already entangled. The two partners stare at each other and after a second or two Ryan steps closer to the bed. Apparently Beckett and Castle aren't the only ones who do mental communication.

"Castle, I…. umm…We wanted to say thank you." Ryan stutters into his opening but finally hits his straps.

"What you did last Thursday went above and beyond, not just what anyone could expect from a civilian consultant, but or indeed what we reasonably could expect from our partner regardless of whether they were a cop or not. You don't have a badge, but we consider you one of us. Regardless, we're both really grateful for what you did for us. I got to go home to my wife, and well Espo…got to go home….eventually."

Rick catches the glare from the Latino to his Irish partner but chooses not push for the tale just now. He also spot's Lanie Parishes tell – her eyes widen slightly and she shifts her feet nervously. Oh there's a story there. He's sure he can get it later. Perhaps Kate knows already, girl code and all.

"Hey guys I was just doing what you would have done for me. Or Beckett. What you have done for us. No thanks necessary."

"Look Bro. Ryan pretty much said everything that needed saying. We owe you but we're not ones to make a fuss about something, even when it is as important as this. So we just wanted to say thank you." Esposito responds to Rick magnanimity.

"You know we don't make a big thing of it. Maybe a few drinks at a bar – when you get cleared for if of course. Anyway, I know a place where the drinks are cheap so us poor cops won't be impoverished with your expensive tastes." Esposito has a smirk of his own. In all likelihood Rick knows he'll be paying indirectly for his own thank you drinks but it doesn't bother him in the slightest. If he didn't already own a 'cop' bar he'd go out and buy one just for the occasion. Not to flaunt his wealth, but to treat his friends.
Kate has silently watched the stilted yet heartfelt exchange between the three men but now can't resist teasing the Boys.

"You know if you had waited any longer, Gates would have beaten you to the punch. I think she is planning on coming to visit tomorrow. We've also got the Chief of Detectives coming, the Mayor, and Evelyn said she would come round. You're lucky we could fit you in to his busy schedule." She's smirking at both of her partners and challenging them. All the time unaware, or perhaps uncaring, that her words confirm just how deep her partnership with Rick runs.

Neither take the challenge up.

Jenny Ryan clears her throat and despite all the other occupants of the room turning to gaze at her she keeps her courage

"Mister Castle. Thank you."

"Rick" the author corrects. "You know me well enough now, Mrs Jenny Ryan. You can call me Rick.

"Rick." She hesitates, tentatively testing the name on her tongue before continuing. "I've always known that Javier would do anything for him. Detective Beckett too. But for you to do what you did. Look I'm going to say this and I know it is not going to come out right but please don't judge me immediately."

"Richard Castle, you're not a cop. You haven't had the training, all the years of experience, and the practical lessons, sometimes painful. And yet, I know my husband idolizes you. At first because you were Rick Castle, millionaire author, ladies' man and all round witty guy. Plus you had a Ferrari. But over the years I know that Kevin's view of you has changed. That he now trusts you not only with his life but that of his partners. There is nothing more sacred to Kevin than his family including the one at the Precinct and I'm sure that he considers you an integral part of that group," Jenny pauses again. Even more nervous she continues.

"I know Kevin doesn't tell me everything but sometimes he's had nightmares. Plus I've read the papers and the Internet. I've heard other cops and emergency services talking. I've seen it in his eyes and his stoic suffering through physical and other injuries. I know you've played your part. So thank you for doing your best to ensure he comes home to me. Not just this time but all those other times. And Javier and Kate too. Thank you with all my heart." As Jenny draws to a close her husband pulls her into his arms and enfolds her gently sobbing form in his protective embrace.

"Guys, Jenny. Look there really is no need to thank me. You are all my friends. In many ways, my best friends. It is I who should be thanking you. For letting me participate and be part of your work. Contribute in some small way to the important tasks you do." Rick is picking his words carefully here.

"You've saved me." Looking towards his partner he continues "Saved Kate. Saved both of us. We've done the same. It's what partners do. There really is nothing more needs to be said." Both Esposito and Ryan nod in agreement.

"I'm the one who should be thanking you. Hell even Gates. You're the ones that let a civilian tag along. Especially given the frequency that I get myself and too often you into trouble." Rick falls quiet suddenly pensive. Kate instinctively strokes his left arm.

Lanie Parish had been unnaturally quiet throughout the time since their arrival. It was never going to last.
"Rick, I do know that you are the dearest person on this planet to my girl. I've known Kate for more than a decade and I have never, ever seen her in this deep, this totally girlie before. In fact I don't think I've seen her girlish before, not truly, ever! Sure she had moments but they really were moment, seconds not even minutes. Nothing like this. So I hope you know how special you are and how lucky the both of you are."

"We all know how affected you were when Kate was in this position. She's been the same this time too. What we all want for you both is for you to stop ending up in these situations." Strong nods of confirmation come from the two male detectives and Jenny Ryan.

"Now, I will take a moment to lecture the both of you on how long it took you to FINALLY see what pretty much everyone else has done for years. You are both so right for each other." More nods of affirmation.

"Oh pish, I know you'll argue, and tease, and wind each other up, that's what you do. But what you have been through in these five years, is more than most successful marriages survive in a lifetime."

Castle is actually struck dumb and Kate's jaw temporarily unhinged as she near panics about the direction her friend's speech is taking. Neither of them are ready for more publicly. Lanie knows this. Oh, and Lanie Parish is smiling straight back at them. The shark smile. She is so into this. But how far will she go?

Fortunately for both that is where the ME draws the line. For now.

Stepping in the hug Kate she whispers "Girl's night. Soon! I have not forgotten you owe me, Katherine Beckett." Kate mutely nods in acknowledgement.

After the anxious and awkward start, the room is soon occupied with conversation tinged with friendly banter. Before long it is nearing eight pm and the end of visiting hours.

"So Castle." Esposito opens.

"Your Ferrari?" Ryan's turn.

"Yeah?" Castle's tone conveys a considerable volume of caution, probably well-merited.

"It's stick isn't it?" Esposito again.

"Of course!" Ugg who would owe an automatic supercar?

"So with your shoulder injury and rehab....." Ryan.

"You're not going to be able to drive it for a while." Esposito.

"Perhaps you could loan it out to some good friends to look after and keep the engine, umm, ticking over." Ryan finally gets to their point.

"Really? I know other people. Perhaps they might want to drive my Ferrari. What about Kate?" Actually he knows all about Kate and his Ferrari after a date night some months ago. She had demonstrated remarkable talent with her mastery of his car and him.

Castle has fallen silent and Kate suddenly has alarming intuition about the memories that are currently distracting her lover. If he mentions her and stick control in a sentence he is dead.
Fortunately for all Ryan unwittingly prevents any revelations that Lanie might love.

"Um not just for me Castle. The wife too. She's never been in a Ferrari."

Jenny Ryan actually bats her eyelids at Richard Castle. Kate laughs.

"Hey, so you guys come here to thank me. And in appreciation for the thanks I loan you my Ferrari? Am I missing anything?"

At least both of the detectives have the good grace to look slightly abashed. But at the same time expectant.

"Oh wait I am. Apparently it is also to be used to allow Ryan to get lucky with his missus." Ryan's eyes go wide but apparently his misjudged his wife's reaction because from where Castle and Beckett are they can see the excitement of all kinds in Jenny Ryan's eyes.

"Hmm. What about you Esposito. Hoping to use my Ferrari as an inducement for a lovely lady?" Whilst speaking Castle's gaze has not strayed from looking directly at Lanie Parish.

"Well I do appreciate fine things." Lanie's voice is slightly breathless and she doesn't back down from Castle's stare cum challenge.

"Well it is a piece of art. Look guys I am sure I can work something out. Alexis can't drive it yet, and well Mother should never drive – any car, she is a born passenger. So I'm sure we can work something out so you can both exploit the fruits of my labor."

Both Esposito and Ryan nod in appreciation. Jenny Ryan is almost bouncing on her toes.

"Actually that reminds me. Talking of art, guys I have a question."

Alexis and I were checking all the web news stories" About him and the shooting was unspoken "and we couldn't find anything about what happened to the paintings. Is it being kept on the quiet?"

"The paintings?" echoes Ryan.

"Yeah, you recovered them from the false wall. Right?"

Suddenly Castle gets the distinct impression that he had left both detectives dumb-struck. Indeed it takes almost a minute before Esposito responds.

"Bro, look to be honest with you going down and everything, we weren't focused on the paintings. But afterwards CSU swept the scene and didn't find anything."

"The pictures were, are, hidden either side of the false door that hid the stair case. You are seriously telling me no one checked?" He actually rolls his eyes Beckett-style.

"Look I've got an image on my phone of the plan I downloaded. Looking at the city plans you can see how Jussic Senior built a false wall not only for the hidden doorway but also because he wanted space to hide something. The dimensions are more than suitable for housing the paintings."

As her passes his phone to Kate so she can see the image and his calculation of the internal cavity inside the wall either side of the vertical door.

But as she looks down at his phone screen she spies the discoloration at the bottom of the phone in the grill. Suddenly she realises what it is. His blood. Rick's blood from when he was shot. The
phone had been recovered and returned but any cleaning had missed some of the blood embedded in the grill. He's recovering. He will be okay. She's not okay with it. Him getting shot. Nearly losing him. She's so not okay with that.

Channelling her years of training and her own experiences she doesn't give anything away as she passes the phone over to the Boys to look at. She makes a mental note to seek out Alexis and arrange for a new phone. At least one more reminder of how close it was can be banished. She has enough that won't go so easily.

Ryan and Esposito look at the image and then shake their heads.

"Oh crap. Thanks Castle. We better get straight on it. I don't think there is still a guard on site and police tape isn't much of an impediment to anyone." Passing Castle's phone to Ryan, Esposito pulls out his own and hits speed dial as he heads for the door.

"Good Evening Captain." there is a pause for a response and then Esposito continues "Sorry to bother you at home Sir but…"
Clamour Part I

Chapter Summary

Their friends have been to visit and despite the social nature of the call, somehow Rick once again makes a breakthrough on the case.

New York Ledger Website – Front Page

Castle Fans Campaign for Commendation

Fans clamour for their favourite author to be given a valor award following his actions saving the lives of three NYPD officers last week. Many of the Richard Castle fan sites are banding together and starting a campaign to have New York City award the author a medal or similar citation for bravery.

This isn't the first time Richard Castle has been involved in events above and beyond what a civilian consultant or observer is expected to do. Rumours have long circulated regarding other heroic deeds by the author during his five years shadowing Detective Kate Beckett's homicide team at the 12th Precinct.

There was no comment from the New York Police Department. Nor other authorities including federal agencies notably the Department of Homeland Security and FBI. DOHS have consistently refused to comment on an incident in 2011 when disaffected veterans threatened New York and which saw NEST teams deployed in Manhattan in what was described as a precautionary measure. Likewise the FBI has refused to comment on or confirm the author's involvement in several serial killer cases.

The author and his representatives have consistently refused to comment on any aspect of real cases during his five years at the 12th Precinct. Indeed Black Pawn referred to an earlier statement from 2012.

'Richard Castle's stories of Nikki Heat take their inspiration from the events encountered whilst working with the NYPD's 12th Precinct but do not relate to actual cases. Whilst Richard does on occasion accompany the detectives into the field, the real work and bravery is performed by the selfless officers of the NYPD, and Richard is grateful to be able to contribute in his own small way.'

Regardless of the official line, plenty of fans are adding their voice to the demands for a bravery award for the author.

Richard Castle remains in Bellevue Hospital having recently been transferred from Intensive Care after being shot twice. He is expected to eventually make a full or near to full recovery from his injuries.

His publicist has asked us to remind those wishing to send gifts or money that instead donations are welcome if so desired and should be directed to the NYC PBA Widows and Children's Fund, or alternatively the Brighter Blue Futures Trust or Joanna Beckett Endowment.
Mandarin Oriental, 9pm

Wearing her Taylor Matthews 'uniform' of khaki slacks, blue polo and blazer, Clare strode towards the now familiar hotel door. There was no way she was facing that woman casually dressed. This was business and nothing but. Her attire was just the one facet of that protective shell she strongly suspected she would need tonight.

Knocking twice she waited for it to be opened. Approximately 105 seconds later the door was opened by Meredith Lee.

Oh fuck! She answered the door in a short green silk robe, with a cream and slate grey negligee visible underneath. One look at her face was enough to show that she had been drinking, maybe not drunk yet but certainly not sober. Seriously was the women totally insane?

"Good Evening Miss Lee."

"Hello Clare. I do believe you should call me Meredith or Mere if you wish."

"That's quite alright Miss Lee."

No ground conceded. Professional. Detached. Distance. Well as far away as possible in the same room would be the goal for now.

"Oh."

Disappointment?

"Please come on it then Clare."

Moving into the room Clare chose the single chair and sat quickly, leaving Meredith no option but to choose the sofa.

Oh yes, she was clearly disappointed now based upon the expression on Meredith's face. Wait was she upset she hadn't sat on the sofa with her? That damn woman was doing nothing about the robe that was now all most completely parted. Clare had noted – dispassionately thank God – that her nipples were visible beneath the lace. What was she up to? Rick had never described her a nymphomaniac but perhaps she should be medically assessed.

Oh well, Clare wouldn't let it distract her.

"Clare, thank you for coming." Meredith's voice was surprisingly level and even-toned for someone who had been drinking. Obviously a developed tolerance.

"Miss Lee."

She'll be more than cold enough that even the woman opposite gets the message.

"You said you had information for us." She leaves an expectant pause and maybe the woman will respond. Nope. This was obviously going to be an effort. Clare continues on not willing to wait. Nor spending any longer with this woman than she absolutely needs to.

"Information that you hadn't shared before relating to a friend or associate who has more direct involvement with matters that you believe might be pertinent to the issue facing you and possibly the Castle family."

Clare watches as Meredith expression tightens and the eyes flinch at the separation of her from the
Castles. She has no sympathy for the woman whose actions resulted in her being effectively alone. Certainly excluded from the Castle family. The same family she had once had nearly the strongest claim to be a member of but who she had betrayed and rejected. Clare tried not to be judgemental but long before the military reinforced those character traits loyal and honor were part of her make-up.

It is almost comical. Certainly wryly amusing if one was dispassionate enough. Clare watches as Meredith Lee's face echoes the internal struggle of the mediocre actress before the wash of acceptance and defeat floods her features.

"Roseanna Fulson."

A name. A start.

"Rose is a friend. Of sorts for some years. Sometimes really close, others barely an acquaintance. A bit closer of late, more so recently."

Despite her mental rigour Clare can't help wonder about what sort of friend this Rose had been. It is really unfair – well perhaps not really – to the woman but Clare lets herself have the moment of pettiness. It is the least the woman deserves for the trouble she has bought the Castles and by extension Taylor Matthews.

"She's been actress for a while but mainly extra or small roles."

Meredith pauses and leans forward towards Clare almost conspiratorially but also exposing a considerable amount of cleavage. Clare has never been more happy for her poker face and the ability to keep her head and eyes locked on Meredith's face. Years of army drill and discipline pay their dues in the strangest ways.

"Unfortunately Rose did some hardcore stuff early on and so the majors won't touch her. Social media is the closest thing to instant career death I know."

Meredith sighs and Clare high expects a diversionary woe-is-me tale. Instead Meredith surprises her and carries on with delivery of her information.

"Anyway Rose has a major cocaine habit. Compounded by the fact that she can't tolerate street grade. She likes the pure stuff. She really prefers Merck."

Meredith pauses as she takes in the look of incomprehension on Clare's face.

"Sorry. Merck coke is another name for pharmaceutical grade cocaine. The stuff Freud and others used to recommend before it got banned."

Clare keeps the expression of surprise from her face and internally chides herself. Meredith Lee may have many faults but she does appear to have some education. Even if it does appear to include an appreciation of narcotics.

"Look I don't do it. Well not now - not anymore. But Rose tells me there is no downer. Swears there is none of the side effects that coke normally brings. No tiredness or depression. Apparently there are no withdrawal symptoms."

Meredith is almost sounding like a spruiker for the product. She continues on seemingly unconcerned by her revelations or Clare's response.

"Also the high is a totally different type of euphoria, good for creativity, and not impacting sexual
Well at this point Clare has to momentarily blink and school her face. Of course sex would come into it with this woman.

Clare does know a little about the drug in question. Pharmaceutical grade cocaine is rare. It is licensed by the federal government through the Food and Drug Administration. The FDA works with DEA and FBI and have implemented a program that ensures it is also traceable. All legitimate manufacturers have to incorporate a unique identifier into the molecular composition of the product.

"Anyway Rose gets her gear from a person in the industry. She hasn't specifically told me who but I think they are connected to Angel somehow. Whoever it is, I think they have a friend or possibly family connection to the pharmaceutical company where the coke is sourced from."

"Anyway Rose told me just before I left for New York. She apologised but she was desperate for a fix and they were withholding. She told me that the blackmail was intended as payback for something that Richard Castle had done to a family member. She wasn't specific, probably didn't know but I think it involved a death."

Meredith comes to a halt perhaps having exhausted the information she has to offer. In the meantime Clare is assessing the information. Richard Castle is not the sort of person to harm others without good reason, certainly if he was aware of it. Could it be related a case he has been involved in here. But why the impulse and strike via California? No something based in California is most obvious. She would need his travel itinerary for the last few years but he hadn't travelled much outside the Tri-state for a while. Maybe it is business related?

"Clare?"

Meredith's voice snaps her back to the room. Clare mentally slaps herself for losing focus and starts to speak as the actress stares at her.

"Miss Lee. Do you have anything else to offer? Any more information that might help us?" Clare leaves it hanging and is relieved that she gets a response.

"I have Rose's contact details but you won't need them. She's staying at my Bel-Air house at the moment." Clare nods in acknowledgement and nothing more. So rigid is the self-imposed internal discipline that she doesn't even contemplate the information beyond its face value. Not at the moment anyway.

"Will she cooperate with us?" Left unsaid is who the 'us' is. Taylor Matthews, the Castles and Kate Beckett, the DEA, local cops in at least two jurisdictions. A potential cluster-fuck if ever there was one. Too many toes and egos to be stepped on and bent out of shape. Of course Meredith the fucking civilian knows nothing of this. But Clare maintains the sheen of calm.

"I believe so. Rose is not particularly brave but she will do the right thing."

The right thing? That very statement makes Clare wants to open up a new line of questioning. Why Meredith hadn't told them sooner? How complicit is she in the as yet unexplained and unresolved plot? Why loyalty to her ex-husband or at the very least her own daughter had not trumped whatever it was that was on offer in California?

Pushing those questions aside Clare continues to probe for more information from the woman opposite. She'll stay as long as it takes to get the job done. Richard Castle and his family deserve
nothing less, and Clare's own creed allows nothing less.


Night Watch

Chapter Summary

Whilst Clare is visiting Meredith and slowly uncovering new information there's plenty happening elsewhere.

8.43 pm

By the time Esposito pulls his unmarked unit into the lot there are two marked patrol cars parked up outside the tenement block. He had wanted to make good time from the hospital and had run under lights and sirens to clear some late traffic before going silent a couple of blocks from here.

After finishing speaking to Gates but before leaving the hospital he had let Ryan head home with Jenny. He wasn't sure but he suspected his partner was trying to make a baby and both Kevin and his wife deserved a break. Besides Gates only needed one of them to supervise the uniforms and await backup and the arrival of a watch commander to assume proper command. He'd happily take the duty. Ever since Castle's shooting he and Ryan had been chafing on desk duty. This was an opportunity to get active and back on the streets even if it was only security detail for a crime scene. He'd take it.

As Esposito exits his car he goes to the trunk and grabs his vest and NYDB windcheater. As he is about to close the trunk he pauses and then reaches for his kit bag and opens a side pocket and grabs the spare magazine carrier for his Glock and slaps the Velcro-backed holder onto his vest before re-zipping the pocket. A couple of extra clips seems like a sensible option without grabbing the shotgun.

Closing the trunk he moves back to the front of the unit and making sure the windows were closed and the doors locked. He didn't want to join Hendricks from Vice on the Chief of D's shit list for having his unit stolen or vandalised. Gone were the days when criminals left cop's cars alone. Now they would do things for the kudos alone let alone the gear in the trunk. Shaking his head he moves towards the two parked patrol cars and their occupants.

"Evening Detective Esposito. Can you tell us what's going on?" Officer Carl 'Bull' Davis inquiries as he approached the two pairs of cops waiting by their units.

Esposito doesn't answer immediately as he completes the task of putting on his vest and adjusts the extra pistol clips securely on the Velcro. When he does his voice is measured and the volume sufficient to reach the officers but no further.

"We need to secure the crime scene where Castle was shot. I'll tell you more upstairs when we get to Apartment 67."

The officers nod in understanding but noting the extra clips and his vest they all return to their units and do similar before checking their own car doors and re-joining Esposito. As a group they turn and head towards the lobby entrance and the elevator.

There's no doorman here, never was, and the entrance is unlocked. The utilitarian lobby is at least clean if spartan with no furnishings. The single elevator is already at the ground floor, the door
open. Piling in the five cops are alone in the elevator so with privacy assured Esposito continues the impromptu briefing as the elderly verging on decrepit machinery began it's slow rise.

"There should be a few more units and possibly ESU on the way. Our role will be to secure the scene and all contents until the morning when the appropriate specialists can attend." Holding up his hands to belay the question as to why all of this is occurring.

"Information has come to light that leads us to suspect that the stolen paintings are still secreted within Apartment 67. Somehow they were not found by CSI when they swept the apartment."

All four uniforms look slightly nonplussed but hold their tongues allowing Esposito to finish.

"I know you're all thinking it too but I don't have an answer as how the paintings were not discovered previously. If they are still there."

Bull is ex-military like Esposito and cuts straight to the point.

"Threats? Anything we need to be 'specially concerned about?"

Esposito shakes his head in response to Bull's question.

"Nah, nothing I am aware of. The possibility of the paintings still remaining hidden inside the apartment only came to light this evening. We're reacting like this to ensure that there is no opportunity for external parties to interfere."

After waiting for the uniforms to nod their acknowledgement, Esposito concludes the briefing just as the lift finally reaches the sixth floor.

"But let's not take chances. Stay in visual contact with your partner at all times. The Silva crime family are known to be involved here and whilst they are small scale they very efficiently cleaned up loose ends from the shooting a few days ago." More nods and serious expressions confirm that the team are switched on. The elevator pings for the sixth floor and Esposito is about to let them go when he speaks again as the door stammers open.

"We're security only here. Leave any hunt for the items" he almost said paintings before spotting the resident waiting for the lift "to the experts there is an outside possibility that they could be damaged if not handled correctly."

With that all five troop out of the elevator and head towards the boarded up and crime-scene tapped Apartment 67.

"Good evening Ma'am" greets Bull as he strides past the local who simply nods in mute acceptance of the presence of the cops.

Room 22, Ward 16 East, Bellevue Hospital, 9.06 pm

"Ma'am you need to leave."

Kate Beckett remained unmoved and simply glared at the nurse. Michaela her badge declared. Well Michaela and her were not getting along. Michaela was insisting she leave the hospital, the room and Rick for the night. Hospital policy.

After Lanie, Espo, Ryan and Jenny had departed at the end of visiting hours, Kate had suddenly found herself wondering what she should do regarding staying overnight in the room. The hospital
policy said no visitors past eight p.m. Family members could only stay overnight for critical or dependent patients. Rick wasn't technically in either of those categories. And they had no idea if anything had been arranged with the previously cooperative hospital administration.

Regardless there was no way she was willingly leaving him alone. If she had her way they would never sleep apart again. She hadn't even asked Rick about it. She had simply made the decision regardless of the rules. It was so very Castle of her.

Rick had not lasted more than quarter of an hour after the others left before flaking out with his tablet loosely dangling from his left hand and resting on his torso rising and falling with his now steady breathing. Kate had gently removed the tablet, and connected it to the multi-device charger along with both his and her phones – this was clearly one of the times that dating a *gadget guy* was clearly of benefit - and placed all the devices on top of the bedside table to charge overnight. Much as she and Rick needed to do. Recharge their bodies and face the next day and its challenges refreshed.

Kate nipped into the bathroom to brush her teeth and use the toilet. A glance in the mirror had confirmed that the exhaustion she felt would be obvious to anyone who looked. After exiting the en-suite she had silently approached him, taking in his calm, peaceful features, the sandy hair already bed-tossed and begging for her fingers but she fought the urge to caress and disturb him and simply leant forward and brushed her lips, first over his and then his forehead. Before moving away she uttered her own private words of commitment and confirmation to him. Then with no proper bed – camp bed or not – Kate had simply grabbed some cushions and a spare blanket and hunkered down on the sofa.

Which was were Michaela found her at 9.01 when the nurse came in to check on Rick. She hadn't quite got fully to sleep and the door opening had her out of the makeshift bed and instinctively reaching for the sidearm that wasn't there. The nurse had been startled by Kate's presence but had performed her duties and updated his charts in a matter of a minute or two. Turning to leave, the nurse had indicated the doorway to Kate and once they had approached the exit she informed Kate in a low voice that she couldn't be here and she needed to leave. Hence their standoff at the door of the room with neither party had budging from their position during their whispered exchanges.

"I am not leaving him."

"Ma'am. Hospital policy...."

"I am not leaving him."

"But Ma'am we already have plenty of security with those police guards and those other gentlemen already cleared by the hospital."

"I am not leaving." Kate could feel the fire in her voice, even at the low volumes and she was sure it was clearly visible to the nurse in her eyes.

With no further words Michaela had withdrawn from the room. Kate was not sure if it was a tactical retreat or not. No doubt there would be ramifications but right now she didn't care. She was tired. She wanted to be home. But Rick was here so she was too. It was a simple equation but it wasn't one born of logic but instead of need, tantamount to necessity for her.

Right now she needed sleep. Anything else could wait until morning.

Returning to the couch she had dropped down and pulled the blanket over her. She barely had time to complete the action before the wave of exhaustion dragged her under.
Mandarin Oriental Hotel, 10.45 pm

As the hotel door closed behind her, Clare purposefully maintained her calm, measured paces that carried her away, blissfully further away with each step she took, from the sinkhole that was Meredith Lee. Only after she entered the lift did her mask slip.

"FUCK!"

Clare was not a member of the universal sisterhood. She viewed everyone she met or formed an opinion on as individuals regardless of gender. But just occasionally she wished some of those individuals – notably women - would consider the collective harm their infractions were capable of. She had suffered the impact such issues throughout her military career even if it was her unashamed and honest homosexuality that ultimately stopped her rise and led to her departure, her gender had been responsible for many of the multiple obstacles she had managed to overcome.

She debated calling California now and then reporting in to Tim and Derek who were now taking a more active role in the assignment but decided she would take a cab back to her apartment and make the calls from there. It would be more secure and she would be free to talk openly with her colleagues and bosses.

Exiting the elevator she swept through the lobby and nodded to the hotel doorman who held open the door as she exited and strode towards the taxi rank. Unceremoniously jumping into the first available cab she barks her home address and leans back into the seat closing her eyes trusting that her posture and demeanour will discourage the taxi driver from trying to make small talk.

The Loft, 11.58 pm.

Alexis has given up on sleeping. Well for the moment anyway. Padding down the hall she spied her Gram's door open and the dim illumination of the bedside light. Instinctively she knew where she would find her. Reversing her direction she quietly descended the stairs and headed towards the kitchen.

Her grandmother was exactly where Alexis expected. Sitting at the kitchen counter with a glass of red wine and a well-stocked cheese board in front of her, accessorized with grapes, dried apricot and wafer crackers. Whilst she and her dad would retreat and seek solace and comfort in the cool, velvety escape of ice cream, her Grams preferred the savoury bite of cheese duelling with and complimenting a good red.

"Hey Grams."

"Oh Alexis." She can't quite decide whether it is disappointment or concern in her tone. She settles for both. "You can't sleep either?" It is not really a question.

"No." Alexis shakes her head in double confirmation.

"What has you awake Grams?"

Martha internally debated for a moment before deciding to be completely honest.

"Paula called whilst you were studying. She and Gina have both heard from reliable sources that the press coverage is about to take a less than completely positive tack. In short the gloves are coming off."
"Oh."

"I'm not so worried about your father. Well not directly. He's experienced that sort of coverage before. Well to be honest, there was a time when I thought he used to deliberately encourage it."

"Not anymore." Corrects Alexis.

"No. Thank God for that and Kate Beckett."

Alexis simply nods her agreement before responding.

"So you're worried about Kate?"

"Yes. And her reaction to such exposure and focus. And what she does naturally impacts Richard and he is not in a fit state to do much at the moment. Not that it will stop him from trying to control and fix things.

"Richard told me how concerned she was about the press and what they would dig up and expose. Notwithstanding recent events, we know that she is an intensely private person, and well I think your father is quite right to have some level of concern."

Martha takes a moment to cut a slice of some really quite wickedly creamy Camembert, smear it against the wafer thin cracker and rather ungraciously shove it into her mouth. After swallowing she continues.

"You remember Tina?"

"I liked her." Alexis nods again and half smiles in the memory of the Italian American school teacher who had dated her dad for almost five months when Alexis was eight years old, in a time long before Gina.

"So did I Dear. Oh she was never going to be a step-mom or daughter-in-law, but we all liked her. But she ran as soon as the press became interested."

Alexis counters "Kate's much braver than that."

"Oh she is, but I fear the press is going to go much further and as we know Katherine has some key events in her life that she does not want exposed to be gossiped over and dissected especially in the papers and on the Internet. Heavens you father worked for years to be trusted with some of that information and he is extremely protective of that knowledge and insight he has acquired. He's kept her confidence and not shared much of it. I'm sure Katherine dreads any sort of public disclosure of that information."

"Did Paula say why the press focus was changing?"

"No Dear. But I think it is inevitable. The cynic in me believes so but is much earlier than perhaps I would have hoped and with your father in hospital he is not best placed to support her."

"We can." Alexis blurts out.

"We can support her." She clarifies. "Make sure she knows and feels she is not alone and defend her against them."

Pausing Alexis momentarily chews at her lower lip, unconsciously echoing one of Kate Beckett's mannerisms and Martha resists displaying too big a smile at the unwitting complement to the
young woman who has merged into their lives.

"I think that is a wonderful idea. Stand together like the Three Musketeers. All for one, and one for all! Hussar!"

"Yes Grams, but hopefully without so much of the dramatics." Alexis is self-aware enough to fight the urge to roll her eyes at her Gram's antics.

Alexis moves to the fridge and grabs a bottle of water and then turns to her grandmother.

"Anyway I am heading back to bed. I'll see you in the morning and perhaps we can call Paula and find out what more there is and what we can do to help." With that she turns and heads for the stairs.

"Good night Alexis. I'm going to stay up a little longer." Martha waves the unfinished wine glass in acknowledgement and turns her attention back to the cheese board. What to sample next? Experience has taught her that some matters are best left untroubled until you can actual do something about them. The voracious press can wait until the cold light of day.
Cold Light of Day – Part I

Chapter Summary

Clare has more information from Meredith and now it is time for Taylor Matthews to resolve the matter for their most important client and his family.

Dunne Residence, Tuesday 23:46 pm

Dressed in sweats but still comfortably damp and warm from her shower, Clare had made herself some hot chocolate loaded with marshmallows – a childhood vice she couldn't and didn't want to shake - before settling at her kitchen counter and getting her Taylor Matthew's secure laptop and comms gear setup.

She had messaged Sass before taking a shower and agreed on a start time of midnight her time for the conference call. Sass would coordinate all the other parties.

Before starting the conference call, Clare checked in with on duty protective teams at the hospital and the Castle's residence. Satisfied with the all-clear situation reports she had replayed the information she had received from Meredith Lee and her own quick research. She collated it into a quick bullet list for sharing on the con call.

* Meredith Lee came to New York seeking case from her ex-husband. Ostensibly to payback a loan shark with ties to a Mexicales drug gang.
* There is a connection to narcotics including medicinal cocaine through her current housemate/guest, Rosemary Fulson – a part time actress.
* The coke comes from Vertex Pharmaceutical. A California based boutique biomedical firm that was developing a cancer drug until it tried to hide unsuccessful field trials, was exposed, and failed FDA test licensing.
* This caused severe financial difficulties for the company and faced with civil and criminal charges the founder/CEO had committed suicide last year.
* So what is the connection to the Castles? Nothing obvious.
* One of Vertex's side business was that it was a licensed manufacturer of medical cocaine. In fact according to an FDA/DEA evaluation their produce was the top rated laboratory cocaine. Extremely pure.
  * Supplied to Rose Fulson (and others?).
  * Who is the supplier (assumed link to Vertex)?
  * High risk as it is easily traceable. Source/supplier is Desperate? Financial motive?
  * Possible revenge motivation.
  * But Meredith doesn't consume coke (to be confirmed).
  * But she was blackmailed over sex videos.
  * Guilt by association?
  * What is the connection to the Castles?
  * What outcome are the organisers/blackmailers seeking?
  * More information required to link the available facts and form an evidence chain that is actionable.

As the conference call fires up, Clare is joined by the Taylor Matthew West Coast element of Sass,
Mitch Belmont, and Marty who was keen to atone for the failed operation on Monday night. Also signed in was Hillary Huston from the DEA and a representative each from the LA County Sheriff, LAPD HQ and precinct covering Bel Air.

Clare shares her notes and provides a verbal briefing that elicits surprisingly few questions and is quickly accepted as the basis for follow-up and hopefully a new successful plan of action.

Quite surprising is that formerly uptight DEA agent is in favour of immediate action but is of course constrained by her bureaucracy and due process.

"We'll be putting observation on the Bel Air house immediately but they will have to wait on warrants." States Hillary Huston.

The LAPD offer up an unmarked patrol car for immediate surveillance which is accepted by all.

"Actually we don't have to wait to gain access to the property." Sass states authoritatively.

"The Castles granted Taylor Matthews site access privileges as part of their protection service contract. Whilst the Bel-Air house is occupied by Meredith Lee, it is actually owned one of the Castle entities and managed by Miss Alexis Castle. It is covered under our contract. Taylor Matthew employees can enter the property without any further permission. If we find anything that raises concerns naturally we can invite the appropriate law enforcement personal to attend."


Well didn't that knock Ms Prissy DEA back on her heels? She recovered quickly.

"Good news. That would certainly be advantageous. How quickly can you have a presence in Bel Air?"

Sass turns to Marty who responds "Sass, we can be mobile in 15 and on site before midnight PDT." Marty takes the affirmative nods from Sass and Mitch as approval and starts to rise.

"Marty take full load out for this one. No more cluster-fucks like the other night."

"On it Sass. We'll go in softly but carrying our big sticks." With that Marty rises from the conference room and goes in search of his team. They were all keen to make up for Monday night's near debacle.

On the conference channel Clare can see the meeting attendees and she is not surprised to see Tim and Derek's id's appear in the right panel. However, in keeping with their general practice of hands off neither join in the conversations so far. Both remaining muted and trusting their team to handle matters.

As the conference call winds down, Clare and Sass get messages from Tim and Derek to stay on line.

Once all other attendees are off the con call, Tim takes charge of the session and locks out any new connections.

"Clare and Sass, is this the breakthrough we've been waiting for?" Tim Matthews, former Ranger and Chief Executive of Taylor Matthews wants the honest no-BS answer.

Clare responds first.

"Good evening Tim, I believe it is but we are still missing a lot of connecting information
including how this links back to the Castles.

"I will be speaking to Rick's lawyer and business managers in the morning. I suspect that there may be a connection through a financial investment and possibly the failed field tests for the cancer drug."

Sass speaks up. "Hi Guys. I agree with Clare. We think this might be some form of revenge by proxy going on here. According to Meredith Lee's former agent, she still played up her connection to Rick Castle and was especially hyping it for the reality TV show. If as we believe the xTMX is the link and conduit for the drugs and sex tape blackmail then I think we can narrow down the suspects pretty quickly."

Clare smoothers a yawn and asks her bosses outright. "Did you want me to stay on line for the results of Marty's visit to the Bel-Air house?"

"Negative Clare." Derek Taylor, former Seal and Chief Operations Officer of Taylor Matthews, speaks for the first time.

"I want you to get some sleep and hit up the Rick's team first thing in the morning. Marty and Sass can handle it from here.

"Both Tim and I will be visiting Rick tomorrow afternoon or early evening. We would love to have some good news for him and his family by then. Please make sure you are available to accompany us Clare."

"Affirmative Chief." Clare loves slipping back into military parlance. They all miss elements of the service life even if it was time for them to move on for their own reasons.

Derek isn't quite done with her.

"Clare is there anything else you or your teams need?"

"Not at the minute for this assignment especially as most of the action could be out West. But we are pushing at the edges of other planned East Coast engagements if this goes on beyond this week."

"Tim and I will deal with that if it arises. You know this has absolute priority. We're very happy with how it has been run by all the staff and Martha has expressed her appreciation directly to both of us too."

"Good to know. I'll pass it on to the teams."

It's nearly Zulu 00:30 time for bed. The East Coast team can run it from here and she can catch up in the morning.

Room 22, Ward 16 East, Bellevue Hospital, Wednesday 7.05 am

The closing of the room door woke him. Richard Castle blinked awake and managed to suppress the urge to lift his arms to stretch. He had tried that yesterday when still half-asleep from a nap with less than pleasant results. No damage but some sharp pain and a resulting ache that had seen him self-administer pain killer.

He had slept well. Best night since the shooting. Doesn't remember waking at all. What's the time? Maybe just after six or seven am. That must have been a status check happening. Or was it
someone else coming or going. He blinks his eyes again.

Last night drifts back. He vaguely remembers Lanie and the Boys leaving but nothing much after that. He can't remember saying goodnight to Kate or even what was she was planning to do once visitor hours were over. He wanted her to stay but knew that hospital policy wasn't particularly amenable to that idea plus she really needed rest something their bed would be the logical and superior choice. But he passed out before they could talk, decide what to do.

Still blinking the sleep from his eyes, he scans the room. And almost immediately spots the familiar shape on the couch.

His gaze locks on to her.

Oh she's here.

Good.

Great even.

His mode improves simply from her presence. God he's such a sap.

He had steeled himself for waking alone but instead she is in the same room. It's not the same bed, but he's unreasonably pleased that she stayed. He won't deny periodic moments of insecurity regarding Kate Beckett even with all their recent positive progress on the relationship and sharing front. He had two failed marriages and a handful of relationships, not to mention a string of dates that never qualified for that status as a basis for that self-doubt.

'Blergghh!' His mouth tasted like shit. He really needed to brush his teeth but he would settle for sipping the room temperature water from the cup placed on the left hand bedside table. Finding the bed control he hits the button that raises the mattress and a soft whirr brings his torso up so he can drink without spilling and drooling. Not a good look.

She was still asleep on the couch. Her body turned away from him. His physical thirst sated for the moment, he drinks in the view of her.

The blanket tangled in her legs had pulled away from her torso and her top had ridden up exposing the long lean sculpture of her, from her hip through to lower back and spine to his gaze. That translucent glow of her skin makes him want to run his hand over the warm, smooth surface and feel the soft firmness, the layer of muscle beneath and have it respond to his touch.

She had never – well not yet – divulged her full heritage and where her coloring came from. He suspected some Slavic influence in her long angular lines and skin tone but softened by western influences that made her so beautiful.

"Still creepy Castle." Her voice husky with sleep but still sweet and alluring interrupts his observation.

"How?" He automatically responds. He can't help but blurt things in her presence. Even better that he could worry less about thinking less before speaking now. But not always. His mouth would always get him into trouble, especially with Katherine Houghton Beckett.

"After all this time, I know when your eyes are on me Rick." Kate rotated on her makeshift bed with her easy effortless manner, so graceful and lithe. The same movements and rhythm that make him so awestruck and jealous at once. Rick almost groaned in loss of her back and smooth skin but instead was rewarded with the glorious glow of her face and a wide smile that lit her eyes from
below. She looked beautiful, naturally so. He can't look away, his gaze locked with hers. Unblinking. She looks great, her eyes are clearly less tired than before even without makeup to conceal the dark shadows that had been growing there.

"I can feel them." Kate pauses, considering and then with certainty in her eyes and voice she continues.

"The burn of want and worship, and when you dared, desired possession. For so long I never felt worthy of it. But I cherished every undeserved occasion as if it was the finest illicit liquor. Now I don't I know what I would do without it. I'll never fully deserve the way you look at me Rick. I'm just a broken but healing girl who loves you. Not some goddess on a pedestal no matter how you spin your magic."

"But you are. I'll never stop be some thankful, so surprised that I somehow am worthy of your love, Kate." Once again he has to suppress the instinct to run both hands through his hair. He settles for the left hand before he replies.

"God, your smile. When you smile for me, it confirms everything. It drives those insecurities derived from my failed marriages and poor relationship and life choices away.

She smiles again and he can't help himself so entranced and lost in the pull of her emerald eyes and brilliant beam of her teeth.

"All I want to do is marry you and spend every possible moment of our lives together."

To her credit her expression doesn't change. Certainly doesn't fall in surprise, shock or infinitely worse disappointment, or rejection. She throws off the cover and makes her way to the bed with typical graceful alacrity.

"Rick are you asking? Proposing?" Her tone is almost level but tinged with emotion her can't quite place.

"Kate I hadn't planned to. But I would. You must know I want nothing more than to be with you for the rest of our lives." He pauses and can't stop himself continuing.

"Will you marry me?"

Kate had taken his left hand and is running her thumb over the surface. Her eyes are locked with his, and he can see the timbre of tears touching and teasing at their edges. Her voice of course is level, in control mostly.

"Oh Rick. Not yet. Please." She is still smiling and despite the answer it doesn't feel like denial or rejection. A promise for the future instead and she confirms his thoughts.

"I want us to do this properly. I told you my conditions." Rick can't but help grin in recollection of some of those terms before an involuntary groan as he realised how far away he is from meeting some of those, especially the more physically rewarding ones.

"But we are promised to each other." Kate reaches one hand to his face to ensure she has his eyes and attention. Swallowing back any disappointment, Rick again nods in acknowledgement. This reminds him that he still needs his own token of that promise for Kate. He will need speak to Martha this morning before she came to the hospital.

Instinctively he seeks to lift the mood less it counteract what had been a good night for both of them.
"That's one near-proposal each now Beckett. Do we have to keep score?" He teases.

"Oh I don't know Castle because ultimately we both win what's the point of keeping score?"

"Beckett are you trying to avoid a challenge?"

She leans forward to kiss him again with a whispered "Maybe" and then changes the subject.

"How did you sleep?"

"Great. Best night so far. I feel pretty alert. Pain is not too bad.

"You too Kate. You look a lot better as well."

"I slept well after the interruption from the night nurse who tried to send me home. Sorry Rick but I think we'll have some blowback from that this morning."

"Don't care. We'll sort it. Gotta use my celebrity status for something useful after all."

"I'm going to freshen up and then come help you do the same and we can see about some breakfast."

Kate leans in to kiss him rather thoroughly before skipping to the en-suite with a decidedly enhanced sway of her hips.

She is pretty sure she hears the rumble of his voice calling "Tease!" as she closes the door with a smile.
Chapter Summary

They had a breakthrough and now teams on both coasts are working feverishly to undo Meredith's catastrophic descent upon New York. Elsewhere Beckett and Castle are starting their day. One which will be full of surprises.

Room 22, Ward 16 East, Bellevue Hospital, Wednesday 7.45 am

After freshening herself up, Kate had given Rick an impromptu but too fleeting bed wash, teased him gently about his old-school bed pan which was much preferable to a catheter, before fleeing his grabby hands for the hospital cafeteria or a local deli to grab some breakfast for both of them.

She had returned to the room almost thirty-five minutes later thanks to a busy breakfast rush forcing her from the hospital cafeteria and out onto the nearby streets to locate something suitable for breakfast. As she arrives back she finds Karen Wright from the hospital's administration team leaving the room. The woman nods acknowledgement and with a warm smile greets her "Good Morning Detective Beckett." Kate returns the greeting and can barely restrain her curiosity as she opens the door.

Re-entering the room she finds Rick sitting upright with his hospital provided breakfast tray in front of him. Kate waves her own tray with two cups of coffee and pastries in his direction. His smile indicates which meal he would prefer.

Pushing his tray to one side, Kate quickly unpacks the two coffees – his is the smaller, low caffeine cup and he pouts as he notices his diminutive drink – and pastries. Before she can sit, Rick speaks.

"You saw Karen as you came in? So we've reached an understanding. You or one other family member can stay at night. But no extra bedding. The couch is it. But we can't draw attention to it and it may not last for the duration of my stay."

"How?" Kate wasn't comfortable with misuse of authority even if it was light-hearted and linked to his celebrity status. One of the many things she had to adjust to as her inevitable path towards a full life with Rick had developed. Sometimes it felt like a blindfold downhill slalom race with little or no choice on which direction she took or where she would end up.

"I threatened to request a transfer. Apparently the prospect of the press being told that I was no longer happy at Bellevue was enough incentive for the compromise. Is that okay? Not too much?"

As ever he knows what concerns her and he is uncertain enough for that to show on his face and voice.

"Yes Rick. I think I can live with that." She gives him a reassuring smile before smoothly changing topic.

"So what did the hospital provide for breakfast?"

"Soggy eggs, soggier French toast, fruit in jello and some weird fruit juice concoction. NO COFFEE!"
"Well Mister Castle, you're in luck. I have some caffeine for you. Admittedly a small one only, just as permitted by the doctors, and some pastries. Assorted Danishes, and a blueberry muffin. Oh and for me a raspberry and white chocolate muffin."

"Yummy. Thanks Kate."

"Always R-icky." She rolled the R and watched the impact on his eyes.

"Tease" For the second time this morning Kate Beckett thoroughly enjoyed his half complement, half compliant.

**Crime Scene - Apartment 67, 8.55 am.**

By 8.45 am Apartment 67 was hosting quite the gathering of assorted law enforcement teams and support. The still shattered kitchen bore evidence of multiple takeout cups and more than one empty donut box.

The overnight ESU team and the original patrol crews had rotated off with the morning shift change leaving Esposito to brief their replacements. Like all good cops the new shift had performed a diligent but fruitless sweep of the vicinity before retreating on standby with some staying outside the apartment and others retreating down stairs to avoid overcrowding especially as the detectives and specialist support arrived.

After being on site all night, Esposito was staying despite Ryan's offer to sub him and the Gate's suggestion that he was not required. The look on his face was enough to give Gates pause and not repeat her offer cum command. She had expected no less of the former soldier but it was her duty to ensure her team were safe and healthy. Something she had failed to do almost a week ago.

When Captain Gates had arrived, she had been accompanied by a contingent from Robbery led once again by Detective Tom Deeming who was the very soul of restraint and professionalism this morning. Filling out the numbers on the scene were a CSU team of three (including a photographer/videographer) and a technician with a sideways imaging device.

The whole dog and pony show knew why they were all here. Gates had briefed them all this morning before leaving the 12th Precinct. They were to look for and hopefully recover the stolen paintings from their well concealed hiding place in Apartment 67.

As the CSU equipment was being finalized Ryan approached Gates.

"Captain?"

"Yes Ryan?"

"This doesn't feel right without Castle being here. His investigation got us this far, and that is before we even acknowledge his actions in saving us."

"What do you have in mind Ryan?"

"CSU have live video cams that can feed a secure stream. So long as Castle has the right software on his tablet or phone we can give him and Beckett video feed of the search. Probably audio too. Possibly two-way as well."

"Okay set it up but we need to get this show on the road. The Chief of D's, and Assistant Commissioner are both anxious for an update and to stop paying overtime for such a large
deployment." Gates rolls her eyes and Ryan still hasn't got used to this less tightly buttoned-up version of their Captain.

Ryan nods and moves away in search of the CSU tech with the video gear.

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**Room 22, Ward 16 East, Bellevue Hospital, Wednesday 9.01 am**

Kate's phone rings and she smiles at the caller ID and answers.

"Hey what's up? Need help already?" she teases then falls silent as the caller responds.

Rick is watching her carefully, clearly curious. Kate turns to him and fill him in.

"Rick, its Ryan calling. He wants to know if you have secure video conferencing software installed on your tablet?"

"I do. What's this about?"

"Ryan says he's going to give you a live feed from Apartment 67 so we can observe the search for the paintings. He's even got audio so you can speak to him or whoever is driving the camera.

"Hi Ryan. He does have it installed. Yes he has an LTE connection. You'll message the connection details? Next five minutes sounds good. Thanks." Kate hangs up and moves over to join Rick.

"Sounds like we have a show to watch."

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**Apartment 67**

After a somewhat comical but touching round of tele-presence introductions for Beckett and Castle insisted upon by Ryan and Esposito, the CSU team let the technician with the sideways scanning device loose on the wall starting at the chimney end.

Initially there was nothing visible. Only a haze and probably solid matter on the digital scanner.

"You getting that Castle?" Ryan's voice comes in clearly if a little quiet but the tablet's speakers do an adequate job.

"Roger than Ryan. So the imaging device shows nothing from front on?"

"Correct Castle. This is just what they saw before on the previous sweep after the shooting." Damn Ryan cringes when that last bit of the sentence escapes past his lips. He can see Esposito make a face, even Gates seems on edge, but Castle doesn't acknowledge the faux pas if it is one. Instead his steady voice comes back down the connection issuing guidance.

"Ryan, you need to raise the hidden door and then look into the wall sideways from the frame of the door. I think that the material Jussic Senior used for the false wall might be masking the imagery."

"Sure Castle, give us a few minutes to get that sorted."

Kate takes the opportunity to observe Rick. He's in his element here. His injuries and long road to recovery momentarily forgotten. His virtual presence at the crime scene where she so nearly lost him has him fascinated and entirely distracted. She makes a mental note to thank Ryan for his idea for getting Rick linked in.
After some minutes the sideways scanning camera eventually finds the wires hidden behind the flashing of the hidden door frame. There was no obvious switch or lever. The team try to trace the wires but they disappear into the plaster of the internal wall. A seeming dead end.

Then prompted once again by Castle they simply pull both sets of wires and this results in a section of the inside of the wall coming loose. The wires were built into the plaster. Pulling the plaster plug away reveals a narrow but deep alcove almost half the height of the wall, lined with some sort of foil – probably what defeated the earlier and today's scans.

In the narrow space they can see a simple sliding rail which refuses to budge at least initially. The reluctance is hardly surprising since the have likely not been moved since 1969 or very soon after. The lack the lack of lubrication was fixed by some WD40 and eventually the rail slides carrying with it five wrapped, rectangular packages.

Within fifteen minutes the five paintings are out and carefully been opened to ascertain their identity and condition. The mode in Apartment 67 is buzzing with excitement and not a little celebration. However, Castle isn't satisfied and is bugging Ryan down his Bluetooth earpiece.

"Where are the other two paintings? There were seven in total. Still missing is the Monet. It is one of Monet's many iterations of 'Waterlilies', and probably the most valuable of the paintings stolen in the theft. Some of his more important 'Waterlilies' have sold for more than thirty million each in the last decade. Now the missing one isn't in that range but it's certainly a seven figure painting possibly in the eights."

Ryan starts at that news. That is seriously big money. Or 'Monet' as the pun goes in his head. Damn he really does spend too much time with Castle sometimes.

"Sorry Captain, but Castle would like to point out that we're still missing two painting excluding potentially the most valuable one."

Gates quickly calms the room and eventually after some further confusion they locate a second smaller rail pushed deeper into the cavity by the first rail beyond the normal reach of their torch light illumination. It doesn't want to budge until Deeming grabs a fire pole with hooked end, and using this they latch on to the rail and drag it out.

Sure enough there are two more packages there. Another five minutes passes before Ryan can confirm back to his remote partners that there were indeed the missing two pictures including a rather fetching painting of waterlilies.

With all seven paintings recovered this is turning into a red letter day for the NYPD. Moreover, whatever his criminal tendencies Jussic Senior had protected the paintings well and there was virtually no so sign of damage or decay on any piece.

"Mister Castle" Captain Gates' voice echoes in the hospital room and around Apartment 67.

"Yes Captain?"

"I wanted to congratulate you on a job well done. We have recovered all the stolen paintings and I believe that is largely down to your detective work. The NYPD and the citizens of New York are grateful." Gates pauses and then proceeds.

"I trust it won't be too imposing if I come to visit the hospital this evening?"

"Of course not. You would be most welcome Captain."
"Thank you Castle. I'll see you and Beckett this evening." With that she hands the mike back to Ryan.

"Nice work Bro. Signing off now." And with that final praise the link is terminated.

Kate carefully lifts the tablet from Rick's left hand, and moves her face into proximity with his.

"I'm so proud of you Rick. You've done plenty of good detective work before but you've knocked it out of the park here. I really think that this could cement your formal consultancy."

With those words of praise and hope she completed her approach and pushed her lips to his and gave him another through kissing to emphasise just how proud of her man she was.

Taylor Matthews West Coast Operations Centre, Orange County, California, 07.40 am PDT.

Marty had just finished typing up the incident report from last night's operation in Bel Air and was skimming through it before submitting it.

They had entered the Bel Air property just before midnight PDT. He and 'Connie' Aguilar – the only female on his team had gone to the main entrance first with their vests and handguns only. Bringing Connie with him was hopefully so that she might put Rose Fulson at ease or at least less stressed or threatened. Smith and Cortex were hanging back in the shadows backing them up with a pair of M4's with tactical sights definitely not a stress free view for civilians.

Connie's presence at the door hadn't mattered as their initial knock at the door and press of the doorbell had received no answer. Trying again had got the same result. There were lights on and music could be heard through a partially open window.

Marty had keyed the door security code and they had opened the front door and announced themselves as per correct procedure. There was no response.

Calling Smith and Cortex forward to join them, Marty had paired one riflemen up with Connie and himself and they split into pairs to sweep the substantial property. Despite the obvious option to go to the source of the music and incidentally most well lit area of the house, the teams maintained their tactical search patterns moving through the property in a full sweep.

It was Connie who found her in the en-suite bathroom for what the house plan said was the main bedroom in the guest wing. Rosemary Fulson was alive but clearly the worse for wear. Connie reported her as nearly naked, beaten and somewhat bloody but conscious and possibly sexually assaulted. Spotting some white powder on a surface near the subject cum victim Connie had reported that in too, and motioned Smith to wait outside whilst she holstered her pistol and identified herself to the shocked woman. Rose was barely responsive possibly in shock and Connie called that too.

Listening to Connie's report, Marty had wasted no time in calling it in on the already open channel. He requested LAPD, Paramedics and DEA presence immediately. Sass' acknowledgement and confirmations from the DEA and LAPD were almost immediate.

Then he and Cortez had continued their sweep of the property. Heading into the owner's wing and the closing in on the source of the music and light. They found no other occupants but there was clear sign of multiple presences in the master bedroom including bloodstains and more white powder some still in its little plastic bags.

Within fifteen minutes the streets outside were a hive of flashing lights and activity. Typically for
LA this activity also bought the hovering press with two helicopters making an appearance before moving off once they determined there was not actual useful imagery to be gained. The upshot of all this was that pretty soon the whole neighbourhood knew that something was happening at 'El Castillo' as the double winged house with two uncannily turret-like features was known.

Once the paramedics had assessed her, Rose was lead into the main living room to meet the posse of law enforcement and security awaiting her. First CSU completed their initial evidence gathering before she found herself facing off with LAPD, DEA and Taylor Matthews representatives. Despite her ordeal Rose declined immediate transport to hospital – although she would be going there for a rape kit after speaking to her waiting interrogators - and she offered to talk with no constraints. She declined a lawyer and answered in the affirmative when both the LAPD and DEA agents gently cautioned her that she could be the subject of criminal investigation despite her current victim and witness status.

She had been paid a visit by one of her regulars who had bought not only some cocaine but also two 'friends'. They hadn't been gentle. Rose had reported the events dispassionately. Seemingly not concerned by the sexual assault but by the beating and half-hearted attempt to hot-shot her with some 'bad' gear. Fortunately for Rose her intolerance for anything but the best grade medicinal cocaine had resulted in her seemingly passing out long enough for the visitors to leave before she made her way to the guest bathroom and threw up.

As Meredith Lee had implied Rosemary Fulson was not a brave person but in light of what had happened to her that evening she decided to tell it was time to tell the truth. From there it was surprisingly easy.

She had identified Jesus Agrass aka Sweet Angel's sometime girlfriend – Sophia Skifarno –as the source of the drugs. Sophia's deceased father was CEO and founder of Vertex Pharmaceutical. In return for the drugs they had initially asked her to make a number of trips down to Mexico to visit and party with some regulars and special guests. Rosemary's deadpan delivery of the information and her tacit admission of near effective prostitution is effective evidence of that the blight that her drug habit had taken upon her life.

The DEA were particularly interested by the number of flights Rose had taken to Mexico. Each time she had been pulled away by the TSA for additional examination. After the interview, the team had discussed this and the DEA had been somewhat impressed by the tactic. Knowing that TSA resources were limited sending enough flagged people onto a flight could tie up all usual TSA personnel and ensure that other couriers could have a far greater chance of passing undetected. This confirms that the organisation they are facing off against is smart but also relatively small time. Airline smuggling was not a major drug conduit especially give the risks and the relative low cargo capacity.

Then had come the chance meeting between Meredith and Sophia Skifarno. Meredith was trying to land a role and was once again using her former married name to try add weight to her case. Sophia had asked Rose about the surname as she though Rose was staying with Meredith Lee. Before Rose could explain Meredith had dived in and played up her continued association and intimacy with Richard Castle. Rose remembered Sophia being suddenly distracted and leaving shortly after. That was shortly before XtmX approached Meredith for the reality TV show.

The onsite interview had wrapped up shortly after with Rose Fulson being transported to a hospital for a full work-up including rape kit. Law enforcement would handle most of it from here on. Marty had left Connie and Smith on site to secure the property and returned to base to complete the report for Sass and await further orders.
Dunne Residence, 10.20 am.

Clare was already up when Sass had called from California almost four hours earlier and had dumped the initial findings on her. Now she had Marty's report as well.

Rather than wait to meet with Rick's team she called them as early as she dared, energized and driven by the new information out of the West Coast. Even better was that collaborating confirmation she rapidly obtained.

Less than a few minutes into her phone call with Steve Mathers and it was all falling into place. Steve explained that Rick was a member of an informal investors club called the "Small Change Posse". They had a maximum investment ceiling of five million dollars and made a small number of investments in low profile companies with medium risk profiles.

Just over two years ago Rick had pushed four club members to make a maximum five million dollar investment in Vertex Pharmaceutical to fund field trials of a new cancer drug that had very positive lab results. However less than eight months in Rick had done some research of his own on the field trials and with the aid of another investor with a full medical background they had determined that both the original lab trial and the field trial results had been falsified.

There had been no question of protecting their investment. Instead Castle had consulted Steve Mathers and together with the three other shareholders reported their discoveries to Federal Drug Administration and the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission. In short order Vertex Pharmaceutical went almost totally bust within months. None of the five million dollar investment had been recovered. According to Steve, Rick had tried to reimburse his fellow investors their lost money as Vertex had been his find. He had also directly confronted the company CEO, Godron Skifarno on record regarding the illegal activities.

With Steve's evidence and that already funnelled from California the remaining pieces fell into place.

The CEO of Vertex, Gordon Skifarno, had committed suicide as authorities closed in with criminal and civil charges. He was declared bankrupt post-mortem and his family turfed from their previous lifestyle of wealth and luxury.

Somehow a part of the pharmaceutical company had continued to operate thanks to a non-linked trust. Ironically the surviving operation included the labs licensed to manufacture medicinal cocaine. The son, Roberto, a Stanford trained biomedicine researcher, took over running the surviving fragment of his father's company. Roberto Skifarno appears to be a cleanskin with no evidence of criminal activity. The daughter, Sophia was definitely not so clean. She had prior form for possession and use but not on a trafficking scale. With her degree in media studies, she had no direct role in the day-to-day operations but clearly had access to the labs and somehow to what should have been closely monitored and secured drugs.

The daughter had went to the same college and studied largely the same courses with Jesus Agrass the suspected drug trafficker who went by the street name of Sweet Angel. It was an on-off relationship for some years. Even prior to the new information the DEA had strongly suspected she was the source of medicinal cocaine from the Vertex labs that was making occasional appearances on the DEA's radar. However, the relative scarcity and relative low importance of the incidents meant it was flagged for intelligence rather than enforcement.

The conclusion from Taylor Matthew and the law enforcement agents was that Sophia Skifarno - and possibly her brother – was taking revenge against those they believe responsible for her father's ruin and suicide. First and foremost was Richard Castle.
It appears to have been purely opportunistic. The daughter accompanying her producer boyfriend to a shoot and then meeting Meredith who was still playing up big on her link to Castle. So they targeted Meredith because they believed that by hurting her it would hurt Rick Castle and his family. Revenge by proxy.

It should have gone nowhere, except for the desperation of Meredith Lee. The ex-Missus Castle the first had displayed none of the loyalty or respect the Castles deserved.

During her service, Clare had seen and experienced a lot on and away from battlefields around the globe. Often events and actions that saw people stretched, twisted and too frequently broken. Yet rarely had she seen behaviour as self-centred and morally void of redeeming characteristics as that being demonstrated by Meredith Lee.
Sideways

Chapter Summary

After 44 years the stolen paintings have found, the blackmail plot is exposed and Rick is on the mend, but whilst things seem like they are coming good sometimes they just go sideways.

Less than an hour after the discovery of the paintings, lawyers for Mercantile Mutual Insurance – the successor company to the original insurers of the paintings who had paid out the claim some eight months after the theft – were in contact with the NYPD regarding their property. With so much money at stake they had wasted no time in contacting the Commissioner to assert their right to their property. For their part the Commissioner's office had accepted the assentation at face value but had factually respond that all the recovered items were currently evidence in multiple serious crimes but that in due course it would be expected that they be restored to their legal owners. New York was the nation's biggest city and her top cops weren't intimidated by lawyers and shiny suits. Besides they had more immediate concerns on their plate.

Apartment 67, Wednesday 10.33 am

Unsurprisingly the events in Apartment 67 and the recovery of the long missing paintings had not remained under the media radar for long. Shortly after Gates had called the Chief of Detectives to report the success of the operation, the NYPD and especially those on the scene quickly found events around them in danger of spiralling out of their control.

Fanned by unchecked, and mostly inaccurate - but not totally without some basis – rumours on various social media feeds, the mainstream news outlets have quickly picked up on the story. As ever supposition and exaggeration are the order of the day and unsurprisingly the news reports include speculative and totally false values of the paintings. As a result the small, manageable groups of curious onlookers were rapidly being superseded by larger crowds forming outside not only the tenement block but also the Twelfth Precinct. The ESU team leader hadn't even waited for Gates to make the call for backup, instead contacting his command and requesting crowd control – 'All you've got' – plus the Riot squad on reserve.

As the NYPD was mobilising one of the department choppers was tasked to the scene but this simply added to the ongoing theatre. Two news channels had then added their own choppers to the mix and as they all buzzed and hung in the vicinity, the story was now live on half a dozen local stations and being monitored by the nationals and cable news networks.

The news of the paintings recovery was not universally welcomed. Switching the TV off, the viewer almost snatches up the red burner phone - one of the four on the desk - conveniently all different colors - and dials a mobile number from memory.

"We need to meet. Today. I want to bring forward the assignment." There is a pause whilst the other party speaks briefly.

"Extra is fine. Within reason. I don't care about the risk to you. That's what I'm paying you for."
Another pause.

"I'll be there. Just my driver and myself. Understood."

The call is terminated and the mobile phone is placed back on the desk. The TV is turned back on and the desk's occupant focuses on the local news anchor's summation of this morning's events.

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**Room 22, Ward 16 East, Bellevue Hospital, Wednesday 10.45 am**

"Thank you for the update Clare. It was very informative. I, no sorry I meant we, will need some time to assess it and take it in but despite the nature and disappointment of the personal betrayal you've done good work and hopefully broken it wide open so thank you. No doubt we'll see you soon." The call disconnects and Rick pushes the phone a little away from him on the table that swung across his hospital bed.

Rick and Kate had done their level best to remain neutral during the phone call from Clare updating them on the quite astounding level of progress suddenly made on the Meredith induced chaos.

"Fuck!" The expletive is driven hard and low from his mouth.

"I don't understand. How was I ever married to her? Fuck I was an idiot. Am an idiot!" There is genuine hurt in his voice. As she has learnt Rick's own demons are just as possessive and destructive as hers. But with that revelation had come her own deeper understanding and acceptance of the true nature of their partnership and the extraordinary bond and commitment that exists between them. One she knows is truly unique.

"God no! No Rick you weren't. You were young. You did what you believed to be the right thing, the honourable choice. And it was and still is. You have Alexis. NEVER forget that. Alexis is worth all of that. She's worth more than that and so are you too. Plus you've managed to live your lives mostly free of HER mayhem." Kate is not backing down, she knows she needs to arrest Rick's self-pity and anger before it takes root. She has her own personal scars from painful experience of letting dark emotions exacerbate physical pain and hinder recovery. Unfair as it, she's not granting Rick that selfish choice.

"Okay." Rick's tone still carries some, well lots of uncertainty and reluctance but Kate won't back down. There is no running or hiding in this relationship now. Perhaps it is not fair that Rick is the first one to have full blowtorch turned on him, but it is what it is. Kate takes his left hand in hers, thumb stroking his skin, distracting him from playing with the tablet and his thoughts. As his bloodshot and teary eyes automatically come up to seek her face, she gives him her serious smile. The one that carries comfort, concern and not a little irritation as if he is a naughty child but all tinged with love.

Before Kate can speak again her phone buzzes with a familiar tone that signifies a text message from Ryan. At Kate's annoyed but questioning look, Rick subtly inclines his head in ascent and Kate picks the phone and reads the message.

Quickly scanning the message a frowning Kate turns on the TV in Rick's room and brings up NY1. Then sitting back next to Rick the two of them watch initially in bemusement and then with not a little growing concern at the crowds that swarm around the tenement block and the Precinct.

Rick had been on the verge of attempting a humorous observation regarding book signing queues to Kate when the crowd suddenly surges outside the tenement block but somehow is pushed back from the building. The thin blue line holds for the moment.
"Oh shit that doesn't look good." Rick's observation is entirely rhetorical but Beckett hums in agreement before speaking.

"Yeah. Where's the crowd control? They're going to have to be careful not to provoke something as they are seriously outnumbered."

Their early conversation is put aside but not forgotten as more pressing matters on the TV screen have their attention, but Kate knows it is only an abeyance. One more thing to be revisited and resolved.

**Apartment 67, Wednesday 11.05 am**

Esposito had to hand it to Gates. Despite the crowds, their increasingly semi-siege like confinement of the Twelfth's relatively sparse contingent on scene, the Captain radiated calm. She had both stairwells secured and down at ground level, the ESU team and remaining uniforms were vetting all visitors and only allowing residents into the building and access via the ancient elevator. It was slow but that was a key reason for its selection as it kept the numbers of moving citizens in vicinity down to manageable levels.

Gates had all the unmarked vehicles removed from the scene and driven back to the Twelfth. Now if they were to leave, it would be together. The crowd had let the cars go when it was obvious from the deliberate placing of only a single uniform into vehicle that there was nothing of value and certainly no paintings in the vehicles. The only downside is that they had lost three uniforms to move the vehicles.

Meanwhile, they had no idea what the crowds wanted, doubted they the crowds themselves knew either. Regardless Gates had them all focused on deliberately keeping the situation as calm as possible.

Gates was receiving constant updates from the mobile command truck situated only two blocks from the tenement. Updates told them that only two blocks away – but not close enough in their estimation - at least four crowd control squads backed up by a growing riot control team were assembling. Whilst they weren't the last resort, no one in command in wanted to use them. Deputy Commissioner Lawrence was frantically working the phones to community leaders to seek their assistance in keeping the situation under control.

CSU had finished their evidence gathering but hadn't managed to leave before the security situation deteriorated. The paintings had been re-covered with the same material that had protected them for the last forty years. Gates had ordered the security of the paintings be entrusted to Demming's team who were reinforced by the CSU techs. Esposito had reluctantly accepted this as the wisest course of action as Gates had used all the remaining uniforms to secure the floor perimeter and two stairwells. With ESU also occupied downstairs this left Robbery as the logical choice for the paintings. It was them and the CSU techs would carry the pictures out when it was safe or necessary to do so.

Gates had called the two homicide detectives into a corner. Despite the rank difference Esposito feels the need to articulate his appreciation.

"Nice work Captain. Tactical situation isn't so bad so long as the crowds don't get rowdy or surge. Of course it would be good if we knew what they wanted."

Gates nods in acknowledgement.
"They don't know themselves. This is a classic urban mob and our best plan is to ensure they don't get provoked and simply wait for them to disperse.

"Esposito and Ryan, you're my reserves. I'm trusting you to deal with anything that develops or especially if the security goes to hell. Physical security of the paintings is the priority unless lives are at risk."

Both the detectives nod in turn. Neither needs to voice their concerns but they knew they may offer limited effectiveness if the situation deteriorated. As the scene was secure earlier they hadn't worn their vests, and carried only their service pistols and standard two-spell magazine load-out plus as an ASP expandable baton. Esposito had his department sanctioned backup piece – a Glock 26 - but Ryan didn't have his with him but he did have two pepper spray dispensers one of which he had passed to a sceptical partner.

Gates has noted her detectives discomfort but leaves it unvoiced and turns discussions to how they are going to leave the scene with the paintings. Initial options regarding using one or more of the ESU trucks to transport the paintings are shelved when the command informs them that the Museum of Modern Art had contacted one of their specialist courier firms who would be able to provide the appropriate secure transport truck. Once the location was secure and the crowds dispersed.

Eventually this discussion peters out and Gates leaves to make a call on her mobile. When she moves away leaving the pair in an isolated corner of the apartment, Deeming approaches Esposito and Ryan.

"Look I wanted to apologise for the other week. I made an arse of myself and I know it may be hard for you to forgive me."

"They're our partners Demming. Friends too. They've been through a lot and deserve an even break, a fair chance to make things work. God knows they have enough going against them."

Once again it is Ryan, surprisingly who is the first to speak his voice full of emotions bordering on indignation.

"Look for what it's worth I am sorry to have intruded. No one knew. Well no one I asked. But look that's not why I wanted to talk to you. I didn't think approaching Beckett directly would be best but I suspect that they may have a little more adversity to overcome."

Both homicide detectives fix the Robbery lead with inquisitive gazes.

"I was contacted late yesterday by a journalist, gave his name as Frank Hull but no publication, looking for background and quotes on Beckett. Someone had told him that we had a brief relationship. He wanted quotes and information. Photos if possible. He was sensible enough not to offer a cop money for it but he did indicate a willingness to negotiate."

"Fuck!" this from Esposito.

"Yeah, I mean considering we dated less than a month and only went out a handful of times, it's not like we were really public. Not even common knowledge in the Precinct."

Both Ryan and Espo raise eyebrows at that. It had been the talk of the locker room for weeks. Beckett being out of character and open in the Precinct especially as the money was on her and Castle. Many were shocked but had been sensible and scared enough to ensure it didn't filter back to Beckett herself. He never really stood a chance even if Beckett and Castle didn't get together
Demming has continued on unaware of the silent exchange between the two homicide cops.

"Anyway, I politely declined and left the bar – Donohue's on Sixth – and went home. I wasn't followed and there has be no further attempt at contact. Just thought you should know."

"Did he give you a card or contact details?" Ryan again. At Demming's shake of the head, Ryan offers a more conciliatory tone.

"Thanks Demming, we appreciate the heads up. We'll be sure to let Beckett and Castle know."

"But I did take a picture of him and also a shot of another guy I saw him talking to. Not sure how much it will help but I'll send them to your phones."

"Actually that could be useful. Cheers Demming."

"Look, like I said, I made an arse of myself, but I'm still a cop, Beckett's a cop and Castle maybe would have made a good one too. Not that you necessarily need to tell him that, ego's bad enough I imagine. So I got their backs, especially against the press."

"No maybes about it Demming. Castle is a great cop. He just doesn't have the badge."

"I got to get back. Keep an eye out, I got a feeling there will be a lot of attention on the Twelfth and those two in particular."

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**Room 22, Ward 16 East, Bellevue Hospital, Wednesday 11.20 am**

Two nurses were in with them, running through some routine checks on Rick when Kate's phone rings with Ryans' tone. Not wanting to disturb the nurses, Kate's steps out of the room answer to Ryan's call. She keen to get an update on the situation anyway.

Rick takes the opportunity presented to him.

"Excuse me Ladies. Any objections if I call my Mother?" The Castle charm worked its magic and he was rewarded with two nods and smiles as they continue to work around him.

Pulling his phone out he's hitting speed-dial for the Loft and miraculously it is answered in seconds.


"Good morning Mother."

"Oh Richard" Busted!

"How are you dear and more importantly how's that lovely not-yet fiancée of yours." Oh she's fighting back.

"Mother! I'm good and Kate is good too but she could do with some more rest."

"Oh lovely. Perhaps we can get her to sleep at the Loft tonight and Alexis can stay here. If there…." Rick cut in across his mother's voice.

"Sorry Mother. Look I don't mean to be rude but I'm on a deadline here."
"Oh you have something you don't want Katherine to hear." She was always quick on the uptake.

"Yes Mother. Look I need you to bring something to the hospital for me today but without Kate knowing.

"Is it a ring?"

"No mother but it is jewellery." Rick is suddenly aware of the two nurses attempting to continue working whilst pretending not be paying attention. His slight frown earns red cheeks and a sudden burst of activity.

"Mother, can you please go to the safe and get Rebecca's bracelet for me and bring it with you this afternoon?"

"Richard I thought that was for Alexis?"

"And it still is Mother, it is just being temporarily redeployed, umm loaned out for a while."

"Okay, I trust you know what you are doing Son. Is there anything else?"

"No Mother, that's all. The combination hasn't changed."

"Any chance you can clue your dear Mother in on what's going on?"

"No Mother, not right now. I will explain it to you when I can. Please ask Alexis to keep it to herself too as I do want to surprise Kate."

"Oh Richard, I don't know why you just don't go ahead and ask the girl to marry you. I'm sure she'd say yes."

"All in good time mother. Now if you wouldn't mind."

"We'll see you both soon Richard."

Apartment 67, Wednesday 11.22 am

He had stepped out to the quiet of the stairwell to give an update to Beckett. Now looking down from the stairwell window, Kevin Ryan could only wonder at the surreal events of the morning. Espo would naturally dismiss what had happened as just a bunch of idiots. Ryan wasn't so sure even if he could explain it himself. Castle would have taken a stab at explaining it. If nothing else they would have all found some amusement in it, especially Beckett who wasn't so certain to swallow her smiles these days even if Castle's tales still earned a patented Beckett eye-roll at the end. He missed his other partners. Prompted by their absence and the dull, depressing drizzle, he couldn't quite push the melancholy thoughts from his head today.

The whole situation had felt off all day. Evidently this had filtered through to those outside too. None of the crowd had really known what they intended to do and looting the pictures wasn't an option and in the face of an intractable police line that was being reinforced, reality had set in and gradually the crowds began to drift away. But in the end the chilly October weather was more effective than anything else. It started raining and the steady cold drizzle dispersed most of the crowd without any further incident.

12th Precinct, 1.30 pm
As planned the two secure courier trucks accompanied by Demming’s Robbery team, an ESU squad and numerous squad cars and motorbikes had headed directly for the Museum of Modern Art leaving the remaining Twelfth Precinct cops to return home courtesy of a couple of somewhat crowded Riot Squad vans.

Some ten minutes later, it is a mightily relieved detachment from the Twelfth Precinct that wearily emerged from the cramped confines of the vans onto the pavement outside the Precinct. The crowd here had dispersed and only two pairs of uniforms scanning the street gives evidence of the earlier predicament.

As they trooped through the lobby and towards the elevators, the Sergeant Adams has a couple of rookies handing out coffee, sodas and subs which were gratefully snaffled by the team. Even Gates – usually the home made salad muncher – takes a meatball sub and can of soda on the way to the elevator. Of course Ryan throws everything into confusion by asking if there was a vegetarian option. Adams had left him stewing for a minute before smiling and reaching under the counter and then handing over a wrapped sub with a big ‘V’ scrawled across the wrapper.

Returning to Homicide with their prized cargo safely recovered and on the way to a secure home, the team had still be been quite animated, buzzed even, as they reached the bullpen, possibly re-energised by prospect of their food. However, their celebratory bubble was ungraciously deflated by the sight that greeted them.

Waiting for the team as they left the elevator were four figures in suits. Two female, two male. Esposito and Ryan’s defensive posture was automatic and entirely instinctive, and perhaps not unwarranted given the chain on expected events of the morning.

Gates has more than instinct to go on as she recognised two of the party of four waiting for them. Lieutenant Carmel Davies and her side kick Detective First Grade Horace Bateman. Bateman had worked for then Lieutenant Victoria Gates in IAD. Now he was attached to NYPD Ethical Standards Professional Integrity unit – a definitely not-NYPD-in-house concept and creation. He and his colleagues were no doubt waiting for her team.

"Esposito and Ryan take lunch."

"Sir." Both seasoned detectives know when to follow an order.

Less than five minutes later, Captain Victoria Gates is barely keeping her cool. Ushering the investigators out of the conference room and directly towards the elevator and out of her Precinct, she knows all eyes on her.

Ryan and Esposito at least have the sense to remain in the break room. Other squad members including a couple of interlopers who came up on the first whispers of scuttlebutt for a look-see all scatter for cover.

No sooner than the four suits are in the lift than the remaining pair of her best foursome emerge from the break room.

Gates holds up her right hand with the five fingers spread. Esposito and Ryan nod and divert towards their desks, soda in hand, the rest of their lunches already wolfed down.

Closing her office door, she sinks into her chair and opens the wrapper on the meatball sub. It’s lukewarm but she doesn’t care. She’ll allow herself a few bites and savours the rich taste before
turning her attention back to seeking to uncover who was trying to fuck with her Precinct, her detectives and her.

She knows she has only temporarily run off the wolves and there is little time to waste.

For Captain Victoria Gates, the first port of call is Thomas Delaney, NYPD's Chief of Detectives, and longstanding mentor and friend.

She dials his private line.

"Hey Tom. It's Vicky. Do you have any idea why the Ethical Standards hounds were waiting for my team when we returned to the Precinct just now?"

"Well hello to you too Vicky."

"Look whatever it is, it is not from here." His inference that it hasn't come out of 1PP is not good.

"So if it didn't come from Kelly or Lawrence where did it come from? Those guys don't just rock up. Someone points and sets them loose."

"Vicky, I have no idea. Was it Davies?"

"Yeah Tom, it was. Bateman was with her too."

"Damn, I think I know what this is. Can you keep this to yourself for a while."

"So long as I don't need it to protect my officers, you know I can keep my word Tom."

"Okay. It's off the books – so not out of 1 PP, nor the DA's office. It won't be the Mayor's office, so that leaves federal agencies - but they prefer to do their own work or at least run a show. So the final option an empanelled grand jury with a special prosecutor.

"Fuck!" Gates doesn't swear often. Tom knows this.

"It's the last one isn't it?" Gates knows this is entirely rhetorical.

"Tom the NYPD is getting great press. Really positive. And to cap it all we recover seven valuable artworks, worth millions, that have been missing for more than forty years and successful defuse a near riot involving hundreds. Do we get a break? No instead I find fucking head-hunters waiting for my team." She pauses, exasperation evident in her tone.

"What's going on?"

"Well you know that team was not an NYPD initiative so it will be the one of the sponsors, someone out of our local political slime pit has an axe to grind with the Twelfth and Homicide. I'll see what we can dig up. For the record neither Lawrence nor Kelly will take this lying down either.

"In the meantime what's the status with the investigators?"

"They didn't have warrants, and appealed to my cooperative nature. I decided I didn't have one and chucked them out. Davies almost had a stroke. Don't think she expected that. In return they decided they didn't need to share the subject of their investigation.

"Ballsy, I'll give you that Vicky. They'll be back. In the meantime let me know what you need.

"Thanks Tom."
Hanging up she picked up the meatball sub which had now gone well past lukewarm and tolerable. Any bad experience to chalk up to a day that had started with so much promise.

He watched the car drive away. His meeting with the passenger had taken only minutes. They had provided details for an offshore bank account with his fee already deposited, and a deadline. He in return had provided an assurance and a new phone number having already discarded the one used this morning.

The man is cautious. His new client was an unknown and he disliked uncertainty. For a man who only existed in murky twilight and lived in the shadows he liked his life ordered in a very black and white manner. But then again he dealt in absolutes.

Despite his qualms the new client has met all the requirements and seemed on the whole to be balanced and calm, although they had been particularly animated about the big news of the missing paintings being recovered. He was uncertain of the relevance if any but he didn't care either way. So long as his clients paid, he could accommodate their idiosyncrasies.

Regardless this new client came recommended by a trusted partner. They would need to be. What they requested, and paid for, will have consequences and attract considerable attention. The latter is not something he usually dealt with or was comfortable with, but the money was exceedingly good. Certainly enough to take the risk but perhaps afterwards he should consider a break or perhaps even relocation although that would be a last resort. He liked New York – the sea of people allowed him to work unnoticed here for more than a decade. He would dislike it if that went sideways.
Chapter Summary

With the blackmail plot and the paintings recovered this may well be a red letter day for Rick and Kate. Or maybe not.

Room 22, Ward 16 East, Bellevue Hospital, Wednesday 11.28 am

Rick had managed to secure the two nurses' cooperation and silence with the promise of signed merchandise and a photo before Kate returned to the room only minutes later.

If Kate had noticed the two nurses leaving the room with smiles and little waves to Rick she would have likely put it down to residual playboy author syndrome, maybe unabashed fan-girling. Whatever it is, it doesn't stop a patented Beckett eye-roll which Rick would have simply shrugged at and tried his best 'who me' pout except for his right shoulder doesn't work and he's on edge for some reason this morning. She's noticed but she's doing nothing about it for the moment. Leaving it up to him Kate had made no comment and matter-of-factly updated Rick on the situation at the crime scene from the besieged contingent at Apartment 67.

Fortunately for him, he hadn't tried to act nonchalant or innocent – something her finely honed detective senses would have picked up on for sure – but he's almost despite for the cavalry in the shape of his two red heads to arrive.

Kate finished by mentioning that Ryan and Espo wanted to come and talk to them later. Both she and Rick were curious as to what the Boys wanted to tell them but whatever it was Ryan didn't want to share over the phone. Kate had picked up on Rick's anxiety but she was going to wait him out for now. Whatever it is, it's serious. He has none of the giddy exuberance of the sugar-rush writer-boy. Something she is missing. His lightness, his laughter. She has his love, but still she wants all of him. Always. Even the bits that make her grind her teeth and blink hard - not that she is telling him that, ever.

Room 22, Ward 16 East, Bellevue Hospital, Wednesday 1.25 pm

Lunch had been and gone. Now he anxiously awaited the arrival of his mother and daughter keen to finally be able to reciprocate Kate's promise to him with an appropriate token of his own. He suspected that Kate knew something was up, but was – for once – letting him proceed with his attempt at a surprise without busting him, she wasn't even teasing him and trying to draw the answer out. It didn't mean that she wasn't trying to discover what he was up to, simply that she was going about it in a circumspect if not downright sneaky manner. Sometimes dating – well more than dating - a detective, an extremely good one at that, wasn't all that it was made out to be.

Martha and Alexis arrived at the hospital just after lunch if that was what it could be labelled. Kate had watched stoically and with the occasional barbed comment and barely smothered smile as he fought with the hospital provided lunch. His appetite was returning but regardless he left near half of it on the tray. Kate snaffled the apple and orange for her own lunch and her glare challenged him to attempt any form of coercion to eat more.
As the two red heads enter the room and hug and kiss the couple, it is soon apparent that Alexis hadn't bought Kate a real coffee today and Kate's face falls when she notices. It is only a brief moment, a lapse in her maintaining a rigid guard on her emotions, but all in the room catch it. She's been running close to empty for almost a week. She is normally far, far stronger than this. Reduced to near tears over a missing cup of coffee.

Alexis almost immediately starts to mother Kate, insisting that her father's girlfriend looks tired and in need of a break and good coffee. Kate finds herself agreeing not least because she wants to apologise to Rick's daughter for her poor manners. Something she is still too mortified to do in any setting other than one-on-one even with what increasingly feels like their family.

After a barely permitted peck from Kate on Rick's cheek, his daughter is soon shepherding Kate out of the room with a sly wink back towards her father and grandmother.

Oh he's so doomed. Anyone of these women outclasses him, two or perish the thought all three of them managing him would be impossible.

Regardless the departure of the two junior members of the triumvirate leaves him alone with his mother and hopefully completion of her personal errand for him.

No sooner than the door has closed than his mother is sweeping her eyes quickly round the room and then with more focus and determination, over her son. There is a smile but she's still tired, and it shows in her body language and tone. Even her outfit was not as vivacious as her usual want. Which meant it wouldn't be out-of-place on Caribbean cruise.

"Hello Richard." She leans in and kisses both cheeks and then his forehead, her hands gently stroking his hair. Suddenly he feels eight again, in hospital with a broken leg after coming off the unicycle at the skateboard park. He really should tell Kate that story someday soon. It needs almost no embellishment to work on oh-so many levels. His mother's voice brings his attention back to the now.

"You look better. You really do Richard."

"Thank you. How about you Mother? Kate and Alexis have been worried about you."

"I've not been sleeping well. But none of us have been. So I've been soldiering on, like all of. However, I am lot better now that I know my son is on the mend."

"Good." He is almost afraid to ask.

Did you?" He almost can't bear to complete the question. Fortunately his mother decided to draw this out.

"Of course I bought it." The grand dame of the theatre is never far away and despite the desire to make a brief appearance she somehow controls her urge to act it out. Having quickly reigned in her dramatic impulses, she composes herself and fixes her son with a serious mother's stare.

"I do hope you know what you are doing Richard?"

Rick is tempted to show his mother the chain and loaned ring that hang around his neck and retell the story that bellows with it but a sudden burst of insight tells him this is something Kate and he should share with their family together.

Instead he simply nods and gives her a serious look in return.
Satisfied Martha pulls the hand sized jewellery box from her bag.

The box is simple. A dark purple velvet with a basic silver catch to hold it shut. Despite the passage of the years since Rebecca's distraught mother had pressed the box into his trembling hands the day after her funeral, the material has lost none of its deep lustre and still fascinates him three decades later.

Rick feels an unfamiliar mix of anxiety and expectation as he handles the box. It holds a powerful symbol of his past but also his future.

The box itself is equally ambivalent. There is a mysterious duality for it is neither fragile, nor sturdy. Also the emotions it evokes are equally complex and complicated. The bittersweet memories associated with the box weren't always so evenly balanced. He recalls that from the age of seventeen until twenty-nine he hadn't viewed it all. Simply been unable to muster the courage. Instead he left it locked in the bank safe deposit box that was his one permanent unchanging address during those years, even now. With therapy and the passage of time, he is more inclined to remember the happiness the bracelet's owner bought him and her everlasting friendship rather than the dark reality and the demons he imagined in the wake of her death.

Opening the catch, he pauses uncertain about viewing what is contained within. He can remember the last time he had seen the contents. Alexis's fourteenth birthday – the same age as Rebecca. He had presented it to his daughter, and told her the story. Well some of it, the better part on the whole. Only Kate has all of it. Neither his mother nor his daughter need bear the full weight of his grief and guilt.

He fights down the emotions that have been pooling inside him since Kate made her promise to him. A part of his frustration and mood swings have been because he was unable to reciprocate her grand gesture trapped as he was in his hospital bed imprisoned by his own frailties. Grand gesture was nowhere near significant enough a term for her actions so he honestly calls it what it is. Her promise. Her commitment to him.

He's often been the seat-of-the-pants kinda guy especially when it comes to relationships, but his previous failings in that area as well as his more successful business dealings have taught him to plan and think. He's been thinking a lot about his future. Their future.

With Rebecca's box in his hands he knows now that he has reached a crossroads in his life. It is an epiphany. He recognises the moment for what it is and feels like. Destiny. Suddenly his nerves are gone. He knows now that he is right to give this to Kate as a token of their commitment. That she will accept it – temporarily – until such time as they can exchange more permanent tokens of their love.

The romantic dreamer in him sees this as the start of a family tradition. The bracelet passing from one generation of female family members to the next. To Kate, then – back – to Alexis, and perhaps loaned to Kate to pass their daughter or Alexis to hers – no time soon of course, he's so not ready to be a grandfather.

Pushing the simple silver catch to one side, he opens the box lid.

It is exactly as he remembers it. As a younger Alexis cautiously but reluctantly slipped it from her wrist back into the box.

Two simple coils of white gold carefully wrapping round each other suffused with filigrees of yellow gold. Four times the two coils join but they are still separate but yet with a shared bond, the pair of coils are strong and unbreakable, a union of two into one.
Satisfied he snaps the lid closed and slides the box into the top drawer of his bedside table.

His mother has watched silently and even now she does not speak. Martha simply strokes his left cheek with her right hand and smiles in pride at the man her boy has become.

Alexis has Kate's hand and tugging her along, or at least away from the hospital room. The ever-present Taylor Matthews shadow falls in a few steps behind. His silent presence is reassuring despite the undefined nature of any threat.

"Where did you want to go Kate? The press and crowds are still outside. A bit less than before but Paula has warned us that it doesn't necessarily mean that interest is waning, just that their focus may be elsewhere."

"Oh, inside is fine then." Kate is clearly distracted about something so Alexis keeps the conversation light all the way to the hospital's cafeteria.

A few minutes later and somehow they managed to find an almost deserted corner. The new Taylor Matthews shadow – 'Bernie' as he had introduced himself during the walk from Rick's room – was a table away with a coffee provided by Alexis.

Kate takes a sip of the passable hospital coffee before speaking to the young woman opposite.

"Oh God, I'm so sorry Alexis. About before in the room, when you arrived without a coffee."

Alexis tilts her head in puzzlement.

"I shouldn't have reacted that way. It was so rude of me. Especially as both you and Martha have done nothing but try to make me welcome in your family. Sharing your father with me. I'm the intruder here, the guest, and I've let you and myself down." Kate runs one hand through her hair.

"Plus it makes me seem like a hopeless caffeine addict."

"Kate you have nothing to be sorry about. Also you don't have to hide your emotions from us. I respect that you do feel this way.

"We're family, going to be even more soon I think. I hope too. You're the best thing that has happened for my Dad in such a long time.

"The public think he's this happy-go-lucky guy without a care in the world. We know different. And you've made such a difference to him and our lives in the last five years.

"Equally I'll admit to being conflicted about things too. I know I'm at college and barely home. But I admit that I have been jealous of his devotion to you. I still am." Kate nods in understanding at this. She remembers the time not long, maybe a year after her Dad got sober, when he briefly dated a lady he met at the church hosting his AA meetings. She was nice and normal but she wasn't her Mom and Kate had acted out and had been rude. Alexis has been much more mature and understanding of the situation than she was.

"I have to be honest about the lingering resentment and concerns I can't make go away. The situations you've put my Dad in. How vulnerable you've made him. Especially now." Alexis fixes Kate which what she hopes is her best steely eyed stare.

"If you betray his total commitment to you now it will break him forever." Kate nods in acknowledgement but before she can rebuff the accusation and assure the young woman opposite her, Alexis plows on.
"The whole thing of you moving in thing happened so fast. I know my own thoughts and emotions were scrambled and hadn't caught up to that significant news when Dad was shot. Even now I haven't processed it fully. I'm sure I'll be fine with it. It's not like I'm home a lot now, and you certainly are there a lot. Permanently once Dad comes home right?" Alexis looks at Kate and sees the affirmation to her question from the confirming smile on the older woman's face before continuing on.

"Then there is the inevitable marriage…"

At Kate's sudden blanche, Alexis halts for a moment with an uncertain laugh and then Castle-style dives straight back in.

"Oh please. You know it is inevitable. If I know Dad, he probably has the ring already." This time it is Alexis who blanches as she hears herself and comes to a sudden stop as she realises what she has just said.

"Kate, please forget I said that. Look I can't say I'm a hundred per cent okay with that prospect right now. But I will be. Please give me time."

"Me too. Oh most definitely me too!" Kate responds with a gentle laugh of her own and Alexis gives a wan grin in response, clearly concerned she has overstepped.

"Alexis, I do understand. You have a similar mindset to me I think. Logical. It is not too different to how I usually approach things. Gathering evidence, information. Thinking it through and processing it logically. Of course your father has corrupted me a bit and the illogical and emotional are certainly much more prevalent in my decision many than at any time since my teenage years. But I do understand that you need time to adjust and take in everything that has happened to us, especially in the last few weeks.

"I denied and evaded my feelings for your dad for so long. For a lot of bad reasons that seemed good at the time. But I came to realize that it was mostly because your dad, well he is my best friend and I couldn't bear to lose him in my life if it didn't work out romantically. It is selfish I know, by Richard Castle has been the rock on which I have anchored against the storms in my life for so long, even before I had actually met him."

Alexis' eyebrows raise and this new information. There is obviously a story here but as Kate continues she accepts she's not getting it today.

"I've never been in a relationship like this. I have had three others that have lasted a while but were never going to be lifelong. With your father I see a lifetime. I hope he does too. Have you heard the phrase 'One and Done'?" Kate sees Alexis nod.

"Well your father is my 'One and Done.'" Kate can't but help smile brightly as she says this and in return Alexis's own smile is stronger and more certain than the previous one.

"What scares me the most is that I'm not scared. I know it doesn't make sense, but for once I don't care about the lack of logic. I'm so certain of him. All those years together, even when we were with someone else we have almost always been there for each other, and certainly when it mattered.

"So no I won't betray his total commitment because mine is the same. So please trust me. I'm not going anywhere. Not without Rick."

Alexis takes a sip of her coffee and regards her with what Kate reads as acceptance and hopefully
not a little affection. It is time for their conversation takes a lighter tack, and once Alexis pushes off first.

"Kate, I did also want to say that having you around a lot has had its benefits. I have learnt from watching you interact with my dad. Particularly useful have been the lessons on how to manage men, or boys really that's what so many of them are." Alexis glances down at her lap for a moment before seemingly summoning up the courage to continue.

"You're so different to how other women behave, especially around Dad when he's in Celebrity mode. I like how you can be sultry and sexy with him but not appear slutty." She bites her upper lip. "Look I'm not sure if that came our right but you do know what I mean? Don't you?"

"Alexis that was perfectly fine. I do understand what you mean. Actually the comments, innuendo and near-flirting, and I'll admit outright flirting have been part of the interaction between your father and I right from the beginning. Of course this is only appropriate if both parties known the boundaries and stay within them. Which you father mostly did. And me too if I'm totally honest.

"So have you put any of those learnings into action?" Kate had meant the question as a bit of light-hearted teasing but the beetroot red complexion across from her confirms much more than she intended to learn from her future step-daughter. Wow it is still weird thinking of Alexis light that, so let's not get ahead of ourselves here Katie.

"So Max and you?" Kate doesn't quite know how to phrase the question, and is not entirely sure she wants to, or least hear any answer.

Ducking her head down as she tried to control her flaming blush, Alexis eventually raises her head and with a level gaze.

"We're dating but it's not exclusive. I like him, quite a bit, but not enough to be long-term serious. But we're having fun." Alexis actually blushes more deeply again with the last word and Kate understands. She's been there herself.

"Oh right."

"God, please don't tell my Dad. I think he knows but suppresses the fact that I'm not a virgin anymore."

"Alexis, I won't tell your father unless I believe it is in his best interest, or yours for him to know. And this goes for any private conversation we have."

Alexis dips her head in gratitude and her shoulders relax some of the sudden tension easing from them.

"So whilst I appreciate the much-needed caffeine fix are you going to tell me why we are here? And don't tell me simply because I needed coffee." Or you giving me another round of the rightly protective daughter speech.

"No."

"No?"

"Nope. Nada. Non. Ixny even." Alexis is having a bit of fun. She shows her father's influence and genes at the most surprising times.

"But you don't deny it." Kate amps up her detective stare, not a full power but more than enough to
intimidate most teenagers. This one doesn't even blink. Simply stares back unabashedly. Probably the result of too much time with Lanie Parish, possessor of a not insignificant intimidatory stare of her own.

"No. But Kate I have no real idea what Dad is up to. Grams knows a bit more but not all of it I suspect. My job was to get you out of the room for a bit."

Alexis is looking nervously at Kate. She's not telling her everything but Kate is reluctant to call her on it as it is clearly linked to the surprise Rick has been planning.

"And get you coffee. You're not mad are you?"

Kate shakes her head and gives what she hopes is a reassuring smile but has otherwise gone quiet. Then there is a frown crinkling her brow but it is slowly replaced by a smile that starts small with no hint of teeth. Then her mouth rapidly changes shape and it not so much curves upwards as throws itself open and joyous laugh bursts forward. Even their dedicated shadow loses his focus and his head turns towards the source of the happy sound as do many of occupants of the cafeteria.

"Kate, have you guessed?" Alexis' question is met by the Detective's best poker face.

"Do you know?" Still nothing from the Detective except the smile until she responds with a question of her own.

"Can we go back now?"

"I think so. Gram said we didn't need to be gone too long."

Both quickly drain their cups. Their shadow is already on his feet and focused on their protection.

"Are you going to tell me what this is all about and what makes you so happy?"

"No."

"No?" Then Alexis pauses and stares hard at the woman.

"You're getting me back aren't you?"

"Oh, I can neither confirm nor deny that accusation." Still smiling Kate continues. "Come on Alexis let's go rescue your father from Martha."

"I don't believe that for a second. You love leaving dad to get tortured by Grams. You want to hurry back to find out what's going on?"

"Um, yes. Don't you want to find out too, Alexis?"

"Kate, much as I'd love to witness whatever he had planned I don't think Dad wants Gram and I around for it. Just make sure we're told what's going on as soon as possible please."

With that Alexis takes the older woman's arm and skips off towards the wing hosting her father's room. Their Taylor Matthews shadow keeping pace with his nonchalant ease.
Appreciation - Part IV

Chapter Summary

Rick is up to something and has his two red heads in cahoots. Kate suspects she's knows but she'll give him this and wait for him to surprise her.

Room 22, Ward 16 East, Bellevue Hospital, Wednesday 2.32 pm

Kate finds herself almost shoved through the doorway and into the hospital room by Alexis who remains outside. A grinning Martha is out of the chair beside her son in a flash gathering up her bag and barely brushing Kate's cheek with kiss before leaving with a promise for both to return in an hour or so. Martha's final act before passing through the door is to give her son a pointed look that Kate doesn't miss either.

Hearing the confirmation of the door clicking closed securing their privacy Kate focuses her attention on the one remaining occupant. An easy task as he is still immobilized on the hospital bed. He's clearly nervous.

"Rick?"

"Kate?" Really? Isn't it supposed to be his rodeo?

"Oh for Heaven's sake Rick. Detective remember?" There's a touch of the Beckett Glare there too.

"Oh right." And much more quietly and diminutively. "Sorry."

"Rick, you've barely seen Alexis today and now you've sent her off with Martha." She's going to play with him a little and he has the decency to look slightly guilty, and then her resolve breaks. She won't tease him despite it be second nature to her. If fact teasing Rick and using her own innuendo is her patented coping and avoidance mechanism so she'll do her level best to not do it here. He deserves more.

"Rick, you're really shit at trying to keep secrets from me. Well anyone actually. You bounce around like a child who just has to share." She does roll her eyes. "Before it bursts out of you. Honestly you're worse than Ryan. I still don't know how you can be such a good poker player."

"Hey I resemble that. Well except for the bouncing at the moment." He half waves his still bound right arm as a hint at his injuries. He winces slightly as the shoulder comes into play and Kate can still visualize the ugly purple stain spread across his upper body and the torn mess that is his shoulder.

"Kate." His serious tone. He can switch so quickly from jokey attempts at humor and deflection to dead serious, and back again. It still catches her by surprise, especially when it is a side of him that he so rarely displays except in those life or death situations that they had all too frequently encountered and even then he often tries to keep it light.

"Kate." Deeper and this time it carries a fair degree of authority and she finds herself complying. This is a new and unexplored side of her man. One she is not yet entirely comfortable and familiar
"Please come and sit with me."

With barely a nod Kate acquiesces and sits on the left side of the bed by the top of his legs. This way she can take his left hand and still look him squarely in the face and see his cerulean eyes. They stare back with solid pupils full of intent and purpose.

"Three days ago – Sunday - you made me a promise and gave me what is most probably your most precious keepsake of your mother as a sign of your commitment to us and our future together. I responded with words but was unable to provide a suitable token of my own. Until today."

Kate looks down and she can see the chain around his neck and the ring nestled above his heart. She tries to ignore the edge of the purple bruise that is also visible.

"It has taken me some time to organize myself to be able respond appropriately and demonstrate my own commitment and appreciation for you putting your heart and life in my trust. So right now I want to do the same for you."

He squeezes her hand and she instinctively knows he wants her to let go for a moment. With his now free left-hand he reaches into the draw of the bedside table and removes a dark purple velvet covered jewelry box.

Kate's heart is momentarily in her mouth before she realizes it is too big for a ring or it's a really, really big and so-not-her ring. She's honest enough to admit to herself that as well as relief that it is not an engagement ring, there is also the disappointment that it isn't. She's proud of the fact that she shows none of this in her features at this moment. Nothing to distract from his focus and his moment.

"Aleska, Rebecca's mother, gave this to me after Rebecca's funeral. She told me to keep it for someone special who I would love like her daughter. That's why I have originally given it to Alexis. I took her at her word literally. And for a long time there was no one else I would want to have it and wear it. No one who was worthy of wearing it except for my daughter."

Kate makes to raise her hand in protest and to reject something that isn't hers and not really his to give to her. Rick shakes his head gently and she stills her movement and the protest dies before it reaches her lips.

The jewelry box is facing towards Rick and despite his one handedness he somehow flicks open the simple latch on the box and opens the box is a relatively smooth movement and then turns the case towards Kate.

Kate stares down at the case and sees the contents for the first time. It is not what she expected. This is a simple yet elegant bracelet. The two rings– is it white gold threaded through with the yellow of regular gold? – wrap together four times. Understated it could be worn every day without attracting attention but equally it could be worn with smarter, dress-i-er clothes.

Kate is unable to speak.

"Alexis has kindly agreed to loan the bracelet back to me for a while. I didn't tell her why but she did know I would be presenting it to you. I know that things have been a little fraught between you but Alexis loves you, and I know my daughter and I'm proud to say she readily agreed when I asked for a loan of the bracelet. And she's a smart girl I think she can join the dots."

Leaving the box resting on his upper thighs, Rick reaches under his pajama top and brings the
chain and her Mother's ring clearly into view.

"Just as you have trusted me by endowing me with your mother's ring as a symbol of our promise, I hope that you will accept and guard this bracelet as my token to you of our promise.

"Kate, this is truly important to me. To us. This is more for me than reciprocating your mother's ring and your promise. I'd like to try and explain.

"Rebecca was my best friend. She was my first true best friend. She believed in me, supported me, and encouraged me. I loved her and I think she loved me. Now our love was of friends, near filial like sister and brother, but it was love never-the-less. The first time I knew I loved anyone other than my mother.

"Kate long before I was able to call your my true love and life partner, you had become my best friend. Like Rebecca I knew I could rely on you. That you would be there for Alexis and my Mother. For me also. That you had my back. Long before I dared to believe that I could love you in every way, I loved you as my friend.

"You inspired me to create Nikki Heat, to write her story, and this in turn has inspired so many others. I sometimes wish your humility would allow you to read some of the fan letters we get because they are both humbling and exhilarating. More importantly you also inspired me." She knows this, she can see it in his eyes, hear it in his voice, confirm it in his actions, and feel it in her heart. "You inspire me and motivate me to try my best, to be true to myself and my past to be worthy of you and our future together. That, Katherine Houghton Beckett, is your power and what makes you extraordinary. And you've captured my head and my heart forevermore.

"In return all I ever wanted was for you to be happy, even if that wasn't with me. I made you a promise of always, and I need you to know that it still applies whatever happens to us in the future. I will never walk away from you."

Oh she is crying now. She wants to contradict him, to tell him that it is she who is not worthy but she won't interrupt his moment. She dare not. Not when his words carry so much weight and deserve to be remembered and treasured.

"Now I have more than I almost dared to dream. More than I feel I deserve, and I'll spend my life endeavoring to be worthy."

With this he reaches into the box and lifts the bracelet up and Kate extends her left arm instinctively forming a knife with her hand, tucking her thumb in on her palm, and although it is relatively small the bracelet passes over her hand and wrist with ease. Rick gently releases onto her forearm where it nestles in snugly.

Kate lifts her left arm towards the ceiling and admires the elegant jewelry as it adorns her arm.

"Katherine Houghton Beckett please take this bracelet as token of my promise to you. To seal our mutual commitment for our shared future together."

"I do."

It is all she can manage and retain any semblance of control. But nothing more is necessary. Her words are full of love, and more. Both can hear the intent and symbolism in those two small words. Powerful beyond the single breath and transient moment it takes to say them, another sign from the Universe perhaps. But before Rick can contemplate the omens further Kate thoroughly distracts his chain of thought by closing the gap between them, locking her arms around his head and kissing
him until they both needed oxygen.

"Wow!" Her breathy murmur as her lips retreat from his almost makes him laugh in happiness but instead Rick waits until her can clearly see and focus on her face.

"Rest assured Kate, I will be replacing this with a more traditional and permanent symbol of our commitment to each other sooner than later."

Right there in those words is her promise of always with him, and she's not letting go.

"I'm so looking forward to that Rick." And she can't help herself she's closing back in and depleting their oxygen again. This time she does such a thorough job of it, his monitor alarm sounds and their privacy is lost in the approach of rushing feet and for once unwarranted medical attention.

After a somewhat half-hearted dressing down from the nurses – who seemingly couldn't control their blatant smirks and possible jealous looks - Rick and Kate had quietly resumed more normal activities pending the return of Martha and Alexis. Rick had confirmed that he totally sucked at Angry Birds one-handed, especially with his left hand. He did make a mental note to work on strengthening his off-hand coordination, something he remembered from his research for Derrick. Kate had settled back into the couch with a book – not one of his but he lacked the energy to pretend to mind.

When the two females did return their party included an unexpected and surprise addition.

Jim Beckett.

Kate's dad had previously warned her that he had commitments for much of the rest of the week and would probably struggle to make visiting hours. So both Kate and Rick are surprised his arrival that afternoon.

Jim apologized for catching them by surprise but he had an evening appointment but had some free time that afternoon that had come up unexpectedly. In compensation he bought some donuts and hot chocolate which he had been assured by the hospital staff was okay for the patient.

Rick had uncharacteristically fallen silent at Jim Beckett's simple but thoughtful beneficence. He manages to mumble a heartfelt thank you, and was clearly affected by the effort the man had gone to on his behalf to provide some comfort. Jim Beckett for his part had carefully placed the mid-size hot chocolate cup complete with steam escaping the vents in the lid on the tray table, and the box of glazed donuts alongside it. With his left hand free he had gently ruffled the hair on the writer's head and respond with his own brief words of acknowledgement.

From the corner of her eye Kate can see Martha and Alexis fascinated by the interaction between her father and Rick. She continued to watch mutely, biting her lip and clenching her hands to stop the emotions overwhelming her. Both families were incomplete and yet somehow in this room there was a feeling of wholeness.

She watches as Rick picks the cup up and takes a careful sip of the hot liquid and his face breaks into a big happy smile that lifts not only his cheekbones but lights his eyes and shallow hospital complexion fades under the onslaught of a simple but heartfelt action. Motivated by what she had witnessed she doesn't second guess herself or take a moment more to think through what she is doing.

"Dad." Her own voice surprised her but quickly overcoming her own surprise at what is a spur of the moment decision, she continues.
"Martha and Alexis" She pauses long enough for the two other women to turn their attention to her, and this gives her just enough time to reach Rick's side. As she approaches the bed Rick's gaze is on her and with their still uncanny mental symbiosis she senses his consent and catches the emotion in his eyes and the subtle nod of his head as he acquiesces.

"Rick and I have something we'd like to share with you."

"You're engaged?" This blurs from Alexis. Perhaps she's thinking back to their conversation in the cafeteria only an hour or so ago.

"No" Do they look disappointed? "Not Yet."

"Pregnant?" Really she thought better of her Dad.

She shakes her head and fixes the three with a stern detective glare. "Ohh" Issues from more than one mouth, possibly all of them. That actually sounded really disappointed. Perhaps she is too. No it's too early. Isn't it?

"Not yet." She can play with them a little bit, but it's hardly playing when she wants that too. Not yet, and the desire isn't all-encompassing yet, but someday and for always.

Reaching down to take Rick's somewhat constant abused left-hand, she smiles at her man and then turns back to their family.

"Well in light of recent events Rick and I wanted to strengthen the bonds of our relationship. As we told you just week or so ago at the Loft we're in this for the long haul. Forever.

"But Rick's shooting has reminded us of just how fragile life can and to really ram home the need for us grab on to every opportunity and live it as we want. God knows, I" And looking at Rick she squeezes his hand before continuing. "We have wasted too much time, spurned too many chances to be together. We're not wasting any more." Kate can feel Rick's strong squeeze of support. Her audience opposite her appear mesmerized by Kate's eloquence but they shouldn't be. She regularly outwits and bamboozles criminals and can more than hold her own with Castle.

"So on Sunday Rick and I had a long talk and we discussed our past, present and a bit about our future together. In short we bared our souls to each other. It was difficult especially as it raised past mistakes our parts but ultimately it was a cathartic experience for both of us. At the end we mutually pledged ourselves to each other. Made each other solemn promises for more, to be more." Kate pauses again before continuing.

"We have exchanged tokens to symbolize that the shared promise between us."

With this Kate released Rick's hand and raises her arm and Rebecca's bracelet comes into view. At the same time Rick has used his now free hand to pull the necklace and Johanna Beckett's ring from underneath his pajama top.

Their audience initially appears dumbstruck, which may be a first at least for the Castle/Rodgers clan.

"Richard?" Martha finally speaks first.

"What she said." Alexis rolls her eyes.

"Well it was prefect. Surely I don't need to add anything to what she said?
"So you're not engaged?" Alexis again.

"Not yet, no."

"But we will be. This is" Rick gestures to include Kate and her bracelet and Johanna's ring around his neck. "This is a definite step along the way."

"Well I am pleased for both of you. God knows Katie has taken her time with this relationship." Jim Beckett this time.

"Dad!" Kate's protest silences the elder Beckett who appears content simply to smirk. To one side Martha and Alexa do a surprising hip looking fist-bump. But then Jim isn't finished.

"If you'll just let me finish Young Lady?" Oh a little bit of snarky Dad there. Never as scary as Mom of course.

"I think your Mother would be incredibly proud of you and honored with the meaning and esteem you place on her ring and the purpose you have chosen – even temporarily for it." With those words Jim Beckett strides across the room and wraps his daughter in his arms as they both leak bittersweet tears.

"Katie, can I ask why now?"

"We've wasted so much time. Missed so many opportunities that we don't want to take too long. We're committed to each other, and whilst we're not dashing to the altar any time soon, certainly not until Rick has recovered, but once we get engaged it is not going to be a long engagement either. None of us are getting any younger and there are lots of things we want to do." There is absolute certainty in her voice and not a soul in the room doubts her for a second.

"You know you're absolutely right." Kate is looking directly at her dad when he says this and she can almost see the moment some epiphany strikes.

Room 22, Ward 16 East, Bellevue Hospital, Wednesday 5.31 pm

Jim had headed off for his appointments and Martha and Alexis has disappeared although Alexis said she would be back later but had not explained her statement of intent.

The afternoon is drawing to a close and transitioning to evening. Once again Castle's stamina is flagging. Kate can't but help worry a little about long-term health impacts and risks for Rick. That he had survived was amazing but his recovery and long-term health still had big question marks she had only dared ask herself secretly.

Then if by fate – she has grudgingly come to not instantly negate his belief in The Universe - there is a knock at the door, and they are surprised to see a small delegation of medical staff arrive. Leading the way is the surgeon Dr Paul Creswell. Behind him are two doctors – one female, one male - of Indian descent wearing identical white medical coats to the lead surgeon, and a fit looking mid-thirties male in slacks and a polo shirt that has the hospital logo on the left chest.

Maybe they'll get answers, including her unvoiced questions and fears.

"Hello again Mr Castle." The surgeon is looking less tired than the last time they saw him and his tone is upbeat even chirpy.

"Please call me Rick."
"Well Rick. We believe it is time to get you up and moving." The effect on Rick is almost instantaneous and Kate can sense her Writer's excitement and the earlier fatigue blow away as he takes in the news.

"But before I begin I would like to introduce you to Doctors Palavi Seghal and Ajay Lazar – they are both experienced surgeons here in the US for more training and have been observing and assisting me for some time. They both participated in your surgery. Also with me is Terry O'Connell who is one of our leading rehabilitation physiotherapists." As each of their names has been spoken the individual has raised a hand or nodded firmly in acknowledgement.

"So starting tomorrow we'll be looking to get you out of bed and doing some basics yourself. Now by basics I mean walking to the toilet, having a shower whilst seated, perhaps wearing some of your own loose-fitting clothes. These may not seem like much but after your injury they will initially feel like major exertion. So we will start slowly and build up to more adventurous stuff like leaving the room, maybe making it to the hospital garden, and then eventually out of this room and home.

"Terry will fill you in some more in a minute, but basically starting tomorrow we will have one physiotherapists meet with you to do an assessment and start the creation of a rehabilitation programme for you.

Then depending on how you progress we'll look into releasing you within a week to maybe a little longer. The how soon really depends on you.

"Really?!" He sounds like a little kid at Christmas.

"Oh Rick, that's great!" This from Kate who is almost as excited as her partner. Just for the moment she'll let the joy damp down the voice of reason echoing in her head.

"Rick, I must caution you that you are recovering from extreme trauma and whilst the prognosis for your remaining injuries is good, we do need to proceed with caution. Even in the best case, you are looking at months of work and rehabilitation with no guarantee of being free of any permanent debilitation."

"I do understand but firstly let me please just state my appreciation and thanks for what you all have done for me."

"You are more than welcome." This came from the female doctor - Palavi Seghal - and both Rick and Kate are startled by the broad English accent they can't quite place. Their puzzlement must be obvious.

"I'm from Manchester in the north of England. Born and grew up there. I married an Indian doctor and we've been in Chennai for the last four years until this opportunity to come and study in America came up. Ajay is my colleague at the same hospital in Chennai. We are enjoying our experience here and learning such a lot."

Her colleague chips in with a barely noticeable Indian accent. "Mr Castle, no thanks are necessary we were all simply doing our jobs."

"Well we're all extremely grateful for your expertise and professionalism nevertheless. Thank you all." This from Kate.

"You are most kind." Doctor Creswell is speaking again.

"Well I believe we still have a few minute before dinner is delivered" Both Rick and Kate are
expert observers and can't but help smile a little at the surgeon's incomplete effort to hide the flinch and traces of sarcasm from his tone as he mentions the hospital food. "If you don't mind we'd like to spend a little bit of time going over your injuries and our treatment plan for you."

"By all means go ahead. You've kinda got me prisoner here anyway and anything to delay having to face the hospital food is fine by me."

The information from Doctors and physiotherapist had lifted Rick's spirit and he was still buzzed and active even after the hospital meal. Throughout the meal which Rick didn't even pause to examine or condemn, he kept up a constant stream of barely filtered ideas and comments on rehabilitation, going home and too many things he had missed and couldn't wait to do as soon as he was able. Kate had willingly let herself be swept along with his seemingly boundless enthusiasm. After the week they had just had it was great to share the room once again with her buoyant boy-man.

Not long after the meal tray had been cleared away, Alexis had returned on her own, and even if Rick hadn't spotted his daughter drop what looks suspiciously like an overnight bag by the door as she entered Kate does. Kate doesn't draw attention to it preferring instead to patiently wait for Alexis to inform them what her plans were. She suspects she will be tagged out tonight and sent to a proper comfortable bed. She's so tired and the longing for a soft mattress and thousand thread cotton and snowy comforter is enough to make her not automatically dismiss the possibility of spending one night away from Rick.

Martha has gone to dinner with friends and plans an early night at the Loft. Alexis' part shudder at the possible implications of that has them all laughing.

Ryan and Esposito had texted that they would pop round before seven on their way home from the Precinct. Lanie too had messaged to say she would be round before the end of visitor hours at eight.

But before their friends arrive, the room receives some new and unexpected visitors.

There is a knock at the door but it is not followed by anyone entering the room.

For a second Kate feels the sudden rush of concern. The what if's spring to mind but she forces that back well aware that between the NYPD and Taylor Matthews guards there would have been some disturbance, commotion or outright warning if there was a thread.

The three occupants have ceased what they were doing and some ten seconds or so pass before Alexis rolls her eyes and rises from the couch and reaches for the door calling out to the unknown party.

"Please come in." It is loud enough to pass through the door and just as Alexis reaches the door it opens. As it swing inwards there stands Captain Victoria Gates still very much attired in her business clothes. Behind her are three more people.

The man looks to be in his mid-fifties, tall, just a tad over six-foot at a guess, still relatively lean, more of a runner's body. A sports jacket and blue shirt with dark grey corduroy pants.

The two children fall somewhere between the Captain and her husband in height. One of each sex, both in their early twenties and attired in smart casual clothes, no street-wear in sight. There is a marked resemblance to their mother around the mouth and nose and they favour their father in lean builds.

Alexis is first to respond and directly to the tall lanky man in the sports jacket.
"Oh hello Professional Reynolds."

"Well good evening Miss Rodgers. I have to say it is a surprise to see you here."

Before the man can continue Rick jumps in. "Well my mother is Martha Rodgers, and we've found it circumspect to enrol my daughter under that surname instead of mine. To maintain her privacy and allow her to study without distraction."

"Ah, I see. So you are actually Alexis Castle and you have been taking my class on 'Law and the Fundamentals of Identity' under an assumed name?" The question to Alexis is very direct and it is all Alexis can do to nod in response, and she can't but help wonder if there will be any ramifications from this.

But her mind is set at rest when the Professor gives a deep-throated chuckle and then his wife intervenes.

"David, can you please check the teacher mode for moment. Perhaps we could do the introductions properly?" Her best Captain cum Mother tone.

"Good evening everyone. This is my husband, David Reynolds. David as you may have gathered teaches law at NYU but also guest lectures Jurisprudence at Columbia which is where I presume Miss Castle or is it Rodgers has encountered him.

"These are our children Natasha and Francis. Both are in grad school at the moment here in New York."

There is a round of polite personal introductions and handshakes between all the Gates family and the Castle/Rodgers and nearly Castle/Rodgers.

"I'm told you are partial to these" and with a somewhat surprising flourish the Captain presents Rick with a large bag of Hershey Kisses.

"Thank you very much Sir. The hospital food leaves something to be desired."

"Please we're not in the Precinct. I would very much appreciate it if you could call me Victoria."

Kate can sense Rick's instinctive desire to push the boundaries so a firm squeeze of his hand prevents any other version of her name, especially diminutive leaving his mouth. He settles for a nod which is met by an appreciative smile from their Captain.

"Mr Castle, Rick, I..... and my family.....thank you without reservation for your brave actions last Thursday. You saved myself and your partners from serious or even fatal injuries and in doing so were critically injured and almost died.

"You may not wear the uniform, but you are one of US and your actions have repeatedly proven this over the years of your involvement at the Twelfth Precinct. It is an honor and a privilege to have you some selfishly give up your time to assist the NYPD and we count you as one of the team at the Twelfth."

Almost instinctively Kate knows her partner's ego is swelling, and of course, he's about to interrupt. She's not willing to let him ruin quite possibly a once in a lifetime moment, so his partner not-so-much-steps-in as lends a hand which she gently places across his mouth silencing the imminent interruption from the bedridden writer.

There is a grateful nod replete with a smile to Beckett, and Gates continues. Alexis is smirking and
the other members of the Gates’ family appear caught between shock and outright amusement.

"Indeed I think that on this occasion there may well be some official recognition of your endeavors in due course. Now I don't make any guarantee but I believe you do deserve something and public acknowledgement of your involvement. Of course it will take time and will be after the official investigation and inquiry. Just because the majority of the suspects are dead it doesn't mean that there won't be a full formal investigation.

"Captain…um..Victoria, I hope you understand that I don't do what I do for the recognition or any form of vanity. Despite my reputation and a few incidents in the past I have tried to keep what I do for the NYPD separate from the necessary publicity for my books.

"It did take me some time and it may be against policy, and regulations, even common sense to a large extent, but having witnessed you in action I believe I have gained a reasonable appreciation of your contribution and how your unique partnership with Detective Beckett and her team works.

"I have spoken to the Chief of Detectives, the Commissioner and I believe the Mayor has also participated and put forward his thoughts to 1PP." The last few word are spoken in a tone that conveys so much meaning including the mutual recollection of Rick's engineered return to Precinct after Beckett's shooting when he had gone over the Captain's head to secure his place.

"We will discuss how to continue your contribution to the NYPD when you are recovered and able to contemplate a return to the Precinct. I will warn you, no perhaps advise is a more adapt term, that becoming a fully official police consultant will result in changes and your relationship with the NYPD and your involvement may well become more formal. It may not all necessarily be to your liking.

"In the meantime, the NYPD will be granting an extended absence to Detective Beckett so she can assist with her partner's recovery and as study leave in preparation for her sergeant's exam.

"Beckett, I will need you to come into the Precinct in the next few days to fill out some paperwork. You will be able to keep your badge but regulations require that you surrender your official weapons due to the extended nature of the absence."

Kate is caught off guard by the last condition and doesn't trust herself to answer and settles for a firm nod which is returned.

Rick can sense Kate's uncertainty about turning over her service weapons and he knows she doesn't have a concealed carry permit of her own, nor personal weapons at home. He thinks he has a solution but one best left for later when they are alone.

"Mr Castle." The tall professor is addressing him.

"Please call me Rick."

"David."

"Rick, I can't tell you enough how much you actions meant to our family. Vicky's job entails risk, but I guess once she made Lieutenant and certainly Captain, I - we - had hoped she had left that largely behind. Last week's events reminded my family of the realities of serving this city and the risk all cops face.

"Your bravery saved her for us. We are so very grateful. Without you we came very close to receiving one of those dreaded delegations at our door."
"I am a friend of Roy Montgomery. I say 'am' instead of 'was' because of the depth of our bond transcends death. We go all the way back to the army, more than thirty years ago. When Roy Montgomery was killed in the line of duty, I was part of the group that went to formally notify Evelyn."

"I didn't know. I considered Roy my friend and I had known him for more than a decade and I didn't know of your or indeed the Captain's relationship with Roy."

"Roy and I kept our relationship low-key and away from the job. But if I told you I was his golfing buddy 'DM' would that ring a bell?"

Rick's face frowns briefly and then he nods. "He mentioned you a couple of times. Called you the world's worst golf cheat if I remember."

"That's me. He wasn't much better at golf, he was a better poker player.

"Look for reasons I won't explain here and now except to say that there are bunch of reasons why we kept our relationship low-key. Vicky's job in IA was one reason especially towards the end but it wasn't the only justification why. I guess the best way to describe it was that Roy kept his police life separate from his previous life. We mainly fall into the latter category.

"Rick what I really wanted say is that I know first-hand what it is like to have to tell someone that their loved one is not coming home. Last week we came close to getting that same dreadful visit. There are no words sufficient to convey our gratitude for your actions in sparing us from that."

"David I totally understand. I've come to close to losing someone I love on the job and I wouldn't wish that one anyone even before I found myself on the other side of the equation."

The Gates are literally walking out the door when Esposito and Ryan arrive.

The two detectives recover from their surprise at meeting their Captain and her unfamiliar family quickly and a burst of introductions follow before the Gates resume their departure and the two make their way into the room.

Rick's news about rehab and eventual release are welcome but the two quickly turn the conversation around to their concerning news with Ryan leading the way.

"Beckett, Castle. We've got some information for you and to be honest we're not really sure how to handle it other than to tell you straight-up."

"Guys you can tell us anything." Kate reassures them.

"It involves the press. They're looking into your relationships, specifically Beckett's past."

"Fuck!" Kate's sotto voce wasn't quite as quiet as she thought judged by the looks of concern she received. Rick's injuries have left him with barely any ability – at this time – to hide his true feelings and Kate's stomach falls as she sees the near panic cross his face. She knows what is behind his fear because he understand her so well.

Her fear of facing the press, Page Six and the loss of what increasingly little of her treasured privacy is left has been responsible for the decision to try and keep their serious relationship under wraps when he would be perfectly happy to announce it to the world. Going public at a time and place of her choosing was no longer on the cards, and by all accounts having her life turned inside out and every mistake especially those that concerned Rick exposed for the world to judge. At least
she would have Rick by her side to face them down.

Alexis interjects to give her dad's girlfriend time to recover some equilibrium.

"Paula warned Grams and me the other day that the press coverage could potentially turn. She didn't have any specific information. I think it was a general warning and she was going to mention it to you Dad when she came to see you. But she hasn't been yet, right?"

"No pumpkin. She's meant to be coming in tomorrow, along with Gina." Rick's grimace at his own mention of his second ex-wife's name is second nature and all in the room do their best to hide their own reactions. Kate keeps her face neutral not wanting to expose the discomfort she feels when Gina Cowell is around Rick, the debacle of two-and-a-bit years ago and the subsequent blow to their budding near-romance of that time still hurts not least because of her own culpability.

"When we were recovering the paintings, Demming was part of the Robbery team and he came to see us whilst we were waiting for the crowds to disperse." Esposito pauses for a breath and continues.

"He apologized for his behavior." The looks of confusion that greets this statement remind him that the two don't actually know the details about their encounter with the drunken man at the Old Haunt. So Ryan quickly fills them in.

Beckett thanks them. "Guys that was really sweet of you. Thank you for having our backs."

"Not a problem, you both know that. What Demming really wanted to speak to us about was to warn us that some journalist has been asked around about you Beckett." Her face falls.

"He knew that you and Demming had dated. Demming said he didn't say a thing to the guy and had no idea how they found out in the first place."

"How did the press find out about Demming? It was more than two years ago and only for a comparatively short time. Not many people knew."

"We don't know Beckett. Perhaps someone is feeding information? But who?" This from Ryan.

"Any why?" Esposito this time.

Alexis has been listening quietly.

"Excuse me but this rule about cops dating, it prohibits partners or team members being in a relationship, right?"

"Yeah, that's correct." Ryan confirms.

"So does it get recorded or reported anywhere if they do?"

"I don't know." Esposito with a shake of the head. But Ryan knows more.

"Yeah it does. I had a couple of undercover cases when I was in Narcotics and OCE. You inform your supervisor of any interpersonal relationship that might compromise a case or operation and it gets logged. What happens to it after that I don't know."

"I did tell Roy about it." Kate's quiet voice startles them. "We were working the robbery/homicide case and I didn't want to hide anything from him or disrespect him." The timbre of her voice tells everyone in the room just how painful it is for her to relive this mistake. She has her right hand
firmly in the comforting grasp of Rick's left hand.

"He simply said it would be noted and it never came up again between us, except that he asked if I was sure I knew what I was doing." She's looking directly at Rick as if to apologize. "I can't but help think he was disappointed in me in some way."

"So it is possible that it might be recorded in Kate's personnel record?" Alexis continues.

"We'll see Gates tomorrow and ask her to check. If someone has been improperly accessing and distributing confidential NYPD personnel records, she'll want to do something about it."

"Thanks Ryan." Kate's voice is level and only those who know her well would guess at the possible inner turmoil.

"Oh crap! What about Josh?" Kate drags her free hand through her hair.

"We were together much longer and we did have a little bit of a public profile. I went to the Surgeon's ball with him and there was press and a photo in a trade journal. I remember him showing me. They're sure to go after Josh. I'm not entirely sure he'll be as loyal especially given how we broke up."

"Kate I'll have Paula get on this first thing in the morning. Perhaps you can track Josh down in the hospital and see if he has been approached." Rick is trying to offer solutions and calm his girlfriend down.

"But Kate, what is in your past, it's not now. It's not us. I'm hardly one to raise my own past."

"Good point Bro!" Rick's flat, hard stare actually makes Esposito break eye contact and look away. Her near-fiancé is clearly not amused but Kate is a little but she is wise enough to cover her smirk.

Kate had done her best to not be spooked by this but she was struggling and the half-smirk falls from the face to be replaced by a frown which Rick naturally picks up on.

"Oh God Kate! I'm so sorry, please believe me I've tried so hard to preserve your privacy and not draw you into my crazy world. I guess I hoped I would be as successful as I have been with Alexis."

"Rick, it is part of your life so I need to accept it and adapt to it. I can't believe I am about to say this. It's not your crazy world. It's our crazy world now."

"Wow."

Esposito and Ryan don't stay long as they need to head off home and for some reason the Hispanic detective is not keen wait to see Lanie.

Lanie arrives just before eight pm and the end of visitor hours. As Lanie enters the room she spots the overnight bag and she winks at Alexis who smiles and winks back.

Unfortunately for them Kate has observed their interaction and they're busted. She knows she's been set up.

But before Kate can address that point, Rick decides to fill Lanie in about Demming's warning regarding the press and the increased and possibly negative focus on Kate's previous relationships.

Surprising the ME brushes it off and decides to get straight down to brass tacks as they say.
"We'll worry about that tomorrow Writer-Man."

Lanie turns to Alexis.

"So Alexis, ready for the changing of the guard?"

"YeP." The 'P' pops loudly from the teenager's mouth. She actually sounds excited to be spending some time with father in a hospital room.

Kate tries to protest. "Do I get a say in this?"

And is promptly shot down by both her best friend and Rick's daughter.

"Nope."

Alexis quickly explains to them that she will stay with her Dad tonight and Kate can go seek the comfort of a proper bed for the night. Alexis is heading back to the dorms tomorrow and will be endeavoring to catch up on her missed college assignments. That she would offer herself up for this speaks volumes and Kate can't bring herself to attempt to deny the girl.

Kate leans into Rick and hugs him as best she can given the restrictions of his strapped right arm and shoulder injuries.

"This doesn't feel right. My place is with you Rick. I promised I wouldn't leave you."

"Kate, Alexis is staying with me tonight and it will be good for you to sleep in a proper bed. You're not abandoning me, simply going home. I'll see you bright and early in the morning."

"Okay, I'm doing this reluctantly mind you. I love you Richard Castle and I'll see you in the morning."

With this Kate gives her partner a mostly PG-rated kiss on the lips before breaking apart.

"I love you Kate. Until tomorrow."

Then turning his attention to the medical examiner. "You hear that Doctor Parish? Early night for the two of you Ladies."

"Are you telling Me, US, what to do Richard Castle?" Oh Oh, Murderous Medical Examiner mode.

"Well on second thoughts maybe not?"

"Good Boy. Don't worry I'll take good care of her and she'll get her requisite beauty sleep. And make sure you do too!"

With that Lanie takes Kate with her barely giving the detective time to grab her bag before pulling the still startled and more than somewhat reluctant woman from the room and with not so such much as a backward glance.

He swears he hears echoes of 'Love You!' as the door closes leaving him with his somewhat bemused daughter.
Rick has reciprocated with a token of his own to symbolise their promise and Alexis is taking the night watch leaving Kate free for a Girl's Night with Lanie!

** WARNING - Adult themes ahead with strong language and discussions pertaining to sex. Still T rated but strong T **

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It took until they were in the hospital lobby and about to exit and walk the short distance back to the OCME building to retrieve Lanie's car before Kate shook off her bemused state.

"Lanie, what's going on?"

"Kate, you've not been sleeping properly. You need sleep." Feeling Kate halt and knowing there would be a hard as steel gaze on her, Lanie didn't even turn towards her friend.

"Oh don't give me that look Girl. I know you. We know you. Running yourself into the ground won't help Rick's recovery. And before you get started on how you've done this before, I know that. Which is why as your friend I'm telling you you're having a night of proper bed rest away from the hospital." She could sense Kate relax a little. Being with Rick Castle has modified the previously intransigent detective possibly beyond her own compression. Certainly more than her friend would possibly acknowledge.

"Also this is Alexis' last night before she heads back to the dorms so she wanted to spend it with her dad." She plays her trump card.

"Wait, Alexis is restarting college next week. Why is she going back to the dorms so soon?"

"She wants to make sure she is fully caught up on the work she missed. Plus I think there is a certain student she has been missing." Pulling the trump card has worked but just to make sure.

"So let her have her night with her Dad."

"Of course. I'd never willingly get in the way of Alexis and her father." Score!

"Right. In the meantime, this is the wrong place to be having this conversation." Lanie gestures around her to the public area. Unspoken is the increased risk of being 'papped'.

"You can come to mine, or we can go to you place?" She pauses waiting for Beckett who doesn't respond.

"By the way, which is your place now? The Loft or your apartment?"

Kate smacks Lanie's arm but still doesn't respond.
"Oh Gurl we're only just getting started. You owe me details. Lottsa details."

"Damn, I was afraid of that. My place. My apartment then. Martha will be back at the Loft early tonight and while I am loathe to concede so easily, if we are to discuss what I think you want the subject to be then we'll definitely need privacy. Martha displays an alarming degree of interest in her son's life sometimes." And she thinks for a second. "And drinks of course." Kate pauses again. "Plus if I stay with you I can get lift in the morning as OCME is close to the hospital."

Lanie laughs. "You're using me for my free transport."

"Yes, I admit it. Oh we'll need to stop off for supplies on the way, I've not been back to the apartment for a while." Kate pauses but not long enough for Lanie to ask the question she obviously wants to ask.

"Then while we're there you can tell me about you and Espo as well. What's going on there?"

"What?! Nothing!"

At Lanie's stammering protest Kate merely rolls her eyes and responds.

"Well if I'm sharing, you're sharing too. Quid pro quo Doctor Parish."

Lanie stops at a cluster of shops. Among the half-dozen there is a small supermarket and a liquor store. All the supplies they'll need.

They take the liquor store first. Kate has wandered straight into the small section with the premium wine selection catching her friend by surprise.

"White or red Lanie? I'll stick to wine tonight so white or red?"

"How about one of each?"

"Okay. I'll choose and pay for the wine you can get the groceries. Don't forget we'll need breakfast too."

"What? You really have no food at your apartment?"

"Yeah – we deliberately cleaned out the fridge and pantry the last time we were back there about ten or eleven days ago. The previous time I was away at Rick's for an extended period it took a long, long time before the rank smell of rotten food including dairy and potatoes vanished."

"Oh rotten potatoes are gross. What's the Red?"

"Californian. It's really nice. But my favourite is this New Zealand semillon sauvignon blanc. It will blow you away Lanie." Kate slowly waves the bottle at her friend who has time to catch sight of the price tag.

"Holy shit Kate! This bottle is ninety dollars!"

"Lanie trust me it's really good. Rick introduced me to it a couple of months ago. It's become my favourite."

"But it's ninety dollars! Hang on. What happened to Immaterial Girl? You know the one who wasn't after his money?" Lanie falls quiet without a response from Kate and doesn't pursue it as they are now at the checkout. This is a subject for later, in private.
"Oh My God! Kate Beckett is that what I think it is?" Lanie is looking at the New Amsterdam Black Visa debit card in Kate's hand.

"Yep." Kate has her new bank card out and swipes it and then thinks for a second before entering the security PIN. She can feel Lanie's eyes on her. "What? It's the first time I've actually used it. I had to recall the numbers."

"Where did that come from? Wait, I don't need to guess."

"Lanie, I'll tell you all back at my apartment. But not now okay?"

"Girl, you are so on for that. Now let's get some food. I'm thinkin' dips and Turkish bread, grapes, something sweetish for desert and bagels for breakfast."

"Sounds good. You're paying don't forget but no skimping on the dips, the real stuff not the knock-offs."

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**Beckett's Apartment**

Not long after she and Lanie had arrived at her place Martha had called wanting to know if Kate was coming home tonight. She had declined Martha's invitation to stay at the Loft, explaining who she was with, if not the full reasons why. The elder Castle/Rodgers hadn't sounded disappointed or even judgemental and simply wished her a pleasant night and looked forward to seeing her tomorrow at the hospital. Kate could almost see the deep understanding in her eyes.

Lanie had listened to the Beckett end of the conversation for increasing pleasure. It was obvious that this unconventional bunch were a family. Legalities and surnames be damned. She made a mental note to remind herself to follow up on that. Something very important happened at the hospital between Sunday and now and she wants to know. She's her best friend. She has a right to know.

Whilst Kate is finishing up her conversation with Martha, Lanie un-bagged the shopping and then went to use the bathroom. By the time Lanie emerges a few minutes later Kate is assembling the platter of food on her kitchen bench with the Turkish bread toasting under the grill.

"Girl, where is your stuff? I can barely see any of your clothes and shoes. Where is it all?"

"Um, the Loft." Kate stares down at her bare feet. "I guess you could say that we've been doing the moving in together process for a while, just never made the formal decision until that night last week."

"Girl I am feeling majorly let down here. I'mma suspectin' breaches of the girlfriend code. You better damn well make this up to me tonight."

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Kate sat cross legged at one end of her couch. Lanie was more conventional positioned towards the other end with her feet firmly on the ground. A platter loaded with Turkish bread, celery sticks, baba ganoush, a couple of flavoured of hummus and grapes sat on the coffee table keeping the wine bottles company. Chinking their wine glasses, Kate guesses this is the calm before the storm so to speak.

"I'm not sure I actually want to have this conversation."

"Tough. You owe me. Lottsa details. So start talking Detective!" Kate remains steadfastly mute,
taking an extra-large scoop of bread and tip to further reinforce her silence.

Her silence is so not rewarded as Lanie Parish goes on the offensive.

"So White Whale?" Lanie goes straight for the kill.

"Wait….I can't believe you're starting with that question. Why do you want to know?"

"Call it scientific curiosity."

"Look when I told you before that it is proportionate, well it is. Rick's a big solid guy, so is his." Kate's stuck for a suitable euphemism for penis which sounds far too clinical.

"Wang, dong, dick, cock, Little Ricky, Mini Castle?" Lanie gleefully rather than helpfully suggests. Kate rolls her eyes and glares at her friend. Who simply looks back completely unperturbed by Kate's 'perp' stare.

"So does he have a name for it?"

"No Rick hasn't named it. At least not that I have heard." It is true. He has never named it in her presence. She has. But she's not telling. Even Lanie.

"Sorry I don't believe that for a minute. Mister Creative hasn't named his appendage?! Javi has."

"Lanie STOP! I told you before I don't want the details."

"Oh no, I'm sharing this so you owe me details."

"Jabalina."

"Bless you."

"Ass! It means 'javelin' in Spanish."

"Christ Lanie. I really didn't want to know. I have to work with the man. No more please."

"So? I have to work with Castle but it doesn't stop me wanting the details."

"See that's why I'm actually worried about you. But in the interest of our friendship and on the promise of never, ever sharing I will tell you a few things. So ask away before I regret this more than I already do."

"So White Whale?" Lanie goes straight back to her original question.

"Pretty much entirely deserved. His girth is quite large."

"Oh girlfriend I could see that at the hospital. Even without the blood flow!"

"Still not happy about that." Lanie stares straight back, entirely unabashed.

"What about…?" Lanie moves her hands apart. Kate knows what she is asking but she doesn't respond as yet prompting another variation on the query.

"Have you measured it?"

Kate actually looks at Lanie like she's crazy.
"What!? No!" Kate vehemently shakes her head. "Of course not!"

"Why not?"

Kate glares at Lanie who is not deterred. She frowns, her eyebrows perceptively curving inwards, and she sighs then answers.

"More than one, but not a two hander."

"Ooh very nice! I'm officially jealous. And how is he compatibility wise?" Another eye roll. This might easily be her most uncomfortable girl's session ever. But she answers.

"First few times had me walking funny if you know what I mean. Mind you that could have been the fight with Maddox." She smirks at Lanie. Take that.

Lanie simply rolls her eyes with an implied 'you're not getting away that lightly.' And then asks outright.

"Is he good?" A nod of confirmation. She can work with this, build up to more detailed answers.

"So he has skills?"

"God the man is multi-talented. A lot of that annoying ego and the reputation is actually very well deserved. The things he can do to me with his hands, his mouth and his thing."

"Thing?!" Lanie laughs out loud but Kate doesn't expand on that. Lanie lets it pass for now.

"The best?" Time to ramp things up.

Her smile before she even moves her head confirms that.

"Oh Lanie you have no idea." Kate's laugh tinkles like a happy bell.

"Well that's what I'm trying to get. It's not like I'm gonna get a shot so I have to live vicariously through my best friend who owes me details."

"Oh he's got talent but that's not it Lanie." Kate pauses clearly debating how much to tell her best friend.

"He loves me with everything he has, and worships my body. Scars and all. He is so reverent and yet there's this fucking hot possessive streak, like he is taking everything he wants of me. Any other any man who would try that with me would be gone in a shot. But with Rick it's so different. It so masculine and reeking of massive self-confidence. Having me ceding control to him. Things I hate - usually. But he's giving back all of himself. So much so that I know he is fully exposed and vulnerable and that I could destroy him if I so wished. It's so much more than sex, fucking, even love making. When we're like that it is everything. The world just fades away. There is only us. The two of us."

Kate comes to a stop surprised by her own admission. Lanie is awestruck, there is no other term for it.

Both take a sip, or rather a gulp of their wine and snaffle a piece of the dipping bread which they coat in whatever delightful mix they want and nothing is said while they eat for a minute and sip again at the delightfully smooth wine.

"Kate, I've never heard you talk about this. About a man. Like this."
"You never will." There is so much unsaid from Kate's brief answer and Lanie takes a moment to mentally add the missing 'No other man. Ever.' before proceeding on, hopefully steering the conversation towards a less emotionally intense topic.

"I woulda thought Rick was a breast man based on his past companions." She knows her friend is secure and comfortable in her body but has occasionally expressed concerns about her bust size even expressing some jealousy of her own fuller figure.

"But Lanie the playboy persona was largely contrived" But not entirely she reminds herself. At least at one time.

"Rick doesn't seem to care. Wait that's wrong. He does care. So much. He likes them. More than likes them. He says he's not a breast, or leg or ass person. He's a Kate person."

"Aw! How sweet!" Lanie's instinctive reply gets a well-deserved glare in return and she feels her cheeks heat a little.

"Anyway, well he does call them perfect and he's got this way….." Kate suddenly checks herself.

"Wait. I'm not telling you this."

Oh damn, it was just about to get interesting.

The disappointment must be showing on her face because Kate does that thing with her teeth on her bottom lip. Something that Lanie secretly admits to herself is kinda hot.

"Oh look Lanie. I'm going to tell you some stuff that is best-girlfriend, never-to-be-divulged okay?"

Lanie is pretty sure her head almost detached from her vigorous unspoken promise.

"It's so different from Josh, or anyone else I've ever been with. He's so different."

Lanie stays quiet knowing her friend will spill at her own pace and level.

"Sometimes it's fun, sometimes it's just sex – really good sex, a lot of the time, no most of the time, it's so much more. There's an emotional connection, more than that. It's spiritual, like it's not just our bodies. Which seem to fit perfectly. We're more than compatible. It's like we complete each other. I really didn't know and I'm sure Rick didn't. I think after our first night we both looked shell-shocked and overcome by what we shared. Although we didn't say it, I knew then that this was it for me. I'm pretty sure it was the same for him and we've since spoken the words that confirm that.

"Whether it's fast and frantic or slow and sensuous. Sometimes it's a mix of some or all of that. The one thing is it's never boring or routine. We laugh. We tease each other. Sometimes we'll get one of us off and not the other, especially if time is short. But we'll make it up later. For a man he doesn't mope about sex. He takes it as a challenge. And believe you me, he's very competitive when it comes to that."

"Wow." Lanie doesn't want to interrupt too much for fear that Kate will stop sharing but nor does she want it to end. So she continues her careful prompting.

"Favourite place?"

"Our bed. Oh elsewhere is good but our bed is best." Kate stops but the expression on her friend's face makes it clear she wanted more. "Not just cause it's huge, and the sheets are this thousand
count Egyptian cotton that almost feels like satin – mind you he has those too – but because before and after it is our favourite place to be. We read, he writes, talk. God Lanie, it just feels like home. I never want to leave."

Lanie Parish takes some time to ask her next question. Possibly because she appears to be fighting back the sudden appearance of moisture around her eyes.

"Have you christened all of the Loft?" The question was direct but her tone was anything but.

"God no! Well almost. Not Alexis' room or Martha's obviously. But yes to most other places. We're working on it." Kate's openly grinning as she carries on.

"Still got a few to do at the Hamptons. Something I plan to fix while I'm helping Rick recover." She grins salaciously at the thought or perhaps it's the memories. Or both. Lanie Parish appears dumbstruck at the moment, so Kate carries on.

"This place too. Obviously a little less to work with but we've done this couch multiple times for instance." Kate doesn't even hide her evil grin.

Lanie instinctively wiggles on the cushions looking slightly, well maybe more than slightly uncomfortable despite her initiating the topic. The look on her face is priceless. She wants details but not those details.

Kate laughs. Her big open, booming laugh. The one Lanie normally only hears if Kate is with Castle.

Lanie has to concede that whatever else Rick Castle has done for her friend, he has made her far more than simply happy. There is a luminescence about her friend that hints at the most profound changes to her psyche.

She wonder if this Kate Beckett is most likely akin to one before her mother's death. The one she never got to meet. The one that probably seemed irretrievably lost when they first met more than a decade ago. Oh this is so not helping her fight off the sappy tears.

And this Kate is willing to share that too.

"So is there anything else you want to know Lanie? This is, like, a one-time offer. It is too precious to share otherwise."

"So tell me. Have you opened your 'Kinky Box'? Used some of the contents?"

The blush is so rapid that it appears Kate Beckett goes beetroot red in one shocking moment. Oh this is going to be good.

Kate's revelations have left both of them somewhat hot and bothered. Lots of wine drinking to cover awkward moments and sensations. Lanie had heard the details about Kate's previous sexual relationships but what she learn tonight was so much more. Not so much because of the physiology – in fact Kate was light on the details of the actual events this time – but because of the psychology and emotion involved.

It makes her more frustrated with her own stalled, possibly sinking relationship with Javier Esposito. Just when she thought she was making progress with him, he backslides or worse runs. Certainly dodges.
They had been moving beyond booty-calls or at least she had thought so. And if she's listening in to her thoughts now it's Kate's turn to ask the questions.

"So the first night in hospital when I called. You were in bed with Espo? It's not a question. "It wasn't just a booty-call was it?" Damn she sometimes forgets her best friend is also the best detective.

"No. At least I don't want it to be. Not now. Kate I've seen what you and Castle have and for all my sass and teasing, I'm jealous. I want that too. I'm a professional woman, and I don't want to give that up. I've worked too hard and long for it. Especially in a male dominated world. Would you believe Perlmutter is nowhere near the worst I have to deal with?" Kate's head moves in agreement.

"When we were leaving the hospital that first night, he was so scared, lonely and guilty. I just wanted to comfort him. I didn't mean for us to have sex. Well not then. But I felt we connected and then it just happened and it was sweet and tender and all those things that were missing last time.

"So what's wrong now? Esposito took off like a scalded ferret today at the hospital before you arrived."

"It's complicated." Kate's eyebrows arch at that. How many times has she said that? Too many.

"Oh Lanie. Please don't tell me that!" Kate had to fight down the urge to laugh and cringe simultaneously. So many times over the years she has said that to Lanie when referring to her relationship with Castle. And Lanie never let her of the hook. Well mostly not.

"He says he wants us to date. But he's been seeing this other woman. He didn't say who but I suspect it's this tech support girl, Tori I think her name is, that works between the Twelfth and Fifteenth. He says he's not ready to go exclusive.

"There was a time when I would have been happy, well not happy but okay with that. Hell I broke it off last time when things looked serious. And suggested the booty calls."

"But now?"

"I don't want to share. I want it to be more. More like you." Lanie shakes her head.

"Fuck! You know how messed up that makes me sounds? I what to be more like Kate 'One-foot-out-the-door' Beckett."

"Gee thanks Lanie!" Kate's sarcasm bites and deservedly so.

"Ouch. Sorry I deserved that. But it's exactly why I feel so messed up.

"More wine? It will have to be red. We appear to have finished the white."

"Oh why the hell not. But enough about me and that immature boy."

Kate laughed. Lanie glared at her hard.

"Oh look I'm sorry. But for years I had the immature boy and now you do. Well a different one. Not mine. Not that he's a boy. Definitely not. Immature yes. But not a boy!"

"Lanie, what am I doing?"

"Sorry?"
"I sometimes find myself second-guessing my life even now. I have since my Mom…” Kate doesn't need to finish the sentence and Lanie jumps in to move the conversation forward and rescue Kate from her memories.

"You Love Him?"

"Yes. Of Course. Always."

"Then stop over thinking this. I know you are want to constantly analyse, actually over-analyse especially when it comes to relationships. But Honey you don't need to with this one."

"I know and I'm not. Well not really. It's just that since Sunday our relationship has changed. For the better. But it has definitely changed."

"Kate. Are you telling me you're ENGAGED?! To Richard FREAKING Castle?"

"Wow Lanie. Calm down. We're not engaged. Well not yet anyway. But I know what to expect from you when we are."

"When! Okay that is so not helping. You need to explain that right now! What have you two done? Because I am assuming it was both of you."

Kate is silent for a moment. Contemplating how to explain this. She wishes Rick was here with his words to expound on their promise and the exchange of tokens. She's pretty sure she won't be able to do the events enough justice. But she'll try. Perhaps the flailing fan-girl opposite doesn't need the full Richard Castle experience.

"You remember on Sunday when you helped give us privacy at the hospital?"

"Yes?"

"Well Rick and I had a very honest exchange of our histories, hang ups and hopes. It was really, well, both uplifting and draining. Ultimately it felt to me, and to Rick too, that the final pieces in our connection were joined. I can't explain it any better Lanie.

"Are you sure you're Kate Beckett? The one who used to complain about previous boyfriends and over sharing or lack of independence and space?

"He's not my boyfriend Lanie. The term is nowhere deep enough for what we are. What we're going to be."

"Woah Girl! I feel like I am missing bits. Did you jump through some bits that might be important? Can you go back to the beginning and perhaps fill in the key points?"

So Kate proceeds to tell Lanie about the promises and just a tiny bit of their hearts and minds they had exchanged. She lifts her left arm to let her sleeve fall and expose the jewellery wrapped around her arm and her heart.

"Wow Kate that's a lovely bracelet. It really suits you."

"So you gave him your Mum's ring as a token of your commitment?"

"Yes. And in return he gave me his dead best friend's bracelet as his token."

"This is bad how? You gave him your dead mom's ring."
"I did."

"The way I see it is that they are both significant tokens with powerful symbolism and deep, personal significance and meaning for each of you." Kate nods.

"It shows this is not a trivial matter for either of you. In fact I would go as far as to say it is everything for both of you."

"Yes. It is the physical embodiment of our promise. It is only temporary when we're engaged he'll return it and I'll return Alexis' bracelet."

"Damn Girl, there you go again with the engagement thing. I've never heard you like this." Lanie can't help keep the excitement and surprise from her tone.

"Look Kate, I know you have a tendency to worry and perhaps over think but I don't believe you have a thing to worry about.

"Rick has changed for you. And you did for him. You both choose to that not because the other person asked but because you wanted to.

"So Girl, why are we even having this conversation?"

"I don't know. I love him so much. And his family."

"So what's freaked you out today then?"

"The Paparazzi. Ryan and Espo got the heads up from Demming. Someone is digging into my past relationships. A journalist approached Demming wanting information but he blanked them. Ryan reckons they must have got into my personnel records. He and Espo are going to follow that up tomorrow.

"I'm more concerned about Josh. There was some publicity about us being together. We went to that Surgeon's ball and there was a picture and blurb in the Ledger. Also a charity bike ride with another picture in the paper. Plus we didn't end well and maybe he harbours a grudge about it. I wasn't in a good place and I was so short and abrupt with pretty much everyone including Josh. And Rick."

"Oh, I remember that ball. You had a good time, I distinctly recall you being very enthused about the evening. But not the public aftermath. Something about, oh hang on, I remember the headline. 'Nikki Heats Surgeon's Heart'. You really hated that. You know who really hated that too?"

"Rick?"

"Damn straight. I remember I was fan-girling over the picture, you looked so hot, when he came in the morgue looking for some information for Alexis. Oh Kate you should have seen his face. He usually managed to put a brave face on when you were with Demming or Josh but just for a second there was no mask, no filter. Oh honey, how could you not know how he felt about you?"

"I did. But I was afraid. I needed his friendship and support so much and if it didn't work out and I lost him, then I was sure I wouldn't survive."

"I think I understand that. And you are entitled to your choices even if they were stupid. I'm glad you were already finished with the puppy love stage with Josh before he came back to the Precinct."
Lanie rises from the couch and goes for the line of photo albums on her shelf, selecting one with deliberate care.

"I'm surprised you have this out where he can find it. Oh wait. Has he seen this?"

"No. Not that I'm aware of. But no more secrets Lanie. We agreed not to hide our pasts from each other."

Lanie sits down and places it between them and flips the album open. There on the pages are photographs of Kate and Josh together. There is the infamous Surgeon's Ball shot without the headline or text, several more of them in their leathers on or by their bikes. There is another of Kate and Josh in bathers on a weekend break to Florida.

"I don't feel guilty about those. And I shouldn't. Rick was still with Gina. He hadn't even come back then, I didn't know if he was ever coming back. I threw myself into the thing with Josh, trying to have a relationship I wanted. It was fun, especially in the beginning. I don't regret that. If Rick finds them or asks I'll show him.

"But I guess I wasn't honest when it began to not work. When Josh was absent so much. After Rick came back. From there my relationship with Josh never stood a chance. Everything I thought I had pushed away, gotten rid of, came back. Only more pronounced, more intimate, more personal. I'm not sure whether it was Josh lacking commitment in the first place or him sensing things because of Rick but I'm the one who lacked the courage to break up and prolonged it well past the expiration date. Breaking up with Demming only for Rick to go off with his ex-wife hurt so much. I didn't want that again.

"But we talked it through on Sunday. In a way that third year together was a real foundation stone for us. Even if we were seeing other people, well eventually it was only me still in a failing relationship."

"Does Josh have copies of these?"

"Most of them I guess. And others"

"Well that could be an issue. Anything embarrassing or worse?"

"You mean worse than me in barely there string bikini with my arms wrapped round an admittedly hot guy that isn't Rick? No. Not that I'm aware of. Josh was, is a pretty decent guy. I did like him – a lot – even if he wasn't the one for me. I'd like to think he wouldn't stoop low enough to get revenge but I'm not sure."

"Have you communicated with him since?" Lanie leaves the rest unsaid.

"Well actually Lanie. You're not going to believe this. You know Josh is back in New York?" Lanie's head shake is ahead of her. "And he's actually working at Bellevue?"

"Well that's not exactly great."

"We've spoken already. We bumped into each other in corridor. It was polite enough and only mildly excruciating."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'll try and track Josh down and speak to him. Hell beg if I have too. Too much of my life is about to be exposed well beyond any comfort zone and that's without any of my past and especially
relationship history being smeared across the papers and Internet for everyone to see."

After a toilet and water break, they reconvene back on the couch. Lanie having grabbed one of Kate's throws to drop down before she sat. Kate simply smirked at her.

"Alright I think we've had quite enough of the sex."

"I haven't" Giggles Kate.

"If you'll let me finish Detective." Eye roll response.

"And more than enough of the privacy concerns for tonight." Kate's definitely not laughing about that.

"I meant it's time for a new topic. So tell me about that black Visa card and how you're comfortable drinking ninety dollar bottles of wine. Something tells me there is so much more to this story."

Kate proceeds to explain about her meeting with Rick's lawyer and business manager. Rather than have to talk about Rick's fortune to Lanie she goes to her bag and pulls the envelope containing the summary report and hand's it to her friend.

"Read this Lanie."

Lanie is not the speed-reader that Kate or Rick is but she's fast enough that it takes only a few minutes accompanied by more than a couple of tempered under-breath exclamations.

"So let me get this right in my head."

"You're nearly engaged to Richard FREAKIN Castle." Kate nods. "And he is absolutely LOADED!"

"Holy Cow Girlfriend! I knew he was rich but according to this he has assets of more than half-a-billion dollars and a net worth of more than a hundred million bucks."

"Yes Lanie. He's loaded."

So just to be clear, you're in love with the man?

"Yes."

The same man 'ruggedly handsome', a great father, happens to love you more than life itself, is fantastically wealthy beyond loaded, not to mention he's loaded in the underpants department and is giving you the best sex of your life?"

"Um Yes."

"So Girlfriend I only have one other question for you."

"Why aren't you married and having his babies already?"

"That's two questions Lanie. But the answers are soon, and in a little bit. We just want to have some time alone first before starting a family."

"Oh My God. Katherine Beckett. I am officially so happy for you." With that Lanie scoots across
the couch and wraps her best friend up in a full hug. "And jealous."

"Lanie!"

**Mandarin Oriental.**

Meredith had started Wednesday with a stinking hangover. After 'giving up' Rose the other night and being cold shouldered by the compact Amazon from Taylor Matthews – not that she was really trying she tells herself, she had worked her way through a couple of bottles of champagne – the two hundred dollar kind that her keepers hadn't prohibited. She was feeling her age all day. She had skulked in her room, skipping breakfast and lunch until the twin pangs of hunger and dehydration drove her from the covers.

She had ordered a late afternoon brunch and she had channel hoped in search of a distraction for her head and her problems. She caught the local news and their breaking story of how the NYPD's Twelfth Precinct had recovered stolen paintings worth millions. There were images of two male detectives she vaguely recognised – did they work with Ricky? – along with a black woman in a NYPD windcheater emerging through a protective cordon of police leading another group of carrying the paintings. She liked the square jawed, clean-shaven one at the front. Not much in the way of lips, but maybe he had other talents than kissing. They then broke to a police spokesman and Meredith turned the TV off.

She had ordered an in-room Spa and facial and after a snack and some more champagne accompanied by some casual channel hoping. Now it was getting late and all she felt like doing was going back to bed to hide.

Everything had gone wrong now. Regardless of what happened with the blackmailers she had blown so much. She had been so deluded, so desperate. Events had run a wrecking ball through what had been a satisfactory if not ideal life. Now she had no agent, no roles, no friends, and likely no family and possibly no home to return to.

She didn't even have her usual self-pity to sustain her. That party was long over and she couldn't bring herself to indulge anymore.

Her phone beeped with a new message. The tone indicated it was from Rose.

Meredith liked Rose, and despite their recent mutual lack of loyalty, she was at least completely non-judgemental. She could do with some of that. Picking her phone up and swiping to the newest message, it was short and direct.

* Mere, please come home. We both need a friend. Please. xRx. *

She could definitely do with a friend and right now LA looked a lot more bearable than New York.

It was three more days until her scheduled flight back to LA. She could last that long. First thing she needed to do was call Rose and find out where they stood and almost as importantly where they slept.

**Clare's Apartment**

"Thanks Sass. I'll see you in less than three weeks. Already looking forward to it."

Clare terminated the call and chat session with Sass.
Now the case was turned over to the Feds, the pace had slowed to near glacial crawl. This of itself was no surprise. The Feds almost never rushed. Certainly not like their fictional counterparts on TV. In fact they made the US Army appear both enlightened and motivated. Which is not entirely how Clare remembered that particular Federal institution, certainly when her career was in its final protracted terminal nose dive.

Another non-surprise was that the chief suspects had gone to ground or worse. Vanishing off the law enforcement and Taylor Matthew's surveillance radars. The Feds seemed optimistic. Taylor Matthew official position was to be optimistic with them, but realism colored their thinking. It was highly likely that Jesus and his associates were paying the ultimate price for his cleverness, double dealing, and failure.

They had a team watching Rose but it would appear that she was judged insignificant and no further risk to whoever was ultimately behind the operation. The Feds were happy that the evidence pointed to Mexicales, Taylor Matthews was beginning to doubt that.

Clare had been surprised that Rose had been allowed back into the Bel Air house. More significantly Meredith would be allowed to remain. The instructions had come from Steve Mathers and had the endorsement of Alexis Castle. Those who didn't know her would have pegged this possibly as a soft-touch for her currently estranged mother.

Clare knew better. In most cases and circumstances one of the abiding traits of the Rodgers/Castle family was their empathy and compassion which also saw them capable of considerable forgiveness. This appeared to be the case for Meredith Lee.

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**Kate's apartment, Kate's bedroom.**

"Lanie stay still, I'm trying to get to sleep. I'll send you back to the couch."

"Ughh No. Sorry. I'm fine here. Just give me a minute or two to settle down."

"Right. Oh by the way, you are not to mention the sleeping arrangements. Certainly not to Rick."

"What? Why?" Kate could almost hear the click as the half-asleep mind of her best female friend finally got it.

"Oh!"

*Oh indeed.*

"You haven't told him about college?"

"God no. He's bad enough as it is. Giving him that sort of information would only fuel his already fertile fantasies."

"Now shush and go to sleep. We both have to go into work in the morning. And I want to see Rick at the hospital first before I go see Gates."

"Yes Mom."

Kate groaned internally, rolled her eyes in the dark, and then firmly forced them closed wishing sleep would take her under for a dreamless rest.
In this universe, Lanie Parish has been Kate's best friend and rock since Kate moved back to New York after her mother's murder. In Jim Beckett's alcoholic induced absence Lanie was the focal point for Kate's support and fulfilled a role that has eventually been assumed by Richard Castle. There is so much shared history and few, if any, secrets between them. Kate's trust in Lanie is absolute and the reverse is true. So I don't think this chapter was over sharing in that context. Plus I had so much fun writing it.

For Clarification - Kate and Lanie's relationship has and will always be entirely platonic. Those secrets from her college days are something else and may just stay secret in this tale. We shall see.

In terms of Americanisms and especially New York colloquialisms I do my best but with a mainly UK-based education and a degree in history I have a tendency to revert to 'proper' English without realising it. Thank you for those who have patiently tried to educate me.

Oh and the reference to USC 926C relates to the federal law allowing the carrying of concealed firearms by qualified retired law enforcement officers. Hopefully I have interpreted it correctly.
Kate had been dragged off for Girl's night cum interrogation and Alexis volunteered to stay with her Dad.

Room 22, Ward 16 East, Bellevue Hospital, Thursday morning.

It was only 6.21 am. Her phone told her this. And it had told her it was 6.15 am just six minutes ago when she last checked. Alexis Castle still had a cricked neck. And a sore back. And she was tired. As she half-dozed listening to her father's still slightly compromised breathing as he slept and snored lightly, she pondered how Kate managed more than one night here. As well as being uncomfortable on the couch, there was the fact she was woken twice in the night by her Dad having nightmares. He had settled down at her touch but she would have to ask Kate about those. She imagined it wasn't the first time.

She turned her thoughts to Kate Beckett. A part of her - the guilty jealousy of an only child of a single parent – somewhat reluctantly conceded that as much as her father loved the detective, the detective clearly loved him back with as much passion and commitment. And she did so with greater freedom and openness every day. Any doubts she had harboured about the nature of their bond were now long-buried by the events of the last week.

"Oww." That hissed out as she wiggled to try to get comfortable. She was so joining Grams on her next spa day. Plus this time she was old enough to get the full body massage - legally. Last time she had relied on Gram's legendary powers of persuasion or maybe simple intimidation to persuade the male masseur to let her on the table. It had felt good. His supple hands had evoked a series of interesting sensations she was keen to revisit.

Her Dad was still asleep, if not completely deeply under. Hardly surprising, even if he wasn't injured the only thing that had reliably gotten him out of bed before ten in the morning since she was old enough to look after herself was a murder or Beckett. Or maybe they are one and the same thing? Whichever it was Alexis has known for a long time that Kate Beckett and the 'job' – even though it was strictly not her dad's – was what fulfilled him outside of their home and tight little family.

Completely giving up on sleep, she propped herself up and flipped open her text-book. She had set her goals – back to dorms, catch up on her missed classwork and then catch up with Max. She was definitely looking forward to the later. But first she needed to catch up on her assignments and missed lectures and tutorials. Then she could have her reward. Whatever it was it would involve a comfortable bed and sleeping…..eventually.

Beckett's Apartment, 6.30 am.

The blare of the alarm hammered against and then shattered the silence in the bedroom and Kate came awake with the simple efficiency that was her second nature. Except this time, she blinked and it took a second more before she remembered and recognised where she was. Her apartment. Except it wasn't really her place anymore. Her nights here were infrequent enough now that it
didn't feel like home. Her moving in with Rick was so natural and she was secretly proud of her
decision which had been reached without any pressure or pushing from Rick. In fact she delighted
in the way she had caught him by surprise. He really was so easy. For her.

She wasn't hung-over but her mouth still tasted of that familiar mouldy, dry sensation. Another
less-familiar sensation was the warm body behind her. It didn't have the bulk, almost too warm and
ever so comforting presence of her partner. God she missed Rick. The man simply filled her life so
utterly that even the basics of existence seemed almost hollow without him. It was official - she
was a goner.

She let the alarm ring some more (only a couple of seconds) and felt the person behind start to
move – Lanie was always slow to wake especially after drinks - and come awake, before she
slapped the off toggle and the noise ceased.

"What's that?" Lanie not even half-awake. "Oh, good morning Kate."

"Hi Lanie. Time to get up. I want to go to the hospital and see Rick before I have to go see Gates."

"Given me a chance here. I must be getting old. Not so long ago that sort of night wouldn't affect
me."

"Remember not a word of this." Kate almost begs as she turns to face her friend.

"Word of what?" Lanie grins back at her best friend. This prompts Kate to action and she gracefully
slides from the bed. Lanie can't but help be jealous of her best friend's effortless poise and grace.
Kate Beckett could use her God-given talents with devastating effect when she so chose but had
spent most of time Lanie had known her playing it down, disguising it for the most part. Until Rick
Castle. Until it became one of her weapons with which to fight back and challenge him, well really
more taunt and tease the author. And Boy did it work.

"Right I'll make coffee and start on the bagels. You get a shower and then we can swap. There's
clean towels by the shower on the hamper."

"Sure. Almost like the old days, eh Kate?"

"Again, another thing you don't ever need to share with Rick." Kate tosses the words casually over
her shoulder but there is nothing casual about her entreaty not to share.

"Whatever." Despite the inflected humour in her voice, Lanie reaches out touches Kate's elbow and
she turns. "Kate, I've never betrayed your trust and your confidences, and especially you deepest
secrets and fears since we met at college. I'm not about to start now." This is her serious voice. Not
the work one but her far more intense and deliberate tone with each word sharply issues and the
pronunciation spot on with no trace of New York.

"Thank you Lanie. It means a lot to me. Not just now but in the past. You were my bedrock and
safe haven through so much. I can never thank you enough for that." Kate's tone is equally serious
and heartfelt.

"Even if you don't need me quite so much these days." She's meant it to be a tease but the fall in
Kate's face makes her correct that as fast as she can. "And that's entirely a good thing. That Man
makes you so happy you don't need me. And that is so good to finally see you in a place where
your best friend is simply needed for sharing the salacious details and good times." Kate's
responding eye roll and frown declares her verbal recovery a success and she smiles back.

Then as Lanie steps down off the bed, Kate engulfs her best friend in a tight hug. "I love you Lanie.
Thank you for everything you do for me."

**Hospital, 6.45 am.**

"Hey Dad."

"Hey. Good Morning Alexis. How was your night?" He doesn't remember the nightmares or her comfort she thinks.

'Not too bad. Still I don't know how Kate manages to sleep on the couch." Well that's the partial truth. "How you doing?" Play it safe.

"Not bad Pumpkin. My breathing is getting better slowly. I still feel tired all the time. But I can't wait to get out of here." *The bed, the hospital? Both?*

"I know." They're both strangely inarticulate and near-monosyllabic this morning.

"Is Kate here yet?"

"Dad it's still early."

"Ohh." Disappointment leaks from him.

"Do you need a drink or anything?" At the shake of her father's head, Alexis continues. "I'm just going to freshen up before your breakfast arrives.

"Oh joy, I'm looking forward to that."

"Dad. Knock it off. After breakfast you finally get to move again and get out bed."

"A juice please." And then he continues "I don't know what all the fuss is about."

"Dad. It is a big step. Literally. You've been off your feet for a week. You almost died."

"Sorry." She nods not trusting herself to answer or make things worse.

It's almost eight when Kate arrives. She's just in time to catch the nurses and a doctor she doesn't know leaving the room.

"Hey" This from both Castles.

"Good Morning Alexis." She addresses

"Hi Kate. You look better." You slept better than I did. Not petty at all.

"Thanks, I slept well." Awkward moment then "Thank you for looking out for me and caring."

She's kept moving during the brief exchange and has reached Rick. She leans forward and busses his lips.

"Good morning Sweetheart." Where had that come from? She really is filter-less this morning.

"Kate." There's good morning, I missed you, hold me, don't leave me, and I need you all neatly encapsulated in her name and she doesn't know how to be all those things for sure but she'll die trying if need be."
Alexis rescues them in one breathless rush.

"They've removed the catheter and all his drips and monitors. He's got this remote wireless do-hickey instead. He can finally get out of bed this morning. Only as far as the bathroom. They said he could try for a shower if someone is willing to help him. He really shouldn't try it alone and to call for assistance because he'll probably be too much for us to assist." There is another awkward pause and it's moments before Rick tries to rescue them with some flat humour.

"Free! Free at last!" He gives up and awkward silence reigns again.

"So are you up for a bathroom adventure Rick?" *Fuck that really didn't come out well!*

She hears Alexis gasp and blush, and Rick is positively beaming with a mile wide smirk for seconds before he struggles to control it whilst his partner flounders flustered by her own mouth.

"Oh God, NOT like that! A trip to the bathroom to use the facilities including a shower." *Well that was lame.*

Still half-beaming Castle's desire is palpable. At his vigorous nodding,

From the doorway Nurse Carol asks "Do you want any assistance?" When did she come in? She's either the best actor or so inured to the realities of hospitals that she doesn't even show the slightest sign of a smile or even twitch.

"Nah we're good. I got this. Or rather team Castle have this." Infectious enthusiasm trips from his mouth. Both Kate and Alexis can't help rolling their eyes whilst simultaneously feeling slightly sappy over their membership of this exclusive club. But before they can even prepare their charge is leaping ahead.

Suddenly sitting fully upright Rick has swung his legs off the bed. Unceremoniously dropped his feet to the floor and he would have followed them all the way down if his partner had not suddenly thrown herself to his side. Kate staggered under Rick's weight but locked her legs out and straightened her back and Rick's sudden descent is halted.

Nurse Carol breaks in again. "Mister Castle! You were meant to wait for assistance. You've been off your feet for nearly a week. Plus the trauma you have suffered. You should be taking it easy. And accepting assistance."

"I'm good." Rick dropped back against the bed and Kate felt the worst of the load come off her.

"Give me a second and we'll try that again."

"You got it partner. Take your time." She'll offer him her unequivocal support.

Nurse Carol tries one last time. "Are you sure you don't want some more appropriate assistance."

Well that seals it. They'll definitely be doing this on their own. Rick can feel Kate bristle at the suggestion. Reaching across his right hand slides down along her left fore-arm, pausing at the bracelet before squeezing her hand and Kate says nothing simply reassured and assuaged by his physical connection. They'll take their time.

It did take time. More than anyone would have expected but they did it on their own with just Kate and Alexis to support him. Kate could tell how grateful Rick was for that.

Fortunately Alexis has positioned a plastic chair just inside the door and Rick sank down on it
gratefully. He was in pain and short of breath and looked like he had run a mile after a perp not staggered less than 5 yards to the bathroom with assistance.

Kate shared a look with Alexis and the teen nodded and reluctantly withdrew silently. Much as she didn't want to shut Alexis out, she knew that in the next few minutes and likely few months Rick was going to struggle and need to deal with things alone or at least shield loved ones from the immensity and intensity of the process.

"God Kate. I feel exhausted and sore and…I don't know how I'm going to do. If I'm so shattered now simply going to the bathroom how am I going to manage physio?"

"Together." Kate's voice is low and measured only for him despite their isolation in the bathroom. "Rick this will take time. But I'll be here every step of the way." She pauses. "If you let me. If you want me."

"Sorry Kate. It's just so frustrating." Then he jerks his head up and responds to her commitment. "Oh God Kate of course I want you here with me. Nothing else. I don't know how to do this without you. But I'm scared."

"I know Love, but it does get easier. Now how about we get you out of your clothes and into the shower."

In short order she had shorn him of his simple pyjamas and dropped those aside for washing. Alexis had deposited a fresh pair for him in the corner of the bathroom along with his wash bag.

Rick was sat, eyes closed, in the shower on a second plastic chair. Despite having him naked there in front of her for the first time in a week there was nothing overtly sexual about it. Rick was almost exhausted from the effort moving from the bed and eventually reaching the bathroom. He was letting the stream of water fall unguided over him, his hair plastered to his skull, rivulets of water streaming down his head and body and crossing his wounds – the nurses had swapped out the shoulder bandage for a waterproof version this morning. The bruises on his chest did seem to be easing, morphing from black towards purple.

He made no move to wash himself and Kate knew he wouldn't be able to manage most of it. So she quickly stripped off and silently got in shower to assist him. His eyes come open as he detects her presence before she can touch him, and she catches the fire burning within. Even better despite his lethargy she couldn't help the near delight that course through her as she witnesses his reaction to her naked proximity.

Pushing her own desire aside she grabs the wash cloth and starts to clean him. Biting her bottom lip she admits there was a time that she would never have considered this for anyone. Even with men she was sexually active with. Never have dared to do something so intimate and absolute. But then there is no one like him, not for her.

She can't hold it in anymore and she pushes her body into his and feels his arms instinctively come round her torso, both hands rising to cup the back of her head. Anchoring her against him. Part of her hopes he can't detect her tears amongst the stream of water, but the rest of her doesn't care.

They stay like this for a minute or two before they reluctantly part and Kate resumes her duties washing him. Neither feel the need for words.

Twelfth Precinct, 10.25 am.
She's a little, almost a lot, later than intended – the hospital hair dryer had earned negative review from both her and Rick – and the Boys were not around. Despite that Beckett had exchanged greetings with quite a few other officers since reaching the Precinct. Almost all had enquired after Castle and herself. Many had asked if there was anything they could do, and when assured that Castle wanted for nothing they requested that their regards be passed along. Kate felt both humbled and buoyed by the obvious affection for her man.

Entering Homicide for the first time in six days, feels off. She can't put any other word to her perception of her workplace. Her desk is there with Castle's chair in its familiar spot. As she strides towards Gates' office she spots that the corner of her desk and his chair resemble a small shrine. The well of emotion surges inside her and she struggles to tamper it down and maintain her professional decorum. She'll look on the way out before dashing for the door.

Announcing her presence by knocking at the Captain's door, Victoria Gates beckons her in. Kate closes the door behind her and sits down.

"Detective, thank you for coming in." Captain Victoria Gates is all business today. Kate used to be that. She used to struggle to switch it off even outside the Precinct. Not now. Now she doesn't really want to be here. Not without her partner. The Captains words interrupt her train of thought.

"Beckett, I have all the paperwork for your extended leave and some additional paperwork for your Civil Service exam and criteria for promotion to Sergeant. I will need the leave paperwork signed today, but the others can wait for a week or two if you don't have the time today."

Gates takes more than ten minutes to explain the Byzantine processes and how her entitlements are suspended, although she can continue to contribute to her pension if she wishes despite being on unpaid leave.

And there they reached the sticking point. The Captain's warning from the previous night had not made the actual official confirmation any easier. Regulations require Kate to surrender her badge – but she could keep her NYPD identity card - and just as significantly her service weapons – both primary and backup.

"Captain, I have a personal piece but I do not have a concealed carry permit. Outside my apartment I will be unarmed."

"I'm sorry Beckett those are the regulations and well as the State laws." Gates lift's the glasses from the bridge of her nose, and looks directly at her senior detective. "Beckett, is there a specific threat that I need to be aware of?"

Kate shakes her head. "No Sir." She pauses and then speaks again before the Captain can take any iota of a suspicion further. "Call it second nature. I'm guess I'm more comfortable with carrying and being responsible for my own safety even when not on duty. I know USC 926C doesn't apply as I am not retired and anyway it doesn't override the state laws relating to concealed carry."

Gates' signals her agreement with Beckett's view but it doesn't make a difference.

"Look I'm not trying to be a hard ass but the regulations are very explicit. In the past there may have been some wiggle room especially given your exemplary performance. Unfortunately you don't have the luxury of skirting round the edges at all. Not simply because of your recent disciplinary record, nor your high profile relationship with a celebrity but both are significant factors. Simply put the NYPD cannot afford to be seen to be anything less than orthodox with this. Whilst the majority of opinion has been extremely support of the Mister Castle, your relationship and the NYPD, we do have critics and dissenting voices. Some of the issues they raise are valid.
And unfortunately given the high media profile some politicians have weighed in too. So this will be as by-the-book as you could ever imagine. I'm sorry Kate but our hands are tied."

Kate takes a moment. "Captain, I do understand and I apologise if any of my actions have made this more difficult for the NYPD or you."

"Detective the offer for extended leave, even without pay, is not made lightly nor has it been used like this before. Normally it is to add the officer's recovery after they are officially deemed fit to resume duties but have issues making it inadvisable to do so. Or the same for immediate family members. Not for officers to take time off to look after their partner."

"Now did you want to take the extended leave without pay option?" Gates pauses but when Beckett doesn't answer she continues.

"If not you can stay on roster and retain your badge and guns. However, I can only offer you your entitled leave and a bit of flexibility on hours."

"No sir. After my prolonged absence to recover from my shooting, I promised Castle, his family, and myself that I would be there every step of the way. It is not a promise I will break, or even waver on. I intend to learn from my mistakes, not repeat them. I'll take the extended unpaid leave option Captain."

"Look Beckett….Kate…I" It is rare to find the professional and composed veteran stuck for words.

"I will try to see if we can get you a concealed carry permit, call in some favours and get it expedited."

"Thank you Sir."

"How is Castle?" Gates steers the discussion back to safer ground also indicating that this meeting is nearly over.

"Excited about being able to leave hospital, disheartened by the long road ahead for rehabilitation. He at least made it out of bed this morning." Kate thinks that there was time she would never have shared that much with the person opposite but lots more if it was Roy Montgomery still occupying the seat.

"If there is nothing else Sir, I would like get these signed and back to you so I can return to the hospital?"

"Fine. Bring them back before you leave Detective." Dismissed.

Hospital 12.22 pm.

Everything is taking longer than planned today. By the time Kate returned to the hospital Kate found Rick alone in the room with only his foul mood for company.

Reading him from doorway, she doesn't say anything, simply crosses the room to his bed. She is about to reach for him when he speaks.

"Physio was bad. Worse actually. I made Alexis leave after only a few minutes. I was so hurt and angry and frustrated. She asked to stay but the physio said it might be better if I was on my own. If it was I didn't feel it."
"Oh Rick. Love, I do understand. I've been there." She reaches in to grab both his hands as she
notices his right arm is no longer strapped up to his chest. She squeezes gently and leans in to kiss
his brow.

"I'm so sorry I'm late getting back. I wanted to be here for your physio session."

"S'okay Beckett." Not according to his tone and his absent daughter.

"Rick, the paperwork took more time and then I had to surrender my badge and weapons. The Boys
ran me back. Gates even let them. I swear I don't understand her sometimes."

"Tell me 'bout it." He almost snarls in frustration but he moderates his tone for his next questions.

"How do you feel about it? Surrendering your badge and guns again?"

"Less scary than last time. God this was not something I thought I make a habit of. I do feel
defenceless – also unable to protect my family - which I guess is why Gates let the Boys bring me
back here. They apologise for not having time to come up. Anyway Taylor Matthews is here and
there are also uniforms here. Plus I think the overt threats from the two cases are almost wrapped
up."

"God I hope so. We've got enough to deal with." He says it without a trace of self-sympathy and
Kate feels the first shoot of optimism course through her. She needs him to be his upbeat and
indefatigable self – as much as possible. She'll provide the rest. Do anything that's needed.

"Rick can I tell you how I felt when I began my physio after my shooting?" His subtle nod is
enough to encourage her to share some of her burdens and experiences. And so Kate explains how
she understands his state. What it was like for her during her recovery from her own too-near-to-
death experience. Of how everything hurt. The weakness, fatigue, frustration and bitterness. Tired
of being unable to do even the simplest thing. Of how from the first thing the physio asks recovery
is stretching off into infinity, seemingly unachievable and tempting beyond comprehension.

She talks for almost ten minutes and undoubtedly it is a cathartic process for her. Hopefully for her
man too. As she finishes she finds the man opposite attention wavering as his eyes droop. He'll be
asleep in minutes.

"Rick I know this is not good timing but I wanted to track down Josh and find out if that journalist
or any other had been in touch." She hasn't said as much but she's asking his permission to go see
her former boyfriend. It's not just a matter of communicating and sharing their trust, it is
surrendering control of their lives to each other. She could have sworn she'd never be that girl. Be
so subsumed in a relationship, so dependent and vulnerable. Open to hurt. Not since her mom but
here she is.

"Kate. It's alright. We discussed and agreed how to handle that. I can hardly come with you. And to
be honest I don't want to call him to the room and for him to see me like this – not quite up to my
usual ruggedly handsome status."

"Oh I don't know Rick, you looked plenty rugged enough in the shower." She teases him back. It's
nice to feel the ebb and flow between them. Re-establish the equilibrium of their relationship
including the verbal baiting and challenges she never wants to stop.

"Woman! Go sort this out. I'll catch a nap. Maybe feel better. Can you please find Alexis and send
her back to me? I need to apologise." She nods and leans forward for a short but explosive kiss.

"Also don't forget to call Paula and Gina if you need assistance and they'll marshal any resources
you need. After all I know plenty of guys.” Indeed he does.
Chapter Summary

So you know a Guy

Rick is looking forward to leaving hospital but must first begin physio and he and Kate must deal with a potentially hostile press.

Ward 16 East, Bellevue Hospital, Thursday afternoon.

Kate didn't have to go in search of Alexis as she spots the redhead returning to the room before she even clears the doorway.

She lets the door shut and intercepts the young woman. She's obviously been crying. Her Taylor Matthews shadow is already sitting back down in the waiting area with their face carefully schooled. Kate has been impressed by the calm demeanour, discretion and professionalism display by their guardians. Kate puts a hand out to halt Alexis before she goes in to her father.

"Alexis." Kate pauses to give the young woman some time to compose herself.

"I won't say it doesn't hurt and I can't tell you how long it will last. But it will get better. He will get better." She is right up close to the teenage daughter of her life partner, her words barely audible even then.

"I'm sorry Kate. I'm not used to Dad being like this. He's usually more upbeat even when things are not right. But he couldn't even hide it. Didn't try."

"You have nothing to be sorry for. It is very confronting – for everyone especially you Dad but also those who love him. There is a lot to process mentally and physically, and well it not called a near-death experience for nothing. There is a long road back from this. But I will be there all the way. I, no, WE want you to be there too when you can and if you want to be." Still no acknowledgement so Kate continues.

"What we need to do is fix it so your dad has the best support and enough distractions to get him through this once we get him out of hospital. Can you help me with that?"

Now Alexis looks at Kate, really looks at her, and then if suddenly understanding she nods firmly and with a much more purposeful voice responds. "I can. But we're going to need some help. It's a good thing I got a pretty good handle on a lot of the people dad uses. As he loves to say 'I know a guy' or two."

"Good, let's go back in and see you dad - if he hasn't already passed out - and then I need to nip out on an errand but it's in the hospital so I won't be long."
sat back down and she feels a small burst of satisfaction at that. Professional courtesy – they trust
her to make good decisions regarding her personal safety. Secondly she realises that word of her
temporary inactive status must have also reached them.

She assumes Josh is on the surgical staff but at enquiry at the Ward desk is unsuccessful. Indeed a
search of the hospital directory gives no leads. She even tries his old cell number – which she still
remembers. No luck. Time to use on of her own new connections. She uses an internal phone to
call the hospital administration office and is put through to Karen White. Within minutes she had
the location of Josh's office and even his likely schedule for the next few hours along with an
apology and explanation that the Doctor Davidson was new to the staff and the hospital directories
hadn't yet been updated.

Armed with this information she sets off for Josh's probable location in the hospital's
Cardiothoracic Department.

She has his office number but would prefer to do this face to face. Five minutes later she was
pleased to discover that in the end that the task tracking him down is nearly redundant as seconds
after entering the department, she spots Doctor Josh Davidson in a hallway talking with two white
coated colleagues.

Except Josh wasn't attired the same. This Josh was in a suit not scrubs. Apart from the Surgeon's
ball they attended and their third date, Kate had never seen Josh in a suit, certainly not in a work
environment. He scrubbed up well as the saying went. Not anywhere close to Rick in full plumage
but Josh was still an extremely handsome man.

Josh spots her approach and despite the clearly surprised look at spotting her, he appears to make
his apologies to his colleagues and steps away from them to intercept her.

"Hi Kate. Not that it isn't good to see you but why are you here?" Oh that was fairly direct.

"Um Hi Josh, I'm not sure how this going to sound so I am going to come straight out and ask you."

Before she could continue Josh motions them down a small service corridor. She lets him place his
hand on her elbow and guide her part of the way before a subtle twist of her elbow signals for him
to remove his hand and he complies.

Josh takes a few more steps before stopping. Kate mirrors him. "Don't you have an office?"

"Yes but there are people in there at the moment, and I figure you wanted somewhere private to
talk. So what did you want to ask?" He's still being direct. Oh well she'd be the same back to him.

"Have you been contacted by any members of the press?"

"Yes." She had been dreading this response as it only raised more questions, difficult questions for
her to ask her ex-boyfriend. But Josh actually saves her that additional effort and awkwardness.

"I was called two days ago. I refused to answer anything over the phone but that evening when I
was leaving work, there was a reporter and photographer waiting for me. His voice was same as
the one on the phone.

"They seemed to have a lot of background on us and you especially. I confirmed a few details from
the information they had. Only the stuff that was - what do you call it? – a matter of public record.
The surgeon's ball and that newspaper article and the medical journal." Kate was perplexed by the
last reference she doesn't remember that one.
Meanwhile Josh has continued talking. "I'm certainly not ashamed of dating you Kate. You're such a strong and vigorous person. Beautiful too."

He makes no secret that he's looking at her like that now, openly admiring her, even perhaps something more. Fair enough they had seen each other naked enough times, certainly in the beginning. She's more dressed up today than previous days as she had been into the Precinct. Smart charcoal slacks and deep red silk blouse and navy jacket. Topped off by a pair of three inch heels. Carefully applied makeup. Better rested too, fair less stressed than that night six days ago. Still she can handle that look and even at lowest wattage her detective's stare works its wonders and Josh glances away obviously uncomfortable. Despite this he continues talking.

"They asked if they could have copies of personal photos' and other details. They listed examples such as dates or especially holidays. I suspect that would have led to much more personal and intimate questions. I declined all of that. When the guy pushed and wanted more, I said no again. He still wouldn't back off when I said no the third time, so then I told him to leave or I would call hospital security. He left pretty-much straight away but not before trying to offer me his business card. I didn't take it."

Kate flips her phone round towards Josh. "Josh, is this the guy?"

"Yeah that's him. He had a British accent and too many cigarettes." His nose wrinkles and Kate couldn't help the small smile that moved her mouth, he was always fastidious and hyperaware of smokers, having lost his father to lung cancer.

"Look Kate. I know I probably overstepped and should have shut him down straight away but I thought it was harmless. And a just a little bit of me wanted to be, for want of a better word, petty. To have some form of - revenge is too strong - come back for your decision to end us. I didn't want that – you know that. But as soon as he pushed beyond what was already public I…." Josh stutters to stop.

"It's okay Josh, there was time I would have been angry but being in the public eye is something I am slowly coming to terms with. It's the price I pay to be with him." It's worth it.

"Kate, our breakup wasn't something I foresaw. I knew you were attracted to him, but I thought after the better part of a year of not giving in, you wouldn't. I thought we were good together, and had a future. I trusted you."

"Josh, I never betrayed you."

"Maybe not physically but mentally, I'm not so sure. Could you honestly say you weren't attracted and didn't think about him?"

Her silence was all the answer they both needed and expected. She's done making excuses or trying to explain or justify the past mistakes. Kate has a question of her own.

"Josh, we never discussed it but did you attempt to propose out of desperation? To try and keep me? Make me stay?" She can't quite kept the annoyance out of her tone. She thinks that perhaps Josh deserves just a little of that too. She certainly won't give his attempt full credit as a proposal as she never let him even produce a ring or drop to his knees. She wants that special moment to be unique for her and her 'one and done.'

"I guess I did. I had been thinking about it a bit. I didn't think we were ready, but after you almost died, I didn't want to take the chance of losing you if I could help it. I know it's not the most romantic of reasons."
"I can understand that Josh. I'm quite the expert on what-ifs and missed chances. But I think honestly by then I was very close to breaking up with you even before my shooting." He nods, having long accepted that he had a hand in losing her with that degree of that blame lying with his constant absences, and his contentment with the status quo. Even so he still sheeted a lot of the blame home on the author who just wouldn't go away, and who never gave up. But that was the past. And he clearly couldn't turn back the clock.

"You're different now Kate. You look at peace, calmer. You still look great." Josh stares at her, almost like the first time she noticed him, except she can tell by the sudden change in his eyes that this time he is clearly seeing her and recognises something was missing. "You're happy." It is not a question. "It's like you're lit up and glowing. I could never do that. I wanted to, but I think perhaps you were always in love with Richard Castle. He's a very lucky person to have you Kate. I hope he takes care of you."

"He does. And he will."

"Look Kate, I'm late for a meeting but if you need anything else." Josh reaches into the pocket of the obviously expensive and personally tailored jacket. "An official statement regarding the journalist or anything else please contact me." He handed over a business card. 'Doctor Joshua Davidson M.D. Associate Director Cardiothoracic Surgery'

"A promotion Josh? Congratulations."

"Thanks I decided it was time to move ahead with my life. Look I've got to run. It was good to see you again Kate. It still hurts a bit some days but I could never hate you."

"Thank you Josh. And for the record I never hated you either. But you are right. I am happy." He nods but doesn't say anymore as he turns and walks away not looking back.

Shaking her head, Kate knows she should head back to the room but she needs a minute or two, likely longer. And caffeine. Definitely caffeine.

After seeing Josh, and getting answers and questions in almost equal measure, Kate had detoured to the cafeteria for a quick coffee – exceedingly average and barely effective - and then finding a bathroom. Partially refreshed from her short sanity break it's time for her to be returning to Rick's room. She had purchased a six-pack of bottled water for the others which presumably would include Alexis, and the as-yet-unseen Martha. Entering the Ward reception past the hospital security and uniformed NYPD officers, she spies Paula and Gina ahead talking to Alexis in the otherwise deserted - except for one of the Taylor Matthews team - small public lounge near at the ward entrance and nurses' station.

The two women have clearly only recently arrived as they are still wearing their outdoor jackets and haven't made it as far as the door to Rick's room. Gina is standing close to Alexis with a hand on her arm and talking softly.

Kate has never quite figured out the status of the relationship between Alexis and Ex-wife Number Two. Rick had hinted at issues but on the handful of occasions she has seen the two in the same location there have been no apparent issues or antagonism. Mind you, nor had there been any form of familial rapport or affection displayed. Emotionless is possibly an accurate term for it.

As Kate approaches she catches the end of the conversation with Gina speaking.

"I had to get Vijay to come and collect Tiffany and take her home when we heard. She was a mess.
Before I left today she did send her love and that of her family." Alexis smiles wanly at this.

"Alexis, she said for you to call, if you need anything, even it is to just to sit with Auntie T and I need you to know that if there is anything I can do, you just have to ask."

Alexis nods and smiles gently and doesn't say anything, but as she doesn't speak she spies Kate approaching and following her glance in Kate's direction, the other two women turn to meet Kate.

"Thanks Gina" responds Alexis. "I think we're all good at the moment."

Paula takes the lead in greeting the new arrival.

"Good Afternoon Detective Beckett."

"Hello Paula and Gina. I think Kate is more appropriate here." She wants them to know how comfortable she is. She's Kate to his Rick and she no longer cares to hide that. In part it is also her claiming her place and asserting her role in this family. Especially when her partner is not at his best. Not to mention when one of those opposite her is his most recent ex-wife. Oh she can be petty and insecure with the best of them, she just didn't show it - hopefully.

"Now that he had been transferred to a private room on a general surgical ward we felt it was time to visit." Paula explains. "There are some things we need to discuss and catch up on."

Gina nods in agreement but then directs a question to Kate.

"Before we go in could I possibly have a moment of your time please?"

Kate tilts her head in acceptance and she reaches across to pass the pack of bottled water to Alexis and she gives a brief wave to Martha who she has just spotted leaving and heading away from Rick's room. They had made a pact that at least one of the three of them would always try be with him if possible until he left hospital, and possibly beyond.

She follows Gina out of the waiting room and about twenty yards the opposite direction down the other leg of the corridor.

Gina actually looks nervous.

"Can I call you Kate?"

Kate nods but doesn't say anything yet.

"Kate" Gina is extremely tentative not at all like the professional businesswoman abet with a pushy streak. "Rick made it very clear to me at our last meeting about how you both felt about each other. I am afraid I did not fulfil my side of our bargain, sorry that's not the correct term – agreement is more appropriate – our agreement regarding our professional relationship after our divorce. Especially since I found out you were dating."

Gina pauses but Kate holds her silence and Gina resumes.

"He can be extremely annoying when he puts his mind to it, but he is and never has been anything other than totally faithful to the letter in both of our failed marriage and also in our business dealings." She takes a breath. "It was only when we got back together than I found him to be less than focused on us, and to be frank, not-entirely honest about our relationship or you. I think it was actually worse when you were with that boyfriend, the hot doctor. I swear he was jealous, and well we fought. Like before. Some of the reasons were the same others weren't."
"Gina, what is it exactly that you are trying to say?" Kate is not yet sure where this is going.

"Look, I wanted to apologise for the way I have behaved recently towards both Rick and you. I blamed you for our second break up two years ago even though Rick made it clear then that you were with someone else at the time. He was adamant to me that it was us that wasn't working and not you. I know, especially given your subsequent relationship that is not strictly the only reason why, but I might be willing to accept that it wasn't the primary one I think. At the time and since I have chosen to judge and blame you."

"Gina, I won't say thank you because I believe this nothing to apologize for. I made my own errors too. Also I'm not entirely sure I would accept any form of begrudging apology, even if it was necessary. Rick and I had not exactly been upfront and entirely honest and open about our relationship until recently. We're still finding our way and it is perhaps natural given his status, although uncomfortable for me at least – to find our lives played out in public. That's not who I am. But I certainly don't blame you in any way."

"Thank you Detective. I may not be married to him anymore, or have his heart or attention, but I still care for him. And I don't want to see Rick or his family hurt. Please call me if you need assistance with defending him or yourself especially if your privacy is being breached." With that Gina turns and heads back towards Paula who is waiting by the room entrance leaving Kate seemingly frozen to the spot. But it is only for a second or two as Kate backs herself up against the corner, pursing her lips as a barely whispered sigh escapes her.

Kate's beginning to wonder about her day. Did she get out of bed wrong? Gawd she's never believed in that sort of superstition and nonsense. Damn you Rick Castle! Seducer and stealer of my logic.

Of course this is merely illusionary for even as she rants about the very prospect of her loss of independent intellect, she instinctively playing back the events of the last twenty-four hours using her well-honed detective processes to analyse and review the evidence.

Her girls' night with Lanie had simply cemented how much she loved him and what they had to look forward to. Then today in the hospital, first her ex-boyfriend, and now Rick's ex-wife/ex-girlfriend (Ughh! – but at least this one is trying to help unlike the first one) have both pseudo-apologised for possible slights but also significantly and accurately laid some blame on her for her then unresolved feelings for the man who pretty much now occupies her every waking thought. She's guilty on all counts when it comes down to the fact she so studiously attempted to dodge and hide from the inevitability of them until six months ago.

And she has no logical explanation that stands up to inspection now as for why. Well not any she can share beyond Rick and Lanie and possibly Doctor Burke. No wonder her friends, colleagues even casual acquaintances were aghast at their – notably her – failure to be a couple long before they finally succumbed.

Boy did they make things complicated! Unnecessarily so as she now knows. Turns out Rick wants complicated, loves complicated and she knows that despite her promises she'll be that sometimes. But she won't run. And she won't hide. From her past or her future. Their future.

Their history, and their story was complicated but at its heart it was a simple love story. One for her eternity. She knew that now. But to outsiders they looked a mess at times, and with their missteps and pot-holed history it also introduced doubts and uncertainty – not between them certainly, well not now – and phantom opportunities for others to interfere, intervene or worse.

Well there is one way to resolve that. To run off the interlopers and intruders especially those that
are more than merely curious, those who harbour malice and ill intent. She wants to confound their critics. She's going to be open and up front. She loves Richard Castle, she intends to marry him (he better damn well ask soon or she will), carry their children (not straight-away although she's detected an alarming increase in spontaneous broody moments which she blames – quite unfairly - on the Ryans) and live out as many years together on this Earth as they can (damn that vision of watching their grandchildren play in the sand at the Hamptons. Well that could be sooner than expected if Alexis….oh God that would truly make Rick go grey!).

And she'll fight for all of that and more now she really understands what is at stake, what she has to lose. She has been fighting for them for years – in a roundabout way - if she thinks about it – she just didn't acknowledge it at the time. So she'll sing it out, shout it out now if need be. Be loud back. Stake her claim. Answer their clamour with some of her own. No more hiding. She thinks she knows a guy or at least some gurls who'll help with that too. So with new purpose in mind she starts moving and purposefully strides back towards Paula and Gina.

"Excuse me Paula and Gina, I think I need more than a moment of your time if you can spare it."

"Alexis do you know what Kate is discussing with Paula and Gina?" He pauses. "And where did your Gram go?"

Alexis answers the last first. "Gram went to the Gift shop. She said she just remembered something. She won't be more than a few minutes."

"Now as for your first question Dad, I don't know what Kate and Gina were discussing. Anyway, I think Gina and Kate went off down the corridor for their chat." His eyes betray a momentary panic at that prospect but Alexis ignores it and carries on. "Paula was on the phone. I didn't realise they were even talking – Gina and Kate. You know I'm not sure anyone – especially you - should be comfortable with a Richard Castle Ex-Wives/Next Wives club." Rick winces at that. He can't believe his daughter actually said that but he won't follow-up and ask about that up just yet.

"Who is taking you back to Dorms? And when do you go?"

"Detectives Esposito and Ryan offered. I said that was fine. They'll pick me up after they finish at the Precinct. Is that okay Dad?"

"Sure. I'm happy with that." Rick pauses. He doesn't want to ask the next question but he needs to.

"Have you seen your mother?"

A shake of the red head. "I don't want to talk about it. Please Dad."

There is an awkward minute or so of silence and Rick daren't disobey his daughter.

"I'm still really annoyed at her. She went way beyond the bounds of anything she had a right to. Or should have. I can't believe she would do that! Doesn't she care? What does she think it means to me when she does that." Alexis stops dead, clearly embarrassed by her outburst.

"Well I'm sure that she didn't think it through Honey. Beyond that I have no idea what she was up to. I didn't know things had got that desperate. Now how about you come and give your dad a hug?"

"Well they all appear to be back outside the room but they haven't come in yet. Alexis, should I be worried what they are doing?"
"I don't know Dad. Possibly. You're always in trouble anyway."

"True enough." He yawns and winces at the same time.

"Dad, are you okay?" He nods wordlessly somehow guilty about his daughter's concern. In moments like these he begins to understand what it may - in some very ephemeral way - have been like for Kate. He forces a smile to his face and another nod and Alexis accepts it, if not entirely convinced. "Was the physio okay?"

He decides to be honest for that question at least. "No Pumpkin, it was horrible. Confronting, draining. I felt like a complete failure." His daughter's face falls, and he instinctively seeks to reassure her.

"Don't worry. Kate spoke to me, explained what is like. How long the path is, but also that there is an end, and beginning. She's promised.....she will be there every step of the way for me. For us."

"You're going to marry her aren't you? Make her step-mom number two." The first question was acceptable, welcome even. The second maybe, definitely, not so much.

"Alexis!" She almost looks shocked at her own words and goes red at her father's chastisement. "What prompted this?"

"Dad, I'm just worried you making this as a spur of the moment life or death thing. I know you discussed things before and were moving in together but everything suddenly seems out of control. Faster. Accelerated."

"Alexis there is nothing more for me to say than Kate is IT. For me. The one. The rest of our lives." He almost sighs but holds it in. "I know she feels the same. And despite our mistakes we're committed to a future together. This" He indicates his chest and shoulder. "This may have accelerated some decisions, but do you really think that after it has taken us five years to get here, that we're rushing?"

"Aside from you, I've never known anyone as well as I know Kate Beckett. She's my best friend, my lover, my partner in all things. My forever." The last is nearly choked out of his, the emotions suddenly overwhelming.

"Alexis, I love you more than my life itself. And I know you love me equally. But this is not a competition for a place in my heart. I have space inside for all of you, even Gram." Alexis can't but help raise her eyebrows at his subtle but loving dig at his own mother.

"You are moving on with your life and I want to do the same. This isn't some midlife crisis for me Alexis. This is everything that isn't you or my mother. I want nothing more. Kate has changed me. Challenged me. I think I like the changes too. Well most of them. I feel more real, And happier. Far happier than I ever thought I could be five years ago. We had a good life but it wasn't great for me, and I was unfulfilled. Lost even. I think you and your Gram knew it too."

"Dad. I'm not concerned by Kate. Not now. I think, sorry that's not right. I know I can trust her with your heart. This" Alexis waves her hand at his subtle but loving dig at his own mother.

"You are moving on with your life and I want to do the same. This isn't some midlife crisis for me Alexis. This is everything that isn't you or my mother. I want nothing more. Kate has changed me. Challenged me. I think I like the changes too. Well most of them. I feel more real, And happier. Far happier than I ever thought I could be five years ago. We had a good life but it wasn't great for me, and I was unfulfilled. Lost even. I think you and your Gram knew it too."

It is so instinctive that he barely manages to bite down and not protest that 'Kate likes my body'. But he does. And they continue to talk and exchange a curious mix of truths, half-truths and outright lies that neither of them believe but never-the-less accept for the sake of the other person.
It is more than a few minutes before Kate re-enters the room. The first thing Rick notices is the
determined set of her face. Whatever was discussed outside was serious and Kate Beckett was
committed to something. His spidey-sense told him that now was perhaps not the best time to ask.
In fact it would probably be better for him to wait for her to tell him, as much as that killed him.

"Hey Rick." Her face loosens and a smile lights up his mood.

"How was Josh." *Fuck he must be tired. No filter. He hasn't even said her name or kissed her and
he's said Doctor Motor Cycle Boy's name. Idiot!*

"You're tired so I'll excuse that." *God she knows me so well.* "Now greet you girlfriend properly."
She commands whilst seemingly taking his verbal diarrhoea in in her stride.

"Hey Babe." He's going to pay for that but it doesn't stop her leaning down to kiss him rather
thoroughly.

"Future step-daughter in the room. Keep it PG rated please." Kate starts at that, knocked from her
stride by the suddenly reminded presence of the daughter. Correction future step-daughter.

"So Kate what was it you were discussing with Paula and Gina, especially Gina?" Rick may not
have the courage to ask what is behind that serious expression but his daughter does. And then to
cap it all off Martha returns from her as yet unexplained mission to the Gift Shop.

He's doomed. Mind you so is she. They're going down together.

Paula and Gina's visit is brief but surprisingly sweet. Their concern was heartfelt. Their
professionalism to the fore as they promised to deal with the negative press and especially the
troublesome journalist. Rick was unable to determine why they both seemed so relaxed about the
matter when guarding his image usually required melodramatic and threats. Before they departed
there were promises for progress and updates. He may be recovering and still a tad dopey but Rick
didn't miss the look that seemed to pass between Kate and the two woman. Something was up.

And so the day progressed with a typically awful, depressingly predictable hospital-lunch but then
redeemed by a surprise afternoon tea of contrasting deliciousness being delivered around three pm.
Martha makes no secret of the fact she had arranged it via the gift shop where she had spotted a
card advertising in-hospital treats. Of course she had to go and ruin it for him by telling him the
service was intended for children. She was teasing wasn't she?

The Rick had dozed on and off during the afternoon and the company of three girls had not seemed
to mind. They all seemed so increasingly comfortable around each other – even without his
participation.

He is startled from his latest semi-slumber by a firm and not unfamiliar knock on the room door.
As he opens his eyes the reason for the remembrance is before him. Two fit, forty-ish men with
smart, tailored suits and smiles.

Martha and Alexis are first to react and have both wordlessly risen from the couch and hugged the
men, although in the case of Martha there is the ever-present theatre of the cheek kissing and
dramatic movement of the arms. More than once has Kate witnessed the recipient of Martha's
embrace twitch or worse in the face of the onslaught. These two remain remarkably unperturbed
except for the smiles.

Kate is content to watch whilst the two other women first exchange greetings with the newcomers.
Now that is over she stands and steps forward to exchange firm handshakes and introductions with both men who speak for the first time to introduce themselves. Their names confirm her suspicions.

Derek Taylor is shorter than Kate, probably about Espo's height and roughly his size but slightly more stocky but it's mostly muscle from first inspection and yet can still move with cat-like grace and a barely restrained malevolence. The former Navy SEAL has dark hair peppered through with grey but his grey eyes are clean and direct like his handshake.

Kate recalls that this is the man who rescued Rick and college buddies in Florida whilst on leave with his Coast Guard brother. What little Rick has told her of him rings true with her first impression.

Tim Matthews is taller than Rick but with a runner's build. Unlike his former ROTC buddy – back when he was Rick Rodgers – Tim is still lean. White blonde hair serves to disguise a touch of ageing but everything about the man personifies leadership and energy. His blue eyes never-resting on one place. It would be disconcerting but for the obvious humanity, compassion and interest that lie within the former US Army Ranger. Kate has no doubt that this is the moral centre of Taylor Matthews and a man of utmost principle.

Handshakes over Kate retreats a little.

"Still trying to be the centre of attention Rick?" This from the tall man as her approaches the bed and carefully shakes Rick's hand.

"What can I say? Hard to change the habit of a life time."

"I'm pretty sure we taught you to duck and stay out of the way of bullets." The shorter man this time who also shakes his hand.

"I'm working on it." Huffs Rick.

"Work harder." The shorter man again.

"Rick, it's good to see you on the mend. You've had a lot of close calls in the last five years but generally managed to avoid hospital until now. We did think of making you Clare's permanent assignment but she said she'd likely be the one to shoot you." All three women in the room laugh at that comment.

"Martha and Alexis it is good to see you again. I hope our team have been looking after you to your satisfaction?"

"Charming as always Tim and you know it. Your team has been the soul of courtesy and discretion. We're both looking forward to our annual spa refresher."

"Only the best for you and Alexis, Martha. Of course the team are all looking forward to seeing you back again for the eighth year."

"What about me?" Pouts Richard Castle.

"Well they're far prettier and much better company." Deadpans Derek Taylor.

"So you're the Guys?" Kate voices. It's not really a question although both appear somewhat perplexed as to how to respond. Rick steps in to clear the confusion.
"Guys, Kate knows. I've shared with her and she understands quite a bit of the history and I have told her how you both played a key role in the rescue of Alexis. Although she doesn't yet know about the spa days. But I suspect that is probably her very next question."

At this Martha decides it is time for some privacy. "Come along Alexis we'll go get some fresh air."

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After Martha and Alexis had breezed from the room, there is a slight lull whilst the two men sit on the couch opposite Rick's bed where Kate has taken up station beside her writer. Despite her proximity to Rick she feels their focus on her and she wonders why.

"So Kate, Derek and I have some questions for you and also something of a proposition if you are willing to listen?"

"Okay." There is a wave of caution in her answer. "But Rick is right. Before you begin can someone explain the significance of the spa day references?"

"That's simple. It is the cover name for the personal safety course we run and have all our clients and appropriate family members attend. The course covers everything from how to avoid predictable patterns, digital security including social media and as well as what to do in the event of kidnapping or other threats. Martha and Alexis have been coming since Alexis was ten years old."

"If she gets any better they'll make her an instructor." Adds Rick with his paternal pride evident in his voice.

Tim Matthews laughs gently. "Not quite but she is a very willing and smart student. Now that is resolved, I would like to begin with a little background. If I may?" Kate nods.

"Rick now tells me you know how we met and have a past that involves us assisting and providing services for the Rodgers/Castle family including before Taylor Matthews was formed. Which I learned today also includes our involvement in the rescue of Alexis from her kidnappers."

"Yes."

"Derek and I met through Rick although it turns out we had served in the same theatres and sometimes on the same operation but never met directly. We founded Taylor Matthews in 2004 after we had both left military service. To be honest we both departed the military frustrated by direction the politicians and Pentagon were taking operations especially for SOCOM. That's Special Operations Command where I was a Ranger and Derek a SEAL and our units reported up through that chain of command. We both believed the decision to invade Iraq was unnecessary, and clearly the wrong war. Instead we wanted to concentrate on Afghanistan and the emerging threat from Africa and especially the sub-Sahara. We take no pleasure in being vindicated by subsequent events.

"But since leaving we have focused on providing specialised services here in the United States. We only operate in the US. No paramilitary work and no international work at all. We've had offers, some very compelling, but we are not mercenaries and we work wholly within the framework of the law. What we do is a mix of protection, threat assessment and risk management, training, and a growing area for us research and investigation.

"Our workforce is slightly less than a hundred strong. We recruit by word of mouth and personal recommendation. And despite an earlier bias towards the military we are probably about a
forty/forty/twenty split between servicemen, law enforcement and civilians.

"We work very closely in cooperation with Federal, state and local law enforcement. Over the years we have built a unique business and as a result of several early successes have a number of contracts that effectively mean that we can operate – where appropriate - as a quasi-official agency of the government. What this means is that Taylor Matthews is almost unique in that more than half of our employees have federal identification which permits the carrying of concealed weapons across the nation.

"Now you're probably wondering what the corporate sales pitch was for?"

"Simple. We want you to join Taylor Matthews. We would very much like to leverage you skills and abilities as a consultant for use on specific projects."

"In return we would provide remuneration for any work done and access to the legal authority to carry a personal weapon."

"But what about the NYPD?" She blurts out the question when it is only one of many red flagging in her mind.

"Kate you're on extended unpaid leave correct?"

Kate nods and then adds some detail. "Yes, as of about eleven am this morning. For a minimum of three months possibly longer."

"No issue then. You'll be happy to know that our lawyers, Rick's and the NYPD legal department have been in contact and are sorting out the details." She turns her head to stare at her boyfriend who would shrug if he could. "As and when you return to active duty with the NYPD you will surrender your active status with Taylor Matthews.

"In addition any project we involve you on would be non-conflicting with any NYPD or personal cases. That includes any involving you. And yes we are fully briefed in on that. We need to be able to provide protection and for that we need all the information.

Kate can only turn her gaze on Rick and he can read the hurt, shock and near tears. He waits for her accusation of betrayal. It wouldn't be the first time. He doesn't flinch though. He's told her before he'll do anything to avoid her being hurt and that hasn't changed. He meets her gaze with his own unwavering one and her expression changes. Is that acceptance?

"How do you feel about that?" The question is from Tim.

"For a long time I've never considered being anything than a New York cop, but as you know earlier this year I did briefly quit my job. I got to come back but there are terms and conditions and I have enemies, serious ones. But I am also a little bit intrigued and who wouldn't be interested. One of colleagues has been seriously fanboy-ing over your organisation all week."

"We understand that and Rick is adamant that you can manage that separation. We would renumerate you only when you are on the clock for us but will allow you to retain and hold weapons regardless. As for your potential threats. We need you to maintain the status quo and tread carefully. I will caution that some could see you position with us and our access into federal resources as more than a potential threat, and clear-and-present-danger they would need to take care of. This is why discretion is called for.

"So what do you say Kate?"
Some 10 minutes later.

"Why the title 'agent'?" Kate is more than curious. "Why not 'consultant' or 'operative'?"

We work a lot with official law enforcement at all levels. Using the title lends more than a little authority to our employees. Also we shy away from anything with private military contractor connotations.

There is a knock at the door and Kate is surprised to see Clare Dugan enter the room carrying a fairly compact charcoal grey holdall. Clare nods to all the occupants and passes the bag over to Derek wordlessly and leaves the room without so much as a by-your-leave.

"What's going on?" She can't keep the inquisitiveness out of her voice.

Derek doesn't immediately speak but instead passes the holdall to her left hand and waits until she accepts it in her left hand – it's quite heavy – and he quickly reaches forward to shake her right hand with the same firm grip from before.

"Kate, we would like to welcome you to Taylor Matthews as a badged consultant. This is not quite the same as a full-time employee although for the key legal areas it is effectively the same. Open the holdall please."

Kate places the holdall on Rick's bed and pulls the zip down. In the top is a clear document wallet containing from printed forms and two what look like ID cards. Kate retrieves the document wallet and takes the two cards first.

The first is a laminated wallet-sized card with her photograph – relatively contemporary, this year if she had to guess - and her full name along with the company logo for Taylor Matthews.

The next thing she looks at is the second card. This is an official Federal government ID card. This one has the Department of Justice crest on it and identifies her as 'Agent Katherine H. Beckett' of the Department of Justice.

She gasps out loud. Her sharp mind quickly grasps a key tenet of this document. She will be permitted to carry a concealed weapon – anywhere in the United States. Even onto aircraft. This is certainly more effective than the mythical, non-existent federal concealed carry permit. Given that it is actually real, this is rarer than diamonds. Near priceless too.

She tries the title out in her head and then sotto voce. It sounds good. It's nowhere near as comfortable and familiar as 'Detective Beckett' but 'Agent Beckett' has a certain appeal and she'd be lying if it didn't give her a little thrill even if the implied kudos is not strictly accurate. She can sense Rick's approval and excitement.

"How?" she voices the question.

"As we explained before we have an extremely close working relationship with most levels of government. We are trusted to execute confidential and critical work for the government. In return the government helps make our private assignments operate a little more smoothly. So far it has worked out for all parties. We are very careful not to abuse it." The unsaid implication that they are trusting her with their corporate reputation and livelihoods is both heartening and alarming.

Derek reaches into the bag and has the next item out and hands it to her. Kate knows what this is before she opens the black toughened plastic case. She accepts the object and places it down on the Rick's bedside table and flicks the locks and lifts the lid.
She knew before opening that it was a weapon case for a pistol. Inside is a relatively compact, black Sig Sauer pistol with five magazines sitting snugly in the custom-cut foam. Also present is what looks like a compact tactical light/laser with attachment, and a toolkit.

"This is the Sig Sauer P229 Enhance Elite pistol. This is our new standard service piece for our team." She nods and reaches in to tug the pistol from the snug grasp of the foam. Automatically checking it for an empty chamber and safety. It's not her Glock but there is a surprisingly comfortable connection. It feels good in her hand. Her hand has adapted to the grip and she instinctively assesses that she can shoot this both single and two-handed. She returns the pistol to the foam.

"It is chambered for .357SIG round and this is the same basic pistol and calibre as used by the Secret Service, Federal Air Marshalls and quite a few police departments. The ten round magazines are New York and California legal. The Federal permit means we could issue full capacity twelve-round magazines for the weapon but it is simpler to comply with the state legislation. If you can't resolve the issue with fifty rounds then another ten aren't going to make a difference. Also many of our team prefer the balance with just ten rounds."

"I take it you have a secure location to store the weapon and ammunition?" Tim asks.

"Yes." Kate bites back an instinctive 'sir' that had started to form on her lips. "Both at my apartment and Rick's – sorry - our Loft." If Rick is caught by surprise by her use of the collective for their residence he doesn't show it and speaks.

"Same for all residences. All have suitable weapon storage. You should know. They were installed under Taylor Matthews supervision." It is Kate's turn to look at him quizzically. She's trying to remember just how many more residences he has.

Derek continues "In the bag are four fifty-round boxes of Speer Gold Dot 125 grain Jacketed Hollow Point rounds. We recommend that you get on a range and shoot through at least a hundred rounds for familiarization. You were using NYPD nine-mil before?" At Kate's nod of confirmation he adds "Well you'll find out that the three-fifty-seven SIG is a different round. Not too different but you'll need to shoot it to see and it will take a little time to adjust." Kate inclines her head.

"There is also a slim profile black leather belt holster and two matching double magazine pouches. You are a righty aren't you?" She nods again. "The holster in there will be fine for belt attachment. There is also a second larger holster with room for the tactical light and laser attached."

"We'll arrange for Clare to handle your induction and training over the next week or so. There will be a little more gear to hand over and familiarise yourself with. Mainly for electronic and digital security. There isn't too much to cover but it is company policy that everyone including Derek and myself participates in.

"Also after you've had a chance to do weapon familiarization Clare will follow up and do a qualification assessment within a week or so and can source you additional ammo as you use it. We expect our operatives to stay current and familiar with their weapons with a minimum two hundred rounds a quarter with six monthly peer assessment and annual formal qualification for their primary weapons. No exceptions.

"She'll also issue you your backup weapon. Our standard is either the Sig P239 DAK or the P239 SAS which is optimized for concealed carry plus an additional two magazines. You can have three-fifty-seven SIG, nine-mil or forty-cal versions. Most stay on the three-fifty-seven SIG. Alternatively you can request a different weapon up to a value of twelve-hundred dollars so long as it is full calibre but when you leave you have to pay out the non-depreciation if it is not a standard
"Excuse me Derek. I already have a backup gun. It's a Smith and Wesson three-fifty-seven revolver. My former Captain gave it to me when my previous personal backup was destroyed in a fire. I've stayed current on it so I also have experience of shooting a very similar round to the Sig. Also I had a Sig Six-Two-Six as my first weapon out of the Academy and I only swapped to the Glock when I made detective and the rest of my team were using them."

"Derek, any issues with the 'wheel gun'?" Tim again.

"For the record we don't issue combat knives, tasers, batons or any other tactical weapons or gear. If you carry anything it must be fully legal and declared to us.

"We issue vests, other tactical gear and firearms as necessary and as training and certification permits for the mission.

"That's it. I'm done. You have Clare's contact details and she'll follow-up with you in the next twenty-four hours."

"Understood."

"Welcome to Taylor Matthews, Katherine Beckett." This from Tim Matthews as he once again shakes her hand.

"Oh and welcome to the Justice Department Agent Beckett."

No sooner than the door has clicked shut than Kate rounds on her partner.

"Rick?" Her voice is a curious mix of exasperation, curiosity, annoyance and love.

"Yes my Love?" He's got nothing to lose.

"Yes my Love?" He's got nothing to lose.

She seemingly ignores the name. "You did this. Organised the Taylor Matthews consultancy, the Federal ID, and the weapon."

"I may know a few guys..." He trails off. His face is entirely serious as he speaks next with his deep blue eyes firmly locked on her luminous green ones. "But Kate, the role, the weapon, the consultancy that is all your doing. Your achievements and credentials. Your skills and abilities. Believe me, Taylor Matthew would not have been interest and not made the offer unless they believed you to be worthy. No matter how important I am as a customer nor how extraordinary I may think you are."

"Even so. You did this. For me." He can't read the intense focus on her features. She takes a breath and her face relaxes and loses just a little of the intensity. "Rick I'm not ungrateful. Believe you me, I'm nothing if not impressed, and more than a little overwhelmed. Given the short timeframe since Gates told us you've done this for me." Rick doesn't answer her.

"Hell even in the few hours since I temporarily surrendered my badge and service pieces I felt exposed - and no I won't say 'naked' 'cause I know how your mind works." She rolls her eyes to accompany this last and Rick relaxes just a little but then she frowns.
"Rick this Federal ID with the weapon permit is dated from May Twenty-sixth of this year. That is just after I quit and …." She trails off unable to continue, clearly shocked. Rick picks up the story.

"When you told me you had quit and he had got away, not to mention you just wanted me" He throws in the patents Castle eyebrow quiver and she smiles and shakes her head. "Well, after the initial euphoria the paranoia set in and I just wanted you to be able to protect yourself. Also it would have offered you an employment option if you had needed. I just wanted you to have options you deserved and needed." Kate raises a hand to stroke his cheek and he accepts her mute thanks silently.

"As it turns out, events moved rapidly and well you didn't need it then. But Tim and Derek recommended we kept it for contingency purposes. Turns out they were right."

"We will talk about his more Richard Castle.

"Anyway Espo and Ryan will be here soon. How about you and I tease them a little? Mess with their minds especially Espo." She's got a massive shit-eating grin on her face.

"You've got an evil streak Katherine Beckett, but I love you."

"No Fucking Way!"

"Bro! Language!" Ryan warns but Esposito is caught up in his jealousy of Beckett and ignores his partner as he rants on.

"It's not fair. You're not even…." 

"Finish that sentence Espo. I dare you." Kate's tone is dead flat and so will he be. He's so very dangerously close to the line.

"No I'm good Beckett." He clearly wasn't but his self-preservation instincts were still functioning.

"Hey Espo?" Kate is having so much fun.

"What?" Oh snarky.

"Do you really want to know how I got this Espo?"

"No?" His face twists. "Goddamn it. Yes."

So she says nothing. Simply leans forward and demonstrates once again catching Rick by surprise as her tongue glides past his willing lips.

"Oh God no. Errghh! Euwww! Stop that Beckett. It like watching your mom and dad make out or worse."

Ryan is laughing but still has his head turned away, blushing slightly.

Kate laughs and can hear her own happiness. Rick's too.

"Actually the real reason is simple. It turns out that I know a guy…"
Secrets and Negotiations

Chapter Summary

With Kate on leave from the NYPD Rick has arranged for Kate to have a weapon courtesy of Taylor Matthews but there are still secrets and negotiations to be had.

Room 22, Ward 16 East, Bellevue Hospital, Thursday 8.33 pm.

After the Boys had left at the end of visiting hours, there was a final check from the night shift nurses who had to deal with a patient and his partner who randomly broke into giggles and guffaws throughout what became a very brief check. Knowing better the nurses beat a retreat as soon as they were able, dignity mostly intact.

However, once the nurses had left and Kate was assured of privacy the residual humour from their teasing of Esposito quickly vacated the room.

"Rick." Her best cop tone.

"Kate, I guess I managed to put this off long enough." Resignation and acceptance from Rick but also a hint of steel. This was no novice perp about to undergo interrogation.

"Rick, I can't believe you told Taylor Matthews about my Mom and Bracken. But." She pauses to look him square in the eyes and whilst there is anger tingeing the flashing green there is also trust. "I know it's only fair for you to explain."

"Right." He hadn't expected her to be so reasonable. More evidence of her trying to change? Perhaps. He certainly hoped so. Marshalling his thoughts he begins.

"So I told you how Taylor Matthews carried out observation and security around your Dad's cabin after your shooting. Tim and Derek refused to take the job until I had disclosed everything. Even Smith. I was desperate so I gave them everything I knew. They didn't investigate, simply took the information and assessed it for useful intelligence and fed it back to me. They found nothing significant or really new from my analysis. Anything they did find was incorporated on the murder board with the stuff I had. So you've seen that already."

"Rick." He can't tell which is worse. The anger, despair or disappointment in her tone.

"Look Kate, I've given my reasons for why I kept that secret from you. Telling Tim and Derek didn't change those reasons. You accepted my apology then and I believe it still holds." He's no soft touch and he'll fight for what he believes is right and best for her and them.

The shy smile that briefly touches her lips signals her acceptance of that before she continues.

"And I still do. I guess it – rather what I feel now - is more despair. Are we never going to be free of this? I chose you Rick and yet we still keep coming back to her case. Not through our own choice but that won't matter if Bracken decides the deal is off."

"Now Kate as far as we know this time, there is no connection between the Dragon and the botched blackmail. My shooting was purely circumstance which someone tried to exploit and
failed.

"After you resigned and came to me, I was really worried – God I so happy but I couldn't stop thinking about all the potential complications that could hurt us. So I was really worried about all manner of things. And I know it was wrong of me not to include you but given our track record at that time, I wasn't entirely sure you wouldn't run again. I had already contacted Derek and Tim that first morning after you snuck out of the Loft when Mother and Alexis returned unexpectedly. That got things in motion for your Federal ID, and weapon. I took other steps too. Mother and Alexis went round Europe unaware they were shadowed all the way by representatives of several firms that Derek and Tim trust implicitly. Your Dad was checked up on. Lanie and the Boys too. Especially Esposito."

She is silent for maybe half a minute taking that in. The depth of his care and concern for her has never really be at question, but confirmation once again that it extends equally to everyone she holds dear still leaves her breathless and in awe of his big heart.

"Rick, you're probably right. I was half-inclined to run even before we saw Smith in the hospital. But I did the best I could. Then I went solo on Bracken and everything felt wrong. I knew then I needed my partner. But I didn't want to drag you and especially your family down with me. Nor the Boys or Lanie, or especially my Dad. Everything happened so quickly and once the deal was in place I barely gave it another thought." Her tone is much to even and level. He's satisfied any anger is fading.

"Until we saw the news about those bombings targeting local politicians including Bracken. But that was broken up by the FBI and Homeland Security. The NYPD got copied in on some of the intel and I read that Agent Fallon was involved and I saw Will Sorenson's name in the file too but we had no involvement. And I was grateful for that. We discussed it too remember?"

"Yeah, I remember. There was a bit of an argument. Mainly about your former boyfriend."

"Really, I think you acted up as I never even spoke to, let alone saw him. Just so we could have hot make-up sex." She rolls her eyes. His detective is back.

"Um busted. Guilty as charged." Except he looks anything but guilty. She moves quickly on. This is not the time nor place.

"Rick, what I am concerned about is the risk from other people discovering and somehow breaking the deal. Bracken can't be happy with the deal, or accept the status-quo forever, especially with his political ambitions."

"Kate I understand that but for the moment that is outside of our control. Here's what I do know and we can have say in.

"Firstly, the risk of exposure is tiny. Only a handful of Taylor Matthew people know – five I think. Tim and Derek obviously, Clare, and her West Coast counterpart an ex-Treasury agent nicknamed Sass and one of their researchers who is managing the electronic stuff. So only on an absolutely need to know basis.

"Secondly, I trust them with Alexis' life, Mother's, mine, yours. Your Dad's. Plus our precinct family. Everyone that is dear to you, and me.

"Kate I've said before that I won't back down from protecting you – and others – from the threats we face either together or individually. If I need assistance to do that, Taylor Matthews are the best resources to use."
"Thirdly, no one is investigating anything or has been since late May. It's all on hold and locked down. Compartmentalized is the term Tim used.

"Okay. That's everything I've got except for one final thing but I need you to trust me for a little while with that one last secret." She looks pensive but sighs and he takes that as reluctant acceptance. "But from now on I tell you everything then you're fully informed."

"It's a start." She can't help herself. Unlearning more than a decade of first necessary and then instinctive independence and solitude is a gradual process.

"Jesus Kate, you drive me up the wall sometimes. I know we've made fantastic progress but you need to curb that bloody independent streak of yours. We're together and we need to trust each other." He can't keep his own anger and frustration out of his voice. His disappointed in himself for giving in but for once with Beckett it works in his favour. When she starts to speak she's conciliatory, calm and measured.

"Rick. I promised you and I don't break those promises. We're committed to each other. So I'm not running. But it doesn't mean that I'm not going to get pissed at you when you do something that breaks or pushes the boundaries. Mutual respect and disclosure remember. I know you'll do the same back."

As she continues her voice is somehow smaller, more fragile.

"It's been almost fifteen years since my Mom, until you I had no one who truly had my back all the time. So I acting independently became more than second nature. At college and since Lanie has been a rock but there were and are limits for both our sakes. And I never shared with a boyfriend not even with Will who was in law enforcement. He knew some but never asked or pushed. You always have and I can only apologise that it has taken me far to long to understand and accept why you did that."

"Look Kate I didn't deliberate set out to keep it all a secret from you. You had your gun and badge back before anything came of my request to get you a cover and a weapon. It was Taylor Matthews who decided to keep hold of it as a precaution. I agreed but I didn't know if anything would ever come of it, so I never mentioned it. The rest, well we weren't together so I didn't know what to do except to protection in the hope that one day..." She interrupts him

"Rick, we made it to that one day. And I'm so grateful still for that opportunity to begin proving myself to you. But I not done yet. Still so much more to do to repay your faith in me. In us.

"So I won't forgive you now because that would imply you were in the wrong and I do accept that you were acting in what you believed to be our best interests. And Rick I trust you always with my life and our family. So no apology necessary.

"For the rest we'll work it and talk it out as we go along. Now how about we get ready for bed?"

"Okay."

"Did you want to go to the bathroom?"

"Let's give it a shot. No audience either so my manly tears won't be ashamed."

"So what about the girly ones?" So easy!

---

Beesley, Wax & Drummond Lawyers, early Friday morning
Jim Beckett was in earlier than his usual wont. He knew Val would be in early too. Leaving his office, he grabbed the small case folder and headed for the elevator to ride up to the executive floor.

Her door was open, Val was seated at her desk head slightly inclined reading. Despite their friendship Jim still paused by the entrance and knocked on the door frame before announcing himself.

"Good morning Val." Head came up and her eyes sought out the source of the intrusion even as her mind recognised the voice.

"Jim! Good morning to you too." The frown on her face was rapidly replaced by a beaming smile that reached her eyes and Jim's heart equally. Momentarily distracted Jim barely managed to start his conversation with the formidable woman opposite without a stammer.

"If I may, I have two requests of you Val?" One eyebrow twitches in permission to continue.

"I need a family law expert to attend some confidential negotiations around eleven am this morning. I don't believe they will take too long and I know you're free as I took the liberty of checking your schedule."

Her eyebrows curled up at that but she remained tight-lipped.

"Secondly, would you come to dinner with me tonight?"

Val finally responds. "So Jim is the second conditional on the first?"

He blusters for a second or two and a smiling Val speaks again before he can recover his coherence.

"Oh I love doing that to you. It beats me how such a professional lawyer such as yourself can be reduced to the level of a tongue-tied teenager so easily."

"I'll have you know I'm not easy. Except for you. Only you do that to me." And completely disable my filter as well apparently.

"Okay so who's the client and why do you need me?"

"I need your specific expertise plus your reputation precedes you and that will help too."

"What do you need a family law specialist for?" Valerie Wilson was one of the top five family law practitioners in the city, with a reputation for tireless advocacy and success for her clients, not so much for her opponents, although even those beaten in court conceded she had a strong sense of justice and was preference for settlement rather than any form of legal vindictiveness.

"A pre-nup. Of sorts."

"Whose?"

"Well simply Val, there is no-one I trust more when it comes to ensuring my only daughter's future is safeguarded to the best of my abilities. So the client is my daughter Katherine Houghton Beckett."

"Is she engaged to the Writer then?"

"No!" This was slightly strident. "Sorry. No. Not yet."
"Does she even know this is happening?" Somehow Val has deduced what was behind his momentary elevated tone.

"Actually neither of them do. Let's just say concerned parties thought we should get this all taken care of and avoid any unnecessary complications. Strictly out of concern for both of them of course."

"Rigghht" The smart woman is not taken in. "So whom am I acting on instruction for?"

"Um, that would be me." She smirks, her suspicions confirmed.

"And the other party?"

"Richard Castle Enterprises." She nods.

"You know none of this stuff will be binding unless the two principles actually sign off on it."

"Oh they will." His voice contains that stubborn Beckett streak that she finds strangely endearing. She hated it on her ex-husband but Jim Beckett wore taciturn like a comfortable glove and had a perfect dry wit to complement it was well.

"So let's get this straight." Then she pauses. "Actually let's not. It's fine for now. Where's the meeting?"

"RCE has a small office suite in a managed office building in near Wall Street."

"Ten thirty be fine to leave?"

"Sure. I'll meet you at reception. Thank you for doing this Val. It means a lot to me."

"Oh and Jim?"

"Yes?"

"Yes, to your second question. I'd love to go to dinner tonight with you."

He almost skips to his office.

---

Martha was out of the Loft much earlier than her usual wont. Terri, one of Time and Motions female staff was her driver today. Ever chatty Terri and Martha usually got on like the proverbial house on fire. However this morning even as Terri had remarked on the early pickup she had noticed the subtle differences with one of her favourite clients. Martha makes an effort to keep up a polite non-committal conversation for a couple of miles before the experience chauffeur let the conversation peter out.

Terri hopes whatever is troubling the normally vivacious actress is only temporary.

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**Office of Doctor Samuel Clemens, MD.**

Martha was ushered politely into the office. The man stood to greet her with a firm handshake. On other occasions kisses to the cheeks had been exchanged but this experienced psychiatrist had a good read on his patients.

"Good Morning Samuel."
"Martha how are you today?" He had a feeling this would take some effort on his part to draw out the usually gregarious actress.

"Well Samuel, if I was doing fantastic I wouldn't be here and your yacht would be a lot smaller."

"Touché Martha. Please have a seat. And then tell me how you really are."

---

**12th Precinct, Homicide**

Word reaches them from One PP that the insurance company has assigned an agent to assist with the appraisal of the stolen paintings along with the recording and documentation. They are warned the agent will be arriving at the precinct that morning and that their full cooperation is expected.

Telling experienced cops what to do never bodes well and has the partners a little on edge but they console themselves by advocating that they can always pass the insurance agent off to Demming and Robbery to play happy with if need be. Surprisingly Gates has left them alone this morning despite there being no announcements or discussions around the ramifications of Beckett's extended leave. Neither know what to make of that and instead decide to trust Gates to manage it.

Some forty minutes later, the staccato clip of high heels on the floor initially has Esposito and Ryan instinctively looking round for Beckett. Instead in a What-the-flip déjà vu moment they instead find one of Beckett's potential nemesis for the affections of Rick Castle.

If anything she is hotter than last time. The smart dark grey suit clings across every sleek contour and sinew in her body and the silk blouse leaves absolute confirmation of the woman's talents and confidence.

"Well hello Detectives." The voice too is even more alluring than their previous encounter.

Surprisingly it is Ryan who recovers first. Perhaps being married gives him that small buffer to be not entirely affected by the woman who otherwise appears to be holding the entire bullpen in a state of thrall. Even Gates, standing at the door way of her office, seems affected.

"Well good morning Serena Kaye. To what do we owe this pleasure?"

"Detective Ryan isn't it?" she says as she shakes Ryan's proffered hand and "Detective Esperanza." Another handshake despite the mistake with the name. She shakes her head slightly and then in an exaggerated manner. "No that's not right. Esperance? No I got it. Esposito."

Fuck she's playing with him. Not that he actually minds except he has a reputation to uphold – if not for his partner at least for the rest of the bullpen.

"Miss Kaye, here to play in the big leagues again?" Take that.

"Not really. Just a simple lost and found. Even the NYPD should be able to handle that but my employers require me to vet the process. Supervise if you will. You do understand don't you?" If she pats his cheek he's going to cuff her. Not that the idea is unappealing anyway.

"Supervise away." Esposito almost snarls as he closes the gap to her and then in a much quieter and deadly tone. "Men died Miss Kaye, and a good man almost paid the full price saving us." She doesn't flinch despite the cold hard tone.

"My apologies I didn't mean to imply anything." She's nothing if not smooth and quickly recovers.
"So I take it that Detective Beckett and Richard Castle won't be joining us. That's a shame. I would have so liked to renew my acquaintance with them. Especially now that they appear to have finally got their collective heads out of their asses." With that last blunt assessment she turns and then she's striding past them and into the Captain Gate's office. Leaving two bemused male detectives in her wake.

Not five minutes later both women are back with Gates instructing them on the level of cooperation Miss Kaye is to receive.

For Serena Kaye, having got the necessary authorisation she going to have fun.

For the next hour or so she's kind of shamelessly putting playful moves on both men whilst actually getting all the information from them she needs. For their part after the initial surprise they find themselves enjoying some of the banter with the quick-witted woman. But she does like to push at the boundaries.

"Well I'm woman enough. The question is are you two men enough for the job?" It is half-breathy teasing, and fuck its provocative. Esposito thinks she is merely teasing but Goddamn the woman is hot, dresses hotter not to mention borderline slutty but she carried if off and she's smart to boot. He has no doubt anytime with her would tick all the boxes. Of course his romantic life is fucked up enough already. Even Ryan has stopped trying to give advice.

Anyway, before they know it she's sailed right through the boundaries but not waiting for the results of her latest sally she leaves the room, and beetroot red, tongue-tied Ryan looking helplessly at his half-apocalyptic, half-hysterical partner.

"Dude you cannot tell Jenny." Ryan begs.

"Dude you cannot tell Lanie or Tori." Esposito's not begging but it is a plea.

"Dude you've got bigger issues."

"I know."

"Hey, I've got an idea." And Ryan pulls his partner aside to quickly outline his plan.

"Genius Bro. Absolute genius." Esposito is impressed.

Five minutes later those present in homicide are fighting a losing battle against laughter as the ambush of Demming nears completion.

Across from them Demming – lured from up from Robbery with the promise of a hot insurance investigator - almost squawks – whether by choice or not the Boys don't care. The Robbery detective has been abandoned by his squad mates and is at the complete mercy of a surprisingly interested insurance investigator.

"Oh come along Detective, I don't bite…..much." With that Serena Kaye turn and drags Demming by the cuff of his jacket.

Before she enters the elevator she turns and calls out. "Bye Boys. Don't forget to pass my regards on to Detective Beckett and Rick."

Breathing a sigh of relief Espo turns to Ryan. "Your turn to tell Beckett I think."
"Seriously Bro why do we have to tell Beckett at all. She's on leave and doesn't need this distraction." Counter argues Ryan.

"Exactly Detectives." Captain Gates has clearly managed to avoid any proximity alarms before materializing right beside them. "I was beginning to worry that you wouldn't work out what to do with Miss Kaye." As she turns to return to her office she adds "No wonder Roy put her in charge."

Richard Castle Enterprise Offices, Manhattan Financial District, 10.58 am.

The sign on the wall said 'RCE Inc'. Which makes sense thinks Jim as openly advertising Richard Castle tended to attract groupies of the lot-cut blouse genre.

There was no receptionist. And after pressing the buzzer two men emerged to greet them. Jim remembered Steve Mathers and whilst he knows the name this is the first time he's met Harry Dove, Rick's business manager.

Both Jim and Val had struggled to hide a smirk when the lawyer had clearly done at double-take upon recognising who was accompanying Jim to the conference.

"James Beckett and Valerie Woods" Jim begins by way of introduction. "Representing Katherine Beckett." Hand shakes all round, and whilst Harry Dove is no lawyer his eyes too had gone wide when he clearly realises who is accompanying Jim Beckett.

They had grabbed refreshments from a common kitchen area before moving to the meeting room. The small conference room was cosy even with just the four of them in there.

Steve Mathers had to hand it to Jim Beckett. He was no fool and had certainly played a trump card with his choice of representative for his daughter. Valerie Woods was one of the foremost family law practitioners in the state as well as a fearsome reputation as one of the toughest divorce lawyers in NYC. Not that he in anyway thought that the latter would be required otherwise he would be fighting harder against Rick's complete intransigence over no pre-nuptial agreement.

Observing the two opposite him as they settled in and laid out paper work, he couldn't but help notice the couple-vibe that the two gave off. He kept that observation and smile to himself but couldn't help a mental 'Way-to-go Jim!' from dancing over his synapses. Aside from her professional record and brilliant mind, Valerie Woods was a beautiful and striking woman with a rapier wit.

"Firstly, our presence here today is not to negotiate a binding pre-nuptial agreement. My client has steadfastly refused any advice to implement one. He considers the word of his partner and their commitment to be binding for a lifetime."

He pauses to let that sink in.

"We are here to prepare the groundwork for any merger of assets and allocation of funds going forward."

"I would have expected to see your partner here for this type of work, Mr Mathers." Val has her best neutral tone in play.

"Steve please."

"Val. And I believe you already on friendly terms with Jim." Steve was a sharp observer. Having
picked up the vibe between the two he will not be immune to using it if necessary. He was half-tempted to throw in a gentle dig about a double-wedding but his innate caution prevented that.

"My partner Suzanne White is on vacation. She's celebrating her twenty-fifth wedding anniversary with her husband Neil in Las Vegas."

"Well please pass on my congratulations. We've crossed swords a couple of times and I've found her to be a determined and able opponent." Every word was meant. Her reputation for honesty and integrity is more than enough to firmly tilt the inclination of the court towards her clients on many an occasion, and it is equally transparent here.

"Rick got them upgraded to a suite in Venezia Tower at the Venetian Resort. She of course will be spitting mad at him but he'll shrug it off. Good thing he's got a pre-existing injury to hide behind."

"So without further ado and before review the financials I have an opening position from my client."

"I am instructed by my client to offer Ms Beckett rights to one hundred percent of his assets – excepting those allocated to Ms Martha Rodgers and Miss Alexis Harper Rodgers or held in trust for other parties or charity."

"Unacceptable!" This unequivocal rejection came from Val without even consulting Jim.

"Well your counter offer then?" Steve appears unflustered by the rapid rejection and fires back straight away.

"Fifty percent of any income and property during their partnership. Anything more or less is simply insulting to Katherine Beckett as a professional woman. She can stand on her own. She does not and will not be party to being a kept woman, in reality or perception."

"Agreed with the exception that on death or permanent incapacitation of either party, full rights for all assets devolve to the surviving party."

"That is acceptable."

"Well on the basis of that mutual position I believe we can review the assets and financials. If you need to consult accountants or other financial advisers then we are more than happy to accommodate that request."

With a flourish and a grin Harry drops four identical and heavy folders on the table. "I do hope you are speed readers?"

"Occupational hazard for lawyers. I'm sure we'll be fine. Won't we Jim?" Counters Val as she grabs two folders for Jim and herself.

Jim almost automatically replied 'Yes Dear' but somehow managed to mumble something akin to agreement that was accepted as such by the other attendees without comment aside from a raised eyebrow from Val.

Harry continues by drawing their attention to the list of contents.

"As you can see Schedule C-1 contains a complete list of Mister Castle's assets as most recently audited.

"Now according to Mister Castle, their partnership began in 2009. I think you'll find the relevant
assets and statements since then listed in Schedule C-2.

"Schedule C-3 contains the information pertinent to the items excluded from the communal pot. Specifically the trust funds, charities and bequests.

Schedule C-4 contains the assets that are under control of Miss Martha Rodgers and Miss Alexis Castle. In the case of Miss Rodgers this includes her Acting Studio and Education Centre as well as her pension fund. For Miss Castle, there is her education trust, her coming of age endowment, and full rights and management to the Bel-air property in California."

"Are you done?" Val again. Jim loves observing Val at work.

At Harry and Steve's confirmation, Val begins.

"I am tabling our first addendum for Miss Beckett's assets as Schedule B-1.

"This is a breakdown of her assets and what we believe should go into the communal pot. The major items are her property including her apartment, the stock portfolio and pension plan. As well as savings. Her personal items and jewellery remain her own.

"Fine but absolutely no to anything Miss Beckett inherited from her mother. I have Rick's absolute instruction for this." Jim keeps his face schooled but can't but help being – once again – impressed by the level of commitment and compassion the man shows for his daughter.

"Fair enough. I have a second version of Addendum One with the appropriate amendments." This from Jim. He already knew how Rick felt about Kate's inheritance from her mother and had prepared accordingly.

Steve and Harry take the copy of the documents and begin reading.

The negotiations such as they were had gone extremely smoothly.

"Jim?" Steve is addressing him directly.

"I'm okay with it. You know they – well Katie certainly - is going to be pissed at this, but it is good for both of them and from a legal perspective the best we can do without a prenuptial agreement.

"We can tell her that there was no way I was going to let Jim Beckett's daughter get anything less than fifty percent of her partner. He gets fifty percent of her too."

"Agreed."

"She'll know it was a fix but she can't complain." A pause and then Jim continues. "I imagine he will too but probably back down sooner. He'll do that for her. Like everything else." There were so many reasons for a father to appreciate the man who had chosen to dedicate his life and his words to stand by his daughter.

Val joins in the conversation. "I personally think it is the best you can do for two strong minded people. Based upon what everyone has told me about them, I don't doubt they are invested in their future but equally I imagine there will be some fireworks. I look forward to meeting both of them.

Bellevue Hospital Administration, Meeting Room 1.

"Hey Paula. Thank you for coming here. I don't have long and I have other things to do before Rick
gets back."

"Kate, you know it is no problem. I am happy to do this for the both of you.

"But I have to ask. Are you certain you want to do this?"

"Yes. I've given it some thought and I despite my instincts to running screaming in the other
direction, I need to do this."

"Fine. I'll have it all setup. Now is that it?"

Kate nods in response to Rick's agent's question.

"Cool. Can I have it? You can get it back later."

"No need. I've got another."

"Well we're pretty much set then. But before I go I do need to say this."

Kate tilts her head quizzically.

"You're good for him. Never doubt that. I've been his agent and friend for a long time. The boyish
side is appealing, the playboy an act and as Gina found out it's not enough. You've helped fix him
Kate. Let the man timeshare with the boy but not lose himself. Quite the opposite. He found
himself with you. So you deserve all the happiness you both can give and take from each other.
Don't let anyone else tell you otherwise."

"Thanks Paula."

"You're most welcome. Of course I'll deny this conversation ever having taken place if anyone is
to ask. Now if you'll excuse me Kate I'm off to make arrangement to see the former Mrs Castle-
the-first and ensure she is safely en-route back to the West Coast tomorrow morning before Rick
leaves hospital.

Ward 16 East, Bellevue Hospital, Friday 6.18 pm.

The hospital has conducted an entire battery of tests on him for the last couple of hours but finally
Rick is nearly back in room from the final round of imaging. For some reason as yet not clear to
him there had been an inordinate number of staff wanting autographs (his left handed signing was
improving) or photos. He imagined that perhaps it may be because he was due to leave tomorrow.
Despite any inconvenience he chatted and posed and wrote and generally was nice to the staff. It
was second nature to him and even when tired he did enjoy interacting with his fans.

The wards man is wheeling him back and from the corridor outside the Ward he can see the Taylor
Matthews team chatting with one the cops in the reception lounge.

As they approach his room he can see that the room is only partially lit. And what there appears to
be flickering.

"Take it easy Mister Castle." And with the wards man promptly abandons him outside him room
with a knock on the door.

"Just a second please." Beckett's voice drifts through.

Then the door open and it is Kate Beckett is in a dress. It's a dark burgundy colour and wrapping
around her body much like he wants to. Her hair is up and loose arrangement, tendrils breaking free in the pulsing illumination behind her giving a halo like effect. Just a trace of makeup, smoky eyes he gets lost in and a teasing mouth connected to so many memories past and future.

He's obviously still mute because the next words come from the woman bending down to kiss him. "Are you okay there Rick?"

"You stole my words." Clearly not all of them, but obviously any of more than two syllables.

She smiles as only she can, stands tall – dear God there are heels of course – and steps behind the wheelchair to bring him inside her lair.

The door closes.

The hospital room has been transformed.

There are electric candles flickering providing the illumination.

There is food – Italian he thinks from the smell. Definitely a subtle trace of garlic and oregano in the air. "Cannelloni" she confirms. "Garlic bread, no wine but mineral water and juice."

"Sounds and smells great."

"Let's get you settled, shall we?" They are surprisingly in sync as she assists him into the bed. He steals more than a few kisses during the process.

"Hey Love."

"Found your words, or at least your mouth." She's gently sassing him, and he loves it – always. That little bite that could be sarcasm but usually isn't.

"Wow. I'm pretty sure when I left this place it was a hospital."

"I wanted your last night here to be special. To celebrate surviving, going home to the Loft, us moving in together. I know we'll celebrate these with our family and friends but tonight I just wanted us."

"Kate you didn't have to. Just having you is all the special I need but this is truly amazing."

Kate helps him set more upright on the bed. Once he's settled in she kisses him rather thoroughly.

"Rick, before we eat I wanted to tell you something." He turns his patient gaze on her.

"I want to resolve those issues that hang over us, almost haunt us in some cases. Whether it is my fear of publicity, or the threat from Bracken, or any one of the criminals we have crossed paths with." She deliberately doesn't mention Tyson. One of the few times she seen the man next to her fail to bounce back. So she moves on before he can raise that spectre.

"I want to get married and" She pauses for effect. "Eventually raise our family and to do that I not only need to feel safe but be safe. All of us." He's steadfastly silent for a long while and then she senses his move to interject or perhaps protest but she cuts him off before he can get started.

"Now most of the time that is you giving me that feeling. But with some things and sometimes I need to do it myself, to be able to stand on my own two feet. Not just for selfish reasons but so I can support my partner equally. This is a joint venture Rick, the ultimate partnership, and it
requires that we both will do our share. If I am surrendering a large chunk of my independence you
need to make adjustments too. That’s only fair. So you need to curb your instinct to try and fix
everything, especially without asking. At least until we have talked it over. Okay?"

"I'll do my best." She knows he will. He's tries so hard with them. Sometimes to point of almost
losing himself in his efforts to keep her happy and them 'on course'.

"Rick it's really important for me. Since we've met it has mostly been you doing the giving and me
the taking. And whatever the context and the reasons, my running being not the least, that isn't
sustainable going forward for us to work as life partners. I fully intend to bring more than high
heels and handcuffs to this relationship."

She pauses and leans forward and in the flickering twilight of the fake candles Rick just catches
the edges of a salacious smile curving her lips, before her throaty whisper in his ear. "Of course
those will still be in play if Rickie is a GooooDd, or is it BaaaD boy?"

Then she's right back in her previous seated position. He hadn't noticed her resuming her place but
then his mind and attention had been elsewhere temporarily.

"Rick I'm all in. We've sorted out where we will live – at least for now. Next I guess we will sort
out the money, and then there's the publicity. I won't deny it almost terrifies me but it is part of
your life and career and I will do it for you." She makes great play over her reluctance with this
issue and it is true that it has been a major stumbling block for the both of them.

He's looking at her like THAT again. When he calls her extraordinary. Sometimes she wishes he
wouldn't, she's not a goddess on a pedestal. But a lot of the time she never wants him to stop
because of what that look does to her.

"God I want to marry you Kate Beckett!"

"So do I Rick." She starts to move and looks on the verge of dropping to a knee but his hand stills
her.

"Not yet. Remember the deal?"

She swallows and murmurs low near his ear. "I know but it's so hard."

He can't help himself, the laugh bursts out of him un-containable by any compunction or
willpower. And he can't stop and suddenly neither can she.

It is quite some time before they can eat. It doesn't matter.

Dovetail, Upper West Side, 7.58 pm.

He had found the restaurant on the recommendation of an old schoolmate who had posted online
about it. He's seated at the table waiting for his dinner guest. No that is wrong. His dinner date. He
had summoned the courage to ask and she said 'yes' so it is definitely a date.

James Beckett has a very nice suit on. Almost his best, not the most expensive either. But this one
actually fits the best. He's not vain but he is comfortably assured that his lean physique has aged
gracefully and he doesn't look too shabby. Of course how he looks out of it, at least in her eyes, is a
question he doesn't know the answer to and something he pushes to the back of his mind. It's not a
thought he is comfortable with, nor to be honest much experienced if at all since Jo. Val is the first
woman in so long to do this to him. To make him want to. Now that had to mean something right?
He drives the errant themes from his mind and focuses on remaining sitting at the table in a more calm and collected manner than his own nerves betray. Certainly it wouldn't do for Val to find him pacing anxiously.

Val had asked that they meet at the restaurant at eight and on the dot of eight Valerie Woods enters the restaurant through a door held open by a young waiter who looks clearly affected when the beautiful woman smiles at him in thanks and speaks to him as well.

Of course it is not just her date who is taken by her. Not surprising either. More than one diner turns their head. Of course, Jim has an advantage in that his table is facing the entrance. He's not one to gloat and has a very low key ego but he can't help mentally preen as the lady approaches his table.

The Cream skirt, pale blue silk blouse, and white jacket compliment her complexion perfectly. Her makeup is simply but classy with a sheen to her lips. His attention is drawn away from her face and Jim can't but help notice the swell of her bosom and the gentle sway as she moves towards the table. He mentally chastises himself – such a rookie mistake but she does make him feel a lot like a teenager again - and he hopes that the ever alert attorney hasn't noticed.

If she has, he knows she is too classy to mention it in public.

Jim stands to greet her, hand extended but she leans in for a quick embrace and catches the man by complete surprise by busing her lips over his before more firmly kissing his left cheek well enough to leave the burnished impression of her lipstick on him.

"Good evening Jim. You are looking very debonair tonight."

"Thank you Val. You look incredible. Please take a seat." With this he holds her seat out and patiently waits for her to sit before taking his own. Only then does he speak again.

"Actually I kind of wish I could have Rick on hand to help me."

"Rick Castle? Your daughter's boyfriend/near fiancé. The mystery writer cum police consultant. Why ever would you need him, Jim?" She's teasing him a little and he finds he likes it. Someone else used to tease him, sometimes mercilessly and he never really meant it when he complained. He wouldn't if the woman opposite him continues to do so.

"Well he is generally very good with words. Except perhaps when Katie is annoyed with him. I feel I need backup as I'm so out of practice at this." He smiles. "Plus it kinda makes me sound like a cop."

Val rolls her eyes and Jim can't but help wonder if every important woman in his life has mastered that facial gymnastic.

"I disagree. I think you manage perfectly well with your own words. At least you have done over the years we've known each other."

And with that their date begins and soon Jim can't for the life of him recall why he was so anxious.

Alexis' Dorm, Columbia, sometime after 9 pm.

Alexis dropped the text book down in frustration. Despite her good intentions to catch up straight away, even she couldn't do it all inside twenty-four hours. She could do with a drink but she wasn't at the Loft where any petty liquor larceny on her part could easily be passed off as Grams.
The knock at the door broke her train of thoughts.

"It's open." At this the door swings ajar and a blonde mop of hair gives away the identity of her visitor.

"Max!" She is pleased to see him even though they weren't meant to meet upon until tomorrow.

"Hey Sweet Cheeks."

"Max! I told you not to call me that."

"Sure 'Lex. Where's your roomie?"

"It's Friday" Which was code 'she's not here, won't be back until much later, hopefully' which given Carrie's passion for dancing all hours would likely mean a very late return to the dorm if at all.

"How's your Dad? You're back here so that means he's getting better doesn't it?"

"He's doing okay, going to take a while. Thanks for asking." See he's not totally single-minded she consoles herself.

"Sooooo can I hang a sock?" Oh well maybe he is.

Alexis found herself emulating Kate Beckett complete with hard stare and eye roll. It works too.

"Not at all romantic Max." He's a bad actor too and his sad puppy look is nowhere near as compelling as her father's.

"I'm not after romance 'Lex. I'm pretty sure you aren't either." He's far too confident for her comfort level. Is she really that easy? "It's been ten days." Like that makes a difference.

"Don't whine. It's not attractive."

"Or pout." As his attempts to master his facial expressions fail.

Maybe all men were equally bad? But this wasn't serious and after the week she's had fun is definitely a preferred option.

"Fine. I need a break anyway. Come distract me."

Grinning Max moves into the room but before he can close the door she reminds him.

"Don't forget the sock!"

---

Valerie Wilson's apartment building, Friday 10.30 pm.

"Jim this isn't our first date, so you don't have to settle for walking me to my door and saying goodnight. It's not our second date either so the agonising over whether to accept the invitation for coffee is not required either."

"What are you saying Val? You know me. Despite the years of law, I am a plain spoken person."

"I do know you Jim. Which is why I want you to come inside and spend the night."

He doesn't look completely shocked by this development but there is an air of uncertainty about
"Just so you know there is no expectation here. Whatever happens is fine."

He appears somewhat mollified by this and this encourages Val to continue.

"But first I would like to ask you a question if I may?"

"Of course Val."

"Why now Jim?"

"A lot of reasons – loneliness, fear, attraction, a desire to fix last time but most importantly because someone very dear to me gave me some valuable advice about wasted time and missed opportunities. And I didn't want any more of those for us."

"Neither do I Jim. You should be proud of your daughter and how smart she is." She sees the flare of parental pride in his eyes at her perceptive recognition.

"I have also done some thinking and I think I can accept sharing you with Johanna. I know you'll always love her Jim, but that's alright. I just want a part of your heart to call my own. I can share the rest with your daughter and her new family, and your wife's memory."

"Val. I don't know what to say except I am honoured. I'm not the easiest person to deal with, and I doubt I'll ever change. I thought I had really messed up the last time." She shakes her head as if to deny that.

"But I think I would like to stay the night. To take that chance. With you I strongly suspect there is already a place in my heart with your name on it."

"Val, I'm afraid we Becketts don't say the words lightly. I know Katie spent years without it passing her lips except in reference to her mother. She's changed with Rick. Thank God. I would like to hope that I can change too. But you'll have to be patient with me."

"Oh I will be, but I will have you know that my patience extends only so far." With that she grips his hand firmly and pulls him towards her building entrance.

They have the first date moment - there is a kiss at the door. "Just in case we forget from the last time" she breathes into his mouth as their lips close on each other. And more inside as coffee is skipped and so there was no second date replay and in the end not a lot of patience was shown by either person with the third date rule rendered irrelevant.

Saturday morning dawns and Jim Beckett blinks awake. His normal routine is to lie in bed for a few minutes and refresh memories of Johanna in his head. Not always the same ones, but often the little things that somehow mean more. Things not found in the photos and videos. Mementos of the heart and soul. This morning he feels guilty and can't judge if he is being disloyal and if so who is more disloyal to. His dead wife, or the wonderful woman lying next to him.

Reviewing the evidence is not particularly illuminating at first especially as he shrugs off the last vestiges of sleep.

Right now he's naked in bed. And he's not alone. But that's good. The right person is with him or perhaps that should be he is with the right person as this is her apartment. He doesn't want to
remember how many years between events that is. He does want to remember last night. He had always suspected that he and Val would be magic together.

Her acceptance of Johanna was an added blessing. Even so he's not entirely sure how his morning benediction would play with Val. They knew each other well enough but this was something different. She knew his faults but this was a big reach even for her. Even for him to share it. He had told no one. Not even Katie. Although he suspects his sharp minded daughter may have an inking or two given the rare early morning phone calls she's received over the years after he's recalled some memory that absolutely needed to be shared between the two of them.

Turning his mind back to Val he felt unnaturally calm. The handful of times he had a sexual partner since had always left him mortified with guilt and regret. Unfulfilled excepted at the most base level. Not this.

They hadn't said the words, or even many words once they reached her bedroom, but they both understood the commitment that was going on here. There was no backing away from it.

He carefully rose and padded to the bathroom to relieve his morning bladder. A quick rinse of his mouth and he returns to find her awake looking up at him with doe eyes and such an open display of affection and desire that he isn't unaffected.

"Good Morning Val."

"Good Morning to both of you." She giggles. He likes, no loves, that sound.

"Come back to bed Jim. It's Saturday." As arguments go it is the briefest he's ever heard from her but it is mightily compelling and he is of a mind to comply.

Oh it's much more than Saturday he thinks but Jim says nothing more as his lips hunt out hers.

Room 22, Ward 16 East, Bellevue Hospital, Saturday 6.51 am.

"Good morning My Love." She never thought she'd be that girl but here she is standing over him and waking her man with sappy endearments.

Rick blinks a few times and he's awake.

"Hi Kate. It is a good morning. A very good morning. I'm going home today." The hope in his voice is enough to threaten tears from her eyes so she interrupts him with a kiss.

"We going to OUR home." Somehow the words and emotion escapes round her mouth and their tongues, and the hot, happy tears wet their faces.
Home

Chapter Summary

After much organising and planning Rick is finally getting to go home.

Room 22, Ward 16 East, Bellevue Hospital, Saturday 6.51 am.

"Good morning My Love." She never thought she'd be that girl but here she is standing over him and waking her man with sappy endearments.

Rick blinks a few times and he's awake.

"Hi Kate." The volume is low but audible. She closes the distance further so that her face is only inches away from his. He blinks as if refocusing.

"It is a good morning. A very good morning. I'm going home today." The hope in his voice is enough to threaten to pull tears from her eyes so she interrupts him with a kiss – morning breath be damned. There are no complaints.

"We going to OUR home." Somehow the words and emotion escapes round her mouth and their tongues, and the hot, happy tears wet their faces. If he picks up her use of the plural possessive he doesn't remark on it and if he hasn't well only so much the better for later.

"You okay Love?" The concern in his voice doesn't help the tears abate but she is able to mutter against his shoulder.

"Better than earlier. Getting there. Just need you."

"You got me Kate. Always."

"Promise?" She doesn't want to sound needy but it's there in every pore of her being and she knows he can feel that. His uncanny perception of her still startles, surprises and soothes her in equal measure.

Earlier

Subtle variations to the layers of darkness leaking through the blinds hinted at the slow – too slow for her frustratingly un-sleep befuddled mind - progression towards daylight as she lay on the couch, almost painfully alert and awake listening to the most important person in her life sleep soundly. She didn't begrudge his uncanny ability to slumber through almost anything. If nothing else it meant that she had been able to surprise him more than once in their mornings together. There was still more than an hour before the hospital would start its morning routine but she had already accepted she wasn't going back to sleep on this day. The room is all too painfully familiar and it's not somewhere she wants to wake to again. Ever.

Despite the early hour and her curtailed sleep a wry smile crept onto her face as she ran through a mental checklist in preparation for the day. Today was a very important day. Not least because
today they will be bringing Rick home. But there was more at work here than merely returning her man to his home and family. For as simple as Rick's journey would be on this day, today she was launching herself fully into his world. It would in all probability mark the end of her independent and largely anonymous life and yet she was strangely comfortable with the decisions she has taken to lead her to that future. Sure, she's only reluctantly embracing a few certain aspects but in return she gets to have him for eternity.

Kate Beckett had been effectively independent for all of her adult life. The tortuous and traumatic event that initiated this lifestyle was by the very nature the furthest thing from freewill for her nineteen year old self. In the intervening years since she was first at first obliged but then later choose to remain almost entirely self-reliant.

Through that passage of time nothing had essentially altered - or made her want to change - that lifestyle. Not completing college back in New York, the Academy, her Dad's eventual sobriety, progression through the ranks of the NYPD, boyfriends (if pressed she could only class Will Sorenson as a relationship, all the others, even the better part of a year intermittently dating Josh Davidson were merely 'boyfriends'). Nothing until Rick Castle of course.

Nothing until Richard Castle – the author and not his books – had crashed uninvited into her world and begun to dismantle her patiently constructed coping mechanisms and protective barriers. Unheeding of her protests he began to chip away and undermine her determination and carefully crafted justifications to stay steadfastly independent. Sure it had been a protracted struggle no doubt in part because she had resisted with almost equal measures of heroism and stupidity in the face of the inevitability of them. She recognised now that one of the key reasons for that was her determination that she wanted all or nothing of him and until that day in the cemetery she hadn't been certain enough. From there it had been a shaky but largely true path to acceptance and embracing that they had a shared future together. One that became impossible to deny any longer not without irrevocably breaking one or both of them and they had certainly danced close enough to the precipice – she had literally hung off one – to know better now.

Of course once they had hooked up they had expended far too much energy delaying the inevitable public exposure of their relationship. Hiding had begun as a game, waiting and wanting to see who among family and friends discovered them first. Then it was to avoid repercussions at work until it became second nature, a security blanket for all their – well to be honest, mostly her – remaining insecurities. Of course secrets never last and the positive reactions from family (Alexis was naturally a tad slow to come round unlike Martha) and friends (well positive barely covered Lanie's reaction) were a welcome relief unlike the eventually dénouement when Gates and the press found out. As it turns out Gates and NYPD hierarchy's response had been more than fair but that still left the press and public in the undecided camp.

Well there was certainly was going to be no hiding now. Not when she had spent her spare time in the last few days hastily deconstructing so many facets of her life and equally quickly throwing down foundations permanent enough for what she hoped and trusted was the rest of her life.

Yeah no pressure at all Beckett.

The Loft

Martha Rodgers had woken before seven. Something she rarely did especially if there was a choice in the matter regardless of when she actually went to bed. She had no pressing need to rise but sleep escaped her this day. If she was honest the anxiety was still chipping away at her usual sangfroid.
She wondered if it made a difference that she hadn't had a drop of alcohol for the previous forty-eight hours. She had started to cut down a year ago and learnt to carefully pace herself so that the casual onlooker would never notice and simply assume the imitable Martha Rodgers holding court with glass in hand. Detective Beckett had been the one to take her aside and ask if everything was okay. Neither her son nor Alexis has noticed or at least remarked on it, and given the family propensity for sharing and teasing that was as good a confirmation as she needed. That she was okay was a question to which she had been confident was wholly irrelevant until the events of the last nine days.

She looked round her bedroom taking in all that was familiar and comforting. This one room that more than anywhere symbolised home for her. Decorated in her own inimitable style it was actually the largest in the Loft. Originally the master bedroom it has space enough for her queen bed, a sofa and chair nestled up with a coffee table in one corner opposite the large en-suite and a small side office that was now her dressing room cum wardrobe.

She was never more grateful for her son when after the disaster that was her last marriage he had invited his penniless mother to live with him and Alexis. He had more than enough money to set her up on her own but he knew that her already battered pride would be further dented but worse her feeling of worthlessness would persist. So with an intuition a mother would be proud of he had opened up his home and made it hers too.

She wondered what she would do when it was time to leave. She wasn't naïve enough to imagine there wouldn't come a time when it would be more appropriate and suitable for all of them for her to reside elsewhere but that wasn't yet. She secretly hoped that the possibility of more grandchildren would provide the justification for her vacating the Loft but only a short distance away of course.

For her part Katherine had never once even hinted at Martha moving out or any protest about sharing the Loft with any family member. Sure there had been subtle hints from her son's lover for some alone-time, and less than subtle ones from her son of course, but never even a whisper of anything more a weekend or so's privacy.

She rose from the bed and threw on a bright red silk robe. One that even she had to admit pushed the limits for gaudiness. But it matched her mood, or rather her desired mode.

Walking downstairs towards the kitchen her footsteps not so much echoed as resounded off the emptiness of the space. There was no warmth here without her family. Alexis was back in the dorms and Martha had to admit she missed the young woman, possibly as much as her son did. Kate Beckett's absence too was palpable. The woman bought a sense of serenity and calm to the often frenetic loft and a touch of bohemian chic that Martha found uniquely individual to Kate Beckett. She was certainly far more complex person than anyone other than her son and possibly Kate's own parents knew.

She looked forward to having them all back home with her.

Ward 16 East, Bellevue Hospital, Saturday 7.18 am.

Whilst the nursing team were running through their final morning routine with Rick Kate had stepped outside the room to ring her Dad again. She had rung his home earlier just after seven but with no response. A further call five minutes later to the same home line went to voice mail. She given up on the home number and rang his cellular phone. This not often used as Jim Beckett was steadfast in his dislike of the device and refused point-blank to use messaging. This time the call too was on the verge of ringing out and going to voice mail when finally there was an answer.
"Katie?"

"Hey Dad." He knows her. Her voice is taunt, a forced lightness betraying her anxiety. Since she had first approached him two days ago he was concerned that she might put too much into her plan. It was her way. All in, fully invested. Now her tone showed just how much she believed was riding on this.

Of course what she had put together as a plan in only a couple of days was impressive especially for his daughter and her commitment adverse history. Jim Beckett isn't being judgemental – after all he is the last person entitled to be so – but it could well change so much. She was no longer being passive. No longer waiting for Richard Castle. Much the same as the man had been waiting for her. Now she was forcing the pace. Much more Detective Beckett and far less Kate. Secretly Jim Beckett is both impressed and relieved.

"Good morning Katie." Her Dad keeps it light. He knows his daughter, and more than any living person appreciates the magnitude of what his only child is doing and the leap of faith she believes she is taking. He has immense trust in her and almost equally importantly in her partner. He knows he has very little to fear for Katie especially from the man and his family.

"I tried you home number but you're obviously out." There is a pause and she continues. "How did it go yesterday Dad?"

He's grateful she has not asked him why he was not answering the home phone.

"Good. All sorted bar the signatures and some final calculations. I'll be honest Katie, I wasn't comfortable not being truthful with Rick's people nor with Val." The emphasis he unconsciously puts on the last name triggers her detective/daughter senses but she stores that away for another time.

"I know. I'm sorry but I wanted this to be a surprise for Rick." He can hear pause if marshalling an explanation. "I didn't want it filtering back to Rick. He has good people working for him and they would have reported back to him before….." She pauses and rephrased her response. "I want for him to have this first hand, in front of me as far as possible. Not from others. We've got a lot of history of miscommunication, which we're fixing but this time I need him to completely comprehend and get it directly from me, not second-hand."

"I understand that Katie but I don't think you need worry too much. You've moved heaven and earth to get this all done. So what's first?"

"Get Rick released and out of hospital and on the way home."

"Then?" Jim prompts his daughter.

"Press Conference." He can hear the distaste on her voice but is uncertain as to why a press conference would concern her so much. But he won't add anything to that internal observation. He suspects there is so much more going on but he'll wait for her to tell him.

"Then we'll most likely do the financials early next week. I'll let you know if you're needed."

"That shouldn't be a problem my case load is low at the moment."

"We're going to give him time to settle in today but we're having lunch at the loft tomorrow. That's Sunday Dad, and we're all hoping you can join us."

"Of course I'll be there. Who else will be there?" Much as he's come to like and trust the man he's
still nervous about the extended family.

"Well Martha and Alexis obviously, but also Lanie and the Boys, and a couple of Rick's people might pop in briefly. Martha is organising that so I don't really know."

"Fine. I can do that."

"I'll call you later with the details. Will you be back home?"

"I expect so Katie. But I'll let you know if I have a change of plans." As he speaks Kate can swear she hears a female voice in the background say her dad's first name.

"Bye Katie." And with that the call is disconnected.

Kate stares at her phone. What was that? He's never that abrupt. Impolite even. Not since. No he's not drinking again. She has faith in him now. Hard earned but well-deserved faith. Something is up with her dad. She doesn't have time right now to deal with whatever it is but she would make a point of following up.

Shaking her head she takes the two paces back to the door and opens it in time to hear one of the nurses protest "Mister Castle!" Oh well back to it.

As she enters the room her growl of "Rick!" brings a halt to proceedings. Taking in the chaos before her she shakes her head again more in theatre than true dismay. Less than five minutes and this. She doesn't know who will be happier he's going home today. But what has she signed up for?

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Ward 16 East, Bellevue Hospital, 10.50 am.

It was a reassuringly low-key farewell despite the numbers in attendance. For a start there was no press and aside from Rick, Martha, Alexis and herself the only non-employees Kate could see were from the NYPD and Taylor Matthews both sets in the background.

Kate was pretty sure that good numbers of all three shifts for the Ward were here along with more than the odd individual from ICU, imaging, and hospital administration. Somehow they are all crammed into the ward waiting area by reception.

Naturally with Rick the majority of well-wishers appeared to female as well. Yet another facet of his life she was coming to terms with although she's not entirely sure she'll ever be comfortable with it. But she has complete faith in him. He's more than demonstrated the depth of his commitment and she'll try to never question it. Paula had raised the spectre just the other day casually informing Kate that aside from outright offers of a purely carnal nature, his run rate was two to three proposals a month plus everything else downward. Something's were definitely going to take some time to get used to.

Martha had done the bulk of the speaking and thanking. It had been simple and heartfelt. Despite their wealth and relative celebrity (certainly in New York) the Rodgers/Castles were a surprising down-to-earth family. Of course each had their foibles – Martha her dramatic deportment, Alexis' occasional preppy moments, and Rick's ego of course. The man himself had spoken briefly and mainly apologising for his inability to sign autographs. Alexis had collected a list of all the attendees and promised to organise them at a later date once her dad was able to sign legibly again. Mind you Kate was sure that the two nurses with Rick's left-handed signature may well have collectors' items, if anyone could decipher the signer's name of course.

The last two Twelfth Precinct officers – Calhoun and Davies - came forward to give their
farewells. Rick struggles to articulate what the continual volunteer presence from the NYPD and notably the Twelfth means to him, and he's not the only one who blinks back tears. When he settles for a gruff 'thank you' no one seems more grateful than the two self-conscious uniforms who move off with nods of their heads and a promise to "See you around Castle." Kate drifts in closer to him, if that is entirely possible, and gives his left cheek a gentle kiss to try and distract him.

The Taylor Matthews team remain as they will be accompanying them to the Loft before signing off now that the threat has been judged to have be neutralised. There will be a final briefing from Taylor Matthews next week. Kate still has to think and remember that she is – temporarily at least – part of the same organization. If nothing else the butt of the Sig 229 riding in the small of her back should be a frequent reminder.

There is a man and a woman. Kate's seen them before but hasn't been introduced until now. The male is in his forties, a close cropped receding hairline and a slight paunch but one look at his eyes would remove any doubt about him. Hard, direct, the flinty black pupils barely blink with a handshake to match as he gives his name as Michael Popham. The woman, Harriet – 'call me Harry' – Devers, is not much taller than Lanie with a stocky build but an easy grace despite the bulk. A friendly smile and a comfortable grip make her appear less intimidating than her partner, something Kate instinctively knows is deliberate misdirection. Neither say much but before any awkward silence can build Clare Dunne appears.

Clare smiles and the two Taylor Matthews operatives and then Kate get nods of acknowledgement as befits colleagues. Alexis and Martha both receive hugs and kisses to the cheek but before Clare greets Rick her gaze falls on Kate Beckett and satisfied she sees nothing prohibiting her, she steps in to repeat the greeting. Kate reminds herself that there is a back story she wants, no needs to know.

Clare is all business. She is here to confirm their transport is ready downstairs at the rear loading bay including a separate vehicle for the Taylor Matthews team. Before they know it they are all moving towards the service lift and home.

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**Limo, 10.59 am.**

Somehow he'd even managed to look partway graceful – aside from the initial rise from the seat as it was something that remained challenging with only one usefully functional arm - getting out of the hospital mandated wheelchair and into the Limo from Time and Motion.

*Why not a town car?* But that's not the first question on his mind which he voices once they are in the privacy of the car and it is moving off with just Martha, Alexis and him in the rear.

"Where's Kate?" It's tantamount to a demand with just a taste of politeness. On any other occasion he'd have earned and deserved the looks of approbation from his mother and daughter. Instead he gets an awkward silence.

Only when it seems that he is imminently about to repeat his question does Martha reaches across to pat her son's left hand.

"Richard, Kate had a very important task to attend to." *That explains nothing.*

"She didn't say anything." 'Not to me' is left unsaid as he pouts. And it's not the playful, cute kind. There's more than a touch of the petulant playboy from pre-Beckett days. Anger creeps at the edge along with the confusing swirl of almost all other emotions and he could easily fall that way despite his usual even natured disposition.
He forces that rush of emotions down. Giving in would only result in fleeting satisfaction of the worst kind.

Conceding defeat on the issue of Kate's location, he poses the next obvious question.

"Well if you're not going to tell me where she is, can one of you answer why we are in a limo when a town car would be more than suitable?"

Alexis has been quiet until now. "Oh that's easy Dad. We need a TV."

He frowns at the answer. Even he won't get bored in the relatively short car journey back to the Loft especially as it is Saturday and traffic is far less than the weekday gridlock.

Before he can proceed with the next logical inquiry, Martha presses the remote in her hand and the flat panel TV unfolds from the roof and lights up. As it comes to life it is set on the local News and Entertainment channel. Martha presses the volume but he still poses the obvious question.

"Why do we need a TV?" *Is he the only sane person today?*

"Oh hush a second son. Just watch the TV."

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**Conference Room 4, Bellevue Hospital, 11.00 am.**

The press conference has been arranged in one of the smaller media rooms at the hospital and the less than two-dozen press crammed into the room have been selected and pre-managed as best as possible by Paula Haas.

Up front is lectern surrounded by microphones and standing there is Karen White from the Hospital. To the right hand side is Paula Haas in full media witch mode.

"Well Good Morning Everyone.

"Bellevue is pleased to confirm that Richard Castle, Police consultant and author, has been released this morning and is presently on his way home." There is a start in the audience at this news. His release was expected but obviously the simultaneous press conference was meant as a successful distraction of the media. Karen ignores the sudden burst of texts and a few whispers into radio mikes.

"Mister Castle has made a very positive recovery from his initially life-threatening injuries he received on November 8th. When he was admitted he was in grave condition. I am pleased to say that the team here at Bellevue were able to ensure that Mister Castle goes home today with the prospect of making a full recovery in the matter of time.

"I would like to now invite a family representative to brief you further." With no further talking Karen White steps back and to the opposite side of the lectern from Paula Haas. However, Paula Haas makes no move to approach the lectern.

There is a brief round of muttering and exchanges from the assembled press but before it could go further the back door of the conference room opens and the figure strides purposely forward towards the lectern and array of microphones. Female, tall, smartly dressed in a black slacks, a crisp white button down and dark blue blazer, her hair neatly tied back. She is the epitome of professional. Aside from the sound of camera shutters, the only sound heard is a not completely muted 'shit!' from somewhere near the back of the room as the assembled press are almost entirely struck silent in their surprise.
"Thank you Karen." The voice is slightly clipped but perfectly audible, the slight New York flavour, not even a twang barely, discernible especially to the TV audience.

"Good Morning Everyone." The timbre changes slightly, less terse as the speaker relaxes before her audience.

"I am Kate Beckett. I serve as a detective at the NYPD's Twelfth Precinct and I have been working with Rick Castle since he first came to shadow our homicide team more than four years ago.

"We are all grateful that Rick volunteers his time as a valued member of our team and service he has given the citizens of New York. After the last week, I don't think anyone can dispute the depth of his devotion to the job. We had come to think of Rick as one of own long before he once again put his life on the line for us."

"What initially began as observation for background information for his wonderful stories has evolved into an active consultancy and I'm proud to call myself Richard Castle's partner.

"Rick is not only my partner in my role as a homicide detective but in every facet of our lives. I count myself truly blessed that this wonderful man has chosen to love me and I can only hope he understands how much I love him. What we have together is an once-in-a-lifetime partnership.

"This is not a sudden thing. It has taken both Rick and myself years to reach this point. This is the result of momentous and challenging experiences we have shared during the course of our partnership. We've had near death experiences – more than enough– and many other interesting moments along the way.

"As Captain Gates alluded to last week I will be taking a leave of absence to assist with Rick’s recovery and also to complete further education and studies related to my career. During this time I please ask that you respect our privacy just as we appreciate you have done when we have been working active homicide cases.

"On behalf of his family we look forward to welcoming Rick home today. We are able to do so because of the skill and care of the fantastic staff here at Bellevue. We can't thank you enough for ensuring Rick can come home to us. Thank you.

"Rick does appreciate all the support the people of New York and his fans have given during his time in hospital. We are especially grateful to those who donated to Rick's nominated charities. And for those of you who sent flowers and gifts we have arranged for them to be distributed among the patients at Bellevue.

"I would like to finish with some personal observations.

"Firstly I'll admit that I'm not at all comfortable doing this. I am a far more private person than my partner and would prefer not to see my life on Page Six. But apparently this is not an option anymore as a certain element of all this" She waves her hands at the press and cameras in front of her. "Comes with the territory or rather the man."

"We kept our relationship private so as to not impact the important work we do. I fully acknowledge that this has caused issues but these are now being resolved and once Rick is able to return appropriate working practises will apply. We are grateful to the NYPD for the opportunity to continue to serve together."

Kate looks up and faces the cameras, resolve and a challenge in eyes and tone as she speaks again.

"Rick and I want to put past events behind us and move ahead with our lives and anything we have
dealt with previously stays just that - in the past, unchanged and unchallenged."

Kate looks down again and takes a breath before looking directly into the camera right in front of her with her eyes slightly misty as if fighting to control the emotion.

"Rick, I trust our family have you watching this." She smiles just a little as if remembering a private joke.

"It has taken time to get here, and we had some missteps along the way, but ultimately I am wholeheartedly and irrevocably in love with my best friend, partner and soul mate."

"I will see you at home."

"I love you."

She breaks her lock on the camera and briefly sweeps her gaze across the assembled journalists.

"I'm sorry if my time with you is very brief today. I need to go home to see Rick and be with our family. In the meantime, Paula has an expanded statement available for you and will take any questions."

"Thank you for your time this morning." Kate starts to step back and is already scanning for Rick's publicist.

"Paula?"

With that Kate stepped away from the lectern, turns, and managed a carefully measured and controlled stride out of the room through the same rear door she entered through before the press pack can begin to make their questions audible over the sudden collective din. From there she dropped all pretence and sprinted for the stairwell that led down to the loading dock where a marked patrol unit was waiting for her.

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Limo

'After these messages we'll get the statement from Mister Castle's publicists and then we'll be back to the studio with our regulars to discuss whether Richard Castle, previously a perennial candidate for Bachelor of the Year is off the list for good. It certainly sounds like it.' At this Martha hit the remote to mute the TV audio and turned to regard her son.


Wait was that the flash? His attention came back to the limo in time to see Alexis pocketing her phone. He would question her but he was struggling to form any coherent speech.

Watching in the back of the limo, Martha leant across the seat and playfully pushed her son's jaw shut again.

"She…"

"I should have recorded his reaction Grams. It's not often he's rendered speechless." The junior Red Head whispers to the senior. "Even by Kate." She adds for good measure.

"She hates publicity. The press. Page Six." Rick finally finds his words.

"She loves you more Dad."
"I knew that." He protests more for his own benefit he thinks.

"Well I think she wanted to demonstrate not only to you but to everyone else, herself included, that exactly how she feels.

Kate.

She had stolen his ability to form words again.

She was getting very adept at that.

He felt so guilty for his pettiness and sulk over Kate not travelling with them in the car back home from the hospital. He, and pretty much everyone else he concedes, now knew what her important task had been.

He still struggled to believe it. But looking at his mother and daughter he suddenly understood. They knew.

"You knew?" He tries to make it not sound like an accusation but he's not sure if he does. His mother answers.

"Only that we needed a car with a TV and that Kate wouldn't be riding back with us. I swear that's all Richard. Kate sorted everything else out with Paula and Gina directly."

"Oh." Definitely stolen his words.

A smirking Martha knew better than to say anything more but her self-satisfied silence was victory enough for her especially when it looked like the traumatic events of the last week and a bit were ending with a significant progression in the relationship that was speeding along nicely now. She prayed there were no more road blocks in the way to her having the last daughter-in-law and hopefully new grandchildren to spoil before she was too old.

Loft Garage

In the end Rick hadn't fought the use of a wheel chair to get him from the limo to the Loft. Despite his lack of direct leg injuries he was still recovering and tired easily. Unfortunately there was insufficient room in the loft for a powered wheelchair so he would need pushing when unable to walk as his injuries prevented him doing anything other than spinning round as he had aptly demonstrated at hospital much to everyone's amusement until he knocked a jug flying. Everyone in the family was grateful that Rick's bedroom was on the ground level of the loft and it had only taken some minor rearranging to make the space amenable for wheelchair transit if and when he needed it.

Martha had arranged for Eduardo to bring the bags up to the Loft. So Alexis got behind the wheelchair and pushed her dad towards the elevator.

"Glad this is level, not sure I could push you uphill Dad, and on a down slope I might let you go!"

"Pumpkin, I can stand and walk if needed."

"No it's all good dad, even if I am doing it on my own" as she eyed her grandmother carrying little more than her handbag.

Martha had the good sense not to respond. Alexis appeared to be on her game today and quite
sharp, especially if prodded.

**Home**

Martha moved ahead of the wheelchair to open the door with her key but as she approached the familiar portal swung open. As Alexis maneuvered the wheelchair to pass through the now open door Rick was startled to see Kate standing before them.

"Welcome home Castle." Her voice is soft, and rich but wrapped around a layer of steel, absolute certainty. He's home.

Her hair was now down and hanging loose across her shoulders just how he loved it. Dressed simply now in grey leggings, a fawn loose fit jumper hanging and exposing her right shoulder, and despite the bare feet she still strode authoritatively to his side and crouching down to his level kissed him but not so long that their audience would be uncomfortable.

"How?" he finally managed to stutter out.

"I have friends in the NYPD and they arranged an escort for me to get back here before you. Also the limo didn't take the most direct route. We kinda figured you wouldn't actually notice." A smirk concludes the explanation.

"I wanted to welcome you home Castle." Such a simple statement but one he recognises is layered with far more meaning for them.

"Well isn't this a pleasant surprise! In fact it appears to be a day of surprises Katherine." Martha knows how to deliver her lines and interrupts their entrance way exchange.

"Oh Grams!" Alexis half-protests. "Let's all get inside first. After all Dad's almost but not quite home."

No sooner had they passed through the door and closed it than there was knock from Eduardo who had wasted no time in unloading the limo and was now at the door. He had a luggage trolley carrying the bags and the few flowers and gifts from the hospital Rick had kept rather than distributed among the other patients and staff.

Kate has gone curiously silent and suddenly concerned for his partner Rick turns his head to look up at her and sees that concerned mirrored back in her own eyes. Their gazes remain locked. One of those moments - their mutual eye communications occurs and smiles slowly creep onto their faces. Still facing him Kate reaches down to take his left hand with her left hand and walks backwards as Alexis pushes the wheelchair towards the main living area.

Martha takes charge of Eduardo having him take the bags to the foot of the stairs and everything else placed on the large kitchen workbench.

Rick's focus has been locked on Kate but he finally managed to drag his attention away from her even though he's only managed to utter a single word so far.

He's home. Home. He's lived in the Loft for so long that the terms Home and Loft are interchangeable. Despite his other residences and frequent travelling nothing else comes close in his heart and head. The memories he has here, and the stories he has created live within him and on the pages of his books, the photographs on the walls and in the albums, and the mementos dotted around the rooms, inhabiting almost every nook and cranny. Most of the time he can't imagine
living anywhere else except perhaps when he dreams of a future family with Kate, a yard with a swing set for kids and adults, maybe a pet or two.

As they entered the living room Kate had to release his hand and step away so Alexis can move the wheelchair past one of the side tables. He takes a better look around.

He's missed this place inordinately more in the last nine days than when he's been travelling. Once he was awake and coherent it began one of his focal points. It was his solid ground to aim for, part of his motivation for getting out of hospital.

Kate has stepped back in and unconsciously he has taken her hand again as Alexis applies the brake. Her hand feels slightly warm and clammy. Is she nervous? Why?

He looks at her and then takes his first good look at his home.

He misses it at first but then his writer's eyes, perhaps even more finely honed after a half-decade as a consultant for the NYPD, started to pick up on subtle details. Small changes at first but gradually there is a growing pool of evidence that things have indeed changed since his last time home.

There is a small table in one corner of the living room with a vase of preserved plants and flowers. That's not his, it's hers. The table and vase. And the flowers. He last saw it at her apartment but now it's here. There is a picture too of her dad's cabin at sunset, nested in the comforting embrace of the trees, surrounded by the orange glow. It was taken by her mother and is one of Kate's dearest possessions.

Looking around the room in growing wonder he sees that there are an almost constant series of small changes. Not a vast number, nor anything that clashes – too much. He notes his mother's touch and remembers that Kate has been with him almost constantly so he has a suspicion but one he won't voice. He wants to hear it directly from her.

Almost in the background he is aware of Martha and Alexis make their excuses and retreating upstairs leaving him alone with Kate.

"Kate…?" Her hand reaches out a finger to still his question before it is fully formed.

"I moved in." It's so soft, uncertain. He almost missed it and it is apparent that he strained to hear her.

"I moved in." Stronger. He doesn't say anything and she presses on almost afraid to pause without an explanation as to why.

"We agreed just before you were shot and I didn't want to wait any more. I want to be here with you for everything Castle. Every morning and every night. Even if initially it's not exactly as we anticipated.

"Sure there are lots left at my apartment but Lanie and Boys, Martha and Alexis, and my Dad. They've all spent some of their spare time in the last day and a bit moving stuff over and rearranging things. Well the last has mainly been Martha. She's been a champ and co-opted a couple of the doormen to help with the heavy lifting I'm sure." She has been busy scanning the room herself and now turns to face him whilst continuing to speak.

"If there is anything wrong…..if it's all too much?" The question remains stilted and she's suddenly silent, her words lost in the look on his face. She can't place it, nor identify it? Until she does.
"I love you Katherine Houghton Beckett." His tone is cut-through with the same raw emotion on his face and he's shaking only slightly but there's tears. *Oh Gawd he's not going to.* But before she can even finish that thought he continues.

"I know it's too soon to propose." *How does he do that?*

"But every single thing you have done, especially today, only makes the moment closer and more inevitable than before." He slaps his left hand over his mouth. "God I sound like a sap." He openly but playfully chastises himself and she can't but help laugh at him.

"You do, but you're MY Sap." She leans down to kiss him properly on the lips.

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Martha and Alexis have reappeared and he's out of the wheelchair now and moving relatively free, but mainly furniture hopping. Moving into his office she assures him this is the one place that hasn't been touched. Any changes here will only come from him.

She assists him into his bedroom although Rick suspects it is simply an excuse to wrap her arm around him middle and snuggle into his left side. He won't say anything.

No THEIR bedroom they both mentally correct themselves and share a look as if they both understood what the other was thinking.

Not too many changes here, except on her side of the bed resides the wooden box she keeps her most personal keepsakes and jewellery in and a framed picture of her mom both of which sit atop her bedside cabinet. The other changes are hidden away behind the doors of the walk-in-robe and the cabinets. Not that she actually had too many clothes left to bring over. Shoes on the other hand. She knows she will hear from him on that front. She will when pressed concede that she does have a large collection of shoes. It's a vice her mother had first encouraged especially as she started to emerge from her gawky teenage phase.

The Linus the Lion is still on the wall. That has to go. It totally creeps her out. But she's patient and she can wait to get rid of that. She still has to work out how to broach the subject with Castle who she knows will attempt to whine and weasel out of that particular change but she had plenty of weapons at her disposal and isn't ashamed to use them. Not on him. Her love.

Rick has been far too silent for her comfort. She is used to his constant babble like a comforting background accompaniment and it is another thing she has missed since he was shot. Finally he speaks.

"Kate. You've stolen my words at least twice today. I'm still barely able to get past near-monosyllabic sentences.

"I can't even begin to explain the press conference and what it means to me. Except that I know how much that took of you and please know I would never have asked it of you."

"I know Rick. Which is exactly why I did it. Because you wouldn't ask me. I am you partner, lover, girlfriend, future fiancé and wife. I need you to know how committed I am to this. No running, no turning back. Together always. And if I had to go public and share that with millions then that's a price I am willing to pay for you. Plus your fans need to know you're off the market…..for good Mister Castle." She kisses his cheek.

He smiles in acceptance of that. There will be a deeper conversation at a later time but for now he is happy to let that rest.
"I still can't believe you let Lanie and the Boys move you into the Loft. More that you let Mother handle the interior decorating." She rolls her eyes at his implication but secretly there are a few things she's noticed that she'll discreetly change when the opportunity arises. Even better she'll discuss them with Rick, and they will make joint decisions about their home.

"Rick there was nowhere else I would rather be. My place was at your side supporting my partner. We're both lucky that we have such good family and friends to help us."

"What about all the drawers you wouldn't let me touch?"

"Lanie." She smirks. "Except one. That one is waiting for me to retrieve the contents." He nods in understanding and a smile comes to his face. He's looking forward to that.

"Okay. Now what about shoes?" Busted! He loves the deer-caught-in-headlights look Kate has. He does know her very well. Even better after today.

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**Home - Early evening.**

They had simply hung out during the course of the afternoon. Rick had nodded off a few times and he wouldn't be best pleased with one of Alexis' snaps of him drooling into the shoulder of a napping detective. Who probably wouldn't be equally pleased either?

No one was particularly hungry nor in the mood to cook so Alexis had ordered barbecued chicken and salad from a local deli. For Rick's benefit they had eaten at the dining table rather than the kitchen bench where casual meals were usually taken. Without any particular effort or observation they had slipped into the comfortable patter of a family dinner. No one remarked on it but they all felt it.

Now Rick was fading fast and with their light supper wrapped up, Martha and Alexis knew it was time to leave Kate and Rick alone. Martha had promptly retreated upstairs and Alexis said her goodbyes and rang down for Eduardo to call her a cab back to the Columbia Dorms before promising to return tomorrow for lunch.

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**Their Bedroom**

They're dressed for bed. Her in one of his baggy t-shirts and boy shorts and him in pyjama bottoms only – his shoulder and strapped up still made it difficult for clothing his upper body and Kate didn't mind having his naked torso to snuggle into. They had turned the heating up a little to compensate.

She missed this. Well except for the lion in the room. The large feline still stared back at her and she glowered right back at it, but that was a battle for another day.

He sat there propped up by an impressive collection of pillows including one of those curved pregnancy pillows for lower back support. She'd have to ask him about that one.

She can feel his eyes on her, and turns to look at him, their faces maybe a foot apart.

"Rick please don't look at me like that."

"Why?" *He sounds genuinely curious. "Why not?"

"Because I'm not that person you place on a pedestal. I'm just a girl who loves you."
"Yes you are but you are more than that. You are THE girl and so much more. You're everything for me Kate."

"Right back at you Rick."

She closed the distanced and kissed him properly. Her tongue pushing into his mouth and his answering back. It's so good, and she wishes it could be more but there's a lifetime for that so she settles for telling him simply how she feels.

"Welcome Home my Love."
Reverberations

Chapter Summary

Rick is home. Meanwhile Kate has surprised them all by fronting the press conference and moving into the Loft. Of course significant events like these aren't without their consequences.

Saturday Night 5.30 pm, Parish Family Resident, The Bronx

Lanie Parish has been with her family all day at her mother's command. It was so nearly, absolutely non-negotiable. A Parish family tradition where absence is barely tolerated and only if really and rarely justified. So here she was in her family home with her two aunts, one uncle, two sisters, one (of two – the other excused) brother(s), four nieces, and three-and-a-half nephews. Plus two brothers and one sister-in-law. Not forgetting her mom and pa. It made for a full house and as Kate once told her in a moment of all-encompassing honesty, something that took quite some getting used to.

Her phone was still off as it had been since she had got here at ten-thirty when her elder sister – evil incarnated 'Tish - had snatched it off her before holding down the power button had added it to the pile of phones and gaming devices. A day in the Parish residence was very analog.

Secretly she didn't mind too much. After her initial annoyance at going incommunicado, mainly at her sister, Lanie settled down to enjoy her time with her family. She did love them all especially her nieces and nephews, of course her elder sister and absent elder brother not so much. It was nice to be here ensconced in the warmth of family even if her mother was as ever yanking her chain about boyfriends. Of course boyfriends were only a means to an end - because you need one to get engaged, then married, before the grandchildren. Lanie didn't understand what all the fuss was. Her two sisters and two brothers were well on the way to populating the planet on their own.

"So still no boyfriend then Eli?" The hated diminutive from Letisha, her eldest sister. The troublemaker and twin of Leroy the equally annoying, but fortuitously absent, elder brother. Two years separated Lanie from the older pair but it was five from her to her other brother and almost seven to the last sister. She was the middle of the pack but wouldn't change that because her youngest siblings, Michael and Michelle worshipped her as she had been their friend and surrogate guardian for much of their lives, even now.

"Hush now kids. Supper time." Rescued by her pa, the perennial peacekeeper. She flashed a quick smile cum grimace of thanks that received a wink in response. Although the fiery ME was nothing like her calm, collected father in demeanour or temperament they had a good relationship perhaps because she was so like her mother.

After dinner, sorry supper, was finished Lanie joined her family in the parlour as her mother liked to call the massive living room with enough space and seats for all. Another tradition. They would watch the family game shows and then the local news. Only then were other distractions allowed, unless a family conference was required but there wasn't one of those today thank God.

Lanie barely paid attention to the game show and was still focused elsewhere playing with two of her nieces when the news started up. She missed the lead-in until a certain name triggered an
immediate interest and reaction.

"Shhhhush please!"

'Still top local news today. Author Richard Castle is released from hospital nine days after almost dying in a shootout where he saved the lives of three NYPD officers. But the biggest surprise of the day was when the author's girlfriend, NYPD Detective Kate Beckett, addressed the press on the family's behalf. Here's what she had to say.'

"Shut the Front Door!" whistles from her lips she hopes low-key but obviously not quiet enough for her mom.

"Elaine!"

"Shhhh Mama. I need to hear this." Said in such a tone, even her mother was momentarily compliant and hushed.

Lanie watched and listened totally wrapped up in her best friend's entirely unexpected appearance in front of the camera and microphones at the news conference. On the surface it looked like a calm collected speech from a veteran public speaker but she knew better. She knew Kate Beckett better. The little inflections, the slight nervous tic with her hand brushing her hair, the eyes hard as steel, not because she was emotionless but the very opposite. The Beckett way – lock everything in and show no weakness. Except the words, the language wasn't classic Beckett. This was new Beckett.

"You go girl!" Lanie sat back in amazement.

"Elaine?"

"Yes Mama?"

"That was Katherine?" Kate had been one of the few college friends Lanie had brought home, certainly none of the boyfriends – oh imagine the chaos if she had brought Phil 'No Philter' here? She had brought Javi once. He had passed muster especially with her pa but things were complicated even back then.

"Yes Mama that was Kate Beckett." For those last two years of college and for a little while after Kate would come home with her and sit in the corner of any room and watch the chaos of the Parish family whirl around her. Lanie had never told her mother, or indeed her family about the Kate's tragic life, but somehow her mother had picked up on it and never said anything directly to the fragile and withdraw girl. More importantly for the first time in her life Lanie had watched in silent awe as her mother subtly and cautiously gently mothered Kate Beckett. Nothing was ever said but Lanie was forever thankful for her mother's instinct and low-key compassion.

Rising from her seat she strode to the bowl containing the phones, and ignoring the protests against breaking tradition, she retrieved her cell. Exiting the room she headed for the kitchen. First she sent a couple of messages and then called Kate's cell. There was no response to anything and the call went straight to voice mail. Hardly surprising. She checked her incoming messages but there was nothing of note.

"Elaine?" Her mother had followed her in but not to protest about breaking house rules.

"She looked different."

"She is different Mama. So much happier. In love. Scared for her man."
"Did you know?"

At her daughter's silence her mother continued.

"You never told me about them actually getting together." A gentle admonishment. Not because of the gossip, or celebrity factor but because for half-a-decade Katherine Beckett would on occasion be a wallflower in their home taking gentle comfort from a family life not her own. Then after another half-decade of barely discussing her best friend at home, a few years ago she had once again started to mention Kate with regularity. She would regale her mother with the tales of Detective Kate Beckett and Richard Castle and their unlikely partnership and completely unnecessarily complicated relationship, the teasing, and unresolved attraction.

"Not my secret to tell Mama." Lanie seeks the words to explain.

"Sorry. She is a private person and we all wanted to protect her." Her mother nods in acceptance. She understands that perhaps best of all of them.

"So this is?"

"Oh Mama, IT. It for them. It's the forever kind. They're so in love. There will be a wedding and babies. A fairy tale, complete with dragons slain and a happy ending."

And she's crying. In happiness for her friend, and in part for the frustrations of her own life.

"Oh Baby, come here." And with that she was wrapped in the comfort of her mother's embrace. And she thinks again on how Kate didn't have that except through surrogates. First her Mama, and now Martha.

"Someday. You're too good a person to miss out." Her Mama whispers in her ear and she nods into her mother's shoulder. Then raising her head she steps back, gently breaking the embrace.

"Will you see them soon?"

"Tomorrow for lunch."

"Please tell her how happy I am for her."

"Of course Mama."

"Maybe once her man is well enough, she could come for tea? Bring him too?" This is nothing to do with her mama wanting a public figure in her house but everything about family.

Wheels and Heels, 7 pm-ish.

Seasonally clad in Khaki denim jeans, and heavy checked shirt, Josh watched his date walk towards him through the small clusters of customers in the bar. She had dropped off her outer jacket at the coat racks by the door and she's dressed for indoors. Tight black jeans, a dark grey t-shirt, tight too, a classic Levi's denim jacket. His sister's friend and college buddy. Beatrice Dove – Call me Beatrice or 'Buzz'. Call me 'Bgee' or 'Bea' and I'll break something. She was mid-thirties (he wasn't comfortable asking exactly how old, yet. Maybe never.), five eight, dirty blonde, with long-ish legs, and an athletic build.

She had tattoos somewhere – not tasteless his sister had said - and not visible as far as Josh can tell. He's not seen them yet but he had given her more than the once over but then again it is hardly the
season for exposed flesh. The thought of tattoo’s triggered another memory for him. Kate Beckett, long limbs, and having to hunt down the subtle but profound ink adorning her flesh. *Shake it off Josh. She's well and truly spoken for now. Always was.*

He had met Beatrice up at the toll turn pike and they had been for a ride out of the city earlier in the day once what was left of the fading autumn sun had teased any ice from the roads. She on her Ninja 650 with her riding gear of black and red two-tone to match the bike. And she could certainly throw it around despite the inclement weather. Well it was November but no real ice thank God. He had to work and sweat to keep up today, not to mention the odd heart-in-mouth, pucker moment. The ride had made him grateful that he had sold his Harley – a decision taken after the breakup with Kate and with him deciding to head overseas. Eight months ago whilst back for a break he had on the spur of the moment purchased a second hand 2011 Yamaha R1 off a colleague. All white it clashed with his all black gear but he had come to like and respect the machine. Certainly far more agile than his previous bike.

After dashing home to drop the bike and shower, they've agreed to meet up in this mid-town biker's haunt without their bikes or leathers.

Catching sight of him, she smiles and heads his way.

"Hi Beatrice."

"Hello Josh." A nice open smile accompanies the greeting. "Buy a girl a drink? Vodka and lime please." She's direct and to the point. His sister had warned him of this. He doesn't mind it. It might be nice to not have to second guess and delve for answers, especially for questions he has no clue about.

As he turns his head to the bar and look for service, he catches sight of the TV set on the local news

'Still top local news today. Author Richard Castle is released from hospital nine days after almost dying in a shootout. His girlfriend, Detective Kate Beckett addressed the press on the family's behalf. Here's what she had to say.' Then he's lost for the near three minutes it takes her to talk and then not.

*There is no escape from her. Even once she had left hospital.*

"Hey Josh. Josh!" Beatrice's voice intrudes into his haze followed by a less-than-gentle tap to his shoulder.

"Hey remember me, your date for tonight?"

"Oh crap. God sorry Beatrice."

"Okay" As he shakes it off, another question.

"You look like you know her?" Direct again.

"Know her? I dated her for almost a year." *Crap no filter. This will be short.*

"Fuck!" Sorry, that's just so….Wow!" *Okay so maybe she's not running. Straight-away. She appears curious.*

"You could say that."
"Serious?"

"I thought so. I was even….. but doesn't matter, I couldn't compete with HIM." The last spits from his mouth as he glances back at the screen and a smiling visage of the author.

"Oh shit!" She cups his head and brings he face back round to hers. "Look, are you on shift or call tomorrow?"

"No?" There is a question in his answer.

"Excellent!"

"Why?"

"I'm getting you drunk Mister!"

"Look Beatrice. I'm not looking for a pity fuck or to just fuck it better."

"I like you Josh but not that much yet. This is a first date and rules apply. And I don't do either of those latter except for very good friends. You're nowhere near that yet. "

"I'm more than happy to help a good guy like you put an ex-someone behind them by getting drunk together. But sex, fucking, whatever you want to label it. Not happening."

"Okay." He has no issue with that really.

"One question?" She's not even waiting for a response from him.

"Were you good together?"

"I thought so. I had commitments and she did too. Missed a lot of opportunities but I think even then she was part way or more in love with him most of that time. She's stubborn so changing her mind isn't an option. Well it wasn't for me. I tried to ignore it, or at least him. I mean at least I was the one in her bed. But I think it was mutual delusion." He shrugs, strangely content with sharing the précis of his time with Kate Beckett. It didn't seem quite so painful or even pathetic.

"Hmm." Her eyes sparkle with understanding but she won't let him get morose. "So you broke up. Her choice obviously. But kind of a shame if you ask me." Her eyes twinkle mischievously

"Yeah it was." Before his mind actually catches up. "What? Why?"

"She's very hot." There was an almost wistful tone to her voice and then "I bet she was good." It wasn't a question.

"What?!" He looks lost again.

"Shit Josh, I roomed with your sister for a year at college. You should have some clue."

"Oh." The look on his face was priceless Beatrice thought. His sister definitely was right about him being the smartest dumb guy in the room more often than not.

"Damn you're definitely out of the game today. I'm glad it didn't affect your riding." The 'or you'd be wrapped round something solid and immobile' is left unsaid.

"But you're here?" There is so much more in the question. She decides she'll address some of it.
"I'm mainly boys now, and I'm pretty much exclusive unless the decision is entirely mutual. I've had a few threesomes and a handful of more-somes. Generally worked out well. But enough of that. Maybe you'll learn more later."

"Have you ever done a Jager bomb?" Rapid change of subject before she suddenly finds herself discussing favourite positions or some other such stuff that she is not actually shy about but isn't first date material especially with a handsome dude with a mending broken heart.

"God no! That stuff is disgusting." Oh as she suspected. Bit of a whimp. She loved that term and it wasn't always a bad thing with boys or men.

"You haven't live and almost died until you have Buster. This round's on me." There's no escape.

"Hey Barkeep! Two JB's with beer and can you change the channel to the Ice Hockey?" A demand like this would normally be shot down but she flashes a winsome smile and the channel changes in short order. No one in the bar complains. Maybe they've all had their fill of fairy tales today.

"Oh God, I'm going to die." Josh protests one last time.

"No, but it may well feel like it tomorrow." She reassures him.

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**New York Ledger Website – Main Page**

*Richard Castle leaves hospital.*

There was a big surprise at today's press conference at New York's Bellevue Hospital to coincide with the release of Richard Castle from hospital when Detective Kate Beckett stepped in front of the microphones to confirm in no uncertain terms that she was in love with the author.

The Detective – currently on approved leave from the NYPD – has previously maintained a low profile during her romantic relationship with Rick Castle. Not today when she was front and centre in as the key speaker at the press conference.

Sources close to the author confirm that this is indeed the real deal as they say. Indeed the same sources have revealed that the relationship was kept so quiet that even they were unaware of the changed nature of the partnership until very recently.

What has been apparent over the last five years is that the perennial bachelor and good-time boy has reformed himself. Since ending his relationship with ex-wife Gina Cowell, the previously anonymity adverse author has largely stayed out of the limelight except for book launches and smaller books tours and signings along with appropriate publicity events. One of the noticeable changes since 2011 was that he no longer signed body parts. It is clear now that Kate Beckett has perhaps both directly and indirectly has been responsible for these changes.

For full details and the press release from Richard Castle Enterprises go here.

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**Celebrity 'Facts' Website.**

*Naughty Nikki?*

*Is Rick Castle off the menu for good, or is Nikki's heat only temporary?*

Despite knowing each other for almost five years they pair claim they only hooked up six months
ago. But how serious is the relationship? Their claims of exclusivity and commitment may not stack up.

Despite this apparent long term partnership and infatuation with celebrity author and Master of the Macabre Rick Castle, Detective Beckett has dated at least two other men during their time together. One was another detective at the same precinct and the other eminent cardiologist Doctor Joshua Davidson. Kate Beckett and the surgeon were in a relationship that spanned almost a year and only ended after Detective Beckett was shot at the funeral of her Captain, Roy Montgomery. Ironically she only survived largely due to her then boyfriend's expertise as a cardiac surgeon. Not that this weighed heavily on her conscience as she dumped him before she had even left hospital.

Prior to meeting Richard Castle, Kate Beckett was rumoured to have been involved in an unprofessional and prohibited relationship with her training officer – Michael Royce. Detective Royce retired from the NYPD not long after Beckett's training completed apparently leaving the young rookie devastated. This wasn't the end of their story as the pair met up again three years ago when Beckett arrested and charged Royce over his involvement in missing treasure trove. Pleading guilty he served time in New York state prison and on release moved to Los Angeles as his New York private investigator's license had been permanent revoked due to his criminal record. This didn't stop his run of bad luck and criminal involvement as he was killed in a street execution by arms dealer Russell Ganz when he returned to New York in 2011.

Detective Beckett served a two week suspension for disciplinary breaches in May of this year and is now on extended unpaid leave from the NYPD. NYPD regulations forbid relationships between partners and team mates and yet here is Detective Beckett flouting the rules once again.

Gates Residence, Sunday morning.

Dropping the Sunday edition of the New York Ledger down on the breakfast table, she shakes her head gently.

Front page, Page three and not forgetting Page six of course.

Oh well so much for the NYPD's publicity management plan for Richard Castle and Kate Beckett. Of course she had expected the author to the one to push too far and break things wide open.

Not his confident but publicity adverse partner. Not Detective Kate Beckett. When she had a moment she would ask Beckett to explain. As her captain of course. As a woman she knew exactly why Kate Beckett had gone public. She couldn't officially condone it, but she did understand it.

She feels hands encircle her waist.

"Hey DM."

"How you know it was me?"

"My other guy doesn't grab me there."

"Really?!!" A pause then "So where does he grab you?"

"Oh I think you may know that."

"How about I try and find out?"
"Not now. Maybe later."

"Hmmm. Okay. Now I see our lovebirds completely failed the low-key press management."

"Certainly did."

"What does it mean for them?"

"I don't know. Nothing official from the NYPD so long as it doesn't breach the guidelines, including the new ones specially created for them." Her husband can hear the irritation in his wife's tone but sensibly chooses to let the matter drop. After all it is Sunday and they are home alone. What's a man to do?

**Senator William Bracken's Office, Washington DC.**

He muted the incessant talking heads but left the TV screen on. One of the benefits of the Capitol was being able to have all his 'local' channels available on demand.

He pursed his lips and sat down again. Coffee forgotten on the desk.

His sources had informed him months ago that Detective Beckett and that writer were together so that wasn't news. However, Kate Beckett's appearance in front of the cameras for her to confirm the relationship was an interesting development for the publicity shy woman.

More surprising was the subtext in her statement. Her message to him was unambiguous. Leave us along and we'll leave it alone. The deal was in place. He had no option but to comply for the moment.

He hated sharing or worse ceding control to others. The feeling was too close to powerless and he couldn't abide that. He couldn't move against them until he was certain the documents were a bluff and nothing more.

And yet it wasn't the only issue he was facing.

The National Committee was making anxious noises about his potential candidacy not least because of his unmarried status.

What did they want him to do? Take a trophy wife and parade her around to prove his heterosexuality. That would never work. He simply wasn't interested in sex. He hadn't been for so many years with few exceptions and those were catered for discreetly.

He could still remember the abject misery and humiliation. He had been so desperate to fit in at the school where the family name carried history and weight. Yet their sudden family decline was such that only a scholarship in recognition of the legacy the school owed the Bracken family enabled him to attend and continue the family tradition at that same institution.

Despite his nerves, he settled in to the academic routine. Weekdays were fine as his intellectual prowess and work ethic were above average and his athletic ability was sound enough that he wasn't picked upon there. However, weekends were different. No longer confined to the boundaries of the school, his family's newfound lack of money had become patently obvious and deficient to his peers. Yet unlike other scholarship boys his family name attracted attention and additional pressure to participate and perform. He had tried desperately to fit in and fulfil expectations of the Bracken name but whilst desperately short of cash.
So when they arranged for the prostitute as a gift to take his cherry on his birthday he had complied thinking it only natural just as other boys had boasted of in tales told the dorms. Of course he had gone in expecting one thing only to have the roles reversed.

After agonizing for days he had gone to his father who listened without judgement and had arranged the clean-up. Despite their relative penury the name and ties still had more than enough influence. The photographs were recovered and destroyed, mouths silenced and matter swept away never to be mentioned again. Except that whilst his father never commented on it, without further discussion the mantle of the Bracken legacy had been passed to his younger brother who was sent to a different school and took the assured a route to Wall Street with wealth, success, a trophy wife and children to continue the Bracken name.

It had taken him a number of years to craft his own revenge but over those years he had taken great pleasure in tearing down and destroying those who had participated in his humiliation. Of course many of his peers were powerful people in their own right and he had limited himself to non-lethal outcomes but the results and satisfaction derived was still sufficiently sweet to assuage some of that pain. It became known the William Bracken was not someone to be crossed.

He watched the news conference again, and pursued his lips as the image replayed the detective as she strode away from the lectern. He admired her form. Detective Kate Beckett was undoubtedly an attractive female but her tall lean physique and small breasts reminded him of the transsexual whore he had been entrapped with. The one who had taken his cherry but not how the sixteen year-old had ever expected, and begun the bitter path that led him to here.

Naturally the whore had been the exception to his non-physical retribution and the death was attributed by the police to a not unfamiliar overdose. Whilst it had gone undetected by the authorities the upshot had been to set in motion the terrible chain of events that eventually resulted in more deaths including Detective Beckett's mother and colleagues. Worse it had left him exposed and in debt to certain individuals who had strategically called upon his services from time-to-time over the years.

The relationship with those individuals and shadows in his nature and past would not survive the infinitely closer inspection should he become advance much further his party's consideration as a candidate. So he was working diligently to eliminate not only Kate Beckett and Richard Castle but also those he viewed as his deluded puppet masters. He simply needed more time. Something he was running out of as the pace of the pre-election campaign began to build. Then he would show them all, his family included, who had the right to the Bracken name and legacy. Just who had the power. Nothing else mattered just as it had every day since his sixteenth birthday.

An Internet Café somewhere in New Jersey.

The place was full of migrants skype-ing home or somewhere. He didn't care which. He wouldn't be here long enough to leave enough of a trace to trip any NSA monitor thresholds. All he needed was the anonymity of an IP address range shared by hundreds if not thousands of devices a week.

He turned on the tablet and waited for it to complete the start-up routine. Logging on through the haptic ID check, he entered the café passcode (paid for in cash) and when connected he activated his background emulation client which fired up a familiar assortment of innocuous web traffic to make him look like any other net citizen.

Once he was certain nothing had probed back he activated his message client – hand crafted from open source code – and logged on with today's pre-agreed ID.
Almost instantly the message arrived.

'Client impatient. Results expected. Confidence high?'

'As good as if I pulled the trigger myself.' He was supremely confident with all the parameters under his direct control, the others well they would require patience but he had faith in the other parties' dogmatic adherence to protocol. Something the client appeared to be wanting.

'When?'

'Patience' but he paused before sending and added 'please.' and pressed send.

'By the deadline.' He could read the missing ultimatum and threat that should have hung off the end of the terse sentence.

'One week.' He was pretty certain that events were in motion and his target was blissfully unaware of the finite nature of their current existence.

'Agreed.'

With that he shut down his bespoke messaging client and waited for his emulation package to complete its routine. He then disconnected from the café's Internet and then selected the wipe tablet command and placed the tablet back in his messenger bag confident that by the time he had walked the two blocks to the bus terminus the tablet would be back to manufacturer defaults.

**Attorney General's Office, Washington DC.**

"McCord in here please." The professionally attired woman rose from the desk and pulled her blazer on over the white dress shirt and strode into her superior's office. Mid-forties with mid-length dark hair tied back her face echoed too many years of long hours and harsh lessons of reality. Of the battle between dark and light but rarely ever with any result other than grey.

"Sir?"

"We have a blip I want followed up. Priority case and I want this compartmentalized with absolute discretion."

"What is it?"

"Politics." It was pretty much all politics. "One of the potential candidates. A background financial records check hit something that triggered this time."

"Didn't we do one of those two months ago?"

"We did. Found nothing."

"As a precaution we do additional passes as the candidates' progress through the party selection process." She didn't care.

"Where am I going?"

"New York." He pauses and looks at her. "Don't you want to know who?"

"Does it matter?"
"Senator William Bracken of New York."

"Isn't he a favourite with the moderates in his party?" McCord frowns.

"Probably seen as too moderate by some, but up until now his biggest issue was most likely the lack of a wife. Not that should matter to us."

"Doesn't matter to me." She stops for a second and then continues. "Wasn't he one of the targets of that bombing campaign just a month or two back?" McCord racks her mind.

"Yes. Still no real information on why he was targeted along with others. Possibly his background in the New York DA's office. He made quite a few enemies during his stint there. Some of the major crime families."

"Whilst you're there you'll coördinate with Special Agent in Charge Will Sorenson of the FBI. He led one of the bombing task force teams in conjunction with DHS and already has the baseline background info you need. He's based out of DC at the moment but not presently assigned to a specific task force. Let me know if you need him kept that way for the moment, or whether he can be released.

"What's his clearance?"

"Same as always."

"Oh, suck 'em dry and tell them nothing?" It's not really a question.

"Yeah. Why did you even ask?"

"Not sure. Just sometimes I wonder if we need all these secrets and rivalries. Same side and all that."

"Above our pay grade McCord." She nodded but didn't say anything. It was pointless. She had been here long enough to accept it with only the odd minor grumble like now.

"Your flight is seven thirty tomorrow. Sorenson is booked for the seat next to you on the flight. You can liaise directly with the forensic accounts people back here. Keep the FBI out of the loop for the bank stuff. All the information including the trigger points are in the file. There is a name for a bank representative in there. You have an appointment for two o'clock Monday afternoon in their Manhattan offices. Don't take Sorensen there."

"Any local involvement?" It was pointless as there almost never was except when they stepped on toes to take over a case but she wanted to ask.

"None. Stay away from NYPD and if you do need anything go via Stack. He's got a team on the ground at the moment for something else. Otherwise Sorenson might be good for it. He was New York based and has contacts in the NYPD as well. If you need to co-opt him in let me know. Our boss dislikes the moaning phone calls regarding our appropriation of someone else's assets without time to prepare."

"Fine." There is no dismissal but McCord knows when her boss is done.

Striding back to her desk, she decides to catch up on the New York status report. Previously technology-sceptic, McCord cannot deny the power of the data aggregation services that trawl through multiple federal, state, and local databases and then sort the information into topical streams highlighted by relevance onto her computer screen or secure tablet.
She starts with the top level view and see nothing new there. No specific alerts. Crime stats all nominal. Tracking metrics for an ongoing multi-agency investigation into an arms smuggling ring linked to the National Guard. There was a status update on the celebrity civilian consultant who got himself shot a week or two back. She shook her head. Stupid tag along playing cop. Just the sort of thing she detested. *Leave it to the professionals why don't ya.*

Then she blinked. Tagged next to it was an intelligence report from Taylor Matthews apparently related to the shooting and an associated case on the West Coast. Interest suddenly piqued she selects the report and reviews the summary. Despite her bias against outsiders she has to concede that Taylor Matthews are consummate professionals and come closest to deserving their derived federal authority.

It takes five minutes and she is done. The report concludes that the immediate threat has passed and security was being ramped back to normal levels. She blinked again. 'Normal levels'? There is more than meets the eye with Richard Castle and Taylor Matthews. Unwritten inside the report is the implication that some form of higher body may have been behind the events but with no evidence this was purely supposition, one the author didn't even write into the report.

Deciding to ignore the nagging question in her head, she pulls up the mission files and focuses on her next subject. Senator William Bracken of New York. Let's see what secrets you're hiding then.
Heartfelt

Chapter Summary

Rick is finally home and he and Kate have spent the first night in the Loft as a couple with Kate having officially moved in whilst Rick was still in hospital.

Their Loft, Sunday morning, (too) early.

They both slept surprisingly well during the night and despite the early hour things were….well…

Perfect.

This had to be the best way to wake up. Just the two of them. They're almost spooned together but their legs are in opposite directions, almost driving their torso's together, with her back nestling into his front.

Rick was lying there immobile on his left side, his right arm still strapped up and the connected bandaged right shoulder out of the covers. Silent too. He'd normally fail spectacularly at not speaking but instead he's, well, as silent as he can be. She knows he's awake despite the early hour. But she understands. The sort of injuries, hospital schedules, all do that to you. First not enough sleep, then what seems like perma-sleep as your body recovers before too much, and then you find yourself awake at odd times and it takes an eternity to re-establish familiar sleep patterns, if you ever go back to them.

"Not so creepy sometimes Mister Castle". She has her back to him, but she still knows when his gaze is on her. She can sense it, almost feel it, the near palpable sensation of his adoration and devotion. She never wants it to stop. It warms her through and sometimes – well often more - heated and urgent, but for now it was so nearly, utterly perfect. This is a familiar conversation they repeat often but neither would change it, and she's sure they'll happily repeat it for the rest of their lives.

"Always beautiful though. No one could blame me for staring." His voice hitches slightly before he continues hoarser and gentler if that is possible. "Not that it would ever stop me. I could lose my sight and I'd stare at you to the end of time Katherine Beckett."

She had to swiftly rotate and as she completed her realignment to bring herself face-to-face with him, she stole his lips from him least any more words escape them and he make her cry already. His right hand, still somewhat inhibited by the strapping on his shoulder cautiously starts to dance on her and she responds to his touch.

"Hhhmmmmmm" she hums into his receding mouth as they complete the kiss.

"Oh I've missed this." His voice ripples against her, the emotions pluck at her heart and keep her close. She loves him for so many reasons, but his childish delight at even the most mundane or regular things they do is one that never ceases to surprise. It should irritate and annoy more often but instead it ties her in knots of giddy necessity even with the simplest kiss.

"Me too." She affirms.
She kisses him again for good measure before she speaks.

"We need to talk."

Fortunately he is still slightly sleep befuddled and doesn't process those words with his usual efficiency. Before he can respond to that quartet of doom she is reaching for him.

"God. Sorry about that. The worst four words for any relationship." She strokes face and makes sure he can see her eyes and her smile, slightly forced by the sudden urgency. Curiosity stares back.

"A good talk Rick. It's gonna be a good talk." A nod and a visible relaxation of the suddenly tight face opposite.

"Yes we have things to discuss. But only about us moving forward with our relationship."

He finally speaks.

"Thank God Beckett! You nearly fucking killed me there!" For the urban and loquacious author the use of such earthy profanity clearly indicated his shock and temporary unease.

"Sorry." She breathed her apology into his mouth and reinforced with her lips.

"You could apologise some more."

She huffs. But kisses him anyway.

"I like this apologising. Perhaps I'll be bad. Oh even better, you can be bad, no make that naughty Beckett. Then we can apologise together."

Innuendo leeches from every word and with anyone else she'd be rolling her eyes and making a sarcastic putdown, hell with him most of the time it would be that too with him. Instead she laughs but still breaks free of the embrace.

"So before we talk did you want anything?" She asks as she rises from the bed, covers dropping away from her with same silent grace as her effortless ascendency.

"Some water please. And I'll just go ummm…." He starts to rise too as Kate quickly assesses that he can manage by himself and she turns for the door.

She pads away returning less than two minutes later to find him relieved, and now propped up in bed waiting.

She halts by the doorway. There is something about entering a room with Rick inside. The sensation is almost encompassing – a curious mix of comfortable and challenging, so soothing and yet stimulating, all her senses alive with possibilities and potential for them. In turn he's watching her unashamedly like she's making the most important entrance in a movie scene, not just returning from their kitchen with two bottles of water. Mind you her synapses tingle at the pure domesticity of the task, and their shared lives becoming even more closely entwined, the conclusion inevitable.

Unconsciously she does the thing with her lip, curling the lower beneath her teeth and running the edge of her upper bit across the kiss swollen surface like a caress.

Just as she completes the automatic trait she notices that Rick appears to have once more lost his voice and is frozen opposite her. Then he shakes it off but not without first running his eyes across
the simple cotton robe she has thrown on over her leggings and sleep shirt until her reaches her face and the smile that grows and spreads across his cheeks and fills his eyes with cerulean intensity.

Finally getting her legs to cooperate she crosses the space to him and proffers a bottle to him which he simply places on his bedside table unopened for the moment.

"Kate?" She sits on the bed, on his left side close enough to touch but not yet.

"What did you want to discuss? Tell me? Please?" His anxiety levels are growing so she launches right into it.

"I think I'll hate dealing with the press and especially the paparazzi until my dying day. I'm a private person Rick. That hasn't changed."

"But?"

"I want to show, sorry prove, that I am in this every bit as much as you. Partners and so much more.

"Paula had warned me that the press coverage would change, become less sympathetic and more challenging. So I didn't want them to question us. Or at least not without a personal statement of our own. I know you would have the words to express what we are but you weren't available. So as you partner I did it for us.

"I am marrying you one day soon and fully intend to be together for the longest time, so it comes with the territory. In short it is a price I have to pay to be with you Rick and I'll pay it – not always happily but willingly – until our dying day. I've made plenty of mistakes in the past and put myself ahead of you, of us. No more. We're together, a unit, partners in everything. So I have to stop being selfish, scared."

"So…." Rick begins but he almost bites down to halt the rest of the question.

"Is that all?" He finishes almost lamely. It is not the phrasing she expected even if the question is. She smiles slyly. She's not giving it to him easily and makes him work for it.

"Wouldn't happen to have anything to do with making sure other women knew a certain ruggedly handsome mystery author was off the market?" She loves how he can read her. She knows she is getting better at reading him. How they just resonate off each other. He's trying to lighten the moment but then it isn't.

"Permanently?" Rick finishes the question with another and fuck it she wishes there wasn't the slightest trace uncertainly within it. It shouldn't be a question at all, just a statement of irrevocable fact.

"Maybe. Maybe not." She kisses him again and then closes in on him and leans into his ear, her warm breath ghosting across his skin even if she can't quite wipe the sudden frown from her brow.

"Oh believe you me Richard Castle, you'll know firsthand when I choose to publicly mark my territory and make my claim properly." She lets her voice carry all the commitment that are missing from her words.

"I'm looking forward to it."
"Good because it won't be a one-time thing." She pulls back, just enough to look him directly into
his eyes and opens hers flooding them with everything she can muster, every ounce of the emotions
he evokes in her. "Rick, this is forever. I'll be doing this to my dying day."

"Extraordinary" The word is thick with every emotion she just pulled from him.

"I don't tell you enough how extraordinary you are. I've written the word in dedication to you, but
that's not enough, it will never be enough. I often bite down and hold back with you, afraid that
somehow I'll scare you, that I'll wake up and this has been some delusional dream and reality will
be a nightmare. I've loved you for so long but fought to hide least it fracture what lesser
relationship we had, that it is still almost second nature to not fully express myself, to tell you
openly and so frequently how my love for you has me captive, how the need to be in your life in
any way shape or form trumps everything else, even my foolish pride and ego.

"Please don't." She can't keep the tears from her voice. "I don't want you to hold back anymore
Rick. Don't hide from me. I'm in this now and" She hunts around in her mind for the right words.
"I have been for some time so the yesterdays, today, tomorrow, every day of our lives together
Rick. I'm yours."

"Oh God YES."

It is some time before they speak again.

"Rick, I know I've not been an easy person to well, everything really.

"And I've made it harder for you than anyone. Even now, part of me still doesn't understand how
you stayed around. I think I understand the why now, but how you found the courage and
determination. I dated other men, had sex with them….."

Even saying that she burnt with the shame and guilt of her behaviour. Forcing herself to continue,
she picked up with barely a pause but one that Rick noted concern etched on his brow.

"When I was more than attracted to you, and I knew, or at the very least strong suspected you felt
the same or much more. Some police officer I am. We're supposed to be upholders of the truth and
integrity. Instead I was lying to everyone myself included. So how?" she doesn't need to finish the
question.

"I didn't. At least not at first. That second summer. Going to the Hamptons. Gina." It's all too hard,
even though they've talked through this, the words stutter out of him, the sentences barely formed.

"I couldn't take seeing you with someone else even when, or perhaps because, they all turned out to
be nice guys, even Tom. So I ran and hid. Then I came back and we sort of fell back into a familiar
but new rhythm. Then you started dating Josh, or at least showed us you were together. I had no
excuses, I was still hiding away with Gina, refusing once again to acknowledge all the attraction
but more importantly the faults, desperate to paper over but not truly fix the fractures that kept us
together but apart.

"But I couldn't stay away even through Josh. But I did still run again from time to time. Not every
writing binge or book tour was necessary from a business perspective." Her eyes go wide at that,
and he knows she'll chastise herself just a little more unless he carries his fair share of their mutual
culpability.

"The guilt is not all on you Kate. Then you were single and so was I, but our mutual fear held us
back. Neither of us brave enough despite more brushes with death in banks, rivers and tigers. After
the bombing when I heard you in interrogation, I ran again. Of course it turns out that even then I can't run far enough from my hopeless love for you. It so much more extreme now.

"God Rick, we have a terrible propensity for hurting each other. Especially me."

"If there was anything to forgive, I have long since forgiven you Kate. I could never hold it against you. Nothing else persists against the flame of my love for you."

Wordlessly Kate has slipped back into him, her head nestled against his left shoulder, face turned into his neck. After what seems like minutes she speaks again.

"God. This wasn't how I meant this morning to go. I didn't expect it to be so confronting and unsettling. I had, have, serious things to discuss with you Rick but they've all got good outcomes for us. At least that was my intention."

"Kate, I believe you. I mean aside from those four little words of relationship doom you started with nothing has startled me. I think we both agree the conversation went places unexpected, but the very fact it did doesn't diminish what we have, even if it did touch on old hurts. Quite contrary the things we talked about are cathartic. At least I have to believe so. So why don't we settle for this being a heartfelt exchange of views?"

"I can do that." She reaches out to stroke his cheek. "But it does sound like code for an argument." She can almost anticipate his inquiry about make-up sex when he surprises her by skipping straight past it.

"Good. Now can you tell me how you pulled off this press conference? You've told me why."

"You forgot the bit where I left you speechless. She's obviously been speaking to Mother and Alexis. His grimace is not entirely play acting but pretty much especially if the woman beside him has that mile-wide luminous grin.

"That day at the hospital when Paula and Gina came to visit. Gina asked to speak to me. It was all very civil but I kept getting the vibe from everyone about how you changed for me, about how much you do for me, for us. Hell now even your ex-wife is explaining it to me. And the more I thought about it the more I knew it to be true.

"So after Gina and I finished speaking, when I went back I took the opportunity to speak to Paula. Ask her some questions. She had already had the heads up about the change of tone with some press coverage."

Rick nods at this, more intimately familiar with the pernicious whims of the press and their propensity to spin whatever storyline delivered the most money. Whilst in truth there hadn't been too many of his past female companions who had been put off by the prospect of press coverage, well disappointingly it had too often been the opposite, there had been the teacher, Tina, who he had dated for five months when Alexis was eight, who had almost literally bolted when the press found out.

"I didn't want them to take to control and spread lies about us Rick. The truth is all we need."

"Well consider me a fan."

"Hmmm? And what sort of fan are you?"

"The absolute best. Ruggedly handsome, dedicated, slightly creepy, committed."
"The last bit is definitely right. I do want the …" Suddenly she stops and the exclamation rips from her.

"Oh God Gates."

"Shit she's not going to be happy. Nor will the NYPD I think."

"Oh crap. Well what will be, will be. Do you think I'll be good as a sergeant in Traffic?"

"I think you'll make a very sexy Sergeant Meter Maid."

She hits him not so gently on his left shoulder.

"Careful you bully, that's my last good shoulder!"

"Well watch your comments Mister!"

He falls silent and she watches him, knowing he wants to say something but she can't bear the spaces between the frank comfort of their words this morning.

"Rick, all I want and all we deserve is honesty. Please just tell me what's going on up there."

The silence persists and Kate almost cannot bear it.

"It's not how I dreamed of it." When he speaks it almost startles her.

"God Kate, I wanted it to be special. Romantic. Unique and memorable, the sort for a lifetime."

There is another moment of hang time before he continues. "I had visions of us going public and breaking the news with an engagement announcement, well most of the time, sometimes it was our wedding announcement. Not a hospital statement."

"Oh Rick we will have those moments. It wasn't the start either of us wanted for a public life, but I have a lot of the responsibility for that because I wanted the privacy. But we can have more say and choice in the future. And there is a future for us. One and done remember?"

"I wish I was." She almost roughly pushes her right index finger onto his lips to hush him.

"You are my 'One' and so we're 'Done'. Nothing else matters, not our previous, only ours. Us" she corrects.

Removing her finger she reaches for his water bottle and opens it before passing it to him. Still slightly clumsy in his left hand he raises it to his mouth and drinks. As he finishes she takes the bottle from him, places it on the bedside table and then snuggles into his left side.

"So what else did you want to discuss?"

"Money." Well it is the day for surprises he surmises.

"I know I have been resisting discussing this in anything more than cursory detail except that night after Gates gave us the ultimatum. And I may have been a little…"

"Stubborn. Bloody-minded. Irrational." He supplies. Her eyebrow is so very archly twisted by the third adjective.

"Irrational?" she hisses. Oh steely detective demeanour.
"Well just a tiny bit." He's almost afraid to look but he is not beyond playing his trump card.

She reads his play before it is in motion and huffs in resignation and something else. So he freezes in the act of making his best sad puppy face.

"Don't do that please. It's not necessary. Just plain honesty this morning Rick. What did you call it? Heartfelt. I like that term. Everything we do, especially together, touches our hearts, and I wouldn't change that. Don't want to."

"Nor would I. So what did you want to cover regarding finances?"

"I want to work out how we merge our lives together and share. We only touched on that a few weeks ago. But also I would things to be organised so that I'm not left feeling financially insignificant or notably nothing at all like a kept woman. I want to contribute and…." Kate pauses and scrubs at her face in frustration.

"And after finding out about you financial empire, I really didn't have a clue how to go about that. I mean, I knew I was more than okay with you being wealthy, but until they told me I really didn't appreciate just how rich you are. God Rick you should be lying on a beach somewhere with a cold beer not getting shot at dilapidated tenement crime scenes. You probably don't ever need to work again in your life.

You know I write because I enjoy it, well actually I do it because I need it, just like I need my family, I need you. It's an intrinsic part of me Kate. Just as consulting is part of me now. It fulfils me. Plus I get to work with my friends.

"I understand that Rick. Even if we solved it, being a cop, a homicide detective is what I am. Not everything, you've taught me that, but still a major part of whom I am.

Kate paused for a second, her tongue briefly poking teasingly out the middle of her pursed lips in contrast to the thoughtful look on her face and then she continued.

"Before college my Mom always stressed the importance of self-reliance and independence regardless of my living situation. I didn't really understand at the time, and for years I thought that independence was paramount. I never really committed in my relationships and that included finances. Over the last five years I've really begun to understand what she was talking about and what those tenets really meant. I realise now that they are enablers to allow me to be" a slight hitch as she adjusts her sentence "so that I could be equal partners with someone. I know it took long enough but I'd like to think she'd be more than pleased at how it all has turned out."

"I'm sure she would be. I know you Dad is. I heard him talking to his sister about a month ago. God Kate, he sounded like me, I may have competition for the spot as your number one fan!"

"Aunt Theresa? Well who would have thought?" She shakes her head in surprise, although it shouldn't be so. After the very long and tortuous road to recovery her Dad has slowly rebuilt the trust and she knows about the wall in his den covered with pictures, certificates and especially more recently press cuttings. She knew he was proud of her, he told her enough but he clearly told others too.

"So that's what I want to do Rick. I do want to feel like I contribute to what we are going to be. It won't be on the same scale but I want it to be meaningful and significant. We partners and I want us to be equal as much as we can."

"I understand that. I do. And we've been struggling to work out how. But you're not exactly poor
Kate. The apartments, the art, the clothes. None of that is achievable solely on a public servant's salary. Don't think I haven't noticed."

"No you're right. It isn't." For some as yet unknown reason Kate had risen from the bed and she stands stretching her long limbs and lithe body her back turned towards him, her face hidden. For his part Rick remains fascinated in every aspect of her.

"I had a privileged childhood. My parents were both lawyers. Both had good jobs. They saved hard and invested wisely for the most part." She's still turned a little away from him and Rick suspects that will is about to follow is difficult for her.

"Mum had this plan she was always talking about. Retiring early and then travelling the world. She had a scrapbook full of pictures and notes about where she wanted to go. She was extremely driven about building her savings. Then when she died her instructions in her will converted those savings into two trust funds. One was for me and the other for Dad. 'Cause of the circumstances I had to manage both for a time. There was some life insurance as well but I needed to use that for Dad when he wasn't working.

"The trust funds helped keep us afloat especially when Dad wasn't able to. We sold the apartment, not so much because of the money but it was an issue too with neither of us working full time. Home had too many memories, too much confrontation for the comfort we could derive from the familiarity."

She feels his touch as he shuffles over on the bed, close enough to reach her with his left arm. He keeps coming and his feet touch the floor as he remains seated on the bed and Kate slowly sinks back onto the mattress her back still towards him and she lift her arms to welcome his around her. Feeling his broad arms secure her, she sinks slowly back testing his shoulder and when there is no protest or flinch she reverse snuggles him and then speaks again.

"When dad was drinking, the money kept roofs over our heads, put me through college although coming back to NYU from Stanford helped too." Rick suddenly has extra insight into the sacrifices and efforts Kate made as teenager and young woman – barely - to keep the shattered remnants of her family together and still complete college and the Academy.

"When Dad got sober he made me take the money. Well sign over acceptance to manage the second trust fund. We compromised, and so my apartment – and Dad's - were paid for by my mom.

"I spend my salary on living and well, those clothes and other things you noticed. They became my armour and my sanctuary when I needed to retreat. Your books included, and I may admit to the odd poster too. I also put some savings aside for my own travel plans."

*That's something new. Well two new things. He mentally bookmarks those items and thoughts for another time. Whilst his ego would love to crow about her collection of his work and especially the posters – he will have to ask Jim about those, it is the question of 'where in the world does Kate Beckett want to go explore?' that has him fascinated.*

"But I'd give it all back in an instant Castle." He knows what is on the edge of her lips and in her thoughts and he simply holds and exudes what comfort he can to her. Even now this most devastating of losses is still too sacred and personal to her for her to be able to share more than a fragment at a time, even with him. But he accepts that. He's spent years gradually discovering and gratefully receiving pieces of her life from her, and whilst he'd never have believed he would have the patience, he'll forever endeavour to unravel her mysteries together.

She's silent for a minute or two and he's still somewhat surprised at his own ability to respect that.
He's disappointed when she gently prises herself from his arms but she moves to sit by his left side on the edge of the bed with him, her right leg folded up on the mattress, her left on the floor so her body cants towards him. He adjusts his own position too so he can look at her.

"So with us moving in together and promising a shared future, I knew it was time to face up to other realities."

"After my shooting, Dad and I reworked all my legals and financials as I didn't want it to be a chore for anyone." He holds his tongue at that too. There is no point in reliving past decisions, especially events still so raw for both of them.

"With you in hospital and the full disclosure of your considerable assets" She frowns at him, challenging him to take the innuendo and respond but her eyes make a lie of the stern disposition "It was time for me to commit further. So I asked my Dad to help.

"But I wanted to surprise you so I have to admit that I got my Dad to, well basically, lie. He deliberately obfuscated about who instructed him to proceed with the financial negotiations."

She pauses if asking for his forgiveness.

"Um, I may have a little confession of my own Kate"

"Really?" Her eyebrow arches. She has a suspicion but she parks that thought. She needs to stop trying to anticipate him and give him every opportunity to communicate.

"Steve will have pretty much suspected it was a setup. But no doubt he will have played along if came very close the goals I had already set for the financials or he thought it was worth consideration."

Kate looks at him quizzically.

"So your guy knew that my guy – well my Dad but we'll go with my guy- was lying but he pretended to cooperate and act as if he didn't know what my guy was doing. Meanwhile my guy didn't know that your guy knew. But you also suspected this might happen and had prepared your guy?"

"Pretty much. Well except for the last bit. Honestly Kate, I had no idea you would do this. Especially given the last time we tried a serious and detailed discussion about money you slept at your place for two nights and banned me from the Precinct."

She has the decency to look a tiny bit embarrassed about her earlier blow up.

"Look Steve's no fool, and despite my reputation I take my business and financial matters seriously. And I employ very good people I trust. I let them get on with things and filter what they need to bring to my attention. So Steve must have known what was going on.

"So you're not angry at me?"

"Of course not, Sweetheart." Her eyebrow barely twitches at the endearment. "How could I be?"

"Castle, for years you've been taking care of me. Often whether I wanted it or not. So frequently there was no thanks or acknowledgement from me. That was rude and undeserved. I was bought up better and there is no excuse I know my mom would be so disappointed in me for that. Not just for the coffees and food, the non-dates, the Coonan money, the fund-raiser. I've got a lot to be thankful for. I know you don't want repayment for them, but I can at least be grateful.
"You were selfless in your endeavours to make it possible for us, long before I was ever willing to admit to the possibility of a future together. The financials is just one part of me being able to compromise to make our partnership work. It's gonna take time before I adjust fully but I'm in this. And not just for the money."

"Look we'll pick this up again next week. Have Steve and the others come over and work through the top level stuff."

"Sounds good." As she speaks there is a distinctly unladylike rumble from her stomach.

"Hungry Detective?"

"Not a Detective at the moment, remember?"

"Yeah, only temporarily though." His constant belief in her shines through.

"Agent?" He tries. She shakes her head. It doesn't fit right.

"Partner. I like Partner."

"Well how about some breakfast Partner?"

"Yes please Rick."

They've kept it simple. Rick's not up to one of his expansive multi-item feasts, and they're both aware of their afternoon lunch gathering so a modest repast should be more than enough to sustain them until then.

With the remnants of the toasted bagels pushed back, they sat side by side at the breakfast bar, nursing coffee, chatting about nothing in particular and steadfastly ignoring the editions of the Sunday papers resting at the far end of the bench. Martha must have been up earlier at some even though there is no sign of her now.

"Did you want to talk about anything else Partner?"

"Yeah." The way she says the one word speaks volumes for her uncertainty if not reluctance to raise this new issue.

"I think that my Dad is dating."

Rick is silent for some time before responding.

"Is that a bad thing?"

"Yes? No? I don't know."

"Do you know who?"

"A colleague from work. I think she is actually one of the partners. Valerie Wilson."

"Have you met her?"

"Once some years ago at a party to celebrate Dad's associate status and getting an office. She was married to one of the other partners then, but I think he died. There was a divorce too."
"Presumably before her previous husband died." He interjects.

"Don't be a smartass!" He doesn't look sorry about it.

"Kate, what are you going to do about it?"

"Wait for him to tell me I guess?"

"Did you want to talk about how you feel about it?"

"Not at the moment. I might ask him today. This might be something I need to work through with him Rick."

"That's fine. You know where I am if you need me."

"Thanks." She squeezes his hand.

"What was there anything else?"

"Moving in?" She ventures carefully.

"Hmmmmm, what about it?" He can be equally careful.

"Are you okay with it?"

"God YES!" He looks hard at her. "Why is that even a question?" He's surprised by the force of the demand behind his own counter question.

"I don't know. I mean I practically invited myself here." He's still surprised when the determined, certain and usually direct detective gives way to the tentative girl seeking well everything.

Rick takes a breath, and seems to steel himself and then he launches.

"Kate, I've wanted you to live with me, with us, for the rest of our lives, long before we were even a couple. After the Dunn blew up your apartment" And nearly you goes unsaid. "That time you spent with us was a window into our possibilities. It was one of the first times I really had to work at controlling myself."

At her enquiring look, he has to voice his denial. "God, not like that." At her frown. "Well maybe just the odd lascivious thought. But mostly it was entirely domestic.

"Since my teenage years I've always had a strong impulsive streak, I guess because I don't want to miss an opportunity. Of course it hadn't always ended well. A lot of the time." He self corrects.

"As I got older" she smirks at that, one of her teasing, tormenting, and challenging interplays of her tongue, teeth and lips capped off by the delicious sparkle of her tawny eyes. "As I matured" He may as well give her plenty of material, and he is rewarded with an outright guffaw and he can't but help the echo that appears from him.

"Anyway what I was trying to say, was that with you I changed my approach. Had to as it happens as you're not easy in anyway shape or form, but worth it." He's still holding and gently caressing her hand.

"But God it kills me those lost opportunities. If they were necessary to get us here, Kate I wouldn't undo them but dammit they hurt. But they imparted lessons along the way, forced me to be patient, to have faith. So for now Kate, I am perfectly happy for you to lead the way. I'll follow.
"I've got a better idea." She takes his other hand so they are holding both hands.

"Let's do it in-step, together."

"Sounds great. Any ideas what else we can do together?"

"How about I show you instead."

"Cool." She laughs at his childish enthusiasm and gently pulls him back towards the bed room and then down into the luxurious covers of their bed.

There was quite a small crowd of press outside the Loft this Sunday morning. There had been a handful yesterday but the new day had bought a growth in numbers. So one TV station and maybe half dozen photographers, all up a dozen or so.

The building management had called the NYPD who had dispatched a car but there was little the cops could do to interfere with the legal stalking, even of their own.

Kate and Rick had emerged from their bedroom sometime nearing ten after a somewhat languid and ultimately frustrating make-out cum snuggle and snooze session. He's not been cleared for 'coitus' as he had so petulantly named it when given the medical instruction, and for once Kate is taking medical advice to heart, probably because it is not directly aimed at her. Despite this they're both smiling and full of bonhomie.

Martha is sitting at the kitchen bench nursing what smells like herbal tea and observes the approach of her son and his girlfriend, holding hands and smiling.

"Good Morning you two! Don't you both look happy?" Their answering replies are lost as Martha plows on forward.

"How are you feeling Richard?"

"Quite good thank you Mother." She at least lets him answer this time.

"His shoulder hurts but the medication helps and he is at least cooperating." Informs his partner, perhaps less helpfully.

"Snitch!" His accusation is only meant for Kate but of course his mother's uncanny hearing is fully functional.

"Richard, Katherine is only looking out for you."

"Hummphh!"

"Katherine, I honestly did my best bringing him up but he still reverts when it suits him."

"It's quite alright Martha. I kinda like the boy-man side." Kate responds as she leans in to kiss him and muss his hair with her face.

"Well aren't you too full of the joys."

"We had a good talk this morning. Worked some more things out." She answers as she beams back at the woman who someday will be her mother-in-law.
"Well good because sometimes your father and I did truly despair for the two of you." At the sad shaking of both their heads, Martha swiftly changes the subject to the Sunday lunch.

Sometime after 11 am, Alexis sneaks in via the goods delivery entrance – apparently well versed in avoiding the paparazzi.

Despite the smiles and greetings all the adults pick up on her state of distraction but know better than to raise it directly and instead wait for the still teenager to tell them what was wrong.

For her part, Alexis throws herself into tidying and preparing the Loft for their afternoon visitors.

Unsurprisingly Paula is the first invitee to arrive. Apparently well used to navigating past the press she didn't even appear the slightest bit perturbed by it all. Echoes of her 'no comment' still hung in the cool November air outside the lobby as the doorman beckoned her inside whilst glaring at the unwelcome presence of the paparazzi.

The Loft, 11.48 am.

"Good morning Kate."

"Good morning Paula. Please come in." Kate greets their first arriving guest and if Paula is at all embarrassed by already being half-way into the Loft before being invited in she shows no sign of it.

"Excellent, just the person I wanted."

"Paula?" As Kate poses the question, the agent stops just inside the door still hidden away from the main part of the Loft and the rest of the family.

"Kate, before you take me through to Rick, I just want a moment of your time.

"We didn't really cover this earlier as we were focused on the press conference, but I need you to try and do this for yourself and your sanity."

"Do what Paula?"

"Don't read the press. Or the websites. Especially the fan sites. TV may not be too bad, yet."

"Alexis was trying to tell me the same thing yesterday before she left."

"Well she is a smart cookie."

"I think I understand why, but is there any specific reason?"

"Nothing especially, but let me tell you that even Rick with twenty years of experience struggles with handling the feedback and opinion of the media. Of course it's got worse with every idiot with an opinion having a mouthpiece on the Internet.

"Look, I'll brief you all inside in a minute, but I'm telling you as someone I respect that almost nothing good comes of supping at the well of public and press opinion.

"I'll bear that in mind. If it makes you feel any better we've been ignoring the papers this morning and haven't had the TV on or looked at the Internet."
"Excellent. Perhaps you could both enter a Trappist monastery. Maybe for a year or two until this dies down.

"I don't think so Paula. Anyway, I think you'll find that they are properly called the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance, and neither Rick nor I fit their candidate profile but especially him."

"Damn I have to remember you're a smart cookie too. No wonder you've got him." With her best New Jersey accent Rick's agent is grinning at her whilst making the unspoken implication about how many of his previous temporary companions weren't intellectually challenging.

"I do indeed, and I'm not letting go. So whatever we need to do to manage this…” Kate leaves the rest unspoken.

"Great, but we better go through before Rick gets paranoid."

The Loft, 12.25 pm.

Paula is finishing up the media briefing, and Kate is thoroughly impressed having never attended one before. It's just like an intelligence briefly but probably with more accurate information.

"Well opinion is divided on you Kate."

"The mainstream press are generally positive, if slightly cynical. They see the hand of professional spin behind everything. I have told them all that it was entirely your own statement but how much they choose to believe or more importantly report is down to them.

"That's the good news?!" interjects Kate. Paula nods.

"Yup. Now for the fan sites are split about fifty-fifty between you being the right person and the other side as some money and author grabbing gold-digger or worse. Much worse."

"The infotainment media are all in tizzy but will hopefully lose focus. It is the gossip and scandal rags I'm worried about. That article from the other day is just the first of many I'm afraid."

A general air of resignation meets the last statement.

"In a few weeks I will want to talk to you about some follow ups. Cosmo has expressed interest in doing an article on both of you. I guess you could call it a very belated follow up to the first article almost four years ago. The Post, Ledger, Book Review also. Plus a bunch who shall remain nameless for the moment. We'll play on your injuries and need to recuperate to delay things Rick, but I'm afraid that you and Kate will be back in the spotlight sometime. That is of course after we get you out of the spotlight first.

"Thank you Paula." This from both of them at once.

"They're so cute when they do that." Alexis smirks at both of them.

"You're most welcome to stay for lunch Paula." Insists Kate.

"No thanks. I need to miss at least one meal a day to retain my girlish figure, plus I don't want to intrude." Paula's tone makes that final.

"Please call me if there is anything you need. Oh and don't forget that modern digital cameras are
equally good at shooting high res video so don't assume that it will be still only. Video and audio can also be captured. Let's not make any more problems for ourselves."

"But I did need to ask you one final thing before I left."

She pauses for a second, an element of the dramatic in her presentation.

"Did you want to know about Meredith Lee?"

"Crap I completely forgot about Mom." This from Alexis. From the look on Rick and Kate's face so had they. Martha remained quiet too, suspiciously so given her normal inability to avoid having a dig at the so-called actress.

"Not a problem. Well at least she won't be, well not in New York at least. She was put on a plane back to LA yesterday afternoon, and should be back in the Bel-Air residence by now. She has strict instructions to maintain a low profile, and we have every confidence she will cooperate for now."

Mandarin Oriental. Yesterday 1.30 pm.

Paula Haas had quite enjoying the feeling of carefully veiled menace the two Taylor Matthews operatives exuded as they stood behind her outside the door of Meredith Lee's soon to be former hotel suite. She felt even better at the totally defeated look on her least favourite ex-Missus Castle's face when she opened the door to see the three stern faces implacably waiting for her.

Paula had decided to see Meredith off personally. She wasn't going to pass up the opportunity to given the selfish bitch the severe talking to that she deserved. Unfortunately the chastisement it also included a proposal for her to think on during the flight back to LA.

It was simple, and hopefully effective. Stay away from the press, don't visit New York without clearance, and she could remain in the Bel-Air house and maybe they'll sort out her contract with her agent and get her back into work so long as she is not a source of future aggravation. It was more than she deserved but Martha had been adamant. Richard did not do grudges of this nature, so petty revenge was off the agenda plus this could be much more effective at keeping her out the picture in the long term.

She had to credit the Taylor Matthew team whose faces didn't crack an iota during her virtual monolog, well diatribe was much more precise, at the so-called actress during the journey from Manhattan to JFK. Meredith had barely said a word except to acknowledge the conditions collectively imposed by Richard Castle Enterprises, Taylor Matthews, the DEA, and Martha Rodgers.

They had arranged for the airport VIP service to escort Meredith straight to the plane and into her seat. A final touch had been to flag her as 'no alcohol' and Paula had been sure it was worth the cost of a first class seat to ensure that Meredith exited New York without so much as a single acknowledgement from anyone except her escort party.

Paula had then updated Clare Dunne, the lovely operative from Taylor Matthews had declined to attend saying she wasn't required to convey the appropriate message. Plus she may be tempted to shoot Meredith, which would of course be counter-productive. But she had provided Paula's two stern faced enforcers.

All-in-all a much more satisfactory conclusion to the event than could well have been foreseen some time ago.
No sooner had Paula departed than Esposito had arrived with Jim Beckett tagging along after sharing the elevator having met in the lobby. Both looked slightly perturbed by their experience of running the press gauntlet outside the building. Of course Esposito looked like he wanted to punch someone, and Jim Beckett just looked, mildly put-out. Of course Kate Beckett could read her father, and she didn't envy whoever upset her Dad next.

He was followed shortly after by the Ryans and then Lanie Parish. For Jenny Ryan this was her first time at the Loft and it in effect became a double-whammy for Jenny as it was also the first time she had visited Kate Beckett's new shared home with her boyfriend and partner, and his family. Of course this is that first time for all of Kate's extended family too.

Kate and Alexis have given the Jenny and Lanie, ever curious, the nickel tour, although the young woman had bailed out after showing most of the upstairs. Jenny had been thoughtfully polite throughout the tour, and Kate knows it is part because of the discrepancy between what public servants can afford and a wealthy writer and to be fair the Loft and its furnishings are more about comfort than ostentation, but even so she can still remember her first visits here, and how overwhelming it could have been if it wasn't for the open, natural hospitality of the Castles.

Lanie has been nearly silent, so far from her usual upbeat authority and it put Kate off. She was determined to find out what is going on with her suddenly taciturn best friend.

As they entered Rick's office both had taken a few moments to take it all in.

"So this is where the magic happens?" Asked Jenny.

"No that's next door" quoted Lanie who was at least aware of the Loft's layout based on previous full-disclosure conversation with Kate. Kate laughed, relieved that her friend wasn't totally out of it.

With all their guests here, Martha rang through to the same local deli they used last night, to request their lunch order.

Whilst waiting for the food the boys kept their audience amused as they recounted the return visit of Serena Kaye to the Twelfth.

"Ohh Man, we missed that!" confirmed the disappointment of one Richard Castle.

"Yeah well I don't need her attempting to acquire anything of mine." Oh jealous Beckett bears a long, long memory. It's strange how he remembers that the insurance investigator was the second last woman who wasn't Kate that he deliberately kissed. The other was Jacinta the so clearly uncomplicated airline stewardess. Christine Coterra so obviously doesn't count his mind supplies.

He was distracted from that suddenly divergent thought by the Boys passing on Serena's message verbatim which resulted in multiple affirmations from the rest of the crowd. Even Jim Beckett.

As glasses were clinked, Rick suddenly pulled Kate Beckett into him and kissed her to within an inch of what was acceptable with company present.

"Rick! Not that I don't appreciate it, but what was that for?" Kate's mouth is close to his ear so he can safely assume the conversation is just for them despite their audience.

"Just reminding myself, us, that you are the only woman for me, and have been for a long time."

"Oh." Despite the single word he understands that she gets it.
"Good." Then after a second "Right back at ya."

Meanwhile Ryan has continued and picked up the story again. He is now getting the stink-eye from Espo as he recounts his partner's apparent flirting and infatuation with the blonde. The general laughter in the room has one silent spot at a certain glaring medical examiner who doesn't smile until Ryan reveals how lured Demming up from Robbery and threw him to the blonder man-eater.

Even Lanie joins in as they all laugh with Demming's uncertain fate still to be confirmed. There may well be some money riding on the outcome.

Lanie is still not impressed and after a quick silent exchange with Rick, Kate rises to takes her best friend to one side for a private chat in the bedroom.

Un fortunately for Kate, Lanie Parish is channelling 'Detective Kate Beckett the Denial Version' and after several minutes of fruitless attempts to get a meaningful response, Kate knows when to admit defeat.

Shaking her head but otherwise maintaining her own council she watches her friend return through Rick's office to the main living area. She suspects this is how they viewed her nascent relationship with Rick over the years, and her own countless acts of wilful self-deceit.

However before Kate can follow Lanie out there is a knock at the door frame and her Dad is waiting for his own private word.

Thrown by his sudden appearance Kate completely forgets her original game plan and simply asks her dad outright why he wasn't answering his home phone and by implication where he was yesterday morning.

He goes beet red.

Oh.

Before anyone else can notice she pulls him fully into Rick's office and then through into the bedroom.

Jim's eyes are wide open. He's never been in here. But his daughter doesn't give him time to sightsee. Simply glaring at him in question.

"I'm dating Valerie Wilson." Jim Beckett goes for the band aid approach.

"Oh." *Is that a disappointed 'oh', or a surprised 'oh' he wonders?*

Katie has obviously has some prior suspicion hence her not-so-gentle probing.

She is waiting for him, her carefully neutral detective's face on.

"She's the first since...." – he pauses suddenly aware of how that sounds. Even to him, let alone to his detective daughter.

For her part Kate blushes. Oh much more information than she wanted even if she suspects that wasn't actually the intent of the words.

"No! Not that! There's been…" He's redder than her now. "Oh God why is this so difficult?!" he exclaims.
"Val. She's the first woman I've wanted to date properly since you mother." Better.

"Why?" She can't help the question but she did at least keep the accusation and jealousy – she's jealous on her dead mother's behalf? - out of her voice.

"We make each other happy and a wise person recently reminded me that we only get one chance at life. So I decided to stop wondering what if and concentrate on being happy."

"Okay." It is much more tentative than Kate wanted her voice to sound.

"Can you be happy for me Katie?"

"Yes." More definite. She takes a second before continuing. "Look I can do that Dad. It's taken me a long time to get to where I am now. Finally happy again. You deserve the same. It would hypocritical of me to be otherwise. But it is a shock, sorry a surprise." She corrects herself a little late but her Dad seems to let that pass.

"She'll never replace Jo, you do know that? Val said she just wants to share a place in my heart." The fact her Dad is smiling like some love struck teenager shocks her. She knows that look. She still catches it on Castle's face when he thinks she isn't looking. She's pretty sure it's on her face a lot of the time too when she is unguarded.

She can't keep the amazement out of her face. She hasn't seen this person for so long. The taciturn lawyer with serious demeanour and straightest of faces is grinning stupidly back at her.

"Okay. I think I can be okay with this Dad. More than okay if you give me a little time to adjust."

"Katie, that's more than I deserve. Thank you."

"No Dad, you deserve to be happy. I want you to be happy. I think she would too."

"I hope so too. I think about her every day. Every morning when I wake my first thought is often of her. Even now."

"I think that it is good that you have found someone Dad."

"Eventually would you like to meet her?"

"Of course. But in your own time Dad. At a pace you are comfortable with."

"Thanks Katie."

"Just promise me one thing Dad?"

"Sure?"

"Keep the embarrassing stuff private. No traumatising the kids."

"You mean like you and Rick do to Martha and Alexis?" And me goes unsaid.

"Dad!"

"Well they tell me things."

"Oh God, I'm officially mortified."
"Good. One of the last remaining satisfactions for a parent as they age is to continue to embarrass their children. I'm not giving that up even if I am dating."

"Dad!"

And then everything was alright again.

Lunch is extremely casual with some sat at the dining table, some the kitchen bench, and plenty of roaming between the two by most of the group. There is much chair hopping and side conversations spring up and die down as the Moussaka, salads and Turkish bread and dips are consumed.

**The Loft, 3.05 pm.**

Rick is flagging and all their family and friends notice. He of course is adamant that it is fine and they can stay even if he is passed out on the couch. Despite his assertion things begin to wrap up. Esposito looks to be the first of the guests to depart as he takes his dessert dishes to the kitchen and then returns to the living space.

"Hey, I need to be going. Thanks for lunch Castle" and then suddenly remembering the new domestic arrangements for the pair, he thanks the co-host. "You too Beckett. Of course."

"So Esposito where you off to? Got a hot date?" When tired Rick's often ineffective filter is pretty much completely absent.

Stunned silence hangs in the room and the man himself looks trapped. Rick's unthinking tease is obviously right on the money.

"Men!" Lanie can't help herself. Of well, that confirms that the self-same 'hot date' isn't with a certain medical examiner.

In the awkward silence that follows Esposito's wordless plea for brotherly support is not returned by any of the men in the room.

"Bro?" Ryan's eventual response is low key and accompanied by a shake of his head. The disappointment conveyed in the single syllable clear to all in the room.

"You're so whipped." Esposito's response of disappointment at the lack of brotherly backup from his partner should sting but the accusation is taken with mere acceptance by the happily married detective.

Esposito looks towards Rick who is even faster and more certain in his denial.

"Oh No, count me firmly in the moving towards, if not already entirely in the whipped basket."

Rick is rewarded with an arms round the neck hug and kiss on his cheek from his partner.

In his desperation, Espo looks at Jim.

The lawyer gazes back and then shrugs before speaking.

"Sorry Javier, I guess you'll have to count me out too."

Martha and Alexis perk up at this and Lanie shifts in her seat leaning forward. Kate sometimes
wishes her friends and near family weren't quite so fascinated in all aspects of her life.

But they'll get no more from her Dad and she's relieved both for herself and him.

The Ryans make their excuses not long after. Suspicion falls on their plans to start a family and Kate has heard more than whispers from Lanie regarding somewhat overzealous planning and practicals on the part of the couple, especially Kevin Ryan.

Taking the opportunity Kate and Lanie persuade Alexis to take them up to her room and once there pretty much demand the details of what is bothering her.

It turns out that Alexis is perfectly happy to talk about it so long as it doesn't get back to her father which both agree to, subject to the usual conditions.

It transpires that Max has been seeing another girl at college. They weren't exclusive but Alexis had assumed. As a result Alexis was very much of the opinion that men, no make that boys were asses! A conclusion that Lanie Parish was fairly in favour of.

"I like Max a lot, but it isn't, sorry make that wasn't love. I'm more annoyed, angry even that I have been played for a fool. Taken advantage of.

"What are you going to do about it?" This from Kate.

"Talk to him. Be honest. If he doesn't want exclusive then I need to walk away. I'm not comfortable with sharing, especially if we're intimate. Not just because of the risks."

Kate is proud of the teenager and she can tell Lanie is too. At least this has somewhat distracted Lanie from the issues with Esposito.

"Please don't tell Dad."

"Of course. So long as you stay safe and happy Alexis."

"Thank you both."

Lanie had left not long after and offered her former intern a lift back to the Columbia dorms which Alexis had gratefully accepted. Kate suspected some more frank advice on men would be offered on the way.

Martha has vanished to her room and before retiring has informed them she would be going out and not to wait up.

The remainder of the afternoon had vanished in a nap for both of them, followed by the limited clean up following lunch, a few TV shows and a movie in the background before they both admitted they were already tired enough for bed by 9 pm.

"Another early night." Kate mutters.

"Yeah but not taking proper advantage."

"Don't pout. You know the doctor said no elevated heart rate for at least another week to ten days."

"Yet somehow that doesn't include physio sessions."
"That's because you are being professionally monitored and observed."

"Now there's an idea."

"Oh No! That's a big 'Uh Uh' Richard Castle! There is no way I've having sex with you whilst you are being monitored. You want to fly solo then knock yourself out. You want me involved then it's strictly between the two of us Buster!' She glares at him but then relents a little. "Look it's only a week and a bit. It won't seem like that long."

"But it's already been more than a week and a bit. And it does seem like a long time already. It will the longest since we've been together. I miss you."

"Damn man thinking with your appendage."

"I happen to know you like my appendage."

"Maybe I do. Perhaps more than the rest." She teases and kisses his cheek. "Later." She pushes herself closer to him. "I miss you too."

"Yes Dear." He's learning when to admit defeat.

"Can we at least cuddle?" Or at least adjust his expectations.
Monday on the Mind.

Chapter Summary

Rick is home and after celebrating with his family, he can begin the long road to recovery. Now if only there weren't interruptions and complications.

Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport, 5.39 am, Monday

If the severe business suit and tight hair didn't give her away, the stern demeanour and cold eyes could on their own even before he can eyeball the distinctive bulge of a pistol on her hip hidden under, or rather covered by the jacket. She was waiting just a little way back from the gate, close enough to observe everything but far enough distance to maintain separation and privacy from the other regular passengers. There was a medium size business case and compact roller case at her feet.

"Will Sorenson." He didn't bother with his title. The AG's team didn't use them and had little respect or care for other people's. He dropped his backpack down at his feet. Just small enough to meet the ever stringent airline regulations (although he could use the badge if he needed to) and give him enough essentials for a week if required. Somehow he didn't expect it to last that long.

"Rachael McCord. But I guess you already knew that." She offers a steady hand which he takes and shakes.

"Yep." They join the tail of the queue and proceed through boarding with no further speaking except out of politeness to the staff.

It is still early so the flight is only half-full and they are situated away from any other passengers, one of the advantages of a centralised booking process for federal government travellers and airlines block reserving seats. Of course it also helps they're going against the tide, flying to New York when most of the travel on a Monday is bringing workers to DC for the week.

In deference to the sensibilities of the crew and passengers they keep their jackets on despite the warm air being pumped into the cabin. It is a short haul to New York so it won't be an issue but freaking out passengers with a display of their weapons could be.

"So what is this?" Sorenson ventures keeping the volume low so that McCord can hear but beyond their immediate seats the words would be lost in the background noise that is the environment of a jet plane cabin. Even so McCord seems to think on matters before responding. Is it the discussion outside of a secure environment, or the subject, or both.

"Follow up to the New York bombing case. We picked up some new information and want to run it by you and see if it tails with anything from your case. The AG doesn't like that the suspect behind it was never identified and arrested."

"So are you going to share your new information?"

"Afraid not. Need to know at this time." Despite the passage of years, he wishes he could roll his eyes just like a certain NYPD detective he once knew. Something he had learnt first-hand what
seems like a lifetime ago. He clamps down on the thought, hyper aware that the no-nonsense agent beside him wouldn't appreciate it if she caught him day dreaming.

"Jesus McCord, and people call the FBI supercilious. Your team gives us all a bad reputation for high handedness and makes getting cooperation with the locals problematic at best." He didn't mean to be so blunt but this is not the first time he has worked with the Attorney General's special investigation team – which so isn't their actual name - and he's been treated like a puppy before. His direct dig elicits only a flat business-like response.

"Good thing we don't need any then."

Will Sorenson doesn't say anything more as he passes McCord the first file and she dips her head in acknowledgement before starting to read.

It was Monday, the plane hadn't even left the gate. It could be a long couple of days.

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The Loft, 6.17 am.

Kate padded around the kitchen area comfortable in her acquired t-shirt and leggings. She had collected the morning paper from the doorstep but it lay quarantined at one end of the breakfast bar. Rick was still in bed and still asleep thank God. It had been a disturbed night with Rick having at least two episodes of bad dreams, the second of which left him sobbing in her chest. Fortunately he had slept since then his body and mind exhausted. Sometimes his writer's mind was a curse.

She was having a simple breakfast of yogurt and fruit along with tea. She needed Rick to run through the coffee maker a couple more times before she was confident enough that the quality would be worth the effort. She didn't mind it too much, and secretly she thought that maybe a little bit of practise at being coffee or at least caffeine free might be beneficial for some time later – at a least a few years, a ring and a wedding later. But anything more detailed beyond that particular thought was staying locked away for another time and place.

She was enjoying having the place and the space to herself. It was a peaceful contrast with none of the usual bustle and energy that usually passed for life in the Loft. Shaking her head at her good fortune to have a man who offered her everything she could possibly desire (and then some) she once more attacked her breakfast bowl. Another benefit of a no Rick repast was a lighter healthier breakfast. Perhaps she could ease him into at least varying his breakfast diet from the onslaught of carbs and bacon, although she would concede – if pressed – that his bacon was pretty damn good. Dammit that wasn't the image she was expecting to come into her mind.

Martha hadn't come back from her late night social, but Kate found a message on Rick's cell – she had cracked his security code and hadn't yet told him - from Martha stating she was staying overnight with friends, and would be back by early afternoon. Kate appreciated the tactful move by Martha. Rick was expecting the physio to turn up this morning and run through his training program as well as another actual rehab session.

It was bound to be somewhat confronting and Rick was already having difficulty coping. The exercises pushed well beyond comfortable and given the duration usually taxed endurance as well. Hers had. Rick had promised to try and share with her but had drawn the line at his mother and daughter being in proximity. She respected that as did both of his red heads. Hopefully this phase wouldn't last too long but she would be patient and let Rick find his way with her providing the support she had so wrongly denied him the opportunity to provide eighteen months ago.
She had cleared the dishes and tidied the kitchen. Without even checking she knew Rick would sleep a little longer. Despite retiring early both had read and chatted and then talked for an hour and a bit before Rick slipped away drooling only ever so slightly. Even when uninjured Rick could sleep way past her normal hours.

She felt the need to be busy.

To be honest it was one of the last things about them, or rather herself, that worried her. She was always busy with something to occupy her. He was too but he was different and that posed a question that probably could only be answered by actual experience.

She knew there would be moments, or actually hour's possibly even days, in the weeks and months ahead when there wouldn't be a lot or anything specific to do. Kate Beckett didn't do idle well. She could relax and unwind just as easily as the next person, or nearly if she was honest with herself, but that was recuperation after exertion or concentration preferably both.

Entering his office she moves over the hidden cupboard shelving concealed behind the floor to ceiling abstract image that was just a door width wide. The size of a small walk-in robe, the light came on automatically as the painting swung away from the wall revealing a veritable Aladdin's cave of well, mostly junk. Golf clubs, light sabers (mostly broken or at least well used), real swords (she could actually hear Rick's imagined protest at the label of real) and fencing gear, more than one life size Richard Castle cardboard figure leaning into a Derrick Storm figure and worse, her book-sake (was that even a word?) Nikki Heat as ever packing heat sans cloths but only in silhouette thank God.

Reaching up the top shelf on the right she retrieved the black plastic case lurking in the shadows. There wasn't room in the office safe for pistol case provided to her by Taylor Matthews. So the case was here without the lethal contents stored away in his safe.

Exiting the concealed cupboard she moved to the other wall, placing the box on his desk as she passed, she uncovered his safe, and punched the code in. She retrieved the Sig 229, and the five loaded magazines before returning to sit at his desk.

From the bottom draw she retrieved a roll-out plastic mat which she placed over the padded writing surface, and from the pistol box she retrieved the cleaning kit and gun cloth.

His laptop was open with the PDF manual already on the correct page. Looking at the instructions she checked to satisfy herself there was nothing radically different from the other pistols she had broken down and cleaned over the years. She was relieved to see that it was pretty much identical to the Sig 226 she had first used in the NYPD, even sharing the same instruction manual.

Picking up the Sig she hefted the weight, her fingers curling on the grip and her right index nestling on the trigger guard. Of course without a load magazine the weapon felt both too light and unbalanced. She would have to wait until she was on a range to see what it was really like.

Like all good pistol shooters she had the weapon pointed down in a safe direction even though the magazine was ejected and the pistol unloaded. She pulled the slide all the way back to the stop and engaged the slide catch lever locking the slide in the open position.

Again she performed a visual check to confirm that there wasn't a round in the chamber or the magazine well before placing the pistol right-side briefly down on the cloth.

Pushing the takedown lever to the six o’ clock position she once again picked the gun up and retracted the slide slightly to disengage the slide catch lever and then allowed the slide to move
forward in a controlled fashion and smoothly took the complete slide assembly forward and off the frame. Carefully placing the pistol down on the cloth, she rotated the slide assembly in her hand so she could easily push the recoil spring guide forward slightly and lift to remove the recoil spring and guide from the slide. From there all that remained was to remove the barrel from the slide by pulling upward slightly and to the rear.

This level of disassembly would be sufficient to allow a thorough cleaning after shooting, but of course she hadn't actually shot the pistol yet so it didn't really need cleaning. Nevertheless she inspected the parts carefully. Took the lightly oiled cloth and wiped down the necessary parts carefully assessing with a practised eye and steady rhythm.

These were all familiar and practised moves performed with a simple confidence that spoke of years' of experience.

Growing up she had not had much experience of firearms, certainly never expected to have a career where she carried a gun. Her Dad kept a BB gun and a shotgun at the cabin, and Kate had plinked away at bottles and cans during the summers with the former, only rarely permitted as she got older to use the more powerful shotgun. He had owned a .38 Smith and Wesson revolver for many years and that one summer when she was sixteen he had let her fire off some rounds from it whilst at the cabin but otherwise she had no real experience or familiarity of handguns until she had picked the Glock 17 for the first time at the Academy. Her expertise and accuracy hadn't come easily, and were the result of frequent, sometimes near-excessive repetition and her single minded drive to be the best. The same drive that took her from the bottom fifth percentile on her first assessment at the Academy to the top fifth by the end.

She would need to ask Rick where this other safe was in the Loft. The one mentioned by Tim Matthews. The one that had counterparts at Castle's other residences. Another thing she needed to discuss with Rick. And his team.

As she contemplated that she had completed her automatic re-assembly of the pistol, and started to pack everything away.

Noises from the room next to her announced the rise of Rick Castle. The man definitely wasn't built for stealth, but she had other uses for him that seemed to fit perfectly with his body. Smiling as much for herself as to herself, she efficiently returned the Sig and magazines to the safe, then quickly put the pistol case away in the hidden cupboard and closed it before doing a little sneaking of her own.

"BOOO!"

"AGRGGH!"

She's laughing. Not too hard, not condescending or mocking, but with him or rather because of him. Her laughter, her lighter soul is because of him.

"Fuck Beckett, what you trying to do?" Still laughing especially as in his surprise his usually exact speech stutters, discarding words.

"Big Baby, can I make it up to you?" Teasing a little now.

She laughs into his mouth.

"Meanie!" sneaks out somehow between their lips.
"What's the matter Castle, don't you like surprises?"

She shushes him up properly before moving back when oxygen depletion demanded.

"Good morning."

Richard Castle Enterprises, 8.45 am

"Harry!"

Harry Dove turned at the familiar voice calling his name. Sure enough dressed in business attire was his younger sister. Despite her professional qualifications it was always somewhat of unsettling to see Beatrice in the very clothes she spent her teenage years railing against.

"Hey Sis. How's things."

"I have a problem."

Well that wasn't like the usually totally put-together sibling who had flown the nest at the earliest opportunity.

"Sure come into my office."

No sooner had the door closed than she was unloading.

"Your remember Charlotte?"

"Your hot lesbian roomie from college." He wonders where this is going."

"Yes that Charlotte."

"Well she set me up for a date with her doctor brother." Oh not where he expected.

"And what's so bad about that? From memory he's the one you momentarily considered going straight for when you were in full girl-only mode in college."

"Um yeah, that was him. She's being trying to set us up for years."

"So that's it went okay?" At the look on her face and her animated presence. "Or was it a disaster?"

"Oh it was a good first date. He rides as well." Bike skills were an important criteria for her. She scrubbed her hands through her hair. "Not important."

"Bea?" Only he can get away with calling her that.

"Anyway, you remember Charlotte's surname?"

"Davidson isn't it?"

"Yeah well his name is Joshua Davidson. Josh for short."

"That name's familiar."

"Damn straight it should be."

"Oh fuck – Josh Davidson, former boyfriend of Kate Beckett? The 'Doctor Motorcycle Boy'!?!"
"Yeah I …. wait what was that last thing you called him?"

'Doctor Motorcycle Boy'. It's what Rick called him. I think a few of the other cops did too."

"Kinda fits him." Beatrice finally drops into a chair, although her legs are still moving with nervous energy.

"So what's the problem? Did you want Kate Beckett's permission or something? I'm sure Rick wouldn't mind anyway. Nor would Kate Beckett I'm sure."

"He doesn't know."

"Know what?"

"That my brother works for Richard Castle."

"Oh the Doctor. Guess Richard Castle could possibly be a bit of a sore point for him. Wait does he even know you have a brother?"

"Probably not, and he may well have trouble remembering pretty much anything I told him on Saturday."

"Did you?"

"Shut up. I'm still following the rules. Look I got him drunk when it came out he was previously dating the woman who is now your bosses' girlfriend. Which I only learnt via his reaction to a news bulletin featuring your bosses' girlfriend. Obviously it's something he's not completely over yet."

"So what's the problem aside from him maybe needing some help to forget an ex?"

"I like him."

"Oh I could see how that potentially could be a problem. I take it the sister doesn't know either?"

"God, I hope not. At least I think she doesn't. She knows you're in business administration and that's that. I mean we don't really talk about you. It's not like you ever got along that well."

"Hey I'm easy to know. But I'm not her type. Or any of Lottie's Lesbians to be honest."

"True that. God I forgot about that name."

"Liar! You loved that name originally."

"I did but it wore off, like a few other things. So what do I do Harry?"

"Tell him the truth. That's normally your style anyway."

Her phone pings. "Crap! I need to go. Due in the office for a meeting about an audit."

Well don't be late. Don't want you giving all us CPA's a bad reputation.

"Bite me!"

"I'll pass. Plus I haven't bitten you since I was eleven."

"Yeah and you still owe me for not telling Mom."
As she opens the door to leave his office, he calls out.

"Hey Bea, let me know how it goes."

"Will do Big Brother. Wish me luck." With that she strode out of the office with a swing coming back into her step.

The Loft, 11.44 am.

After the physio session, Rick had wanted to curl up in his bedroom and scream into his pillows. But instead had to face the additional humiliation of having a training plan created. In hindsight they should have done this first.

The assessment from the trainer had been brutally frank. Rick had asked him not to hold back or sugar coat anything. Kate had tried to suggest a less directly truthful assessment if only because when she had insisted on her own version of the same, it had almost totally broken her and set her recovery back a week or more as she spiralled in despair and desolation when hit with the true extent of her own injuries and the journey back.

His lack of core strength was not critical but his general fitness levels, especially aerobic were well down from desirable. He needed to lose weight. His back muscles especially were in poor shape, not aided by the weight he had put on in the last five years. His injuries from the shooting added new dimensions with his ribs still recovering, shortness of breath and extremely limited movement in his right shoulder and arm. All would be worked on over the next several months, but the trainer had made it clear that it was a process that needed to be followed.

Kate hadn't cared about his weight when they had finally crossed the line, she loved the man, all of him. Anyway it wasn't like he was flabby, more just comfortably padded in places. He was still an extremely capable lover and when you added in their emotional connection, sex between them surpassed anything both had previously experienced.

She had listened intently, firing a few questions of her own, and all the time, an idea forming in her head. She would need to speak to Martha and possibly Alexis but maybe Rick's extended rehabilitation program may not be quite so arduous to endure.

A Federal Building, New York

It's a secure room. Well more like a secure air tight box Will Sorenson judges.

He looks up from the printed bank records in front of him. McCord's solo trip to the New York Banking Commission had yielded a bunch of paper (copies) and electronic records. She had passed the latter onto some technicians back in DC and now she and him were trawling through the paper versions.

He was still surprised to have been given anything to do. It was certainly a step up from his previous experience with them. The AG's special team were not renowned for sharing, diplomacy or any of the other niceties required to coexist in the bureaucrats' nirvana that law enforcement in the United States had become. He didn't know whether to be grateful or suspicious. He settled for both.

Tracing his finger along an entry he frowns at the name before him.

"Orantis Solutions?" he ventures
"What about them?"

"They're a small PMC with good connections in DC. It's about the fourth time I've found them in the banking records. They're a private…"

"It's alright Sorenson I know what a PMC is."

Sorenson ignored her and continued. "What I found interesting is that they have Senator William Bracken as a shareholder. Now Bracken has absolutely no military background whatsoever. His only credentials are that he's a Republican. Which doesn't make him unique but private military contractors normally like the military connection to make traversing the Pentagon corridors easier." McCord frowned still not seeing the connection but then as Sorenson was operating in the dark she could hardly blame him.

"During the recent bombing cases we recommended the potential victims increase their security. We even provided recommendations to them. Bracken rejected our suggestion – Taylor Matthews – out of hand, and bought in a team from Orantis."

"I know of Taylor Matthews, we work them on occasion. Slightly prissy and by the book. But very good."

Sorenson laughed.

"You know I'm FBI. Prissy and by-the-book is in our credo."

"I never noticed." Drawled McCord. He actually smiled at that. Maybe McCord wasn't all piss and vinegar.

"Anyway whilst there was no potential breach of conflict laws as the Senator was paying for it all himself, I still find it strange."

"How so? You investigated the security and didn't find anything pertinent to the bombings."

McCord is curious.

"Orantis mainly operates overseas. Most PMC's do. They don't usually do domestic work, and they had to call in favours to get some of their team weapons permits for New York and DC. Taylor Matthews and one other firm had teams ready to go. Yet Bracken and at least one other potential target chose Orantis and had to wait for their designated guards to be legally armed.

"Maybe they were 'illegally' armed in the meantime." Sorenson flinches at McCord's dismissal of the possible violation. In his mind too many of his fellow citizens were allowed to legally, or without legal repercussion jaunt around with guns for no real good reason. Often with more firepower than law enforcement agencies. He'd been on the receiving end a couple of times during his career.

"Hardly incriminating on its own. Anything else?" McCord snaps but doesn't shut down the discussion entirely yet.

"Well Orantis Solutions is clean so far as the company goes from what we can tell. However, going back over the last twelve months two of their former employees have turned up as dead suspects in possibly inter-connected crimes in New York but not related to the bombings as far as I know. However, the cases did involve the murders and attempted murder of serving and former members of the NYPD."

"I'm listening."
"I don't have anything else immediately to hand as the details are fairly sparse. The NYPD investigations were thorough but the dead operators were largely ghosts. Even the names were inventions. Lockwood, and Maddox. We now know Maddox was actually Cedric Marks, a former Green Beret with an extensive black ops record. Neither of the two were employed by Orantis at the time, and we couldn't connect their accomplices who were mostly more ghosts or low totem muscle."

"I don't see the connection." McCord is blanking him. So he makes one last effort to engage her interest.

"I know the lead homicide detective whose team covered the cases. In fact it her Captain was one of the fatalities and she was shot – but survived - at his funeral."

"I remember the events but Sorenson remember this is strictly no local involvement. And for the record, we're not looking into Orantis Solutions today. So let's leave the reunions for another time and get through this."

Shaking his head, Sorenson backs off. "Okay, but you can't tell me that this doesn't concern Senator William Bracken of New York. Potential GOP candidate for the next presidential campaign in 2015."

It wasn't a question and McCord didn't answer.

Will wonders whether he should call Kate Beckett. It's been three years, and he hasn't held any hope of rekindling their fractured personal relationship since that last reunion after events from a witness protection mission left him hospitalised. Even more so now that she is confirmed as actually dating Richard Castle. He wonders what took her all those years to resolve with the author, especially as she had every book of his, autographs, posters, even membership of his fan club. Obviously a lot more of a story than the Nikki Heat novels actually told.

"Sorenson you planning on finishing this tonight?" McCord interrupts his thoughts.

"Shaking his head he digs back in. Any idea of calling some old acquaintances and catching up over a beer long disappearing. Perhaps tomorrow. Monday was a wash out.

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The Loft, early evening

Martha has answered the door in a flourish and swish of colour that would make Joseph proud if not in desperate need of sunglasses.

"Well Doctor Parish please do come in."

There is even a mini-curtsey cum bow in the routine.

"Good Evening Martha."

Lanie had met up with the grand dame sufficiently frequently to adjust to her use of formal titles or full Christian names although her diplomacy skills, not to mention eyeballs, are somewhat taxed by Martha's attire this evening.

"Hey Lanie." Kate greets her friend from the couch as Lanie enters the living area still gently shaking her head from the antics at the door.

"Hi" A quick scan of the room and then "Where's Rick?"
"Napping. Physio really took it out of him. It's his second one of the afternoon."

"Oh. How's doing?"

"Better. Frustrated. The whole shoulder thing is going to take months to come good. He's banned from using his right hand or arm for more than quick tasks for at least the next three to five weeks. So writing or especially typing is out the window."

"Ouch! He's gonna drive you crazy."

"I might do the same to him. We're going to be together a hell of a lot of the time for the next few months. I'm looking forward to it, but I can't help myself.....if it doesn't concern me a little. What if we do drive each other crazy? The bad kind?"

Oh phish you two will be fine. Look Kate I really came to apologise for yesterday." Kate's remains silent waiting for Lanie to continue.

"I don't know what happened between us. Actually I do. The first time we broke up because I didn't want it to get too serious. Permanently serious." Oh Esposito. That's why she's here. At last!

"Then we fell into this booty call thing, and it was good but we weren't exclusive. I did date a guy but it fell through quickly. He's been seeing other woman." Lanie gazes down at her feet for nearly a minute.

"Then with Rick's shooting..... Javi doesn't deal with this stuff real well. I know he suffered Post Traumatic Stress Disorder after deployment and leaving the military but if seems like he has folded it all up on himself. Then he's seeing this girl. Sorry that's not fair. Woman. Tory, the IT tech at the Precinct. They've been on a few dates, and yes they're having sex."

"Who told you that?" Kate couldn't help herself.

"Javi did." Oh shit. Stupid man.

"When?" She really couldn't stop this. No wonder her and Rick's will they/won't they saga had kept her friends and colleagues so engaged over the years.

"Not long after we finished 'make me forget' sex the night Rick was shot. Not a couple of hours before you called."

"Oh Lanie!"

"All this stuff just came flooding out of him." 

"God that sounds a little like Rick without the extensive vocabulary and probable exacting use of syntax."

"Kate, I actually thought it might be a good thing. I certainly learnt a few things. I was cautiously optimistic shall we say. But then he began to close back up so soon after. Aside from work, we hadn't seen each other until yesterday."

"And he had a date." Kate provides.

"I just don't know how to fix us. Or even if I do want to fix us."

"Are we only ever destined to feel the connection in or after extreme moments? I know that was one question you had regarding Writer-Boy and your near death escapades."
"Yeah well we worked that one out eventually."

"You certainly did. But Kate what if we're too broken?"

"I thought that for a long time about myself, and Rick. I look back and I really regret taking as long as I did to overcome my fears and hang ups. I'm not belittling yours Lanie but I had some pretty fucking major ones to overcome. If I can do so can you, but you need an equally committed partner."

"Yeah well that's the real question isn't it? Just how committed is Javier Esposito?"

"You were my cheerleader-in-chief, moral support, shoulder-to-cry-on and so much more. I'll be here for anything you need Lanie."

"If only I knew what I needed or wanted."

"How about we start small. Did you want to stay for dinner?"

"I was only here yesterday."

"Well it's only yesterday's leftovers."

"Another time perhaps."

"Lanie, you don't have to go. Rick and Martha love having you here. You're a friend. They won't judge or even pry, and Rick has a really good wine cellar. In fact I'm pretty sure it is one of the reasons Martha hasn't move out."

"Oh go on you've persuaded me. But no more talk – for now - about that stupid Latino boy."

"Deal. Now tell me red or white?"

The pulsing vibration of her phone drags her from her sleep.

Pissed at being awoken from some decent REM-sleep she still managed a neutral tone as she answered without checking the number. She really was losing it.

"Dunne."

"Clare, its Tim.” It takes only seconds for her be sitting upright in the bed, her covers pooled around her lap.

"Sir.” They still laughed about it, how she left a Lieutenant Colonel and he a Major but she called him ‘sir’, the chain of command never fuzzy even outside of the military.

She's alert now and swinging her feet off the bed. She thumbs her phone to speaker and drops it beside her so she can grab a t-shirt and pull it on, finally acknowledging the cool air of her apartment that pebbled her nipples and raised Goosebumps elsewhere. God she was getting soft.

"Things could be about to get nasty in New York. Looks like some very negative press coverage about our newest recruit is about to hit the streets or rather the webpages."

Tim pauses to give his best team leader a chance to get orientated.

"Tim?” Is all the question she needs to ask.
"A couple of affiliated scandal sites are pushing a story that Kate Beckett was responsible for the death of bystander. Keep them safe and her role under wraps."

"Got it." She would hang up but she then thinks the better of it.

"How bad?"

"Someone is leaking official NYPD personal data to some rather unscrupulous journalists. Spun the wrong way it could look really bad. Possible potential for lawsuits." Against their clients. Tim would never have raised it if it was going the other way, that wouldn't be any of Taylor Matthew's business.

She didn't ask how her boss got the early heads up. Wouldn't get an answer anyway.

"And Kate Beckett?"

"Stays on the books. We were always going to use her in the background but this makes it more essential that any role she does perform is out of public sight at least until the coverage dies down."

"Understood. Do they know yet?"

"No. I'm leaving that to his people to do. Rick has a good team there and I don't want to alarm them if this is just a brief media storm." But that's unlikely otherwise it could have waited until morning or not at all.

"What about other ops?"

"I'm chopping two extra teams to you from the mid-west. Be with you COB tomorrow. We're pretty quiet over there. Make use of them." She mentally calculates what she can cover with her additional resources but is quietly confident in the adaptability and professionalism of her team.

"Clare, I think it might be time for some specialist attention for Alexis Castle."

"Roger that. The usual?"

"I think that would be best. I'll let James know you'll call in the morning."

"Right. Anything else Tim?"

"Not that I'm aware of. Please keep us updated. And Clare I know you had a break out West with Sass planned. We'll see what we can do to make sure it that it's not postponed."

"Thanks Tim, I appreciate it but Rick and his family come first."

"Take care Calamity. Out."

With the call terminated she hauls her t-shirt over her head and throws herself back under the covers in a determined effort to regain the deep sleep she had lost. As her head settles into her pillow, the clock takes its final count of the day, and with that Monday was over, and Clare was certain without doubt the shit storm would still be there in the morning. At least it would be Tuesday.
Rick is home and after celebrating with his family, he can begin the long road to recovery. Now if only they would be left alone….not too much to ask surely?

The Loft, Tuesday.

He was up early again. And there wasn't even a dead body.

Won't be for some time, and maybe that's a good thing.

Mind you his hadn't been too far off not so long ago.

So he'd take the pain and frustrations of his rehab as very real confirmation that there was life in the old body yet.

Of course this wasn't his favourite confirmation of life but doctor's orders but apparently he was following them, even if Kate's enforcement of them was hypocritical to say the least. At least Kate had promised to make it up to him later.

He had left Kate in bed and this morning and he was in his study surfing the Internet. Although warned against overuse of his right hand, he was sure a short period of web surfing wouldn't be too strenuous. He could even try driving the mouse left handed. Although he had a tablet, several actually, in fact too many gadgets of all kinds, he much preferred his laptop for everyday surfing. And writing, not that, even if he was capable, he felt like doing.

He had checked his business email and was relieved to find that it had nothing that needed his attention - most likely the efficient work of Harry Dove and team. He was immensely grateful for their endeavours and loyalty, and he sometimes wondered if observers and commentators ever considered what it took to create and maintain a lifestyle like his. And this wasn't in reference to his playboy past, but now with his admittedly low key business empire. He was only able to concentrate on being a single dad for Alexis and the best partner for Kate because he could trust those around him. That included Steve and Suzanne his lawyers, Harry and team from RCE, Paula, even Gina.

Kate had sauntered past maybe five minutes ago, pausing to kiss his head with a 'Hey Babe' before disappearing out the door before he could summon enough wit to respond. He'd go find her in a minute after he completed checking his e-mail. How they ever thought he could be playing 'Birds all that time in the Precinct was beyond him. For a start he'd be some global champion not the middle of the pack he actually was. But like many things in his life up to Kate, it was easier to let people believe what they wanted to, and not the reality. Even after sometimes. He'd learnt his lesson with Kate, they were certainly different now.

The client configuration had his multiple email accounts organised and stacked into different folders including some that were pseudonyms and covers (he never wanted his personal shopping to be not quite so private).
It was in one of his personal accounts – known only to a select group of friends – that he found the email from an unfamiliar user ID simply said 'Bad news travels fast'. He was wary enough to not click on the URL link that was the sole content of the message but a quick cut and paste into Google search found the desired location on the first results page.

Clicking the link and blessed with a writer's ability to suck words from a page it takes less than thirty seconds for his stomach to start to lurch and his head to throb.

"Fuck! Fuck! BarrrrssssstarDS! " He has no idea how loud is the anguished sound that rips from him, but as Kate doesn't come to investigate so maybe it wasn't that loud.

He snatches his phone and is dialling her number which picks up before the first ring has barely completed.

"Paula!" He's almost screaming into the phone. He's certainly being loud. In the back of his mind he realises Kate might hear but before he can consciously modify his volume, Paula's calm voice carries from the end of the line.

"Rick. Please take a breath or two. And please lower the volume."

He's silent for a second so Paula takes the opportunity to start speaking.

"Rick, I'm really sorry. We knew nothing of this. Got no heads up. I got called by the Ledger and Post not five minutes ago."

"What can we do?"

"We'll get to that in a minute Rick but I need to ask, but how much in there is accurate?"

"The basic facts are correct. But they are, sorry were, never public record. And the way that is she is portrayed. Makes her seem so callous and thoughtless and unprofessional when she's so clearly not. Also Esposito. They're both a big part of the reason New York cops are called 'The Finest'."

Paula ignores the last bit – Rick has a tendency instinctive clichéd hyperbole that he somehow curbs for his books - but picks up on the salient point from the earlier part of Rick's statement. "So you said not public record correct?" She carries on without waiting for his confirmation.

"Someone is leaking from inside the NYPD. Well I can start to work with that. I'll call Victoria and that useless press suit at headquarters. Then we can set the wolves lose too if need be, but I prefer to play this level and measured. The Ledger and Post have given us a couple of hours for a response, more if we do it in person." Paula is on a roll and figures she should get her point across before her Number One client did something they would all regret.

"Rick, for Christ's sake please keep everyone away from the media. No statements. Especially Martha. She's a firebrand but we need a calm response. We need to set the tone. But not yet."

"I'll do my best. Thanks Paula. But right now I need to go tell Kate."

"Good luck with that. I'll call you with updates, okay?"

Hanging up, it is with a heavy heart and growing sense of dread that he knows he must go find Kate and tell her. He'll never be less than totally honest with her now, the painful lessons of their past dictate that, but it doesn't mean it he do this with any less trepidation than before.
He finds her in the love seat near the windows, curled up with a book – not one of his he notes neutrally – and headphones on.

He smiled wryly. Kate had initially frowned at the streaming service and wireless headphones installed in the Loft but after a demonstration from Alexis including how to keep her playlists private she had become a frequent user. He'd done his level best to respect that need for solitude and now she was moved in he'd need to make a serious effort on that side.

There were also some wireless speakers although these were often powered off, least the other house hold members be woken by show tunes at unspeakably unsocial hours. For someone as techno-illiterate as his mother her master of the streaming app on her phone spoke suspiciously of teenage guidance. Denied of course.

She sees him coming and looks up with an open smile of her own. "Hey."

She takes one look at his defeated posture, and the complete lack of joy in his face and instantly puts the book down and pulls the headphones from her ears.

"Rick?"

"You're going to hate me. It's all because of me." He's barely loud enough to hear himself.

"Hey. We've spoken about….." He interrupts her.

"The press." He forces out. She squeezes his hands.

"A bad story?" Ain't that the truth!

"Yeah. On the 'net. Spun out a few selected facts to make you and Esposito look really bad. Callous and unprofessional. It's truly ugly. I never wanted that. I'm so sorry Kate. I couldn't protect you."

She's standing and caresses his hand before taking it.

"Shush. You have nothing to apologise. Please show me Rick." She gently leads him back towards the study.

Celebrity Searchlight website.

'Bad Beckett?'

'Murder Mystery Author's Cop Girlfriend 'Responsible' for death of bystander?'

'Sources confirm that Detective First Grade Katherine Beckett, the girlfriend of crime novelist Richard Castle, was officially censured in May of this year by the NYPD following the death of a civilian during a homicide investigation.

She served out a forty day suspension for failure to follow protocol and failure to maintain chain of command.

The death occurred at the Alhambra Long Stay Hotel on 13th Street. Detectives Beckett and Esposito entered the hotel without backup of a suspect wanted in connection with the homicide of burglary suspect, Orlando Costas. Mr Costas, former gang member and ex-soldier, was found dead in a stolen car having been shot execution style in the forehead.

The hotel duty manager, David Borrens, gave the detectives access to the room using his master
key to open the door. The suspect wasn’t present at the time of entry but during the search returned and surprised the officers.

During the confrontation, the suspect killed Mr Borrens with a single blow to his throat. With Detective Esposito knocked unconscious, Detective Beckett was unable to detain the suspect. She herself was in imminent danger and was only saved by the arrival of backup including ESU. The suspect escaped the scene.

The suspect later identified as a former Special Forces soldier, Cedric Marks, also known as Cole Maddox, was killed less than twenty-four hours later by a bomb in booby-trapped safe in a derelict building under refurbishment in circumstances that remain unexplained.

The motive for the original homicide and the exact nature of the crimes remains unsolved.

David Borrens left behind two teenage children and former partner, Natalie Grunezski. Miss Grunezski paid tribute to the hard working father of two who had continued to make time for his children despite their separation, stating that he had recently started to assist with coaching their baseball team in order to have more time with them.

Detectives Beckett and Esposito were ordered to serve a total of forty days suspended – the consecutive suspensions for ten and thirty days for the disciplinary breaches - by Captain Victoria Gates of the Twelfth Precinct. They both returned to active duty with no further sanction.

Barely six months after the death of David Borrens, the NYPD has rewarded Detective Beckett with an opportunity for promotion, generous extended leave entitlement and time off to study for her promotion whilst she has moved in and is now sharing millionaire boyfriend Richard Castle's luxury loft in trendy upmarket Soho.

Neither the NYPD, Detective Beckett or Richard Castle have responded to our request for comment.'

Kate takes longer than him to read the news item, not that he'd ever dream of mentioning that, at any time, but especially not now. Whilst she reads he does something very un-Castle-like and stays back and doesn't hover or bother her. A sound not dissimilar to a 'tut' can be heard on occasion from Kate, otherwise a steady silence fills the room.

She is not only absorbing the raw story but reading every nuance in the language. Each little twist and insinuation and outright innuendo and lie.

Then she finally speaks. Her tone flat and surprisingly level.

"Damn right I'm angry… for Esposito. He never choose this." Kate rises from the seat and ensures she is right in front of Rick and reaches up to cup his face with both hands and bring his eyes onto hers. When she speaks her voice is softer, the emotion is still there but different.

"I on the other hand chose you Rick Castle. I came to you and told you I wanted only you even when I didn't feel deserved you anymore, I had rejected you. You loved me enough to let me back in. That's more than enough for me. For a lifetime. So there's no going back now. For either of us." Her right hand taps his left shoulder for emphasis.

"Wait why are you smiling?" He was indeed smiling, a remarkable state given his apparent morose state moments ago.

Rick wrapped her up in a left-handed half-bear hug.
"I'm smiling because I have most fantastic girlfriend and partner I could ever hope for." She tilts her head in puzzlement, still reluctant to accept, his admittedly sometimes gushing, praise and adoration.

"I'm proud because despite the crass attempt to tarnish your name, your first instinct was for your friend and colleague, and not for yourself. You're…." Her hand is on his mouth, gently for once.

"Don't use that word. Please. It has so much meaning and I don't like it being overused."

"Okay. Can I tell you how special you are?"

"Maybe later. Perhaps you can start by telling me what we're doing about this?"

She takes his hand to get him to sit down in his chair. They have quite a bit to discuss and some phone calls to make.

There is a knock and Kate moves quickly and checks the security vision before opening the door. Attired in leggings and sweat shirt, she has the Sig 229 snugly secure in the holster at her back.

On the other side is Clare Dunne, regularly attired in her uniform with two, what Kate assumes to be, Taylor Matthews's team members, similarly attired in the smart business casual clothes all Taylor Matthew's employees seem to favour.

Right hand out Clare greets Kate with a firm but friendly handshake.

"Hello Kate. I didn't get the chance the other day to welcome you to Taylor Matthews. I look forward to working with you."

"Thanks." After a pause, she adds "Likewise." If only she knew what she would be doing for them. At the time she had met the Tim and Derek she had been focused and quite frankly overwhelmed with the need to obtain a legal carry permit and a capable weapon. Still that was a question for another time.

Clare introduces the other two team members, and Kate remembers that they are actually her colleagues, at least for a little while.

"Mike Dempsey and Adrian Hill. Normally based out of Chicago but things are quiet in the mid-West. They'll handling security here. One near the lobby and the other on this floor. We don't think there is sufficient reason to be concerned but we don't take chances"

"Kate Beckett" she confirm her name as she exchanges handshakes, firm and measured in both cases.

Leaving the other two operatives by the door for the moment, Clare strides into the Loft and spots Rick on the couch.

"Hey Rick. As you can see we're putting security back on for the moment." She certainly doesn't waste time.

"God Clare, it's good to see you. I was going to call." He's obviously not phased at all by the direct approach from Clare.

"Rick it's not a problem. We don't have any threats but we've got the physicals covered here. How are you?"
"Getting there. It's going to take some time and things like this don't help."

Her nod of sympathy is sufficient, and he presses on. Kate takes a seat beside him.

"How bad is it?" Rick continues.

"Well you've got every major, and a good chunk of the freelancers down stairs. The NYPD will move on those that constitute a safety hazard but that's all they can do for now. They have a car outside. There is no real public present aside from some curious bystanders. But effectively you're under siege by the press – for the moment. Aside from that we have no idea who is behind the news story and what possible motivation they might have."

Rick swears under his breath and clenches both fists. Clare watches the muscles in his arms ripple as tension works its way upwards. The wince as the tension hits his bad shoulder. She reaches out to place a comforting hand on his right forearm before continuing.

For her part Kate watches with interest. The woman is obviously comfortable with Rick and his family, and doesn't shy away from physical contact but at the same time is almost relentlessly professional.

"We have reports of press outside Detective Beckett's residence and also her father's. Do you want us to put a team on your father Detective?" This last is spoken addressed to the motionless figure on beside Rick on the couch. The words seem to have an impact. Kate, who had been fighting the desire to bury herself away, starts at that information and grabs her phone from the coffee table as she sprints for the office.

"Can I let you know? I need to call my Dad." Rick doesn't trust himself to speak and merely nods and tried to ensure he didn't exacerbate the matter as he was concerned she could hover dangerously close to breaking point.

He gets a small answering smile as Kate strides towards the bedroom and privacy her back ramrod straight. There will be ramifications from this and his gut sinks as he forces away thoughts of what it could do to their relationship. Even now despite their promises and all the progress, the insecurity lingers, years of unreciprocated devotion has etched maybe permanent tracks on his psyche. Everything is so close to overwhelming him, the anger, frustration, worries, physical pain, it all hammers against him.

Clare returns to the loft entrance to organise her team, leaving Rick alone with his thoughts for some minutes. Eventually she returns back to the couch.

"What about Alexis?" He forces his mind back to the room and the matters at hand.

"Nothing on the scope, but I'm prepping an affiliated organisation who specialise in this sort of thing." Clare responds.

"What sort of specialism?" The father speaks.

"Working with young people, students, that sort of clients. They're really good and blend in. You know we wouldn't put her in harm's way with any form of substandard cover."

"Sorry Clare. I know you wouldn't." It is the change in his voice that alerts Clare. She's not been around much in the last four years, but she knows Rick Castle. That tone, the unconscious tremor through his voice, that's not him.

He suddenly turns and then after a handful of huge strides, he's in the far corner of the living area,
his back to the wall, dropping to the floor, eyes shut, hands fisted, shaking, mouth clamped closed as if to hold back the howls of emotion.

Clare doesn't follow him despite instinct ghosting at her feet. He needs someone else. Immediately.

The Fates are kind as Kate chooses the moment to emerge from his office, a purposeful stride bellying the fact that she's been crying. No tears now with a face that looks remarkably calm given the circumstances.

Her eyes catch Clare's face and she immediately looks for him. Her partner. She follows Clare's head as it turns to indicate the corner of the room. She's fast and she's by his side in seconds. At first leaning down but then dropping to her knees. She hears him.

"Stay. Please stay. Please. Stay."

Her heart falling, she sinks into him, wrapping herself around him. Rick falls silent at her embrace but his body is trembling. It is some time before she trusts herself to speak.

"Rick." He still shakes and doesn't acknowledge her.

"Rick, please look at me."

He doesn't comply. She knows this type of reaction. She's intimately familiar with it. Except she suffered in solitude unwilling to admit the one person who could help.

"Love. Rick. Please look at me." She persists and his head raises enough she can see him blink, his eyes no longer firmly socketed shut.

He still doesn't answer but as she tightens her embrace she feels the sobs shaking him subside.

"I'm not going anywhere except with you. Our promises remember?"

Still no words but his body is less tense, and his breathing is settling.

"Still not running Rick. Okay?"

"We will be." He speaks. The sudden panic is fading but anger is still pumping and surging in him. His family and friends are under attack and he can't do anything about it for now. He hates that. He likes to fix things. Use his wits and connections to make problems go away. Sometimes his fists, but not often.

"Rick!" It is almost a command from Kate but she bites down on the instinct. Remembers how counterproductive it was for her. Instead she changes tactics and pleads.

"Please don't let this burn you. We'll get through it together. But you need to let go the anger. I know this, I've been there remember. I didn't do what was best for us then, but I am now."

"Okay." A much more even tone of voice. Hope blossoms in her and she can't help the smile.

"But I reserve the right to punch something." That's better too.

"Just use your left hand for the moment Big Guy."

He looks at her properly, his eyes finally focusing.

"Thank you Kate." Simple, heartfelt, endearing.
"Do you want to stay here or perhaps somewhere more comfortable?"

"I think I should get up. I think my ass has gone to sleep. Get sorted out. I need to speak to Mother and Alexis before anyone else."

"Whatever you need Rick." She rises and offers him her hands and his reaches out his left arm and with some assistance from his right pushing off the floor he staggers to his feet.

He's really close to Kate and she simply merges herself into him and holds on tight.

"You." It's a whisper. She's not sure if she's meant to hear. But she does. "All I need is you."

Martha never one for prompt mornings had risen late, taken in the bare facts tersely delivered by her son, simply shrugged, hugged both of them, kissed their foreheads and retreated back to her room with a cup of tea and some fruit in about three minutes flat. Kate had stood there motionless for just as long, a single tear coursing down her right cheek as she fought to get her emotions under control.

It had been the simple, heartfelt intent behind the actions that had reduced her to mush. She still wasn't used to this family's unconditional offering of support and love without question or limit.

Rick had sat back, leaning on the back of the couch waiting for her to compose herself and then come back to him.

Rick worked the phones like a pro.

Kate was still endlessly fascinated by this aspect of him. She had seen him turn on the charm, goof-off with the best, throw insanely wild theories around like confetti, comfort the bereaved, but aside from their favourite alone time, she was rapidly becoming severely infatuated with 'Serious Rick.'

Right now he was on the phone with his lawyer with the phone of hands-free on his knee closest to her.

"Hey Steve!" He sounds far more upbeat than he is.

"Hi Rick. I'm on it already. Paula has called me multiple times, the last not twenty minutes ago." Kate can hear the exasperation in the man's voice, but Rick breezes on through.

"What options do we have?"

"Well there is no accredited author, the ownership of the website is murky to say the least, most importantly the actual facts are close enough to meet the standards for accuracy, possibly public interest. It is just their spin that is so negative.

"Susanne is back from holiday, but had been working from home today. She's dropping her plans and is already working the phone on her way in. We'll work a plan out. But....."

Steve's pause is protracted.

"It will take time. We can't just make this go away. Sorry Rick. I would if I could." Then as if remembering.

"Miss Beckett, apologies. I forgot you were there."
"That's quite alright Steve. I'll forgive you so long as you call me Kate. You call him Rick. Please treat me the same."

"Of course Kate. Now my recommendation to both of you is to sit tight, and say nothing. Oh and if that could include Martha and Alexis even better. Paula will synchronise a statement with the NYPD so that should be our first order of the day. So settle it. It could take a while. Sorry."

"Thanks Steve. It's a good thing we don't have any place we need to be then. I'm sure we'll talk later."

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**Homicide, 12th Precinct.**

Lieutenant Carmel Davies and her seemingly faithful sidekick, Detective First Grade Horace Bateman, were definitely feeling the heat. Currently standing – there had been no offer of seating - in the Captain's office – and receiving the closest thing to a dressing down they can both remember. This wasn't how it was meant to be for IA officers.

Victoria Gates was on the warpath.

"Lieutenant. I don't think I have made myself clear here." Tone more than firm, ire clear, volume rising.

"Someone is leaking confidential personnel police files to the press. I won't have my officers subjected to this." Ownership, responsibility, command all emanate from the Captain.

"Detective First Grade Beckett is an extremely able officer. There was an error of judgement related to an intensely personal crime and she has already been disciplined for it. As has Detective Esposito." *My team, my responsibility, my family.*

"As for these other matters you are investigating? They're a witch hunt and I won't permit it my people to be subjected to these spurious accusations and petty rule enforcement." *In short fuck-off.*

"Ma'am." Davies tries to get a word in. Of course it is the wrong word.

"Sir!" She corrects and the officer is stunned into silence for some seconds before they catch on.

"Sir. Our hands are tied. We have to follow protocol. Surely...."

"Are you questioning my judgement and authority Lieutenant? Did you forget where I served prior to the Twelfth?" The last is purely rhetorical but she'll use every weapon at her disposal.

"No Sir."

"Good. I suggest you concentrate on determining who, why, and how the information was leaked."

After a silence of ten or so seconds, Gates terminates the meeting.

"Do I need to tell you you're dismissed?" *Really, just fuck off already.*

---

"Esposito and Ryan!"

"Sir?"

"In here now."
"Right." Esposito confirms for the both of them as they leap from their desks, leaving computers open on the self-same web pages that were the topic of conversation across the New York or at least in the Twelfth, which was as much of the city that mattered right now.

"Close the door and take a seat please." They comply.

"We have a leak, possibly here but potentially at One PP. Someone has direct access to of Beckett's and Esposito's personnel files and many related case files. The only ones untouched are related to certain cases with a much higher security flag.

"Unfortunately this reprehensible action has been used to tarnish both Detective Beckett and your reputations' Esposito. And by implication the Twelfth." Gates is spitting fire, and both detectives are somewhat in awe of the righteous fire emanating from their Captain.

"Based on the access records we can possibly expect more revelations. Unfortunately the technical team and IA are unable to shed any light on the perpetrator. The ID used to access the information was that of a retired Sergeant from the Academy – hence their permission to access personnel records. That individual has been dead for six months and his account had been locked out since retirement. They are still looking into how it was unlocked and a new password granted. The information was accessed from the Fifteenth Precinct according to the logs.

Gates' look softens.

"Detective Esposito, I can only apologise for the breach of confidentiality. As you know I have worked in IA before returning to regular duties. What has gone on here is not in the spirit of the NYPD or how I wish for my command to be run."

Esposito looks his Captain straight in the eyes and nods. Apology accepted. Cop shorthand.

Ryan had been silent but he looks thoughtful and Gates nods her permission for him to speak.

"They obviously didn't have clearance for anything flagged for National Security. Nothing was mentioned about the other information we obtained on Maddox or Orantis Solutions."

"That can help narrow the field of suspects down. Of course perhaps whoever was behind this didn't wish for that information to be public."

Gates breaks in.

"Also there was no mention of the earlier break-in and theft from Captain Montgomery's house. No mention of Evelyn shooting the thief. Nothing about what was taken."

Both detectives start at that, and can't keep the surprise from their faces.

"I've told you before Roy Montgomery and I go a long way back, and my husband and Roy long before then."

Ryan and Esposito look at each other and silently agree that they can trust their Captain. Perhaps it is unfair that the other half of their partnership is not here to decide but despite that they are comfortable.

"This is connected to Beckett's case isn't it?" Gates is as ever direct.

"The events of May 2012 were but I don't know about this though." Esposito counters not willing straight-off to tie this very different attack to the more immediately life threatening events of six
months ago.

"I suggest you return and secure your desks and then grab a coffee and return my office. I have a feeling this may take some time."

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**The Loft**

Clare had departed to complete organisation of protection for Alexis.

They had done their level best to ignore the media siege outside. Kate had been concerned about cameras looking into the loft from the vantage points on surrounding buildings. Whilst some rooms, namely the bedroom had curtains the main living area didn't, nor did the ceiling skylights.

Only last night she had voiced her concerns to have Rick assume one of his overly self-satisfied looks. She knew that his intent was taunt and tease her to ask why he wore such an insufferable countenance. She gave in after less than three minutes, if only because she was concerned at him attempting to hold that face and breathing at the same might actually be beyond him. She told him as much too. It did the trick and nicely deflated his ego.

It turns out that Rick had the Loft reglazed with switchable privacy glass. Either from the light switches, or one of the remote consoles, or the smart phone app, you could selectively choose which areas where blocked out from outside view. In addition Rick mentioned that the glass was now bullet resistant security glass. It would stop anything less than a direct hit from .308, and even then slow or divert that calibre round. Only the much heavy .50 calibre rounds or above, or a handful of custom smaller rounds could penetrate directly. Whilst pleased about the first revelation, Kate had silently absorbed the guilt that comes with knowing that she made her new family the possible target of assassins.

Satisfied that they would have no telephoto snoopers, or snipers, for company she had settled for distracting herself and her partner by taking Rick through his rehab routine with her assuming the role of the physio and trainer. Naturally they had called off the visit by the actual physio due to the media scrum outside the Loft.

They were also waiting for Alexis to get back to them. She was in classes this morning and they had settled for sending a couple of messages. Rick has used his computer to send one and she was curious as to why? The man himself has simply smiled one of the Cheshire Cat smiles and said nothing. Frustrating Child!

Kate eased Rick into the stretches and repetitions carefully, well aware than over-exertion could easily outweigh any benefit. For his part Rick was being as stoical as he could. Which effectively meant he moaned and groaned the entire time and pouted if he had the opportunity. For her part, Kate carefully assessed his actual condition and then simply ignored the majority of his complaints before assisting him with his shower.

The lack of anything to film other than more journalists and the odd onlooker has led the majors to withdraw their crews by early afternoon.

There is still a visible press presence and regardless it still felt like they were under siege.
Digging in

Chapter Summary

Kate and Esposito are the target of a negative press article and the media pack have descended on the Loft. Who is behind it? How do they respond?

Chapter Notes

A/N – the timelines for this chapter overlap with the previous chapter (54) – it is still Tuesday.

Beesley, Wax & Drummond Lawyers, Main Conference Room, Tuesday morning

Jim Beckett could feel his butt going to sleep even if his mind wasn't. He should be more engaged in the meeting especially as it pertained to the future of the firm, but somehow he couldn't keep his mind off his new girlfriend. He made a point of not looking at her, well aware that their agreement to keep everything professional at work wouldn't stand a chance if they couldn't actually stop acting like love-sick teenagers at the slightest glance.

He forced his focus back to the room. The staff meeting was not going well. Recently none of them had, but this one was a special train wreck all of the Chief Operating Officer's making.

Jeff Beesley, scion and undoubtedly lesser light of the firm's former head partner, was in a real spot and he was taking it out on the staff. Boy was he pissed.

Another three clients had departed as soon as they had been informed via last week's glossy brochure spruiking the new direction for 'BWD'. Commissioned by the Chief Operating Officer without input from the other partners, the electronic and paper versions had been disturbed just last Friday. And between Monday and this morning those three clients worth about ten percent of the firm's regular billables had departed. That in itself had been the cause for a vicious and frank exchange of views between the partners not two hours earlier according to the water cooler scuttle-butt throughout the firm.

Jim knew it was bad because Val was still seething. Her normal response was flare fast and viciously and settle in a cool, frosty demeanour. Today she hadn't. He could tell from her stiff, upright posture and hooded eyes. He had made sure to keep his averted and off her except for brief glances. Fortunately most of the staff were doing exactly the same. And with the other partners too.

He wished he could offer her some form of support than his remote presence. But she had shaken him off with the most subtle of head movements as they been in proximity in the corridor before the meeting, and he respected her wishes.

Everything was still too new. Their weekend together – aside from his visit to Rick's home (and Kate's he reminded himself) – appeared surreal in light of the events at work and their inability to exchange more than a handful of words due to caseloads and workload.
Jim Beckett as was his wont had remained silent through delivery of the news and lively debate now sparking up in the conference room. One of the clients to walk was one of his. But he had nothing meaningful to add to the debate if it could be called that.

Suddenly, his mobile started to vibrate. He can see Katie's image on the screen.

His innate belief in the importance of family means he'll take this every time. He'd let their family down before, and never again.

"Excuse I need to take this call." His politeness won through as always, announcing his need to step out. Despite the already raised voices, his level tone somehow penetrates the din. He rises and heads for the door without waiting for a response.

"You can't leave. I didn't give you permission…..."

Before Jeff can speak further Val intervenes.

"Let him go Jeff. It will be his daughter so it will be important." Despite her anger she is coldly polite. Viciously so, and no one in the room misses it. Moreover, few miss her knowledge of his personal priorities. Jim Beckett was not a social butterfly. Not a cold fish either, but most in the room could be pretty sure that no one else knew that piece of information about his life.

"No. I forbid it." The less than manly quaver at the end of the attempted command didn't help Jeff Beesley try to impose his will.

Jim ignored him and in spite of the instructions he left the conference room, closing the door firmly behind him and headed down the hallway to find a quiet nook a good twenty yards from the conference room.

"Hi Katie, everything okay?"

As his daughter filled him in Jim Beckett found that his morning could indeed get worse.

Returning to the conference room, Jim was immediately struck by the vastly increased tension in the room. Some of the junior staff and even a few of the others looked, well, aghast. What the hell had happened?

Val had risen from her seat and was now directly facing a still seated but clearly uncomfortable, possibly even intimidated Jeff Beesley.

"Everyone else OUT! NOW!" Her voice brooked no discussion or objection. Compliance was the only option. Everyone including the other senior partners moved.

"Jim please stay. This concerns you." He'd never seen her like this. Not sure if he wanted to. Just as hard as Katie in full cop mode – he could still remember the last time she had done that to him before gave up drinking for good.

It took less than sixty seconds for the other occupants to file out - hastily, no lollygagging - passing by a for-now silently raging Val. Jim didn't miss that two of the four other senior partners didn't look Val in the eye. Stalemate. Three versus Three. Beesley had at least two bought. For now.

Once all the other staff had left, only then did Val speak again.

"God Damn You. You immature child." Definitely lost her cool Jim observed. Something more
than pure business was at stake here.

"Look what your actions are doing! We lost nearly ten percent of our regular income in twenty-four hours. Income is down almost forty percent on last year and outgoings are up."

"We'll have more than triple the income with our new clients. You're not seeing the big picture Valerie." So condescending but she skates past that, not dignifying it with a response.

"So you say, but not of that is actually definite. None of the other partners nor I have seen any sign of the new clients or especially the fee structure."

"Yeah well you've been too busy with your new boyfriend." Jim's jaw dropped just a little at that. How did he know?

"Whom I date is absolutely none of the firm's and especially your business." She's not giving an inch.

"It does if they work here and it effects the firm."

"Never stopped plenty of the partners in the past. Especially your family. Your father at least had the decency to only try to bed me once – even if I was already married to another partner, mind you he was married too. That didn't stop him either." This was spat at the man.

Jim's mind was struggling to catch up with the implications of Val's statement and seemingly uncontested acceptance by Jeff. Had he tried to bed Val too?

Looking directly at Jim the next words were like a blow.

"Well I wouldn't touch you now after him."

Beesley's sneering insult caught both of them by complete surprise. And confirmed Jim's suspicions. A strong dislike of the pathetic figure was now manifesting as hatred. Jim was already moving in anticipation of the reaction Jeff's abhorrent words would evoke.

Momentarily baulking with shock, Val's reactions were just slow enough that Jim managed to reach her before she took Jeff's head off. Jim caught her arm as gently as he could.

Val's hand stayed raised, the tension in her body transmitted to his through his now strained grip on her upper arm which he slid up to her wrist and lower hand. Not the way he had envisaged first holding hands at work.

Jim understood. A large part of him wanted to punch out the pitiful excuse for a man opposite them.

"Go on." Jeff taunted her. "I can't wait to see you get what you deserve."

"Is that a threat Jeff? Because it damn well sounds like one." Cold fire emanated from her tone.

Val decided to appraise Jim of what transpired during his absence.

"Go on Jeff, why don't you repeat what you said when James was out of the room. Explain why we're here now."

Jeff Beesley rose from his seat and despite his attempted bravado nervously eyed up the couple before retreating a few steps out of reach before speaking. Jim decided it was safe release Val's arm.
"I simply noted that this firm does not condone nor sanction unbilled work for family members, especially in the case of potential criminal proceedings. That needs clearance from the COO or the full partner board meeting.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Jim couldn't help himself. He hadn't been so unprofessional in an office since it was the alcohol talking for him.

"Your daughter. She was suspended by the NYPD and there is a strong possibility of wrongful death suit."

Jim won't let that falsehood stand. He advances on Jeff and is satisfied as the man retreats a pace.

"My daughter is a great cop. Her professional record is none of your Goddamn business. But for the record it's pretty damn exemplary aside from one incite for which she was suspended. That proscribed penalty for her only formal disciplinary breach was served six months ago and she has resumed her career and is now being promoted. She has been given the full support of the NYPD. She is presently on officially approved leave to look after her partner."

Whilst he was angry, the overwhelming emotion was curiosity tinged with concern, varying towards near paranoia. How the hell did Jeff know all this about his daughter? The news article had only been in circulation for a handful of hours. As far as he was aware the partners had been sequestered in meetings since well before office hours.

*Who the hell had tipped him off? And why? Why is this man so interested in his daughter?*

He had a suspicion. One that filled him with dread and an overwhelming need to also protect Val from his family's tragedy. But he can't and won't say anything now. Not with HIM present.

In the angry pause Val decides to address the original point.

"None of that was going on. It wasn't billable to the firm. It was a favour. I represented James as his friend."

Jeff's expression left no doubt about how he perceived that friendship.

Jim balled his fists but held his tongue.

"So you feel comfortable doing....." Val cut him off.

"No Jeff." She's regained her sangfroid and the tone is icy cold.

"Should you ever have a partner, it would have once been nice to assume you would do something similar. But as all you do is fuck people over for personal benefit and you oversized ego, it's not something I shudder to think I will have to contemplate."

"Well your antics won't concern this firm or me for much longer. We may be stalemated at the moment but once the new income starts flowing in then I'm confident who the other partners and staff will support the new approach. I'll exercise the option to buy your late husband's shares."

With that final statement Jeff Beesley retreats from the conference room leaving Val and Jim somewhat shell-shocked by developments.

*New York Banking Commission.*
Miles Gold was comfortable. More than comfortable to be honest. He had his middle management role as a senior auditor at the commission which paid comfortably well. Even more so when you considered he covertly traded information for more wealth diligently hidden offshore, a lifetime of auditing others had shown him many new tricks and more importantly which ones worked.

From his briefcase he lifts the burner phone and enters the passcode. Unlocked he dials the one number. He lets it ring three times and hangs up.

A minute later a message arrives with a new number to call. Using the burner phone, dials the new number. After one ring it is answered.

No voice responds but he can hear breathing so he speaks. It is ever thus.

"Two federal agents arrived yesterday. FBI and I think Attorney General's office.

"They had warrants for electronic and paper copies of statements and transaction histories for New Delaware Bank and Tri-State Savings and Loan from 1996 through to 2005."

There is no response but he senses the unasked question.

"There shouldn't have been anything to give them except for the summaries but there was. We had to comply. I don't know what happened or how they knew."

There is a click and the connection is broken.

"For the first time in a long time, Miles begins to doubt himself. More importantly be concerned about the faceless people he feeds information too. The information he provides for this particular anonymous customer is so mundane and yet they pay well, almost too well.

He'll ditch the burner phone and stay low for a while. Certainly until the Feds have left town.

Columbia University, Lecture Theatre C3, Tuesday 11.14 am

Alexis Castle, correction Alexis Rodgers as she was known at college, was not paying attention. Which was moderately weird and out of character. Especially as she normally loved Professor Haussman's class. She was taking it for extra credit – psychology wasn't one of her main subjects – but it was usually interesting and easy if truth be told.

She was actually doodling on her notepad. Not taking notes. She was kinda old school like her Dad in this respect. Lots of gadgets but analog writing still held a lot of appeal, especially note taking as she found it helped retention. Not paying attention wasn't a big issue per se, as she like the rest of the class could access the podcast later.

But doodling?! Who was she? Her Dad?

Oh worse. Look what she was carefully writing out.

'Aлексис Бэккет-Роджерс.' Repeated through the margins and across the page. Oh crap. Well it kinda made sense. She should be mortified but somehow it didn't phase her not after the discussion she had had with Kate Beckett.

Saturday night after her Dad had crashed she had found herself talking with Kate in the kitchen. Chatting about nothing. Laughing about less. Having a sip of the wine she had poured herself.
Kate had merely blinked once and remarked when Alexis looked at her quizzically that it would be extremely hypocritical of her if she was to be negative about a college student drinking responsibly. There was so much on that last word. Alexis wanted to ask but didn't. Her relationship with Kate was still finding its feet especially when her Dad wasn't around. But moments like this didn't feel as strained and they were rebuilding the friendly rapport and natural trust from years ago.

Grams had arrived about half-way through the glass and made no comment other than to reach for another empty glass and push it across towards the bottle on the bench. Kate had poured the diva a generous serve which had been gratefully received.

They had fallen back into the conversation until Grams, being Grams of course, had turned to Alexis and ever so smugly asked if this was 'a getting to know your next and hopefully last Stepmom' moment?

Alexis emboldened by the presence of her father back in their home, even if asleep – probably for the best - and the best part of a glass of rich, deep, fruity red wine had responded. 'Well you know me…..Alexis Beckett-Rodgers.'

Kate had blanched, with Alexis's gut sinking the girl's face had matched the other woman's. Then a tear appeared in Kate's right eye and after a growing anxious silence the temporarily-not-Detective responded.

"I prefer Castle myself. Kate Castle, although I will say Katherine Beckett-Rodgers does have a nice ring to it." She reached across to Alexis and squeezed her hand. "I would be honoured if you were willing to share any part of our names."

Alexis has immediately teared up herself before Gram opened her mouth once again.

"Well that's the whole point my Dear. A ring. I really don't know what's got into him. That Boy is usually much more on the ball."

"God Grams." Alexis chided her grandmother but Kate smooths things over and then some.

"It's okay. We're both definitely moving towards that. Please give us time. I want nothing more than a ring from Rick someday soon." Both red heads perked up at that before Kate left them floored when she continued. "Maybe I'll give him a ring."

The silent thrum of her phone bought Alexis back to Professor Haussman's lecture. Oh a message from Dad.

Oh Oh! No simply text from him. Of course.

It was an image. A Castle – a medieval French château she absently noted, middle period when they were still primarily functional before the onset of gunpowder if she was right - surrounded by the four horsemen of the Apocalypse wearing press hats and holding cameras.

Trouble!? Well it was her Dad….still…something out of the ordinary was happening.

Of course the accompanying message was totally discordant with the image.

'Log coordinates. Away team will come to you. Tasha Yar commanding.'

Only her Dad would mix medieval with Sci-Fi. Cowboys and Sci-Fi she could understand even support mostly unless it involved dress up. Oh well.
This wasn't good. It was part of the fun yet serious code her Dad developed when she was old enough to understand the less positive parts of his public life. The Loft Castle had a press the horsemen presence, lots if the image was any indication. Also there was a security issue and Clare Dunne aka Tasha Yar – of course would be contacting her.

She wondered what's going on. All focus on the lecture dropping away as she bought up Google and committed the cardinal sin of the famous entering her father's name.

Oh.

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**NYPD Press Statement**

**Issued on behalf of Thomas Delaney, Chief of Detectives, and Captain Victoria Gates, 12th Precinct.**

A number of claims and insinuations have been made in certain sections of the press regarding the conduct of the NYPD and two our officers. We do not normally address such matters but both officers, veteran detectives, have waived their right to anonymity.

Firstly the information published by a number of news sources was illegally obtained from internal New York Police Department records relating to personnel and disciplinary matters. As such it is a complete breach of confidentiality and the duty of care owned by the NYPD to the officers. The department will be taking appropriate legal action. Anyone considering publishing or otherwise sharing the information is advised to seek legal counsel before doing so.

Secondly, with respect to the incident in question on 24 May this year, the New York Police Department deeply regrets the death of Mr Borrens. It is correct that he had assisted the officers in their investigation. However, what the previous press coverage failed to mention was that after Mr Borrens opened the room using his master key, he was then requested to return to the front desk by Detective Esposito. Both officers then entered the apartment and conducted a search. Unknown to them Mr Borrens choose to remain immediately outside the apartment. It was here some minutes later that he was attacked and murdered by a single blow from the mercenary killer, Cedric Marks.

The suspect - Cedric Marks, a former special services soldier - was being sought for the murder of robbery suspect, Orlando Costa, and the attempted murder of Detective Beckett amongst others. He is suspected of being involved in at least three other murders. The suspect died a day later when a booby trapped safe exploded whilst he was trying to retrieve its contents.

Neither detective was aware of Mr Borrens failure to follow the instruction until they found his body after recovering from being ambushed themselves by the suspect.

The NYPD does not normally respond to specific allegations made however Detectives Beckett and Esposito have both waved their rights to have the offenses remain confidential under the NYPD code of conduct and disciplinary rules.

Following the incident a command review lead by Captain Gates identified a number of clear breaches of regulations relating to chain of command, and pursuit. As a result of the breaches both the officers were put at risk and injured by the suspect. Regrettably Mr Borrens failure to comply with the detective's instruction resulted in him being killed by the suspect but there was no direct breach found in the case of Mr Borrens unfortunate death. Captain Gates imposed 40 day suspensions on both detectives.

The matter was reviewed by the NYPD's Internal Investigations team and Professional Standards.
Captain Gates' penalty of the 40 days suspension without pay was found to be in line with current policy for the specific breaches.

Detective First Grade Kate Beckett and Detective Second Grade Javier Esposito are long serving officers with near-exemplary service records with multiple citations and decorations for valor and good conduct. There were the first and only formal reprimands for both detectives. Both accepted the proscribed disciplinary penalty and have since returned to full active service. The purpose of the disciplinary process is to correct abnormal behaviour and where possible return officers back to duty as wholly effective members of the police service as has happened in this case.

The NYPD will make further comment when appropriate, and reserves the right to take legal action to protect the reputation and effectiveness of the force and its officers.

The Loft

The Taylor Matthews door guardian had demanded id before admitting her but Susanne White had simply acquiesced without fuss, much as she went about most of her life. Her arrival at the Loft would be her first meeting with Kate Beckett who waiting inside the door.

"Hello Miss Beckett."

"Kate." Beckett corrects her. She hadn't been called Miss for so long. Beckett, Detective, Kate. Miss Beckett feels alien.

"Kate. It is a pleasure to meet you at last. Steve has told me a bit about you, and that one" she indicates Castle hovering in the background. "Well he doesn't shut up."

A small laugh escapes her before Kate can clamp down.

Then waving generally in the author's direction the lawyer adds "Hello Rick."

"Hi Susanne. It must be serious you're here."

"What can I say? Steve plays a mean game of scissors, paper, rock."

"Look I don't have any further updates for the issue but my intention now is for verifying the facts of the media reports, and determining how best move forward in response. Your restraint so far has been admirable."

Kate is interested by the woman. She appears sharp, alert and probably entirely professional if Rick's track record of employing the best was any indicator. But she looked like a soccer mom. She's far too tactful to raise the point, but the equally appraising gaze coming back indicated she too is under observation.

Interestingly this appears to be one of the times Rick doesn't pick up on the interchange between the two women but he is also hanging back. So Kate guides their guest into the kitchen, and after they had grabbed coffee they sat at the dining table and got to the purpose of the visit.

"As you know the NYPD has just issued a statement repudiating the version published on the web." Kate nods. She had a call from Captain Gates to give her warning.

"We are still no closer to finding out the source of the information, the motivation or even the author. The NYPD and Taylor Matthews are investigating too but there is no quick wins here.
"Kate, I need you to review the press articles and confirm the facts for me."

Kate had found the situation wryly amusing. Being interrogated and asked for her version of events to queried and checked seemed so wrong.

Rick watched from the comfort of the couch as Susanne questioned Kate and listened to the honest and open answers flowing from his Detective. He could never think of her as anything else. Even with all the other things he can call her, her very essence is wrapped up in that role, just as he is a writer, and whilst he knows she may not always work as detective, she will always be one. And his too.

Kate had seen Susanne out. And decided not to disturb the now dozing man. Picking up his discarded tablet she swipes the security code in and then almost drops the thing.

*Celebrity Freak Website*
*Bada-Boom Beckett. Cop Castle's Cutie working Vice!*

Shit!

Kate knew that image. She hadn't seen it for years. Taken when she was in Vice. It had been a particularly freaky night and she had taken down two suspects single handed and in the process her undercover attire had been compromised. Well that was the diplomatic way of saying she had become somewhat overexposed but not to obscene levels. Titillation is probably an apt description. Of course then had been press on the scene as part of the mayors big clean up. The pictures had done the rounds of the bulletin board for a week or so until dying out.

Oh double fuck. This was really getting annoying.

She resisted the temptation to wake Rick, and decided to call Paula herself to get the issue handled and the lawyers on the case. Again.

This was really starting to piss her off.

*Columbia University Dorms.*

Alexis had returned to her dorm room after the lecture. Carrie was out but Alexis wished she was here. She could do with a distraction or two. Otherwise she would be back looking at the terrible things some segments of the media and worse bloggers and social media were saying about Kate Beckett and in some cases her Dad. Whoever was the target it was her family and she had to fight the urge to post back.

There had been a message not thirty minutes earlier from Paula advising the self-same thing. Don't look and especially don't comment.

She was interrupted by her phone.

"Hello Alexis."

"Clare?"

"Yeah. How you doing?"

"Okay. Nothing wrong here. But what's going on?"
"Nothing too serious. So with the negative press and extra attention we figured it was time to provide some close protection for a little while."

"Oh is that really necessary?"

"Yes." Typical Clare near monosyllabic if possible, and she could make Kate look like her Dad or Gram.

"We have a specialist joining you. Jane Sinclair will be with you in two hours. She doesn't report back to your Dad or even Kate. Unless it is a serious threat she'll keep every confidence like a proper bestie.

"Just like we ran through in training?" Alexis checks.

"Former school friend, visiting for a couple of days. It is as good as any story. But you can run through it when Jane arrives."

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The Loft.

Rick had woken from his nap and he and Kate had talked through the latest developments over an extremely muted late lunch. Martha had joined them towards the end and had scarcely contributed more to the proceedings, or eaten anything.

Martha can't face the disconsolate faces around her any longer, and decides it is time to put her master plan into effect. She knows her son can't usually abide her interference but she's sat on the sidelines too long. She has been an unwilling witness to the years stuttering between them and now they're finally almost there she's not willing to let them backslide. Of course she can't decide whether to make the plan known now and share with them or wait and surprise them.

She knows exactly what will be good for them.

Her actress genes win out with surprise the order of the say. So having decided to wait, she moves back upstairs to her bedroom.

Locating her cell phone, she pulls her contacts book out. Flipping through the pages she finds a Hamptons number and dials. It takes quite a few rings but eventually it is answered.

"Louis?" There is a dull reply at the other end that brightens as the person recognises Martha's voice.

"Louis, how are you Dear?" Martha deliberately keeps her tone upbeat.

She listens patiently as one of her dearest friends from decades in the theatre understandably listlessly updates her on life without his darling wife. Frankie died some fifteen months ago after a sudden and typically late diagnosis of pancreatic cancer. Martha sees him regularly, every trip to the Hamptons if she can, and their circle of friends pull Louis away from the loneliness of his memories when they can.

"Look I am sorry to impose but do you have the name of the firm who did that lovely work for you the last summer. You know on the conservatory conversion. They were so quick and efficient."

When they decided to bring Frankie home from the hospice, they had converted the sunroom of their Hamptons beach house into an all-in-one living place for the dying woman. Whilst visiting
the terminal woman, Martha had met the builder and his men and been charmed by their manner, efficiency, diligence and workmanship. And also their humanity in dealing with the clearly very sick and dying woman and her distraught husband.

She has exactly the need for those same skills for her plan to work.

"You do? Excellent. I hope you don't mind the intrusion." She goes quiet as listens to the former theatre producer expound upon the work done and how it has helped Frankie.

"Yes, I am thinking that something similar for Richard. He needs somewhere quiet to convalesce away from the city. But we'll keep that to ourselves for now, you know how children are with their parents interfering."

Louis speaks again and Martha can't but help smile in pride. Her son affects so many people.

"Oh Louis, it is so kind of you to think of Richard. I know he will be pleased to hear what you did in his name. Of course I'm not sure it will be good for his ego, but he does deserve it this time. Louis has sponsored a bookcase at the Hampton's main library in her son's name. Hence forth when citizen went in search of Crime novels they would be found housed in the Richard Castle Case. Oh Richard would be proud and somewhat vain when he discovered that.

Having got the name and phone number from Louis she hangs up with a promise (actually meant) to visit soon.

She walks to her dresser and pulls out a pad and with pen in hand dials the number of the construction firm. After feeling largely useless since Richard's shooting Martha feels a little empowered. She can do this, and just like Doctor Clemens had advised she can make herself useful.

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**Columbia Dorms, mid afternoon**

Carrie, Alexis' roommate, had been and gone. She has agreed to bunk at another room for a couple of days. Her arched look at Jane had made Alexis want to simultaneously laugh and punch her for her assumption and insinuation.

Jane for her part had simply shrugged gently and sat back looking everything like a young college student and nothing like a high-trained bodyguard.

They were going to head out and grab some coffee and snacks and have a chance to get to know each other.

There's a knock at the door. Alexis starts for the door before she remembers to check with her bodyguard.

"That's okay. Just answer as normal Alexis." Both Clare and Jane had been fairly adamant that the risk was relatively low, and that Alexis should carry on as normal as much as possible.

She opens the door, and short of a kidnapper or journalist – she's not sure which is worse at the moment - there is the person she least wants to see.

It is a tentative Max on the other side. If he was any more nervous he'd be hoping from one foot to the other. She's seen her Dad do that, and Alexis smiles at this memory. Despite her residual anger and her harsh stare at him, she is suddenly lost for words.
Max mistakenly assumes he has permission to enter and seeing her smile he steps into the room and mistakenly tries to wrap Alexis up in a hug assuming maybe he was forgiven.

Fat chance.

In hindsight his assumptions are a very bad mistake as the next thing Max is certain of is that the dorm floor is very solid, his right arm is locked at a more than somewhat painful angle and who the hell is the blonde chick with the solid death grip?

Alexis can't help smirking just a little. This is something satisfying about watching Max squirm. She'd have to ask Kate about that. Asking her Dad would undoubtedly leave him tongue-tied and also the subject was too icky for parent-talk.

Secretly she's also impressed with Jane's speed and skills. Max wasn't a jock but he was fairly well developed and certainly bigger than Jane. And yet Jane had taken only moments to render him immobile on the floor.

Jane looks back at her just for a second, the question etched on a raised eyebrow.

Her conscience gets the better of her. She shakes her head. Jane releases Max and steps round him to close the door.

Max's eyes are darting back and forward between the two as he slowly raises to his feet, rubbing his right arm and shoulder.

"Who?" His power of speech returns.

"Jane's an old friend. Visiting for a couple of days." Probably not going to fly unless you believe ninja-like blonde chicks with catchy dress sense. Probably only in a Tarantino movie too.

Yeah Max doesn't look like he's sold on that line.

"Well can she give us a moment?" But he's not going to call her on it. Not directly. Chicken.

Jane's shake of the head and serious demeanour signifies no. Alexis frowns back at her and this time Jane shrugs in acceptance. But before she leaves the room and her charge, Jane decides to do some reinforcing of her own. As she rises she lets her top open enough for Max to catch sight of the compact pistol holstered at her waist.

He pales alarming.

"Sit down Max." Alexis issues an order and manages to drag his attention back to her.

He complies no doubt still flustered by the sight of the weapon.

"Who is she?" Max stammers out.

Alexis fought the urge to smile at his lack of cool. Such a boy.

Alexis shakes her head in resignation at what she is going to say.

"My bodyguard of course." His eyes go wide at that. Probably regretting coming here. Alexis certainly hopes so.

"Jane, can you give us a moment please?" Her bodyguard is still just inside the dorm room close to the door. Jane nods towards the door to indicate she will be just outside, and seconds later the door
closes and Alexis and Max are alone.

"Why do you need a bodyguard?"

Alexis gives Max the hard stare, and leaves that unanswered for the moment, despite the desire to tell him that Jane is there to deal with douche ex-boyfriends.

"Max." She's firm, controlled. The same tone she uses with her Dad when he's done something stupid but now with more Kate. She tries to find the tone of voice she had heard Kate and other officers use.

"You hurt me."

He nods. She can't tell if it is merely confirmation, acceptance or the beginnings of an apology. She continues when it becomes apparent there are no words from him in response.

"I know we hadn't talked too much about us, our relationship, much beyond dating and seeing each other regularly. I mistakenly believed we were exclusive, or at least on the physical front given there was sex involved. And I whilst it is partly my fault we didn't clear that up there was no misunderstanding on my side." Again no words and he still can't meet her eyes properly.

"I certainly didn't have sex with you lightly or casually and I am very disappointed in your actions.

"I was only away from college for a week. A WEEK Max! One fucking week. For a family emergency. You couldn't ...."

She runs out of courage, and Max finally takes the opportunity.

"I'm sorry Alexis." He actually does appear sorry but what for? Hurting her. Missing out on sex? Being such a boy?

She keeps her face a stern mask and somehow he jumps straight to the end, missing out the messy middle of the conversation.

"Are you breaking up with me?"

_Ah, now we're getting somewhere._

"I thought I made that clear on Saturday when you finally managed to confess during your brief appearance. But that was only after I had heard from others including the girl you had sex with last week."

She lets the impassive mask go and the anger flush her features.

"Do you know how mortifying that is? We had sex on Friday night! I don't trust you Max. I can't trust you now. You weren't honest with me. I have a lot going on in my life and I need people I can trust implicitly. You know without question. All I know now is that there a lot of questions and answers that don't do you any credit."

"Well apparently, I'm not the only one. I feel I don't know you properly either Alexis Rodgers."

_Touché. Time to be totally honest._

"Yeah well about that. That's not my actually surname." Max looks at her uncomprehending.

"Castle, my name is Alexis Castle. I used Rodgers to enrol so I could try and avoid some of the
issues that goes with having a famous parent."

Max has gone almost totally pale and she can detect a tremor in his body as makes the connection to the beautiful young woman in front of him and the headlines of recent weeks.

"Oh shit. You're dad's Richard Castle. Man, I knew your dad was in hospital but I never connected it. He got shot." Max looks surprised but perhaps he should be. He had only ever met Grams once and she had immediately been on first name terms and who had winked knowingly at her when Max wasn't looking. No mention of her dad.

"My Dad has kept me out of the press. But now that I'm an adult…I don't know what's going to happen."

Okay she wins. He's completely flat-footed.

"Look Alexis I'm really sorry. About everything. I saw on the news that your Dad is home. So that's good isn't it? And I am really sorry about the other girls."

Girls! She thought it was just the one. Fucker!

"I want to believe you Max. But it's not enough. I need someone I can trust. Especially now. Someone who waits. My Dad's shown me that. It can be difficult, frustrating, really tough but I find you lack of patience and faith disturbing. So…." She doesn't finish.

She doesn't need to. He knows. His head sinks in resignation and he can't hold her eyes again for more than a moment. Then he looks up. Resolved. Accepting.

"I know. I'm going to go, but before I do can I just say that I found your partial Star Wars quote kinda hot."

Alexis shakes her head from side to side in part mock sadness but hints of a smile at his last boyish hurrah. The very things that attracted her to him. Echoes of her father but at the same time so clearly not. Another boyfriend that falls short.

"Goodbye Max."

"Bye Alexis. Maybe I'll see you around?"

She doesn't think so, at least not like Max implies so she doesn't respond as he opens the door and leaves.

Jane steps back into the room, head slightly askew in an unspoken question. Alexis doesn't answer that one, instead she has a question for her erstwhile bodyguard.

"So new found bestie, ready to go grab a drink and something to eat. While we're at it you can give me the low down on what the ground rules are."
spent shell-casings so to speak. Still the facts implicated a serving US Senator in campaign fund violations at the very least. Undeclared donations and given the offshore nature of some of the transactions, illegal ones as US law prevented campaign funding from non-US citizens or organisations.

Whoever had worked the figures had been an expert. But they had made one mistake. They had assumed that once deleted the bank records would be lost. They hadn't counted on the offsite backups. Multiple copies archived away. Somehow the data had been restored. Why data from 1998 to 2004 had suddenly been restored troubled both Sorenson and McCord but they didn't have an explanation.

But for the moment the mystery of the sudden restore of decades old financial information is with the technical investigation team back in DC. As well as ensuring that more than one copy of the tapes is taken into evidence.

Still the numbers – financial ones - don't add up. The sums of money flowing through the accounts don't even begin to match the public records for the campaign funds for one William H Bracken, then Assistant DA and bidding to become District Attorney back in 1998. There is far too much cash moving and a lot of it offshore. Banking regulation was much more lax then especially for those who had friends to manipulate the system.

Bracken had won after a number of highly respected opponents withdrew from the race. He stayed for five years making a name for himself with big (and successful) mob prosecutions. He resigned to campaign for the US Senate, and somehow Bracken had jumped ahead of the queue to become a candidate for the Senate election of 2004. A narrow win made him the junior Senator for the state of New York. Now in his second six-year term after a more comprehensive win in 2010, he remains the state's junior member but with powerful connections and reputation as a man not to be crossed.

Not that this phases McCord at all. She appears entirely dispassionate about the nature of their investigation. Will wants to ask lots of questions but over the last two days has learnt that he is best to wait for her, pushing only gets less not more information.

McCord has her jacket off, and Will Sorenson's top button is undone, the tie slightly is about as relaxed as they had been.

Pushing her tea cup away from her, McCord changes topics, and surprises him with his first name.

"Look Will, I know you're frustrated by lack of promotion opportunities in the FBI. It's even in your official record. So I'm going to lay our cards on the table.

"The AG office is looking to expand our group, specifically my team. What we are looking to do is add a couple more active field agents. We're general duties so the work changes a lot, but it is mainly political or national security. Very little straight or not so straight criminal stuff. That's still the Bureau's territory.

"The money is a bit better. Certainly more than a Special Agent in Charge makes and with greater responsibility and authority even as a team member. Sometimes you'll operate on your own, other times with one or more of us. Sometimes you'll take charge of other agencies but we mostly work alone.

"I won't sugar coat the downsides. Lots of travel, often short notice, politicians and diplomats, lots of compromise and sometimes things that won't sit well with you. Personal relationships strained, usually ruined to be honest.
"Finally there is burn out. Most of our agents last less than five years. At the end you get options including returning to your original service, or in some cases a desk job, usually in analysis or intentions for the odd one or two. Most retire or leave federal service at least.

"Professional ethics are paramount. No work relationships even outside of your team. No social media, no blogs. No life outside work really." McCord is blunt and to the point. Well Will couldn't say she sugar coated it. At all.

"So are you interested?"

"Why me?"

"You've shown a track record of putting the job first. Boston. Moving to Europe. Tying to advance and got good results. More recently you have worked some sensitive cases with tact and not a little fancy footwork. Finally you keep secrets. That's a big one. Too many people blab."

"Trying is right." Will can't help the bitter edge to his voice regarding his lack of promotion.

"I do understand. I've been there." He wonders about her past, and her path to here. How many years has she been in?

"We don't recruit often and it's by selection. We tap you on the shoulder, there is no job advert. Also not many repeat chances, usually a one-time deal."

Will is quiet, clearly thinking. Apparently McCord dislikes quiet introspection as she resumes.

"Like I said we've been looking to increase our numbers, mainly here in the East Coast and DC especially. We've been looking at suitable candidates but they are few and far between. Mainly federal agencies, but we've had a few cops on the radar too. One particular one here in New York. A homicide detective but she is in a high profile public relationship plus we don't' think she'd really fit the ethos we require to function effectively.

"Beckett. You were looking at Kate Beckett."

"Your former girlfriend? Yes we did."

"Why not?" He's no longer surprised by what they know but does wonder why McCord raised it.

"Her relationship with Richard Castle. Whilst he's not a major celebrity he gets his share of coverage, especially with his recent heroics. We need people who blend in and don't stand out. One looks alone she could have issues but her recent press conference was certainly confirmation that we can't use her no matter how good her skills are.

"Also remember the relationship rocker. We're not completely dispassionate. Our job would at the very least strain, if not ruin their relationship. The evidence is pretty categorical on that."

"Damn McCord you almost sound human."

She smiles somewhat wistfully at that. He didn't mean for it to anything other than light hearted. An apology forms on the edge of his lips but she shakes it off.

"Finally, there is a lot of grey in our jobs. Compromises, sometimes things less palatable and just occasionally a lot worse. It doesn't sit well even with those of us who have learnt to stomach it. Detective Beckett strikes me very much as justice-whatever-the-cost individual."
"Oh she is." He confirms. Too much probably Will thinks. But that's who she is, and God knows he could never change her. He suspects Castle might have done better but just how well is down to the woman herself.

"Oh and one final point. She's already - temporarily – badged as a federal agent for the DOJ."

"What?" McCord caught him with that one.

"Her boyfriend has managed to secure her a short term gig with an associated organisation that gets her federal credentials and a carry permit whilst she is on leave from the NYPD."

Will sits back suddenly pensive. There is clearly far more to Richard Castle than his jealousy tinged observations from years ago picked up. If he was honest, he knew that anyway. Kate had let him hang around all those years. She had told him things within months of meeting as he learned when they met up for the mob witness case, Things will had never really learnt from her, except by chance.

"She's working with Taylor Matthews isn't she?"

"Very astute Sorenson. But back to you."

McCord pauses and looks at him, wonders if Sorenson knew how obvious his refusal to mention Richard Castle was, but settles for shoulder shrugging to emphasise her question as she fixes her gaze on him.

Will looks back at her. Not backing down either. He finds he's surprising open to the idea and says so.

"Well to be honest it's a surprise more than anything. But I am interested. More than a little. Do I have until this gig is up to decide?"

"Maybe, but remember you don't know how long this gig is."

"You know what McCord I don't think you know either. This is far more complicated that first suspected and looks like being a major case."

McCord simply nods in acceptance of the agent's deductions and leans her head back towards the stacks of evidence. Time to go back to work. This is fun, this sort of detective work isn't common and she finds she misses it.

Richard Castle Website.

Rick's Ruminations - personal blog of Richard Edgar Castle

You've probably noticed I haven't posted much in here for a while. I've been pretty busy trying to enjoy the best that life can offer. Until the other week. Now I have slightly rocky road ahead before I can do that again. As ever I am humbled – okay just a bit – by the support of my readers and the public.

It is no secret that I have been shadowing and then consulting with the great homicide team at the NYPD's 12th Precinct. I am extremely fortunate to have worked with some of the city's finest officers. It truly has changed my life for the better. Despite my recent brush with death and injuries I hope to be able to return in some capacity, and continue to repay what I have been given the opportunity to participate in.
But if I don't I still count myself the winner – if there can be such a thing. 'Cause I got the girl! (She may well kill me for that, or at least twist my all too convenient ears).

Kate Beckett is extraordinary. This was my first and abiding public description of her. I stand by that today. She has overcome terrible personal tragedy and brushes (too close) with death to serve her fellow New Yorkers with distinction and honour where others have fallen by the wayside.

I count myself the truly lucky one to have been her partner for more than four years, and now to be in the best sort of partnership with her. We have been dating for a little over six months. I fully intend for it to never end if it is in my power to do so.

Occasionally even great people make mistakes. Sometimes they pick themselves up and carry on, sometimes they don't. We're all human. What we owe them – and ourselves - is the opportunity to try again or support them if they don't. Cops make mistakes and regrettably sometimes it involves great tragedy and loss. Perhaps more than anyone else cops understand this and yet every day they turn up for duty and stand up to serve our city and us, it's citizens.

Kate Beckett has given me the opportunity to be much more than I was, than I ever hoped to be. Corny but true. I am a better man because of her.

Please do her the courtesy of being able to continue to do the same.

We have been given an opportunity to great together, and for that I am forever grateful.

I fully admit that I've lived much of my - allegedly - adult in the public domain. Often a bit too willingly. But in the last few years that has changed. For the better I hope, and I trust we have found the proper balance. But just at the moment the harsh spotlight has fallen upon me and especially those I love.

Somewhere along the way we all lost track of our responsibilities, duty even, to be fair to one another including ourselves. That includes the press.

We can all do better.

Rick.

Ps I should mention Detectives Esposito and Ryan – least they accuse me of equating them to chopped liver – again!
Conundrums

Chapter Summary

A series of negative press articles target Kate and feeling under threat security is once again beefed up for the Richard Castle and his extended family.

Tuesday

After their confrontation with Jeff Beesley both Jim and Val had been obliged to return to their offices and actually produce work for their clients. Despite, or perhaps because of, the fractious internal politics, everyone at the firm was required to maximise their efforts on behalf of their remaining customers and potential clients.

Seemingly an interruption to matter they wanted to discuss, the distraction of work was actually beneficial giving both time to recover from the elevated emotions and tension. They breathed easier, especially once one of the PA's reported that Jeff had left the offices for an external meeting in the late afternoon, and wouldn't be back.

Jim had been unable to completely push away the troubling thought that somehow Jeff knew more than he said regarding Katie. The seemingly, careless, bitter words somehow implied that. The nagging, unanswered questions from her shooting still tormented him, and the thoughts continued to nibble at the edge of his concentration all day.

With all that in mind he had questions for Val once they met up at her apartment after work.

"Val, do you know who the politician or party that Jeff has lined up?"

"No, he hasn't said. Says it's big and national, something on a federal level. Massive potential to be more than fifty percent of our income stream according to Jeff."

Away from the office and with Val, Jim allows himself to drop the poker face and lets the surprise show.

"That would completely change the firm. I don't think I would like that."

Val nods and steps in to gently kiss her boyfriend.

"Me too Honey. Too many things don't add up."

Jim returns her kiss although somewhat distracted with a large part of his mind afire with her use of a pet name for him. Not that that he really objected. It was simply something new again, unfamiliar after so many years. But he forces his focus back to the events of the day.

"I'm concerned. I haven't been able to get past the suspicion that has been forming in my mind since the confrontation this morning. Why would he even care about my daughter? He's only met her once at that party years ago."

Shaking his head, he pulls away slightly from Val and runs a hand through his hair. Evidence of his concern and frustration clear on his face. Val reaches up to carefully cup his jaw and feathers a kiss
over his lips. This sneaks a smile from the man before his continues.

"Why did he know so much about Katie and her suspension? Also he knew about the latest press article even though he was in meetings prior to the boardroom."

Val snaked herself back into Jim's side and wrapped her arms around his midriff.

"I don't know but I do think that perhaps you should call your daughter and see how she is? Also check up on her man. I'll start a light supper."

"Good idea. But first I've been wanting to do this all day."

Twisting his body to face her, Jim cups both hands to her cheeks and brings his mouth back into contact with hers and kisses her rather thoroughly. Certainly enough to drive all thoughts of dinner or his daughter temporarily from his mind.

*God he's acting like a horny teenager!*

*Oh why had he waited so long to do this?*

*For the right woman of course.*

*He remembered something Rick had said when they met at the Old Haunt only weeks ago when Rick had gently teased some hints about Val from him and promised to keep it from Katie until Jim told her himself. 'Few people enough are fated to find their soul mate, the chances of it happening twice, well that's the Universe telling you to get off your arse and go for it.' He was right. Not that he would tell him that. The author had a big enough ego already although that was Katie's problem to deal with.*

Breaking the kiss a somewhat flustered Val pushed herself off.

"Call your daughter then come find me in the kitchen. I have a perfect idea for dessert."

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**Office of William H Bracken, Senator (j) for New York, Capitol Hill, Washington DC**

The office is classically fitted out. Very singular in its statement. A single massive desk dominates the room. An unlit computer terminal precariously positioned on the precipice of edge, significant if only by its obvious lack of use, unlike the telephone and pad that occupy the centre, clearly the familiar comfortable tools of the occupant.

Entering through the door without knocking, the slim, smartly dressed, mid-thirties male with the vague remnants of a younger man still apparent on his face walks quietly across the carpet and halts a few yards from the other occupant of the room.

"Excuse me Senator."

"Yes Matthew."

The Senator's long-time aide resumed his approach to the imposing antique desk and chair that dominated the far side of the office. The younger man having long ago become accustomed to the politician's mannerisms and lack of graces when not on show for the three P's – public, press, politicians.

"Sir, Mister Court is here."
There was no need to add it was important. The Senator's special projects consultant didn't appear without an appointment and certainly did not come to Capitol Hill unless the matter was of the utmost urgency.

"Well why isn't he in here?" Matthew Weston didn't react to the verbal barb, his face dispassionate, simply backed up and returned to the doorway to open it again and usher in the man waiting just beyond threshold and then he stepped out into the outer office and closed the door.

James Court – which unsurprisingly was not his birth name – appeared almost entirely non-descript or at the very least remarkable. Maybe late fifties or early sixties, approximately six feet tall, perhaps a touch over two hundred pounds, close cropped but not crew-cut, clean-shaven and smartly attired in a three-piece suit, muted tie and black shoes. His facial features were unremarkable, almost as if he had been cloned from an identikit collage. In short he blended in. Well, for Washington DC at least. Despite a near-two decade military career he didn't have the bearing of an ex-soldier, nor the arrogance of a lawyer or the insolence of lobbyist, and yet he looked like the epitome of a Capitol Hill insider.

"Hello James."

"William." It is a simple acknowledgement of respect contained in the name. Nothing more. The Senator appreciated the economy of words the other man possessed. And his ultra-calm demeanour. No matter what the situation requiring his expertise. And the situations he had resolved over the years.

"The Attorney General's office is running a covert investigation into your campaign finances in New York."

As ever straight to the point. A small frown is the only reaction as the seated man considers for a moment before asking.

"Do they have anything?"

"Unknown at this time. My source isn't that well placed." There is a slight shrug of c'est la vie by way of explanation, for now.

"What the hell started that off? They don't just poke around." The senator is not quite as relaxed as his initial response to the other man.

"More information is still pending."

"Well someone must have tipped them off but there is nothing for them to find. Or rather should be nothing for them to find."

"There isn't. We cleaned that up thoroughly. The whole New York operation was wiped clean years ago." Both men known the when and the why of the activities that had shut down and so methodically and deliberately erased all evidence. Or so they thought and had assumed until now.

There is also the fact that despite the Senator's federal role, New York remains the nexus of their operations, both their fortress and their weakness.

"How long before you can have more information on the investigation?"

"Depends when the field team report back in."
The Senator's eyebrows arch. *Ah, so his source is inside the AG's office but not an active agent. Or perhaps even on the AG's task force. No surprise.*

"Fix it."

James Court had known William Bracken for a long time. In other circumstances they might have been friends but regardless their mutual actions many years ago had left their lives and futures intertwined closer than most married couples. A mutual reliance and a shared destiny so to speak.

He nods but only in acknowledgement of the request, not affirmation that it will be carried out. He says as much too, albeit in a careful manner.

"It will require care. Direct measures would be counterproductive and not necessarily achieve the desired outcome." He pauses before continuing his cautious advice, already knowing that the other man would be frustrated. Bracken's desire for immediate results and direct action had not always paid off. Detective Beckett was merely a prime example of this.

"Look I'll be blunt William. They are effectively out of reach for us to directly touch in anyway. It is unlikely I would get the required expertise for action without disclosing the target and then the resources won't touch it when they know who they are being assigned."

"The money isn't the issue as you know." Both men knew that beyond the Senator's publicly documented wealth and influence, there far more resources available thanks to the very activities they were hiding.

"Look specialists, the ones who could do the job, survive by staying out of the sights of federal law enforcement. Especially now. Since 9/11 and the new information sharing, one of the consequences has been superior intelligence and analysis and not just of national threats. Dozens of serials killers and not a few contract killers have been caught. So we do the same and don't provoke closer examination especially at a federal level except where absolutely necessary."

And even then only used expendable assets for the most part. Cole Maddox was the exception but his vanity and innate ego had been the man's undoing.

"So I just do nothing and wait?"

"No. I didn't say that." But before he can continue, the Senator interrupts him.

"Is this linked to *HER*?"

James arched his eye at that. He had secretly wondered how long it would take for the Detective to be mentioned. Katherine Beckett had certainly become more of an effective nemesis than her mother ever was. Or at the very least protracted distraction. Especially now partnered up with Richard Castle. But in keeping with the second deal both had stayed away from his employer and any associated activity in the last six months. He had them under observation as he searched for the evidence she claimed to have. He voiced as much.

"Nothing we have indicates that this is the case. She has stayed away since May and we have seen nothing to suggest otherwise. Plus she appears entirely pre-occupied with her partner."

The Senator nods, dismissing that track for the moment. "Who then?"

"I suspect it is your former partners."

"They wouldn't dare!" Indignation shot through, almost like he was playing to the gallery or the
cameras. The other man remains impassive.

"Well to be fair William they did strongly warn against you progressing past the Senate as they feared the scrutiny of your shared past endeavours would bring too much attention on them. Becoming a potential candidate for President certainly is exceeding that boundary."

"I don't care for their restrictions." Or anyone else's.

"Bill." The use of his diminutive pulls the Senator up. James continues.

"I happen to agree with their assessment. I know you want immediate results and the security of knowing it is not a threat. But I can't give that to you. You just need to be patient and calm. Something you are not doing with your current shadow candidacy."

"I don't want to discuss this."

James ignores him.

"Beating your brother, Daddy's replacement heir, achieving more than him, recovering your rightful place as the head of the family, is blinding you to the risks you are taking. Remember how close you came to losing it all when Joanna Beckett was investigating? Or more recently with Vulcan Simmons?"

James' reference to the Senator's younger brother, David Bracken, soon to be CEO of the third largest private investment firm in the nation is spot on. He knows he is the better man, he merely wants the family and the rest of the World to acknowledge it. He leaves unmentioned that his father, William Bracken II, was already long dead so any one-upmanship was solely for the man himself. Vulcan Simmons was another matter.

"You said he is being taken care of. I want Vulcan gone."

"All in good time. We need him for a while longer. And he will be sorted once his usefulness is past. But it takes time to do properly and avoid any ties of anything back to your PAC and ultimately us."

"Any other updates whilst you are here?"

"Regrettably I have once again met with that idiot at the law firm in New York. Not a patch on his father. But he will suffice for now. Unsurprisingly he is having trouble getting sufficient acceptance from the other partners for the new political role for the firm despite the money.

"Just so long as we are able to get the accounts and billing in place. And also get our hooks into HER father." There is real bite in the last sentence, and James appreciates the bitterness the man feels for having to compromise and the fragile truce. Admittedly a truce that Kate Beckett and her partners have shown absolutely no sign of abusing. Unlike this side. Still the Senator's preoccupation with Kate Beckett was concerning. She was no more of a risk than many others and was for the moment, low priority, unless she was provoked. He said as much.

"Bill, I wish you would let that bit go. The risk from messing with Beckett's father for your own personal satisfaction could imperil our other more critical activities."

"Well it wasn't deliberate but what were the odds? Her father working at the one law firm we select for our fund processing." The Senator counters and chuckles and not in a humorous way.

"If she perceives any risk to her father, she may well react badly." The other man cautions.
"I don't care. I'm fed up with working at a snail's pace. I want action. I want results. And want those motherfuckers who pose a risk to me dealt with. I want to move forward and I want to have all the issues dealt with conclusively. No more deals or fucking compromises."

"We need to be cautious. Already that idiot Beesley has made some form of connection and if he can others could too."

"Well he needs a lesson in keeping his head down and mouth shut. Arrange a learning experience for him. Not too severe this time. We only need him for two years but I don't want him becoming discontent."

"Fine. I'll arrange for an object lesson for him. The material we have on him will keep him in check regardless."

The old soldier – not that he shared that with anyone - seems to consider something before speaking again.

"But to be honest I am more concerned about our old associates." The Senator nods.

"The Silva family are a direct threat to your campaign, and well to you. They have warned you against raising your profile outside the state. Your refusal to comply almost cost you your life. The Silva's are great survivors, and cunning. No one linked the assassination attempt to them. Even your FBI saviour didn't make the connection."

Another pause. The rigour in the seated man's face show the difficulty he has in dealing with the matter.

"They want to meet again."

"No!" This spat from the seated man's mouth.

Senator Bracken's fists tighten in recollection of the last ever face-to-face meeting with the elderly head of the Silva family. The man may have looked like a genial grandparent but there was steel and ire in him. Both men were unaccustomed to the position they found themselves in. Neither was used to being disobeyed or disrespected in any significant manner. The meeting had been acrimonious and the outcome for him nearly deadly when a car bomb almost killed him just days later. Only the quick thinking action of one of the security task force, an FBI Agent Sorenson, had saved him.

The standing man waited patiently. This was not unfamiliar to him. Eventually the Senator spoke again.

"The risks are pretty severe for me. What guarantees are there?"

"It will be the daughter and if we proceed, we'll be using a local hotel where we control the security. I believe it will be safe. They won't make another attempt on you. Either direct or indirect. Not for a while."

With the Senator making a slow deliberate nod of the head, James makes a mental note to check the Senator's calendar with Matthew and find some suitable dates. But the Senator interrupts his mental noting taking with a further question.

"How goes the task of locating their information cache?"

"Slow. But better than Beckett's. We have leads and a couple of inside people. We're having to rely
on Vulcan Simmons for much of it, and as you know he's somewhat easily distracted. But he does run a very tight operation. And he has been loyal over the years except for that one incident."

"Strange that. I would have thought he was another one who needed silencing at some stage but he had proven himself. Still we will close out that loop too when we no longer need him."

"Quite so. He disposed of another undercover cop trying to infiltrate the carriage service operation the other week. Thank Christ there are enough corrupt cops to prevent a real surprise being sprung. Our main concern is to stay away from federal level interest. We don't have enough pull outside of New York."

"I don't like the risk of exposure."

"Well you probably shouldn't have decided to take up drug trafficking as a means of building a fighting fund then."

"That's not appreciated James."

"It wasn't meant as a joke." But it is a muted point, the decision made and their fates sealed so long ago. With that the man starts to take his leave.

"Send Matthew back in and I want an update by Friday."

"Yes Senator."

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The Loft, Tuesday Night

They were in bed. Or rather Rick was in and Kate was on top of the covers in her cotton leggings and an over-sized Watchmen t-shirt borrowed from her partner.

He had lost track of how many items of his she had acquired. He had pretended very hard not to notice how many of his previous missing items had reappeared now that Kate had moved in. He had his suspicions about her proclivity regarding his borrowed clothing but he had surprised himself by not teasing her about it, instead taking solace in those nights apart that even then she choose to have something of him with her. And well she never made a point about the odd missing knickers, or camisole, or that pair of stockings, so he figured they were somewhat even.

Both had books out but were making a very poor play at reading. Rick simply bone tired at the end of the day as he had been every day since coming home. Kate on the other hand had been extra pensive since a phone call from her Dad.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Kate breaks the impasse that has lingered since they came in here.

"No."

"Okay" Kate nibbles her lower lip. "What if I wanted to talk about it?"

"Fine then."

"Damn you Rick Castle." She fights the urge to roll her eyes at his petulance.

"So you do want to talk?" He turns it back on her.

"Yes? No? I don't know." Exasperation showing in her voice. He remains silent, patiently waiting for her. After almost five years he knows this, knows her. Better than she knows herself.
sometimes. Certainly better than anyone since her mother.

"Look the Vice picture is nothing. You've seen me on ops in less and off duty welllll…." Her voice drops and instinctively his breath catches.

"Officer Beckett, I never!" His voice is in the game but the lack of wiggling eyebrows just one little sign of how much recovery was yet to be made.

"Stop being an ass for a minute Rick." But there is only humour and affection in it. No ire or even annoyance. He may be the clown on occasion but he's so clearly her own jester.

"I'm okay now. I'm more concerned about your reaction babe. What happened earlier wasn't good."

"I didn't want it to happen. I tried to rationalise it away but all the potential and possibilities just overwhelmed me. And I've not been sleeping great, the arm is uncomfortable and Christ those meds they gave me. I think I understand you reasoning for declining painkillers if you could. They scrambled me up and coming off them hurt worse.

"I know all those feelings too Rick."

"I know you do. I don't want either of us to have to handle that again. But if we do, it's never alone. Together. Okay?"

She nods. Swallows down and forces the question out.

"Did you want to see someone?"

"No. Not yet. I want to try together first. If that's okay?"

Both books long forgotten as she takes his hands before answering.

"Of course Babe." She kisses him and then snuggles into his left side.

Some minutes pass and then Rick speaks.

"Are you concerned about the threat?"

"No."

She elaborates.

"I don't think it is Bracken. His methods are usually direct and this is far too subtle and almost deliberately secondary. Like we're not the real target at all."

"You know you could be right. But if it is misdirection. Why and for whom?" Rick stares ahead before voicing the obvious.

"I still worry about him."

"Rick we have the deal. Even without him we seem to get in enough trouble. But I don't know why I am being targeted."

"Sorry no crazy theories spring to mind."

"S'okay Babe. I'll let it slide this time." Wiggling her hip against his, she speaks again.
"You know I've missed this."
She doesn't explain further and there is no need as her partner knows her.
"As ever it is a pleasure to build theory with you Detective."
"Not Detective. At least at the moment. Remember?"
"Oh I remember lots of things. Firstly you'll always be my Detective. And secondly you'll always have me. Remember that." He cranes his neck forward to kiss her deeply.
Kate responds for a minute but slowly breaks the connection and somewhat breathlessly responds.
"Oh I do too. But I also remember very specific medical instructions. No excitement and elevated heart-rate for at least another week."
"Spoilsport!"
"Just think of it as a rain check. An IOU even if you want."
"Can I get that in writing?"
"What you don't trust me?!"
"NO! That's not what I …." As Rick fumbles for the words, she smiles up at him archly.
"So, so easy!"
She kisses him just to clear up that she is only messing – gently – with him.
"You ready to sleep?"
"Yeah, I think so."
"Good night Rick. I love you."
With that Kate hits the light switch by the bedside table. Rick did have a clapper – naturally - but after some interesting illumination moments during some energetic coupling, they had decided to disable the clapper and stick to more traditional methods of light control.
"Until tomorrow Kate. Love you always."
As Rick drifted off Kate made herself promise that she would talk to him about her Dad's phone call. Forcing it from her mind she squeezed her eyes closed and willed herself to sleep.

**Wednesday morning, Boston, Ma**

He looked exactly like he was to everyone who knew him. Or thought they did. Late thirties, slightly overweight, moderately unkempt hair, a touch of stubble. All that equals mainly sedentary, IT worker. A coder for hire, blogger and genial nerd. He had found that confirming expectations and stereotypes defused suspicions and opened doors faster than anything else.

Of course that wasn't everything about him. Starting with the reason why the native of New York was currently in Boston.
He had come here to avoid the potential for physical violence in his home town.

His employer(s) was or were unhappy with the lack of progress with the assignment. He had demanded a very large fee with a substantial upfront payment. This had been delivered without quibble but accompanied with a blunt assertion that non-performance would be very adverse for his health. Given that they were Italian Mafiosi there was a fair degree of weight behind that threat.

He'd been here two days. Ostensibly catching up with friends and contacts whilst all the time looking over his shoulder.

So it was with some relief that the phone call from that fool Miles Gold at the New York Banking Commission had confirmed the Feds had finally got their act into gear and begun investigating. Even better it was the Attorney General's special unit investigating.

This alone tipped him off that the target was a politician and clearly a federal one at that. Moreover, the politician was obvious corrupt and significantly so if the raw data was to be believed accordingly to Miles Gold. The idiot had actually checked to ensure the right information had been restored. There were millions passing through the accounts. Some going offshore and others through shadow accounts.

A couple of simple searches had narrowed down the handful of potential suspects to one. Senator William H Bracken of New York. He had been district attorney back then. He wondered if the Senator knew he was a target. He imagined that Bracken's people – the Senator surely had networks within networks, especially if the level of corruption was to be believed - would pick up word of the probe. He smiled in satisfaction at the thought of their frustration at not being able to touch the investigators. Only a rabid fool would try and cross the AG's special team. They had some accomplished operatives and specialists in many fields including his own.

Sitting back he slid the SIM card from the cheap (burner) phone and dropped it into the small bag that contained a ready to mix solution that would melt the plastic and trace elements of metal in seconds. The phone would get an acid bath later. And just like that any link to Miles Gold was gone.

Thank God that the man knew nothing about him, even a name, of which he had many but two epitomised him.

In the grey and darker corners of the Internet one moniker was mentioned with almost reverence by some. Nomad. Hacker would be an understatement of what he could do. He considered himself a grey hat. A neutral wizard in the ever expanding but increasingly monitored digital realm.

Nomad was certainly not the sort to openly challenge authority. No WikiLeaks for him. No ranting from the apparent anonymity of the Web. Or under siege in foreign embassies. Doing nothing to invoke the ire of authorities and remain below the threshold of their interest. Everyone was on their radar but only idiots sought to make themselves the targets for investigation. Or worse.

Yet despite his low-key approach, his exploits were legend for some. Sure he kept his 'shows' to a minimum, and he mainly picked on corporations and banks exposing their duplicity and should-be-illegalities.

Certainly he'd done nothing to attract the concentrated attention of Federal authorities. They were becoming surprising effective and it would be a fool who didn't take their new competence seriously. He did. Hence he was still unidentified and free.

Authorities may have been slow to recognise the paradigm shift the Internet bought but a number
of nations were scarily up-to-speed now including his own. If the populace thought the NSA was scary they were sadly mistaken.

Of course Nomad didn't actually make him anything other than kudos. He had an alternative alias for the more pecuniary and prosaic needs.

Today he wasn't Nomad.

Today he was Nimrod.

The great hunter.

Digital assassin.

Stealing information, manipulating information, planting information, finding information. All for a price from a carefully vetted customer base. Well mostly a carefully selected and safe customer base.

His current assignments were definitely towards the uncomfortable end of the spectrum he covered.

His choice of client alone was risky. The Mob were surprisingly good payers but expected, no demanded, results and tended to view less than totally success with a great degree of dissatisfaction. Hence his current precautionary relocation to Boston.

Then there was the targets.

The New York Banking Commission were easy. He had an inside mole after it had taken less than two days to find and compromise Miles Gold sufficient to persuade him to assist with enough information to give him an effective knowledge of their IT infrastructure and security. Then he had simply called the service desk and made a request.

His instructions from the client had been clear. The NYBC assignment simply needed the banking data from a now defunct bank from 1998 – 2004 restored to the live production system. There it would be discovered by the automated auditing tools run by the various bodies that monitored financial institutions.

The NYPD information systems on the other hand were nowhere near as easy.

Fortunately some light-touch social engineering got him the access to the user ID he needed for the NYPD personnel systems. Then it was a matter of manipulating the IT support process to get copies of the data. This is where the NYPD project got trickier. With his years of experience and some simple acting research and brazen confidence he had been able to pass himself off as an IT worker requesting a set of backup tapes to be sent to the DR site. Sure enough the data storage firm had complied and he had simply intercepted them at the entrance, the low paid courier delivery driver caring for nothing more than getting back in his van and off to his next job.

Restoring the data had been more problematic as he didn't know the full specifications of the actual NYPD production system. But once he accessed the tape media he found the backup log stored on the final tape. Using that information he reverse engineered the storage specifications and after a day and a bit he had managed to create a large enough disk array to host all the data volumes.

Then came the matter of restoring from the backup tapes. To say it had been time consuming was significantly understating things as the recovery process first required the full weekly backup restored, then the online database backup and then finally the transaction log archive restored and
replayed. Unlike the NYPD he didn't have a tape array for the restore and had to manage with a single tape drive connected over SCSI. The throughput with the single tape drive was a fraction of the performance of a disk or tape array and also required manual media changes compounding the time and frustration. All in all it had taken the best part of five days to get the system restored. It also meant he couldn't return the media back to the data storage firm without arousing suspicion. At some point this might raise a flag but he was confident the security footage would be overwritten sufficiently to prevent any possibility of identification and the courier wouldn't be able to pick him out naked in a line-up.

With the operating system and data volumes restored his next task was to be able to access the server. Obtaining root level access was relatively straightforward as he had physical access to the local disk and once he had that he was able to start make the necessary changes to the configuration files to allow him to start the application and database. Fortunately these used local accounts and not any directory based ID's and worked first time. It then took several goes to get the application started, requiring tuning to cope with the mismatch in hardware between the actual system and his facsimile.

Despite his lack of a copy of the NYPD directory services (Active Directory) he knew the HR system stored a cached copy of the LDAP directory on the system for use by the web frontend. From a virtual client he then used a browser to connect to the web front-end using his borrowed user ID and password. He was able to logon and access the HR records of the six police officers and one civilian consultant requested.

The stolen user ID had sufficient access to information to meet his client's requirements. He had been unable to get past the security blocks for the restricted content which was flagged Top Secret or higher. Strangely enough it was one officer and the civilian who had the most redacted content.

Having exported the requested information, he shut the virtualised DR instance down. Taking the information he split it into the two groups requested by the client. Three former officers in one group and three current officers and the civilian in the other.

He then encrypted each data set and compressed each into an archive file which he posted to an online storage service.

Naturally he had been curious as to what else he might find on the system but his self-control was good. That and his previous near-misses with over-indulging his curiosity nearly landing him in serious trouble was enough to encourage his cautious approach.

Once he had confirmation the client had retrieved the information he had secure wiped all the disk systems and magnetically wipe the backup tapes before dissolving them in acid. Visiting a couple of computer fairs he had offloaded the hard disks randomly for cash over the course of a couple of days. No one was putting those volume sets back together. Sure he could have physically destroyed the hard drives but there was no need and he did pocket more than two thousand dollars for the parts.

All he needed now was some word from his erstwhile employers that they were content with his execution, and then he could return to New York.

The Loft

It had been a slow start to the day only punctuated by Kate's early rise to use the building's gym, and a quick phone call from Alexis where the still teen had enthused over her new friend.
Around mid-morning Rick wandered into the kitchen in search of a snack, finally glad his appetite was returning, even if the muted taste in his mouth still lingered. His mother was sitting at the brunch bar, a cup of tea and the paper to hand.

On seeing her son, Martha had risen and wrapped him up in a hug.

"Not that I don't appreciate it, but I'm not dying Mother."

"No, but you almost did. Again." More than a hint of accusation in the angst.

There is nothing he can say to respond to that. He suddenly feels bone tired again, and tears creep to the edge of his sockets. And she sees.

"Oh Richard." She wraps herself back around him. Memories flood back of all the times before. Being wrapped up securely in his mother's embrace with the scent of Chanel and not a care for her vividly resplendent wardrobe so long as she made him better.

"Thank you Mother." Such a simple statement but one which conveyed so much for more for both. Martha released him and stepped back to resume her seat, all the time keeping her gaze on her son.

"You know Richard that you may be able to handle being cooped up here for an extended period but I don't think Katherine can."

"You know I think you're right. And I'll admit to being a little stir crazy myself. Although the drizzle looks like it may have driven almost all of the press off so perhaps getting out might be on the cards soon."

"That and some scandal involving reality TV" replies his mother as he catches sight of some candid with half-naked figures – aren't they always - from the gossip section of the paper she waves at him.

"Well thank God for reality TV then. But you are right Mother."

"I am?" He's caught her by surprise but as ever she quickly recovers. "Of course I am."

"But it is already in hand Mother. Kate will be going out today anyway. She's just getting ready now. Clare is coming to take her for some orientation for Taylor Matthews and some weapons practise I think."

"Oh. That sounds interesting." She sounds almost disappointed.

"Yes Mother, it's a real shame you won't be able to witness my girlfriend and Clare interacting."

"What about you Richard?"

"I don't have any concerns. I don't have any secrets anymore Mother. Or at least I probably won't if they talk but regardless I trust them both, with my life if necessary. So there shouldn't be a problem. Should there?"

Suddenly uncertain. His mother smiles and that does not nothing to reassure him.

"I'm certain Katherine has questions for Clare. Perhaps Clare has some in return?" She smiles archly. "Anything you don't want them to share."

Through gritted teeth he asserts his confidence. "Well Mother, Kate shares with Doctor Parish, so I
really do have no more secrets."

His mother laughs before continuing.

"Okay so long as you are certain." The vivacious red-head pauses and then asks. "Will she back later?"

Rick is tilts his head down and aims his best intimidatory stare at her.

Martha blinks but once again closes the distance to her son, and suddenly looks so serious.

"Well I do want to discuss something with both of you."

"What did you do Mother?"

"I may have arranged for some minor renovations at the Hamptons."

"What!? Why?"

"You need to get away Kiddo. You both need time just for yourselves."

*Escape just the two of them?! That's actually a good idea. Kate doesn't have to be in New York.*

"Oh I know the local police are no good at investigating murders but they are at least very good at ensuring the privacy of their residents."

"I don't disagree Mother but where do renovations come into it?"

"Well you remember that lovely conversion they did for Frankie? I have the same building engaged. They are putting in an exercise area and equipment for your rehabilitation and I am sure Katherine can use it too."

"Nothing else?"

Martha looks back at her son, gazing into those steely blue agates, suddenly reminded of the stubborn teenager who raged against the injustices of the world, and couldn't be budged from whatever decision he had made, right or wrong. After Alexis, that stubborn streak had been replaced, eventually, by the easy-going father with the playboy charade on the side. Since meeting Katherine he has changed again and this time there is steel in him and the stubborn streak is back but this tempered by his experiences. She is so very proud of him.

"No. Of course not Richard. I just wanted you to be able to get away together but also continue your recovery. You've not had much privacy especially in the last two weeks."

"Okay then. Thank you Mother. It may well be a very good idea, so long as I can persuade Kate to go. Do you know when will the work be completed?"

"By Friday they said. And Richard, that girl will go where-ever you go my boy. She is fully committed to this."

At her wave of the hand at him and the whole Loft, Rick turns the conversation around on her.

"How are you Mother?"

"I am sleeping better."
"And?"
"What?"

"Really? We both know each other too well sometimes Mother."

"Well I have been going to see Doctor Clemens. I have another appointment on Thursday."

At the mention of her psychiatrist he gives a slight nod of appreciation.

"Good. Does it help?"

"I think so. I still haven't been able to talk to Alexis. She deserves a chance to complete her transition to adulthood without additional load of my issues on top of her own trauma she is already experiencing. Not that you should feel guilty about that. You've sacrificed so much for her. It's your time now."

"I hope so. But I do honestly feel guilty about that. But the choices I face now, they're so conflicted. I'm not the same person I was a few years ago, and what is at stake is so much more."

After a pause he corrects himself. "Everything."

"Would you give it away? Really do that if Alexis asked? I don't think so. And you shouldn't."

"You're correct Mother. Not yet anyway. But down the track I think we have some ideas about how things might work in future." He won't mention more children and how they'll handle that. He's quite prepared to be Mister Mom again but not if that means Kate is out there without him. But once again he's getting too far ahead of himself. But his Mother knows anyway.

"Well let's get you healthy again and on the way to making me some more grandbabies. You know I think I may even be ready to be a grandmother this time!"

"Mother!"
Clearing the Air

Chapter Summary

Kate has been recruited to work for Taylor Matthews whilst she is on leave from the NYPD. This gets her a gun permit, but what else? Time to find out.

The Loft

Clare had appeared at the Loft's door sometime before eleven and Kate was waiting. Dressed in dark slacks, a white button down (‘sexy’ Rick had said in that deep, bedroom voice of his that left her tingling), dark blue blazer, three inch heels on her black patent leather boots and an overcoat. Beside her was a bag with her gym gear, pistol case and ammunition. Rick had greeted Clare warmly, and then slowly and deliberately kissed Kate goodbye with a ‘see you for dinner?’ reminiscent of a married couple. Observed all the time by the other woman with a wry smile and small shake of the head.

Kate had wordlessly followed Clare as they exited the building through the service bay and into a Toyota hybrid mini-van with dark tints and a driver introduced only as Clark. Kate and Clare had sat up back during the trip downtown to the offices maintained by Taylor Matthews.

During the trip there had been minimal conversation leaving Kate alone with her own thoughts.

Earlier.....

She had woken early that morning and unable to sleep further had gone to the building gym – fortuitously empty – to work out her nerves whilst Rick slept on. She had a bundle load of issues flying around in her skull and a good thirty minute run on one of the treadmills had at least distracted her from those, or most of them anyway.

Returning she had time to shower before Rick awoke and then they had a simple breakfast before Kate had assisted Rick with his rehab exercises. Whilst she had Rick distracted with his routine and associated discomfort, she took the opportunity and probed him on Clare Dunne.

"Kate, Clare is a friend. But also a consummate professional. She’s worked for Taylor Matthews since leaving the Army and that’s how I met her. I followed her around for a couple weeks learning what a security consultant does. We became friends. Entirely platonic I have to stress.

"I've trusted her with security for Mother, Alexis, myself. Still do. She did an assignment guarding Alexis for a couple weeks a few years back in LA. She does security training for them most years, usually up in the Hamptons."

"So you've never been interested in her? As a conquest? As a muse?"

"No. Wait? Are you jealous?" He had actually laughed then, and Kate had been tempted to force his shoulder a little harder as he stretched his arms about his head.

"God you have no reason to be insecure. For a start Clare holds the all-time record for turning me
"down flat."

"Oh."

"Yes 'Oh' doesn't really cover it. Her first words to me were 'I'm a lesbian Mister Castle, I know your reputation. I'm also Special forces trained, and if you want any chance of being able to live up to your reputation in future, you'll behave, and treat me with the respect that someone who could cut your balls off without compunction deserves.'

"Really, those were her first words to you?"

"Exactly those. She wasn't long out of the Army then and it showed. So why are you insecure?"

"I'm not. Well perhaps a little. There is so much about your past I still don't know Rick. Clare appears out of nowhere, you've never mentioned her and it obvious there is a story. One I don't know."

"Kate, I've told you the big things, the important things, and we've share our pasts and talked about our hopes for the future. I'll continue to share. All you need do is ask."

"I know and I do trust you, but I sense there is a connection between the two of you."

"Yes but only friendship. Look I'll admit that when I meet Clare I was interested in dating her. But not just for sex. Because she was interesting. She had a story, but it turns out it wasn't particularly one I could use much of. Too much of it was classified. Really classified, as in visit from the men in black time. And well any romantic or frankly sexual link was out."

"Why did you not see much of her for so long? I hadn't heard of her until the hospital."

"Well firstly Gina hated her. Might still do. Clare can be a little intransigent when she wants to be. And well Gina was never the client."

"Can't imagine why."

"Lots of reasons but mainly because she was my friend. There was never anything romantic or physical but we had in-jokes and little routines. In hindsight not my brightest move to parade those in front of Gina. I had got so used to Alexis being so mature and accepting of Clare I never adjusted for Gina. One of many things I did wrong or didn't do in that marriage."

"Anyway, Clare is a good person, and had kept her distance for most of the marriage, and before the marriage was over she started spending a lot of time in California helping run operations there."

"Then Clare moved to LA full-time the year before I met you and didn't return until earlier this year. We sort of conversed a few times and emailed and we saw each other on the summer breaks too. If only because Clare always came back to run the annual safety training for Mother and Alexis. Remember the 'Spa Days' that mentioned back in hospital. It is code for personal safety training for female clients. Well Clare is one of the main instructors for those. And well summers were always the time we managed to spectacularly screw things up and didn't communicate or share so it is in part why Clare never came up."

"But we're past that now Rick."

"Yes we are. So Kate I have to ask if you are okay with my friendship with Clare? I will drop it if you want, nothing is more important to me than you. Clare would understand."
Kate hadn't even hesitated.

"Babe, no of course not. I couldn't ever ask that of you. I don't want to ask it of you. I guess I'm just curious. But she's your friend."

Rick had smiled and simply responded.

"Well ask her then. Clare won't lie to you. It's one of her best character traits. I've never met someone as dedicated to the truth as Clare Dunne. You never know she might be your friend too. But at the moment she's your boss as well."

"I hadn't thought of it that way."

"Well now you do."

"Okay. But Rick I do have something else I want to talk to you about."

"Last night we my Dad called he had some disturbing news. His firm is looking to revamp its income stream and has been approached to provide services for a Federal political campaign and handle legal matters for some PAC or SuperPAC."

"You don't think its Bracken do you?"

"I don't know but there's more than a chance. Dad said Val was told it is Federal politics, and new campaigns and representing one or more SuperPAC's. Surely there would be a New York link or why not use a DC firm? Also why Beesley, Drummond and Wax? They've never done political stuff before. Why now?"

"Well we let Taylor Matthews know and then we sit tight and do nothing. We've been honouring our end of the deal."

"You don't think we're being naive do you?"

"Maybe, but I don't know what else to do at the moment."

"Me neither Babe. But one last thing concerned my Dad. He said that the boss, Jeff Beesley seemed to know quite a bit about me and my recent issues in the press. He has no reason to.....unless....."

"Oh. You don't think do you?" Rick couldn't actually phrase the question but Kate understood.

"Don't know. But we'll stick to the plan. Now I need to get ready before Clare gets here."

Manhattan Business District.

Exiting the minivan outside a fairly new office tower, Kate noticed that the Taylor Matthew's offices were extremely close to the address of the Richard Castle Enterprises offices. She remarked on it to Clare.

"Yes and pretty much most of the business in New York have their headquarters around here as well. This is where most of our customers have their offices so this is where we are too. Come on up. It's not a big place but it has comfy furniture and two secure rooms. I'll give you a run through the place and then we'll get the induction stuff out of the way."

Having collected coffees from a shop in the lobby they had gone up to the floor that hosted the
offices. There is no one on reception so Clare has used her ID card and biometrics to gain access and opening the heavy glass door, they pass straight through the small reception area with the Taylor Matthew's signage and head into the conference room, Clare starting to speak as they do so.

"One of things we'll sort out of the next few weeks is your ID and office access. Although you will probably be working remotely when you are on assignment. The offices here are mainly for show and to provide a convenient base of operations for when we visit our clients. We rarely have them come here."

Dropping their bags down, they settled into chairs opposite one another.

"Look Kate I appreciate this could be a little uncomfortable for you but I have some additional questions I need to cover off with you as well as the formal induction. Likewise I'm sure you've got some questions for me."

"Before you begin and just so you know, Taylor Matthews recently performed a security and background check on you. Mister Castle wasn't specifically informed, in fact as far as I am aware he doesn't know. It was initiated by us and was not as the request of him or his companies. This is Standard Operating Procedure but we would like you to be aware of it. We do periodic security checks on all employees from management down.

"I don't have anything to be concerned about sharing. You're aware of my suspension and the fact I briefly quit the NYPD earlier this year?"

"Yes. That isn't a concern for us. I can't discuss other team members but it would be safe for you to assume that given their experience and records most have fallen foul of petty bureaucracy at some stage in their careers. That said we don't take criminals, or those who don't meet our strict criteria."

"In turn we look for experienced, smart veterans of law enforcement or the military, and just occasionally outside of those fields. We want people that are good team players but also capable of running solo. Integrity is our biggest thing and we prize honesty and loyalty above other traits.

"And I fit the bill?" *Kate can't help wonder how much of this is Rick Castle's influence.*

Clare looks at her. It is a direct, piercing near-stare, and Kate doesn't break their eye contact.

"And you're curious as to whether it is your boyfriend who got you the job rather than your skills and experience?"

Kate nods.

"I won't lie. We wouldn't have approached you now without Rick's request from earlier this year. But only because we don't recruit individuals who are still in active service. In May of this year you weren't. And this time we're skirting along the edges.

"Kate, you've got quite a record. Baring the suspension and some minor infractions during training and as a rookie, your NYPD service record is about exemplary as I have seen. Your closure rate and the successful prosecution percentage put you in the top two percent of law enforcement nationally. It has you on the radar of federal agencies too."

"Thanks." She's too shocked by the last fact to ask how Taylor Matthew's knew that.

"I'll frank. You'd be a borderline candidate for us. Your fixation on your mother's case would raise a big flag. The fact that you put it aside when you began a romantic relationship with Rick Castle is why you are here now. Rick has a lot of pull with Taylor Matthews but not that much. The decision
was Derek and Tim's back in May and mine now as I run New York field operations."

"Understood. That seems fair."

"Kate, the Castles are a very important client for Taylor Matthews. Possibly our single most important. Not in pure financial terms but because of their history with the company. Rick bought Tim and Derek together and helped found the firm.

"After Rick was shot, here in New York there was myself plus two full teams of four working in pairs on twelve hour shift protecting Rick and Martha and Alexis. We had several specialists involved. Also in LA we had at least one team plus other specialists, supervisors on the case plus head office were involved. Taylor Matthews is not a large firm – this is a substantial asset deployment and impacting other clients. Not a compliant simply facts."

"Understood. How important are they? I would die for him, for Alexis and Martha too for that matter. Would you?"

"Yes. Firstly it is a professional risk we take. Taylor Matthews are extremely careful but sometimes you can't prevent it and we have lost people or had serious permanent disabilities. You need to understand that."

"But for myself I would put my life on the line for Rick because he is my friend. He's been my friend longer than he's known you. This isn't a competition but I need you to know that I have had Rick Castle's back for a long time. Same goes for his family. We have a level of comfort and friendship, near intimacy that some find disconcerting. Certainly his last wife, Gina Cowell did.

"Kate, I imagine you might have done, or arranged for, a background check on me. Is there anything you want to ask or say?"

"Actually Clare I didn't. That would be an abuse of authority. Rick gave me some information and I trust him. But I am very curious about your friendship."

"I won't cover too much of that now as I want to complete the induction before we head out for some appointments. But I'll say this. I'm a lesbian. Absolute. I have never had intercourse with a man. Not even Richard Castle could tempt me."

Kate half-smiles at that and Clare lets her official business face slip equally slightly.

"He told me as much."

"Oh. Did he tell you the first thing I said to him?"

"Yes. Word for word probably."

"So you understand I am not threat to you." Clare suddenly sits forward and her gaze intensifies.

"Unless of course I fancy you."

Kate rolls her eyes and gently shakes her head in admonishment.

Clare laughs. "Oh well played Beckett. God you have no idea how disconcerting that is when people fall for that. I don't know why non gay people believe we are threat and want to come on to them. Maybe they think gay people have so much more sex than them?"

Kate keeps her own counter observation to herself. Hmm she really didn't know Rick then!
Then Clare is sitting back in the chair.

"Sorry time to get my boss head on. I need to run you through your Taylor Matthew's induction and get you up to speed on a few things."

Kate switches back to Cop-mode. It is entirely instinctive now. Half-the-time she isn't even aware that she does it but Rick has told her how effortless and natural it appears. Many times.

"Right firstly, you're no doubt curious about what sort of work we have in mind for you? It will be primarily research and review. Often you'll be doing analysis for field teams, sometimes they will be on active operations. Hours wise it will be variable but will still give you enough time to care for Rick and I would expect not more than twenty in a week often less or sometimes nothing. Remuneration is similar to your current NYPD rate but our pension, health and life insurance cover is superior."

"Understood. I wasn't actually concerned about the money."

"Kate for the record this isn't some sort of cover to get you a weapons permit. It might have started as that concept, but this is serious work and you are expected to be professional and deliver. That's not going to be an issue is it?"

"No. Absolutely not."

"Good. Now I'll run you through our remote working process and get you set up with your laptop, phone and biometrics and two-factor authentication."

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Brooklyn

It takes just under an hour to run through the induction and for Kate's head to be swimming with new information. Taylor Matthews' equipment especially the technology is so much advanced than the NYPD's. See could see the attraction of working for a firm like that. But there is little time for her organise and to let the new knowledge settle-in as they are back in the mini-van and are soon heading across the bridge into Brooklyn.

It only takes a few minutes once over the bridge and then the mini-van is pulling over. At an indoor range. It's not particularly auspicious but then in New York there are only a small number of legal ranges and those that remain open are not particularly profitable nor high-profile by choice and necessity.

"Welcome to the Metropolitan Rod & Gun Club. They have six fifty-foot booths with electric target carriers." Clare announces.

Kate nods. The place is quiet with only a mid-aged man at the counter and no other customers visible. Clare nudges her forward.

"Let's get you signed in and then down to the range and see how you go with the P229. Okay?"

"Sure. I show them my Federal ID right?"

"Yes. I'll use mine too so we don't appear out of sync. I've also got a New York license as well."

The place was clean but obviously old, and the target booths were just the same. Kate is curious as to why they are here and voices it once the man has left them alone in the range, seemingly
satisfied two Federal agents don't require any further supervision.

"Why here? I could have gone to the NYPD training facility at in the Bronx. It will be great when the new Academy with the indoor range at College Point opens."

"Sure we could, but remember what we've told you about low-key?"

Kate nods, carefully keeping her face neutral. She's remembers that but quite why she can't use a NYPD range doesn't click.

"Taylor Matthews is very low key. We have a very loyal customer base but don't advertise or make a splash. The same goes for our employees. We also don't broadcast our Federal credentials."

Clare looks at Kate.

"In short we don't go in for Robocop moments. No big scenes. No big ass canon blowing chucks on out of targets. Showing up others or provoking questions we don't want to answer.

"Given that press conference pretty much the whole of New York and beyond know you're on a service break, especially within the NYPD. Which means you have no badge, and probably therefore no guns. Those at the Precinct certainly would know this and the academy as well. So you can't just rock up in possession of a concealed service pistol and start firing away. Even flashing your Federal ID would only raise more questions."

Kate takes a second and blinks before wordlessly acknowledging the other woman.

Clare waits for a moment and then continues seeking confirmation.

"Is that an issue?"

"No. I mean that I use a gun as tool for my job. I'm more than capable with it but I'm not a weapons junky. Certainly don't need to make a show of it. I just want to get familiar with the P229 as I never shot one. I did have a P226 as my first NYPD service weapon though."

"Good. The two are very similar. Let's get setup. I'll just observe for a bit, but I did bring two of my guns and some extra ammo."

Despite the warning, the first time she fires her new P229, the muzzle blast is a bit of a shock. Even with the eye-protectors. The noise is not too great, the ear protectors muffle the worst of it, but there is actually a small flash akin to a flame from the muzzle. Clare had warned her about that.

Dropping her hands so that pistol is still pointed down range but not at the target hanging at thirty-feet, Kate looks down range following her first shot. Frowns. High and right. Maybe if the target was from the Eighties and in possession of really large shoulder pads, otherwise she hit thin air. At thirty feet! Damn it!

Taking another breath, she tamps down on the disappointment, centring herself, she raises her hands, brings the weapon up and aligns the sights and squeezes off another shot. She doesn't lower the weapon again, adjusts and pulls the trigger once more. And again. Crescendo building she empties the first magazine and ejects it, slapping the next in with barely a pause.

It didn't too long before she had shot through her five magazines. Now they needed reloading.
Returning the pistol to the table with the slide locked open, and chamber clear, Kate bends down to collect the few casings on the floor. Most were caught in the scoops that sit either side of the table for that exact purpose. Whilst still bent down she reached into the bag for a box of ammunition.

Standing, she drops the spent casings into the scoop and pulls the lid off the box of ammunition. With years of practice she smoothly feeds the rounds into the magazines.

During this timeout to reload, Clare steps back into the booth.

"So what did you think Beckett?"

"Not bad. Nice size and grip. Good sights. Weight is okay, and trigger is good. The muzzle blast takes some getting used to, just like you said. Recoil is fine. This range is too short to tell if the flatter trajectory makes much difference. But yeah the muzzle flash is something else."

"Yeah well that is about the only downside of the .357SIG. There is a pronounced muzzle blast and flash compared to 9 mil or even forty cal Smith & Wesson. Most non-nine millimetre users prefer the forty calibre configuration over the slightly smaller round."

"You don't?" Kate is curious.

"It was a conscious choice based on some experience in the early days. I don't mind shooting any of the larger calibres from nine millimetre up. I have come to appreciate the .357SIG round though, especially on the slightly smaller frame of the P229. Also I'm good out to about fifty metres with this configuration, even with the shorter barrel on the two-two-nine."

Kate can't help the involuntary whistle that leaves her lips. Fifty metres?! One hundred and fifty feet is damn impressive with any handgun. Three times the distance on this range, and she had only shot at a thirty-feet, a fifth of that range so far.

Whilst Kate has been distracted, Clare has hit the target carrier return button and the now perforated target whistles down to the booth.

"Let's have a look at your groupings."

As the target carrier glides to a stop Kate is fairly pleased upon closer inspection. With only the first miss, the rest at least hit the target. Whilst the groupings are not as even as she was scoring with her Glock she is happy, especially as she has eight years with Glocks and less than thirty minutes so far with the Sig. Despite this almost all impacts are in the high scoring zones.

"Not bad."

"Need a lot more practice. Takes a little getting used to but I'm pretty sure I could come to like it."

"You know Rick has a Sig too?"

"No I didn't. I mean he's mentioned guns in the past, and I know he is a good shot, but the only guns of his I've seen are antiques or collectables. I know he has at least one muzzle loader and he has mentioned a Civil War revolver. Although at the hospital something was mentioned about weapon safes and pistols."

Clare nods. "He actually does have a few modern pistols which are secured in safes at various residences and have the appropriate licenses as well. Oh and not to mention the few antique weapons he has as well."
"Umm how many is a 'few'?" Kate well knows that Rick for all his image often understates things.

"Well to be honest, I don't know for sure." Clare pauses as if mentally counting and then continues.

"Vintage or classic weapons wise there is a genuine Colt 1851 Navy, he also has a replica of that I believe. Best used for scaring Alexis' boyfriends." Now that's something Kate can believe.

"He has a classic World War Two vintage Colt 1911A1 complete with presentation box and service history. Oh and some modified replicas as well, including one for some show about space cowboys."

Kate knows about the 1911, she has seen it in his safe in the office and Rick took it out and showed her a few months back. It hasn't been fired for years, although Rick keeps in it good working order. He is very proud of it. It had belonged to a Private James Fredrick Ryan, a 101st Division paratrooper from Minnesota who made three combat jumps – Normandy on D-Day, Arnhem, and the Rhine as well as fighting in the Ardennes and all the way to Germany. Naturally Rick loves the story and the genuine history behind the weapon.

"Damn, I almost forgot. He has an old school Walther PPK chambered for 7.65 mm just like in the James Bond books and early movies. It' one of his treasures."

Treasure indeed. But Kate has never seen nor heard of it. She feels strangely cheated, not least because this woman beside knows this about him and she doesn't. She also understands the deep affinity Rick has for the British spy, but she suspects there might be more to his near-infatuation than mystery and glamorous women.

"Modern weapons wise there are a couple Glock's - a Nineteen and a Twenty-six. He got those a couple of years, so after he met you." Kate shouldn't be surprised. He has the same weapons as she uses. But she has never seen them. Another question for him.

"And he has Walther PK380's for all the family. Plus he has at least four Walther target pistols including at a pristine GSP and a newer SSP as well as at least two P22's. I've taught both Martha and Alexis on the P22 before they used the PK380's and I know Rick has let Alexis try the SSP. The P22 and PK380 are so similar that minimal extra training is require to use the more powerful .380 ACP round version.

"Really?" Kate can't hide her continued and growing surprise. She's familiar with .380 ACP pistols, very popular for home defence and concealed carry although not so much in New York where strict gun controls were the order of the day – for law abiding citizens but not the criminals. It is the surprise that Alexis and Martha are trained and have familiarity with guns. Nothing has ever been said.

"Yes, they are all members at the Maidstone Gun Club in the East Hamptons. It's where I've trained them all. Some of the 'Spa Day' is held there. I'm not sure if you knew but 'Spa Day' is the code for the personal safety course we run for female clients, and it includes an element of weapons training."

"What even Martha?"

"Yes. But admittedly Martha only fires off a few rounds on the PK380 and then leaves them to it. But she knows how to handle a gun. Rick insists they all know. There is a PK380 in the weapons safe at the Hamptons and the Lodge. I'm fairly sure there is one here in New York at the Loft too. The Glocks are there too I think. You'll have to ask Rick where they all are."
Kate is almost flabbergasted by this. She also needs to ask about the Lodge. Is this the cabin that was referred to in his assets? Also the weapon's safe at the Loft? She is pretty sure this isn't a reference to his office safe. She will most definitely need to have words with him. The man had a small arsenal of weapons.

Clare continues on seemingly without noticing the other woman's ongoing surprise bordering on consternation.

"Also Rick has a very nice custom SIG. A 226 X5, but his is chambered for the forty cal Smith and Wesson round. Fitted grips, and a modified trigger. He's a first class shot with it. He keeps that one at the Hamptons. He's won a couple of trophies with that gun. They're in his study at the Hamptons. I know 'cause he sent me a picture last summer when he won the most recent one."

Almost as an afterthought Clare adds.

"Oh there is a conversion kit available for the SIG. So I'm sure he'll obtain one so you can share ammo and mags. You seem to share everything else."

Clare doesn't hide the innuendo in her tone.

"Yes we do." Kate can be unequivocal back as well, and can't quite hold back the slight snark that creeps into her voice.

Shaking her head, she pushes her latest discoveries to one side and focuses back on the range.

Having completed loading her last magazine whilst they talked, she pulls the used target from the carrier, inserts a fresh one and sends it hurtling out the maximum range. Fifty feet.

Turning to Clare she inquires.

"You watching here or leaving?"

"I'll stay for the minute."

A twist of the head signals her acceptance, and pulling the ear protectors back in place, Kate faces front, readies the pistol with her right hand as her left inserts a loaded magazine and she releases the slide and smoothly brings the pistol up and opens fire.

Manhattan

Just over an hour later they are back in the minivan and heading across the Bridge back into Manhattan. Kate had shot another ten magazines making it one hundred and fifty rounds in total. She was pretty satisfied with the results.

Clare had used her own P229 and shot ten magazines in very rapid fire with efficient groupings. Then she switched to her compact backup gun, another SIG. This time a P239 SAS in the same .357SIG calibre. Clare has shot two magazines and let Kate fire through two mags herself before they cleaned up and signed out from the range.

On the journey back there is more conversation this time as Kate and Clare discuss their firing practice and the conversation moves across topics both business and not so business like. Kate finds herself relaxing and establishing an easy rapport with the woman. Clare Dunne doesn't appear too different to herself in many ways, both women with careers in a male dominated field.
Arriving back at Taylor Matthews's offices, the minivan drops them out front and Clare leads them upstairs to stow their weapons in one of the secure rooms. Then gym gear in hand she leads Kate down to third level of the building. Exiting the lift Kate spies the entrance to a health club and sure enough there is a gym downstairs in the same building as Taylor Matthew's offices. She shouldn't be surprised.

"So Beckett, I want to see how good you are. You okay with open floor, full contact?"

"Sure. Sounds like a challenge."

"Oh believe me it will be."

---

'Lets Get Physical', Manhattan

Despite the name, the gym appears to be first class and professionally fitted out. Also there is not a creepy number of personal trainers hovering around waiting for fresh meat. Not that the two women who emerge from the lockers appear like novices.

They are not alone in the matted gym area.

There are a bunch of mostly less-than-martial warriors practising what looks like Krav Maga in the far corner. A few gymnasts practising tumbles in another. Kate and Clare pick the unoccupied corner.

Clare is simply attired in black stretch leggings and close fitting charcoal grey, tank top. She has a slightly bulky build despite her apparent lean physique. There is certainly visible muscle under her gear belaying her decades of military training. Her feet are bare whilst her hands have wrapping on them.

Kate for her part has similar stretch leggings and purple and blue Lycra sports halter with her midriff on display. Clare brazenly looks her up and down, noting the lean, tone, and long, long legs. Kate pops an eyebrow in question but says nothing.

Clare runs them through a fifteen minute warm up routine that includes stretches, push ups, squats, and to finish, Kate's personal bête noire - burpees. Finally there is a few minutes of meditation to clear their heads before they gear up.

There is minimal safety gear – the hand wrapping to hopefully protect against open wounds, and a mouth guard. Otherwise no padding or headgear.

Then they are standing less than four feet apart when Clare grins at Kate.

And then she lunges suddenly, throwing her body at Kate's feet attempting to take her down. Kate narrowly avoids the over-telegraphed move but just by a fraction.

Clare springs straight up, seemingly flying out of the roll and launches a series of blows aimed directly at Kate's body and head. Some she manages to dodge and a few more she blocks but this only delaying the inevitable as the older woman doesn't slow down, instead increasing the pace of her assault.

The speed and ferocity of the attack is hard to counter and she can barely protect herself let alone fight back. In the end she holds out just over a minute before Clare has her pinned to the mats in submission.
The impact of Beckett's body hitting the mat is the common soundtrack for the next ten minutes or so. She's seven-zip down with not even a credible nearly moment to show.

Breathing heavily Kate warily eyes Clare who is also sweating profusely. At least she has made her work for it.

They have an audience too. The Krav Maga class and a few others unabashedly watching the two women fight. Plus at least two staff. And a fight it is. They are not sparring. It is deliberate, gladiatorial combat.

Normally Kate would ignore the onlookers, or stare them down. But this time she takes strength from the audience of strangers, and uses it as motivation.

She is determined to take her opponent down at least once, and decides to play a little dirtier.

She fakes a strike to the head with her right fist but as Clare blocks with her left arm, Kate twists right angling her body in and with her left arm bent slams her left forearm into Clare's chest. And the ex-soldier is caught by surprise, partially winded and knocked briefly off-balance. Seizing the opportunity Kate shoots her left leg out and her foot slams into her opponent's right ankle causing Clare to topple gracelessly towards the floor.

Yet even as she does, Clare's right hand shoots out and grabs Kate's braid which has followed her head and torso's rotation and yanks hard. Pulled off balance and hurting not a little from the forceful nature of the sudden pull on hair she has no option but to follow Clare down to mat.

But Kate's not done yet. Twisting she lands on her knees – which will hurt more later – and propels herself into the other woman. She makes contact with a shoulder slam which rocks the older woman's head back, and Kate gives no mercy driving her right knee into the solar plexus. With Clare winded and possibly disoriented Kate wastes no time in flipping her face down and locking her right arm up hard into her back.

Clare taps out. A win. At last. Beckett would celebrate but that makes it 1 -7. Hardy a worth anything other than a footnote of acceptance at being bested. She is slightly aware of some muted applause and indecipherable comments from their audience.

Coming out of the shower Kate was already starting to feel the strains of the session. She had hoped she might have a day or so before it felt like she had overdone it at the gym. No such luck. Spying Clare's form by a locker she approached.

"I think I hate you just a little bit." There was just a tiny bit of bitterness mixed in with the respect. Clare shrugged.

"Different training. My last six years in were as part of Special Operations Command. There aren't many females in there and if you want to last you have to compete. Actually more than that, be competitive. We trained to disable or kill, not capture. But I also did a lot of martial arts since I was thirteen as well. It kind of all mixes up now."

"You ever use it?" At the pensive look on Clare's face Kate regrets the question. "Look sorry if you don't want to…"

"No it's alright." Clare closes her eyes for a second.

"Twice. For real. You know not just arm twisting or intimidation." Clare was obviously referring to
her current job.

"First time was in Kosovo. Three locals thought a woman would be an easier touch. I left one with a permanent limp. He was the lucky one. The other two ended up paraplegic – I don't think the disabled get well treated there. There was a bit of a fuss. Some diplomat wanted to press charges against me as one of them was the son of a local VIP but my CO told them to go to Hell." She grins openly at that.

_Shit! Kate had already revised her first and second opinions of the woman. Now further revision was necessary._

"Last time was when my chopper went down, some locals pulled us free. But turned out they were aligned with the Islamists we were tracking. They had taken my guns and knife. Thought they could have some fun with me. I killed two bare-handed and got a weapon – an AK - off one of them. Got my crew free. We held out until recovery team could reach us. It was where I got this…"

Clare lifts the side of the towel to reveal her scars.

"Surely you got a medal for that?"

Clare shakes her head.

"Weren't supposed to be there. So no public acknowledgement. Just two more killed and three injured in a _training accident._"

"Harsh." And so many other things.

"Maybe. But it's what we signed up for. I never regretted it. Never complained. Anyway my injuries took a while to heal up. Took the time to do some book learning – finished my masters and decided to go for my full Eagle."

At Kate's puzzled look Clare explained.

"Full colonelcy. I was a lieutenant colonel. For command of a task force I needed a promotion. But for Special Operations it's not just the military who need to vet you. Usually just intelligence and the desk jockeys but the unit I wanted to lead was in the spotlight. So unfortunately politicians happened too."

"How?"

"Had to go in front of a Congressional Oversight committee for validation. Should have been a formality. But someone had prepped some questions. It was a setup. Ambush. Of course it was neatly wrapped up so it didn't look like outright bigotry." There was enough ire left in her voice for Kate to determine that

"I had the option of not being honest. But I wouldn't lie. Confirmed I was a lesbian and that was all she wrote."

"Do you regret it?"

"Now no. But then yes. Extremely bitter. More than twenty years' service ended like that."

"Could you have stayed?"

"Yeah but not in Special Ops. My injuries slowed me down. I needed a command role. Competition
was fierce. I wouldn't go back to regular army, so I mustered out. Honourable discharge. Reasonable pension.

"Spent first six months angry, did a couple of stupid things that somehow didn't backfire too much and then Tim and Derek came calling, and the rest is history."

Kate reaches out to touch Clare's forearm in understanding. The tight nod back acknowledges the sentiment without the need to verbalise it.

"How about we finish getting dressed and get a coffee and something to eat and head back upstairs to the office before I run you home?"

"Sounds good."

---

**Taylor Matthews's offices, Manhattan.**

Settling back into the comfortable chairs in the conference room with coffees and pastries, Clare leads off.

"So you have questions?"

"A few. Actually lots."

"How many are about Taylor Matthews?"

"Some."

"But not all?"

"Hell no."

How about we get the work questions out of the way before we deal with the personal ones. I feel that those might take longer, and" Glancing down at her watch "We should get you back to Rick sometime."

*Shit! Most of the afternoon had gone by.*

"Okay. What are the rules about printed material?"

"Depends on the security rating. But so long as you have a secure safe or locked room then the same rules as NYPD apply. But we do encourage staff to work digitally if we can. Also leverage the collaboration tools. We try not to have information locked up in one head only."

"Fine. What about travel?"

It took about twenty minutes to run through Kate's work orientated questions. Coffees finished, they now had water and fruit in front of them on the conference table.

"So you had other questions?" Clare is straight into it.

"Questions about me and Rick?"

"Yes. Definitely. I'm curious. Well very curious about you the two of you. I'd never heard you name mentioned in more than four years, yet you so clearly have a bond. And you know his
family, so clearly Rick trusts you. So I am quite honestly curious, especially about how you two became friends."

"Before I answer that I need you to understand something about me.

"I believe in absolute truth. It cost me my Army career because I wouldn't disassemble or outright lie about my sexuality. But this doesn't mean I don't keep secrets. There is stuff from my service I will never reveal.

"I believe in honour, integrity and service. Sacrifice where necessary. Since I was eighteen I have always based my choices and decisions on those creeds. Despite leaving the Army they stay with me.

"Rick is a great friend, I dare say that he is the man I love most in my life. But it is purely platonic and that is despite a not inconsiderable effort on his part when we first met. But you would know about that too given that you kept him at arm's length or better for so long.

"Yeah I know. But that's resolved. No more stupidity from me over him."

So Rick being my friend. Well for the record, it wasn't my idea or even my choice."

"What to become friends?" Kate is confused.

"God NO!" Clare laughs and continues. "For him to shadow me at work. It wasn't my choice. I was new to Taylor Matthews and Tim and Derek ordered me to let their writer buddy follow me around for a few weeks to understand what a private security consultant did. I'm pretty sure it was some form of hazing as well. You sent the lesbian up with the womanizing playboy."

"Shut the Front Door! You're kidding me. He shadowed you at work too! It wasn't my choice either."

Clare laughs again. It's quite deep, and just hint of manliness, but it suits her. Seems so natural. Kate wonders how much is conditioned by twenty years of military service.

"I know. Maybe it's some kind of pickup technique?"

"I'd say it's not particularly successful." Kate dismisses it with a slight and minorly embarrassing snort.

"Well there was Sofia Turner. So not a complete washout for him" Kate was flat-footed by that. Clare knew about the Russian mole! *Did she know about her treason, betrayal and near murder of Rick?*

She is still processing that as Clare continued on.

"And he got you eventually."

Kate rolled her eyes, as much to give her a moment to recover as to express what she felt was the necessary sarcasm. She decides she wants the focus back on Clare.

"So how did he go from unwelcome tag-along to friend?"

"Probably because annoying as he can be, he's a really good guy and once we sorted out the whole sex not happening thing he quickly progressed to being what a buddy and soon became the brother I never really had since I left home. Pretty much in a matter of weeks actually."
Shit! That quick. I wonder how? I took ages to warm up to him properly. Or did I?

Either Clare is a mind reader or the question was clearly apparent on her face because her next words actually address that thought.

"We probably got to the friend stage so quickly because the whole sex thing was a non-starter."

There you go then. Maybe I should have been his conquest or he mine. No! Because I ended up with so much more. More than I ever hoped. Probably more than I deserve.

"Rick may have mentioned something about you threatening to cut his balls off."

"Yes that bit was true. I think it quite disturbed him. But give him credit he bounced back. Anyway, he shadowed me for a couple of weeks. Asked a bunch of questions. Interesting thing is that whilst he starts off with the obvious or asinine queries but then you eventually realise there is a pattern to them. He's researching and building the story, and then for the piece de la resistance he fills in the gaps. He's really such a good judge of character when he wants to be.

"Me too. He did that to me too. It was pretty disconcerting and uncomfortable at first."

"Anyway because of the nature of my work he couldn't use too much of the stuff I shouldn't have told him in the first place. He has a knack of doing that to people too."

"Plus he said I came across too much as some form of hard-case Amazon. I didn't see what was wrong with that. I was more than happy with that description."

"Despite finishing the shadowing we started hanging out together away from my work. I didn't have anyone here in New York. He introduced me to his family. He was between serious girlfriends, not dating much at all. But even if he was he never made me feel like a substitute or second choice.

"So I got to know Alexis and Martha too. His Mother was still married to Walter, that con-artist before he ran off with what was left of her money. The Castles were my safety net in New York until I made my own friends. Rick and Martha's networks of contacts helped out with so many things.

"Anyway we started going on double dates. Initially because we thought it would be funny, and it was, but we continued it because it was fun. I can't say our dates always agreed. But that was part of the appeal. We would vet each other's partners and whether we thought they were worthy of bedding."

Kate can believe that of the old Rick. Now, she's pretty sure that is all behind him.

"And one time I got him to be my wingman."

"Seriously!?"

"Yep – took him to this almost lesbian exclusive gay club. I tell you he was the only straight man in there."

Then Clare snorts.

"Oh sorry I just remembered something."

"Care to share?"
"Well you know how metro sexual Rick is?" Clare doesn't wait for Kate to confirm it. "Well back then he was working out regularly, getting good exercise and he had his hair quite closely cropped. He definitely could have fitted in, been mistaken for a gay guy, especially with the expensive, nice clothes.

"Well not long after we had got seats and drinks, this really hot chick and her friends rocked up. She gave him the evil eye and asked if he was gay.

"He just spluttered. Then indignantly said no.

"Then she asked if he was bi-sexual.

"He looked at me for support."

"So what did you say?" Kate can't help break in.

"Well I didn't know, so I asked him."

Kate can't but help the laugh that burst from her. Oh fucking god to have been able to see his face.

"Oh believe me it was worthy of a picture."

"You know it wasn't the only time his sexuality has been questioned."

"Really?" Clare is intrigued.

Kate stays quiet. She can tease with the best of them and this might be a tiny bit of payback for the whopping she just took.

"Oh really! You're gonna drop that out there and then not share. Speak up or it's back to the mats."

"Yes Sir!" Kate barks accompanied by an eye roll.

Clare leans her head back, tucking her chin in and giving Kate a hard stare.

"Jezz, relax Clare."

She gets a tight smile in answer.

"It was a couple of years ago. They were making the Nikki Heat movie, and lead actress came along to shadow me to get in character. It seemed like a good idea at first but got more than a little creepy quickly."

"Shit you met Natalie Rhodes. I kinda had a thing for her in those movies. You know Knife 2, Mutilation High and Demon Patrol. Of course that was before she had the substance abuse issues. But she did fill out her tops nicely, especially without a bra. Didn't Heat Wave go straight to DVD?"

"Yeah, Rick's still smarting over than one. But back to Natalie. Let's just say she was heavily into using method technique for her research."

"Oh. I get the gist but I'm not quite following. Rick wasn't dating then was he? Certainly wasn't with you. So what was the issue?"

Kate can't bring herself to answer.
"Jesus Beckett! Were you jealous? Possessive?"

Kate can't answer that one. Though her silence and subtle blush give it away.

"But what's this to do with Rick's sexuality?" Clare shows mercy and moves back to the topic at hand.

"He turned down her offer for some 'Nookie' role play. 'Research' Natalie called it. The following day she asked me if he was gay. Apparently no one ever turned her down."

"Oh God that's classic. Wait does Rick know?"

"Oh God No! I can't ever tell him. It would reveal too much of how much I cared back then."

"Mind you I did assure Natalie he wasn't. She leapt to all sorts of conclusions about us. Wrong ones. She even asked me if I would give him permission to you know."

Clare shakes her head but doesn't make anything of it. Simply shrugs in acceptance as Kate goes back to the original track.

"Anyway we got distracted. What about this wingman mission he did for you?"

"Well he had been spouting this crazy theory about wingmen and how he could get me any date I wanted. So I challenged him to prove it. He was right. Took him less than twenty minutes and we didn't have to sing 'You've lost that loving feeling'. Honestly, it worked out really well for me. I dated the woman for a couple of months."

"And?" Kate almost burns with anticipation and exasperation.

"Oh I'm not going beyond that. You'll have to ask Rick for that rest.

"Please?"

Kate bats her eyelids at the older woman. Who laughs and then apparently changes her mind.

"Well for a start Rick worked his magic on this rather attractive divorcee. She wanted to take him back with us as well but I don't do men and don't share. Rick was disappointed, more than usual I think, but he made a phone call and then went somewhere whilst I took my new date to a hotel room for a hell of a lot of fun. But I never did get the full story of what Rick got up to after we parted company that night. All I know was that he seemed intense curiously about a threesome with two women."

"He's not shared that story with me." Kate manages to keep her voice level. Well you have to give him credit. How the hell do you share 'oh by the way I once had a threesome with two women'?"

"Sensible. Are you sure you want to know?" Clare is looking at her with curiosity.

"Yes." Kate is certain.

"But I promise I won't use it against him. It won't change how I feel about him Clare so please don't concern yourself that way. It's just that he knows so much about me and I'm still peeling the outer layers off. Or at least it feels that way. And I've met so few of his real friends who shed any light on him."

"Okay then. Just don't blame me later."
"Oh I remember now. Louise. That's where he went. Or at least where he said he was going? If you want to know more than I can tell you, ask him about Louise."

"Louise?"

"An ex-model, ex-dancer friend of his. They didn't date but they were friends with benefits. And she was bisexual. I remember that much."

"Oh!" Kate can't help the little sigh that escaped her. It really is irrational. She didn't even know him personally then and she agonizing over his having consensual sex with another woman or was it women?

Clare has diplomatically ignored the slip from Kate.

"I didn't see him until he turned up two days later for coffee. I tried asking about his evening after we parted company but I got stonewalled. Whatever, it was, it probably wasn't what he was expecting based on his reaction."

"Perhaps I shouldn't ask him?" Kate can't actually believe she's asking Clare for advice on Rick. Well so quickly. Rick was right about the woman, but again that was not necessarily something she would confirm with her boyfriend.

"I can't be the judge of that Kate. You need to decide for yourself. I doubt Rick would deny you anything. But do you really want the answer?" That left a lot more questions for her.

"Anyway, not long after that he started dating Gina. They had been out before but this time Rick made a concerted campaign to woo her. Rick was concerned about a lack of female role models for Alexis. He generally hid most of his dating from Alexis, or tried too. He didn't take girlfriends home from what I knew. Gina was the first in a while.

"Gina never liked me. Implied I was unprofessional because of my friendship with Rick, and well I guess it was fair to say the feeling rapidly became mutual."

Kate could tell that Clare was bitter about the allegation. She could understand that. As a woman in a male dominated field, the only thing worse than being accused of being unprofessional was using your sex – in whatever way – to advance. She decided to change topics then.

"You said you worked with Alexis in LA. Did you meet Meredith?"

"Oh yes and what an uncomfortable experience that was."

Clare seems to settle back into her chair, and she takes a drink before starting the story.

"From time-to-time Rick acquired stalkers and most, on investigation, were harmless fantasists. We had one that wasn't. Photos of Rick and his family, outright threats of physical violence. In was the start of summer so Rick sent Alexis to LA earlier than usual. He explained it all and requested I go along. Meredith initially seemed fine. Happy to see her daughter and accommodating of me. Well I mean the house at Bel-Air is certainly big enough for quite a few people."

So one evening after Alexis had put herself to bed, we're having a chat and Meredith was drinking. Seemed okay but then she hit on me."

"Shut the Front Door! Really? She tried to seduce her own daughter's bodyguard?"

"Seduction would imply subtlety. She really just asked if I wanted to fuck. Even said she had
friends who could pop over if I wanted more or even just an audience. All this with her daughter in
the house."

"God what happened? What did you do?"

"I just turned her down flat and performed a tactical retreat. Meredith barely spoke to me after that,
treated me as a glorified baby sitter and worse barely paid any attention to Alexis as well. So
Alexis and I hung out together for a couple of weeks going to places Meredith wouldn't normally
take her like Disneyland, theme parks, museums, touristy stuff. Fortunately the NYPD found the
stalker and they got committed to a psych ward and believe me were both happy to be able to return
to New York. Rick of course was ecstatic to get Alexis back."

"Just wow. Unbelievable. It' a good thing Alexis is such a mature person.

"So now you know. I'm two for two with Rick's wives hating me." Clare looks directly at Kate
before continuing. "I do hope you're not going to make it three for three."

"Shit Clare! No pressure! We've only been together six months, there's a way to go." Kate almost
believes her half-denials. But from the look on Clare's face she doesn't.

"Bullshit! You will be his wife. I've never seen Rick like this for anyone except for Alexis and if
the truth be told Martha too but he'll always lie about that."

Rising she stretches as she comes out of the seat.

"Look it is time to get you back to the Loft. I'll grab some more ammo for you. Chuck in some
extra boxes in case you want to get some practise. We have a store room here with some ammo,
just email when take some, and we also have accounts at the stores I told you about."

"Thanks Clare. A couple of extra boxes won't go amiss especially if I plan to go up against Rick at
some stage."

"No problems. Let's get cleaned up here and get you home."

12th Precinct

Captain Gates calls the Esposito, Ryan and Tori Ellis into Conference Room 3.

Their surprise guest was Deputy Commissioner Rod Hawkins. A die-hard street cop, he was well
respected and plain speaking. After the introductions and handshakes, Captain Gates wastes no
time.

"Detective Ryan could you please update us."

"Sir. We can confirm that the latest article appears to have pulled information and imagery directly
from the NYPD personnel record for Detective K H Beckett. When cross checking with the first
article there is a high probability that the NYPD records system was the source of the information
as well.

"However, we can confirm that there has been no access to the personnel records leading up to the
articles being published. The last accesses were updates from Captain Gates in late June just before
Beckett returned to duty, and then confirmation of her resumption of active duty.

"However, there were five instances of unauthorised access to the records after the news items
were published."

The Deputy Commissioner breaks in.

"I have two sergeants, a rookie and two civilians on my shit-list as a result. Guilty of stupidity and curiosity but not outright criminality." He pauses before looking at Gate's team.

"So what does this mean?"

"Whoever it is got the information from the NYPD. However, they are not accessing the information from the primary system." Tori Ellis, the IT tech answers.

"So from where then?" The assistant commissioner is impatient.

"Our disaster recovery instance or a version of it." Tori explains.

"As a result of budget cuts our disaster recovery platform is now kept offline and is only activated in the event of a real incident or for annual testing. The next test is February 2013, some three months away.

"So it hasn't been activated for almost eight months and this has been confirmed by the support team?" Gates's question beats others to the punch.

"Yes Sir."

"How is the data synchronised and kept up-to-date?"

"It is done real-time using the storage platform. Every single bit is replicated to the DR site by the storage hardware."

"There are also tape backups taken at the DR site. There is an outside contractor, Recollect Information Security, who collect and store the tapes." Tori nods to Ryan who picks up the tale.

"This is where it gets interesting.

"The tapes are generally retained and not recalled unless needed. We have managed to uncover three request for backup tapes since May of this year.

"They were delivered to the disaster recovery location. Now the DR site is usually unmanned. When the tapes are recalled a member of staff goes to site to meet the courier and then loads the tapes. This is usually down to check the tapes are still viable.

"We have confirmation that the middle transaction is legitimate. However, the first and third requests we not made by the NYPD's Information Management Service. The first was on 26 June and last one only three weeks ago on 2 November. The tapes never entered the data centre proper but in the first cases they were still available for pickup two days after drop-off as per the standard process. However, for the last one, the tapes were not returned.

"The requests were made in the name of a recently deceased civilian worker from the Ninth Precinct. We suspect some form of social engineering was used to facilitate getting the information necessary to access the NYPD IT service desk and log the calls."

"So I presume that's a dead end. Anything from the security cameras?" Gates moves to the next bone.

"No. Afraid not. As the site isn't a NYPD facility, the security recordings are not kept that long, or
at least not long enough for us. Retention time is just a week. And then it is progressively overwritten.

"So in short we have one or more individuals, but in all likelihood a single person, using internal NYPD resources to order backup tapes." Gates summarises.

"They obviously are familiar with IT operations in general and a specifically with our own IT operations including disaster recovery, and service desk processes." This from Tori.

"We're dealing with a ghost." Gates is a little disheartened.

"Actually maybe not." Ryan corrects his Captain.

"This is where we may have a bit of luck. Tori was reviewing the digital footprints and whilst all our current records have been purged she did the same thing the intruder did and called back some backup tapes. She thinks she can get more information from those.

"But aside from that we've cross reference with the Feds and there are some matches. The MO matches about a dozen intrusions into mainly corporate and banking systems over the last four years. About half seem to have a common profile and of those a couple are clearly attributed back to one particular name.

"Nomad."

"Well what are you waiting for?" The Captain is impatient.

"I want to be able to update Beckett and Castle today. They deserve that at the very least."

Not that the motivation is needed. "Yes Sir." Echoes from Ryan and Esposito as they stand and prepare to head back to their desks.

As her team exit and the door closes the Deputy Commissioner turns to Gates.

"Victoria. I need some expertise from your IA days if you could."

"Of course."

"Do you know a Captain Fowler from Narcotics?"

"Yes, made a massive bust a few years ago as a sergeant. Fast tracked to Captain. Operating out of the 23rd Precinct."

"Yes well too many of his recent operations have gone wrong. We've also had two undercover operatives go missing, suspected murdered. One just last week."

"Shit that's bad. So how can I help?"

"I want you to review his operations. Look for the holes and inconsistencies. But whatever you do Victoria, none of your people are to go into the line of fire for this. Am I clear?"

"Perfectly but I wouldn't dream of it anyway."

Captain Gates purses her lips.

"What will Flower think of it?"
"Frankly I don't care. You're one of the NYPD's senior Captains. You're a more than likely candidate for promotion. Fowler's just a grunt promoted out of his comfort zone and ability. Or at least I hope so. Either way he'll just have to learn to live with the disappointment."

"You'll arrange for Fowler to provide access?" Gates knew from her IA time that sometimes awkward moments just felt less disheartening if it came in the form of an order from a superior rather than a peer or worse a subordinate rank.

"Hiding behind a superior Victoria. That's not very you."

"Hush now. Do you want me to review his screw ups or what?"

"Not going to a get a promotion with that sort of attitude Captain."

"Bite me." A beat. "Sir."

"I'll have Flower deliver his stuff early next week. That should give him time to hide what he can. Have fun picking it apart."

"I wonder if any of them every twig why we give them time?"

"That it is actually a test of their honest and integrity? Very few. And those handful would be smart enough not to do it in the first place. Roy's idea was so very simple. Take a snapshot of the evidence, and then tell the suspected party that they would be required to turn over the evidence or reports at a later date. Then compare the two.

"God I really miss Roy."

"I know Rod. But we can't turn back the clock. We all made the deliberate and conscious choice. We knew the risks when we signed up."

"That we did. Still." It remains unsaid, but they've never needed to give voice to that decision that bound them together even more than twenty years later.

After a moment, the Deputy Commissioner gives a sad smile and with a small, cautious laugh he rises.

"I miss you Victoria. Came back and work for me again."

"Can't I just have your job instead?"

"That's my Girl. Keep it up and you can. God knows Glenda would be happy if I actually retired."

"So would I." And she meant it sincerely. Rod Hawkins deserved to be able to enjoy a peaceful retirement after almost forty years' service to the City.

"Oh before you go Rod. You need to know that I brief Detectives Esposito and Ryan on Integrity yesterday. I think it may be pertinent to what's going on now. And it certainly is very likely to be regarding Detective Beckett's shooting."

"That's your call Victoria. You must trust them."

"Yes. They're very able and dedicated. More importantly they're extremely loyal to their team and their Captain. They think they were keeping Roy's secret. You also need to be aware that they will tell their partners as soon as they are able. So you can expect Beckett and Castle to know as soon as those two can get to meet privately."
"Careful Vicky, you're giving yourself away. You called him Castle, like he's a cop."

"Well he virtually is. And he would have made a great one, if we had got to him early enough. But as it is he's a better investigator and partner than most serving. Mind you I'm not sharing that with him anytime soon. Man has a big enough ego as it is.

"You actually like him don't you?"

"Not answering that Rod. Now don't you have a desk to drive? I know I have a precinct to run. And I need to call Castle and Beckett and brief them on the investigation."

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**The Loft**

Listening to the update from Captain Gates, both Rick and Kate had kept their responses minimal but they were mindful to express their thanks for being kept in the loop.

Martha was waiting for them as they emerged hand-in-hand from the office.

"Well what news?"

Kate looks at Rick and then responds.

"They have worked out how the information was obtained. But not the who and the why. They have a possible alias for a hacker. But nothing more. They're still investigating."

"Well at least it is quieting down out there." Martha alludes to the press with a wave of her hand.

"The rain helps." Rick is still relatively quiet and with his left hand pulls Kate towards the long couch. His mother speaks again.

"I spoke to Alexis earlier. She apologizes but is still hiding out at College due to the potential intrusion from the press. Apparently her new bodyguard took down Max when the foolish boy turned up to visit, but has since then has spent most of her time fighting off hormonal males herself. You wouldn't know anything about that would you Daddy dearest?"

"Me?! Of course not."

At the look from both his Mother and Kate, he replies.

"Honestly I didn't. Clare organised everything."

"Hot Chocolate you two?" His mother seems to have accepted his explanation.

Kate looks at Rick and with his nod, she acknowledges the woman.

"Yes please Martha. Do you need a hand?"

Rick interrupts.

"Actually she doesn't. She makes a great classic hot chocolate using a European sugar-free ready-to-mix powder and milk from the coffee machine frother."

Kate picks up the remote. "Any preference?"

"Nothing loud please. My head hurts." *Kate mentally added nothing too-bloody or work related*
either. Comedy or Romance it is.

"How long until you can take more pain relief?"

"About nine. I'll be good until then so long as it isn't too loud."

"Big Bang good?"

"Yeah."

As Castle drops into place, Kate waits for him to settle before snuggling into his right side. She had started on the left but they had found that this blocked his working hand so she carefully inserted herself onto his right hand side pressing the familiar controls on the remote.

She wanted to talk to him and ask about all the new information she had learnt from Clare today. However, there hadn't been the right moment to do so since she arrived home and clearly Rick isn't really in the best place for that sort of discussion so she would be patient. There was always tomorrow.

Rick had gone to bed at approximately nine. A pounding headache rendering TV channels fuzzy and the slightest noise excessively aggravating.

Unable to be bothered with trying to manoeuvre a t-shirt or anything else over his sling, he settles for just the pj bottoms and even then he notices they're hip-hangers as he can't be bothered to tighten the waist strings. He makes his usual mess of brushing his teeth with the wrong – but only really working - hand. He throws down some Advil before collapsing on their bed.

Because of his injuries they've reversed their usual arrangement in bed with Kate moving to his side and he into her usual right hand side so his right arm is on the edge of the bed. It still feels alien and they've had some sleepy near misses since he returned home. Not least the other night when Kate returned to the bed after needing the bathroom and literally almost climbed on top of him before she woke enough to correct her path.

Still he's tired enough that when he closes his eyes the room drops away and he doesn't need to fight his thoughts for once.

He's almost completely gone with only moments of drifting in and out of any degree of awareness when he feels the mattress dip and before he can speak he can feel her move into his left side. As she melds into him he detects the absence of her usual cotton sleep attire, indeed any form of sleep attire.

"Kate are you naked?" Slightly hoarse, and rougher, he didn't mean it to sound like his bedroom voice.

"Hmmmm. That's a yes then."

"Damn."

He can almost feel her smile into him. He can feel parts of him respond by instinct.

"Don't laugh Kate, but I've got a killer headache." He knows the smile just got bigger.

"I know Babe. But that's not why I'm here naked."

She snuggles in closer and he instinctively adjusts his body as best he can as she curls hers into
him.

"I just want to feel close to you. I've missed us. This is just some reassurance and perhaps conditioning for soon."

"Not helping my heart rate here."

"Shhh. Go back to sleep. We'll both be here in the morning."

"Until tomorrow Kate."
Kate has been fully inducted into Taylor Matthews. In the meantime Martha has suggested they 'escape' to the Hamptons. A suggestion Rick and Kate plan to follow. Meanwhile plenty of others are making plans….

The Loft, Thursday morning.

When Kate woke up she found herself face to face with Richard Castle.

Not that was an unusual experience of late, but still it could give a girl a bit of a start. Especially a long term, incorrigible fan girl. Like her. You could say she was living her dream but it was so much more than she had ever dreamed possible.

Of course she had done her best not to share how much of a fan girl she is – or at least not too much - with him. Although she suspects he may have uncovered more than she wanted to share about that too. He always did. Yet now somehow he kept that too himself. Not like the early days. They had both changed – themselves and each other. For the better. For each other.

He was far more complicated than his one-dimensional playboy persona. How had she not seen through that façade earlier? There are some days she wants to kick herself for waiting so long to take a chance on them. But on the other hand as Lanie had pointed out after Kate had confessed all about finally starting a relationship with her man-child, it had been a four year long courtship just without the extra benefit. Mind you Lanie has finished with the assurance that 'there was no way smart people like you two could stay that dumb forever'.

But this morning her issues were more in line with a severe case of 'Castle scratch-my-itch.' After all it has been more than two weeks. The longest they had ever, well not had sex. *Man, that sounded worse in her head that she imagined. But accurate.*

Being naked didn't help either.

Having her unencumbered form moulded into his hot body was probably not ideal at all.

Except it was.

Still tired, she lets her eyes drift closed even as she focuses her thoughts.

Just his proximity is enough sometimes, but in their bed she's such a goner. His body heat should be cloying, driving her away, and instead it draws her in, seeking his heart and gentle bulk. She's never been with anyone like him. She doesn't believe there is anyone like him. Certainly not for her.

Her previous boyfriends – well since college and the academy - have all been very much of one type. Professionals, hard, fit, trained bodies, mostly-able lovers, or at the very least energetic enough to compensate – to a certain extent. But none of them even come close to this unique person she gets to lie in bed with, and sleep and be with in every meaning of the term.
He's not lean, even solid is a slight stretch these days but she finds she doesn't care. The fire within her comes from the entire person not just his outer shell. It's not to say he lacks a physical presence but despite his size - she internally rolls her eyes at her own unconscious double entendre - he rarely imposes it on others. But she remembers Lockwood and how Rick took him down unarmed. Espo, Ryan and Gates all attested to his physical prowess in disarming the suspect before he was shot.

More importantly he loves her with everything he has. He's considerate, goofy even, tender, passionate and on occasion extremely dirty. The last has her on edge today.

She's sudden conscious that her body is betraying her. Moving against him. Subtle for sure, but definitely in motion. Undulating even. She's she sure she is flushed but whether in embarrassment or desire, or both she's not certain.

She senses the change in his breathing and when she peaks one eye open to check sure enough there are two gorgeous blue ones, gleaming back at her.

He is close enough that when he murmurs 'Good morning Gorgeous' his breath gently tickles her face. What's especially disgusting is that he doesn't even have morning breath.

More than semi embarrassed by her lack of control and to cover her aroused state, she assumes her default defensive posture. Snark.

"What?! No creepy comment?" Damn her filter is completely off. He didn't deserve that.

She wonders if her desire is as apparent to him as it feels to her. She snakes her hips a little to disengage her legs and core from his heat, and instantly feels the loss.

He semi-shrugs – he's getting better with the fine motor skills and isolation so he is not using his dominate arm and recovering shoulder for the moment – but he still remains silent.

"No it's sweet really." She moves to apologise and reassure him. "Good Morning Sweetheart."

She is rewarded with a goofy grin and mischievous eyes before he speaks.

"Thanks. But….well….I can't never complain finding you in our bed, plus you are naked too!"

She should roll her eyes again but her mood is too good.

"There is that." She conceded and then makes an exaggerated show of stretching, using her toes to push the covers down as she arches her back and reveals two nicely perky breasts and semi-tumescent nipples. Lovely if she does say so herself.

She can sense the impact upon her partner. He's drawn to her breasts but displays a remarkable calm reserving his worship merely to the heated brush of his eyes across her body.

"What would like to do this morning?" Oh he's playing cool.

Plus he probably thinks with the existing medical advice he doesn't stand a chance. He's so wrong. She always take a chance with him.

She could mess with him, and by default teasing is second nature to them both, but this morning she decides that total honesty is her first choice.

Rolling onto her right side, and closing back the small gap between them, she is leaning forward
intruding into his space until her lips are hovering above his nose, and she whispers.

"Well how about we come up with a way to avoid raising you heart rate but still enjoy ourselves?"

"Really?"

"Yes, oh yes."

"What about Doctor's orders?"

"Doctors, Smoctors. Dated one, they know nothing." *Whoops that slipped out.*

He doesn't blink. Doesn't call her on it. Instead she gets sass.

"Rebel Becks? Is that you?"

She smacks his chest, more in relief that anything.

"Careful or you won't find out."

"Sorry" But the glint in those baby-blues says a lot more.

"No you're not. But get up."

He complies, strategically removing the bed cover and sheet as he gets up. He doesn't look sorry at all.

She makes no move to cover her nakedness. Instead grins at him and drops onto her back with her body flush against the sinfully smooth cotton and to cap it all stretches her limbs out and opens her legs for good measure.

She's not sure if she moans, but she swears he did.

Parts of him are stretching too, reacting very positively to this morning's developments.

She suddenly rolls upright and bolts from the bed, almost sprinting for the bathroom.

Over her shoulder she chucks what should be one final command.

"Shower time! Lose the clothes Bigboy."

"Bossy, but I like it." She can hear him. Still sassing her as he watches her naked derrière disappear through the doorway to the en suite.

She stops just inside the door.

"Why are you still over there? Shower. Now!"

With that she disappears into his cavernous bathroom and the shower with more jets that the Air Force and a nice solid seat.

Perfect.

---

They emerged from the study both freshly scrubbed and holding hands, sharing ridiculously wide grins.
"Oh good morning you two."

"Crap Mother!" Rick starts at the surprising presence of his mother downstairs at this early hour. Moreover she's dressed, although at first glance the bright assault on their eyes could be mistaken for some pyjamas.

They both want to turn tail but the diva has them in her sights. All too surprised to completely wipe the satisfied grins from their faces. All it would take is for a knowing glance from her to have them both blushing deeply.

Kate recovers first.

"Good Morning Martha."

"Well look at you. Don't you both positively look glowing this morning?" The arched eyebrow says it all. And here comes the blush reflex. For both of them.

"Shit!" He's muttered it under his breath but she can hear it. If Martha heard it she's at least being diplomatic about that.

"So Martha what has got you up so early?"

"Well I came down from some tea and I could hear the shower running. Richard, you really should get that pipe fixed. It still knocks when the shower is in use. Especially for long periods of time."

Mortified would be one word Kate could pick for that moment. If only it was the first – and last – time Martha has 'busted' them having sex. Well at least they were in the privacy of their bathroom this time.

"Anyway Dears, I shall be leaving shortly. I shall be going to Hampton's house to check on progress with the little renovations. I plan to stay overnight and return tomorrow."

"And the fact it's Thursday and it's Ladies Night at Julian's has nothing to do with it Mother?" Rick finally finds his voice.

"Don't ask unless you want to know." She says as she ambles over and pats his cheek with a mother's touch, and aims a sly wink at Kate who can't help but smirk a little as Rick pales at his mother's insinuation.

Letting go of each other they head into the kitchen to fix breakfast. Martha has resumed her place at the breakfast bar, sipping her tea.

Shortly Rick and Kate have finished preparations for their oats and fruit along with the oh-so-necessary caffeine, and join his mother at the breakfast bar. Once they have sat down the Diva resumes.

"Well I must go finish getting ready. The driver will be here shortly." Martha pauses clearly considering something before she asks. "So have you two had a pleasant morning so far? What else do you have planned for the day?"

Kate responds for them.

"Oh Yes!"

There is a slightly breathy element to her voice.
"We plan to finish packing and organising a few things. The press outside seem to have dropped to single figures but we'll stay home if possible.

"But in answer to your first question Martha yes we've had a very pleasant morning. Haven't we Rick?"

*She seriously doesn't expect him to answer that?! Does she?*

"Well morning sex will do that for you Martha. As we didn't want to mess the sheets we had a very lovely time in the shower. Didn't we Rick?"

*Crap why does she keep asking me these questions?*

Kate has kept her eyes on Martha all the time and she can swear the woman just turned about five shades paler as she retreats at pace, speechless for once. She can almost hear Rick's jaw bounce of the kitchen bench beside her.

As his Mother concludes her hasty retreat upstairs, a rapidly recovering Rick raises a hand for a high-five from Kate and can't help himself from joining in.

"Don't ask if you don't want to know, Mother!"

Kate knows she should be perhaps a little horrified but has to actually fight back the laughter.

Rick is looking at her with gleaming eyes.

"You know it never occurred to me. Rather than cringe, simply give her more information that she needs."

"God, whatever you do, don't tell Alexis or you'll never hear the end of it."

"True. Plus I'm really sure I don't want to know."

"That too Lover Man."

Less than an hour later a still somewhat subdued Martha departs the Loft with minimal fuss and a mere two suitcases for her overnight stay at the Hamptons.

But not without Kate catching the woman for a quiet word before she departs. Rick is hiding in his office still not quite brave enough to face his mother again just yet. So with the words just between the two ladies, Martha listens intently and promises Kate that she will take care of her request.

Ninety minutes later and they're not laughing anymore.

Ryan and Esposito are sat at the breakfast bar, cooling coffee cups marking their spots.

Kate still has trouble adjusting to the fact that this is her home, their home. It's not that her own apartment wasn't great, the money from her trust fund and her own bohemian style had seen to that, but here was an intangible but apparent bonhomie, a joie de vivre that fed from the creative spirits of its inhabitants as evidenced by the countless, meaningful knick-knacks scattered around the Loft, including her own merging into the diaspora of their lives together.

Also having their friends visit helps.
Especially now she's on leave from the NYPD.

Even if this morning was mostly in their professional capacity. Of course given the recent events this wasn't really a social call.

Their presence helps centres her and distracts her from the temptation of mental gymnastics and an inclination to review her life and second guess her choices. In short how she'd spent too much of her life long before Richard Castle burst into what she had considered her carefully controlled and measured existence and turned it upside down and inside out.

Since she and Rick had got together they hadn't spent too much time outside of work with their colleagues. She missed it a little but she was too focused on their precious time together, ideally alone. Something she hoped the time away in the Hamptons would be.

It had been Ryan who told them. She always knows when it is going to bad, or at the least the Boys think it is. Espo clams up, and leaves Ryan to do the talking. She doesn't know if it is because they think she'll go easier on him, or simply that the he is best of the two of them with words, explanations, excuses, apologies, and puppy dog looks.

Rick is looking at her with those blue eyes wide in surprise. They knew that Gates knew about Montgomery. One of the secrets that has bound them closer as a team isn't anymore. The Boy's had given them a heads up earlier but today they get the detail of what she knows, or at least what the Captain had chosen to share with them.

Apparently it never really was just their secret. Because Captain Victoria Gates of the NYPD knew most of Roy Montgomery's tragic burdens. Long before their team did. As did a small number of other NYPD members including the Chief of D's, and the Assistant Commissioner who were both inaugural members of an anti-corruption operation that ran for almost a decade.

Captain Gates had described Roy how had been set up with the John Raglan and Gary McCallister as part of his assignment until that fateful night in the alleyway outside the Italian Club. He hadn't shot Bob Armen, the FBI agent but it had been his gun and the others had basically threatened pin it on him. Roy had been adamant that he would report it but before he could do anything the local ADA had intervened and flipped McCallister to betray the team and demand the money from them. Without Gates naming the ADA the entire team knew who was behind the blackmailing of the kidnap gang, and taking pretty much all the ransom money in return for the freedom of the implicated cops.

Roy's handlers took the opportunity to break him loose of his criminal partners, and from there on his role in the anti-corruption operation was inactive. However, as they all now knew the ripples from the events in that alley way had devastating consequences. Even without speaking about it, Kate needs to retreat to a corner of the Loft for a few moments to compose herself before returning to take Rick's hand. Her partners, both cops and her writer waited patiently for her return before resuming.

The anti-corruption operation had never been able to discover any usable evidence about who was behind the blackmail that relieved the kidnappers of the money. Nor did they realise at the time that both the other kidnapper cops were turned. McCallister was fully involved in the criminal enterprises for the Dragon and Raglan severely compromised to the extent that he hushed up the murders of Johanna Beckett and three others years later.

As the two detectives repeat their conversations with the Captain, Kate finds herself expressing considerable surprise and responding with questions or exclamations. For his part Rick is especially quiet. His respect for Montgomery is boundless despite, or perhaps, because of the
man's mistakes. Kate knows he still grieves for the man and his family, and his inability to help prevent Roy's sacrifice, along with his guilt for triggering the events that led to this. His dedication in the book that followed that fractured, broken summer was telling. Even more so the trust fund he established for Evelyn and the Montgomery children.

They'll talk about it later. Then it will be her turn to provide comfort and reassurance. This relationship is like nothing she ever experienced or dreamed she would. There are elements of her parents in there, and her grandparents, and yet it is unique what lies between them and binds them. She wouldn't have it any other way.

So for the moment she again takes his hands in hers and squeezes gently and despite being in full view of Esposito and Ryan she lifts his hands up and dips her mouth to kiss his knuckles. It is so certain and without reproach that there is no teasing response from the wide-eyed men across from them.

It is moments like this that make the two cops more than certain that what they have been witnessing for years has blossomed into a lifelong partnership beyond all rational explanation.

Strangely for the next part of the story, it is Esposito who fills them in on the how Gates knows. Their new Captain hasn't shared too much outside of her own and Roy's roles but it is enough for Espo to outline 'Project Integrity'. How it started life as a covert anti-corruption program operated off-the-books by a number of concerned NYPD commanders and assorted civilians.

The genius has been to disguise it as part of affirmative action for encouraging minority groups to serve in the NYPD, Project Integration. Integrity's actual purpose was to prevent organised crime gaining further footholds in NYPD senior hierarchy, and where possibly rolling back the existing corruption.

Predating the rise of gansta culture it centred heavily on Black and to a lesser extent Hispanic officers. It was felt that the Anglo-Saxon ranks, especially Irish, and Italian, had been excessively compromised by the Irish and Italian mob. Hence the presence of Montgomery and the recently graduated Victoria Gates amongst the small pool of recruits.

Montgomery had been an obvious selection, a former Army MP with a tough but easy demeanour. Gates was one of the few females in her graduating class and the best scoring in all assessments.

Roy was assigned to infiltrating a posse of corrupt cops that were enabling drug dealing and other crimes in the Washington Heights. For her part Gates had not been deeply involved in undercover work for the program. Her time in Vice had been comparatively short – Rick had somehow managed to almost keep his disbelief about the Captain's time in that division under control. But this still prompted Kate to intervene.

"Castle, you know not every female in vice dressed up as a prostitute? Plus real hookers aren't supermodel hot, while at least not the ones on the street."

"But you…".

"Castle!" Kate needs to shut him down before. She's reaching for his ear and gets the response she needs before her hand completed its journey.

"Shutting up now."

Too late the Boys both look interested. However, they are professional enough to leave the revelation alone as they continue with the new information. Plus even without her badge Kate
Beckett is still scary.

Ryan explained that they thought that Gates had experienced a near-miss and although only alluded to by her, and had then stepped out of field work into a different role. Then she had been placed into IA and what was another very close call which apparently involved politics as well. The team speculate whether Bracken or any of his cohorts might be involved but without more information from Gates they're blind on that matter.

The final piece of information is the slim lead Ryan has with the name of a hacker with a similar MO to the one that stole the NYPD backup tapes. Tori Ellis and the rest of the NYPD's computer crimes team are investigating but the individual appears to have covered his tracks well.

As they are wrapping up, Kate fixes the two with a flat stare.

"Oh and Boys, I may not be active at the moment, but I have a long memory. So any photos of undercover ops from back-in-the-day stay locked away." She's well aware that Rick is mouthing 'call me' and making the phone action behind her.

"Yes Beckett."

Both answer together prompting Rick to observe. "You know it's kinda creepy when they do that."

"Oh don't think I don't know what you were trying to do too Mister. Don't for one minute think you'll stand a chance."

Despite the serious nature of their earlier conversations both cops leave their friends with a chuckle and a promise to keep them up to date.

Secure office, Federal Building, Manhattan. Sometime after midday.

Will Sorenson was still hung over.

McCord had been slightly sympathetic for the first quarter of an hour but since then had driven him hard with no allowance for extra coffee or fresh air. Even the early lunch break hadn't brought much relief.

Last night had seemed like a good idea. Catch up with the old gang, many of whom were now back in New York.

It had been good to see them and exchange tales. Except most of them were married now. Which in itself was depressing especially when coupled with him being the only singleton there.

Of course the last time he had caught up with so many of them at one event he was still dating Kate Beckett. In fact the prevailing opinion had been that Will was about to make a profound decision concerning the relationship with the young detective. He did, but his was unexpected by most as he went to Boston instead of moving in or planning an engagement. Of course some of them knew this. Some kept their consul and some didn't. And so the evening had taken a bit of a turn for the worse, hence the hangover when a few beers became more beers.

He had also taken the opportunity to chat with Mark Kudowski, his old partner and now an Agent in Charge for the Bureau's Financial Crimes unit in New York. Unlike him, Mark had managed to break through and get the promotion.

Unlike some of the other attendees, Roberta, Mark's wife, had been very sweet about his failed
romantic life. Although intensely curious. As she and Mark didn't have kids and were the gathering's hosts, she took every opportunity to gently probe him about dating 'Nikki Heat' through the evening and then when he and they were the only ones left.

Of course Will had very little he could say about Kate Beckett as Nikki Heat because he no longer recognised large elements of this new Kate Beckett. She had told him about her Mother's murder after two months. She had been just out of therapy when they met and after telling him, she made him swear to stop her if he found her looking into it. They were much alike and things were very straightforward, and pretty easy but he could never escape feeling of the darkness that lurked beneath her. It helped that they were both in law enforcement so the understanding about the job was mutual, until he decided to go to Boston, and she didn't. He had been sad, disappointed and just a little relieved. Kate had been getting antsy whenever he had tried to raise their future, and he had wondered if she was going to break up with him. He also had doubts about whether he wanted to shoulder the responsibility of a lifetime commitment to someone as potentially damaged as Kate no matter how much he liked her. Even now Boston feels like the convenient, cowards way out.

Eventually the beers took their toll, and he had crashed in their spare bedroom, waking early enough to apologise and manager a last minute dash back to his hotel to shower and a high-speed change that had left him only twenty minutes late that morning.

He did wonder if he should try and contact Kate especially since the negative press coverage at the start of the week. But he had to admit he had no reason other than their past and as she made clear four years ago, that she had moved on. And so had he. Except she had now someone and he had a seemingly becalmed job, and no personal life.

Then there was something about this case that was nagging him. There had been since he first met Senator William Bracken. Admittedly the man was a politician but it had taken every ounce of his experience to maintain a diplomatic and concerned stance around the obnoxious egotist and wannabe despot in his unguarded moments. Man voters were dumb.

They had been relocated to a bigger secure office to accommodate the growing evidence they were logging as well as the coming and goings of another Task Force team led by a Jared Stark who made McCord appear like a bubbly airline hostess. Not that he'd share that observation with either.

After four days they did have a pretty through picture now of multiple criminal acts performed by the now Senator William H Bracken or his agents starting from before he ran for District Attorney in the late nineties.

Their financial team back in DC was putting together a very convincing evidence trail. Guided by their initial detective work, the electronic analysis had picked up further significant finds. Investigations had now spread to thirteen US banks and more than twenty overseas financial institutions were on the target list. For the moment most of those were out of bounds for fear of alerting the now multiple suspects.

Everyone working on the investigation was staggered.

The off-shoring was two way. Both were more than technical breaches of the laws and they had five distinct instances of inbound transactions being funneled to Bracken's campaign funds via multiple accounts. A single count would be enough to terminate most political careers, five would nail anyone especially a potential candidate for the highest office. Acceptance of 'foreign' money was illegal and anathema with US politics. Bracken would be ostracised by his own party once news broke. Of course that would be the least of his problems.
Then there was the sum of money. Estimates had it at more than a billion dollars. A number that raised so many red flags that had McCord talking to Chief Carl Villante the head of the Task Force.

More concerning was news that morning from a second team lead by Stark that was now also in New York, that had uncovered evidence of ties to more than one criminal organisation. Ties that also began in the nineties and apparently continued to this day. The initial links were to a small Italian crime family, the Silva's but towards the end of the nineties had blossomed into connections to some big time drug syndicates including more than with one extra-territorial elements. Also the investigators had discovered disconcerting evidence of links to multiple corrupt or suspected corrupt NYPD offices as well at least one member of the state judiciary.

Sorenson was at first surprised by these new discoveries. Well that was definitely understated, more than that he was disturbed. During the bombing campaign just months ago they had investigated all the potential targets thoroughly and found absolutely no hint of any maleficence higher than ignored parking tickets. Were his investigative skills so lacking that the he and other FBI agents missed information discovered in days by the task force? Or something more sinister at work?

But once McCord has explained about the other shadow team operated he had to concede there may well be a lot more, as well as being more comfortable about his previous efforts.

Jared Stark's team walked right along the tightrope. Their investigation methods were certainly not in the FBI's field manual, nor the Justice Department's. They were a results orientated strike force and rarely did their missions require or result in prosecution. Very much the eponymous Men in Black. Starks team were as close to black ops as they could legally be. Their role was to secure critical evidence and if that meant invalidating lesser charges or even lower value targets due to breaches of law then so be it.

Of course all their discoveries don't come without their own issues.

This was BIG. Probably larger than that. A serving US senator, potential POTUS candidate, illegal campaign funds, money laundering, links to one or more criminal organisations, corrupt law enforcement. Who knows what else? Multiple agencies would be involved. Just as many would want in regardless of their jurisdiction.

That was the next thing. Once back they were back in DC and the finding left the AG's task force it was only a matter of time, possibly hours before it would be leaked. Despite whatever secrecy level it was assigned.

Leaving aside the issue of why the data had been restored, they focused on the information they could gather and collate. They were aware any defence would pick up and attack that angle – who would have motive for restoration of the 'evidence'? Hint at the less than stellar chain of evidence, possible record tampering.

Regardless of any potential future legal objections, they were currently almost overwhelmed with data. Much more than they initially needed but they continued to extract and log it. Back in DC, Agent Richmond had an extra team of experts working under his supervision and was regularly performing small wonders with the data retrievals.

Then there were the possible CIA links as well. One name more common than before, Orantis Solutions. Hints of links to the illegal rendition of suspects and potentially worse. Villante had kicked that upstairs and the team was forbidden from following any trial there.
McCord has been off with him since well before lunch time. At first he thought it was because of his hangover but it wasn't that. Eventually she pushed her chair back with a scrape on the floor. Looking up, Will quickly recognised the moment was here.

"Look Will I'll be upfront with you."

"Time to make the decision?" He didn't mean to interrupt her but he blurts it out.

There was a lot going on, and even with his hangover he could sense the pressure coming down on them. He could feel the tension rising yesterday. McCord was getting updates from her superiors but stepping out for privacy, at least from his ears. Whatever this was it was bigger than campaign funding irregularities or criminal acts associated with that. He hadn't ever thought that any of the calls could be about him.

"Yeah." There is resignation and frustration in her voice. She drops into a nearer chair beside him. Her faces relaxes.

"I didn't want it to be like this. I wanted to do it properly but we're out of time."

"Time?"

"Afraid so. Things have escalated massively and accelerated. We can't keep a lid on this. So if you don't want join us then we'll have to drop you out of the investigation. We need to compartmentalize this as long as we can. Your current security clearance doesn't get you in. Hell I'll be blunt, if you're not a member of two of the Task Force's teams you're out. Worse you'll get sequestered and held in isolation until it goes public or the AG decides otherwise. Sorry it really is that big."

He nods. Still after his initial outburst he'll hold his tongue for the moment longer.

"Will, this one is off the charts. I've never worked anything like this before. We don't have a handbook for how to handle this. We normally work tight cases that can be handled discreetly. This one won't be. There is also the risk of retaliation. It looks like Bracken has all sorts of dirty shit going on. It could prompt attacks against us. Normally our reputation is enough to safeguard us but this....."

She doesn't finish the sentence. Instead purses her lips for a moment, a frown on concentration apparent. Then taking a breath she resumes.

"Will, if you choose to join the Attorney General's Task Force, you can stay on the case. Help us get him and his associates. It's big case. Massive. The downside is that outside of the Task Force and a few select officials you'll never get credit for helping break one of the biggest political corruption and worse cases for decades."

"I'm in." His mind was made up last night. He really has nothing left for himself in New York or anywhere else, and the FBI was road to nowhere. He had made the choices that led him to this point, and he took full responsibility for the consequences. Maybe this time it might work out a bit better. Perhaps it was time he had a better plan.

"Okay." He reaches his right hand forward and for the second time this week, McCord shakes it but this time with a degree of enthusiasm.

"Welcome on board Agent Sorenson." She actually smiled.

"Oh by the way the paperwork's a killer. Way worse that regular FBI or police."
"Great, now you tell me! Thanks McCord."

Aunt Molly's Kitchen, Boston, Ma.

The remnants of his late lunch pushed aside he looked like any other geek on a lunch break. Computer in front of him, scanning his smart phone. At least the corner booth in the noisy restaurant gave him a measure of privacy.

He was planning to return to New York tomorrow.

His employers had called the new burner phone number. Exchanging the new numbers was done via small ads on Craig's List. He sometimes wondered what percentage of adverts were fraudulent. Probably pretty high.

Unlike the usual short, terse exchange of messages this had been an extended conversation. Not of his choice.

During the call he had learnt that they knew his real name and all relevant details including his family and friends. Ex-girlfriends, not that there had been too many of those. Regardless of the expectation that he might be identified it was something he had been dreading. Especially by those well outside of the legal authorities.

The anonymous voice on the other end of the call stressed that there were 'quite satisfied' with the results of the engagement. However, final payment would be withheld until decisive action was taken that resulted in the desired outcome.

He knew better than to protest the change in agreement.

Secretly he was pretty damn sure and confident that ultimately he would receive full payment. What he had managed to learn about the Attorney General's Task Force was sufficient to give him that confidence. They wouldn't let the damming evidence go astray.

However, any relief at not being under immediate threat from a mafia family was tempered by the concern that his cover was blown. All it took was one careless person and he would be in even greater danger, or being pursued by the Federal authorities. Although what he knew of Senator Bracken's nefarious activities he certainly didn't want attention from the man, or worse his agents either.

Pulling the Sim card out of the phone, he replaced it with another data only card and then put into router mode using a mini-USB cable to tether his laptop.

Using the sandbox on his laptop he quickly access one of his hidden sites located on the TOR network. He wasn't foolish enough to believe it was secure or safe but with him ghosting behind numerous hops and through countries that didn't share their information with US, well at least not willingly or knowingly, he was satisfied that brief connections were low enough risk.

Running through the report output his heart sinks. The report compiled the results of Internet searches for specific keywords including his aliases along with thousands of innocuous words to help disguise his own fingerprint searches.

Shit! At least three firm hits on his Nimrod alias in the last twenty-four hours. Two coming from IP addresses belonging to the City of New York. That would be the NYPD's Computer Crimes unit. The other IP address came up unknown except for a North-Eastern Internet Service Provider block.
Fuck! He really should vary his methodology more often. The NYPD had obviously determined the similarity in techniques when he used the backup tape trick to expose that savings and loan fraud two years ago. Damn his ego. He had clearly tagged that one Nomad. Whether they had any more than identified him was the question. Probably not, but he was going to need to go dark for a while.

Now that he had a heads up that the NYPD is looking for him, he needs to make a decision and update his plans. Should he return to New York, remain in Boston or go elsewhere?

He has to. Return to New York. He needs to report back to work on Monday. He has community college to teach. Any sudden absence could trigger suspicions.

He was going home.

The Hamptons, early afternoon.

The town car service had Martha in the Hamptons in just over two and a bit hours. She had stopped for a light lunch before continuing on to the house. Regardless there was definitely something to be said for coming here off-season, well very off-season and not travelling on a Friday or Sunday. Much faster journey times.

Exiting the car, Martha pulled her coat tighter around her in response to the biting chill of the ocean breeze, as she approached the entrance to the house. There were two trucks in the drive way. Both with signs for the Richardson Construction. How apt she thought.

Unlocking the door, Martha was grateful to at least be out of the cold wind. Dean, the driver, delivered her bags to just inside the door.

"Do you need me to take them up Missus Rodgers?"

"Oh no thank you Dean. I'm sure I can find some to assist me." She nodded down the hall-way with the noise of multiple men and thuds could be heard.

"Very good. What time should I pick you up tomorrow?"

"Let's make it six o'clock provisionally but I'll confirm by lunchtime. Is that alright?"

"Perfectly."

Martha knows better than to try and tip. The Time and Motion drivers won't accept it. Richard takes care of the account and throws a Christmas party for the company in gratitude.

She picks up the lighter of the two cases, which contains all she actually needs and carries it upstairs to her bedroom. They – as in the Castle/Rodgers clan - didn't often come here outside of the warmer months. The house itself wasn't particularly well insulated and with lots of glass, and big open spaces designed for cooling in the heat of summer, it was clearly not intended as an-all-year-round property. That said there were fireplaces in maybe half the rooms and a couple of the smaller bedrooms heated up quite nicely unlike the ostentatious master bedroom with its free standing bed. The only saving grace for that particular room was the large fireplace, and she tried not to think about other ways her son would find to keep warm in there.

Returning downstairs she heads down the corridor towards the sounds of men working. Entering the doorway she finds the renovations of this sun room well under way.
She doesn't need to introduce herself as the foreman spots her.

"Missus Rodgers?"

"Please call me Martha."

The handshake is firm and polite as is the middle aged man in overalls and blue fleece jacket in front of her.

"Well Martha, I'm Tom Richardson, foreman of this crew. My Dad, Henry owns the firm.

"Please to meet you Tom. How are things progressing?"

"Pretty good. Your maintenance guy met us here at seven and let us in. It helped that the room was empty so were able to start straight away. The machines were delivered just a couple of hours ago and we have two new circuits to power the equipment going in now.

"Now Martha you called late this morning. Some amendments to the plans?"

"Yes. But more like additions." She reaches into her hand bag and extracts the paper Katherine passed to her along with the verbal instructions.

"My daughter-in-law, well future daughter-in-law" she self-corrects. "Wants some floor mats in place but it needs to be a reasonable surface area. Say at least sixty or so feet square. More if possible."

The man looks round the room. The logical place would be the centre area, free of the support beams and other fittings. However, there are already exercise machines in place there. Pursing his lips he makes a snap decision.

"Hmm…we've use the main area already for the machines, but what about we relocate them to two sides?"

Martha nods, wordlessly encouraging the man to continue.

"So if we move the machines along the wall, the rewiring is minimal and actually easier, and that frees up that center area for the floor mats. Should be able to get a ten by ten surface in there. The only thing is we don't have the matting material."

"Excellent. I believe that is being sorted by Katherine, she has put the number of the firm on this paper. I believe if you call before five with the measurements, they can deliver tomorrow."

"Sounds good. We can accommodate all that."

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**Beesley, Wax and Drummond Lawyers**

Jeff Beesley had been tempted to ring in sick. But unable to stomach the idea of the insinuations his absence would create he had literally limped in late that morning and retreated to his office. And remained there.

**Last night**

_He was out and enjoying a drink with friends when the hot red head came on to him. He suspected she was a pro but he didn't care. He was happy to pay, even more opportunity to get exactly what he wanted, instead of pathetic compromises or worse rejection._
Sure enough it takes less than twenty minutes and he's heading out with her. He had followed her to her room at a nearby hotel, further confirming his suspicions. They were shedding out layers coming through the door, and fuck she was hot kisser. She pulled away and then came the punch line.

Not at all abashed he had fished the five hundred out and then stripped off. She followed suit down to her lingerie. Turns out she was well half-way. He didn't particularly mind. A hole was a hole as his father had said. And it wouldn't be his first time.

But first he wanted her mouth on him. He had barely had time to kiss her and then push her down his body.

Well that was the last thing he remembers before he woke up in his own apartment in his underwear.

Still groggy he was thinking clearly enough to recognise that his drink had been spiked. That also wasn't the first time for him. But what sort of criminal returned their mark back to their apartment?

He hurt all over. He needed some painkillers and some water. Then he'd deal with the missing cash and any compromised cards. As he sat up and swung his feet round to the floor he had pulled his right foot back in agony.

Looking down he had nearly fainted there and then. Swallowing back the bile that had suddenly appeared in his throat, burning his taste buds, he forced himself to remain looking at the ruin of his right foot.

The middle three toe nails from his right foot were missing. In their place bloody mess and pulped remains of the flesh where the toe nails had been yanked away.

At that point he had vomited over the bed covers.

He obviously hadn't been conscious for their removal but regardless they fucking hurt now.

Then his phone had rung.

Blocked number.

"Good morning Jeff. My employer would like to remind you to please remember your professional ethics." The voice is smooth, well-spoken but the next words are brutally frank. "Or if not that, focus your own fucking self-preservation. Silence is golden and circumspection is your key to survival. Breach our client's trust again and it will be more severely punished in future. Tread carefully. Well if you can."

Whoever it was they had done this to him.

"Now clean up your mess. It really isn't becoming for a grown man to sit in his own vomit."

CLICK.

Fuck! They can see him.

Somehow he made it in. Doped up on painkillers. So he hid in his office, having his PA bring him lunch, nursing his injuries and fighting a growing sense of panic.

Whatever else he was Jeff Beesley was no fool.
Whoever he was working for was powerful, and ruthless. He wasn't surprised by that but their almost arbitrary actions had caught him off guard. Obviously he did something to rile them up. But what? And this was obviously meant as a warning. He certainly didn't want an escalation.

Almost as crucially, he was under observation. Whoever they were, they ran a very tight ship. And brooked no deviation or risk. Something they had all too brutally emphasised to him last night. He was going to have to be very careful.

But the rewards on offer were simply too much to pass up. The forecast was at least two point eight billion through the accounts over the lifetime of the deal.

A small but significant percentage of that almost three billion would go to the firm and he would take both his rightful cut as COO and also the finder fee for bringing in the new business. By his calculation he would get around hundred million dollars.

More than that it would raise the profile of his firm up from another middle tier Manhattan law-shop into something more. This was his plan. So long as he lived. Feeling the continuing pain radiating from his right foot, he acknowledged he might need a better plan.

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**Silva Family Estate, Long Island.**

Despite the geography, it was not a stereotypical mafia fortress, having once been owned by a senior movie producer who got a better offer to move out West.

Francisco Silva had lived since the mid-eighties, after they had established themselves in the New World. Of course he was a lonely man since the passing of his wife. Their only child, Sophia, was dutiful certainly. She was ran the business day-to-day. She lived here in the other house with her second husband and two teenage children.

She was here today along with their key staff. Harrison Williams, fully Italian despite the name, but simply known as 'Roma' who ran the operations. Mario Stanza their chief enforcer and Paul Denosta their legal guy. This was the command structure for the Silva family.

Their home was their fortress. It hadn't always been so, but now they had technology as well as muscle protecting them now. Thanks to the work of the hacker they recruited. 'Nimrod' such a childish name. Still he had made them secure against electronic eavesdropping.

Accordingly the discussion this day was open and honest. But respectful. Always respectful. They may be a small organisation that specialised in other matters but at their core they did things just the same way as the other families.

"Will he move against us?" The man's question was valid. Roma's foot soldiers and team were bearing the brunt of their current issues.

"Of course." The person answering was old, frail, more possibly. The strength of his voice belied his physical fragility. Francisco Silva was almost ninety years old. His body was failing him, but his mind remained alert.

"He is impatient. Arrogant. Untrustworthy. It is a blight on this family that we ever chose to become involved."

The others all nod.

"He was beneficial to us for many years. But now he is a threat, or rather more of a threat.
However he will be difficult to harm." This from Mario Stanza.

"But we don't need to attack him. His own hubris will be his downfall. His secrets will drag him down." The female voice interjects.

"Si, the seeds of his doom were sown long ago. All we need is time." Her father agrees.

"Agreed. It is right that it was his own actions that will be his doom." Mario again.

"His father was wise man in comparison." Francisco remembers the senior Bracken, bloodied but not broken by his bankruptcy and fall from social status. A reasonable man to do business with. Unlike his son.

Still the decision to do business with William Bracken had been taken by himself and others.

"It was a foolish thing I did to align with him."

The woman who had been sitting respectfully in the corner leans forward so that her head is near the much older man's shoulder. She reaches forward to touch his right hand.

"Papa, it was the only thing you could do. It saved us. You think the other families would have shown mercy?"

The shake of the old man's head is enough to confirm that as he grips his daughter's hand.

The woman continues warming to her topic.

"Would they have even allowed us to continue? We are no threat to them, but it is not right that they give us no respect."

Another firmer shake this time. The woman continues, the ire in her tone biting.

"If we were lucky then you might have lived, I would have been married off, the schism with the motherland broken for good."

Now her father speaks again.

"None of that is acceptable. Not then. Not now. It is why we did business with that man. But no more. I regret ever accommodating his father and rescuing William Bracken from the mess he made.

"He is building a dangerous empire. His mercenaries are clumsy, and soulless. And that mulignane he is the worst!" The last epithet is spat from the mouth. The offensive street slang strangely not out of place even from the old man.

"Yes, Vulcan Simmons. I don't think we should worry too much about him Papa. I think he is as dangerous to our enemy as us. I am sure that he will not survive.

"Sophia I don't like it. He acts with impunity and hurts us with no cause. He kills without reason. At least Bracken's mercenaries have an objective."

Roma joins in. "Si patron. They attack us, but then claim it was the gangstas. We do not believe their lies but they have too much influence." Too much power, money and firepower too.

"They have so much money Papa. It can't all be drugs. Can it?"
"Not directly. They are money laundering for many groups including some families and drug cartels. The operation is massive. Far beyond what should be safe."

"How?"

"Orantis Solutions have some sort of contract with the US military or perhaps CIA for prisoner transfer and more distasteful things. Because of this they have some form of immunity or exemption from certain oversights.

"Surely they will not allow this to continue."

"The son is clever, he traps and then turns people, uses them for his own advantage. Unlike his father he has no conscience and is ruthless in eliminating threats."

"Well he won't trap us." His daughter is adamant about protecting her family.

"Yes, but I don't want us to be sucked down when he falls. It will make a very big impact and hurt lots of people."

"We have set things in motion. I'm sure even now the Federal Government is finally preparing to do something about the corruption in its ranks."

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**The Loft**

"Rick, what are we doing?"

"What now? For lunch?"

Kate slowly closed the gap with fire in her eyes.

"Okay." Slow and careful from her man.

"We're going to Hamptons." He answers and then continues.

"Well I think we deserve some time alone. Extended time. Quality time."

She arches her eyebrow at the last cliché.

"Not just for that!" The protest is automatic. But then he corrects himself. "Yes that too. God you don't know how intensely erotic it is when you let go. You're loud. But it's more than that. You're free. You can be Kate. Just Kate. My Kate."

She relents at his sweetness.

"There are so many things I want to talk to you about. To explore how we feel about them. Together. To understand and map our way forward as a couple. That talk we had after Gates gave us the ultimatum and the secrets we shared in hospital, they're all good but it only makes me want to know more of you. To better understand you.

"I also want to resume those serious discussions about marriage and children."

"I think I'd like that too Rick."

"Kate it been bouncing around in my skull since I was conscious and able to remember was day it was. Facing your mortality does things to you. Forced me to look at what I want."
"I know." She's so quiet he almost doesn't hear her. But he does and he blanches, suddenly aware of the implications of his words.

"Oh God, I didn't mean it like that Kate. Please."

"S'okay Rick. I know you didn't. But I do understand. Last year I had too much time alone and I thought about a lot of things but was too much of a coward to make many decisions, barely any actually."

"So I think that if we had time to share our thoughts, and understand more, then perhaps we'd be even better."

"Hey, I think we're pretty good at the moment."

"I think so too, but I also think we can be better. Be more. Don't you."

"I do. But I've never made it this far before. It's more than a little scary."

"Kate, it equally scary for me. I've done this twice and failed. I can't do that to you."

"I trust you Babe. I'm so looking forward to marrying you Rick. One and done remember. So I just need you to be sure."

"I've never been surer of anything in my life. God Kate, I wish I had never married. So I could be your equal in this."

"Shhh Babe. You have Alexis."

"Still I didn't need to marry her mother."

"I think you did. Would Meredith have kept her if you didn't propose?"

"God No. She wouldn't."

"So there you are."

"There's still Gina."

"I'll give you a pass for that one. We're all entitled to mistakes and she's not all bad."

"Really?"

"Well in small doses on the end of a phone line."

"I'll remind you of that when she's chasing chapters."

"Fair enough."

"I want us to be Rick and Kate. I used to doubt if there was such a person. That all there was behind Detective Beckett was a closed book. Slowly I began to see a different person."

"Rick, I know I'll never be the person I could potentially have been before my Mom died, but I have you to thank for allowing me in and for making me this person. And I have you to reward for scaling those walls and finding me Rick."

Rick's phone pings.
"It's a message from Alexis. She wants to pop round tonight. That's good. We will tell her tonight right?"

"Yes. Martha knows. I'll speak to my Dad today as well. I'll have to at least let Gates know out of courtesy."

"What about the Lanie and the Boys?"

"I want to keep our departure as low key as possible. I'll message them tomorrow."

"Sure I just think we should let them know before we go. CBR has been wanting to borrow the Ferrari anyway. So he can nip by and pick up the keys."

"Sorry, who wanted to borrow the Ferrari?"

"Umm, Ryan."

"That's not what you said."

"Wasn't it? I'm sure that's what I meant."

She's up in his face, prodding a finger into his good shoulder. "Spill Ricky."

"Well about that…" He realises he isn't going to escape.

And then she laughs.

_Oh crap she knows._

"Rick, after the Boys found out about us, do you remember that night at the Old Haunt?"

He narrowed his eyes.

"The 'I have never….' night? Karaoke? Or trivia night?"

"Trivia."

"What about it?"

"Well Ryan was really drunk."

"I know his answers were actually better than mine."

"And still completely wrong. But that's the not the point Rick. The fact is that when like that Ryan has no filter. Worse than you."

"So?" His gut is sinking.

"He told me about you nickname for him."

"Oh?"

"C. B. R. ring a bell?"

"Of course. 'Castle's Buddy Ryan'."

"Bzzzt! Wrong answer!" She stared him down. Satisfied he was suitably intimidated she asked.
"Want to try again?"

"You got me."

"And?" Hands on hips time. Head tilted. Slight frown.

"Do I have-ta?"

"No whining Rick."

"It's short for 'Cock Blocker Ryan'."

"And you named him this when?"

"Well it's just every time we were on the cusp of communicating better it seemed like one or both of them would interrupt. Ryan was the worst."

"When."

"Umm almost two years ago, in fact."

"So I was with Josh then."

"Um yes. So?"

"She huffs. So does this mean they've know about your…." She's stuck for the correct word.

"Infatuation is a good word." Rick offers helpfully.

"Creepy is more appropriate."

"Creepy Infatuation."

"Stop trying to win brownie points. But really Cock Blocker Ryan. What the hell did you call Espo?"

"Anything he wanted me to. The dude is scary."

Kate laughs again and all is right with the world.

The Hamptons. Early Evening.

The black delivery van with the gold lettering had pulled up outside. And the lean mid-forties occupant struts up to the already open door.

"Hello Marcus."

"Good evening Martha. It is a pleasure to see you again."

"Well young man, what have you got for me?"

"Well in the van I have a wide assortment of breads and meats, along with lots of garnishes as well as soft drinks, and a sandwich press."

"Well I didn't know what the young gentlemen would want."
"Martha, I'm sure there will be something in there they'll like. Then looking at the nearest truck, he laughs. Plus I know Tom and his boys. They come into the deli regularly. I'm sure they'll all be very happy."

"Excellent, please get set up in the kitchen and I'll go send them through."

Martha swans into the Sunroom to interrupt the still busy workcrew.

"Gentlemen. Marcus from the Ambrosia Deli is here. He's going to make you all some supper. Please consider it thank you for you all staying back late to continue working on this project. Especially as you are doing it at such short notice."

The kitchen was cleaned and the materials returned to the deli van.

"Thank you Marcus."

"My pleasure. Martha. Do you mind if I ask how your son is? I saw on the news."

"He's making a good recovery."

"So he's coming here for a bit?"

"Yes – to have some time away from the city and complete his rehabilitation without interruption."

"Well I hope he wraps up warm, a lot of these Hampton homes are meant as summer houses and can be a bit chilly in winter. Though this one's not too bad but some of the rooms are pretty big and airy."

"I'm sure he'll cope. And he has someone to help keep him warm."

"Oh I almost forgot. Can you please deliver this tomorrow afternoon – say around Four pm."

Martha says whilst handing over a shopping list.

"Absolutely."

"Thank you Marcus. Please say hello to your sisters."

"Will do Missus Rodgers. Goodnight."

Martha wandered into the sunroom where the workmen were clearing up for the night.

The room looked good. The machines were off to two sides of the room and connected to the power. The space for the new floor mat as requested by Katherine was there in the center of the room.

The mat itself would be delivered tomorrow. Made up on individual tiles it would be somewhere to exercise.

"Hello Martha. Wow the food was great stuff. Thank you for organising it."

"Tom, there is absolutely no problem. I am grateful you have all been so dedicated.

"Anyway, I am off to visit my friend. You remember Louis?"
"Oh yes. I was so sorry to hear about Miss Frankie."

"I saw that you sent flowers and made a donation to her charity. Thank you."

"She was a lovely lady. It was nothing really."

"Yes she was. Anyway, you'll lock up and I'll see you in the morning?"

"We'll be here about seven am again. I'll let Chief Brady know you're in town and that the house will be occupied from the weekend."

"That's very kind of you. Good night Tom. Boys!"

With that Martha departed the room in search of her coat just as her phone chimed with a message from the taxi to say it was outside. She was so looking forward to spending some time with Louis.

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The Loft.

It's well past early evening when Alexis makes an appearance. She's not alone. Jane, her bodyguard/cum new bestie is right beside her.

Alexis bounces through the door looking entirely chipper and happy. Hugging both her father and Kate in short order.

Jane hangs back and then introduces herself.

"Hi you must be Detective Beckett."

"Just Kate will do fine. I'm on extended leave from the NYPD."

"Well then Agent Beckett."

Kate's eyebrow twitches, and she recovers from her surprise to fix her best detective stare on the younger woman.

Grinning, the Protective Duties Operative beats the question framing on Kate's tongue.

"My employer works closely with Taylor Matthews. So I am aware of your change of status."

"I'd still prefer Kate if you would please. Also the position is on a need to know basis so we're not advertising it."

"Sure. That's no problem."

"Hi Rick Castle. Alexis' Dad." Someone's feeling a little left out.

"Jane." The handshakes are honest and not testing. The younger lady smiles.

"Well personally I'm impressed." Rick is almost gushing.

"Why is that Mister Castle?"

"Firstly please call me Rick. Mister Castle has unfortunate connotations." Kate snorts.

"Sure Rick."
"Well it's simple. Alexis is letting you do your job. She's always had issues with security and the few other times we've engaged bodyguards have been exercises in frustration bar one."

"Clare?"

"You know her?"

"Yes – she did much of my training. Kind of my hero. Everyone is in awe of her."

"Well that's easy to understand."

With that they settle into an easy conversation with Alexis chipping in.

Xxx

Kate had left them to it so she could go back to their bedroom to finish packing. She was completing her task of sorting through a few more warm things to take with them when she heard the rap on the door frame.

Looking up she finds that it is Alexis who has knocked. "Excuse me."

"Oh Alexis." Kate clearly looked uncomfortable but swiftly moves to explain herself.

"Look Alexis it's still you home, you don't have to knock to come in here."

"Actually I do. Dad's rules. Everyone knocks before entering a bedroom. Knocks and waits for permission, especially for explicit approval if the door is closed."

"Sensible rule. Why hadn't she heard this? Another thing to discuss with Rick."

"No it's not that at all."

"What then?"

"Are you okay? All that terrible stuff in the press. Especially the Internet. Dad's said how much you hate the press and being exposed by that."

"It does hurt. But it is transitory. Your father and family and our friends get us through it. Plus I do need to get used to it. Being with your father has a certain degree of exposure."

"Do we know why there has been all this negative coverage? Dad said it wasn't just the press being feral to sell copies." Alexis certainly can drill directly to the point.

"Alexis, we're not sure. But your Father thinks it might be some form of distraction or misdirection. For what we don't know. But both your dad and I are outside the investigation at the moment, so it's not easy to keep up."

Alexis decides to change the subject.

"So where's Grams?"

"Martha has gone up to the Hamptons."

"In winter?" Alexis doesn't hide the surprise. "That house style is not particularly well.....warm. Especially for the winter winds off the sea."
"Oh. I didn't know that. It's not too cold is it?" *Shit I never thought about that.*

"More that it has a lot of open space. Difficult to heat. We've been there before when it's cold. Just stay close to the fireplaces or rugged up."

"Okay. Sounds like a workable plan." *She knows just the person with excess body heat.*

There is a small frown of puzzlement on the girl's face. "Kate are you and Dad thinking of going up there?"

"Yes. Martha suggested it. Get away from the city and the attention. Your Father can do his rehab there. We've checked with the hospital and they've recommended someone in the Hamptons to supervise and do the check-ups."

Fighting the urge to bite her cheek or worse call Rick in here, Kate continues. "It is a really good idea for us. We're hoping that the time together will help us be better. I'm sorry we haven't discussed with you. We were going to tell before we left. Tonight."

"No that's alright. I'm an adult and you shouldn't have to organise your life around me. Plus I don't live here anymore."

"Alexis, we don't want you to feel like that. You certainly shouldn't feel you have to stay away because of me. I'd like to think that you'll always have a place here if you want it or need it."

"It's not that. It is actually nice that you think of me, and are so considerate."

"So why has Grams gone up? Other than it's Ladies Night at Julian's."

Kate shakes her head. "Someone is going to have to explain that one to me."

"I can't. Apparently it has to be seen and experienced. Plus I'm not old enough." She's smiling.

"Perhaps I should go investigate myself." Kate pops both eyebrows in a manner which provokes an even bigger smile from the girl.

"God. Well if you do, don't tell Dad it will stress him out."

"Well clearly you know more than you are telling."

"I know."

"But you're not telling? Again."

Alexis remains silent. There is a firm, short headshake, then a smile. Just for good measure she bats her eyes at her father's more than girlfriend.

Kate laughs.

"Martha has gone to supervise some workmen put in some exercise equipment."

But Kate decides it is time see on how Alexis is really doing.

"So how are you Alexis? Really?"

"Good, I think. Better certainly."
She scrunches her eyes as if mentally reviewing something.

"Actually I am. Now that Dad is recovering and he's got you. Everything is less scary. It is good being back in college the study is helping distract me.

"Also I've found out who my friends are. Who can be trusted. It hurts that he …..

As Alexis trailed off. Kate didn't need to know who he was.

"I'll let you in on secret Alexis. It's not just males who can let you down. Although, young men, boys really, can be especially bad.

"I think I understand. But I don't just put out. I want sex to be special. I'm not a virgin but I don't want to be disrespected or worse."

Kate nods and then speaks.

"That wasn't solely what I was talking about. The person you need most to be honest with is yourself. I am truly happy here, but I lied to myself and others, especially your father, for a long time. We lost a lot of time, missed opportunities, and almost completely lost each other.

"I know you're not me, but anyone can make the mistakes. Not the exact same ones, but same difference." Kate pauses for a second. "Look I'm not doing a very good job of this. Kinda new to it if you know what I mean."

"Kate, it's okay. I think I understand." Alexis takes her own moment and then continues.

"The second night back, Friday, Max came round. It didn't feel right but I convinced myself that it was what I wanted. Then the next day I find out he's had sex with another girl from the same dorm whilst I was with Dad. From the girl herself. God I was mortified. But only briefly. It was the betrayal that hurt. I thought he was different."

"Are you alright?"

"I'm getting there. I broke up with him that night. I wanted to punch and scream at him and I did nothing except tell him I didn't want to see him again.

Then when he turned up the other night, I was lost for words until Jane laid some impressive moves on him when he got too close. After that I didn't have any trouble making clear my displeasure. And Clare may have intimidated him a lot. All-in-all I think he finally got the message."

"So how are you coping with the bodyguard? Your Dad was pretty uncertain about how you would react."

"Previous experiences haven't been fun. Even that time with Clare in California. But Jane? She's cool. She totally handed Max his arse and she's not an encumbrance. I mean previous security was in the way. This isn't. Plus I think all my friends are jealous or maybe scared. Or perhaps both."

Alexis closed what was left of the distance between them and envelopes Kate in a firm hug catching her by surprise. The steps back and Kate flops back onto the bed partially in surprise.

"I just wanted to say thank you for looking after my Dad. For loving him. For being there for him. Any remaining doubts I have are gone. And I'm sorry for having those, but I know now I can trust you with him."
"I know. I please don't think for a minute that your doubt are a negative factor for me. If anything they make me respect you more."

"So Dad told you?"

"Of course. We're promised not to keep secrets unless they directly hurt someone else and they don't impact our relationship."

"Oh. Look Kate that's great. I need to explain something.

"Since Mom left, and when I was old enough and probably before, well Dad has always had this policy of being as honest as possible with me. Doesn't mean he didn't make up stories to entertain me, naturally he's good at those, but about the real things he kept it honest."

Kate mentally berated herself. She should have realised just how deep and strong this was. This explains so much about the relationship between the two. Something so strong and natural they it was one of the first things that clued her in that there was more to Richard Castle than his public persona. They are a small family but have total faith in each other. She realises too that she too is part of that family.

Kate suddenly rises and takes a surprised Alexis in her arms and hugs her tightly.

"Thank you."

"Sorry. For what exactly?"

"For letting me in. Allowing me to be part of your small family."

You don't have to. Anyway, I think Grams has wanted to adopt you right from the beginning."

"No. How would you know that? Did she tell you?"

"No Kate she showed us."

"Do you remember almost the first case you worked together? Dad got you that gorgeous red dress for that charity auction. Do you think Grams loans genuine diamond and ruby necklaces to any of my Dad's dates or girlfriends?"

*Shit that was genuine. I mean it felt genuine. But really, it was REAL!* 

"None of them. Even Gina never got to borrow it. Or any of the other pieces. When they were married nor later."

"Grams has such a strong connection to that jewellery. It was about the only things her last husband didn't steal. They were in a bank vault and needed Grams and Dad's signature to access. So they mean even more to Grams than their monetary value. Which means it's a lot."

*Shit! And Martha still lent it to me.*

"I mean when the second time just before they broke up, one of the last arguments was about you and the necklace. Well that and me."

"What about you?"

"Dad made you an emergency contact for us. And a while later I got hurt at school. Just some abrasions but it needed the nurse and parental notification."
"Gina turned up for a date that night and noticed the bandage. She asked what happened. Of course it came out that neither you nor Dad answered your phones – Dad says you were in interrogation – and Grams can and got me. Gina asked why she wasn't a contact. Well she was the first time when they were married. But after no. Not at all. Dad didn't say anything. She just took all the implications from his silence. They still went out but he came home alone that night. Early.

"A few weeks later, Grams was going to gala. She had the ruby necklace on and Gina remarked on it. Then asked why she was never able to borrow it when you had. We were all surprised she remembered that from a few years before. Clearly she did. Grams replied that she trusted you. Gina wasn't happy. That was the night of Gina's fight with Dad at the Le Circe that made Page Six. They broke up shortly afterwards.  

Oh crap. She was – admittedly indirectly – responsible for the breakup of that relationship.

Their bedroom
Kate is reading in bed when Rick comes in having seen Alexis and Jane off.

"How did your conversation with Alexis go?" Rick asks.

"She told you about that?"

"Yes. But you didn't have to do that."

"But I wanted to Rick.

"After my Mom was gone, I didn't have anyone to discuss those things and give them perspective. I mean I had Lanie but I didn't have my Mom. I just missed her so much. Alexis shouldn't have to miss out on that advice and support. A mother's wisdom."

Then her face fell.

"Oh my God, I didn't mean it that way Rick."

"Kate. Kate! KATE." Rick eventually gets her attention.

"Look at me. I entirely understand. I do. It was the same for me without a dad."

"But that fact that you want to help, so you obviously care but you're not imposing yourself."

"I just worry. I mean she's so polite. What if she's just putting up with me?"

"You're right. She is polite but she is also unfailingly honest. If she had an issue she would tell you or one of us."

"Okay."

"Good but thank you again for talking to her. We all appreciate it."

"Okay but now I have a different question.

"Rick how are getting up to the Hamptons?"

"You know I hadn't actually thought about it. We could use the car service."
Kate shook her head.

"So we drive up ourselves?"

Kate nods, breaking into a smile. "Yeah Babe, but I'll do it. Too much, too soon for you."

"The Ferrari is not really practical. Not with all the gear we're taking." He noted as he glanced over at the accumulating pile of bags before continuing. Kate looked almost embarrassed at her own accumulating pile of possessions.

"Plus Ryan wanted to borrow it to woo his wife."

"That's a good idea. Remember that one for later Ricky, I could stand a fair degree of wooing in that car, especially if I can drive." She just purrs that whole sentence out, and it is a few seconds before Rick can respond.

"Duly noted.

"Kate, I can rent an SUV. You know like that Jeep we had for the trip to your Dad's cabin. Should be enough room for everything."

"That sounds like a good idea. Can we get one in time for tomorrow?"

"Not a problem. Anyway, we'll be coming back to the city every so often. You've got your course work and I'll have business meetings, plus we'll want to meet up with everyone, so we don't need to haul everything up there."

"We could get the others to come to us up in the Hamptons."

Kate actually looked nervous at making the suggestion and Rick fought to suppress any reaction. Secretly he was ecstatic that Kate was wanting to treat what he already consider their homes as if she had a right to offer their hospitality to their friends, which of course she did. Or rather she legally would have after tomorrow. But that was a surprise for tomorrow.

"Sweetheart, I know we could but the travel time is a lot for them as they have jobs plus I want to try and keep the place for just us and our family at least for a little while. Perhaps in summer when it is more suited for visitors anyway." Rick couldn't believe she let him get away with the endearment.

"Okay." Secretly Kate was relieved. She was really looking forward to getting away with only Rick for company.

"Rick, when are we planning on heading up there tomorrow?"

"I was thinking mid-afternoon, we should still be ahead of any peak hour traffic. Mother has arranged for some of the local stores to deliver supplies to the house, so we won't need to venture out for a few days."

Also I've got a few business things to take care of before we can go. That can all be done from the Loft. And we can have that conversation about guns and weapon safes."

"Good. I am very curious since Clare told me about things I had no idea my boyfriend was keeping from me."

She gets the result she was hoping for when Rick winces in anticipation.
"Anyway, I'm beat. I'm going to crash. Goodnight Babe." She kisses his cheek and brushes past his lips.

"Me too Kate. Goodnight. I love you. I'm looking forward to spending time alone with you."

"Me too. Love you."
Chapter Summary

Rick and Kate have plans to escape to the Hamptons. But before they can depart, there are matters to take care of.

The Loft

Friday morning dawned much the same but also with some profound differences than previous days.

For a start they were together in their bed but today they had the Loft to themselves. On previous rare occurrences of such solitude they had taken full advantage, especially of the absence of a red-headed diva seemingly lurking to catch them canoodling or worse. Yet this morning despite this potential window of opportunity nothing more than a few enthusiastic kisses were exchanged before they rose to make breakfast.

As they were alone, they took the opportunity to stay in their night-time attire without covering up with robes or changing into sweats. The Loft’s superior – Kate happily conceded this term simply because it made no audible noise unlike her apartment - heating is more than capable of keeping the chill November bite at bay. Both revealed in the simple domesticity of the mood this imparted as they moved freely around their home.

In fact Rick couldn't even bemoan the missed opportunity to be intimate with his partner because he got to watch her dance round the Loft, humming and here and there, singing fragments of the songs emerging from the recessed speakers streaming the Internet radio station she had selected with the controller on her phone. At one point he had sunk onto the end of the sofa and mutely watching Kate shimmy round the kitchen, hands caressing the air above her head, simply celebrating being. Of course she called him for creepy staring which he couldn't deny and she could only beam wider and laugh louder.

Then there were the visitors they were expecting starting on the dot of nine thirty. After a couple of days of being dug in with the exception of Kate’s field trip for Taylor Matthews, there were people to see before they headed to the Hamptons.

All Kate knew was that first were the lawyers – Steve and Suzanne – who were coming over with papers for them to sign. Rick had told her last night before they settled into bed but had been light on the other details. In the spirit of their new togetherness and trust Kate had clamped down on the questions and doubts, believing that her partner had everything in hand. Plus she had made certain arrangements of her own.

Today was their last day in the Loft for a while as they planned to head up to the coast that afternoon unless Martha had any bad news concerning delays from the house for them. They hadn't heard from her last night but she had mentioned that she was planning to visit Louis and Rick informed Kate that she was never very chatty after that.

Meanwhile there was some final packing and preparations to make, as well as few chores at the Loft. All of which could help keep a lid on a growing sense of excitement for the couple as it got
closer to their escape.

Kate had kept Rick to a simple breakfast of hot oats – gruel he whined – with honey and some fruit. She was determined to modify his diet to more align with hers as no amount of gym work – at least in the time usually available to her – could work off the sort of breakfasts Rick would regularly make given half-the-opportunity. Plus they were getting older, it was quicker to go on and harder to come off, or at least that's how it appeared for Rick at least.

Showered and dressed by nine, they hung out reading the papers, nursing second coffees, and chatting whilst waiting for the arrival of Steve and Suzanne, Rick's lawyers - and to a certain extent now, Kate's too.

As was her wont Kate couldn't help all the small touches and glancing contact she made constantly through the morning, even trailing him round the kitchen to slot her hands into the back pockets of his snug fitting jeans as they cleaned up after their earlier breakfast. Not that he objected in any way and reciprocated just as much when he could. Whilst his injuries were on the mend, it didn't take much to remind them that he still wasn't healed, and had quite a way to go. The sling for his right arm was more than sufficient indicator most of the time.

With a little time before Steve and Suzanne were due, Kate took the opportunity to resume their postponed conversation about the gun safes and their contents.

"Rick when I was with Clare she mentioned that you have quite a collection of weapons. Especially handguns. What surprised me was that as well as the unique collectable pieces there were quite a few more workman like ones. Certainly more guns that I knew about or even expected, to be honest." Rick silent 'oh' face signified she had caught him on the hop, despite his own commitment to discuss things.

"Also why have you never mentioned them to me before?"

"Kate, there's a lot I need to cover for all that. But first let me assure you there was never any deliberate intention to hide it from you.

"The safes are biometrically secured but do have a manual override. However, I never needed to share them with you as there was the office safe here and at the Hamptons to store your service pistol and badge.

"Under the terms of the agreement with the authorities only family members have access to the weapon safes. New York is very serious about private handgun ownership. We've gone over top in compliance with digital security including access monitoring, and biometric security. But I would have told you very soon, not least because from today you'll have the legal status giving you access rights."

"So that is why you didn't tell me?"

"Well to be honest, it never came up. But I guess so it was an omission on my part. Christ Kate it wasn't deliberate. Please tell me you understand that?" Rick finds himself repeating himself, not something he usually does.

"Of course. It's just that it hurt a little finding out from someone else. Someone that knows something important about you I don't."

She sits. Forces herself to do so really before continuing.
"That should be me. I want this to be me learning all I can about you. You spent years studying and learning me, and whilst you shared stuff and eventually I got my head out my arse long enough to begin to reciprocate it isn't the same. There are times when I still don't understand you Rick. You are a far more complex and nuanced individual than anyone including myself gives you credit for."

"Okay. Well I promise to spend a lifetime sharing with you Kate. If you'll have me?"

"Oh believe me Richard Castle, there is nothing I want more to have you any and every way for the rest of our lives together."

"Kate?" Rick's voice drops an octave or two and is barely a whisper.

"For her part Kate has recognised that their typical banter has crossed a line towards that momentous question. One they both knew they would be asking of each other one day soon. But this wasn't the time and place.

"Rick."

"There is nothing I want more than to answer that question but not yet. Okay?"

"Okay." Rick takes a breath and speaks again. "It's just that each time that we touch on the subject it gets harder to step back. God Kate, sometimes I just want to blurt it out."

"Me too." Her confession emboldens him further.

"Can I tell you something? I think we're a point where I could share this without you running for the hills."

"Hmm sure."

"That first morning. After you came to me. Well when you left and sneaked out – rather unsuccessfully as it happen given Mother saw you – and left me. Well after Alexis and Mother had gone to bed, I showered and went out. Too much nervous energy. Plus I didn't want to face Mother for a bit. After I forced myself not to head straight for your place, I somehow found myself outside Benedict's."

"Benedict's?"

"Umm… Benedict's is a bespoke jeweller." Kate's eyebrows shot up but the rest of face was carefully neutral prompting Rick to continue. "I spent ten minutes outside window shopping, but I was recognised so then I went in as much to avoid any encounter but I did spend another thirty minutes gazing at engagement rings. I may have asked to see a few."

"Rick!"

"Kate." He swallows back and fixes his courage. "I didn't but it took all of my self-control not to."

"Not to?" It is a half question/half statement from the woman he so much wants to.

"Not to buy the best ring I could and dash straight to yours and ask you."

"Ask me?" Kate could kick herself. She when was she so monosyllabic? Oh that's right since meeting him. Moments like these.

"Yes. To ask you." Rick takes her hand.
"But do you know what stopped me?" Kate involuntarily gives a shake of head, chewing her lower lip in that familiar mannerism that triggers his own desire to kiss and bite it.

"None of them were right. None of them were you."

Kate's quizzical expression brings him up short so he tries again.

"Sorry Kate, I'm doing a really bad job of explaining myself. None of the rings I looked at was you. I spent quite some time and believe I was almost desperate to find the one. But none of them were right for you. For the only woman now I'll ever marry." He leaves the 'clarification' silent and they both appreciate the absence.

"I know that getting married is a one-time thing for you. So it has to be right. Everything that leads up to that perfect day when I get to be your husband has to be. Right. Perfect. What you want. That includes the ring that forms part of that question for you.

"Rick you know it doesn't have to be. Also I want it to be your day too." Mentally she's lurching. Since when did she get comfortable discussing their wedding plans? Fuck! THEIR wedding plans. Oh she was a goner.

"And it will be. You becoming my wife. I can't ask for anymore. Even that seemed such an impossibility not so long ago. I really don't need any more than you and our family and friends in attendance and you in a dress that renders me speechless and wanting nothing more than to help my wife take it off later."

"Sounds like an excellent plan especially the last bit Babe." The kiss is fervent and reinforces the enthusiasm apparent in her voice and tongue.

"But you know what. If it is going to be my perfect day, then it needs to be yours too Rick. I'm going to be your last wife, so I want everything that you never had from the other ceremonies. It's going to be our day, and I can't think of anything better than sharing it with you."

This time he kisses her. She's shifted round and moved astride his lap. She kisses him gently at first, and then builds until despite the obvious fervour in both of them, she slows the pace, controls the contact and they slowly come down from the high they were reaching for.

"Shit, we're doing a really bad job of following Doctor's orders."

Kate was almost relieved when they switched the topic back to his rather large weapon collection. Oh crap. They sounded just as bad in her head. Thankfully she hadn't mentioned that out loud to him. She'd never live that one down.

"I know when you make a list it is quite surprising collection, but each weapon is justifiable and serves a purpose. Or at least had one when I purchased the particular piece or pieces.

"I'm not against responsible gun ownership – I own enough of my own - but you know I don't agree with civilians carry concealed pistols. Certainly not in New York. I've never pushed to carry one during my time with the NYPD. Sure I've joked about it, and Slaughter set me up with one, but to be honest it felt unnatural and I self-conscious and totally ineffectual with it. That was a mistake all round. I was so dumb then. I didn't have the training or the natural authority that comes with the uniform or badge." Kate caresses his wrist, letting her touch communicate all she needs to say, and Rick nods and moves on.

"It was different from those times you have lent me a weapon in a genuine emergency."
Rick's words bring her back to now. "The Walther PPK is up at the Hamptons. I did want to mount it on the wall in the Bond corner of my study there but as it is fully functional it has to be secured and locked away. So it's in the gun safe there. But yes it is a genuine 1964 7.65mm pistol. Even came from the United Kingdom. I have no providence for it other than it is original and legal.

"Also in the Hamptons is my competition SIG P226 X-Five and the Walther target pistols. I do most of my practise at the gun club up there. Occasionally I enter a few of the competitions and I do okay but I request they don't publish my results or put me forward for prizes even though I use Richard Rodgers as my registration. The club is also where Alexis and Mother have practised.

"Here at the Loft is a Walther PK380 and P22. This second P22 is for occasional target practise and the PK380 is for self-defence. And the Glocks. They're the same models as your NYPD primary and backup pieces."

"Why Rick? Why have the Glocks like mine?"

"Um come the Zombie hordes I wanted you to have weapons you were comfortable and familiar with."

"Really? Zombie's? I'm sure the licensing department accepted that without reservation." She plays along with him. For the moment.

"Well not so much." At her eyebrow arch he admits "At all." However you can't suppress the irrepressible. "But I did want weapons you were comfortable with. And I wanted to practise with them myself. The couple of times you've passed me your Twenty-Two it's always felt a bit small in my hands. When I shot at Scott Dunn it wasn't the result I was looking for. I bought the Glocks that summer I spent in the Hamptons." He trails off, realising how that probably sounds to her.

Oh, that long ago. All those little things that should have added up. They both spent far too long denying the evidence that was all around them. But that also explains that first case back when he shot and disabled Kitty Canary who was behind her just as she took down Earl. It was a skilled shot. She really should be grateful for his hands on research. And she is.

She caresses his wrist in acceptance and further apology and she moves on. They'll never get anywhere if they constantly readdress past mistakes. Especially as there were so many!

"That's a lot of guns Rick. Even when in service with the NYPD I only have four - my Glock Nineteen and backup Glock Twenty-Two service pistols. Aside from those two, Evelyn gave me one of Roy's older service pieces, a Smith and Wesson thirty-eight as a keepsake. And I kept my original service weapon, a Sig P226. But that's at my Dad's place in his safe. Plus it's not been fired for years and will need a really good service."

As she finishes her tongue pokes briefly between her lips, following shortly after by the question. "Why didn't you just give me access to some of your guns? You said you got the Glocks so I would be familiar with them if I needed them, right?"

It is a good question. And his answer is better.

"Because it wouldn't have been legal. As a sworn police officer you need to uphold not break the
law. I could be party to putting your career at risk. Without your NYPD badge, the only other option would be a carry permit which are rarely granted in New York. So at best you could have access to the guns within the confines of one or more of our homes. But you couldn't carry, certainly not in a ready posture. Working for Taylor Matthews addresses both those points. Plus I figure the work they give you will be a boon for you. I'll need to write at some point, and I whilst I don't doubt you could find something to occupy your mind, you're much better at this sort of work."

"I almost forget sometimes how well you know me Rick. Thank you for being so considerate." She wraps herself into him before she continues. "It still amazes me sometimes that I am here in a relationship with you.

"Same her Kate. It's pretty much all I've dreamed about for years." The accompanying kiss is gentle and sweet.

"Not a dream anymore Babe."

They are interrupted with the ping of an incoming message on Rick's phone. Steve and Suzanne are running a little late, peak hour traffic slowly their journey, but will be there in minutes.

"Kate, Steve and Suzanne are coming over with paperwork for us to sign. They're just a few minutes late. How about we park the conversation about the guns until later. I do promise we'll resume and I won't hold anything back.

Kate nods. "Holding you to that Big Guy. Obviously we still have a few more matters to disclose."

"From today Kate, you will legally be a member of my family. All those temporary powers granted you whilst I was incapacitated will no longer be transient, they'll be permanent. From that point we share everything."

"Rick, I thought we'd need to be married?"

"No, not for this. The legal documents will be all authority we need. But in answer to that question. Yes. We will be getting married. Well at least I my heart I know so."

He feels her grasp tighten and her other hand strokes his cheek and he finds himself meeting her tremulous eyes, glowing green with expectation and touches by moisture.

"But this, if this is enough then I'll gladly stop. Just being with you is all I need. The rest ....." Her lips silence him not for the first time.

"It is very important to me Rick. Remember One and Done. I'm not giving that up. Okay?" His mute affirmation is rewarded with another thundering kiss. "Only you. Only with you Rick." She whispers into her mouth as they break for air.

"Dammit. I wish we had more time to ourselves today."

Kate laughs, almost a snicker. "Hush now. I foresee plenty of alone time in our calendar. Hmmmm, including the two of us getting hot and sweaty." The last is low and throaty, and despite everything he knows about this woman who has him so totally and willingly entrapped, he falls for her tease.

"Oh yeah." He breathes, low and deep. She may be teasing, but he can tell from the hitch of her breathing and the darkening of her eyes that he's getting to her too.

"Working out." She clarifies.
"Not the sort of work out I was thinking of." Eyebrows moving. "But then again maybe it was."

That was so worthy of the eye roll it receives.

Just a little after nine-thirty Steve and Suzanne turn up complete with apologies for their – insignificant – tardiness, a box of donuts, coffees, and a formidable folder of what presumably is legal documentation.

The greetings are brief and familiar between them and Steve. Introduced for the first time, Kate shakes the hand of the middle-aged woman who identifies herself as Suzanne White.

As they deposit everything on the breakfast bar, Kate looks back at the folder. There is a serious stack of paperwork there. Polite chit-chat accompanies the sorting of plates and allocation of caffeine. They even have her coffee just the way she likes it. Rick's people – it is still far too soon for her to consider them hers in any way – clearly do their research and preparation.

It doesn't take long for Kate to be curious about the dynamic which has the comfortably rather than fashionably attired Suzanne White taking the lead in this morning's events. The older male lawyer seems perfectly comfortable with playing second fiddle despite his obvious seniority.

"Do I need to have my Dad or other legal representation here?" She addresses that question to Suzanne and it is the woman who answers.

"Well Kate, that would be your call but you Dad has reviewed all of the documents, and made some annotations and changes. You can take as much time as you want to review."

She considers that and with a sideways glance at her partner, turns back and asks the question. "Look do you mind if I make a quick call?"

There are no objections and so she darts away from the worktop.

Kate steps away into Rick's office and then on into their bedroom. By the time she perches on the end of the bed her father is answering.

"Hey Dad."

"Katie, how are you?"

"I'm good Dad. Is now a good time? I'm not interrupting anything?"

"No, actually I was thinking of calling you."

"Oh, I just need to confirm some information with you about the legal documents you drew up."

"Right, so Steve and his partner are there then? I wasn't sure when they were going to go through everything with you and Rick. How is he by the way?" Kate was somewhat taken aback by her Dad's sudden change of direction at the end. Was he nervous?

"He's good Dad. Getting better all the time. It's gonna take time though."

"You have plenty of that I hope."

"I do too."
"How come they're doing all that today? You're not planning on eloping are you Katie?"

"No." And then because the denial wasn't enough. "Dad!" using his name and position as a term of chastisement.

"Good because I have every intention of walking your down the aisle one-day soon and whispering I told you so on behalf of your mother."

Crap. Well if only you knew Dad.

"Rick had originally said he was going to leave it a bit but as we are going away he decided it was better if we got to meet up today and sorted some things out before we left.

"Oh, you're going away?" There is clear surprise and is that disappointment in his voice?

"What is it Dad?"

"I wanted to see you this weekend. Perhaps have you" He corrects himself. "Have both of you meet Val if you were willing." She can tell he's trying to recover to force the neutrality back into his voice, but right now he's hurting and she's responsible.

She unconsciously bites her lip, showing her own nerves before continuing. She had been expecting it, but maybe not so soon. Probably hoping for it not so quickly on top of everything else. It's clearly a serious relationship and she needs to adjust and accept that. She is making steps towards that, but just with everything going on it hadn't been a priority. Perhaps it should be?

"Oh Dad." There is disappointment in her voice and she hopes he realises it is for her not him.

"Look Katie..."

"No Dad, please let me explain. It's not deliberate. I'm not hiding from you or your new relationship. This is about Rick and I. We'd made plans to get away. Maybe it is selfish but the one thing it is definitely not is meant to hurt anyone, especially you."

She talks a breath to force down that awful taste of bile that is suddenly lapping at her taste buds and souring her mouth.

"I won't pretend that I'm not having a little bit of difficulty adjusting to the concept but that is all on me not you and it is certainly not a judgement on her or your relationship."

"That's why I want you to meet. You'd understand a lot if you meet her Katie."

"And I will Dad. I'm not saying no. This is just me saying I'm sorry Dad because I'm not sure we'll have time before we head out today." And she is genuinely sorry. This is important to him, and thus to her too. Their family may be in the process of expanding but it has just been the two of them for so long.

"I am too Katie. But I do understand. But you'll understand if I'm disappointed too." It still tinges his voice but he doesn't give her a chance to respond. "Look, I'm sure you need to get back to the meeting. There is nothing in the documents you need to worry about."

"Thanks Dad. I love you and..." Her father cuts her off before she can apologise again.

"I love you too Katie." It's all too swift and near-perfunctory and she's left sitting on their bed almost entirely dissatisfied with the conversation. Sure she has the reassurance about the legal
documents she really didn't need but now has a whole new set of issues to distract her.

Kate smiles for the group but it doesn't fool him.

Rick takes only a moment on her return to the main living area to determine that his partner needs his support.

She settles alongside him and squeezes his hand. 'Later' she conveys. His response of 'Are you sure?' is waved off.

Steve Mathers, Rick's long time lawyer leads off now that Kate has returned.

"Well Rick and Kate, I have to say chunks of this are largely new to me. Fortunately Suzanne has some experience of this type of arrangement. Sorry if that's a somewhat poor term for what it is you are doing.

"Effectively you are legally joining your personal lives together and this covers a pretty wide range of areas. Given you are not married – yet, I'm instructed to add – means there are some additional steps to take. However, the outcome should be the same. So there will be no issues around access to medical records or consent, financials, or property.

"Well to be honest it's pretty much everything except the actual marriage. And compared to many marriages probably far more complete and sweeping as you have chosen not to maintain any separate accounts or assets of a personal nature."

Rick sits a little straighter at that but Suzanne speaks up before he can.

"So we do have quite a stack of legal documents for you to review and sign but before we begin I need to ask you both a question, and possibly a follow up."

"Can you please confirm that you want to merge your lives so completely and irrevocably without any form of legal protection from the other party?"

Rick answers first.

"Absolutely."

"Kate?" Suzanne prompts.

"Definitely."

Okay, did either or you have any other questions or queries?

Kate goes first.

"I don't believe so. My Dad helped me. And I suspect his new girlfriend did as well." Kate was proud – well just a little - of her level tone, and complete absence of any insinuation. Of course discussing his girlfriend, especially in passing was one thing. Meeting her was another thing entirely.

"Oh, well if that is Valerie Woods then yes she was present for the final negotiations." Steve confirms, and then with a little grin. "I have to say it is not every day you walk into what is expected to be a friendly family law negotiation to find Manhattan's, dare I say, premier divorce lawyer across from you. Your father plays a mean hand, Kate."
"I know. He's just full of surprises." Rick gives her a sidelong glance at that. She shoots a small frown back at him, warning him to back off.

"Rick, when I first learnt about just how really wealthy you were, back in the hospital whilst you were still unconscious, then I'll admit I needed some time. My Dad helped a bit with that. Strangely enough bumping into Josh, an ex-boyfriend" She clarified for the lawyers. "Helped too."

Rick's right eyebrow does a passable Doctor Spock but Kate continues. "When he asked after me, I told him about us, about how certain I was, about our future. Only in veiled terms but it centred me. I was able to go calmly back into that waiting room and be with our family."

"In doing so I decided I had to face up to all the implications of joining with you. So I got my Dad on board – which given he's such a fan of the real you, wasn't a task at all - and we kinda decided to keep it secret so we could surprise you."

"Hmm, consider me more than pleasantly surprised."

"Well, I'm not done yet Babe."

"I'm not exactly penniless myself Castle. My Mom was a very smart lady and she made provisions. There is a trust fund and life insurance. They helped a lot when times were tough." Kate didn't need to add when your father is an alcoholic, unable to earn an income, and you're in college or later the Police Academy whilst you both mourn her in different but just equally destructive ways.

"Later I was able to accept using some of the money for the apartment.

"I love New York. Mom did too. It's one of the reasons I don't think I could ever move away, not permanently at least."

She gestures at the documents. "In here is a plan for how we move forward as a couple." She looks at the lawyers and Suzanne picks up.

"There will be a joint checking account with equal contributions from both parties based on Kate's NYPD salary – obviously when she is paid again. In the meantime, she will make some ex-gratia payments from her savings.

"Kate's trust fund worth is now $430,000 cash. Plus property assets of $1.4 million which is principally Kate's two bedroom apartment. She's owns the apartment outright. I believe her father persuaded her to use the trust fund/life insurance to buy after she had to leave her previous rent controlled one. Something about a bomb?"

Kate could remember how she had been unable to find anything suitable that was affordable to rent, especially on a public servants salary. As hospitable as the Castles had been she had almost fled the Loft as soon as she could. She regrets it now and she does many of her ill-judged actions especially in light of what she now knew about Rick. But that was the past and couldn't be undone.

"Miss Beckett will retain the apartment for the moment with a view to leasing it out. This can reviewed in future."

Kate feels the need to clarify her intentions with her boyfriend.

"Nothing has changed about my plan to move in together Rick. Whether here or in the Hamptons. Or your mountain cabin – which we will be having words about. There isn't any more I need to know about is there?"
"Property wise, no."

"The merging is strictly on a personal level. The business operations of Richard Castle Enterprises are excluded." Suzanne completes her brief, and Steve Mather's takes up the running as he is more familiar with the business operations.

"The assets of RCE and the various organisations are untouched. Miss Beckett has waved any claim to those."

Naturally Rick protests. "Kate, we share everything."

"Rick. We will, for the stuff that connects us. But I'm an independent person. I will give up a lot, surrender most of me to be with you, but I will not let it be insinuated that I am after you for your money. Especially knowing it's a massive nine figure value."

"Kate I know you're not. But people will make that insinuation anyway. But it's not true and we know better."

"Rick this is what I'm comfortable with. I'd be with you regardless of your finances. You know that Babe. But I feel really strongly about this. In fact I'd go so far as to say I am adamant about it."

"Okay, I accept. Although I have a feeling my lawyers" Rick takes a moment to try his best intimidatory stare at his two lawyers but without any real meaning they simply smiled back. "... That my lawyers may have agreed already."

"So Steve and Suzanne, any further views and advice please."

Steve resumes.

"Well I'll admit it was strangest negotiations I've been part of, and let's face it Rick you've had your fair share of weird ones. In this case, the other party spent most of the time justifying their exclusion from your assets.

"But it is well documented, and once signed perfectly legal. I am happy that both parties are as well protected as possible given the absence of a pre-nuptial agreement and an actual legal marriage."

"Suzanne?" Rick enquiries.

"Seriously why aren't you married to her yet already?" Delivered with a serious face Suzanne White clearly surprised her client. And Kate, although fortunately for her she is not required to speak just now unlike her partner.

"Oh, well..." Floundering after barely a single word, the usually verbose author is rescued from his potential pothole by his lawyer.

"Oh Rick, please stop right there before your mouth digs a hole for your head to follow." Suzanne relaxes her face and winks at Kate. What is it with everyone winking at her recently?

"It was largely rhetorical. But as your lawyers we needed to make sure that your best interests, those of your family, and your businesses were represented. In this case, we believe they are. Could you protect yourself better? Certainly. But neither of you want any conventional form of prenuptial agreement and Miss Beckett has refused any rights to a share of the business interests.

"Now the complete personal asset merge and yet the complete isolation from any the RCE
business components is certainly a bit different. In effect all of one, and nothing of the other.”

Rick is staring at Kate.

"What?" She whispers trying not to derail what is almost the closing arguments.

"Kate!?” He's a little louder and this time the lawyers do pause for him.

She decided to answer him. "Being together is my only choice Castle. As a couple. So what's mine is yours and in return what's yours is mine, but it's all ours."

Rick's response is simple. "I can't argue with that."

"Smart Man." Affirms Suzanne before she returns to the matter at hand.

"Now I will add that there were a number of rider clauses added by Miss Beckett's attorneys. Most were to refuse or outright reject any rights to assets or other property aside from those listed under the schedule for personal property.

"In the unlikely event of any separation, the mutual assets will simply be divided equally. No property assets will be sold instead the equitable share of the then current market value will be assigned to the non-retaining party. Any children will live with both parents unless deemed impractical and at that point negotiations will be undertaken."

Steve jumps in. "I would like to stress this was added entirely at the insistence of Miss Beckett's attorneys and against her own specific instruction."

"So what do we do?" Kate asks quickly so as to move on from that point.

"Well presuming there are no further questions, then all that remains is the formalities."

Suzanne uncaps a very nice looking Parker pen and slides it across to Kate. "Sign or initial where indicated please."

As Kate picks up the pen, Suzanne clarifies further.

"Rick yours are the green Post-Its and Kate yours the yellow ones. Please leave the tags in place that way when we review we can check we've got all of them now rather than have to do any part of this over later."

"Sure."

Kate's hand hurt. So many signatures, and initials. But now they were done. The stack of documents returned to the folder except for a smaller collection of papers inside a simple card binder that remained untouched.

"Right so once we file these later today then it will be final and binding." Confirms Steve as he quickly completes a text message.

"Rick as discussed there is a slight risk that someone might be monitoring the filings. They could pick up on this and there may be some press coverage. I believe Paula may have some thoughts on dealing with this if it arises."

"Surely they can't access the contracts?"
"No but they will see the names. We'll split out the personal filings from the business ones. I'll have my clerk do the personal ones and get Harry to do the business ones at a different time.

"Is there anything else Suzanne or Steve?"

The Cheshire-Cat grin from the woman answered that question and made Kate's stomach churn, if only briefly.

"Actually we do have one more set of papers. They don't need signing today, but all your legal representation for both parties thought it was advisable to draw up these particular papers, and have them ready."

"What are they?"

"Well you know how we discussed that these legals were pretty much the same as effectively being married and in some cases more sweeping?"

Kate's jaw dropped.

A quick glance at her boyfriend reveals exactly the same expression on his face as she imagines on hers. Quite simply her future fiancé looked equally dumbfounded.

"Well your Father suggested we may as well draw up the marriage contract as well. Obviously it is not as complete as many others because you have most of the details covered in the pre-existing contracts. And obviously we didn't obtain a marriage license as this needs to be done in person and regardless only has a sixty day validity. Plus that would definitely get some media attention."

*Oh her Dad did this?!!*

"Your Dad is quite good at this, isn't he?" Leaning in close Rick puts words to her thoughts.

"Yeah. But just be grateful it's not my Mom. It would have been far, far worse." Kate's own response is equally quiet. Rick brushed his hand across her arm.

"I do have a couple of questions for you Kate." Suzanne interrupts their quiet exchange.

"There are no marriages or de-facto relationships on your side we need to be concerned about? I know all about Rick's." He had the decency to look a little abashed at that probably because Suzanne's tone was very much of a disappointed mother.

She frowns at Suzanne, not sure if she should be offended, saddened or amused by the question. Rick squeezes her hand just a little more but remained steadfastly silent in his support.

"God no. It's not anything I've personally ever been this close to doing. My other relationships have never been anywhere as serious and in no way so complete." She has a firm grip on his hand now.

"Okay. I just needed to ask. Sorry if it was a little off."

"No that's okay. Best to ensure everything is covered now."

"Aside from the NYPD benefits and life assurance do you have any other policies or endowments?"

"No. As a serving officer many insurers aren't willing to cover cops and after my shooting that range dropped to zero."
"Do you have a will?"

"Yes"

"When was it last updated?"

"About fifteen months ago."

"Okay. You may want to consider revising that as soon as possible. If you want we can handle that through your Father."

"I guess that's acceptable. I'd still have all the input?"

"Of course. Rick's will was updated in late May, of this year but will need a perfunctory review." Of course it was thinks Kate. We're together a handful of days, hours really, and he changed his will. That Man!

"That's fine Suzanne you can organise that. Is there anything else as we've got stuff to do before we escape?"

"No you kids are all good from our perspective. Get well Rick and enjoy your time together."

With Steve and Suzanne take their leave with a final farewell at the door, wishing the two partners all the best and good recovery in the Hamptons

It's now gone Eleven am and they still have a handful of tasks to complete before they can leave.

Devoting themselves to mundane activities such as moving their packed bags to the door and some final household chores manages to bring both of them back from the edge of engagement that their earlier conversations and spectre of marriage that the departing bombshell the lawyers had them hovering at.

Of course Rick's phone pulses with more messages. An urgent delegation from RCE needs some of his time before they leave town. So he accents to their coming over so long as they bring lunch.

Sure enough just after midday Harry Dove and Paula Haas arrive with lunch in the form of sub sandwiches from a deli Kate happens to know Rick loves.

"Hmm, the two of your together? Coincidence?" Rick's non-standard greeting is shut down by his quick-fire publicist.

"Nope." There for good measure. "Absolutely not a coincidence."

Paula Haas continues walking and talking as she pushes into the Loft.

"So I hear you two are planning a getaway. And without telling me!"

"Um Paula, who did tell you?"

"Well, I'm not saying. But you're not denying it." Rick looks at his Business Manager.

"Not me boss!" Harry is straight on the defensive before either Rick or Kate can respond to Paula. Suitably distracted for a moment Rick turns to his business manager. "Not that I don't believe you but just out of interest Harry, why are you here?"
"Umm, I need to go through the strategy for Haborside Habitats again. It's urgent Boss." He adds by way of further clarification.

"What? Today? Why now?"

"Rick, it looks like the City Council are going to accept a recommendation to review the previously approved plan and also accept new proposals for the land use. It could negate our purchase and force it back to market."

"They can do that?"

Kate has been hovering but now pipes up, "Excuse me but what are you talking about?"

Paula butts in too. "Hey I was here first!"

Rick's head is swivelling from one person to the next. He raises his hand for silence. "Harry can we park this for a few minutes?"

"Sure."

"Okay Paula the floor's all yours. So long as you're quick."

His agent nods towards his office and starts walking and the couple follow them whilst Harry heads off to sort out lunch.

No sooner than Rick and Kate entered the room Paula was straight at them.

"We need a press statement to cover your absence."

Kate interrupts. "Why?" It's blunt.

But Paula doesn't take offence. Instead she is secretly pleased by the direct Detective. After years of dealing with a usually too laid back Rick Castle, simple questions are a blessing.

"Look people are interested in you two, especially both of you together. You make, dare I say it a cute couple. And let's be honest Rick she's clearly your match and that compliments both of you."

"And I know I recommended we didn't react to the negative press and those attack articles but we don't want to leave a void. And you two running off to hide in the Hamptons is a big void." Paula holds up a hand as if to forestall a further invention. "And look I know you're not in it for the publicity, even you Rick, but it will help in the long run. Better to have a relationship with the press or at least the bits that can spell."

Kate nods in agreement and Rick speaks for them.

"Okay if we have to. Short and simple. Something like this perhaps."

'Rick Castle has temporarily left New York to continue his rehabilitation and recovery from his injuries. Once again he is thankful He has no further statement at this time.'

"What about Kate?" Paula is straight on his lapse. He has the decency to blanche slightly and Kate dives straight in too.

"Yeah Rick, what about me?" She winks at Paula. "Not even worth a mention?"

"Umm, look…that's….umm…not what I intended."
"Clearly not." Paula is letting Kate run with this one. Rick is nothing but mentally dexterous, and doesn't flail too long before he responds.

'Kate Beckett and Rick Castle have temporarily left New York to continue his rehabilitation whilst he recovers from his injuries. We look forward to returning to the city we love. Thank you for all your goodwill and support.'

"Hmm, better. I can work with that. I can work with that can't I Rick?" Paula's question clearly indicates she would improve and polish it.

"Fine." Then as if remembering something. "Kate?"

"No that's okay with me Rick. But what about the press? Will it make them come and hunt for us in the Hamptons?"

"Well actually we should be fine. It's not generally known that I have a house at the Hamptons, and as Mother said the other day the local police are actually pretty efficient at protecting the privacy of the residents. Plenty more that are wealthier and more important than me. Or rather I should say us."

Paula starts to collect her things. Look I'll leave you to Harry, he's literally been hopping up and down for the last two hours. But don't be strangers and please keep me advised of events."

As Paula is about to step out of the office Rick turns to Kate.

"Hey, I'm sorry for not checking with your first regarding the statement. Still getting used to the notion that you're okay with us being linked publicly. I really do appreciate that. But all-in-all I'd still rather have you to myself."

"Me too Babe. But I'm in love with Richard Castle and apparently he comes with baggage. So I'm dealing with it. Mostly in my own way but with a little help" She glances at a clearly amused Paula who has paused by the doorway. "There's nowhere else and no one else I'd rather be." Rick concludes.

His, no their, publicist's nasal tones can be heard to remark "Romance for the ages, I tells ya. Sickeningly cloying but still romantic." As she departs through the doorway.

Back in the main living area, Harry is calmer now. He'd helped himself to coffee and looked more steady as he entered the office, coffee cup in one-hand, plate loaded with two halves of different subs in the other.

"Rick, Kate. I'm sorry about before it's just that this is important and I wanted to bring it to your attention immediately before you left New York.

"We're not going far Harry and there are such things as telephones and the Internet."

"I know but this is pretty serious Boss."

Kate was watching Rick when Harry delivered that assessment and in a flash a different man appeared. This was business magnate Richard Castle not the goofball or even her consultant partner.

"Okay before you update us on the latest developments Harry how about you give Kate a quick rundown of the history here."
His business manager nods and takes a quick bite of one sub and rapidly chews and swallows.

"Hold that thought Harry, let's take this to the kitchen and we all can eat." Harry doesn't even look the slightest embarrassed about starting lunch without them.

Once they have settled in with plates with the sub assortments and drinks, Harry starts in.

"After 9/11 not everywhere got the money to rebuild and revitalise. On the northern Bronx side of the island particularly. Bob Weldon wanted the whole of New York to recover, not just the financial district. It was one of his campaign platforms. Even before his election he was pushing projects. Co-opting supporters and celebrities to some of his campaigns.

Once elected he started to really help the progression of projects assisting low cost and social housing. The latter is of course a dangerous term. Naturally there wasn't enough money to go round, and there was one particular development Bob supported that stalled. These are a couple of blocks on the Harlem River, just by the University Heights Bridge at the top end of the island. Mostly former warehouses that have been neglected for some time. Anyway, post 9/11 new plans were submitted but without the funds it went nowhere and then commercial developers got interested.

Bob organised a group of like-minded citizens to purchase the title ahead of the commercial interests, and push for a primarily social housing development there. They would also be some small business but it would be pedestrianized and eco-friendly with proximity to rail and bus routes. The concept was that once it was completed it would be leased back to the city at a break even rate to allow the donors to recoup their money.

"We had it all planned out too." Rick's voice is almost mournful.

Kate looked at her boyfriend in askance.

"Yeah, I was one of the concerned citizen's Bob asked to help. There were three levels of buy in at five, ten and twenty….million. Myself, James and a couple of others stumped up twenty but most of the others were around the five mark but we raised the funds to buy the block. But after the purchase things didn't go to plan.

"Over the years, as the project has faced multiple delays, a number of the original supporters have dropped out. So RCE has stepped in, and now we directly own about 30% of the project and guarantee most of the rest. The book value is about two-fifty to four hundred and with our guarantees we're in for two-fifty to three hundred." Kate is still startled how he can leave pertinent words like 'million' off his statements.

"Sounds like a great idea."

"It is, but it's been held up in planning for almost since the beginning, getting on for six years. The more cynical amongst us believe it is a tactic to force us to sell. But there hasn't been any moves to force a sale or buy us out. Never-the-less this is why a number of supporters have dropped out.

"Wow I can see why the Mayor might owe you a favour or two." Kate, leans forward and kisses Rick. "And I'm impressed that my rich boyfriend isn't a greedy soul too."

Harry picked up the tale again.

"It was primarily intended to provide rent-controlled housing for lower socio-economic groups. The workers who would otherwise have to live off island and commute longer distances. The mayor wanted to use this project as a template for others. These would be rented out long term at
comfortably below what a commercial rate for Manhattan, even for that part of the island."

"But why such opposition?" Kate is curious.

Harry answers. "Greed mainly. Various businessmen and particularly some landlords are concerned we'd shake up the marketplace too much.

"Then there's the politics. Simple expediency to oppose what the other party is doing. Mayor Weldon was initially very vocal in his support but in order to maintain the bulk of his programs he has had to temper his support. At first we hoped it would drop off the radar and we could progress it a year or two later. We didn't count on his opponents tying it up in planning for more than half a decade longer.

"It's no secret that we are heavily leveraged. But why the gloves are about to come off now is largely unknown at the moment. Except." Harry pauses and swallows before continuing.

"Rick." Harry's tone was enough. Glancing over at her partner, Kate observed that Rick looked at his friend and advisor with no trace of levity or humour on his face.

"When we got wind last night that that City Planning Committee is going to accept the recommendations for a major change to the redevelopment zone, I did some investigating. The rival proposal will strip out most of the social housing and replace it with luxury lofts or small commercial properties.

"But I found out this morning that two of the key backers for this are Congressman Dike, and Councilwoman Glaser. I'm sorry we didn't know this until now. It might be relevant. But it is the reason I'm here. I'm sorry we didn't catch it sooner.

"Kate." Rick's voice fills her with dread.

"Kate, both of those individuals are Bracken apparatchiks and heavily linked to his campaigns. If both are foursquare behind the council review then I think it is obvious that the Senator might be too."

Kate started at Bracken's name. "Rick, does anyone know about RCE and your involvement?"

"We don't advertise it but it's not a secret and can be dug out if you know what do look for." Rick turns to his Business Manager.

"Harry, how bad?"

"Well given that the properties were leveraged with collateral from other holdings, if the banks make the call anytime soon, then you're looking at one-fifty maybe two hundred down as we'd lose control of pretty much all of the development. If they make the full set of calls we lose a good portion of the collateral as well unless you want to take out a loan. We could probably swing the loan no issues but it will leave the RCE heavily geared."

Oh. Rick sinks back in the chair.

Beside him Kate blinks. Then looking at Rick, she completes the mental translation. He means millions. Two hundred million. Or more.

"Ironically it barely alters your personal current net worth as all the properties were heavily mortgaged and cross funded. But it would cause ripples through all of the RCE portfolio. Worst case scenario is it would halve the asset base for RCE."
Kate blinks. Wow. Five hundred to two-fifty in so little time. Millions. Damn now she's doing it too!

"What other options do we have?"

"None really. Sorry, none that allow us to retain the property without putting more or all of RCE at risk."

"What about if we gift it to the City under the condition it is used for low cost housing?"

Kate looks at her partner. Nope no sign of any levity. He's serious. Harry's response is equally serious.

"Hmm, there would be a tax write-down allowed but you'd lose most of the equity invested and have to chop some of the other property portfolio to pay out the banks and rebalance what's left of RCE. Terrence would need to confirm that, but it's possible. The upside is that the city can provide the security for the debt after all with a city income of damn near fifty billion it shouldn't be too hard."

"Just a shame outgoings are more."

"Yeah well we're not gonna fix that." Harry pauses and then looks at his boss. "But you could be giving up more than half of RCE's book value if you did this."

"Harry, so long as those jackals don't get it I don't care about the RCE losses. So check it out please. Report back by mid-week okay?"

"Sure. Terrance is going to have a cow." Harry has a smirk at the thought of RCE's accountant learning the news. Like all accountants he tended to think of his clients' money as his own.

Rick grinned for the first time since Harry delivered the news. "He is, isn't he?"

Kate is still stunned by the turn of events and the prospect of potential Bracken involvement. The man's shadow looms over them even now.

As ever Rick has accurately assessed her mood. "Kate. Once we get to the Hamptons we can discuss it then. Let's just concentrate on getting ready to go."

"Okay let's get finished and get out of here. When is the SUV being dropped off?"

"Less than an hour."

"Great let's finish lunch and get ready to escape. I don't mean to rush you Harry but we're on a deadline." Kate enthuses.

"No problem I'll take my lunch and run. I'll keep you updated on any developments. I hope your stay up there helps."

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**Federal Building, New York.**

It's after lunch and Sorenson had been left on his own for a couple of hours by McCord but the unheralded opening of the door to the shuttered off, announces her return and she's not alone.

"Hey Sorenson. Sorry for the delay." McCord steps to one side and lets the slim man behind her steps in line, hand extended. McCord has a mid-sized holdall and the other man, Stark, Sorenson
guesses from the description carrying a document case.

"Will Sorenson, soon to be ex-Bureau." He's up out of his seat and offering his hand to the new comer.

"Jared Stark, AG's office." The handshake is firm, direct but Will senses the reticence, like the man opposite is holding something back. The eyes are moving, sweeping, giving him the once over. Dispassionate.

"But you knew that."

"McCord may have mention you. You fit the description."

The man looks quizzically at Will's future team leader.


The man grins, and shakes his head.

"You're so easy McCord. I swear if I didn't know better I never picture you facing down terrorists with a peashooter."

"Well if you hadn't let them get away the first time I wouldn't have needed to do that."

Will can't but make an observation.

"Wow. I feel like you two are having a whole different conversation than me."

"Easy Sorenson. But get used to it. Compartmentalization is a big factor in our operations."

"Actually there is a more serious reason for my attendance here." Stark nods to McCord who addresses Sorenson.

"Are you ready?"

"I am." He is. He wants in. The work looks interesting and if nothing else it's better than jockeying for one of a limited number of roles against professional arse-lickers and bureaucrats.

"Your FBI identification please.

"I'll also need your service weapon or weapons and magazines. When you return to DC you'll need to gather any other FBI assets and arrange their return as soon as you can."

Stark produces an official document with the Attorney General's seal on it.

"Sign here please."

So he does.

"You know the oath?" McCord this time.

"I remember it."

"William Herbert Sorenson, by the authority granted by the Attorney General of the United States, I hereby confirm your appointment as a Special Agent of the Attorney General's office." McCord announces his new title, and nods to him to begin.
"I, William Sorenson, do solemnly affirm that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter. So help me God."

"Agent McCord." Stark prompting again.

"Will, this is your ID." She hands over a simple leather wallet containing a Federal identity card.

"We simply identify ourselves as a 'Federal Agent'. If pressed you can confirm the Attorney General's office."

Putting the holdall up on the desk, she reaches inside and removes a waist holster with the butt of a pistol visible.

"This Smith and Wesson MP40 is straight out of box. It's a 40 calibre model. There are four extra mags. 100 rounds of 40 calibre ammunition. You can go see our armorer when we get back to DC, for any customisation and extra ammo.

"Sign here for the gun please." Will signs the new form and Stark takes it to add to the others in his folder.

"Welcome to the Task Force." She extends her own hand and at least with her the handshake is warmer and feels more natural.

"Thanks."

"Okay party over. Would you two care to bring me up to speed on your investigations? This is a real ball breaker. Yet somehow we've managed to keep the lid on it. But it won't last. So before all kinds of hell descend on us and our boss, let's get as much of this collated and contained."

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**The Hamptons**

Dinner with Louis has been the usual mix of charming and bittersweet, and Martha never drank more than a glass of wine on those evenings. She had retired to bed early but had been tardy to rise, enjoying the luxury of not having to put on a show for anyone, even herself.

She had eventually risen to find the construction crew making the final adjustments.

Now at lunch time, Martha finds the foreman and one other man awaiting the final piece of the construction jigsaw – the floor mats. The work on the second Sunroom to convert to into a recreational therapy and gym was impressive especially given it was all inside a day and a half. She almost felt it was like one of those reality TV shows that Rick and Alexis mocked so loudly.

After receiving assurances that the matting would be here by two o'clock and installed by four she started arranging the last few details for Richard and Katherine's arrival.

Martha grabs one of the cordless extensions and hits the speed-dial for housekeeping. After a few rings the audible click of a connection prompts her into action.

"Hello Marisol." The cheery return greeting belies the professional lady whose business cleaned and maintained a substantial proportion of the homes – holiday or otherwise – in the area.
"Can you please organise for the housekeeper to come a little latter today? Say four o'clock?"

"You can. Excellent. Thank you for being so understanding. The builders are running just a little behind schedule. Also can I confirm my earlier booking for regular services Monday and Fridays until further notice?"

A pause whilst Martha listens to the other woman. "Yes Marisol, there will be someone up here for a while. Please send the bill to the usual place. Thank you so much."

Hanging up she proceeds to work her way through a number of local services and complete the organisation to get the house stocked, and what heating there was turned on. The only wrinkle came with the pool service. Apparently there is not much demand for pools in winter. However, after working some Martha Magic the firm had agreed for someone to come out on Monday to restore the pool from winter hibernation mode to be fit for use by the end of next week. Of course it would cost a pretty penny to run the heat pump on the pool. Good thing her son was rich!

The Loft.

Harry had left taking more lunch and after their own hastily consumed sandwiches they had finally assembled all their luggage and other belongings near the door.

"I feel like we're travelling with my Mother."

"Rick!" Hisses Kate in gentle disappointment.

"What. It's true. You've seen her travel."

"Well we're not much better based on the evidence. Five large suitcases, a big duffel bag, two backpacks with computers, Kate's Taylor Matthews bag with her gear, and some boxes of food and other items. Plus what Kate assumed with a gun bag that Rick had bought down from upstairs, contents unknown.

The intercom phone pings and Kate answers.

"Hello Eduardo."

"Hello Miss Kate. There are two cars from Time and Motion downstairs. Shall I bring the trolley up?"

"Okay. I think you'll need the larger one as well as the baggage trolley please."

"No problem Miss Kate. I'll have George run up in the lift."

"Do we need to sign anything? You need one of us to come down?"

"Oh no Miss Kate it's all taken care of. The driver says Mister Rick knows." Oh HE does?"

"Thanks Eduardo."

Hanging up the intercom, Kate turns back to Rick, hands on hips, lips pursed.

"Umm, guess I should tell you about the slight change of plans."

"That would be good. Earlier would have been better…Dear." He flinches at the endearment, half inclined to wave his right arm and its sling as some form of immunity.
"Tommy offered to have someone take us up in the town car as was going to be bringing Mother back anyway. A second driver will take the SUV we'll use in the Hamptons up with the bulk of our luggage. This way we can travel together and you won't have to drive."

"And you were going to tell me this when?"

"Umm, now?"

"Your forgiven as it is really sweet of your to consider me but don't make a habit of it."

There is a knock at the door signally the arrival of George and the luggage trolleys.

"Ready to go Kate?"

She skips over to him, any sign of annoyance banished as she brushes her lips over his and confirms so.

"I am! I'm really looking forward to this Babe. Just us. Lots of healing and discovery. Not to mention *alone time.*" Her mimicking of his suggestive eyebrow wiggle has him laughing as he kisses her back.

"This is going to be so good!"
Rick and Kate have plans to escape to the Hamptons. But before they can depart, there is one final last minute matter to take care of.

Manhattan, early afternoon, Friday.

Sitting beside Kate, from the back seat of the Time and Motion town car, Rick watched the luxury SUV pull away from them and the sidewalk outside the Loft with most of their things for their stay in the Hamptons. Leaving them temporarily behind in the town car with their personal bags including Kate's Taylor Matthews kit bag with her weapon, ammo and other equipment. In the trunk were was a box that Rick had managed to smuggle past Kate. Given the number of items they were taking to the Hamptons is should have been quite an easy task except for the fact she was trained detective. Still he had pulled it off, at least at this end. He'd rely on his Mother's dramatics to save him at the other end.

But that was for later. He was pleasantly excited to be leaving town with Kate. They hadn't got away from New York often enough since getting together. Just two full weekends away and the odd night in the six months. This was new territory for them even if it was only to the Hamptons.

Rick had dreams of whisking Kate off to tropical paradises, and places she had mentioned and he certainly had the means to do so if only they had the time. Still he would never ask her to step away from the job she, and he, loved. Not without some exceptional threat. Strange how that criteria somehow didn't include tigers, dirty bombs, and assassins. He caught himself actually shaking his head in disbelief, and he brought himself back to the now, least she catch him out.

Still the Hamptons was a happy place for Rick. Some of his fondest memories, certainly with Alexis, came from the beach house and surrounds. In truth it could have almost been anyway for much of it and yet the place had a resonance with him. Something that called to him and his family, one that now included Kate.

And despite the seemingly inevitable murder and the past associations of the beach house, Kate had reassured him that she was entirely okay with the prospect of spending lots of time there. He was secretly relieved because as willing as he was to sell the place if it was even half-way close to any form of deal-breaker or even moderate annoyance for Kate, he knew he would never score such a sweet deal again especially not in a surprisingly buoyant market in the Hamptons. Plus his two red heads loved it, and no one had been more overjoyed when his divorce settlement from Gina had left the place entirely in his hands.

Turning his attention back to his travel companion, partner and lover, he frowned internally. He knew she was distracted and that something new – from this morning he surmised - was bothering her. This much was apparent to him despite her efforts to present a more positive state. He simply knew her too well. Knew her tells, both physical and vocal. Still he hadn't yet deduced what the actual issue was.
This morning had been somewhat busy if not quite fully hectic. Reflecting on events, her mood had swung during the first visit – that of the lawyers. Initially he had thought it was the matter at hand, but upon reflection Rick realised that it wasn't that. After all Kate had initiated many of the clauses and the extent of the agreements that were now another cord to bind them even more irrevocably together. For their lifetimes.

Was it the marriage contract? Nope, as surprising as it might be, Kate had barely flinched at the prospect. She was so not running.

So what was it?

It started after Kate made the call to her father. Obviously something else came up. Something more than the legal matters.

Not from Kate he thought. It must be her father. But what?

She had played it close to her chest through the morning and even now.

But she wasn't fooling him.

But how to get her to open up?

She could be a stubborn and frustrating as always. Maddening seemingly at the flick of switch. If only he could locate said toggle. Dropping that fruitless idea he contemplated asking her directly but then a better plan struck him. One less likely to meet with obscurification, and probably outright denial.

Leaning forward Rick pressed the intercom button.

"Dean, can you please divert to midtown. I'll give you an address in a minute."

He felt Kate stir beside him. No doubt her curiosity growing but still silent.

Turning to her, his voice low, "Kate."

"Umm. What's up Rick? Why are we diverting to midtown?" Not so long ago his decision would have bought a shrill question or command from the Detective but her quiet question illustrates how much further their relationship and trust has blossomed.

"Call your Dad. Tell him we'll meet him for coffee if he is free." He delivers it carefully phrased somewhere between a question and request. Command would never have worked and when she gives him her best suspect stare he nearly folds.

But he doesn't.

He simply smiled back. Neither pusher nor pushed.

She didn't acknowledge him other than to palm her phone and hit speed dial, and lift it to her ear.

Well that was a relief. It worked. Of course, the next obstacle was whatever was the issue that had come up this morning? Rick didn't articulate that. Simply sat there and held Kate's hand which has slipped into his own as soon as she had completed dialling.

Her Dad was free for coffee, he gave Kate an address, which she repeated to Rick who repeated back to their driver, like some Chinese whisper.
Twenty minutes later they exited the town car, and walked towards the modern looking but otherwise compact café less than a block from her Dad's office.

The car service had dropped them and headed off, no doubt to circle the block a few times in what can pass for short-stay parking in New York City. Whatever the case, Dean promised to be back to collect them within ten minutes of any call.

Despite his earlier success in getting Kate to call her father, Rick harboured a fair degree of uncertainty about what came next and this mood betrayed him. He stalled on the sidewalk but before Rick could make his previously silent questions known, Kate had quietly taken his left hand and tugged him away from the kerb, and through the door of the café.

Ever the detectives, coming through the door they scan the locale. What they can see is a quaint café with a homely touch despite the modern décor. The interior is 'L' shaped with a serving area and kitchen off to the right side, the base of the 'L' snaking behind the rear of the serving area/kitchen. There are open booths to the front, and towards the rear, taller, more private versions.

There was no tinkle of a bell or other audible marker to announce their entrance, but regardless a cheerful greeting was issued from behind the counter along with directions to please find a seat and await service. Of course they're looking for an already occupied table and seconds later locate their target, half-way along the left wall in an open booth.

Jim Beckett is waiting for them sitting at the booth facing the café entrance. There is a tentative wave of the hand from the man, almost self-conscious as he notices them and gestures them over. Rick has always found him to be reserved in all manners and he respects the quiet determination and fortitude, even if it did make for the odd uncomfortable moment between the two of them. More so if his Mother's exuberance was present, memories of a near-disastrous first family dinner still linger.

Approaching the booth, Kate lets go of Rick's hand as she reaches for her father and wraps her arms around his body, hugging him even as he rises.

In a near whispers Kate speaks only to him, "Dad, look I'm sorry."

Despite the hug, Jim Beckett raises his hand to halt her. He knows his daughter. Never one for public apologies, if you won one from her it was usually better done in private but all the more heartfelt for it. This was the rarest of rare, a near-public show of contrition.

Pulling free of his daughter's embrace, Jim beckons them to sit, and as they slide into the opposite side of the booth, the older man extends his right hand to exchange greetings with younger. The handshake is warm and yet firm. The man's gaze is equally friendly. For the first time since leaving the Loft, Rick begins to relax. Whatever this is, it should be able to be solved, hopefully today.

Before they can proceed further, the efficiency of the café is demonstrated with the arrival of a server to take their order. The motherly woman leaves them be once she is satisfied that coffee is all that is required, promising to be back with their order shortly.

Kate uses the interruption to organise her thoughts. No matter how many years have passed, talking to a parent can sometimes evoke triggers from childhood memories. In her case, talking to her Dad, usually alone without her mother, had always been about working through some logical conundrum, a class choice, what summer courses to do, what job to take. Her Mom had been the heart, and less defined stuff. She missed that. She had missed her Dad's talks too. It had taken until, well too long, all-in-all about five years ago for anything to resume, and even now often got stilted,
both caught up in varying measures of guilt, anxiety and awkwardness. And Rick's presence wasn't an issue. She trusted him now with everything, determined that the secrets and untold truths of their pasts would no longer blight them.

"Dad, Rick and I are getting away for a bit. It's only a decision that has happened in the last couple of days, and I swear it wasn't meant to…"

She quietens her with a father's touch to her cheek.

She's surprised by that. Her father is a publicly reserved person, always has been, only more-so since her Mom. It is not the only change she discovers.

She takes a closer look at him. He's always dressed smartly, if conservatively – when he was focused on his career. Today, he looks positively dapper. The suit is, for wont of a more fitting word, sharp. It is modern and flattering, yet conservative enough for his career and age. She suspects the very reason they are here today is behind this sartorial upgrade. One she has to admit perfectly suits him.

"That sounds like a good idea, Katie. It really does. A chance for the two of you just to share with yourselves whilst Rick recovers."

"Still I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner, Dad." Story of her life. Holding things in. Not telling people she cares about until it's – almost – too late. If only…..well if only is not her anymore.

With just the slightest pause from Kate who appears momentarily lost in thought, Rick finally feels that it is safe to join the conversation.

"Jim, we're heading up to the Hamptons. To my…." Looking at Kate, then back at Jim, he corrects himself, "To our beach house. The plan is for me to continue my rehabilitation there and for Kate to commence studies for her civil service promotion exam. Plus it will give the two of us an opportunity to focus on each other without external distractions."

Rick pauses, clearly contemplating how much to share with the man, before making a decision.

"Jim, I've made no secret of how important Kate is to me. She's everything and only my daughter comes before her. But it's also no secret that we've had missteps and mistakes, hurting each other in the process. We want this time to work through those issues and it is something we're determined to do alone. There have been too many outside interferences in play, so this is non-negotiable."

He pauses, clearly his head and tempering down the unsought anger born of frustration which this man deserves nothing of. He had been entirely supportive of their partnership long before it became romantic.

"We plan to spend our lives together. Hopefully, someday soon, as husband and wife. I trust my commitment to Kate is not in doubt."

Staring straight back at the man he entirely trusts with his daughter, Jim is equally unequivocal. "Rick I haven't doubted you since the first time I met you. Good times and bad."

Rick can only trust himself so far as to nod in response.

A long moment passes before Kate speaks, and expands further on their plans.

"It's what I want too Dad. We've been spectacularly bad at some, well lots, of this relationship. We want to be more than that and everything each of us deserves and wants for the other. If it is selfish
then so be it."

There is a pause before Jim answers. Both of the couple recognise he is summoning his courage.

"I do understand Katie, but there's someone I'd like to introduce you to. Perhaps it's not the best
timing, but I would like to do it before you leave the city if you're willing."

_This was it. She had suspected (feared?) as much. Can she do this? Can she meet the woman who
has replaced, no that's not right, has a place in her father's heart. What had her Dad said?
'Alongside her mother'. Can she do that?_

She feels the silent support from her own partner. The hand low on the base of her back, the heat
from his palm fusing into her, spreading out.

She nods, not trusting herself to speak.

Rising her father leans across the table to take her hand, in a way she hasn't experienced in so many
years, and then gently pulls her up and out of the booth. He turns towards the back of the café
towards the high-sided booths.

It is only a matter of seconds and a mere handful of steps.

Rounding the corner of the rearmost booth Kate spots the occupant sitting in the corner, nursing
what looks like tea. Kate's ever present heels given forewarning of their arrival and her inquisitive
look is met with an equally curious one.

The woman sitting there is striking. No two ways about it. So different from her mother's casual
chic this woman commands the space with an elegance and poise. Comfortable authority speaks
from her expensive tailored outfit. But she also looks extremely nervous. And Kate takes some
comfort in that. She shouldn't do but she does anyway.

As they approach, the woman rises. She is almost grace personified as she rises to full height,
maybe five-seven Kate estimates.

The hand extended is cool and the grip carefully precise. Kate's response back is likewise
measured and calm.

"Hello. I'm Valerie Wilson. I'm very pleased to meet you again Katherine."

"Hello Valerie. Please call me Kate."

"Likewise please call me Val. I was at your father's promotion party some five years ago, and we
were introduced then.

"I do remember." Kate holds back any mention of the fact that the woman was then married to
someone else – one of the partners.

Rick steps in before any uncomfortable silence can eat at them, a real danger given the sparse
sentences being exchanged.

"Good afternoon Val, I'm Rick Castle, Kate's partner." She really does love the way he says that. It
means everything to her, just as he tries to convey so in the intonation and crisp delivery.

"I'm so very pleased to meet you Mister Castle. Jim has told me so much about how good you are
for his daughter. He was extremely concerned for you, and so it is very good to see you up and
about and so animated." Her tone is rich and warm. Sincere. He likes her.

"Please, Rick is more than sufficient. And Kate is more than I deserve." There is a small pause, and once again Rick fills the space.

"I do have to say that you and Jim caused no small degree of trepidation amongst my lawyers when you met to plot behind my back."

The wry laugh is entirely natural and engaging before the woman responds.

"One does have a certain reputation, and what girl doesn't like to cause a little consternation from time to time."

"Oh believe me I know."

The not so gentle pair of fingers into his side indicate the limits of his teasing. Rick directs a quick glance towards Kate to reassure her that he'll behave.

Val continues "But we were acting on instruction. From our client."

"Yes, colour me surprised when I found that out." Ouch another finger dig.

"Valerie..." Kate begins.

"Val, Kate, please call me Val." The woman corrects her.

"Umm, okay Val." He hasn't see her this flustered for a while. Baseball stars, drunk Maddie's second round of Castle baby questions (the answer was he'd love to, of course), and being caught by his Mother (too many times).

"Look it's probably best if I put my cards on the table." Kate has gone into detective mode to cope.

"Please do."

"This is very new for me. And I will need to adjust."

"As it is for us. This is not something we have leapt into."

If it is a Beckett trait Rick wisely keeps that thought to himself.

"And I can tell you are good for him Val. I do acknowledge that."

"And he is for me too."

"And what Dad told me about your commitment and sharing his heart, well to be frank, I love that. I'd never really thought about him with anyone else and that was selfish of me."

Kate turns to her father. "Dad, I'm so sorry. I made it all about me and her. Never you."

"You don't have to be sorry Katie. God knows I contributed enough to hurting you too."

"But we're better than that. And Val, I apologise because it never should have been about you. It was and is still to a certain extent about my own fears and lingering issues from the loss of my mother."

"Kate. There is no need to apologise. That you are here is progress enough and I hope you
understand that I am in no way trying to surplant your mother, either for your Father or yourself."

Kate nods before continuing.

"Well to be honest, it took some encouragement to be here. I'm not entirely sure I would have done this on my own."

"But that is entirely the point, we are all here because we are no longer alone." The lawyer points out.

Then as Val reaches for cup to take a sip of her tea, the motherly waitress arrives with their drinks, having noted their change in seating. They pause whilst the coffees are distributed and the waitress assured of no further requirements.

Everyone at the table notes that Rick and Kate's coffees are in take-away cups. In the silence that has fallen as drinks are taken, Rick steps in.

"Jim, Kate and I are heading up to my place to escape and have some time to ourselves. I still have a reasonable way to go with rehabilitation. Kate's going to help me with that and we're going to finally have some time to concentrate on each other."

He looks at Kate, and she squeezes the fingers in response to his non-verbal question and gives a barely perceptible confirmation from her abrupt nod.

"Look, if you would like you can come up and visit. We would welcome it. There is plenty of space, just bring a few extra layers as it is principally a summer house although enough living spaces have good heating." He leaves the offer open and doesn't force it.

"Dad, we'll be back in the City from time to time. I need to attend some courses for my promotion. And we'll have other commitments. So we can catch up then but as Rick says you are welcome to come visit. Both of you."

"Oh yes, congratulations on that." Val chimes in regarding her promotion but stays away from the offer of accommodation.

"I've not got the promotion yet." Kate clarifies but her Father is having none of it.

"Nonsense you've more than earned it Katie. Hasn't she Rick?"

_Oh so this is how it's going to be in future? The two of them ganging up on her?_

Before Rick can chime in, her father's girlfriend comes to her defence. "Jim. Don't tease your daughter. I'm sure she has a gun somewhere on her person." Actually she does.

"Well this is refreshing. It's normally me she threatens to shoot." Rick jumps back in now.

"And it will be. There is no way I'm going to last up there on our own."

"Personally I'm still surprised someone else shot me first." Kate swivels into him so fast he has no time to react before she roughly grabs his face and pulls him into her so she can whisper an almost harsh command in his ear.

"What too soon?" he blurs.

"It will never be too late for that. Okay?"
"Yes Dear." Not deserving of an eye roll it does elicit a shake of her head.

"Look Val and I need to get back to the office. I'm sure you want to be on your way. Thank you for coming to see us both."

"Dad, I'm sorry we're getting away and spoiling your plans. Val, it was nice to meet you again, and I can tell how good you are for my Dad. It's nice to see him this way."

"Kate, thank you for being so graceful. I'm sure it is still strange but I promise to do my best to look after him. I do love him."

Her Dad's face is rigid with surprise. Apparently that may be something new between them and suddenly it feels like they are intruding. She knows her father will need privacy and time to respond. Val deserves that too.

And yet her overwhelming thought is of how adorable it is.

And then her Dad finally recovers the power of his speech.

"Just don't go getting married with up there without us."

They both gape at that, but Kate recovers fastest.

"Well you're the one who gave us all the paperwork for that."

"Oh, touché I guess then. But the request still stands please."

"Not an order?" Rick queries.

"I haven't be able to order her around since she was a pre-teen. Too much like her mother, always more of a negotiation…..if I was lucky."

"Perhaps I can help." Ever helpful, but oh no he's shutdown so fast.

"Not if you want to ever get lucky again Mister Castle."

Val laughs and Jim looks just a tad uncomfortable with his – admittedly adult – daughter using sexual blackmail on her partner.

"And with that you're all on your own Jim."

"Not anymore." And they all take a moment to process that and then smile, even Kate.

Rick's mobile vibrates. He doesn't bother to look at it, the message is self-explanatory.

"Umm, really sorry but we need to go." Rick stands and Kate mirrors him.

"It was lovely to meet you Val." And with a sidelong glance at his partner, Rick reaffirms the earlier offer. "Look please consider coming up to stay. There is plenty of room and I'm sure if nothing else Kate could do with a break from minding me."

"It was very nice to meet you Rick. I'm looking forward to finding out how much of those tales Jim tells me are true." Her careful deflection of the question is recognised but unremarked upon.

"Kate Beckett, have you been snitching on me to your Dad?"
Rick's best indignant voice masks the moment further. And Kate decides to play along. Relieved that the question had been dodged, if only for now.

"No. I've been telling on us to my Dad for years Castle."

"That she has. I think everyone has known about you two for more than long enough. We're just grateful you both finally saw sense."

"As I am I Jim. As am I."

Rick reaches for his wallet, but Jim's hand touches his wrist.

"I've got these Rick. At least one member of the Beckett family can buy coffee occasionally."

"Right you are. Taking notes Beckett?"

"Yeah, like you'd ever let me buy coffee?"

"True. Val, Jim please consider the offer. By the way Jim, you're looking very sharp." Of course he noticed. He's just as much a detective as her these days.

One final round of farewells and they're out the door looking out for the town car and their ride to the Hamptons.

She has to give him credit. Being driven up to the Hamptons is far easier than making the drive themselves.

She would be driving otherwise. Instead of being curled up next to him.

He's dozing.

Nearly dying takes it out of you.

She should know.

So does he now.

That's not something she ever wanted for him, or her.

Shaking her head, she forces herself into a change of topic away from the morbid.

She is honestly looking forward to the Hamptons.

Mostly.

She wants to be unequivocally for it.

But she can't help the trepidation about this. The little questions that nag at her.

Whilst she believes, wants to believe, they are stronger than any adversity, she has no doubt that this time together alone will challenge and change them.

For the better is the intent.

Their plan.
But since did anything in their life go to plan.

It's complicated.

Damn fucking straight it's complicated.

Her Mom had been right.

'Life doesn't throw you anything you can't handle' her mom had told her. Of course she was sixteen the first time she heard that, just dumped by a boy, and not really inclined to understand the philosophy of the statement.

Right now she could handle hassle-free above all else.

Of course her Mom had also told Kate that loving a man was the easiest and hardest thing to do. Especially if he's the One.

She had tried to ask her Mom about that. How you knew it was the One? Why was it easy and hard?

Johanna Beckett's answer had been a wry smile.

Kate suspected a hearty 'told ya so!' if she was still around. Of course she would be giddy about it being Rick. *I mean, how fucking fairy tale is that?*

Not very was her own answer. Well unless your fairy tale including excessive near death moments, and stalker-arzzi amongst the plot lines.

But it was them.

She snuggles back into Rick and nods off herself.

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**The Hamptons**

As the town car turned off the main road and onto the access road, Rick couldn't help himself, as the anticipation finally gets to him. Leaning forward he lowers the window despite the chill.

There is no overpowering essence of the sea here. As if the land and the ocean are in balance, near harmony but still both push and probe at the edges of each other, never winning. Of course it was winter so the greenery was in retreat but it was a pleasant day without any of the overcast solemnity that late autumn could bring here.

The chill air flowed in through the open car window but Kate can't resist crowding forward with him. She's not familiar enough to recognise the sights but she can take her cue from her partner and she feels him edge just the little bit further forward as his excitement leeches into her too.

Sure enough, the car slows further as the access road gives way to the driveway of the house. The SUV is out of sight, but most likely in the standalone garage already. The slight crunch and rustle of the driveway is their first welcome to their home for the next few months.

For her part Kate is still awestruck by the property. This is only her third visit here – their murder-weekend and a single night about 7 weeks ago - and despite her newly gained legal status, it still feels like someone else's place. Too soon for her to be laying any form of claim. Of course that will likely change over the coming weeks and months. They haven't talked about how long exactly
they'll stay here but at least the two months up to Christmas have been more than tentatively agreed with the occasional trip back to the city when needed.

Rick has the door open before the car has stopped and alights just as the wheels stop rolling. Kate is a just a step behind him concerned by his sudden burst of almost manic energy.

The next welcome is far more effervescent as Martha emerges from the front door and almost dashes down the stairs.

"Hello Mother."

"Hello Richard." She kisses his cheeks and repeats this with her future daughter-in-law.

"Kate Dear please come on through. I'm sure my Son can supervise the unloading. I'll get Hank the other driver to come and help Dean and Richard."

"Martha, shouldn't I help Rick?"

"Oh no, the driver can unpack what's left, plus it's just that I wanted you to check the exercise room first. Make sure you are happy. Then we can surprise him."

"Okay."

6 pm-ish.

Kate fights the temptation to speak with her mouth full. She completes her mouthful, swallows down and resists the urge to immediately replace it with another bite so she can ask a pertinent question.

"This is heavenly. Where is it from and why haven't you mentioned this place?"

"Ambrosia Delicatessen." At least that is what Kate believes Martha said around a mouthful of the decadently soft baguette and fillings she is worshipping.

"What she said." Confirms Rick. "Ambrosia Delicatessen. Simply the best sandwiches, meats and assorted treats in the Hamptons." At this point he is forced to pause because he can no longer resist a small nibble of his sourdough & rare beef sandwich which he duly chews as rapidly through as can so he can continue.

"Kurt and Athena are New Yorkers. Won some money in the state lottery, retired up here, got bored, and opened Ambrosia about fifteen years ago. The rest as they say is history, except they finally retired for good two years ago and their son Marcus now runs the day-to-day operations. I believe this is all left over bounty from a delivery they made yesterday."

He takes a swig of his soft drink and Martha completes the explanation.

"Oh yes, I fed the workmen as they were so kind as to stay back and ensure the work was concluded in time for your arrival."

Rick resumes his story.

"Alexis and I found it, one summer when she was about five or six. She wanted a magic sandwich. She was adamant about that. She was very determined at that age, and ever so serious when she wanted to be. I took her at her word when she told me I had promised her 'a magic sandwich' for
after the beach and our adventures that morning. Well let's just say I got lucky when we crossed that threshold of the shop that day. They made her the magic sandwich and that's it. Nowhere else for a sandwich up here. Actually took me a little while to persuade her to have any other sandwich even back in New York, but fortunately she was receptive to logical arguments even at that age. But in the Hamptons, Ambrosia's or nothing. Been that way for a dozen years. Sure we don't eat there all-the-time, go to other places, but without fail no Hamptons stay is complete without eating in at least once as well as getting take out or home delivery."

Kate listens attentively. Most of what she had learnt about him and his family had been incidental through sharing their lives a little segment at a time over the years, but now she makes a conscious effort to share their memories and she loves it when treasured memories like these come up. She knows Rick has been more forthcoming since they were together but still there are so many gaps to fill. So much more to understand about this complex man. So much dedication to repay with her own. A lifetimes worth.

So sitting there at the kitchen bar in the Hamptons, she savours the moment. Inhales the scents and tastes of this life, one which would have once overwhelmed her, but now more than ever carries an echo of her childhood. Just another thing to love him and his family all the more for.

It is not long before they are cleaning up. There are enough ingredients for a few more lunches as well as a fully stocked fridge and larder. Martha has outdone herself in preparing the house for them. And Kate ensures that she knows it is appreciated.

She eyes her boyfriend sitting at the end of the bench flicking through his tablet. Rick had been busier earlier getting all their gear put away, and she suspects there might be a surprise or two he has attempted to smuggle along without her noticing. Really Rick? She's a trained detective after all. Plus she knows him better than any man with the full intention of learning more. But she can be patient. Let him have his little surprises.

Martha bags are in the town car already, but she had returned to the kitchen to collect the small cooler box loaded with select cuts and some extras for Alexis. A 'care package' she labels it. She'll deliver it at the weekend. There are claims she did as much for her son whilst he was at college. From the look on Rick's face, Kate deduces that perhaps the only common element is the woman's love and nothing more. Once again both hold their tongues, anxious perhaps not to provoke or possibly delay the spirited diva's departure. Much as they love her, they want to start their together time.

Not long before 7 pm.

"Well I shall be off now Dears."

"I'd tell you not to miss me, but I have a feeling you'll be perfectly distracted with each other." The arch of her eyebrow alone spoke volumes.

Neither her son, nor the woman she considered his almost-wife, responded to the insinuation so she wrapped each up in a wordless hug and kisses to both cheeks.

It is dark with a creeping chill outside but Dean and Hank – the driver of the SUV – were both patiently waiting by the town car for the return leg to New York.

"We'll see you soon Mother." Rick says as Martha steps back.
Kate speaks as she steps to Rick's side. "Thank you again for organising everything Martha. It's nearly perfect. I'm not entirely sure Rick will be thanking you when he's being stressed out and sweating in the new gym but it is exactly what we need to manage his recovery."

"Well thank you Katherine. But you know you really don't need to. We're family and this is what family does for one another for love. Please take care of yourself and my son."

Turning she strides towards the town car and the waiting pair of drivers.

"Alright Gentlemen. Let's get back to the bright city lights, there are at least two parties I can still make tonight."

Watching the tail lights recede he turns to her.

"So?" He leaves it there. Open. Waiting. Questioning.

"So…" Kate mirrors his word but with a huskier tone and steps into his body and wrapping her arms around him, her head into his chest.

Without her heels she's looking up to him, and she finds she increasingly likes this when they're alone.

"Take me to bed Castle."

"As you wish Kate."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note

Hey I finally got them to the Hamptons. It only took 60 chapters and 17 months.

I have a serious day job. For the last month and the next few months it is pretty much a serious day and night job.

Apparently tiredness makes the characters stop talking to me. At least in a manner I can interpret, and then write legibly.

I think shorter chapters (yeah I know I've mentioned that before) might be the answer.

Thank you to all the regular readers for staying with me. Welcome to the new readers. Your thoughts and reviews are most welcome.

Coming up next: -

Chapter 61 – Regrets.
Hamptons, Saturday Morning. Day 1

"Shit!"

That was loud. Almost too loud. Damn she didn't want to wake him. It was too early still. For him anyway.

She couldn't help it. It was more than distinctly chilly – being kind – outside of the covers. She had instinctively thrown off her covers and exited the bed swiftly. Bad mistake.

There was no heating. Indeed the room felt icy. So much so that she jumped straight back into bed and back under the covers which hadn't had time to lose their retained heat even if her wonderful pocket of warm air had dissipated. Bother any attempt to be stealthy and let him sleep. Her bladder could wait.

She needn't have worried. Her expletive and the disruption to the bed barely triggers any response. She's grateful he's sleeping so soundly. She snuggles in again seeking heat.

"Whaat?" his question is mumbled into the pillow. Okay maybe not sleeping as soundly as she first thought.

Moving her head just enough, she looks at him.

Somehow despite his right shoulder being strapped up and immobilised, he is almost inverted, face-planted, and nearly buried under the covers. During the night they had made their own cocoons of warmth under the covers. In the near darkness, her eyes were still good enough that a quick glance confirms a moderate volume of night-time drool on said pillow. Something that would have grossed her out, or at least been cringe worthy with someone else, is simply accepted as part of who her man is, just one tiny element of the complete package. Of course she would tease him about it from time to time. But never meanly.

"Kaaate?"

She answers him this time.

"It's cold Babe. Really cold. I just didn't realise. Needed the toilet but I can wait." Then after a moment, "Sorry for waking you."

'S'right. I was almost there on my own." He rolls onto his left side, his right shoulder still strapped
up to protect the recovery tissue and muscles. And in return she moves in closer to push her body against his. Of course it doesn't hurt that has remained ensconced in his warm cocoon and she'll shamelessly share, well steal, some of that warmth.

"Good Morning." Despite the cold, she honest feels it. The joy and expectation of time to themselves. She's excited for this opportunity and not just because two weeks ago she thought she might never wake up with him again. This is about more than just his recovery. This is for both of them. A time together to grow into their potential.

"Hey, good morning Kate." Quite frankly he is oversized puppy-adorable like this. Still slightly sleep drunk, serious bed-head, smattering of sexy stubble, and yet exuding warmth and security. She snuggles in closer and tips her head back to kiss the underside of his chin. She can feel his grin.

They stay that way for several minutes before even he finally feels the need to move.

He sticks an exploratory foot outside the covers, "Oh we definitely forgot the heating. Sorry about that."

Back in the bed Kate had retreated fully under the covers, desperately seeking to maintain contact with his body heat to warm her.

"Well we made our own last night." She responded.

"That we did Kate." He's almost entirely awake now.

She knows where his mind is going, and she jumps several points ahead in the conversation. "How about a raincheck? I need the bathroom and hot caffeine in that order."

"Okay. How about I handle the latter, and also get the heating going?"

"Sounds good." She starts to rise from the bed, scanning for a robe or something to help hold off the chill. Then she thinks of something and darts her face up to his, lips brushing his, and then the rasp of his cheek. She can almost feel his elation at her simple actions. "Meet back here?" she asks.

"Definitely. See you in a few Kate." With that Rick rises and strides towards his thick cotton robe thrown over the back of a chair. Hers is beside and he throws it onto the covers and he turns his back heading for downstairs and the kitchen and utility closet where the heating controls are located.

He's bought mugs, creamer and a full French-press up to the bedroom.

Kate eyes up the tray, practical plastic with high sides, and the glorious coloured mugs with what look like Anime characters – she doesn't recognise – on them. Most of all she inhales the glorious aroma of fresh coffee.

"Wow Rick, I think I love you." There should be an element of tease, at least she intended it to. Instead it is so literally true in every sense.

"Think?" There is an edge of teasing expectation in his question.

*Oh how comfortably they do this, the banter, the tease, the dance around the topic. Subtext. Redirection. Misdirection. Well no more. Or at least not too much more. They won't even stop, but here they plan to exchange plain words – if he ever could – and the simple truth of them.*
"Well I haven't tasted the coffee yet." She fires back.

"Oh." He fixes her with his own teasing look before relenting. "Let me fix that right up for you."

"Please. And then jump back into bed. I've got a warm spot just waiting for you."

"Will do. The heating is on. This kitchen and small dining room should be warming up. The study will take longer. But in the meantime we can cuddle for warmth." With that he turns his attention back to the tray and completing preparation to serve their morning coffee.

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They sit in silence for a while, mostly under the covers, just enough of their bodies still wrapped in the warm, thick cotton robes he already had here, torsos exposed whilst they imbibe their first coffee of the day.

As the warm caffeine seeps through them they come properly awake. Still silence reigns. Comfortable at first, but slowly with a building air of expectation.

"You want to talk about it?" Finally Kate feels the need to speak. This is strange - normally her partner is the far more verbose, often incapable of silence. Instead today, here, it is her speaking first, attempting to thwart what is turning into a prolonged and uncomfortable silence.

"Yeah." It whispers out of him, reluctance and guilt all at once. Fear as well. She's not at all confident that the confirmation is meant in the affirmative, rather than simply a postponement of having to address the event of the night. Of how his cries and thrashing had pulled her from the comfortable slumber warmed by this presence and love.

Still she won't back down. She will give him time and space where necessary, but they were going to do this, starting today. Yet this is still alien to them. The open sharing and listening. It's going to feel odd for a while, perhaps a very long time. The alternative is simply not worse, it is unacceptable.

They are. They will be. Nothing else is acceptable to her. And to him. She just needs him to recover the certainty of himself and them that he once possessed. She knows it will take time, her own recovery had taken far too long and hurt both of them in the process. She knew that a lot of that was her reluctance, hell outright determination not to accept assistance, especially his. So this time and in future –of course she wishes that the future wouldn't contain the need, but with their track record?

But after that swallow affirmation, he falls silent again. Perhaps unable to know where to begin. Or afraid. Definitely afraid she thinks.

She wants to help him. Guide him. Her time with Burke has taught her a measure of patience to go with her bloody minded persistence. She thinks both will be needed by her today and throughout their time here and probably for their lives together.

"So Rick?" Nothing from him so she tries again, more specific this time. "The dream?" The dream – well nightmare in all honesty. One that had made him thrash about at three in the morning, whimpering half-comprehensible words or phrases. Ten minutes or so passed before he settled under her touch and murmurings of love and support.

"Uh." He puts his coffee cup down on his bedside table. She mirrors him and then turns to face him. She wants her body close to him but needs to give enough space so she can clearly see his face and how he copes with what is coming. Instead she sneaks her left hand across to his under the
covers. As her fingers snake into his, she is relieved to feel his squeeze of acknowledgement and affection.

"Not a dream." Voice low but determined, he shakes his head once to reiterate that fact. "Opposite. Almost. But not a nightmare." He pauses again clearly marshalling his thoughts. "Too close to reality."

Her heart sinks for him. Of course she knows firsthand how traumatic and debilitating such events are. What is different now is that she knows too from their disclosure in the hospital that their mostly shared experiences have left him traumatised and needing help. But this is different. More. It is the first time he's been the one at death's door. Close calls are one thing but effectively cheating the Reaper is another thing entirely.

"Kate." His use of her name, and the plea contained within almost brings her to tears. She forces that emotion back, fights it, knowing full well that it is ultimately futile. But she won't break yet. She'll be strong him, just like he has been for her. Partners. In every way.

His hand tightens on hers.

"This is not the first time I've had a nightmare along these lines, but this time it was worse. Everyone this time." He doesn't explain further and she doesn't need him too. She's had the same nightmares, even awake sometimes. 'Everyone dies. Everyone leaves.' Her mantra since she was eighteen. Until she finally accepted him. Still she burns with the familiarity of the theme, and her own battles. The memories, doubts, terrors even, may fade but they're never truly lost. The scars fade but never go away if you know where to look. Shadows and blemishes, history tracks and bloody mementos. Her body and now his is testament to that inescapable fact.

But they need to move on. This time in the Hamptons is meant to be their chance to be themselves, especially with each other.

So they won't wallow in regrets and recriminations. They are so far beyond that. They deserve to be.

So she moves into his space and begins to kiss him, all the time fighting back her tears. It is futile. All the more so when her tongue makes contact with the salty trickle coming off his jaw. Her own tears fall from her. A mirror.

Wrapped in each other they cry it out. Together.

Sometime later, wearing sweats with their thick cotton robes on top, they make their way down to the kitchen, and find themselves luxuriating in the warmth of the room. The heating is definitely working in here. So much so that the cotton robes soon come off.

A simple breakfast of poached eggs on English muffins with hollandaise sauce so good it shouldn't come from a jar, accompanied by more fresh coffee helps them recover and fortify them for the day ahead.

Unspoken agreement had left the breakfast conversation light. Moreover, the food and warmth have lifted their spirits and the hard start to the day – their first day here alone – is forgotten, for the moment at least.

After clearing up, they slip the robes back on and hand-in-hand Kate leads Rick out of the warmth of the kitchen and down the long hallway to the of the house.
Both instinctively shiver at the sudden wall of cold in the corridor. Kate wonders how they'll go when the weather gets worse. This really may be a summer house. She pushes the thought aside for the moment, excitement growing as they reach their destination.

Their first stop is the former sun room. Despite the short time frame and lack of structural alterations, this room has been transformed. It is still airy and spacious but the miss-mash of unused furniture and half-forgotten possessions that had long inhabited the less popular of the two ground floor sun rooms has gone.

In place was a curious mix of the classic and the new.

Of course this is no surprise. Kate had been fully briefed by Martha and there had been a more or less perfunctory inspection last night but the lights had been barely flicked on before they had returned to the kitchen to enjoy supper with Martha before she headed back to the City. Thereafter the two had been distracted by other matters.

But in the light of the new day, their new training room is impressive. But cold. No heating and the expanse of glass meant to catch and expose the summer sun does nothing but leach the winter cold through. But whilst the thermal nature of the room remains unchanged, there are many more alterations that call out.

Dominating the centre of the room are the padded tiles, medium grey in colour, the squares meshed together to form an approximately 12 foot square mat. Pushing with their toes the tiles flex a little. They are still solid enough to provide good support but take the edge off any impact, most of the time.

On the seaward side of the room survives a square dark wood table with 4 padded wooden chairs that sit close to the double doors. Somewhere to sit and observe whilst someone exercises or take a break.

To the right of the entrance are the exercise machines. A treadmill, rowing machine, and an exercise bike. All good, reliable professional gym grade models. On a ceiling mount in front of the three is a forty inch flat screen which Kate knows is linked to the house's integrated audio video network. She had received a limited introduction to the entertainment network on their first visit so she could control the music in the kitchen whilst she cooked. If Martha could drive it, then Kate was fairly certain she could too.

Taking everything in properly for the first time Rick realises that without meaning to, Kate has just made the first significant change to one of their homes since moving in. He is sensible enough to not mention it, but his heart swells regardless. He'll guard the knowledge until he can introduce it to her without the fear of adverse reaction. This thought alone tells him, that no matter how far they have come, there is still a journey to be completed.

But maybe it's not so far to the end now. This last thought fills him with hope. So much so that he can't resist gently nudging Kate up against a wall and crowding into her space.

She doesn't resist or even protest too much, returning his enthusiastic kisses with her own. He can't keep the grin from his face. Nor his eyes.

She looks up him from beneath long lashes, observing how happy he is. "What has you smiling so much?"

So he takes a chance that the moment demands of him. Hopefully of her, no both of them.
"This. Us." He's usually more articulate. So he tries again. "Making a home with you Kate. It's not all I've ever dreamed about but it's one of the bigger things. Being Here. Committing more to each other. It's a good sign right?"

"Yes Rick. It is a good sign. A really good sign. And for the record, I love what we're doing. And more importantly I don't want you to hold back. Sure there will be times I might have to ask that you slow or tone down something but I don't want you second guessing yourself or us. Me especially. I'm in this so far I can't ever get out. Not that I want to."

Her gaze is on him still and she observes how his face is frozen in…..is that shock?

"You okay Rick?" Just a little concern edges her voice but his answering smile wipes that away instantly.

"More than. Just caught me by surprise Beckett." He pauses to correct himself. "Kate. I guess I'm still getting used to you like this. The last six months have been great, and what you've shared with me, I love that so much. And now, well I always knew there were so many layers to the Beckett onion. Now, I get to peel more of them away.

"Hmmmm, I like that. And who many layers of the Castle Cake do I get to peel away."

"Castle Cake?" His voice is alive, and it's infectious.

Better than Kitten he reminds himself.

She gives him a semi smile, and a shrug of the shoulders, her eyes dancing.

"I think you have many cake like qualities Rick."

"Oh yes?"

"Hmmmm, well you're appear soft but have surprising layers on the inside, pretty much everyone likes you, you're sweet, and I'll always want more."

"I like the last one best."

"I thought you might." As she leans in to kiss him again, and he responds.

Eventually they break off the make-out session to run through the room features.

Kate has information from Martha, and the various providers will be along during the course of the next week to guide them through their new gym.

"The therapist will be here on Monday to brief us on your rehabilitation programme, and a qualified representative from the equipment provider on Wednesday to run us through the gear and integration with your rehab.

"Now it's getting pretty chilly in here. How about we go for showers and get dressed?"

With that she leads him from the room and back down the corridor towards the stairs and their bedroom.

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The shower had been delayed by an impromptu decision to climb back into bed for a nap. Rick still got tired easily and after the disturbed night both he and Kate had settled into an easy slumber. Waking near one o'clock they had showered together and hurriedly thrown on clothes before
Having finished lunch and disappointingly almost the last of the sumptuous supplies from Ambrosia – his mother must have finagled more than her share for Alexis' comfort box and herself – they sit in the warmth of the kitchen in that comfortable silence that still surprises them.

She never expected him to be so able to be so undisturbed, compared to the majority of her experience with him. For his part Rick still marvels over her unflinching acceptance of his proximity, Kate not Beckett he knows now, but still he's unremittingly thankful for every opportunity to be of comfort to her.

The relaxed reflection does not last, as his phone rings. He has to rise from his seat to reach his, whereas hers is still held close by, the adulthood habit of waiting for a call, still not abated.

"Hey it's Alexis."

Hitting answer, he taps speaker, and places the phone in between them.

"Hey Pumpkin."

"Hello Richard."

"Mother?" His surprise is mirrored by a look on Kate's face. "Martha?" she mouths to him.

"Yes. Surprise Dears!" Definitely his mother, and then another voice chimes in.

"Hey Dad. Hi Kate."

"Hello Alexis." Kate answers for both of them.

"Grams dropped round with the goodies from Ambrosia. You're all officially my favourite people ever!" She sounds almost giddy. "This stuff is so good. And so much of it too. I've been sharing. Talk about instant popularity. I think Grams may get mugged on suspicion next time she visits."

"Good to hear from you Alexis. On the subject of Ambrosia, I would say Mother has been more than generous."

"Oh hush Richard. I'm pretty sure I left you enough, and you can always arrange for more to be delivered." She pauses, and Alexis joins in the teasing.

"Yeah Dad, I should say 'you shouldn't have' but it all tastes so good.

He knows when he's beaten, and Kate laughs as he raises his left hand and twitches the right arm in surrender.

"Katherine you are keeping him in line aren't you? He's not being any trouble is he?"

"Surprisingly he's been very well behaved but I'm not expecting it to last."

"It never does my Dear. Always such an inquisitive and adventurous boy but with such a good heart and compassion."

"I know. They are some of the reasons I love him so." She is looking at him as she says those words so naturally, instinctively, and he can see the utter truth of them.
"And we are so grateful that you, my Dear. You totally deserve each other and nothing makes me happier than to see you together now. Well not unless you count a wedding and more grandbabies."

"Grams!" Alexis protests on their, and her behalf.

"Honestly Kate, between the two of them, I'm not sure how you've adjusted so well."

"Alexis, it turns out this family, is exactly what I needed in my life. That won't ever change. So I need you to know that I love you both too, not just Rick."

"Darling you shouldn't feel the need to tell us, your actions and your affection need no words."

Martha ever the grand dame thanked Kate in her own unique way.

Alexis on the other hand simply gushed.

"Thank you Kate. I'm so happy that you have each other, and us. Just so long as you're both safe."

The young lady added for good measure.

At that point they hear a ring tone that Rick knows is Martha's and they can hear her answer her cell.

"Grams has stepped out for call." Alexis informs them and then seemingly summoning some courage she addresses her father.

"Talking of safe, Dad I do have a question for you."

"Yes Alexis?"

"Well, you know how I never asked for a pony growing up? Even though you offered one from time to time." Kate could well imagine that.

"Yes?" Uncertainty has crept into Rick's tone.

"Can I have a bodyguard please?"

"A what?" Kate is certain Rick heard his daughter.

"Bodyguard. Well to be more specific Jane."

"What?"

"Can you employ-Jane-so-she-doesn't-have-to-leave?" Alexis rushes through the question but then pauses and continues at a more comprehensible pace. "She's leaving Dad. She's my friend now. I don't want her to leave."

"Can you back up a step please Alexis?"

"Okay. Sorry Dad and Kate." Alexis does sound a little flustered. "Clare rang just before Grams arrived. She says the risk assessment has been reviewed and in light of them finding out earlier today that the threats were not substantiated they were going to pull security by the end of the weekend. Clare said she would call you today. But I don't want Jane to go. She's my friend and she's so cool and a bodyguard too."

Rick takes his time before responding.

"I'm pretty sure you don't need me to buy you a friend Alexis. In fact I know so. Just because Jane
isn't there doesn't mean she can't be your friend."

"But Jane's job takes her away a lot."

"I understand that, and so should you. So do you want to explain what's really going on?"

"Maybe." There is a long silence. Not even Martha fills in the void. "I'm just lonely. You and Kate have gone for a while, I don't have a boyfriend, and I'm still not sleeping well."

Rick looks at Kate in question but she is already nodding, granting permission.

"Alexis, how about you come up next weekend? Come spend a couple of nights with us. We can make s'mores and have bonfire on the beach. Is that okay?"

"Really?" She sounds excited. "Kate are you sure, what about your alone time with Dad?"

Kate is ready for the question. She squeezes Rick's hand to keep him quiet. "Alexis it will be fine. Come visit for the weekend. You can help me with your father, and we can talk about plans for the holidays. Just so long as you'll be okay until the weekend."

"Okay that sounds great."

"I'll arrange a town car from T&M for Friday." Rick sorting things as usual.

"I'm looking forward to it and seeing you both. But can I call you during the week?"

"Of course Alexis. Anytime you know that." Once again Kate answers for both of them and Rick is perfectly happy to concede some of the admittedly light parental duties to Kate.

"Great I love you both. See you on Friday. Bye Dad, bye Kate."

"Bye Alexis." They conclude together, grinning openly at each other with yet another unscripted display of their uncanny synchronicity.

"Do you think Alexis is okay?"

"I think she is still reacting to the shooting Castle. You just can't expect her to get over it that easy. You've been her life of so long. And yes you're out of hospital. But you're not fully recovered, and now you're away. And there's me." She squeezes his hand again to silence the inevitable protests.

"Despite her protestations of independence leaving home is always hard, and worse if a parent is unwell. She's doing better than perhaps she might have. We'll get her there." Kate's reassurances are mana for Rick, who has long sought a more grounded female viewpoint for input into raising Alexis.

"Thank you Kate." He keeps it simply and heartfelt. She smiles shyly back. Even now the simplest of compliments warms her so.

"Are you going to call Clare?"

"No, I'll wait for her to call. She is always reliable."

"You trust her don't you? Really trust her, with Alexis I mean."

"Mother, Clare, you. Tim and Derek. Those are the five people left I absolutely trust with my
daughter's life. The Boys, and Lanie to a slightly lesser extent.

"Rick, you said five people 'left'?

"Roy." She bites her lip, a sign of nerves but he continues. "A long time ago I once trusted Roy with everything and he came through for us. Whatever his sin, he spent a long time redeeming himself Kate.

"I know I forgave him. I really did in the hangar. I wish he knew that."

"I think he did. You don't misspeak or lie Kate. Roy would have known."

"I miss him."

"So do I. He was a good man."

She doesn't speak again for a while lost in her thoughts.

How about a walk?

So after a check of the weather had revealed no planned showered they find themselves on the lawn overlooking the beach.

They're wrapped up in layers. Kate is barely visible beneath one of Alexis' ski beanies and a scarf - possibly Martha's.

Naturally Rick has a few issues with his strapped shoulder. Unable to properly fasten his big warm coat, he settles for an extra layer courtesy of a baggy sweat top with hood under the coat and a huge Whovian scarf of his own.

"I feel a little like Napoleon." Before adding a Kate's frankly unimpressed look, "Only taller. Much taller."

"What about Nelson?" She teases.

"His was actually missing." Rick points to his arm with his left hand, "Plus he died and all he got to do was kiss his best man friend."

"Good point."

"Although Beckett you know that you are too."

"Are too what?"

"My best friend. Well not best man friend, but definitely best friend."

"That's sweet. Now lets get moving before I change my mind and retreat in doors."

With that she set off down the path to the beach.

12th Precinct, 4.32 pm Saturday.

It sure felt lonely in the bullpen. It wasn't even their weekend shift but there had been a two near simultaneous homicides, one extra messy, and Gates had requested both Esposito and Ryan as
The other team was still out at the messy robbery/homicide and here they were back at their desks writing up the arrest report. Or rather Ryan was whilst Espo nursed a lukewarm coffee, apparently lost in reflection.

Their had been a straight 'pop and drop' with a fast arrest. Two testosterone laden idiots with easy access to handguns had actually arranged a duel over a girl, only for the more sensible (relatively) one to decide to minimise the odds and to ambush his opponent arriving at the agreed venue. He might have got away with it if it were not for the social media posts from the opposing groups of supporters. Tory had taken less than five minutes to drop enough evidence on their desk for them to have a warrant within thirty minutes and they even picked the guy up still carrying the stolen Ruger pistol he used as he returned home.

Captain Gates materializes alongside them. Startling both. Esposito more so as he almost lost control of the coffee cup.

"Shit!" as the lukewarm liquid sloshes near the lip of the mug.

"Sorry Sir." The Detective apologised but his Captain waved it away with an almost smirk.

"I'll see the both of you in my office now please Detectives."

The door was shut.

The Captain gestured at the two chairs opposite her desk.

They chose to stand.

"I'll be blunt. The City budget is under considerable strain. There is pressure on all departments to reduce costs, including the NYPD. As a result the department is consolidating – temporarily - some squads across precincts to try and save money and also improve training and experience sharing. Naturally squads, and teams where there are vacancies are amongst the first to be considered for operational reasons as well."

"We don't have any vacancies Sir." Espo knows where this is going, and damned if he is giving up without resistance.

"In normal times, I might agree Detective. But this isn't one of them. Now with Beckett and Castle, absent, this team" Gates waves her hand in their direction, "will be supplemented by two senior detectives from outside the Twelfth effective next shift pattern."

Neither Ryan nor Esposito choose to speak at that time, and so Gates continues.

"Naturally this raises the question over who will lead the team. It won't be you Detective Esposito. Despite your record, your recent suspension can't be ignored."

Years in the military receiving bullshit orders or inequitable dressing down means that his face remains flat, no sign of the bitter bite of disappoint apparent as he barely turns his head to his partner and says with absolute conviction

"Congratulations Bro."

For his part Ryan is equally unreadable.
Gates responds for him.

"No. Detective Ryan is not eligible for command of the team either."

"Do you mind me asking why not Sir?" Espo can't keep quiet now. Discipline and face be damned.

"The same reason as you Detective."

"I don't understand." Esposito turns to look at Ryan who is somewhat doing a mediocre job of avoiding eye contact with his partner.

"Detective Ryan choose to take the same official reprimand on his service record as his partner. The only difference is his suspension was registered but not served. Deferred instead."


"Detective Ryan felt that he hadn't properly supported his partners hence the situation you and Beckett found yourselves in. When his case was reviewed he chose to take the same penalty as his partners despite being assessed at a lower level of offending."

He nods in understanding. Another time and place he would have snapped to attention and saluted his partner, but Ryan's own determined set and yet soft eyes clearly indicate that the subliminal message is received. They'll pseudo discuss it later in the context of beers, pizza and a game. Then never again.

Gates had fallen quiet during the silent exchange between partners Espo notices. Maybe she was just as attuned to this as they were. She wasn't Roy Montgomery but she wasn't the by-the-book ballbuster her preceding reputation had painted.

"Detectives Second Class John Sullivan and Henry Blake will transferring across from the 28th Precinct for the duration of Beckett's absence. Sullivan will have seniority."

No response. Still hurts.

"Look Detectives I'll be up-front with you. This isn't the result of your suspension. You're both experienced and able investigators and your full team is quite frankly the best single homicide squad I've ever come across. I would have been happy to leave you as a pair whilst Beckett and Castle are absent, but this is not possible.

"The transfers in and the resultant temporary team changes are driven by a combination of the drop off in homicides and budget pressures. One PP has been looking to reorganize to save costs but also ensure we don't lose too much capacity and experience. This is in effective a compromise, but one that is going to hit morale. Other Precinct Captains and I are doing our best to minimise the disruption and impact. But we are going to need our senior detectives to play their part two. Can I rely on you?"

The question is delivered without the Captain's usual bite, and the softer tone, so nearly a plea, that resonates with the two detectives. They can both remember Roy using the same tone, often when something with Beckett or later Beckett and Castle concerned him. Less their Captain, and more their pack leader asking them to stand up for the pack.

This time there are answering nods in the affirmative from both detectives. Sure it hurts but damned if they'll do any less.

"Thank you both."
"I regret that this is the position we are in. You are more than capable of managing your own investigations but this is happening across the department. Beckett and Castle will be back and I will happily restore you team then. I guarantee it. Even so it will be different with Beckett’s promotion, and well I can envisage they will have other factors influencing how and if she continues her career."

Gates doesn't give them any time to absorb the implications of that statement.

"But Detectives a word of advice. To advance much further in your own careers will in all probability require your separation in the future. Only you can make those decisions but you would be wise to bear them in mind. The situation that Roy allowed with Beckett and you two, and later with Castle, is almost unheard of and even the role we have planned for Beckett on her return is pushing the boundaries of regulations and authority.

"In the meantime, thank you both for coming in off-shift. The paperwork can wait until next week. Take Monday as on-call as well. Have a good weekend Detectives."

Dismissed.

The Detectives take the opportunity offered and secure their desks and records in record time before heading out figuring they have time for a quick beer before heading to their respective homes.

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**The Hamptons.**

They had walked for quite a way. Admittedly at a slow pace, first along the beach, Rick pointing out some of the landmarks and houses, providing a mix of facts and (tall) tales regarding the places and their residents. Eventually they find a road leading off the beach, and in the face of the rising wind with a nasty bite, they take the more sheltered laneway back to the main connecting road and walk a little quicker back to their home.

Returning to the house, they seek the warmth of the kitchen and make huge beakers of hot chocolate laden with marshmallows to warm them.

They also know it is time to resume the once-postponed the resumption of their early morning talk.

As it is late afternoon, and Rick and Kate decide to seek out the comfort and warmth of the study. His study Kate corrects. Not theirs, his. Too much of that room reflects his personality. They haven't spent much time together in it, preoccupied with other things during their previous stays but now she knows how much it represents the man, the very embodiment of his personality and ethos. She loves it.

There are two entrances to the Study on the ground floor. One from the corridor and the other through the library room. Of all the rooms in the house, even in comparison to the extravagant master suite, the library room is the most striking.

The library room was previously the main entertaining room of the house. It occupies half-the length of the house facing the ocean, and when originally built could have hosted massive dinner parties or a not-insignificant ball room. In order to still allow seaward facing bedrooms and yet retain pleasing dimensions, the room is slightly sunken to allow for higher ceilings which adds to the attraction.

Originally a mostly glass wall with two big sets of wide doors gave an uninhibited view out onto
the green expanse of the lawn and the ocean. Now one set of the wide door remain and much of the glass is gone, certainly at the southern end.

That end, closest to his study, now has elegant fitted, floor to ceiling bookshelves complete with a wheeled librarian's ladder. A sinfully comfortable sofa and two reading chairs huddle around a real fire place. In internal corner of the fireplace wall is the recessed door to his study along with a card table and four upright chairs. Their siren call is so strong Kate can almost taste the wood smoke as she is curled up reading in front of a roaring fire. Rick of course catch the moment and merely says 'Another day' to her.

The other end of the room is more modern. Three large couches covered in throw cushions, sit in a semi-circle to face what can only be called a media wall. There is a sixty inch flat screen in the centre, and off one each side slightly smaller fifty inch panel mirror each other. There is a one hundred and twenty inch motorised screen in the ceiling for the project hidden away in its own drop down ceiling box. Somewhere in the walls and ceiling recessed speakers lie dormant for the moment. Hidden behind sliding panels and purpose built furniture are game consoles, cable box, Blu-Ray player, media centre, dedicated CD transport, and even a record player. They watched a movie here on her last visit whilst a late summer storm blew itself out around them.

If the bookshelves and study are one part of the man, this modern man-cave is another. The gadget mad nerd and eternal child. She doesn't begrudge his well-earned toys and looks forward to the first time the Boys visit and are struck dumb by his extravagant indulgences which he shares so freely with his friends and family.

Rick leads her through the small connecting door to his study.

It is darker, more traditional than his space at the Loft. There is heating in here - installed some years ago so he could escape to write here in winter - and for that she is grateful.

The contents are an eclectic mix of one and new. The wooden desk is so old-school but his custom Herman Miller chair equally effortlessly Star Trek. More bookshelves, lots of comics, and sci-fi, walls covered with pictures and knick-knacks. A chaise-longue with a reading table and lamp sits under the sea view window shuttered by horizontal wooden blinds.

There is a walk-in storage behind a sliding panel that can be missed at first glance. She's never been in there. Another place to explore now that they have the time.

Rick sinks into his desk chair and Kate alights on the chaise-longue as Rick leaves his feet up and spins the chair to swivel and face her.

"Actually I'm okay with what I did that day. With my actions."

She waits for him to continue.

"I didn't consciously put myself in danger. I mean I was hanging back. I really did wait for the all clear and to be invited in."

"I know Rick. Gates and the Boys confirmed it. The place was meant to have been swept and clear."

He nods and swallows.

"Rick." Her concern is touching but he just needs to get through this without pausing.
"I know. No guarantees. Definitely know that one."

She nods. He's her partner, and so much more. Just like the families of those that serve he accepts and bears the knowledge of the risks that the police face. But more, because he's all too often there with her, and then their extended family bear those consequences too. And yet none of them are selfish enough to demand that they stop. There is so much strength in all of their family.

"I'd die for them too. I didn't realise I would be willing to do. I've known and accepted for a long time that I'd die for you without fail. But I'd do it for them too." He means the Boys. Their Boys. Strange how the joke about 'Mom & Dad' rings so true.

"Perhaps even Gates." He seems to think on that. A small grin teases before he speaks. "Well maybe that might be a stretch." She grins back just a little too.

"But." He stops.

But what she wonders?

"I'd regret it."

"Not as much as I would Babe."

"I'm not so sure. You've ruined me Kate. Mostly in the best possible ways."

"I'm not sure I like the sound of that Rick."

"Only that you've made me reach for my dreams. To not settle. To live my own life with those I truly love. So I would regret missing out on those opportunities.

"I regret lots of things. Foremost is my cowardice in not telling you about my feelings. If only I had been honest. Had the courage to tell you directly and truthfully. But I could barely be honest in my head. Writer's curse I guess. I would almost always picture how it would go wrong and how much I would lose."

"Me too Babe. Me too."

"I regret Gina. The second time." He clarifies. "Probably the worst example of settling for something less than I wanted. Needed. I think you know that."

"I do. Still hurt though."

"I really didn't think that one through. Everyone paled in comparison to you. I just never thought I stood a chance."

"You're probably lucky you didn't come back until the fall. I'm pretty sure the Captain, the Boys, hell especially Lanie wouldn't have been kind."

"Actually Roy did contact me. He never explained why but he seemed disappointed."

"Why?"

"He wanted to know when or if I would be back. He may have hinted that I was missed. But if he did it was pretty subtle. I was pretty clueless and had done a half-reasonable temporary job of convincing myself you were never going to be with me.

"What about you?"
"Rick, I'm no different I think. My biggest regret is the same lack of honesty. That and the inability to communicate except in subtext and teasing.

"It was, is, fun…." Then his face falls, "Well most of the time anyway."

"That it was and is. Still I regret Demming. He was never going to be serious. I had no idea what I was doing dating another cop. Stupid! Stupid!"

"Oh that sounds like a story."

"One for another day Stud. Just make a note and park your pencil 'cause I'm not filling in that particular back story any day soon."

"Spoilsport."

"Sure you don't want to stick your tongue out too?"

"Nope. I'm good." He pauses clearly more to say and she knows he's waiting for her. For her last ex-boyfriend. For Josh Davidson. Doctor Motorcycle Boy.

"When you walked off with Gina – she could use her name, the ex-wife, she could avoid the pettiness, well most of it – it really hurt. Mostly because I really wanted to try, but was too afraid and then it was too late. I blamed myself, but focused my emotions and my anger on you. Especially when you weren't in contact until the fall. You came back but she was still there. I tried a few dates and then met him. I can't regret needing him for a distraction in the first place but I do regret persisting with Josh, giving him that chance after the dirty bomb case, one he didn't really deserve. Especially when it was clear that we were going to be something.

"Don't get me wrong Josh is a good person." She holds her hand up to forestall Rick's interruption. "I know you'll disagree. But he was, or rather is, a good person. Just because he's not you, it doesn't mean I had low standards, especially with anyone I invited to bed. Rick I had to more than like the guy and they had to be a good person. I'll always regret a lot, but that's on me. But my boyfriends shouldn't share that responsibility.

"None of them were the right person for me. None of them were you."

"Kate I know that now. I can't say that even now, when we're together and committed it doesn't sting a little, but I know I carry a lot of blame myself. I never manned up and told you the truth. Such a coward. But I was so afraid that if you didn't want or weren't ready that it would. I'd take any part of you I could get Kate."

"I was too Rick. Too afraid of losing you in my life to make the next step. We were finally getting brave enough to try when the Rabbit Hole sucked me down again.

"The blame? We share it okay Rick? I think our friends and family honestly despaired for us at quite a few points. I regret more my lack of honesty with myself that I could be anything more than your work partner and friend. To be what I wanted."

They both nod, clearly reaching a shared conclusion about mistakes that clouded their past.

Rick reaches out to take her hand. She looks up and sees his blue eyes sparkling back at her.

"So we're agreed." She nods not even knowing what exactly she is in agreement about.

"Whatever else our time here is about, we will not wallow in our past."
"Yes Rick, no more regrets."

"Great. I have plans for our lives Kate. But I want to make them with you now. Our plans. Can we spend some of our time here doing that?"

"Sounds like a good idea, but I'll deny it if you try to tell anyone I said you had one."

Her pulls her up from the chaise-longue, kissing her hand as she comes to him. She leans her long body down, dipping her head to bring her lips into contact with his. Sealing the agreement.

"So dinner. I was thinking something quick but warming. How does franks and beans sound?" And with that another foundation in the cornerstones of their lives was done.

They had watched the news and a few repeats whilst making and then enjoying dinner and their own company.

Kate had relegated him to observer whilst she prepared and plated their food. All the time he kept up a steady stream of chatter ranging from the inane to the intense, innuendo laden of course. Naturally for her part, Kate had easily settled into the comfortable role of tease and tormentor. The angst and anticipation of the day was lost in the warmth of their familiarity but now they didn't hide behind it.

Towards the end of the meal, Kate noticed him wincing, and despite having his pain medication at the correct intervals, she could remember several times during the day when he had failed to hide his discomfort. She suspected that he, and her, had been too quick to relax their focus on keeping his shoulder immobilized. She would call Lanie later.

Leaving him in the kitchen nursing the last of a nice red, and watching the TV, Kate slipped out to the study to make her call.

The phone was answered on the third ring.

"Hey Lanie"

"Girlfriend how are you?"

"Good Lanie. Really good." She couldn't quite keep the anxiety from her voice.

"Really?" Lanie seemed to pause, and then jumped straight in with both feet.

"Wait a minute. Then why are you calling? Are you regretting this already?"

"Hell no." Kate knew being so directly adamant was important to settling her best friend down and avoiding the wrong impressions.

"I'm not saying there haven't been some tough moments already, but it's why we're here. Sorting our lives out. Hopefully without too much outside input. And it's going great so far. So no regrets at all."

"Good. So when do you think he'll propose?" Lanie didn't take the unsubtle hint regarding external interference. Not that Kate expected her best female friend to.

"Lanie!?"
"Well I think you're both thinking and talking about it."

"So what if we are?" Best defence is offense, right?

"Well?"

"No…we're not planning on rushing into anything."

"Five years is not rushing Kate." She knows not to bite at that comment, but there is too much truth in it.

"We're only doing it once and we're going to do it right." Take that!

"Anyway, not why I called."

"And?" Lanie is impatient. Does she have a visitor?

"I do have a question. Medical related." The silence indicates a willingness to listen.

"Rick's shoulder is giving him some elevated pain this afternoon and evening. He took the prescribed painkillers at the correct times but it is still troubling him, I can tell."

"Is he keeping it strapped properly and fully immobilized?"

"Mostly."

"Mostly isn't good enough yet Kate. He needs it to be kept as still as possible for a while longer before he can start to move or use it all. Too much use now, even the smallest movements, will make recovery much harder down the track. There is also the slight risk of permanent impairment. Look the rehab guy will be there on Monday. Until then keep it strapped up as tightly as possible and restrict his" she pauses, "and your physical activities as much as possible."

"I think I hate you just a little bit."

"No you don't sweetie."

"You're right but you could try to not sound quite so happy about it."

"Why?"

"I give up. Now why don't you tell me what I interrupted when I rang?"

"Nothing."

"BS Lanie! Complete and utter….."

"Alright. But it goes no further."

"Who am I gonna tell Lanie?"

"Him and his followers on twitter."

"He doesn't do that you know Lanie."

"I know but you can't tell me it doesn't scare you sometimes."

"You should see what they post about him, or for him."
"I know. You do too. But I take it you haven't shared your username with him."

"Another hell no on that one too."

Lanie laughs.

"I'm gonna let you go Kate. Remember walking is okay but nothing more strenuous even if you think it doesn't impact the shoulder."

"You've got a visitor haven't you?" Kate wasn't quite willing to let Lanie go without a confession of sorts.

"Yes." She sounds a little exasperated. And was that guilt?

"And it's not Espo." Not a question.

"No. My friend Phil from med school and Bellevue. You remember him?"

"Yes, the one with no filter. Do you know what you're doing Lanie?"

"Having dinner with an old friend."

_Fine. Be like that._

"Just don't make it complicated. I don't want you to get hurt. And yes, I know exactly how that sounds coming from me."

"Goodnight Kate."

Leaving the study, Kate went in search of Rick only to discover he had left the kitchen, which was now in darkness. Following the pattern of lights upstairs she found Rick lighting the fire in the master bedroom one-handed.

"I had contemplated moving back to the study to join you, but I thought instead that we should have the fire on in the master bedroom tonight."

"Hey. Lanie says you need to scale back your activities and keep the shoulder really isolated. I can see the pain is affecting you.

"Okay. Can you please help?"

"Sure Babe."

It didn't take long for the fire to have the room comfortably warm. Much better than last night when their own distraction had meant the fireplace was forgotten in their own heat.

Snuggled up in bed, Kate knows Rick hasn't quite finished for the day.

"Kate?"

"Yes Rick" She snaps her book closed to emphasise that her attention is back on him and leans towards him, "I want to know what's on your mind."

"It's not just that I have no regrets about this."
"It isn't?" She can't stop the question in her voice.

"No. There's no doubts either.

"No uncertainly.

"No second guessing."

Each short pronouncement has been punctuated with a determined stamp.

"So what are you not saying? She's a little impatient now because his words are simultaneously exciting and frustrating her. Maybe a little scary too.

"What I am saying?" Oh he's playing with her a little.

"Ah hum." She can play back. Biting her lip in frustration and enticement.

"Kate." Oh, he's still going to tease out his statement.

"What I am is committed.

"Utterly.

"Irrevocably.

"Wholeheartedly.

"Forever."

Then he kisses her. She lets him, not that she would resist him. Returns in kind her own kiss briefly, knowing he is not done.

"Whilst we're still taking our time, there will be no more missed opportunities. No diversions.

"I want to be yours and you mine.

"So this isn't a proposal. This is just me telling the woman I love for all time that I will ask her that question. And some time soon. Not right away but not far off either."

"Hmmm, sounds so good." She can't help the excitement that nearly explodes from her.

"For the record Rick, I think that you'll really like the answer that question gets."

"Oh I hope so."

"I know so." Her megawatt smile illuminates her face and his heart.

"I look forward to it Rick. I really do."

"Me too. But I want everything with you Kate. I look forward to everything with you."

She kisses him again. Then leans forward and nips his ear, whispering, "Even when I have you out of bed early, exercising in the cold? Or sweating in summer."

"I may have one or two minor reservations but never any regrets."

"Good Boy." She kisses him again before sitting back, looking slightly nervous, just enough that
her tongue and then her teeth edge her lower lip.

"Just for the record you don't have a ring already do you?" She can't stop the question.

He looks at her hard. Uncertain whether it is a tease or she is serious. He plumps for the later.

"Truthfully, I told you about how close I came, but I don't have the ring. I haven't found the right one yet."

"Rick….you know it doesn't…." He cuts her off.

"It does. Everything has to be right Kate. You and I are only doing this once and for all. Not long after we met you told me that you are one and done kind of girl. Well there is no earthly way I am going to make a liar of you, Katherine Beckett."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note

Time certainly got away from me.

In between the last chapter and now my 'One and Done' celebrated our 25th wedding anniversary with a fantastic trip to the centre of Australia. We had a great time and all I can say is 'Ice cubes!'

Thank you if you are still with me.

I look forward to hearing your thoughts.
Sunday morning, Rick AND Kate's place, the Hamptons

Rick Castle had a conundrum.

Technically the issue was probably more his girlfriend's, but as she was still asleep the decision and immediate responsibility lay with him.

And he was stuck. Perplexed. Conflicted. With an added side of chicken – the coward's version.

He had woken from what had been his, and by implication, Kate's best night in weeks. Undisturbed sleep. Bliss. Nirvana. Heaven. Whatever.

However, he had been pulled from his slumber by a noise. He couldn't pinpoint it at first but then it became clear, it was her.

He had woken when he heard Kate call out to her 'Mom'. Twice, the second time softer. She hadn't said anything since, but he had chosen not to wake her either. Instead he was waiting to see if it followed the usual path that would require intervention before a full blown nightmare or worse, night terrors began. She hadn't had any for months, and attributed it to his presence in their bed. Credit he was totally prepared to accept if it meant she slept well.

That she hasn't been wracked by bad dreams is good and so he's relived but remains slightly concerned.

She is still, content even if he were to hazard a guess, and the final factor in his reluctance to wake her, was the gentle smile that graced her face before she rolled to face him, still firmly asleep, eyes pressed tight.

Kate has had dreams or rather nightmares about her Mom with him but never something like this. Usually he would gently wake her but this time it felt different, and if it was he didn't want to be the person to take her from her Mom, even the dream version.

He can't fathom a way out of the situation that confronts him. So yeah a conundrum. He's normally so good at puzzles, but Kate Beckett has defeated him for years, and will for many more to come if
they have their way. He settles in beside her, sneaking a big palm onto her hip. And waits.

Some time later.

So he's lying here watching her. Still. He had even slipped out to relieve his bladder and sneaked back into bed without disturbing her. She didn't appear to have moved during his absence, his return to bed, or the replacement of his hand on her hip.

He knows they'll get up soon. She's rarely much of a sleeper-in. Sure she'll lie-in and procrastinate with the best of them – well that's him if he's honest – IF, and only if she had nothing else committed. So between work, and her penchant for early morning runs, and errands, there were few of those lazy mornings, but the irrepressible optimist in him hopes for as many of those days as they can get. He's much more of a laze in bed person. If he wasn't a writer he would have had to find a career that allowed him to indulge in that as much as he could. Of course joining the team at the Twelfth has resulted in him being called from the comfort of his bed at all hours, but he rarely regrets that choice.

Still he knew she hadn't been sleeping well since his shooting and so, like him, she needed this.

Whilst he waits for Kate to wake, he thinks back to last night. They had gone to bed early but had done nothing more than cuddle up, make out a little, and read before going to sleep.

But before they had settled down last night, Clare had messaged both of them just before ten o'clock. A short apology for the delay in contacting them, followed by confirmation they believed the risk to his family and perhaps them over – for the moment. Clare signed off, finishing with an instruction (command?) for Kate to access her work account after eight am the following morning.

It's almost eight now and as ever he's curious. He wants to know more, almost needs to. Whilst he trusts Clare and Taylor Matthews to keep his family and friends safe, he likes to be informed.

She woke feeling refreshed. She was hyper aware of Rick beside her, his hand on her hip, and she kept still and her eyes shut whilst she sorted herself out.

It has been a great night's sleep until the dream. But that was what it was – a dream. Nothing else. She dreamt of her. Her Mom. But so different. No blood. No terror. Instead she saw an older version of the woman, still a snappy dresser just with grey hair and a few more care lines adorning her face. Hand in hand with her father, on a beach in autumn. And her other holding that of a toddler with irrepressible blue eyes. Kate had tried to reach out and touch her, hug her, embrace her. But she couldn't and although her Mom's mouth moved no sound reached her. But she smiled, and inclined her head towards the child, eyes full of admiration, love and gratitude for the gift. Of a grandchild. Her Mom was always one for celebrating life, and it was nearly time for her daughter to fully embrace that too.

But the first order of the day was to greet her partner. Her sudden movement took him by surprise and a less than manly 'eek' slipped from his lips as she wrapped her body on his and kissed him. However, the surprise was only momentary and then he kissed her back.

The Kitchen.

In fact Rick was so keen to learn what Taylor Matthews had to report that without any adverse commentary he let Kate make them a breakfast of plain Greek yoghurt (his mother has clearly had
a hand in the supplies he had noted the other day) along with chopped fruit with barely the briefest
dlicker of dismay on his face. If Kate noticed she displayed no sign of it.

There was of course fresh coffee. Kate remembers her own recuperation and the prolonged denial
of caffeine had certainly played a part in her terseness. Not that in anyway excused her shutting out
the man who loved her so. A mistake she can't undo but can spend her life making amends for.
Saying more than they could or would with coffee has been a part of their relationship for so long.
She hopes it is a lifelong addiction for both of them.

The Kitchen clean-up took next to no time, and Kate sought out her kit bag sequestered in the study
and bought it into the kitchen. She pulled her laptop out and began to set it up just as Clare has
showed her on Wednesday. It is a Dell Latitude with a low profile and light weight. What had
Clare called it? An ultrabook that was it. It is configured with biometric security (a fingerprint
reader) and a customised logon prompt that requires the use of a one-time token from her phone to
access in addition to the biometrics and password.

Naturally the house had Wi-Fi connected to a broadband service and the laptop also has its own
Wireless Wide Area Network card so it could directly connect via the cellular network. Kate asked
Rick for the wireless password and in about five minutes Kate had her Taylor Matthews laptop
setup and authenticated into the secure VPN. It was all way more hi-tech than the NYPD but she
was pleased to find that it was all understandable and doable. She may have heard Rick muttering
something about hot nerd but he was the picture of innocence when she turned her interrogation
glare on him. She let it pass.

Rick was beside her and with shoulders press together the viewing angle on the screen was
acceptable for both of them.

She opened her email and waited for the client to synchronise with the mail server. She then hit
CTRL + Home to bring her to the top of the inbox and she clicked on the message entitled
'Becket+Castle – Client Security Eval Rpt'.

There was a Word document attached with a little padlock icon. She remembered Clare's
instructions that this meant that the document was encrypted and secured and would require
unlocking before reading.

The message simply said 'C&B. Read. Call me. Clare.'

"She gets straight to the point doesn't she?" Kate observes.

"Always has. It can wind people up but it is her real nature. She can be caring and considerate, she
just needs to be suitably motivated to be so. It also makes her one of the most directly honest
people I have ever encountered."

"Whilst Rick un-necessarily defends Clare, Kate double clicks on the attached document which
started to load and then a dialog prompted for re-authentication which Kate does from a one-time
code from her phone.

"Paranoid much?" Rick observes.

"Hush. Be nice about my new job and people with guns who protect us. Plus I can still shoot you.
Remember that old maxim 'I could tell you but then I'll have to kill you'?"

"Yes Dear." He gets in tight with her and they both rapidly scan through the report. Rick may be
the wordsmith but Kate too is a fast reader, and her years of police experience only enhance her
own abundant abilities. And so it is that they keep pace, wordlessly assimilating the information Taylor Matthews has acquired and collated. Kate advances the text without so much as a glance at her partner trusting that he is keeping the pace until they reach Page nine and the end.

"Wow." Rick breaths.

"Um Yeah." Kate echoes. "It is all un-redacted." Both of them had been caught by surprise by that. The sheer volume and detail of the information inside. It is one thing to guess about the capability and reach of the government and its agencies to gather and filter information, it is another thing entirely to witness it firsthand. Especially if it is about yourselves.

There was information here from the alphabet soup of US law enforcement and intelligence with content from the NYPD, FBI, DEA, NSA, something called AGTF – Attorney General's Task Force Kate explained having had Clare explain acronym to her just last week - and several other Federal agencies. In all her time with the NYPD Kate has never had the opportunity to see such a ready assortment of sources without any form of filter or redaction.

"What was the last bit? 'No determined link to Regal'? What is that? Rick who's 'Regal'?"

He answers immediately whilst reaching for her right hand with his left. "Bracken's codename."

"Why the fuck Regal?" She doesn't pull her hand away. Accepts the comfort being offered even if it doesn't temper her ire. Here with just the two of them she lets her rigid self-control slip just a little. Precinct Beckett wouldn't swear so, she's reserved, professional, cool – mostly. With just him, she's more open, more emotional, still equally intuitive and a master detective. Plus he gets to kiss her. Or her him.

"Names are chosen to be not intuitive so as to not aid easy identification. I have no idea who came up with Regal after I told Taylor Matthews."

Kate nods in acceptance. Seemingly the deal is intact. But if it's not Bracken/Regal' who is it? The common thoughts run through both of them, and they don't need to verbalise them to know.

"So the good news is that the perceived threat to us is likely nothing more than minor, bordering on possible paranoia." Rick's disbelieving tone expresses his discomfort at the conclusion. He's paraphrased the last but it's not too far short of the mark. No closer to finding out who was behind it and possibly being overly sensitive about the whole thing.

The fake news websites have gone. The hosting provider took them down after it transpired they were paid for by a stolen credit card. They have even had some luck in getting Google to purge some of the cached content as it was false.

This hacker they suspect of stealing the NYPD personnel information and setting up the websites. Seems to have two alias – Nomad and Nimrod?

"Appears his ego may be his undoing." Rick observes and he feels the gentle nudge from his partner. She knows it's not truly his nature but she'll still tease him about it. He won't give her the satisfaction of a response though. "Probably a little too overconfident about his ability to avoid detection. Then there is using a consistent, common modus operandi. The report says they have identified very similar techniques for several other known incidents of web shaming. It appears that they may split their efforts between commercial jobs using Nimrod and possibly some freebies, public service announcements if you will under the alias Nomad. According to the analysis they have managed to isolate two of the other incidents to being directly responsible for significant financial impact to organisation and one other appeared to have organised crime links.
"But there is nothing in that covers us. I mean why us?" Kate pushes.

"I know. If it is not Bracken, then why us? Why now?"

"The now is easy I think. Your injury. The extra publicity. You've been very quiet media wise until then.

"Keeping it all under wrapped for you." He responds.

"Yeah, well look how well that worked out." But she immediately adds "I don't take it back Rick. Stating publicly for the world that I love you. I could never take that back." He kisses the side of her head, before she continues. "3XK?"

The shake of the head is mutual. "Kate, there would be bodies, staging, something elaborate, something 'clever'. None of that here."

"True. I can't help but worry about some of those we've crossed paths with and still on-the-lose."

"Whoever it is this appears to be a distraction, or a mental game, rather than a physical threat." Rick ponders.

"Yeah well I didn't appreciate mine, or Espo's, personal files being opened up to the world."

Rick shakes his head, apparently disbelieving own words as he speaks, "I'm beginning to appreciate Gates you know. According to this report, she has been hounding NYPD to do something to block the source, locate the hacker and restore the reputations of two of her 'best' detectives."

Kate is similarly reluctant. "I think I always did in a way. Still do. Of course, it took me a while after Roy. But she was never less than fair, even if the manner was brusque. Those times we got the ramrodded. We probably deserved it, and Roy would have done the same. Plus for her to make it to Homicide Captain by way of IA. Not an easy path especially for a woman."

There's not much he can say to that.

"You ready to speak to Clare?"

"Hi Clare." This is Kate's job, just like when she's a NYPD detective, so Rick takes a back seat and lets her drive. After so long he finds it so natural. Their natural order of things, both when they're working and at home together. On the job she's first through the door, but he's as close as he can be supporting her the best he can, in anyway he can. At home, it is a different person, Kate, who lets him take care of her, love her. He cherishes every version of Kate Beckett. He's pretty sure he loves this 'Federal Agent Beckett' just as much. Anyway, who said a change-up, a little role play wasn't fun? He keeps that last thought to himself. Maybe share it latter in a more fun situation.

"Hello Kate. Hi Rick."

"Hello Clare." He lets himself speak now. "Well firstly I'm grateful that neither Alexis nor Mother appear to be in any danger whatsoever."

"Naturally they were our first priority Rick." Clare seeks to reassure Rick knowing full well that he will always think of his family first, even before Kate Beckett if only because he knows she is more capable of protecting herself ahead his mother and daughter.
"So as best you can figure that it was some form distraction. What's the Russian word?"

"Maskirovka." Beckett provides in perfectly accented and so fucking sexy Russian. His sideways look at her is met with a tantalizing mix of ingénue and vamp, her green eyes flashing.

"Why seemingly target Beckett?" He forces himself back on topic whilst really wanting nothing more than to press his lips to hers, hell his entire body into hers.

"We think opportunity. Your shooting opened up a window. Couldn't target you the hero. So target the secret girlfriend who wasn't by your side." Clare's conclusions are just like they had already discussed.

Damn that still hurts. Kate blinks as Rick's left hand slides down her right forearm to squeeze her hand. He doesn't think so. She'll still think it. Sometimes. She won't share that with him.

"Why then? What's the story?"

"Still have no idea about that Rick. What we do have is a fairly positive ID on the person behind the character attacks and websites. We're working closely with the NYPD and other agencies on this.

Who hired this Nomad/Nimrod character?

"Again no idea."

"You really don't think it was anything to do with B...." he corrects himself. "Regal?"

"Nope. Nothing." Clare assures them and then goes quiet.

On the other end of the line Clare bites her lower lip in frustration. Their network had hinted that a New York politician was under investigation by the AG's Task Force and late yesterday Tim had confirmed it was Bracken and ordered her not to tell the couple.

Her boss was entirely right. Still it didn't sit well not telling her friend and her colleague. Still she could give them something.

"Let's just say that he's been ruled out."

At the other end of the line both raise eyebrows as they absorb the unsaid. Bracken was ruled out which means that someone, or rather some agency, has 'eyes on him'. He is being watched, monitored and sufficiently well enough that they can categorically rule him out of this. Something else is going on but they can push that aside. Be patient and wait. After all, thirteen years has past, a few months more, longer if necessary, to get justice is something they can manage together.

By the time they had concluded the call to Clare and Kate had packed away her Taylor Matthews gear, there was the makings of beautiful early winter day outside. It is a much balmier day than yesterday. There is sun peeking through what is admittedly a fair degree of clouds and making the day a few degrees warmer and the wind is conspicuously low, though it can never be absent by the ocean, but it is muted and less intrusive.

"So are you going to take me on the grand tour Mister Castle?" Kate inquires as she strolls back into the kitchen where Rick is tidying a few things away. He has a notepad out and Kate spies the jottings of the beginning of a shopping list.
"Why Miss Beckett, I'd love to. Please accompany me."

Their previous two stays at the house had never really got beyond the main bedroom, kitchen and library. Sure the first time there had been a whirlwind tour that was abandoned for an impromptu and marginally uncomfortable round of 'sex on the stairs' after she had deliberately backed her derrière on to him and ground him to a stop. After that they had retreated to the bedroom, the rest of the tour forgotten.

He leads her upstairs first.

On the northern end of the house is the Master bedroom with huge ensuite, walk-in-robe that in reality is really a good-sized room in its own right, and a dressing room.

Kate is pretty familiar with the northern end, especially the bedroom and the ensuite with the sunken bath. She's never failed to luxuriate in it at least one time on each of her two previous visits. And of course there is room for two, and space to get comfortable.

The walk-in-robe has lots of free space.

"You have no idea how many times I have had to evict Mother from here."

Kate's eyes have alighted on the wall of shelves and racks hidden behind sliding doors. Shoe racks, clothes racks.

Then is a picture of Alexis aged about three in here. She's dressed as a pixie, the glorious green outfit – Martha's hand no doubt – contrasting but complimenting vivid red hair. Kate knows the picture was taken by Rick because this much younger Alexis looks directly through the lens with such unquestioning worship that Kate knows there is only ever one person it could possibly be behind the viewfinder. Long before she conceded anything else about him, she had accepted that he might possibly be the best dad a child could ever want for, and she wants that for their children too. To be challenged by him, to strive to be his equal in loving and nurturing theirs.

Her detective eye catches the faint outline where other pictures no long hang. Kate suspects that Rick has the entire house sanitised of any evidence of any previous relationship, baring a handful of pictures of Alexis with Meredith when his daughter was tiny. Looking around she also notices something different from previous times.

"Yours." Rick states. "Your space. We share everything from this point forth, so half this room, half this house, and more is yours.

"That's a bit of one-upmanship on a drawer Rick." She's carefully neutral, anxious not to ruin the moment. And she can accept this. After all she's somehow managed to convince herself to come to terms with his, no their, humongous bank balance. Some cupboard space is easy. Relatively.

"I don't care. The only thing you don't get half of Kate is my heart. You have all of that. You have for so long and always will have."

Damn! If there was a competition going for romantic statements, she need to concede now before it was a complete whitewash. So instead she answers him with the best weapon in her arsenal and kisses him. Rather thoroughly in fact.

The Southern side of upstairs has four bedrooms and a playroom at the end of the corridor. Each pair of bedrooms shares a bathroom and there are connecting doors from each room into the bathroom.
Alexis's room faces the sea. The other room on the sea side is the official guest room.

Rick guides her into Alexis' room. She hasn't been in here before. There is a queen double bed, a study table and chair along with bookshelves.

On the other side of the corridor is what Rick calls 'Chez Martha'.

Martha's room doesn't face the ocean – or the early morning sun for that matter. The other upside is that these rear upstairs rooms have heating. Martha also has expanded from her bedroom into the wardrobe of the other bedroom, and a good degree of furniture has transformed the second bedroom into a sitting room.

"A lot of Mother's furniture and other possessions came here after her last marriage. Which was good because a number of rooms were scarcely furnished. I secretly think she comes here a lot because of those items and the connection to her past. Of course having Frankie - rest her soul - and Louis and their other friends here is another motivation."

Kate nods in appreciation. Martha whilst open and flamboyant does not really share much of her real life aside from the enjoying teasing her son with hints of her life away from the Loft. Since she and Rick had finally got together as a couple, Martha has been trying to give them some space. Sure she still intrudes but Rick swears it is far less than previous. Kate finds she misses the woman, and she knows secretly Rick does too. More so since Alexis moved out to the Columbia dorms.

At the end of the corridor past the bedrooms is a large open space equivalent to the massive master bedroom.

From her previous visits Kate knows this area was once Alexis' playroom. One look at her now silent partner and she can imagine where his memories have taken him.

He can still visualise the long since put-away play-mats and soft toys, followed by the endless and all-to-rapid transition to more evolved and complicated toys. It is a curious sensation, a combination of loss and longing that makes him just a little wistful and hopeful all at once.

His eyes settle on the considerable bulk of the toy box and he can't help himself. He has the lid raised and his eyes filled with memories within before he even thinks of Kate. Somewhat bashfully he turns his head to find her watching him, still with his left hand holding the toy box lid open.

He finds her smile first. She's leaning against the opposite wall, her right leg bent, resting the foot behind her on the vertical surface. She's observing him quietly. Those hazel eyes gleam, thoughtful, and not a little hooded so he can't detect the true purpose behind them. Smiling back at her, he turns his head back and drops his eyes down glancing at the contents of the box in front of him letting the history wash over him.

It could be seconds, perhaps a minute, or two whilst he is lost in the maze of his own memories.

Using her foot to push off the wall she strides over, and cupping both arms around his torso, she whispers into his right ear.

"One day."

It takes everything in him not to twist round and throw the question at her, answer her promise with one of his own.

"I'd like that." He corrects that. "I'd love to…..with you." Damn he's all tongue tied and flustered.
"I look forward to it." He finishes. Not really knowing what else to say.

She smiled into his neck. He's adorable. Really. What was she thinking delaying this, all that time?

"Me too." Then she adds, "But quite yet. I want some time for us. Is that okay?"

"More than. What we're doing now?" It is inelegant and entirely unlike his usual control of the language, but she knows what he means. The Hamptons. Without interruptions. On their own.

"Yes, and more. I want to go places with you. Make memories to last us a lifetime." Before a family is unsaid.

"There's nothing I want more Kate." As ever he's near letter perfect at her context.

"I know. Me too." As she speaks she has moved round blocking him from the toy-box. One glance at her eyes and the flush of her face and his attention is entirely shifted to her. Her mouth makes sudden contact, connecting with his cheek and chin more than his lips. Without ceasing she simply works her way onto his mouth. Her kisses fire him, and he responds in kind, his left hand raising to caress the back of her head and lock it in place.

Eventually their tour resumes once Kate has straightened out their clothes and they have caught their breath. Chest still heaving slightly Rick adjusts his stance slightly trying to get comfortable until the results of their heated make-out session can pass. Instead his action is greeted with a dirty giggle as his partner checks out his erection still tenting against the sweat pants.

For his part he merely fixes his gaze on her chest when despite the bulky jumper two distinct protrusions indicate the arousal was entirely a bilateral affair. She sticks her tongue out. Which isn't helping at all.

"Real mature Beckett."

"Yeah well bite me."

"Anytime."

Kate bites back the automatic response that forms on her tongue. Fuck how do they fit so much subtext, context and outright flirting into single words? No wonder not just homicide but the entire precinct, hell NYPD had wagers going on them. How pretty much everyone assumed they were together before they were.

Forcing her attention back to the room they've just made out in. Once Alexis' playroom, now it's a curious mix of day room, storage and what?

Despite the wide space and mishmash of contents, the room still looks tidy and ordered.

An antique dolls house sits in one corner. The briefest glance tells her many things. It's genuine antique, worth a lot but still it has been played with and loved. The slight sheen of dust dulls the surface but indicates that it still gets attention, someone still cleans it and re-orders things inside, perhaps just a moment spent pretending they were a child again, still.

His voice, low and reverent beside her startles her from her thoughts.

"Alexis loved it when we saw it. She was six. Even I thought it was expensive and it had so few accessories. It wasn't a modern toy with a complete set of contents and people ready for purchase.
But it was perfect for Alexis. For about three years she saved her pocket money and did extra errands to pay for things for it. We’d go to markets and second hand shops, online hunting for the perfect things for the house. And if we didn't have it then she had her imagination.” He pauses as if recollecting that time. "It was like a mirror of our lives. Just a girl, her father and their eccentric grandmother living in this mansion with the eclectic furnishings and enjoying adventures."

Kate sinks into his body, succour from his size and heat. This side of him still surprises her. Not just his dedication to being the best father he could for his daughter, but by how much it overwhelms her. The contradictory memories of her own mother and the bitter loss, her dad's struggle, now long since forgiven, and yet the joy they gave her growing up. She had been so wrong about how to live her life after her mother died, and yet somehow it all lead to this unique man-child entering her life and her heart, showing her how to truly live again.

"She still played with it for a few years after her intense fascination began to wane, kinda stopped by twelve mostly but I know she still has moments even now when she's here in the Hamptons. She'll slip away and make sure she's on her own with no witnesses but a father knows these things. She's the one who told the housecleaner not to touch it as she'll clean it herself. And things move and the little lives she's played out in that home go on."

Kate brushes her lips on the corner of his chin. "Thank you for sharing your family with me. Your memories." His tight nod and shallow swallow say everything.

Kate looks away from him at the rest of the space.

Little clusters of items, a sofa covered in blankets and teddy bears, a small table and three matching chairs. Bookshelves of course, almost overflowing with content. Combined with the massive library downstairs, she imagines it would easily rival many small public libraries. This family love and cherish words, and the books that hold them.

There is a chimney breast but no fire place. The space where it once was is filled in although the mantle place remains. To the left side of the missing chimney the room is shorter, almost unbalanced.

Looking again Kate spies the access point, and with Rick's guidance she locates the recessed entrance control, and a door swings open. The panel fits flush with the wall and would be hard to spot on a casual glance especially if the room was not well lit.

As the door opens a light automatically illuminates what is a relatively small space, especially in this house. Still there is room for a mid-sized worktop next to a tall steel cabinet. A stool is tucked away the bench.

Stepping into the space, Kate already knows what the cabinet is and the biometric lock with a single glowing red light on it confirms her thoughts.

Rick reaches out with his left hand and presses the palm and fingers against the pad. It takes about a second for the light to change to green.

"Thank God I was paranoid to have both hands registered."

"What in case a ninja chopped one off?"

"Not cool Beckett. Don't really hear you mocking though."

He twists the handle and pulls first the left and then the right hand outer doors open.
"If you don't open the door within 30 seconds it locks again. If the door is left open more than 30 minutes it triggers an alarm. Every event is logged and sent to Taylor Matthew's operations centre and my phone." He pauses. "I'll have yours added to." Another afterthought in the merging of their lives.

It is clearly a weapon safe. The right hand side has a full height, second door with a keypad. On the left hand side are five evenly spaced shelves to make six partitions, the bottom and top two hold key locked drawers. The middle two shelves are open.

Kate immediately spies the contents of the top open shelf, which is at a comfortable height for easy access.

The Walther P380 has a magazine in place and Kate knows it is loaded. Two loaded spare magazines sit alongside the weapon. The immediately available 'home defence' gun. The one Rick has ensured all family members are trained and competent to use.

The other open shelf below contains a mix of what looks like gun maintenance gear.

Rick watches her inspection and fills in the information for what she can't yet see.

"Ammo in the bottom two drawers. Top drawers contain some of the other hand guns."

The right hand side has an internal door with a keypad. Rick punches out the number and swings the internal door open.

The space inside runs the full height of the cabinet. The main feature is the weapons rack that occupies most of the space. The contents are fascinating.

There is a set of fencing blades and two sabres as well. Not at all what she expected.

A lovely recurve bow. Unstrung. But looks like a lot of fun. Beside it a smaller one, obviously meant for a child.

What looks to be a small calibre rifle, possibly an air rifle, and next to it in a padded and lined slot is possibly the most elegant long gun she has ever seen in person. It appears to be an extremely high quality double barrelled shotgun with a beautiful deep red wooden stock.

"It's not a shotgun." Is he reading her mind?

"Looks like one."

"Nope – a double rifle."

"A what?"

"Double rifle. Chambered for rifle rounds not shotgun cartridges. In fifty calibre."

"Jesus Rick. What do you shoot with that?"

He doesn't answer her. Instead, he lifts it up one handed. It is a truly lovely piece of craftsman ship, the red hue of the wood gleams in the light. Rick passes the gun to her and she is almost reluctant to hold it but does so.

She gazes along the stock and down the burnished barrel. It looks familiar.

"Rick?"
"This is a double rifle. Made by Anderson Wheeler of London. Chambered in 500 Nitro express. Walnut stock. Custom made to order."

As he speaks Kate twigs where she has seen the gun. *Shit we saw that just a month ago in Skyfall.*

She had so wanted to go to see it on launch. Even more tormenting was that Rick had an invite with plus one to the New York premiere. However, with their then attempts to keep their relationship a secret, they couldn't risk going out together. She had been upset, and not just because she lost an opportunity to perve at Daniel Craig on the big screen. She wasn't disappointed for long, as Rick had arranged a movie night in and produced with great fanfare a screener disc courtesy of someone he knew at Sony Pictures. They had even dressed the part – for a premiere - and Kate could still feel a flush from the memories of Rick peeling the dress off her once the movie was over. His surprise and delight at finding she hadn't been wearing any underwear all evening.

"This is the gun from the new James Bond movie, Skyfall isn't it?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"Well you know how I turned them down all those years ago." She nods. Another keystone moment that could have separated them before they were together. "Well they kept in touch. I got asked to help up with some script editing and the comic adaption at the last minute. All hush-hush."

So much so he never shared with her. She bit down on that disappointment and forced a level tone. "When was that?"

"Late February this year." Oh when they weren't doing so great. After the bombing.

Rick continues on. "The trip to London. I did some signings" Which she did know about, second hand but at least she knew about them after the event. "And I spent two nights in my hotel room with the writers, some of the production team and a rep from the comic publisher."

"The gun?"

"They asked how I wanted payment."

"I asked if I could go to the set. See some of it being shot. But there wasn't time to visit somewhere they were actually shooting. Instead they took me to this replica Scottish manor that was being constructed in Surrey and whilst I was there I bumped into one of the armorers. I got talking about my PPK and well the next thing I knew I got to hold one of these gorgeous things in my hands."

"And? Seriously Rick it's not usually difficult to get the story from you."

"Well I loved it. Wanted one. Went back and asked for that as payment. Turns out that it was a bit more than they planned to pay me so I made a contribution. And as luck would have it the firm had made a spare. They shipped it to me once I was back in New York. Caused a damn amount of issues with the paper work."

"How much?"

"About twenty-five grand."

"Shit!" Kate looks a little red faced. "Sorry still getting used to the whole money thing. Have you
fired it?"

"Nope. Planned to do it this summer but something came up." He smirks at her.

Oh something. Her. She came up. They got together. "Good reason" she concedes.

"It will be a while before I do now." A gun in that calibre is definitely going to need a working shoulder and both arms.

He smirks again. "There is some ammo for it in the lock box there. It is almost as beautiful as the gun."

He produces a key and then unlocks the box. And flips the top on a smaller, heavy looking cardboard box. He lifts out one round. "Mind you it should be as it costs pretty much ten bucks a round."

It is a truly impressive round and like the gun, double rifle she corrects herself, is a work of art. She looks quizzically at Rick before asking.

"What is it used for?"

"A double rifle is a big game hunter's rifle."

"Rick?!"

"Kate I would never. I have no interest or desire to hunt big game. It is merely another James Bond souvenir."

"Merely?" The arched eyebrow that accompanies the single word is sarcasm exemplified.

He'd shrug his shoulders if he could. Over the years he done his level best to hide his wealth – aside from the Loft and the Ferrari - from her but now they were finally a couple, she was kind of getting a crash course in his not-so public life. It wasn't without its moments, but he was pleased she was adjusting.

"I'm not going to find the Lotus submersible car in the garage am I?"

"Beckett! What a great idea!"

She rolls her eyes again and he laughs. She joins in.

Rick replaces the cartridge back in the box and she carefully places the double rifle back into its padded rest in the rifle compartment.

"It really is a piece of craftsmanship. Still it is an indulgence too."

"Look Kate, I know my reputation but I really don't splurge or splash the cash. Sure I occasionally use my contacts but I don't abuse it."

"Rick. I know. So what else is in here?" Kate asks.

"The Sig P226 X5 competition pistol and Glock 19." As Rick indicates the top most locked drawer with his left hand.

"The .22 target pistols, the drawer below."
"Ammo is in the bottom two drawers."

"The PPK and Forty-Five are downstairs in the safe along with the smaller Glock 22."

"I know I saw their boxes – for the older guns - when I was putting my pistol in there. I didn't notice the Glock 22."

"It's in there, probably behind the other boxes."

She nods and make a mental note to look closer the next time she is at the downstairs safe.

There is a heavy drape in the corner.

"So what's behind here?"

Without fanfare he pulls it open.

Shit!

"A fireman's pole!? Really Rick?" He doesn't even look embarrassed.

Where does it lead?

"Similar room off the storage in my study. Uses the old chimney space. There was a fault with the chimney and the repairs were never made. Instead it was converted into storage and then when I bought the house we converted it again."

"The Fireman's pole?"

"An extravagance. A toy. Not long after we bought the house."

"Has Alexis ever used it?"

"Of course! Yeah she did between about eight and twelve before she got bored with it. Only ever under supervision." Of course.

"What about you?"

"Me. I was never under supervision." Her looks tells him everything. "Well except when Alexis was here."

"Guess you can't use it now."

"Nope. Another time maybe? You could?" He suggested with just a slight touch of leer.

"Sure. If that's the pole you want me clamping my legs round and sliding down, knock yourself out Ricky-Boy." She does that so well, the tease, near torment, the undercurrent of enticement that pulls him willingly under.

"Okay, that is so unfair Beckett."

"I know." The self-satisfied smirk adorns her face with not an iota for shame.

"No need to look so smug."

She beams back at him and then laughs. His heart melts. Again.
"So are we done up here?" She asks through the smile.

"Yeah. Shall we head down stairs and continue the tour?"

"Sounds good, but we can go via the kitchen and grab some water?"

"Sure Kate."

Unlike the upstairs Kate is more familiar with most of the downstairs, although she remains curious about the house and the contents. In particular she still retains a degree of anticipation and desire to find out more, especially around his study.

Taking her hand Rick leads her through the downstairs, stopping to share stories, usually about Alexis or sometimes the significance of a particular ornament or piece of furniture. As ever his recounting draws her in, the sound of his voice, and the pull on her psyche is entirely instinctual now, even before he weaves his storyteller's magic and makes even the simplest, most prosaic event monumental and profound.

Still it doesn't take them too long to navigate the downstairs.

On the Northern end, under the master bedroom, is the kitchen, attached casual dining, and main sun room which leads onto the pool. She loves the kitchen and has cooked here on their two previous visits and they have always eaten in the casual dining space that adjoins the kitchen even when entertaining retired mobsters.

The northern sun room is furnished in simple but elegant style. There is a table and chairs for eight people, a couple of chaise longue and a huge bean bag. Kate spies one of the entertainment control panels and the recessed speakers.

They had stepped out to the pool area. The heated pool – which should be ready in a day or two - has a separate cabana with shower and toilets. There is a small kitchenette for the adjacent barbeque and wet bar. Finally there is a four person Jacuzzi nestled in a corner out of sight from pretty much everywhere. Kate blushed at Rick's innuendo laden eyebrows twitching upwards in recollection of their skinny dip and hot-tub activities when they made it to the Hamptons for the second time. Of course the pool had been completely drained and sanitized before being refilled after their first visit.

The sea side of the house is dominated by the library cum entertaining room which overlooks the greensward and down onto the beach and the Atlantic. And of course there is Rick's study, his sanctuary nestled away along with the now revealed fireman's pole. That is a whole discover for later as Rick guides her straight past the door.

Opposite on the landward side is a sitting room and the formal dining room. Neither get much traffic and the sitting room is largely bare. Kate recollects Martha talking about the possibility of converting the sitting room into another guest room. It certainly is convenient as there is another bathroom with shower next door to it beside the utility room.

The Southern end now has the converted sun room/gym, plus a utility and laundry room. There is a door from the utility room that leads out to the garden and the short path to the detached three car garage with a loft storage area. The rented Jeep is now parked inside out of sight rather than in the trestle car porch next to the main entrance.

There are no other cars her. Sometime ago Kate had been surprised to find that Rick only owed the Ferrari. All the other cars including the Mercedes he had driven quite a lot this year were rentals or
provided by a car service, mainly Time and Motion. Rick had simply explained that this meant he and his family – which obviously now included the Becketts - could choose the appropriate vehicle for the task. Not to mention, owning cars in New York City was a veritable pain in the butt especially on Manhattan. Kate also knew that it also allowed him to indulge his fascination for the latest gadgets and cool toys without the actual hassle of owning them. Plus it turned out that she was a bigger gearhead than he was. Even her Dad was.

They concluded the tour and found that almost three hours had passed and it was early afternoon.

"Lunch?" Rick prompts as his stomach growls. There is also a slight flinch on his face which Kate picks up.

"Sounds good. And then it's med time for you and a nap. Perhaps after we can go for a walk before dinner."

"Deal." He tries not to scrunch up his face at the prospect of the medication. Whilst he needed the painkillers he doesn't like the symptoms and Kate has learnt that he really detests anything that muddles his mental faculties.

New York, Sunday afternoon.

She wished she couldn't remember the last time she was so nervous standing at a door. But she does. The fact that it was the same door makes it all too real for her. And David who once again stood by her side.

Of course there had been the Chief of Detectives, and Police Chaplin too. They had managed to get the bureaucrats to wait until later. She had been dressed in her Blues. Performing a duty she was bitterly familiar with.

Not this time.

She rings the bell.

And waits patiently.

There is the sound of the latch chain being moved and the door glides open.

"Oh my God, Vicky! And David!"

"Hello Evelyn, may we come in."

"Of course. Please come in."

Once inside and the door closed. Evelyn Montgomery embraced the two, especially lingering with her husband's best friend and former Army comrade.

They settled into the chairs, the tea brewing in the sterling silver heirloom pot before them.

"Without sounding graceless, should you be here?" Evelyn gets straight to the point.

"Maybe, no probably not. But I'm tired of hiding. We're tired of hiding. Even so there is a slight risk and we'll leave at once if you want."
"Nonsense, I didn't invite you in and offer you tea only to throw you out. Not with the best set too."
Evelyn Montgomery counters. "So what brings you here?"

"We felt it was time. In the aftermath of Roy's death it was judged necessary to strictly maintain
the enforced separation.

"Does Tom know you are here?" Evelyn refers to the Chief of Detective's by his first name.

"I did let him know. He just asked that we are careful. Also some of my people know now. The
background at least. "


"They worshipped Roy. But more importantly they supported him. Kept the faith, even at the end.
They deserve to know the truth. It will help them understand."

Montgomery's widow puts down the cup and leans forward fixing both with a stare scarily
reminiscent of her husband. "But why now?" she insists.

"We have news. It's not confirmed and it most certainly isn't public or even a rumour out there. But
it is real and is more than sufficiently important that we wanted to tell you first hand."

"So what is this news you've only just learnt? It concerns Roy doesn't it?"

"All of us really. Roy, your family, myself and David, Tom, and most certainly Kate Beckett and
Richard Castle." This is Captain Victoria Gates of the NYPD speaking.

"A routine background check on a candidate for federal office turned up some irregularities. The
Feds only found new information a few weeks ago. They have been investigating. Specifically the
Attorney General's Special Task force has."

"How do you know this?"

"Tom has a very close relationship with the deputy director of the AG's task force. He was first a
NYPD cop under Tom before joining the Feds. He was also aware of the anti-corruption work Tom
did."

"So if the investigation is local and into a federal politician who does that make it? One of our
congressmen or Senators."

"Bracken." Gates can't help the bitter taste of the man's name on her mouth. "Senator William
Bracken. Potential candidate for the next presidential elections."

Evelyn Montgomery knows the name, and regrettably a little of the man first hand. "So what did
they find?"

"Evidence of financial irregularities relating to campaign finance. That I know for certain. The
investigation has found more but has gone into lock down mode. But Tom does know that it all ties
back to Washington Heights, and the drugs trade and mob versus the gangs around the turn of the
Millennium, and that the investigation is still expanding."

"Kind of clashes with the Senator's man of the people image." Evelyn is immensely composed at
this news. "Roy always kept most of it from me. Said something had gone wrong. He was
compromised. But he never revealed who or what went wrong."
"At the time I was too focused, too selfish, too happy that having his cover blown meant I got my husband back. The real one. Roy certainly seemed to rejoice in it too. Threw himself back into being the best cop he could. Having the Tom, who even though he wasn't yet Chief of D's yet, in his corner helped. Promotions came fast and he made Captain in record time. The others, like yourself Victoria, mainly rose up too."

"But I do remember he had dealings with the then District Attorney Bracken and whatever it was unsettled him. That was when David left the DA's department and moved into teaching." Both the Gate's nod at the reference to the sudden change of career for the former high-flying prosecutor. One made to avoid the ramifications of challenging the aspiring political career of a fellow assistant DA – one William Bracken.

"On the face I of it I was relieved he was going back to being a normal cop. I didn't ask or want to know. Never wanted answers, especially on just who the people were involved. I have enough life experience to know that sometimes it is best to walk away. I certainly know it was a concept Roy spent a lot of time trying to persuade Kate Beckett about."

"He never really succeeded. Got her to put it aside for a while. But I know it frustrated him. He hinted there was more than he couldn't tell her. That he information but not enough to resolve anything except perhaps put her into mortal danger. He never could or would say more, but I knew he had more information. Still he did his best with Kate Beckett and it worked a bit. But nothing really changed until Richard Castle came alone. Somehow he made the difference."

"Well Richard Castle certainly is different." Best Captain's voice.

Evelyn agrees. "Oh yes, Richard Castle is quite the enigma. And quite clearly the best thing that has ever happened for Kate Beckett."

"Oh he is, but she fought it so stubbornly. I would never have believed it, if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes. The loyalty and dedication that man showed."

"I remember when Kate Beckett came over for a BBQ about a month after he started shadowing her. I caught the two – Roy and Kate - on them in a very intense staring match at the end of the yard. They had been discussing something quite loudly over a few beers away from the rest of us. They wouldn't say what it was about and of course those two had been as thick as thieves for some time."

Gate's face must have betrayed her.

"Oh Lord never like that. Roy was like a surrogate father to Kate. "Evelyn shakes her head, smiling. As if!

David laughed at his wife. Who nudged him heavily. "Hey police brutality." He whined. Evelyn carried on with the story regardless.

"Roy told me later. Kate was complaining about the man. The author. Again. Said he was annoying and distracting. Unprofessional."

"Roy simply told her it was his decision and even her best pleading and cajoling couldn't get him to budge. She never tried to threaten or bully Roy like she did to some of the other officers. It was one of the few times I had heard of her almost plead for something. Not in her character to beg though. Still I heard Roy say that he trusted Rick and that he would help."

"So Roy assured her that Richard Castle was a good guy and would be a benefit for them?" Gates
asks, and Evelyn nods.

After keeping quiet so long, David Reynolds's voice is a surprise. "So Roy knew Richard Castle from before then?" David's lawyer mind is keen even if it has been in a classroom for more than a decade.

"Oh yes. Almost ten years before. Roy worked a case and they connected somehow – I never found out what exactly. Over the years they golfed occasionally, more often he persuaded Roy to lose a little at his Gotham Crew poker games. Not so much that you could call them buddies but the friendship was real. He would come with his daughter to visit us sometimes. The age difference with our kids was too much for a friendship between them, but she was always polite and such a smart girl. He was too. Polite and smart. Funny of course. And so handsome. I loved to tease Roy about it. And in all the years I've never heard of Richard Castle asking Roy for anything."

"What not even with permission for shadowing Kate Beckett?"

"No. He initially used his friendship with the mayor, something you may be acquainted with." Evelyn notes archly. "But then Roy already knew and trusted him. Roy never worried about him with Kate. Said he was fiercely protective. I knew there was more to it but he never really said. He made an oblique reference to him being capable of the making the right decisions, the hardest decisions too and the ultimate sacrifice if need be. But never explained that too." Evelyn pauses.

"He was badly affected by Roy's death. I know he felt guilty about it, and he explained how it was partly his fault, but I never believed or blamed him. When we finally got to bury Roy he came. His mother and daughter too. He looked terrible. He had been keeping vigil at the hospital and then working all hours at the Precinct with the other detectives. His mother told me they had made him go home to shower, shave and change clothes for Roy."

She pauses perhaps struggling a little with the memory.

"Then he came to see me some weeks after. Told me about the trust fund he had setup. How Roy's family would be taken care of, how much he'd give anything if, well I'm sure you can guess Victoria." Gates nods.

"He wouldn't say anything to me but I learnt that at the time Kate Beckett had shut him out, and yet here he was still doing all he could for his friends and the NYPD. Then there was the dedication in the book. He called to ask if it was okay. He just wanted to publicly support Roy and pay homage."

"You know Evelyn, it appears I badly misjudged him from the start." Gates admits.

"It's deliberate you know. Give people what they expect. Part of his defensive mechanism. I don't know what it is Roy did for Richard Castle all those years ago but whatever it is the man clearly doesn't believe the debt is repaid. I can only imagine it has something to do with his family."

"He does seem extremely committed to his family. In fact I would say his loyalty to those he gives it to is absolute. None more so than Kate Beckett." Gates observes and then continues. "Roy left me notes about the two of them. I struggled to believe them at first, and well then I thought they were both idiots for ignoring what was right in front of them. They did such a good job. I must admit I was in two minds about how to handle the issue when their relationship came to light."

Evelyn gives a sad little laugh. "You know I went to visit Roy and told him they had finally seen sense. I think he would be happy for them. I get the feeling though that there is much more than a simple love story here. I just hope there isn't a tragedy in there too. Or rather more tragedy."
"I feel the same, and of course I'll deny it to anyone else, but I actually respect the man. He can be
damn annoying, even without trying, but he has become part of the team at the Twelfth. He's one of us in everything but the badge."

David speaks up again after biding his time. "We owe him Vicky's life. That's not a debt or respect that is easily repaid."

Evelyn pushes on with a question to Gates. "So what happens when he returns? He is returning?"

"We hope so. Kate Beckett is being promoted. Of course she'll need to pass the exams but that should be a formality, especially for someone of her talent."

"Good she deserves it. I know she's refused at least one promotion opportunity in Roy's time to stay at the Twelfth and in homicide."

Gates nods. She had been flabbergasted to discover Beckett turned down an offer of a slot in Intelligence as a Lieutenant about three years ago. It was unheard of – both the offer and the rejection. There was a time that she would have taken it like a shot. She made a mental note to raise it with Beckett when she came back.

"With her promotion the plan is they'll spend less time in the field. Hopefully reduce the number of unbelievable situations they get themselves into. And out of somehow."

"Roy always said Rick deserved the luck he had. He had worked hard and earned it. He never said any more than that and Rick nor anyone else would ever explain it."

"Well it almost ran out this time. I'm so glad it didn't. I'm not sure Kate Beckett would have recovered. And the Twelfth, he would leave a mighty hole.

The conversation turns to their children, and soon the three friends are proudly sharing the achievements of their offspring.

All too soon it is time to go.

"Look Evelyn, I know that us coming to you now doesn't make up for our past absences. Whatever the reason."

"It is alright Vicky. I always understood the reasons why and keeping our families safe was the number one priority for both of you. And also Roy and I. I have always been grateful for your friendship and support. Roy made it clear a long time that he and David had agreed to keep their past friendship as low key as possible and out of the view of those that might seek retribution."

"Still it was good to see you. And we will be back in touch. Especially if there are any more developments."

"Vicky, David. Thank you both for coming."

The Hamptons

They had returned from their walk after a short but successful post-lunch nap. Rick has slept undisturbed for two hours before Kate woke him gently and not quite as gently cajoled him out of the house and into the quite pleasant afternoon. There were more people about given the balmy weather and Kate was grateful for Rick's almost automatic acquisition of beanies, scarves and sunglasses for them both before they left the house. Suitably disguised enough to pass casual
examination at a distance they seemingly avoided detection and returned to the house a little tired and chilled.

Kate fixed a simple pasta dish with a tomato sauce, basil and bacon on top of fresh fusilli. Not only was it simple to cook, it also could be eaten one handed which was obviously a requirement for Rick.

As they nursed the last of their food, Kate her wine, and Rick his water – no alcohol with his pain meds – Kate gently broached a question.

"I really enjoyed today Rick." It was so un-Beckett-like, so totally Kate. It caught Rick by momentary surprise but the grin that rose to his face answered her before he spoke.

"Yeah, it was a good day. I think we made progress and learnt a few things." He pauses for a second. "Still I'll admit to being a little nervous about tomorrow and starting rehab up here.

Kate laced her fingers in his left hand and her eyes sought his.

"Together Castle. We'll do this together. Okay?"

"Yeah. Care for another early night Kate. We can watch TV in bed after I've called Alexis."

"Sounds like a plan Rick. After all it is one of my favourite places for you."

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**Columbia Dorms.**

Alexis have given up on any attempt to be upbeat about this. On the other hand she's not going to cry and sulk about it. That's her Dad's domain. At least she won't when there are witnesses. Furthermore, whilst her dad could get away with pouting and even occasionally manly tears, her complexion meant that all was a non-starter. One of the few lessons of any value Meredith had passed on.

"I wish you could stay."

"I don't think you'll miss me too much Alexis." Jane is packed and ready to go.

"Why not?"

"Well you do have real friends here. Plus you take a lot classes. And then there's your family to fill any of the few gaps." Jane looks at Alexis and tilts her head and adds, "Plus you could find a worthy boyfriend, or girlfriend, to compete for your attention too."

Alexis ignores most of that to concentrate on the important thing. "You're my friend too."

"Yes, I would like to think I am. But you're also my client and you don't need me here in my professional capacity anymore. It has been easy protecting you and no one is more grateful than I am that the threat has been ruled out. This is my profession, and I do need to go do my job somewhere else where I am needed Alexis."

Jane takes a breath.

"You're not a child Alexis. You're smart and can handle a lot of things. Personally I'm glad I am not needed here. I like my job but for the clients needing me is not a good thing. You're especially lucky to have all the support and care around you." You don't need me.
"Growing up sucks."

"Not all the time."

"Will you keep in touch?" Alexis struggles to keep her voice level, and the pleading absent.

Jane moves to make sure she is looking at the younger woman directly and has her fully engaged. "I don't know Alexis. Ethics and common sense generally make that not a wise move. I have done so in the past, and generally it has been a mistake."

"But not always." Alexis pounces on the last bit of Jane's statement.

"I'm not one. I won't be a mistake that is." Alexis never shares outside her family, but knows she was surprise for her parents, but 'never a mistake' according to both parents. She believes her dad wholeheartedly, more so than her mom, but it's not something she's ever been uncomfortable about.

"No you're not. And there have been two times that it has been a positive thing. I do hope this might be a third. But you need to understand that this can't be some 'BFF' thing. I have work and other commitments. I will likely drop out of contact for long periods of time."

"That's okay. Any contact is good."

Her phone pings. It's her Dad. "Talking of contact, that's my Dad ringing." She looks at Jane. "You're not going to sneak off when I'm on the phone to my Dad are you?"

"Nope but now that you mention it…..Nah I'll wait to say goodbye." Jane teases.

Alexis flashes a genuine smile at Jane as she swipes her phone screen to answer. "Hey Dad…."

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for the extreme gap. But I've been so busy with work that my characters have not been speaking to me. Hopefully coming to the end of that hump, and I'm hearing their voices again.

Thank you to all of you still with me, or who have joined recently.

If you could take a moment to review I would truly appreciate it.

Coming up next – Chapter 63 'Reality Check'
Reality Check

Chapter Summary

Previously: Rick and Kate are exploring their relationship in the privacy of the Hamptons, meanwhile back in New York…life and events continue onwards….

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Hamptons, Monday

The start of the week dawned early for someone in the Hamptons.

Kate had not been able to stay asleep. Woken early by her own internal - infernal on days like this - alarm clock telling her it was time to rise as most Mondays required. Unwilling to remain under the covers beside a still sleeping Rick, she slipped from the bed and decided it was time for some exercise. Knock the restlessness on the head and help her shed the nervous energy so she could support Rick during what would likely be a trying day. Maybe five miles and some stretching would do it, and she could save the rest for the new gym and working out with Rick later if he was able or rather, allowed to.

Traipsing into the walk-in-robe she quickly located some warmer running gear including a nice lightweight insulated top and quickly shucked her pj's and changed quickly as despite the heating the room there was a definite chill in the air and far cooler than the bed with her own human radiator. With her feet now clad in socks, she left the trainers off for the moment, carrying them in her hand as she stealthed out of the bedroom, pausing and casting a glance at her man, blowing a kiss to her still sleeping partner.

Her phone was in her other hand and she instinctively checked it. No messages – unsurprisingly - as she padded downstairs and headed towards the study. Quickly opening the safe – she had been surprised if not slightly disappointed that the code was not related to any significant date or number like her badge - she first glanced at the holstered Sig P229, and then shaking her head discarding the relatively compact weapon as too large and impractical for her plans, she took a moment more to hunt inside the safe for the smaller still Glock 22 she had been told was here.

She found the nicely compact pistol wedged in behind the cases for the Walther PPK and Colt .45. Just where Rick had said it would probably be. She quickly located two loaded magazines for it. That would be ideal for her run. Her P229 was too bulky for this sort of activity, well comfortably anyway.

There was a music player pouch in her running top that snuggly accepted the spare Glock 22 magazine. Perfect she noted. She slipped her phone in the left pocket and the now loaded pistol in the right and zipped each pocket up. She wouldn't listen to music as the loss of one key sense was not wise if you considered you might be at risk.

On his desk she found a pad and quickly wrote a brief note telling him she had gone for a run and had her phone. She signed off with a simple 'K' and a row of kisses 'XxXxX'. This was not something she did, or him for that matter. Or rather had done up to now. They had either been
together and not needed the communication or somehow felt there was too much chance of discovery whilst they were endeavouring to keep things between them private. So the option to do this now sends a frisson of excitement through her, not least because she knows how significant it is to Rick. If she gets excited, his reaction is sure to be even more priceless. She smiles, promising herself – and him - she'll keep finding ways to bring that joy and spark to his life.

Satisfied she padded back upstairs, pausing only to drop her trainers at the bottom of the impressive staircase, and into their bedroom. She stills, taking another moment to pause at the door and gaze. Reflect is more appropriate. There was a time when the room and the occupant before her would have sent her fleeing. It was over-the-top in some ways, and could so easily scream bachelor's seduction pad to her formerly suspicious self, and yet in her mind's eye she could easily see their children playing in the huge space and making believe around their parents' bed with Rick acting age appropriate for them.

Sap! She was such a sap these days. Silently moving into the room she placed the note by Rick's phone. He would find it when he woke – if he did actually wake before she got back. His sleep patterns were somewhat mixed so you never could tell at the moment. She had been grateful for another good night but knew enough about recovery to understand that even a couple of good nights did not signify that the trauma was comfortably behind them.

Deciding that she had done enough procrastination, she reversed her course, heading downstairs to grab her running shoes and wandering into the warm kitchen. She pulled a chair out and perched on the edge as she put her shoes on and tied the laces. Locating a door key from the small wooden hooks, she palmed it before exiting out the kitchen door.

Whoa! It was cold. Time to get some speed on and generate some heat. She quickly locked the door and slid the key into a tiny zip pocket on her running pants, as she turned towards the beach and sound of the morning tide lapping the shore line.

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**Manhattan. 7.05 am.**

Jim Beckett had risen early and left for work equally early too. The subway carriage was mostly empty with few workers yet inclined to bid farewell to the weekend and commence the working week. For him it was different. Today was different. Today was going to be momentous.

The weekend with Val had certainly been a revelation since her confession that she loved him in front of Kate and Rick on Friday afternoon. The rest of the afternoon had been lost in the aftershock of the moment, so much so that Rosella, the PA he shared with three other associates, had constantly enquired if he was okay. An inquiry she had only ceased when Val turned up at six o'clock and with a wink to the other woman, had refused to let him go home alone, and escorted him out of the building.

Somehow he had been guided to her apartment that night after work where without pause they had both shown exactly what they felt about her words even if he was currently unable to say them out loud. He had received one text from Katie over the weekend and no calls for which he was grateful as he imagined she would hear everything in his voice if they actually spoke. Even now just think about Friday night, Saturday morning, Saturday night (twice) and Sunday morning left him conflicted between blushing and wanting to boast to all comers – after all he wasn't a teenager anymore.

He would admit to being very reticent and almost entirely closed off for most of the years since. Careful and precise with his emotions was a bitter lesson in control after his fall into alcoholism. It had become a crutch and then a shield for him over the years. Not much different than Katie's. But
like her, he had found someone to change that.

He had reluctantly parted ways with Val after Sunday's late brunch. She had kissed him sweetly and told him she understood his need for some time, but informed him in no uncertain terms he was to call to say goodnight at the very least if not update her sooner. He had done both.

After parting from Val he had found himself at the cemetery before he even admitted to himself that he needed to go there. Unbidden memories of drunken forays to that same place had not troubled him for some time. But this was different he hoped. In the beginning maybe not so much so as he found himself confessing all to his wife's headstone. But there was a difference this time. No guilt.

God he missed Johanna. He had been reluctant to begin a relationship with Val because he didn't want to settle for anything less, and be fair to Val, he didn't want to do so as well. She shouldn't have to compromise because of his issues. Turns out love overcomes a hell of a lot of obstacles if you give it the chance.

If pressed he wouldn't be able to articulate how this was different. Just that it was. That despite his past, he now had hope for his own future. Something he had not dared to do for so long, not least because he had parlayed years of guilt for his weakness into profound concerns for their daughter. Now she had her own bright future, having overcome her own walls to embrace a man who clearly loved her as she deserved.

With his concerns for Katie largely assuaged he felt he was able to address a few of his own. After talking it out with Johanna's headstone he had gone back to his apartment and an early night. He was no longer a young man, and two nights of interrupted sleep desperately needed counterbalancing least he fall asleep in the office.

Even now the rhythmic cadence of the subway carriage had eyebrows dropping.

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**The Hamptons.**

Panting, her breath misting the cool air, she sucked in oxygen as she leant by the kitchen door, Kate decided the stretching could wait till later. The five miles – as measured by her phone - had seemed harder – and taken longer - than it should. Admittedly running some of the distance on sand is more taxing than road running but she was fitter than this. She resolved to improve her times and get back to where she was before he boyfriend made missing morning runs too damn attractive. Something she had no intention of sharing with him.

Taking the door key from a small breast pocket of her running top, she unlocked the kitchen door and crept into the kitchen, entirely focused on quietly closing the door behind her.

"Morning Beckett."

Shit! Her heart bounced up to her throat.

She spun to face her boyfriend. Dressed in track pants and baggy sports top, he had seemingly showered but not shaved, and was now wearing a cook's apron with the words 'Food to Die for' in dripping blood on it. Worse still, he had that shit eating grin too.

She was so busted. But no way was she giving that up. Taking a breath, she greeted him. "Good Morning Rick. I see you found the note."

"Hmmm, I did but I missed our good morning routine." He didn't even pout, not even a little as she
strode towards him putting a little exaggerated hip roll into her action, his eyes automatically drawn to her waist line.

"Fixing that now aren't I?" She mumbled into his mouth as she wrapped her arms around him and kissed him.

Stepping back she unzipped the pocket with the Glock 22 and placed the pistol on the bench along with the spare magazine she retrieved from her running top.

"I see you found the Glock."

"Yeah it was hidden behind the other pistol cases in the safe, right up in the corner. No wonder I didn't see it before. How many mags should there be for it?"

"There were two loaded in the downstairs safe and two more empty in the gun safe upstairs with the other Glock."

"Okay. I took this" she waved her hand at the compact semi-automatic "As it was smaller and fitted my pocket better."

"I didn't ask. But thank you for the explanation." He looked at her, tilting his head in contemplation. "How far did you run Beckett?"

"Five." Time to come clean. "It wasn't quick Rick. I need to put some serious work in or I'll really be off the pace when I go back." The last was never in doubt, nor is the extremely – bordering unreasonably so – high bar she set herself. No one was a harder task master than her.

"Whose pace, Kate?" He looks at her, almost sternly. "NYPD policies and you job don't need you to run 5 miles each day."

"Maybe they don't but I do Rick." Her voice is quiet, measured but resolute. The rest of the explanation and justification remains unsaid. She thrives in a male orientated environment, one whose members had not always ceded membership let alone leadership and premiership if not outright dominance lightly or willing.

"Most of the male homicide detectives couldn't run past the donut shop." He scoffs. She almost joined him, especially as she had him in the at risk category for that vice. Although he would always lose to Kevin Ryan who managed to inhale donuts without any impact to his waist line.

"Not the point." She admonished. "And you know that." And then looking at the breakfast spread he must have created almost one handed, she sighed. "Plus with the amount of food you try to force into me I need to exercise more."

Case in point was right before her. There was still steaming scrambled eggs with salmon, toasted bagels, cream cheese, coffee – still steaming too - and orange juice. "Looks good Babe." She allows before she then fixed him with a stare, "How did you make this with one hand?" The unanswered extension of the question regarding restricting use of his shoulder didn't get missed by the man who flinches slightly.

"I coped." He was strangely evasive. Well maybe not so strangely, as Kate knew that tell too well. The slight look away and the eyes that didn't hold. She brushed past him and checked out the dishwasher and then the rubbish bin. There were far too many dishes, not to mention the broken mixing bowl in the bin. She turns to him and he caves before she can even summon a passable interrogation glare.
"Okay so it took a little while, and some corrections but I did it." Then for good measure he added. "And I didn't move my shoulder beyond what we've been told was okay. I was careful Kate." He doesn't pout but his expression is a tad mournful. "I don't want to be like this for longer than I have to."

She wanted to caution him, to urge him to protect his shoulder, but what he did was so sweet and he needed the encouragement. To feel useful. "Okay. Thank you for breakfast, it is a lovely though. But remember what we've been told about you taking it slow."

"Yes Dear."

"Okay Rick you can cut the act." She glowers at him a little. "You did good Babe." She slides onto one of the stools and nods to the one opposite her for him to sit too. "I'll eat now and shower in a bit. We've got a bit of time before our visitors arrive."

**Office of William H Bracken, Senator (j) for New York, Capitol Hill, Washington DC**

Matthew Weston could hear the sharp words being exchanged, muted but still audible through the door to the Senator's inner office. The man inside with him was one of the few who would dare raise his voice, and the fact he did so rarely did so previous, but today had been right from the beginning was all the more chilling.

The Senator had arrived at his office earlier than usual that Monday morning. Usually some residual goodwill from a weekend away from The Hill lasted until lunchtime. Today nothing. A brusque demand for breakfast immediately on arrival signalled that his regular standing breakfast with the rump of his party's key power brokers was seemingly cancelled. Or at least his invitation uncertain if not revoked. Possibly permanently. Certainly sufficiently so that his attitude to his long suffering aide was undeniably abrupt and almost hostile. Matthew traded valuable kudos with a nearby hotel concierge to have breakfast in front of his boss inside fifteen minutes but even that exemplary action had been wasted on William Bracken's foul mood. One which would be infinitely worse once his noisy visitor departed.

The end game approached and Matthew momentarily pondered what his fate would be. Of course it was nothing more than wishful thinking as his position as the Senator's aide meant he held too many secrets for the comfort of the men inside that office. Escape was seemingly impossible and survival merely a chance, one he was not yet able to envisage as William H Bracken's life unravelled at an increasing pace and the maelstrom began to drag all those around him under too.

Still there was nothing official but the rumours swept the Hill anyway, and with them came the first whispers tales of Department of Justice investigators in New York. Then more - the FBI were involved along with financial and banking regulators in New York. Soon the entire Hill was awash with supposition, suspicion and the first snaking shadows of the tendrils of scandal.

It took much less than this for the media sharks to start circling. And course things were now running their course as the residents of the Capitol reacted as ever – everyman (and handful of women) for themselves. Over the weekend, the senior senator for New York had made a very public display of appearing at his regular functions on Sunday and again this morning with extra press, as did a number of New York congressmen, considerably narrowing the field of potential candidates or suspects depending on your viewpoint. Considerably absent from public view was the junior Senator from New York. The same man whose incandescent rage he would be facing when the visitor left.

A frenzy was in the making, and his boss was in the middle. His staff too.
The strident tones ceased, and it was mere seconds before the door opened.

"Matthew."

The was no nicety in the tone. Just cold steel and absolute menace. The speaker had not even bothered to dress it up for show.

"Sir." Limiting himself to the shortest possible phrases Matthew wills himself to look the man in the face even as he keeps the fear masked behind a pleasant smile. Today James Court looked everything like the infamous brutal fixer, and nothing like the suave Capitol Hill insider.

The unwavering gaze doesn't bother to question, simply intimidate. "The Senator is going to need his team of loyal staff to be steadfast and unquestionably faithful during the coming days. The repercussions", the pause and his mouth curves almost in rictus, just a hint of fang before he continues, "the repercussions would be considerable."

"I understand."

"Good. I knew you would." The man's hand doesn't so much as settle on his shoulder as seize it and the sensation is all too uncomfortable before he adds, "How is you brother?"

Matthew knows full well the barely hidden threat behind the question.

"Still unwell. He struggles to recover from chest infections." There was no point in lying. They knew everything. It was their primary lever on him. What kept him loyal?

"You should visit sometime. Check up on him. I know he loves it when 'Matty' comes to visit." The extra confirmation of the extent of their monitoring of him isn't necessary but is not unexpected and this time he can't trust himself to speak, limiting his response to a simple inclination of the head. Affirmation or submission. The feral grin that greets it doesn't seem to care.

"I'll be back this afternoon around four pm. Keep a spot open." Matthew simply nodded, holding his tongue and not mentioning the Senator's usual four o'clock staff meeting. Not so idly Matthew wondered how many of the staff would turn up.

With that the man departs through the outer office door just as Mary Kniff – one of the secretaries – arrives back in the office from an errand. James Court barely spares her a glance and yet she blanches and scrambles out of the way.

The office door remained open and before he could shut it, the Senator's voice requires his presence. So it begins again.

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**The Hamptons.**

The Bellevue rehabilitation coordinator, Terry O'Connell, had recommended a good physiotherapist to run his rehabilitation up in the Hamptons. Robert Aves was a former paramedic and army reservist with a good background in gunshot wound and sports rehabilitation. They had made the appointment before coming up here.

Sure enough on the dot of Ten thirty, Kate opened the door to the compact but fit looking man in his mid-fifties, and after their own brief introduction led him into the large, warm kitchen space where Rick was waiting.

More introductions and a brief chat followed.
Rick liked the man already. He was down-to-earth with an edge of dark humour that no doubt stood him in good stead with many of his clients, especially if they were military or police where dark humour was a necessary self-preservation mechanism.

"Okay Rick, let's go through your assessment. I believe you've got a training area setup. Lead the way please."

He had been right. Just forty minutes later Rick was sure he no longer liked the man quite as much as did earlier as they – or rather he – staggered back into the now too warm kitchen.

Kate passed him another bottle of water whilst Robert sat at the kitchen table and completed his notes. A minute later he began.

"Look Rick, I'll be blunt."

"Please." There is a touch of resignation to the tone, but something else. Determination. Stubbornness. Martha had warned Kate early on – well after they had finally got together – that beneath his easy going shell was a surprisingly driven person and to prepare herself. Stubborn beyond rationality on occasion his mother had added and cautioned her that when it happened it tended to be entirely non-negotiable. Kate knew this first hand from their dreadful fight over secrets at her apartment. But that was the past and so for her part Kate had simply told Martha she loved him anyway and in all ways, leaving the woman completely stunned and Kate to walk away with a confident grin in the certainty that she had her one and done.

"You're doing too much. And even though your arm is strapped pretty well, you're not helping the recovery as much as you could. It is almost impossible to completely isolate the shoulder and even walking triggers instinctive and automatic muscle actions that include your shoulders. Other activities simply inhibit and in a lot of cases can wind back recovery."

"So what are you saying?" Rick pushes seeking clarity.

The man nods. "At least one week's heavily restricted activity. With minimal use of that whole right shoulder area. Or there will be more delays and possible issues with your recovery."

"Bummer."

"Better now than later Rick." He assures his patient. "Think of it as the start of your recuperation, not a setback, okay?"

Rick's acknowledgement is a tight nod that doesn't reach his face or eyes.

Kate chooses to join the conversation. "So what can he do?" Her question is as much to break the mood as discover the possible or the least harmful.

"Walks and by which I mean gentle strolls on up to 30 minutes twice a day, or one of an hour so long as he takes it very easy."

"I would love to tell you no use of the right hand or arm but you're a righty, and it's too damn impossible to shut down more than forty years of instinct and automation." Rick's right fist clenches in response but he does a good job of isolating the effort to the end of his arm. Or at least he feels he does.

"Case in point." Robert indicates the fist. "You've done a good job with the bandage and support. Keep the shoulder strapped up as much as possible. It is too early for the skin to be exposed for
more than dressing changes. Also too soon for it go get wet, especially with hot water from a shower. The heat and water pressure will both evoke pretty intense sensations if you do. Sunshine would be the same but I think that short of a sudden Caribbean holiday you're safe for that one for the moment.

"Another week and we should be able to begin with gentle exercises for your shoulder. I would cancel any plans for personal training for the next few weeks. No real point until we have your shoulder in a more positive and receptive state."

"Okay." Rick acknowledges not the least self-aware that the last thirty odd minutes had taxed him and they hadn't really done anything except stretch and

"Look in general you're not in bad shape. You've got a good muscle base but your core strength and cardiovascular endurance is well below a desirable level. You're carrying too much weight, a good twenty plus pounds. We can't do much about the conditioning in the short term but I am going to have a dietician make some recommendations and send them to you."

Kate takes that one before Rick can answer. "That's fine. I've been waging a slow campaign to change a few of his bad habits."

'At Rick's scowl to both those statements, Robert continues on. "Look Rick you're in your forties, and this is a danger zone for males. Real easy to slip on long-term weight. If we can improve you exercise and tweak your diet, we can do a lot more for you long-term."

"Okay." Rick's response screams resentment and a touch of petulance. Kate won't pull him up on it here. She can remember her own tantrums and dramas during her rehabilitation. They hadn't been wrong when they said it would be a year before she was back to near a hundred percent fitness. She had got there and she almost blushed in recollection of just how she had demonstrated that peak fitness that first night with him.

Turns out Robert is not so reticent to engage the author head on. "Look Rick, you've got what, a decade on Kate?" He doesn't wait for an answer from either. "The reality is that men die younger. For lots of reasons. You can influence some of the major ones directly. I'll leave it in your court."

Robert rises and reaches out to shake Kate's hand and when complete then turns to Rick. "Same time next week. Remember to keep that shoulder isolated as much as you can. Keep up the walks and get busy. I'll see you next week Rick." This time Robert's left hand is extended and Rick shakes it and give a genuine if restrained smile.

"Thanks Robert. Just bear with me. This is a lot to take in and I'm at liberty of acting a little like a child for a bit."

"Not a problem Rick, I don't think you're anywhere near one of my problem patients."

Kate bites her tongue and merely stands beside the physiotherapist before speaking. "I'll see you out."

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**Offices of RCE, Manhattan.**

It had been a hectic morning – especially for a Monday - and the small RCE team had wanted nothing more for the lunch break to give them a lull in the constant stream of phone calls and emails. Life at RCE was normally pretty laid back and calm. Today most certainly wasn't that. Most of their frenetic activity was of course related to the University Heights project. There was
nothing official yet from either the City Council or the banks regarding their cascading decisions around the rumoured awarding of the development plan to the rival consortium. Still their sources were reliable and both lawyers and Harry were in mutual agreement that it was only a matter of time before the pin was pulled. Having exhausted legal duties for the moment both Steve and Suzanne had headed off to different meetings. Their small law firm had clients other than RCE and Richard Castle.

Pushing contingency plans and alternate scenarios aside briefly, RCE's erstwhile Operations Manager was nursing his third coffee of the day hoping for a break. However, the sound of footsteps had Harry Dove looking up from the comfortable chair in the communal open area he had just sunk bonelessly into only moments ago. Summoning his innate nice guy he schooled his face in what he hoped was a polite mask and looked at the new arrival.

The guy was tall, over six foot. The face showed a healthy exposure to the outdoors, the hair neat if a little long for a straight business man. But it was the clothes that gave it away. Nice suit but he didn't look entirely comfortable in it. Not his everyday attire, or at least not until recently.

"Can I help you?" Harry is pleased he managed to keep his voice so level.

"I hope so." The stranger stepped forward, pausing a few steps short of Harry's chair.

"Are you Harry Dove?"

"Yes, I am." Harry left the 'and you are?' in his tone but didn't voice it.

"Um. Look this is going sound and possibly be awkward." Wow the dude failed at introductions.

The much taller man shook his head in exasperation – but at whose Harry didn't know - and then stepped back a little, looking somewhat abashed.

He stuck his right hand forward, and Harry rose slowly the comfortable chair reluctantly releasing him and swapping his coffee into his left hand before reaching out to match the greeting, and the man finally got his name out.

"I'm Josh Davidson." The taller man announces.

"Figured you might be." Harry's not going to give the man anything. He'll have to work for it.

"Umm, this is somewhat embarrassing but I'm here because I want to fix a mistake I made." The doctor takes a breath before continuing. "I've been out with your sister." He pauses but Harry is giving him nothing to work with. "Beatrice." The Doctor clarifies and Harry lets it slide, no need to expand that he only has one sibling.

"Just the once but I'd like to do so again. But I made a mistake - a bad one - and I'm trying to fix it. But she won't return my calls."

Harry sighed. He was not big on confrontation. But this idiot had hurt his sister and he would always be on her side, so he let loose just a little.

"Why? You refused to see her a week ago and rejected her numerous calls." Let the idiot know that he knew.

"Look, we went out and had a good time. We both ride. But then later I was an idiot. Something got to me, reminders – well I was hung up on a past I was never going to have. I let it get to me, and I hurt your sister. It was never my intention. And I know saying it was irrational, and not intentional
even, is not likely to get me any prizes but it was." Another breath, longer this time. "The truth is I
like your sister. A lot."

The doctor comes to a halt. Maybe repaying the monologue in his head. Harry takes a little pity on
him. But only a little. This doofus hurt his sister.

"I do know about this. Also I know about you and Detective Beckett. So I need you to know on
whose side I am." Not yours was all too apparent. To both of them.

"I can understand that." The doctor concedes.

"So why are you here?" Harry pushes. "My sister isn't here."

The man doesn't answer the question directly. Instead begins one of his own. "I believe you may
know my sister? Charlotte. Well she knows Beatrice and well Charlotte was very blunt about my
failings and that I should correct them."

"Yes I know 'Lotte. We had a couple of classes together at college and have stayed in touch mainly
through my sister but also professionally." Harry concedes.

"Yeah, well she rightly called me out on my bad behaviour." He corrects himself. "Unacceptable."

Harry still isn't in the mood to let him off lightly. "Telling me you sister sent you, well, that doesn't
exactly garner kudos."

"Sorry, that wasn't what I meant. Charlotte knows Beatrice and you. And me obviously. Still she
didn't tell me how to fix it. That's down to me. So I'm trying. I wasn't going to go to her office and
disrupt her workplace. That would be crass and could affect her professionally." At least he had
some consideration for Beatrice.

"I came here on what was, I hoped, you lunch break." Harry actually concedes that the guy seems
genuine and was obviously willing to sacrifice his pride and reputation to try and repair things.

"Could you please give Beatrice this?" He pulls an envelope from his right inside pocket. "I know
she'll not speak to me. Hopefully this...well...I'd like her to look at it.

"I'll ask." No promises. "Her decision entirely." He clarifies.

"Thanks. I appreciate that this is awkward for you." He runs a hand through his hair. "Anyway, it
was nice to have met you. I can't believe we've never been introduced given how many years
you've known my sister. And Beatrice too."

With that the tall doctor takes his leave and Harry sinks back into the seat holding the envelope.

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**Twelfth Precinct.**

Victoria Gates watched the bullpen hum along quietly. Mostly. The new influx were still finding
their feet and causing a few missteps in the established routines.

Karpowski and her reinforced team – Garber and Walls from the Forty-third in the Bronx - were
busy working through their one open case, and her other team – she had to force herself not to label
it 'Beckett's' – were rostered off today. They would be back on with their temporary levees to
reinforce the Precinct starting tomorrow. That one would be more awkward with the Twelfth's own
detectives being subordinate to the interlopers. Still she was confident Esposito and Ryan would
step up and accommodate their temporary team mates and superiors.

Pulling her attention back to her desk and the plain two manila folders stack there, she contemplated the contents of said folders. Roy's own personal files had been delivered just this morning direct from the Chief of Detectives. Tom had not explained how he came to be holding them and she chose not to ask.

Pushing her reading glasses back on her nose, she looked down at the one particular file. It was related to a series of unsolved murders in and around Washington Heights dating back to the early to late nineties and culminating with the murders of Joanna Beckett and her two colleagues.

However this wasn't a case file. This was an intelligence summary report from June 2000. The NYPD had long operated a large and sweeping intelligence unit that often more resembled a think tank than an outright surveillance operation. This report was a classic case in point. There was no authors listed nor any official NYPD references. She doubted it even existed anywhere outside of this printed copy – or perhaps one other somewhere secure. Reviewing the contents gave reason as to why this would be the case. Compiled from multiple sources it was never intended for use in a prosecution and contained much which would be inadmissible in a court of law, or even in police records under current regulations. But what it did contain was compelling.

There were no smoking guns but lots of circumstantial evidence and hearsay pointing to the central involvement of Vulcan Simmonds in the distribution of drugs, intimidation, and ultimately murder to protect the first. Murders that included Beckett's own mother and the reason for her career choice. Unwritten throughout was the undeniable fact that the blatantly obvious suspect was being protected by multiple parties as he expanded out of Washington Heights and across Manhattan.

What was also clear was that he was able to do step into a void created by the successful prosecution and disruption to operations of four major crime families starting from the early nineties. Prosecutions led by the then District Attorney and now Senator William H Bracken. The very success story that got him elected to the Senate. Of course there was no evidence that he was doing anything other than his job, but she wasn't that naïve.

What was even scarier was the ballpark figures in the report and extrapolated out on a single piece of paper (in Tom's handwriting she noted). This operation in question had been running largely unimpeded for over a decade and a half and had fanned out from Washington Heights to cover most of Manhattan before seemingly reaching a natural limit and stopping.

The money involved was staggering. She knew by heart the drug figures for her city. How in New York City alone experts conservatively estimated that at least one percent of the population – eighty thousand plus - spends an average of two hundred dollars a week on illicit drugs. That alone would amount to sixteen million dollars a week or eight hundred and thirty-two million a year. These were conservative estimated and did not account for ancillary criminal activity nor anything outside of the city.

The intelligence report stated that the shadowy organisation built up around Vulcan Simmonds controlled close to twenty-five per cent of the New York market by 1999, and had consolidated that in the decade plus since. Using that information Gates concluded that the estimated total income stream for that syndicate to date (2012) was in excess of two billion dollars with a 'profit' margin of around twenty-five percent. That was half-a-billion dollars and yet Vulcan Simmonds had nowhere close to that wealth. He was a front for someone else. Someone who was clearly able to clean and hide the money.

Worse drug money was so pervasively integrated into the legitimate economy that some analysts actually included elements in their calculations and reports. There were in effect established interest
rates and charges for money laundering – roughly ten per cent overall - which not only hid the source but some tightly entwined the dirty money into the mainstream economy it couldn't be detected except in rare cases.

Legalisation might pick away at the edge of the criminality but the money involved was too great to reverse the intrinsic nature of human greed and the misery that it sowed. Still that debate was above her pay grade, and was one she was happy to dodge. Roy had been right. This was a war they weren't ever going to win. Only some of the battles and maybe then if you were lucky choosing a time and a place to make your stand. And you who stood with you.

She wondered where the money was now.

Who controlled it and what their plans were?

There was a massive war chest. More than enough to buy public office. Oh Shit! More than enough to buy to the highest office in the land? Bracken! His hinted at presidential ambitions.

What the hell was Beckett and Castle caught up in?

All of a sudden the exact nature of their predicament

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**The Hamptons**

The weather was unlike the preceding day and had closed in with grey clouds and light rain that had come on since the morning. Despite the persistent drizzle they went for a walk.

It was the only sanctioned exercise permitted and Rick felt the need to get out of the house. Kate had slipped the Sig P229 on her hip holster before they left the house. Unlike for the morning run she could easily conceal the bulk under her waterproof jacket.

The good news was that the rain kept pretty much anyone else away, that and the start of the working week. The bad news was that it was quite miserable on the beach front, exposed to the ocean breeze and the falling rain.

Not far from the house, Rick muttered something about 'mad dogs and Englishmen'.

"Yeah but that was the noon-day sun Rick. Not much of that about?" Kate responds. He jerks in surprise, clearly not aware he had vocalised those thoughts.

"I figure this is truer to life though. It rains a lot in England." She adds.

"I don't know Beckett. You got firsthand experience?" Rick queries.

"Yeah – trip to London with my parents when I was fifteen. Got to experience the **glorious** British summer. Thank God for museums, galleries and tea shops." There is a moment when she is lost in reflection of days past before she turns the question on him. "What about you Rick?"

"Couple of book tours over the years but never enough time with those." The statement is left unexpanded as it terminates with a sudden grimace. "Kyra fled to London. I never followed and in the years since, I never felt the desire to see much of it. Always wanted to go elsewhere rather than relive memories of a lost chance when there wasn't one."

She squeezed his hand tight and took the opportunity to draw their slow walk to a halt so she could kiss his cool, damp cheek, and then brush her lips over his. No words, just her presence. He had
done as much, and more, for her. She would happily reciprocate.

He takes a moment more to blink it away but then adds, "But I would love to visit with you Kate. Make it ours. Our memories. Together. Give me a chance and we'll fill the visa pages so quickly I'll have us needing new passports before you know it."

She laughs with him. Enjoying his good humour. Plus she'd love that. She's not ready to give away her job – can't even imagine that yet except in some dreams about an expanded family – but she'll go travelling with him. Use some of that leave she has – and their money - exploring new places and re-discovering old places with him. Then in the future, there will be places to go with their family. She wants this and so much more and so she tells him so.

"Sounds almost perfect Rick. I look forward to it. "

"It does?" He can't help the surprise in his voice. Even after six months, years of waiting for 'them' has eaten away at his innate confidence, and she hates this.

"Absolutely. All in and without geographical restrictions."

"Good to know." Rick looks more certain and she feels the palpable relief.

"So where would we go first Rick?" She asks as she tugs his left hand and gets them moving, even if only at an ambling pace.

"Well Kate." She loves how their first names trip almost automatically from their tongues. She loves Castle and Beckett, but Rick and Kate trumps everything. "I think we should start small."

"Sure?" She questions him. "Rick Castle starting small?!" She mocks gently.

"Hush now woman." He chides although it loses almost all of its own gentle bite in the face of her arched eyebrows. She swears he mutters 'witchy woman' under his breath before continuing. "Short breaks, three maybe four days away, somewhere we can get too without attracting attention, probably drive, off the beaten track so no press, just us and some charming natives."

"Actually that doesn't sound too bad at all Rick." She admits. Definite potential. She has a few ideas of her own too. And short trips away would be ideal to break up the long stay here in the Hamptons and give some respite from the rehabilitation. God knows she could have done with escaping from her entirely self-imposed isolation at her Dad's cabin after her shooting. Except of course she knows now that she wasn't entirely alone out there in the woods with Taylor Matthews protecting her at Rick behest. They walk on lost in conversations about their future, suddenly the inclement weather less of a concern.

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**Department of Justice, Washington DC.**

The day had been a whirlwind of human resources, introductions, paperwork, and then all too quickly sequestered again with the Bracken investigation.

By some as yet unknown miracle news had not yet broken although rumours were doing the rounds of the Capitol and Federal DC. It was only a matter of time before the news organisations began sniffing and then digging. Word was the AG had called in a couple of long-held personal favours to keep a temporary lid on the story.
For his part, Will Sorenson was beginning to wonder what he had gotten into. The whole day had been a never ending stream of faces and words culminating in near interrogation levels of questioning from what seemed like a continuous stream of suits who never seemed happy with the answers.

Someone had kindly grabbed him a cheese and salad sandwich, an apple and some colored soda of indeterminate flavour. All of which had partially revived his when he had finally emerged back into his new office almost entirely wrung out. As he slouched in the break room trying to summon the energy to make a coffee, he didn't even know if he had a desk. His only real contact was McCord and she had disappeared somewhere shortly before lunch.

One half-hearted coffee later he emerged from the break room to find Rachael McCord back in the office, and seemingly just parting company from their immediate boss, Villante, he recalls the man's name. Will decided to take a chance.

"Hey McCord you got a few minutes?"

"Sure Sorenson." She nods towards a secure booth and ushers him inside.

The door has barely shut and she fires off. "Shoot."

Will barely has time to order his thoughts but starts with the obvious question that had been at the forefront of his mind since he saw the updated brief just an hour ago.

"Why are Kate Beckett and Richard Castle persons of Interest?"

McCord answers directly.

"I've been advised that Senator Bracken is the suspected of being the prime mover behind a series of major crimes that may be related the murder of Detective Beckett's mother in 1999 and the near fatal shooting of Detective Beckett eighteen months ago."

Will was not expecting this, and it takes him a few precious seconds to recover.

"Are you saying Bracken?!...Bracken had Kate's mom killed?!"

"According to our information sources, yes." McCord beckons the clearly agitated former FBI agent and former boyfriend to sit.

"Look take some time and read through the information in full, I'll make it available to you but you'll need to read it from one of the secure terminals like the one in here."

McCord reaches over and swipes her ID pass through a card reader. The screen illuminates and requests a challenge passphrase which McCord rapidly enters.

McCord quickly summarised where they were at.

Their initial investigations into Bracken has started with the campaign finances, but rapidly expanded into other areas as the lines of enquires grew. In fact they were still fanning out to spread across a wide range of criminal activities. Money laundering, intimidation, blackmail and two piece-de-la-resistance – distribution of class a narcotics and multiple homicides. There were also possible allegations of illegal weapons distribution and breach of national security laws. The last two McCord explained.
How one of the fragments they discovered last week had triggered a flag related to an FBI agent's death.

How the NYPD had been largely uncooperative in assisting with the investigation into the death of an undercover FBI agent - Bob Armen. This in itself was not entirely unusual given the rivalries of the time. But still it was disappointing but ultimately a known mobster had gone to jail for the crime.

Fast forward a few years and Kate's mother - a successful attorney and staunch civil rights activist - had been investigating an appeal on behalf of Victor Pulgatti - the mobster jailed for the murder. Her investigations had progressed quite far including interviewing the prosecution team. The assistant DA on the original case was William Bracken. Yet there was no recorded contact between the two. This was a massive flag. Someone of Johanna Beckett's expertise would not have failed to request, or even subpoena an interview. That gap was unanswered for the moment. But it was worthy of a follow up Will thinks.

Moving ahead to now there were serious questions emerging about Bracken's campaign finances all the way back to his original campaigns for the DA's office in New York. Where did the funds for Bracken's campaigns come from? He had parlayed his kudos for jailing lots of mobsters into a media profile but he was still a public servant with no family money after his father's bankruptcy.

The FBI New York office for Organised Crime reported that several smaller mob families were untouched by Bracken's crusade. Notable suspicion that fell on the Silva family to exploit the gaps in the market along with a new wave of black crime lords including a mid-level drug dealer named Vulcan Simmonds that had risen to prominence in Washington Heights but had somehow avoided arrest and had successfully built effective control of close to a quarter of the narcotics trade in Manhattan.

The report pretty much dead-ended there. There were notes of close ties between Bracken associates and several business men suspected of being involved in money laundering but nothing concrete.

Putting that file aside he skims through Kate Beckett's file. Sure enough just as McCord had mentioned there was an evaluation report on her suitability for a role with the AG's team. She had stellar scores across most categories until it came to two areas – public profile, and fit.

The first clearly indicated concerns about her relationship with Richard Castle, one that was now truly public. The second had Will perplexed.

"What does 'fit' refer to McCord?"

"Ah. I wondered when that was going to come up. I guess it is the coded way of referring to whether candidates would be able to accept the compromises we sometimes have to make in this job. I'd be misrepresenting it if I said 'for the greater good', but the reality is that sometimes we don't get to do the just and fair thing."

"And she failed that assessment?" McCord only nods in answer. Will thinks for a second. "Fair. I think that is probably accurate. Kate Beckett is too honest, too committed to the notion of justice. It is what drives her, fuels her immense talents." He remembers Kate telling him of sharing her mother's commitment for the truth. But that feels too personal to reveal to McCord. He was lucky to have been able to share part of her life even if only for six months so long ago.

"Plus" McCord adds, "We would never have considered you if Kate Beckett was already an agent or on our radar. How awkward would that have been?"
He figures he should look at Richard Castle's file. The first surprise is that it is larger than Kate Beckett's.

Typically for law enforcement, all the mutual events with his partner and her team is repeated in his file but then there is more that pre-dates his involvement with the NYPD.

Richard Castle has a CIA security clearance (redacted) and even a codename (redacted). He frowns. He was hoping they would have less security restrictions.

He shadowed an agent (redacted). Clearance given for some references to be included in the Derrick Storm novels.

Later with Kate Beckett he is involved in some form of national security event (redacted) involving the DHS but it too is classified. There is a further CIA incident referenced but that too is redacted.

Will gives in to the nagging question. "Hey McCord, I thought you said we had fairly unrestricted access to information?"

The senior is remarkably straight faced as she responds. "Did I say that? I think you'll find I was implying it was better than the vanilla FBI." She looked over his shoulder. "Yeah, well you weren't expecting the CIA to play nice and share were you?"

The look on his face says maybe he did. McCord decided it was time for a gentle reality check.

"Look Will, whilst we do have additional authority and power, and we do have greater access to information, in the scheme of things we are still foot soldiers. Probably the Praetorian Guard equivalence but that's it."

"I do get that. You alluded to it in your recruitment speech. Still surely sharing information would help."

"Possibly, but they won't except in rare circumstances so best get used to it, so it won't be an issue down the track." She taps his shoulder before continuing. "Look Will, I'll leave you to it. I'll be at my desk when you're done. Just hit the lock terminal icon and it will take care of the rest."

With McCord gone Will settles in and decides to go through the Bracken case files from top to tale. The other teams participating in the investigation are adding more detail but there are still gaps and an absence of real evidence for a lot of charges. The man has obviously devoted a lot of energy and resources to keeping his secrets safe.

Then he starts back on Richard Castle again. This time in detail.

The more he read, the more he realised just how wrong he was in his original and second assessments of the author. What a reality check. He was rarely so wrong in his judgement of people. It clearly didn't help that the author's public persona as some over privileged playboy author was so prevalent.

He had been to an awful lot of schools but had earned scholarships at quite a few. Got a place and a partial scholarship to study Literature at NYU. Whilst there he also entered a scholarship program with the Army Reserve Officer Training Corps for New York City but exited after approximately twenty months. There is minimal information about his brief military engagement, and certainly no adverse findings. Good scores for marksmanship and initiative. Good attendance record.
membership terminated by mutual agreement and the army scholarship funds repaid in full. Graduates NYU with a good degree and two novels already published. Both of which have done well and he's a bestseller and his career is off and running fuelled by at least two books a year for the next decade before he slows down to one a year with his hugely successful Derrick Storm series.

After graduating he is involved in a sea rescue – no fatalities - in Florida. Shortly after that he marries and his soon to be first ex-wife have a daughter but get a quickie divorce less than two years later. She decamped to California where she has misdemeanour arrests for possession and intoxication and an equally insignificant acting career.

A couple of years later his daughter was kidnapped by rogue mobsters. She was recovered but there is no detail of the rescue or if any ransom was paid. No known law enforcement involvement in the recovery. No press coverage either. The suspects are all found dead in the days that follow. Interestingly the police reports are written by a Lieutenant Roy Montgomery and unequivocally clear Richard Castle of any involvement.

He was the original financial backer for Taylor Matthews which is founded less than twelve months later. Sorenson thinks that maybe there may be a link to the resolution of the daughter's kidnapping. But no confirmation in the records before him. He also founds RCE and from here his wealth starts to grow and a considerably faster rate than his book income.

Clearly there is far more to Richard Castle than meets the eye.

He marries again to his publisher – Gina Cowell – but that marriage too ends in divorce and he hits the playboy circuit once more. But his daughter is never in the reports. He keeps her away from that side of life and the girl is clearly smart – excellent SAT scores and attending Columbia where she won but declined a scholarship. She also interned with the Office of Chief Medical Examiner in New York as well as several non-profits and a law firm.

One of things that is clearly at odds with his public and Page Six persona is his keeping secrets. Sure some of them involve national security and pretty much come with a cast iron obligation and severe penalties if disclosed but there is a lot he does that isn't in the public domain. Aside from a handful of interviews including one with Cosmopolitan there are only the routine crime beat reports that mention his presence in an investigation. He doesn't have his agents spinning coverage of what he does for the NYPD except to promote events that support the NYPD or associated charities or organizations. The summary of his time as first a 'ride along' and then consultant at the Twelfth Precinct clearly indicates he could claim a hell of a lot of credit or at least kudos.

In fact it is not until his recent shooting that his representatives and that now included his girlfriend – Kate Beckett – commented with more than a single sentence about his consultancy with the NYPD. Of course the press had already gone crazy with coverage but that is all on the press not him or his representatives.

Also there is no publicity about his romantic relationship with Kate Beckett until it is revealed after his shooting.

He skims through the information summary from the NYPD until he gets to the evaluation report from his current Captain. Victoria Gates herself has an impressive resume and has done an extended stint in IA which is never popular. Her precinct boasts the highest clearance rate – seventy eight per cent - for homicides in the NYPD and any comparable metropolitan PD. Excluding cold cases, Beckett's team lead the way with a truly staggering eighty-seven per cent compared to the NYPD average forecast to be just fifty-seven per cent for this year (2012), down from sixty-five per cent for 2011. If you add in cold cases, Beckett's strike rate is ninety per cent.
But it is the veteran captain's assessment of her consultant that floors him. Phrases like 'exemplary investigator', 'excellent instincts', 'team player', 'morale booster' and 'loyal and trustworthy' leap from the screen. His partnership with Detective First Class Katherine Beckett is 'unique', 'almost symbiotic' and extremely effective. The final compliment is clearly a departure from the usual carefully measured tone, the Captain states that a number of officers owe their lives to Richard Castle, sometimes repeatedly in the case of Kate Beckett's team, and that Richard Castle is 'one of us' in all but badge.

What makes Castle special? How did he earn other chances? It's not his fame or fortune. Kate never went for any of those things.

If he wants to understand how Richard Castle got the girl perhaps there is a clue there. He turned up, and kept turning up. He appears to have taken breaks – to write? - but he never left her to go to another city. He came back and supported her, not least in her profession. Something Will can admit now he was not always as supportive as he should have been, and even ascribing some of that to the petty inter-service rivalry between the NYPD and FBI, doesn't absolve him of his sometimes negative attitude to her job.

The stuff on Kate was less of a surprise. He had always been impressed by her intelligence and drive, and had originally thought them perfectly matched but perhaps they were too similar. He is surprised too that he still thinks of her as Kate. He knows he blew it – their personal relationship. She was never going to leave New York, nor was she going to give him a second chance. He hadn't just requested her on the kidnapping case because of their past. She was a damn good cop with great instincts and drive, and still it hadn't hurt that she was beautiful too. Even if she was no longer his girlfriend.

What he could do and would do for her – and Richard Castle – was help put William Bracken behind bars and perhaps give her some of that closure she had been seeking for years.

The late afternoon editions are out ready for the mass of commuters heading homeward across Manhattan and greater New York. Of course increasingly the electronic versions play their part on tablets and smart phones.

Hidden away on the inside pages of a number of publications are small neat paragraphs - carefully vetted by lawyers - containing apologies for any insinuations regarding detective Katherine Beckett and Javier Esposito and for the unauthorised and out of context use of stolen NYPD confidential records.

Beesley, Wax and Drummond Lawyers, 5.29 pm.

Jeff Beesley hadn't made in into the office today. 'Outside meetings' his secretary had informed Val and other inquirers. Regardless the working week had begun at the firm with Val and Michael Stevens, one of the recent partners, running the regular Monday morning staff meeting with considerable aplomb and not a little humour leaving their staff far more upbeat than usual.

The day had gone well for most, and Jim Beckett was pleased to find that he was wrapping up the end of day staff meeting for his little team on the dot of five-thirty. His team rise and leave his office, passing Val who is waiting by the door. Rosella is still by his desk waiting for Jim to complete signing paperwork for their client.

"Hey." Her dark red lips swoop in and he can feel his PA's surprise at the open events in front of her. For his part, Jim can't resist rising and catching Val's trim waist before returning the kiss.
"Hello dear." Jim decides to play along. Turning his PA, he adds, "Rosella, why don't you head off home now. We'll complete the paperwork in the morning."

"Thanks. Good night Jim. Good night Val." Rosella takes her leave but not without a significant look at the two.

No sooner than she has passed the doorway, than Jim looks at his lady and with the slightest frown seeks confirmation of her intent. "Val, you realise we just told the firm's biggest gossip we're together?"

"Of course." She looked at him with an expression that clearly indicated it was intentional. "So are you ready to go grab and early bite?" But she wasn't going to discuss that here.

"Sure, although I'm not sure how long I'll last. I seem to be suffering from a lack of sleep. I'm not sure how good a conversationalist I'll be tonight."

"That's alright Jim. Perhaps we can get an early night. Let you catch up on your beauty sleep." She replies archly.

"Not fair. You're not playing fair."

"Oh I know that Honey. But I wasn't sure you wanted me too."

"I'll get my coat and then I'll escort you to your office and we can leave."

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**The Hamptons, 8.05 pm.**

Kate had let him mope long enough after dinner. It was time to intervene. To be there for him, even if he didn't want it. To unwind – if that was even possible – her own mistakes.

He had kept up a 'good show' during the course of the day – they had taken another long walk along the beach - but after a dinner increasingly punctuated by silence and angry cutlery she had let him leave with merely a smile she hope conveyed everything but especially support. He had mumbled something that sounded like it contained 'study' in the mash of barely pronounced syllables.

She let him go and busied herself with cleaning up after dinner, doing the dishes, and inspecting their larder and fridge and adding to the shopping list. They would need to go fetch some supplies. Sure they could order on line but she liked the idea of going shopping together. They had only done it once back in the City, so nearly busted by a fan who spotted Rick, and whose Instagram was only seconds from capturing her locked in his arms. They had ordered in or shopped apart after that. But often not alone. Kate had been surprised to find Alexis or Martha accompanying her on a number of what became expeditions rather than merely necessity shopping. And she had enjoyed every one of them. Martha had wondrous tales with a definite air of preposterousness – no wonder her son was such a talented storyteller – but also a keen sense of taste, even if some of them jarred occasionally – another trait her son had inherited. Alexis on the other hand was earnest and excited, keen to expand her culinary experienced, but just not as far as her Dad. Together they had often managed to derail his culinary creatively in favour of something edible.

So yes shopping together as a couple was definitely on the cards.

After she had completed her shopping lift, she pulled her phone out. A brief round of text pong with Lanie followed, and Kate decided it was time to get things on track.
Heading out of the warmth of the kitchen she wrapped her top closer around her as she hit the chill of the corridor. She knew where he'd be.

She didn't knock, merely squeezed open the door and slipped into his study. It was warmer in here. His discarded top evidence of that. Hers joined his on the floor as she padded silently towards him.

His voice interrupts her journey.

"I tried typing. Ham-fisted is not even the start of it." Everything screamed frustration in his tone. His posture too. Head too elevated, back too straight, tension boiling off him.

She doesn't say anything, simply drapes herself over the back of his chair and carefully wraps her arms around his neck, careful to make no contact with his right shoulder. Her relief is almost absolute when Rick almost absent-mindedly kissed her crossed forearms.

"I'm right handed and so I can't even use a pen and paper."

She kisses the back of his head once more, and remains mute.

"And you can't do it for me Kate. It doesn't work that way. I've tried before. The words don't work, don't come and flow unless I am doing it. I can't explain why, just that my creative process is to instinctive and entirely ingrained after so long I can't find a way to change now."

His delivery is more matter of factual. The frustration bleeding, trickling away, slowly.

She keeps any relief to herself. She's beginning to understand Martha's warning. She wonder how bad her three month shutout of him was. She's certain now that any description probably pales in the light of having actually experienced it. Lived it. Like Martha and Alexis. More apologies and making amends. She doesn't mind it. Another step on their journey.

Their bedroom.

"Kate." He begins.

"Thank you for giving me the time and space."

"No thanks or apology necessary Rick. It's what we do for each other."

"I'm not going to be a great person a lot of the time here. I may even go into my shell."

"Really? I must admit I am kind of curious to see what muted Rick Castle is like"

"Not that quiet, I'll have you know."

"Oh, I'm sure about that."

Kate calms him. "What we need is time. We agreed this. Time Rick is the main thing that is going to help here."

"What about you Beckett?" His use of her surname gives warning to his frustration.

"What about me Rick?" Her tone is firm, the correction in her name all too apparent.

He doesn't say 'sorry' but his eyes apologise.
"What will you do?"
"Wait.
"Help." She adds.

"God knows Rick you've waited and been patient beyond most people's – well anyone else's -
nature and capacity for me. But this is not me attempting to repay that dedication. You deserve
more than that. We both do."

"We've talked before about our mistakes, especially about MY mistake in shutting you out after I
was shot. We don't repeat them. We learn from them and we get better.

"I'm never walking away from this. I told you, our families, and our friends." She pauses. "Hell,
I've told the world that I am in love with my partner. That what we have transcends the boundaries
of most definitions. It is not an exchange or trade, we share everything and there is nothing we
don't do together." His head has come up and his gaze is steady. The eyes have a spark again. Her
relief doesn't surprise but the reassurance is soothing.

"Deal?" she checks.

"Deal!" He confirms.

"Bed time." She commands.

They're naked.

Well technically he's not as there is the strapping and bandages in place but she definitely is.

She hadn't intended for this, nor had he probably.

The simple proximity of two human bodies and their chemistry.

The intention of no sex, and the reality?

Doomed.

**Thinkcoffee, Mercer Street, 10.46 pm**

It had been a good night, a really good night. A couple of victories, some non-judgemental
company, eats and zero stress. But getting back to the important point. He had totally kicked ass
with two outright victories in Settlers of Catan. He loved playing the classic version, especially
when it suckered in newbies who thought the simplicity (relative of course) of the rules would
mean an easier game with less of a challenge. It was totally worth it, even the mocking comments
from a couple of hipsters at another table about 'children's games.' Well they could fuck off back to
grooming each other's beards.

Joining up with NerdsNYC had been a Godsend. Likeminded, non-judgemental people he could
lose himself with for a few hours. He'd have to try some of the longer events and the geek in him
delighted at the prospect of attending an event organised by GothamGaming.

Stepping out of the door way, he glanced up and down the street. Nathan Walker pulled his jacket
zip up higher. The wind sure was nippy tonight. He'd need to remember a thicker jacket next time
he came out. No snow yet either but it would fall soon. Damn he hated winter. Maybe it was time
to contemplate a warmer client and some distance from the problems he could no longer hide from here in the North-East.

Enough of that. Time for home and bed. He had a full day at the community college tomorrow and as annoying as some of his students were they paid bills and provided a legitimate cover for his income.

Exiting out onto the street with the casual nonchalance of a native New Yorker he glanced around the street looking for obvious threats for a weeknight. Finding nothing untoward – it was still early enough for a reasonable number of people to be about despite the chill – he turned east heading for the nearest subway stop and a train back to Brooklyn.

He made it less than two blocks from the relative security of the coffee shop. Just far enough for the people to thin out and lighting to diminish so that the shadows cast we deeper and longer.

They were waiting for him.

"Nathan Walker." The male voice was tight, controlled with a strong undercurrent of authority.

Shit!

He froze.

He wasn't ready.

He'd never be ready.

He remained rooted to the spot.

"Nathan Walker." Again the voice. Not so loud but close. Much closer. Too close. Same tone of command too.

Breath damn it!

Almost physical pain anchored him to the spot.

He didn't think running would make a difference. Somehow he summoned sufficient will power and bravery, and he turned to face owner of the voice, trying not to show the sheer terror on his face.

The man was shrouded in darkness but the dispassionate voice continued in a level tone.

"Nathan Walker, alias Nomad or Nimrod if you want." The last was so dismissive of his attempts to hide, to burrow away safely.

He had failed. The blows to his chest felt physical this time. He was pretty sure the terror was clear to see now.

"Someone wants you dead."

Chapter End Notes
Author's Note:

I'm going to be wrapping up a few of the plot threads in the next few chapters. Hopefully that will answer many of the questions about some of the characters and what purpose they serve in advancing the story line. I've taken some time to plan out the rest of the story. Based on my chapter outlines, there will be at least 80 chapters.

Thank you for taking the time to read, follow, favourite and hopefully review.

Coming up next – Chapter 64 – Refuge.
Chapter Summary

Previously - Events in New York and DC continue to reverberate and more than one party contemplates whether it is time to head for cover and seek refuge.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Washington DC, 11.46 pm, Monday.

It was another late night for William Bracken. Nothing new in itself, that was the life of a politician and of course their staff, or at the very least the inner circle. And for those who wanted more than their current office, then more – or rather more precisely, less sleep - was necessary. Even prior to politics, in the DA's office, grad school and college, hell at school, he had been sleep deprived for more than two decades.

Not that the man himself particularly noticed or cared. He had finally let Matthew go home at eleven before the kid fell asleep at his desk again.

He had no one to go home to. A sham marriage back in his early days in the District Attorney's office had ended acrimoniously but not publicly, and that was a lesson on what was not to be repeated. Women offered him nothing he needed except their votes. He could dissemble enough to achieve that without having to have a relationship with one. His mother had at least been honest enough to tell his father that his bankruptcy and ruining of the family name meant she was leaving. He had attended her funeral because it would look good for the media, not out of any love for her.

However that was irrelevant to his current state of mind. All the previous thoughts a distraction from the theme of the day.

His treatment that morning hurt when it was made clear that his attendance at the usual 'breakfast' meeting for the party powerbrokers was denied. Not simply ill-advised, or unwelcome but denied.

It hurt, much more than it should, especially for one who prided himself on his immunity from base human emotions where possible. However, this was more than a mere slight, an insult to who he was, and one he couldn't shake. Indeed it rankled with him. He wasn't used to being summarily expelled from power-sharing forums especially where he had previously been welcomed. Now he was forced to the outside. All his efforts so carefully and assiduously made to insert himself into the power structures of Washington, seemingly undone. And simply by mere rumour and gossip, not facts.

Not that the facts would help. But the years of suppressing uncomfortable facts about himself had made him start to believe his own story about his rise to power, and avoid those dark steps he took to secure his pathway.

But there was nothing he could do in that area just now. He had stewed enough. So he turned his attention to non-political issues that needed resolution. Fixing those could go some way towards resolving his problems in Washington. Top of the list was a certain long-term, and seemingly loyal
associate who now posed too much of a risk to be left alive but in his death he would unknowingly aid his boss. Specifically this was his desire to get rid of Vulcan Simmons and incriminate Detective Beckett in the process.

His original plan – as discussed and formulated with James Court - was to have the detective's backup pistol used to kill Vulcan Simmons thus silencing a man with too many of his secrets and leaving the Detective squarely in the frame for the death of man she had previously clashed with. Two birds with one stone as the phrase went.

However, the Detective had taken a sudden leave of absence to care for her paramour, the hack thriller writer Richard Castle, and surrendered her official NYPD weapons and badge into NYPD custody. With her official weapon no longer in her possession, the plan unravelled. And then she promptly vanished from view along with her boyfriend. None of which fitted the extensive profile he had on the detective. She didn't just leave. She was career and goal focused – something he felt they had in common. Clearly not at this new relationship with Richard Castle had profoundly influenced her. His information on Richard Castle was cursory in comparison to the Detectives, and he was beginning to think that this was an oversight that needed to be corrected.

Momentarily disconcerted and possibly believing his plot was uncovered he had tried to initiate a secondary plan to simply kidnap Beckett and make it appear as if she committed suicide whilst under the influence of drink and drugs. However, his alternate plan, whilst direct and highly likely to be effective, was much messier with a higher degree of risk. So much so that James Court had once more defied him, and refused to organise the action. He had calmly cited the comparative lack of confidence in the resources available to do the work, and the lack of immediate need to act against the Detective who seemed to be honouring their deal.

Subconsciously his hand rises towards the cheek where the bitch had pistol whipped him. Nothing remained thanks to corrective plastic surgery except for the insult. One that would not go unpunished.

The defiance of the man irked the Senator, regardless of the validity of his points. William Bracken had built his power on the exploitation of others' weaknesses but in James Court he had a near equal, and more alarmingly a man with few weaknesses, aside from the one event that mutually bound the pair, seemingly without end. Strange how a single shared event so long ago could rebound and have such repercussions. He was well aware James Court would happily throw him to the wolves if he could. He would do the same should the need arose. The former military man was nothing if not a born survivor and at any cost. Still for the moment, they remained partners, even without the trust.

Still Bracken reflected on one key difference between them. Court had an escape plan – the man had told him of its existence a decade ago and he didn't doubt that the former military officer had kept it up-to-date. Court would accept going into exile. He on the other hand would not. There was no running for a Bracken man. His ruined father had faced his creditors and his bankruptcy head on, even as his wife deserted the family. His father's first born would continue to do the same. He would not run and hide like a cur.

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**Langley, Directorate of Intelligence.**

Agent Danberg pushed his chair back. It had been a long, long day. But an interesting one. Fruitful in some ways. Well mostly. Perhaps he should settle for 'making progress' instead.

Called into the Deputy Director's office at ten in the morning, his original plans for the day, indeed the weeks ahead, possibly longer, abandoned in light of the order from above.
He looked down at his desk at the case files for the two subjects. One was thicker than the other, but both shared a lot in common, notably the last three years. The files laid bare in typically unemotional agency reporting style just how mutually intertwined the two partners were.

He wondered if the pair knew they had been awarded intelligence stars. It was the least the CIA could do after they not only stopped Sophia Turner and her profoundly dangerous plan, but also ensured it was buried out of the public eye. Of course the award itself was secret, and only shared with a handful of those who needed to know. Which didn't even include the recipients. Even fewer knew how just close the pair had come to having their stars on the wall at Langley. Certainly the two subjects did know about the near death experience even if they didn't know how close there were to ultimately joining a small cluster of largely unnamed heroes.

At least probably not. There was always a question mark about just how much Richard Castle knew, and when his inside channel and access came from. Despite the thicker folder being his, there were still gaps in the narrative that left Danberg curious, if not anxious.

Regardless, whilst their actions in preventing 'Pandora' were effectively secret, that was not quite the same in their earlier actions in rescuing New York from a dirty bomb by disillusioned veterans. That too was largely swept under the carpet publicly and the scale of the threat never confirmed. However, the mad scramble in Manhattan couldn't be completely covered up. Too many in the emergency services knew. Then there was the NEST trucks on the scene. The contamination suits. The isolation zone. Finally there was all the photos, videos, tweets and updates from members of the public along with along amateur radio hams' intercepts and more.

The authorities just never shared how close it was, and ironically they used the self-same patriotism of the conspirators to effect enough of a cover up. In return for taking the death sentence of the table, and entering of a guilty plea –which avoided a public trial – they were quietly sentenced to federal or military penitentiary depending upon whether they were still active or reserve members of the armed forces.

In the meantime neither key participant had spoken publicly about the incident nor had the promise of valor awards been followed through. Yet nothing from them, notably the not normally publicity adverse author.

Although DHS had taken the lead, the CIA and other agencies had been closely involved in the follow up to that case. Danberg had been one of the reviewing agents, pulled onto the assignment due to his knowledge of nuclear material smuggling. Later he was given responsibility for review of the case including the two heroes. He was confident at the time that labelling them as such was accurate. A perception reinforced when he meet them the following year.

Curious on return to Langley after the dirty bomb had been defused, his attempts at the time to access further details about the pair had met with mixed success. Detective Beckett's file was then relatively new and a work in progress. His request for Richard Castle's had been blocked at the time. A puzzle that remained unanswered and largely forgotten until the following year.

Named by some the Pandora incident, it had been a very close call for all concerned. Yet despite 'solving' the case, the impressive work of Detective Beckett and Richard Castle, left big questions and few answers. Who was Sofia Turner's backer/client? What further penetration was there and how much had already been lost or compromised?

It also left Danberg with a massive question about how Richard Castle had managed to secure an inside channel into the CIA to work with Sofia Turner previously? A question he still didn't have an answer too, even though he did have access to the bulk of the file now, courtesy of some additional security privileges granted by the Deputy this morning. But not everything.
Rising he walked the ten paces to the coffee machine and filling his cup from the urn of well-stewed coffee, the once merit in the warmth and the caffeine. He had noted a comment in the files that Richard Castle had donated a top-of-the-line coffee machine to the Homicide team's break room at the Twelfth Precinct. Perhaps they could get the author back to shadow him and bring on the perks.

Shaking his head, he returned to more serious matters. Sitting back at the desk, he scrolled to the beginning section of Richard Castle's file. His first engagement with the CIA. Danberg wondered if the agency could ever make use of Richard Rodgers/Castle again.

It started on the third page. 1987 and the then aspiring writer's first year of college. Seeking to pad out his scholarship funds and a comparatively sparse bank account, Richard Rodgers had joined the New York City ROTC where he had made friends with one Timothy Matthews from a military family. Despite the contrasts in backgrounds, the friendship grew and from it came his summer job with an agency front which was secured by the glowing reference from Brigadier Arlan Matthews – then on detachment to the Agency to assist with paramilitary operations - who had been impressed by the young man his son served with in the ROTC.

He wondered what the author would make of his code name. 'Python'.

The name almost sounded menacing. Well until you knew the actual source for the reference.

Of course it was actually missing the first noun according to the supervisor and lead evaluator who had assigned the codename in the first place. The unconventional individual who had scribbled 'Monty' above the official single word codename. Who said the agency didn't do humor? It just wasn't usually recorded in the files.

The programme was named 'Oxford'. College students with suitable vetting and security clearance, ostensibly employed by a small think-tank that most of the recruits were smart enough to deduce who they really worked for. Even if their job was reading supposedly, and almost always, dull intelligence and other material reports from around the globe, then reworking them to propose possible outcomes or events.

This was where the young student, ROTC cadet and erstwhile aspiring author came to the fore. He made some exceptional deductions, and was destined for possibly greater things, or at the very least according to the notes an offer of employment. More often than not his scenarios, his leaps-in-the-dark, were off the scale. Sure some, well most, almost all actually were laughably wrong. But there were more than a few that weren't. Ideas and visions, fanciful stories that somehow were real, or potentially so, to those that mattered in the assessment of those things. The Cold War was coming to an end with a whimper but new threats were being assessed and the young man's hit rate was better than most. He eye for detail and logical pathways even for the most convoluted and nonsensical ideas was unique. Still the agency didn't much take to mad genius or simply wacky and so the initial approval was tempered with an extended evaluation period. He was never formally advanced beyond the entry level in the first year, and yet the supervision notes indicate that he was given much more complex and potentially critical cases to review.

The results doe some were striking. In particular he struck gold with an analysis of future Chinese force projection, and someone who really mattered noticed. Then the agency had started to develop real plans for Richard Rodgers during his second year of college, but before they could invite him further inside, suddenly he had a publishing contract and before long two successful fiction books published to acclaim and not a little publicity. Suddenly no longer desperate for finances, quite the
opposite in fact, he quit ROTC at the end of his second year, and with it went his about to open pathway to the Agency. No longer possessing adequate security clearance points, not to mention his press exposure, he was squarely in the path of the post-Cold War budget cutbacks. There was no repeat of summer jobs for the student and the first engagement between the then student/writer and CIA ended.

And yet Richard Rodgers had kept his involvement quiet long after any legal obligation to remain silent. Nothing in his public biography. No mention of it. Clearly the man took his responsibilities seriously regardless of how he seemingly lived his public life on Page 6.

Then quite some years later he was back. Shadowing Sophia Turner. By invitation. Not hers. But Danberg had no idea why it was even contemplated, let alone allowed, or who sanctioned it. The file was steadfastly silent on the matter. There was a gap – not in the text - but in the narrative that a long termer like himself could spot. Not simply redacted due to security access level, but not recorded. Regardless the decision was way above his pay grade and out of the other side of the CIA. Which itself was curious. Who out of Operations would be interested or involved enough to sponsor the author's foray behind the walls?

It certainly wasn't Turner's idea, she was on record opposing it, vehemently at first, even if she later bedded the now successful author for some months. Danberg shook his head at the matter-of-fact reporting of the sexual relationship. It broke no rules but it should have rung alarm bells. An agent of Turner's status and nature didn't embark on such things without a purpose. Still that would forever remain a mystery, just like her final burial place.

So who invited the author in? Sure it came down from on-high but even more curiously it came out of the then Directorate of Operations. Of course Ops was now the National Clandestine Service and the scary mo-fo's now worked for the Special Activities Division which was the renamed paramilitary operations wing. But different name, same shit. Same scary mothers too, well mostly.

Turner had been Directorate of Intelligence like himself. She wasn't a field agent, although rumours persisted of a stint in PAG – Political Action Group. There were blanks in her service history that even now were redacted and even he couldn't access, not even with his newly elevated authority. Still essentially Sophia Turner was the same as him, or at least should have been. A desk analyst with limited field exposure.

Still someone with a lot of pull had arranged for successful crime author Richard Castle to get behind the scenes access to the CIA for background for his new character – Derrick Storm. And not just the ground floor but well in the upper echelons of the middle tier. Still that mystery could wait for another day, or not at all. You didn't work for the CIA long if unsolved questions bugged you.

But what had him here in the office late was flags. More specifically, at least one associated agency had accessed the files of these two. Possibly more.

The first flag on the access to the Castle and Beckett files came out of the AG's office in DC. Someone on the AG's task force no doubt. Probably connected to the investigation into Senator Bracken. The CIA had harboured suspicions for some time about Orantis Solutions, and had been working with the FBI, DHS and AG's team on getting inside and more information. Which had lead them to Bracken.

However, as it was expedient in this case that the CIA had followed the rules prohibiting their involvement in domestic matters and left it to the FBI and AG's office to investigate the Senator. In other words they had no skin in the game. Until now.
Whether there was anything to concern him. Well that was another matter. It could be nothing or it might not.

He made a note to call in the morning. Vallente owed him a few favours. And if that didn't work there was always a certain on-loan NSA trouble-shooter and all round mean son-of-a-bitch in New York he could call. Of course that would definitely cost him but it may well be worth it.

Richard Rodgers may not be aware of it but the CIA still took a keen interest in him. Protected him even.

For Danberg there was also something more personal. Recruited whilst in college he too had joined the Oxford programme and never really left the CIA after that. He had gone straight from college into the Agency and Directorate of Intelligence. Not long after he joined he had been given the then unidentified work of Python to review and edit. Based on the three of those five-star cases he scored his first promotion, and his pathway to a successful career with the CIA. It had also led to him working with and then for Sophia Turner. Of course she had turned out to be a double agent, much to everyone's' surprise. Once she had been exposed and eliminated (his first and only use of his weapon), his role had turned to uncovering what damage she had done. Richard Castle's and Kate Beckett's efforts had not only stopped a potential cataclysmic event but also opened up a further opportunities for Danberg. Which brought him to now. He liked the pair, and this was an opportunity to serve the Agency's interests whilst looking out for them.

Still that was enough for the day, he may as well try and go back to his apartment and get at least six hours sleep.

Stacking the files for return to the secure document repository inside the office, he quickly logged out of the files, and started the secure log out process on his terminal. Once the shutdown process had commenced, he removed his terminal key and returned that to his pocket and waited for the terminal to complete its shutdown. Satisfied he picked up the documents and dropped them into the folder labelled with his name and rose from the desk.

Undisclosed Location, New Jersey.

Nathan Walker regain consciousness in the same state he left it.

Petrified.

The man who had confronted him on the street in New York hadn't been alone. Two sets of hands had emerged from the darkness engulfing him and had roughly pulled him into a lane way and all too quickly into a blacked out van. He hadn't given a thought to resisting or even calling for help, so shocked by the awful reality of his apparent fate.

Once in the van he was stripped of all his clothes, mobile devices and other possessions. The men's emotionless faces weren't covered and remained steadfastly dispassionate throughout. He had rapidly concluded they didn't care if he saw them, and drew the one logical conclusion from that. Somehow he had avoided soiling himself but that was still an option, and near certainty more than once.

He remembers nothing else since trying to retain control of his bowels in the back of that minivan.

Now he was in a windowless room with a single bed, bedside table with a dim reading light and two bottles of water. There was a bucket in the corner.
He was no longer naked. He wore a one piece orange jumpsuit devoid of any labels or markings. There was no underwear or other clothing aside from a pair of socks, very similar to the anti-DVT ones handed out by some airlines. The fasteners on the jumpsuit were Velcro so there was nothing to remove or use.

The only good thing so far was that he wasn't dead.

He closed his eyes and forced his errant thoughts onto controlling his flailing heart rate and was surprised when he began to feel sleepy.

He came to in the same position he fell asleep.

He had no idea how long he had been asleep.

He hadn't drunk any water for fear that it was drugged. He felt queasy, a touch light headed and quite thirsty. Also his bladder needed relief.

Rising on unsteady legs, he wobbled to the corner. Facing into the corner – in case of cameras - he urinated into the bucket. Even in the subdued lighting he could tell how dark the short trickle of urine had been. He really should drink.

Returning to the bed, he flopped down ignoring the water bottle. Deciding that trying to sleep again might be best, he closed his eyes once more. Despite his thirst, and ignoring the incessant fear, he closed his eyes again.

Opening them again he contemplated the light. Despite deciding on attempting to sleep once more, he left the lamp on, the dim illumination scant comfort in his confinement.

Tuesday morning.

New York woke to a Tuesday with grey skies and drizzle. Hardly breaking news for November day, but even as across the air waves the talking heads were still dissecting Monday night football more ominous and serious chatter was trending especially away from the mainstream media. There was the growing buzz of scandal from DC and rumours in may involve a NYC politician. No names yet but that wouldn't last, especially as the 'it wasn't-me' brigade had already flailed to anyone who would listen on the weekend.

Where once upon a time there would have been a pause to research and check facts, even seek out comment from parties, now the non-stop express of the Internet carried all before it. Still even the Internet needed to pause before stepping right across the line. Certainly the national and local news organisations needed to check facts and then lawyers before naming names. In the meantime, there was an awful lot of coloring between the lines.

The Hamptons,

Rick awoke naked and warm. A state of affairs almost entirely due to the incredible – and equally naked - woman nuzzled into his left side with a firm grip of his one good hand, or at least the hand attached to his one good arm.

He – and her – had pretty much promised to spend the rest of their lives waking up together and this certainly was one way to achieve that.
Of course he did need a shower. In fact both of them would need a shower this morning. Despite Kate doing most of the work last night he had got plenty warm and not a little funky. Not least because Kate had collapsed on top of him and drifted off to sleep with their bodies still intimately connected.

The dull ache of his shoulder stole his focus momentarily away from the pressing need to relieve his bladder. He had never been one in the past to avoid medication, but now he has not a little insight and empathy into Beckett's dislike of being pharmaceutically divorced from body and reality.

He hadn't moved since they finished together last night and that almost certainly meant some slight discomfort with his first bladder release when he made it as far as the toilet. He'd get up and sort that out and grab some pain relief. Once he determined how to disengage without disturbing her. That last thought becomes irrelevant as he feels her move against him. A deliberate and provocative motion if he was not mistaken. Far too liquid and sensuous with more than a hint of salacious intent. The smile bursts onto his face and he's pretty sure that even if she couldn't see it, she knew exactly what was going on as one of her more fantastic features repeats the contact. Twice more. It's moments like this that makes him want to tell the world how lucky he is and simultaneously keep the shared moment private just for them.

"Good morning" he ventures, choosing the safer path from the storm of emotions flowing through him.

"Hey Castle." He envies how steady her voice seems in comparison. It will be that way for everything they do in future. Wedding vows especially. Responding to his proposal, or making her own. Telling him they'll be parents. He doesn't mind. He'll be the emotional one, and secretly – and not always so – she'll reveal in that. He doesn't mind that too. Making her smile is a goal he's been committed to since she first opened up to him.

"Thank you." For last night. For keeping the nightmares away. For being here this morning. For so much. For loving me.

"You never have to. You know that." She affirms as her arms release him and her hands break contact with his body. Sometimes only speaking in context is more than enough for both of them.

"Never-the-less I'll still keep saying it." He leaves the rest unsaid for the moment, but they both recognise that the words are getting closer every time they don't quite leave his mouth.

"Well that's a deal" Kate confirms as she pushes herself up so that they can see each other. His heart almost bursts at the honest joy on her face. Kate leans in to kiss him before he can say anything else and breathes her own good morning into his mouth.

Is it stupidly sappy if it just stays in his head?

Here in the Hamptons, their morning routine, indeed their daily life, was slowly establishing itself. In fact they were building a domestic bedrock here even if neither had deliberately set out to do so.

Back in New York prior to the shooting they had been too caught up in enjoying and discovering each other, and busy flitting back and forth between the Loft and Kate's apartment - often vainly seeking privacy – plus the demands of work – both police and writing – to have much time for routine. Sure some essentials got sorted, such as laundry day which made for lazy Sunday's at the Loft as Rick has the superior machinery including steam iron (she's still surprised he irons so much...
– Mister Mom!) but many other things had never been discussed or even given thought yet. Of course, four years of non-dating, had given them both a pretty good foundation in the practicalities of each other, and well the glow from their now physical relationship was intoxicating. Or was it gross? Certainly it was obvious to those that knew them. Martha smirked constantly. Alexis pleaded 'TMI' at every turn. A pair of detectives and a medical examiner had been forthright on the matter, especially if they didn't want Gates finding out.

Without the constant distractions, interruptions would be closer, of New York, the Hamptons weren't just about allowing Rick to heal.

Still in their night clothes – well after they had found them and put them back on – they headed to the kitchen for a simple breakfast and coffee. Kate was working patiently to reduce his calorie intake and get him to at least vary his diet. This morning it's instant oats and fresh fruit with coffee and they deliberately keep discussions light until they clean up and return upstairs, usually to shower.

Re-emerging downstairs they discover that the drizzle of yesterday has morphed into persistent rain and postponed any thought of a morning walk. Kate has energy to burn so she was still going to work out for a bit whilst Rick's physical prohibition keeps him on the sidelines. Darting back upstairs, Kate slipped some long leggings, sports top and lightweight sweatshirt before returning downstairs to the kitchen to grab a bottle of water, then darting past him to the former sun room.

Not to be left alone Rick, wanders along second coffee in hand, and sits to watch as Kate moves through a range of yoga positions and then starts on a series of Pilates moves. The room is pretty cold without heating, more so if you are sitting still and not exercising. Still watching Kate in clinging Lycra and cotton was heat inducing in its own right. Especially with memories of last night fresh in his mind.

Kate, long used to his observation, decided to have some fun with him, even now after he's graduated from creepy to heart-warming – mostly. Sly little glances in his direction, careful rotation of certain body parts, breathless pants, escalating to a tease of the tongue on her lips, a smoky glance at him. Eventually rewarded with him not sitting so comfortably, but he stayed anyway. He always did.

Kate had taken charge of meals and had drawn up a menu plan for the first week. Which on review had not entirely met with Rick's approval. The stare-down was epic but lost by the one with the pout despite his protests that the undoing the top three buttons on her blouse was cheating.

They had decided not to go shopping in town first hand. Much as she loved the food from Ambrosia, Kate was well aware of how much yummy temptation there would be, and expected that even she would cave. They didn't want to chance a normal supermarket least they be spotted and their escape twittered away so early on in their stay.

Rick would normally simply have shrugged in response to Kate's points but settled for calling his housekeeping service. As Kate discovered they were prompt and efficient and had the order – as vetted by Kate who had quickly wrested control of that key activity back from Rick - delivered and stocked on Monday night. Kate's attempts to assist with putting the supplies away, politely but firmly denied by the team of two. Rick simply sat trying not smile too much and made small talk with the delivery people who he of course knew.

The Study, the Hamptons
Lunch had been followed by retreat into Rick's study to seek the warmth and give Kate some time to indulge in her new favourite hobby, unpeeling the many layers of Richard Alexander Edgar Rodgers Castle.

"The study at the Hamptons has been my refuge for a while. Even before Mother moved in, the Loft seemed constantly busy. I bought this place after Meredith, once I started getting good money especially for advances. I was still writing two to three books a year. This came up through a friend of Mother's who let me know before it hit the market.

"Louis?" Kate tried to remember if Martha had mentioned the surname.

"Yes. Louis and Frankie." Then he looks at her with curious eyes. "Kinsman" he offers. Their surname. How does her do that? Know what's on her mind.

"They often hosted Mother in the Hamptons. I went a bit in my youth and fewer times in my teenage years. They were always nice, never seeing a child or teenager as an inconvenience, despite not having children of their own. Maybe because of that. They were simply nice. Anyway, the point was I was looking for a place with beach access for Alexis and close to New York.

"Why the beach access?"

Kate's question startles Rick. "It's the beach Beckett. What other reason would I need?" His reply was too fast and just a little defensive.

"Because I know you now Rick, and you never really were that impulsive playboy." She quirks her head if remembering something. "Well maybe more than occasionally the impulsive Dad according to my sources." She'll let the playboy reputation go. He has.

"Fair enough" He takes her hand for a moment, the blue of his eyes darker, serious. "Alexis was five and I and took her to see Meredith in California. Only the second time since." He doesn't finish the sentence but she doesn't need him to as he carries on. "We'd agreed for Alexis to stay and visit with Meredith for five days whilst I did some things in California. Meredith had cleared her diary. Promised Alexis."

Kate knows how much promises mean to Rick. Breaking them was anathema, especially if it was to his daughter. Or someone else he loved.

"It was meant to be mother daughter bonding and going to the beach was top of the list. Alexis was so excited. We'd bought a new swimming costume and Alexis couldn't wait to show how good her swimming was. Meredith called after three days. Something had come up of course. An opportunity. They had never made it to the beach. Alexis tried to be brave about it but at five she hadn't quite mastered the self-control yet." Kate sneaks her hand back into his and squeezes.

"So I fixed it. Fate was kind when Mother mentioned the house near the Kinsmans was for sale and was cheap. I drove straight up the next day after dropping Alexis in school. Fell in love with it the first time I saw it. Alexis did too when I took her the first weekend. It was a stretch for me, 'cheap' for the Hamptons is very relative, and the place was a bit of a mess, and needed work which I couldn't afford at the time. But Alexis didn't care. We had the beach and the sea."

And each other Kate mentally adds. Another point of kudos in the Pantheon of Richard Castle, greatest dad.

"It took about five years and a couple of books to get it all sorted. We did stuff ourselves too. Alexis painted her room, and repainted twice since. We did a lot of the painting until the last time."
There's a story there Kate thinks but for another time maybe. Rick is continuing on anyway.

"Not so much gardening, unless you count killing things." He smiles in recollection, and Kate too can remember decorating her own family home with her parents and her mom's infinite patience with her Dad's inability to hang wallpaper.

"As much as Alexis, and Mother love this place, it also became my sanctuary too. When I was writing Derrick this is where I would come to lose myself in his world. My refuge from Manhattan. I love the city but I've done some of my best work here. Derrick. And Nikki too."

"Alexis would come with me on weekends or holidays, unless she was going to Meredith." Kate observes that Rick almost never refers to Meredith as Alexis' mother, certainly not as 'mom'. She is still a little puzzled by that as Rick is quite fair and forgiving, especially of the many previous 'sins'. It obviously cuts deep. Still she lets that go too.

"And this room more than anything embodies that."

He sweeps his left hand around the room. Kate notices he almost led with this right only altering at the last minute. He had been more controlled with his arm but still decades of instinct doesn't just switch off. Yet she is hopeful that the extra care they have taken will be rewarded with him being able to start physio properly next week. He really was chafing at the bit to do more.

"Lots of tools for the job. Lots of research which of course the Internet helps with massively too. The Hampton's library is not quite the equal of the New York Public Library.

"Toys too." Kate observes the room again. Her keen sight taking in the numerous distractions peeking out from around the room.

"Guilty as charged. I like being distracted, and it never got in the way. Well not too much. Certainly not enough to impact the final result. Of course Gina thought different." There is a touch of bite to the last statement but both let it pass.

Kate shifts a little in her seat. Discussing his ex-wife/still-publisher remained a sore point for both of them. Her own exes too. Still they are mostly past that now, looking ahead, not into the past.

"Unlike the Loft, Alexis was old enough here to be able to open doors, so I didn't need the open plan work space. Plus it would have been too expensive to modify and we wanted to keep much of the original style and fittings."

"It's lovely. You know how much I like it here." And she truly does. It was daunting enough from the outside, the sheer size, the view, the beach, the Hamptons. And yet once you left those behind it was a family home, abet a millionaire's holiday home.

"Good thing too Kate. It's part yours now." Oh God, she hasn't adjusted to that yet. She wasn't a blue collar cop, but this was another league entirely. So she distracts, changes the subject.

"Rick, tell me about this cabin. I've never heard you mention it and knew nothing before it came up in the legal reading at the hospital."

"Okay, but can we get a drink first?"

"Sure."

"Well as I said when we bought this place it was due for a major renovation. One of the reasons it
was cheaper than the others for sale. There were a number of associated structures listed in the contract. The garage is one. The pool house. There was a small groundsman's hut but that was so rotten it was pulled down. There was even a cabana down near the bench. That took off in a storm the year after we bought the place.

"What can I say about the cabin? Well we missed it entirely, the first few times. We had checked the property and it wasn't until Steve was doing a check later that the discrepancy came to light. What we never appreciated was that the 'rustic cabin' which was listed under the clause for 'associated structures'. I mean I'm not entirely sure how a mountain cabin a hundred plus miles away in another state comes under 'associated structures' for a beach house but there you are." He even rolls his eyes. Kate can't help the giggle that emerges.

It's in New Hampshire. Up towards the Canadian border. Along and just off the i93. The nearest town is Lincoln. It is fairly close to some ski resorts. The nearest one is a small resort and ski area called Loon Mountain." His attempt at a glare is amusing enough to distract the comment that leapt into her mouth at the name of the ski resort which is perfect for him.

"It was in very average condition. Worse than the house. Long abandoned we thought. Transpires that the second owner of this house once had a sea cabin near Newport, Maine but lost or swapped it in a bet for the mountain cabin. It appears that he and subsequent owners until me didn't care for it.

"You get to it off a dirt road that is passable most winters I'm told. The few times I've been in winter it has been okay. The road finishes about thirty yards before the house. There is a shed – larger than the cabin – that doubles as a garage. The cabin entrance is about twenty yards beyond that. It has no services. It is entirely self-contained. A water tank with rain water collection system, plus there is a nearby spring. Solar power with batteries plus a small diesel generator by the shed. However, it is an old school toilet system. Some tank propane for heating and hot water. There are two fire places in the cabin.

"The cabin is single story but on two levels. The top level has a compact living room which connects to an open kitchen. There is den with the mud room off to one side. You go down about six feet to the two bedrooms. The cabin sits nestled in trees on a small rise. And the balcony's from both bedrooms look out over the view. It's a great view especially when it snows.

"It sounds very picturesque. Can we visit sometime?"

"Of course Kate. It is yours too. I never deliberately hid it from you. Just we've never had the time since to get round to it. Plus it's all very analogue."

"Not very you, you mean." Kate offers.

"Not so much no. I do enjoy it but the isolation, the wilderness, lost in my thoughts, not really my thing for extended periods of time. Not healthy." He considers something, looking at her with that element of possessiveness she secretly treasures.

"Perhaps I didn't have the right company."

"What to distract you from your lack of Twitter." Kate had never been on social media, her own private nature and her profession very much influencing her lack of online presence. Rick of course was quite different, although he had curbs his use of twitter and generally restricted it to his own profession. Occasionally his online activities were an issue that hadn't yet been mutually resolved between the two of them.
The eyebrows twitch, the smirk pops. "Well you are very good at that Kate."

"Maybe I'll accept that challenge." She returns, adding some heat to her tone. "When you're recovered." He deflates a little at that and she smirks back. He takes that as signal to get back on track.

"It's not really isolated. There is a satellite phone kept up there along with some survival gear and lots of long life food. But no Internet or TV."

"There is a weapons locker up at the cabin. The old school kind with padlocks. But we don't keep weapons up there as it is rarely used and doesn't have the same data automation for monitoring."

"Clare uses it from time to time. She loves it up there."

Kate still takes a little adjusting to him having the woman in his life. His family's lives, her life. She likes Clare but the connection Rick has with her is very close, and well she's entitled to be a tiny bit insecure isn't she?

"Taylor Matthews used it for an operation once - as a safe house I think - a few years back no long after the refurbishment was complete. Never did tell me who was kept there. It was a one off."

"I would love to take you there. The last time I was there was December last year – Alexis and I played hooky to go snowboarding for a couple of days. There is a maintenance guy who goes in periodically to make sure everything is working and ensure that no one has broken in."

"Sounds good. Two bedrooms right?" He nods. "Perhaps we could steal Alexis away again. Play hooky."

She doesn't need his voice to know what the offer means to him.

Undisclosed Location, New Jersey.

Nathan Walker had finally succumbed and drunk the water when he woke again. Nothing happened. It was safe. Well as far as he knew. At that point he didn't care.

He was hungry too. Not a person accustomed to skipping meals, it was mental rather than physical at this stage, but eating always comforted him too.

He didn't know what time it was. He imagined it was Wednesday sometime. The room was completely windowless.

He wondered where he was. Not far from New York he figured as not much time had passed – as far as he could tell – and he had no recollection of flying.

He couldn't sleep anymore and this was now a problem.

However, he is saved from having to create a mind-game or other distraction by the door opening. Of course the room has a door. It's just that he never saw it before now.

A lean, angular man in a suit enters.

He seems familiar. He looks again.

The man from last night. Mister 'Someone wants you dead' himself.
"Charles Nathan Walker." The man states. It is not a question.

"I prefer Nathan." How had he managed to say that?

"Or is it 'Nimrod' or 'Nomad' you prefer?"

"I still prefer Nathan." Amazing. His gut had shrunk to the size of an acorn at the mention of his one line personas and yet his voice seemed level. Well to his ears.

"At least you don't deny it. That's a start."

"What do you want?"

"Well it is very simple Mister Walker. Please follow me."

He doesn't rise.

The man turns back to him. "I assume you are hungry. Would like food or a shower first?"

His legs have him standing and moving after the man before his mouth can respond, finally catching up as they pass through the doorway.

"Food please." His mother had always taught him to be polite. Guess that extended to whoever held him.

The room had a skylight. It was light outside, or at grey and overcast. Two basic wooden tables each with four folding chairs.

The food was hot and fresh. A meatloaf, potatoes and mixed vegetables. Not exactly breakfast but then no one had told him the time.

They had surprising few questions during dinner. Or answers.

That all finished once he had emerged from the shower in a replica of the orange jumpsuit.

Another two people joined the lean man. One male, one female. Both equally dispassionate.

By the third question it became apparent that he was in the hands of one or more parties aligned with the government. Not pure law enforcement as his Miranda rights had not been given. There was no relief in that. Whoever it was didn't appear to care at all his rights or the legalities.

This fact alone almost completely broke him. His questioners were skilled and experienced. They had patience and time. Their subject had minimal physical and mental reserves after living on his nerves for some time.

Indeed, within the hour he had caved and numbly answered all their questions, and then some, to the best of his ability. Not that initially they needed much more than confirmation to their surprisingly accurate questions.

His tale began not so different to many. Leaving college he was initially employed by a large development house, but he lost his first job when the market contracted. After a spell of unemployment he finally regained employment with a services company where he lasted four years until his department was outsourced to India. Bitter and possessed of lots inside information and a
reasonable talent he had struck out in revenge initially. Dressed in up a moral crusading to make it
more palatable for himself and his growing audience. So Nomad was born.

But he soon realised he needed to live. So he had freelanced, often for himself, but sometimes hired
anonymously for jobs. His reputation grew. He took a different alias for this more profitable role.
He also built a cover, taking a part-time job at a community college, and donating time to open-
source projects. Both matched his modest lifestyle. Nimrod was darker, and more deliberate than
his other persona. Also considerably richer even if it was squirrelled away for a retirement he
should have taken much earlier.

Some six years ago he was approached by a regular contact about some sensitive work for a new
party. This was the start of an extended engagement with an unknown organisation but who he
suspected represented or where the Silva family. Most of the work was mainly wiping financial
transactions or security systems, digital eavesdropping, and in a handful of cases planting false
evidence or leads. His employers - and he - were careful to stay away from the common scams and
cons. Careful, assiduous white collar crime where patience and intellect were rewarded. Before
long he was almost solely working for them.

His interrogators had him skip most of the details – that would come later – and concentrate on the
series of jobs he had been given from mid-year.

In July of this year he had been approached for a new task but this time by a new contact but one
whom provided the assurance and validation that identified him as being aligned with his regular
employers. All he could divine was that the man was older and had some mannerism in his voice
and language that hinted at a previous military career. They had perked up at that piece of
information but as he had only ever dealt with the party over now-destroyed burner phones there
was little more he could add.

The work was over a period of months and involved a number of targets. Ultimately these included
the New York Banking Commission, the NYPD, The Port Authority, three law firms, and a
publishing house.

First up was the New York Banking Commission. He achieved that using the simplest process he
knew. Human engineering. He befriended a worker from the New York Banking Commission, and
then using their social media contacts built up a list of suitable patsy's and then used their id to
initiate the restore of the data. Why someone wanted data from more than a decade ago restored
was outside his scope. He had done that and then moved on to other tasks.

The Port Authority work related to wiping and replacing a series of cargo manifests and was
challenging from the perspective of having to get past a multiple firewalls and intrusion detection
systems but he was greatly aided by the fact that they were still using two-factor authentication
technology based on the flawed and compromised RSA crypto.

The law firms were simply grabs of their internal accounts and HR records. All three were
established mid-size Manhattan firms, seemingly with no connections. He had delivered this to the
electronic drop boxes and then moved on.

The same story with the book publisher. Although this time he had no clue as to why someone
wanted their promotional itineraries for the publisher's authors.

The NYPD job had come later and with a greater urgency. With the urgency came a sense of what
was being undertaken as the haste required more specific targeting and more risk for himself.
Especially as they wanted HR and case data from the live system.
The actual online production system was far more secure, but backups of the data were taken and stored offline. He had arranged to obtain a set of those tapes – again through the simplest of manners by lodging an IT ticket request in the name of a recently departed staff member. Once he had the tapes then he simply built a replica of the NYPD computer and through trial and error restored the data. Again the information extracted was uploaded to an anonymous drop box.

His final act in all this was when just weeks ago they then asked him to build a fake celebrity news site and insert certain content relating to the NYPD Homicide Department into the stories copied from other sites. He could only surmise it was meant as a distraction and then the facades of his lives came apart.

He had no idea how long he spent detailing his work, spilling his secrets and consigning his freedom to chains. Several cans of soda, a sandwich and two toilet breaks were the marker of time.

Somehow, he found himself at ease with exposing his criminal conduct and past, certainly he had no loyalty to those who had paid him and then were willing to silence him, until the men in the room posed one question to him that left him devoid of anything.

"I need an answer now Mister Walker." Stark was in his face. Almost literally.

"Okay." It is quiet enough that his audience understand that it was his acknowledgement not his answer.

Silence reigned.

"Yes. I accept the offer." Finding some courage. "Give me refuge you son-of-bitches. After-all.

"No need to be so melodramatic. Very well. You will be turned over to the NSA tomorrow."

_The NSA?!_ He can't keep the surprise or is it horror from his face.

Stark seems to sense his alarm. "They are heading up the technical acquisition program and you will be required to provide extremely detailed information and walk-throughs of all the activities you have listed. This is to allow us to evaluate how to improve out cyber posture." _And how to access someone else's too the detainee mentally adds._

"Once they are satisfied, and only then, you will be transferred to US Marshall protective custody and moved to a secure location for a minimum of three months. There will be no Internet or other external communication." Stark appears finished.

"Can I ask a question?"

Silence. He persists anyway, feeling he has little to lose anyway.

"Am I under arrest?"

"Mister Walker, I can categorically state that you will never be arrested."

Somehow that cold statement gives him no assurance whatsoever.

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_The Hamptons._

The rain had eased off so they took the opportunity to leave the house for a later stroll.
Their walk was coming to an end as they approached the house, Kate continued to hold on tight to Rick's hand as he continued he exploration of his motivation in shadowing her.

"Following you and – well - me coming to be working at the Twelfth as a consultant. That was entirely selfish motives. My choice for me. Nothing to do with the citizens of New York, my family and especially you. I know you didn't like it, didn't want me there at first." She doesn't protest the accuracy of that. She really didn't want him there at the start but not for the reasons that were spoken.

"It was so good to be able to choose to do something for myself. Even after finishing school, for such a long time the fairer sex have dominated my life, and my choices.

"First there was Alexis – best sort of control and responsibility. But being a single parent is hard. Alexis helped massively of course. And I never, and I do mean never regretted it or felt obliged. It was, is, magical." He looks at Kate, the blue ocean deep with intent. "I want that for you. Share the experience, the magic, the joy." She can meet his eyes with her own slightly startled and just slightly moist. Another squeeze of his warm hand is all she can manage.

"Then along came Paula to organise my life. Whirling Dervish and banshee. Kinda hard to deny, but at that time in my life it was what I needed to help me succeed." Kate could well imagine a younger Rick Castle needing some firm guidance. He still does on occasion.

"Then there was Gina. And even when she wasn't" In a relationship with him Kate fills in. "She was still there along with Paula. And they dressed me up as mutton for the women. The 'Master of the Macabre', playboy author and perennial resident on Page Six."

"And Mother. Can't forget Mother. We had some rocky moments before getting to where you first saw us."

"Are you saying?" She can't finish the question, and he doesn't let her, interrupting.

"God No! Totally the opposite. Because we are equals. A true partnership. It doesn't feel like the other relationships with any woman I've ever had. It's hard to explain. It's like no effort at all, the simplest and most natural thing to be, and yet at the same time the most terrifying and involved as well."

"I feel that too Rick. It is a lot of the reason I was so scared to try with you. It became all or nothing and I'm not sure to this day which terrified me more."

"But not now?"

"Never now." She kisses him there, under dull November skies, on the beach outside their beach house. Kisses for him for the all the times he has been there for her, for them, and for all the times he will be.

Somewhere off I95, Maryland.

Watching the car pull away, the man wandered back to the tree line and his own car parked out of sight from the road at edge of the rest stop. Unlocking the car, he retrieved the newspaper, and pushed the door closed, relocked the car and wandered towards the diner adjacent to the gas station.

Pausing at the door he glanced in the direction of the car pulling onto Interstate 95. The two occupants were reliable and efficient.
James Court was a man with multiple missions today. Multi-tasking was very much in his nature, the way he lived his life.

He had developed the plan with Bracken to have Vulcan Simmons killed with one or more of Detective Beckett's guns, and use that to effectively frame her. However, her unexpected, and seeming out of previous character, choice to take leave from the NYPD to tend to her lover Richard Castle had thrown that plan. It might still have been workable if they had remained in Manhattan but instead they had gone to his house in the Hamptons and Beckett had surrendered her badge ad official weapons. That left them vulnerable but there was really nothing for him to gain from attacking them at this time. He had chosen not share the information on their current location with the Senator least he do something rash.

Plus there was now the added complication of Taylor Matthews. Those fucking Boy Scouts had interfered again. This time seemingly recruiting Kate Beckett as a temporary consultant according to his source. Court knew the link to Taylor Matthews came through Richard Castle. The author was initially viewed as a pain in the arse, an annoyance but now this was solidifying into an alarming connected P.I.T.A. with some serious leverage available to him. He resolved to find out more about the author.

Plus Beckett was really Bracken's problem and he didn't need to solve that so long as he solved his own problems. Foremost of which was Senator William H Bracken himself. He had no doubt that Bracken would flip on him in an instant if he felt it served a purpose.

He had a better plan anyway. One which might close a lot of loose ends. One he had been working on for a while.

First though he needed Matthew Weston dead. The young aide was pretty smart, and was clearly plotting against his boss, but not smart enough to realise he was obvious about his information gathering. If it was only Bracken at stake then he didn't care but the aide could tie him too closely to the Senator as well. And he had details no one else in the Senator's staff had. Information that could not reach law enforcement. Information that would prompt close inspection of a retired Army Colonel's life and that would not be welcome. At all.

Of course just because the rest of the Senator's staff knew too little to be a real threat beyond hearsay didn't mean that he couldn't just arrange for them to be silenced too. Perhaps murder/suicide. Senator guns down loyal staff and then takes his own life. It certainly had potential. He'd come back to that idea latter. He mind clearly dismissing it as almost entirely whimsical – if mentally toying with the concept of killing almost a dozen people was whimsical. It was something he had not only thought about before.

For his part, when the end game was reached he didn't plan to be anywhere within a jurisdiction that recognised American authority nor one that allowed their remote assassin drones either. The trick was in the timing. Sure he could run now but he never withdrew before he had to. Plus there were a handful of other unresolved issues to tidy up. He wanted to be home free and not looking over his shoulder for the rest of his life. A small, perhaps not so tiny, fortune is not enjoyable if you are constantly concerned about arrest or death.

Of course there was the Silva crime family to deal with. The root of his partnership with Bracken. Both men tied together by their actions so many years ago. He needed anyone with that knowledge dead eventually. That included the old man, his daughter, and their enforcer. Maybe some others. He'd need some manpower for that action. Perhaps he should assign that to Orantis? The firm had enough competent staff remaining to achieve that. He had an independent team from offshore as well, but the Koreans were his reserve. Much better to let the already suspect 'security firm' take
the heat of any investigation.

Still that was someway off as the small Italian-American (so much less confronting than 'Mafia') family was currently his ally. He smiled wickedly at the recognition that he was currently working with the Silva's to bring down the Senator. Bracken's own hubris was the root cause. Well aware that the added scrutiny his entry Federal politics would bring, the Silva's had also warned the man against running, but as ever Bracken fancied himself no-one's man, and ignored the advice/instruction. It had taken a lot of effort on the then District Attorney's part to make the Silva's stand down and wait. Somehow, Bracken's had escaped discovery. However, once again misreading his good fortune in escaping detection, his ill-judged decision to enter the race for the Party's nomination for President was a step too far for all concerned. Back in March Court had covertly met with Silva's daughter and agreed that they should bring down the Senator.

Well aware that the Senator would not hesitate to throw anyone else under the bus to escape, Court had a multi-layered plan in place, one that would first expose his deceptions, strip him of his office and then his credibility. And only then would the ultimate sanction be exercised when required.

Of course, his plan also called for eliminating the Silva's at some point. He had no doubt the Silva's had the same in mind for him.

Orantis Solutions was another loose end to be sure. Maddox had been the last of the really competent operatives there at the firm he had helped found. The former Special Forces sniper had been one of the first recruits, his complete lack of a moral compass a pleasant bonus. Until the man's admittedly well-deserved confidence undid him earlier this year when he triggered a booby trap. Fortunately aside from three employees, all conveniently based in the Maryland admin office, there was no one else he would actually need removed. The others knew nothing useful to authorities except to be perfect patsies.

The Hamptons, Wednesday.

Both of them had slept well the night before and their morning walk had been largely dry. For Rick's part he was getting the hang of isolating his shoulder and right arm and consequently was finding that the pain levels were better and he needed less medication.

Rick had made it all the way through the tuna salad - no dressing, no bread - without complaining once. He had merely frowned at the water instead of coffee or a soda but said nothing. Kate had kept him engaged in light conversation with minimal banter.

Now seated in his study, Kate still couldn't bring herself to call it their study yet, especially this room. It was his, most certainly, and most likely always as well.

"Have you ever asked yourself why my office at the Loft is like it is?"

Kate looks at him for a second. "You mean the bookshelf walls? Not exactly private." They had cause to lament the lack of privacy since May, and she wonders if they will have to do something about that when they are all permanently living under one roof. She loves his, their family, but some things don't need to be shared.

"No it isn't but it wasn't intended to be. The early laptops weren't really portable, and I couldn't really use them comfortably away from a proper work area. So I used mine at my desk in the study."

"Alexis?" Kate confirms as much as asks.
Rick nods. "She was old enough to play by herself but I never wanted her to have to negotiate a
shut door or be able to call out and for me hear her if she wanted me. It didn't mean I ignored her
but sometimes she wanted to play on her own and sometimes, quite a lot actually, I needed to write
when she was awake. I couldn't write everything when she was asleep or at playgroup or kindy."

"So that's why no headphones, no loud music when you write?"

"Part of it." Rick looks a little abashed. "Plus I'm really shit at concentrating if I have things to
distract me.

"Oh I don't know Castle you do a good enough job in plenty of circumstances."

"No fair Beckett. Teasing isn't fair."

"Who said I'm teasing?"

"Still not fair at all."

She smirks back at him, and just when he glances away for a second, she seizes the moment and
darts in to sneak a kiss before he can react.

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**Beesley, Wax & Drummond Lawyers, Wednesday early evening.**

The partner meeting had been largely ineffective. The managing partner's absence was a key
reason. Another day, another no show from Jeff Sealey. Not even a phone call to excuse his
absence today.

However, despite his absence, Val had made no headway in overturning any of his decisions. Even
though his supporters were perceptibly disheartened and were beginning to murmur about his
absence and some of his choices. But not yet sufficiently diminished. The lure of the filthy lucre
was enough to keep some loyal, or at least bought for the moment.

Val had begun subtly probing for more information about the financial deal but had learnt nothing
new. Jim had taken a different approach and gone to the accountants and leveraged his superior
commercial knowledge but with an equal lack of success on the details until he thought outside the
box and contacted an old colleague working for the IRS in commercial taxation. Gavin Thomas
was a mine of veritable information because prior to becoming a government employee he had
been an accountant for a number of political campaigns and special interest groups. He had been a
consultant on the new political funding rules and vehemently dislike the concept, execution and
existence of Super-PACs.

Elsewhere in the firm, the mutterings were beginning to take on more than just talk. A handful of
resignations already, and an equal number of juniors and associates approaching their mentors
seeking advice or merely to inform them that they were contemplating joining the exodus.

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**Columbia University, Wednesday night.**

It was only a dorm party. A midweek stress reliever. Limited alcohol and an early curfew.

But sure enough Alexis knew her ability to avoid people wouldn't last. So she manned up and
made an appearance.

To her relief, there was barely a murmur about Max, and the few people commenting with not
friends or even real acquaintances. She was coping until she re-entered the kitchen looking for another soft drink and there he was along with a couple of buddies who names she had wiped from in her mind.

"Hi." She felt self-empowered – even without her pistol-packing bodyguard. Max was clearly the one caught off guard and feeling self-conscious. His buddies looked on with open curiosity.

"Oh hi Alexis." Max stammered before retreating towards the door and the couple of other boys followed him.

Round One to her.

Soda can in hand, Alexis drifted back to the group from her kitchen area. Then less than five minutes later the inevitable happened.

One of the others. She wouldn't bring herself to call them one of Max's girls. She never called herself that, and they probably didn't deserve it either. She didn't know their story. The other girl could be equally the victim of Max's inability to be, well faithful might cover it she surmises.

"Hi Alexis."

"Oh." Definite pause before she acknowledged. "Hi Rose." She makes herself meet the other girl's eyes. There is no antagonism there, only uncertainty and hurt.

"Look." Is all the girl manages before Alexis cuts her off, sure it was the start of an unnecessary apology.

"I didn't know." Then because that wasn't enough she continues. "Turns out neither did Louisa or Halley." She indicates the tall girl – Halley - in the corner. Rose's face displays surprise, and then anger. Score another point. Alexis had channelled her Dad and some investigation had determined that Max was most definitely a serial offender.

"Well you don't mind if I feel a bit disgruntled about it." Clearly Rose didn't previously have the full information. Until now. Her face certainly indicates so.

"Can you excuse me a minute." Rose blurts, and heads off without waiting for a response.

Alexis simply nods inconsequently, not trusting herself to say something suitably polite, even if it was to a retreating back.

Two minutes later Rose is back with the tall Halley in tow. Oh.

"Look what you do with Max is not any of my concern." Anymore she leaves off.

Rose looks determined. So does Halley. "Oh I know it won't be happening for Max for a while. Certainly from any of us. We're going to put the word is out. I think you'll find he's going to experience a dry spell.

"Do you want to join us?" This from Halley.

The tall girl's left hand is cautiously extended. The fist forms tentatively. Rose mirrors the girl beside her.

Alexis can't help herself. It may be petty, vindictive even. But she'll take it.

She extends her right fist and 'bumps' Rose's own. And then Halley's.
Oh that Boy would be regretting lots of things soon.

**The Hamptons, Thursday.**

By Thursday morning, with the weather closed in again, Kate finds time for her Taylor Matthews assignment. To be honest, it is not particularly taxing but Kate takes it for what it is meant to be. An introduction, a testing of capabilities, confidentiality and boundaries.

Of course Rick teases her gently about it, but only very gently, and he backs off way before he normally would. Unlike his NYPD role, he is not cleared for this, something Clare was very adamant about. Kate is relieved when he doesn't make a big issue about it, and heads off to do something on his own, leaving her to her work.

Not everything they will do in this new life will to be together and in some ways this is just as important as they time they share.

**Twelfth Precinct.**

"Detectives, a moment of your time please."

Gate's order interrupts the team in the middle of another fruitless lead in this investigation that seemingly goes round and round with no discernible progress. Tori blinks as she steps back, eyes slightly watery in tiredness from the long hours gazing at video footage and websites. Esposito and Ryan nod to her in appreciation. The tech really has pulled the hours with them on this.

Ryan turns and follows the Captain, Esposito a step or two behind, delayed by a need to have a moment with the woman. If his partner notices he's not making an issue of it, and sure enough Javi is back there with him in what seems like mere seconds.

Despite her stature their Captain can hustle and has already made it inside her office where she is not waiting for them alone. As they approach they observe her talking to a be-suited man. Grey hair, the tall lean male in the conservative, dark blue suit screams Fed but the face is all the more predatory.

"Detectives this is Agent Jared Stark with the Attorney General's office." Hands are extended even as the Captain completes the preliminaries.

"Agent these are Detectives Esposito and Ryan who have been leading our investigation into the hacking and working with our techs and the team from One Police Plaza."

"Pleasure." The man's tone is clipped and all business. He's cool but not cold, but Ryan can't but help notice Esposito is on edge. It has to be sixth sense as nothing else has transpired.

"Agent Stark has some news and some developments he would like to share.

Exiting the Captain's office, Ryan pulls Esposito into the fortuitously unoccupied break room, pulling both doors shut.

"What you do think?" He asks his partner.

"I don't think. I know Bro." Espo is tired, it's been a long few weeks with little positive results, and it shows as he sinks against the bench almost dislodging a dirty coffee mug into the sink. His
frantic scramble to save the ceramics only cements the mood.

"Yeah. We're never going to find a trace of Nathan Walker are we?"

"Nah. The Feds, or at least the ones claiming to be Feds, have him I reckon."

"Well at least they were polite enough to come tell us personally that we could stop looking." Ever the half-full kinda guy.

"He wasn't FBI." Espo hesitates before continuing. What he is about to share he's told no one outside of his unit. "I've seen that sort before. Overseas. They would turn up and one or more of our guys would go off with them. Sometimes they came back, often they didn't. Reassigned. Detached for other duties as it was officially called.

"CIA?" Ryan queries.

"Sure sometimes, other agencies sometimes. Sometimes freelancers working for well who knows. Sanctioned so they could be there. All sorts of dark shit that it's best not to think about."

"What the hell are we involved in Javi?"

"Whatever it is we need to make sure Beckett and Castle, and their families are safe.

Later that afternoon comes a press release on behalf of the NYPD, FBI and DHS which is jointly released by 1 PP and the Department of Justice. It is just in time for the evening editions of the local press, not to mention local channels early evening news.

The identification of the suspect responsible for illegally obtaining disclosing the confidential personnel records of a number of NYPD officers, including Detective Kate Beckett, is detailed and damning.

Charles Nathan Walker. Also known as Nathan or Nate Walker. A forty-two year old, New Yorker teaching Computer Science at a community college was also a notorious web criminal. They even had his photo, which is actually relatively flattering of the man. Not merely a mug shot. Certainly good enough that anyone paying attention would recognise him should they meet him.

The press release, rather than a press conference, signifies that the suspect is still at large and no one from the multiple enforcement agencies was going to front the press until such time as the news was more positive.

New Jersey.

The evening edition of the paper lies where he dropped it. It takes him moments before he can raise his head. Everything feels terminally heavy.

He looks at Agent Stark. The man could best Trappist Monks in a vow of silence.

"Why?"

"Quite simple. You've gone on the run Mister Walker."

"How can I go on the run? You captured me!"

"No – we temporarily detained you for your own safety. And now you're cooperating of your own
free will."

"I was?"

Stark frowns clearly unhappy about the tense of that statement.

"I am. Look I don't know." His head drops and his hands cradle his head before running through his hair as he finds his voice again, continuing.

"You've ruined my life. I won't be able to be employed. Plus the Silva's and others who have hired me will be looking."

Stark doesn't respond to that statement. They would have been anyway.

"I can't go back. Can I?" The last two words are plaintive.

"No Mister Walker you can't."

"You did this! You entrapped me."

The accusation finally elicits a reaction from the otherwise usually dispassionate man.

Agent Stark leans forward and the jacket falls away revealing the holstered pistol at his hip.

The man shrinks back. Not just from the bare threat of the weapon, but the hard flinty stare of the Federal agent in his face.

"No let me be clear Mister Walker." Stark pauses as he closes the gap even more. "Your criminal actions resulted in this. Your choices. This is what brought you here." He concludes right in the former-Mister Walker's face.

With that the agent straightened, spun on heels, and left the room with an awful sense of finality.

The Hamptons

As the weekend nears he gets more and more excited about Alexis joining them. Kate lets herself get caught up in the mood too. It is surprisingly easy to be swept along by his contagious happiness, especially for Alexis. Kate knows that the two of them, well they're not quite there yet, but it is closer, so much so that it is pretty much tangible and she wants the young woman's friendship without the reservations that have marred the eighteen or so months since she got shot.

Still she recognises that Alexis' weekend visit has become his anchor to get him through the frustrations of his current existence. She doesn't even feel slighted, she's here with him and she knows the proximity and familiarity bring a sense of comfort but also an element of taken-for-granted. She doesn't mind. It was the same with her Dad after her shooting. It is what you do for family, for those you love. She accepts it without compliant, understanding that it is not intentional and that it is all part of the healing process.

Acknowledging how important it is for him, and without Rick realising it, she has started keeping in touch with Alexis. Mostly texts and the odd email. Simple stuff mostly: updates on how Rick is doing, gentle reminders to balance herself (she doesn't feel too hypocritical when sending that), and not least how much they are both looking forward to seeing her at the weekend. The little doubt is there, she knows what it is to be caught up with college and not make it home, but she doesn't share that with Rick and his irrepressible faith in his daughter.
So when late on the Thursday night, Alexis sends a text asking for a call, Kate quietly excuses herself from a semi-conscious Rick buried beside her under blankets sleep-watching episodes of The Big Bang Theory on the big, big screen, and she retreats to the Kitchen to call Alexis.

Alexis picks up on the first ring. "Kate."

"Hi Alexis." She keeps her voice level and unquestioning, giving the young woman time to say what is going on.

"Thanks for calling Kate." The touch of desperation in Alexis' voice overrides her first plan.

"Alexis, are you okay?" The patent urgency in Kate's voice earned a rapid denial, "Oh no, nothing like that Kate. I'm not in any danger. Well at least not around here."

Kate remains quiet. Patience is a virtue, especially with teenagers, a lesson she remembers from her Mom.

"You don't have to thank me for calling Alexis."

"I know."

"So what is up?"

"My study group wants to work Saturday. I'm more than a little behind in the subject and missed two other group meetings when Dad was in hospital so I really need to pull my weight here as the assignment is a group one and the marks are shared by all the group members. I don't want to let the others or myself down." Kate could entirely understand that sentiment.

"Well how about you come up Friday as planned but do some research here and then head back earlier on the Sunday? Re-arrange the study group for Sunday afternoon or night?"

"What if they have other plans?"

"Alexis, I think we'll have to go with one of your Dad's plays here."

"Really?" Doubt seeps from the question.

"Relax. Not one of those plays."

"Oh, that's good. Not sure if I can live another one of those down. It was excruciating watching him embarrass himself when he dropped me off at the dorm at the start of the year."

"I was there too, remember."

"Yeah, but you were laughing. Don't deny it Kate. You were laughing."

"Guilty. I think you did in the end."

"Only after getting him to promise not to visit for the whole semester."

"And he did Alexis just he promised. I had to deal with his pout and sulking. But what I was going to suggest was taking a big box from Ambrosia back with you. Propose a reschedule to Sunday evening and offer to provide supper for the study group."

"Oh. The kindness bribe."
"Yep. That's the one. Works for your Dad all the time at the Precinct."

"Okay. I'll see what I can do to persuade the others to switch.

"Alexis. If you can't make it we'll both understand." Kate pauses before continuing. "But your Dad is really looking forward to you being here." She hesitates before continuing once more. "He's not had the best week. He really does want you here. I do too."

"I know. But he has you Kate."

"Yes he does. But that doesn't change how he feels about you Alexis. It doesn't change your relationship, except maybe that you have another person who loves you too." Kate bites her tongue at her last point. It is heartfelt but she can't but help wonder if it was too much.

The "Ohh" from the other end of the line is muted. Then more strongly the voice comes across "Thank you Kate."

Not too much then. "Don't worry about it. Just let me know what's happening. If need be I can break the news to him."

"No Kate!" Alexis' tone was quite abrupt but Kate waits her out, and sure enough after a moment, Alexis starts again with a more even timbre. "No, please don't. If I have to stay here, I'll do it. It was kind of you to offer but I don't need you to cover for me. Dad and I, we've always tried to be honest with each. I really want that to continue and I know that you have both promised that to each other too. I don't want you keeping things from him, especially on my behalf."

"Okay."

"We've got a seminar tomorrow morning, so I can ask everyone then, and I'll let you know straight after Kate."

"So other than that is everything okay?"

"Well I did bump into my ex, actually I don't know what to call him. Anyway I bumped into him yesterday night at a social gathering. It was a midweek dorm party to help relieve the study and assignment stress."

"How did that go?"

"Actually I felt really empowered. He couldn't hurt me. I made the choices of my own free will. I didn't make the mistake, he did."

"That sounds pretty healthy Alexis."

"Yeah, well I'm giving the boys a miss for the moment. Get back into my classwork. Plus I made some friends. Turns out I wasn't the only one."

"Oh." Kate had been there, done that.

"No Kate. It's good actually. They're both nice girls. I think we might be friends."

Kate can't control the eyebrow quirk and she's grateful Alexis can't see her reaction. She hadn't had the grace to as magnanimous about things as Alexis. Quite the contrary fracturing her relationship with Maddie for many years. "I have to admit I'm kinda pleased about that."

Kate understands the subtext. Then she blinks as the memories come back. She wasn't that kind of
nice girl. She was a bit wild and even if a little mellowed by college, she would have hated being described as a nice girl. She preferred fierce, independent, free-spirit. All those things until none of them were enough to fill the hole in her life.

Friday night

Kate has no idea how she survived the day. The man grew increasingly impatient and excited. Somehow she has him anchored next to her and his bounding suppressed to a barely quivering twitch of his left leg.

It is still outside the house, virtually no evening breeze off the sea for once. The evening air is curiously silent, not even the gentle lap of the waves against the private beach audible as they wait in the darkness. Alexis had texted minutes ago alerting them to her imminent arrival, and together they had come outside, awaiting her on the door step, neither wearing coats despite the cool night air. Instead Kate had nestled into him, their proximity providing all the heat they needed, and leaving Kate teetering on the edge, infused, near overwhelmed, with all that this man is, not just for her, but everyone he loves and who loves him back.

Rick's own excitement is only kept in check by this woman beside him who continues to prove how committed she is to them and their family. He has every intention of asking her that question soon before it escapes anyway. But for now he'll be more than happy to see his daughter.

They hear the town car approach before they see the lights, interrupting Kate's train of consciousness. Seemingly only seconds later the car pulls up in front of them, and the passenger door flies open before the parking brake is fully applied. Kate breaks away from Rick to make room, and a blur of flying red hair buries itself into the arms of the man beside her.

"Daddy!"

Chapter End Notes

So I went on holiday and had a great time (Tropical Super Typhoon Vongfong aside). Then I came back and I could give lots of reasons and excuses as to the delay in posting. Some more valid than others.

If you are still with me, thank you for your patience. Thank you to those who messaged and gently prodded for more.

This story will be 80 chapters long. There are 16 to go. I have them all outlined (some better than others). The story will be completed never fear.

Coming up next - Chapter 65 – Encounters.
Encounters

Chapter Summary

Now that Rick and Kate have settled in, Alexis comes to visit them in Hamptons for the weekend.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Hamptons, Saturday Morning, just before 7 am

Kate padded through the house in her bare feet savouring the contrasting sensations of the soft rugs, grainy wood, and the cool air circulating round her ankles. Even after only a week she has come to be very familiar with the layout of the house and the despite the near-constant evidence that this really is a summer house, or at least not a winter house, she likes, no loves, the contrasts of warmth and cool that ripple through her senses. The fire of their bedroom (but not last night), the chill of the newly fitted out exercise room, the enveloping warmth of the kitchen, the cool of the long corridors, the homeliness of library. Their previous short break here had left little time for exploration outside the bedroom and the kitchen, not she minded that.

Of course it still freaks her out on occasion. This imposing beach house, the Loft, the mountain cabin she has only seen in pictures, the Ferrari. That's before she even considers the bank accounts, trust funds and the business empire. She's not a blue collar cop in reality, her parents' careers, the insurance and trust fund all mean she has been more than comfortable and not without means compared to most public servants (or at least the honest ones). However, through the years her only indulgences have been her apartment, allowing her to live on Manhattan and not across a bridge like almost everyone else she works with, and the odd items of apparel or footwear. But this, all of it, is so much more. She had been shocked when first told - whilst he was still unconscious and it was one of continuous assault on her equilibrium - and now even after the legals (prenuptials her mind associates) and full disclosure, it sometimes gets to be almost too much.

Her feet have bought her here to him once more, and reaching the doorway to the library cum lounge she quietly opened the door and spies inside.

She finds them pretty much where she left them last night when she went to bed, and again at 3 am when she checked on them. They’re still in front of the big screen, except they are properly on the floor now. The lights were off, the electronics too – she had no clue how to operate the myriad of home theatre gear that both he and Alexis seemed almost intimately familiar with but thank heavens for the universal remote that Rick waved around like a real copy of the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy. Finding the master off button which luckily glowed blue in the dark and switching it all off without waking them in the middle of the night had been a boon.

Even in the near darkness of a winter's morning in this room she could see them quite clearly, even if dimly lit by the sparse light leaking in from the corridor. The pair were encased in pillows of every size and color, Alexis was nestled into her father's left side, her left arm wrapped around his torso, blankets covering their midriffs and legs.

Rick was snoring gently, a touch of drool glistening on his chin, his face relaxed. Alexis looked so
peaceful, none of the barely hidden guarded edge that had reminded Kate so much of herself. She paused, caught in two minds, before sneaking sure footed past them down the long room and through the study door. She found one of his digital cameras on a shelf. It was a nice simple Panasonic point and shoot. Satisfied it would be fine for the job, she powered it up, relieved to find it was charged. She found the flash mode control and the turned the flash off, and pivoted silently and retraced her steps.

Returning to the room she took a couple of candid shots of the pair. Something for the family album she thinks. There were certainly be a few from last night.

*Friday Night.*

Alexis finally managed to extract herself from her father's embrace. Not the easiest thing despite his injury, as he had PDG mode activated.

"Dad. Dad! PDG off please."

Kate looks at her quizzically, the unspoken question obvious enough to prompt Alexis to answer.

"Parental Death Grip." Kate is still puzzled. "How you hold on to your kid in crowds, stressful situations, if you haven't seen them for a whole 6 days." She concludes with a touch of sarcasm.

"Oh." Maybe she'd have to learn that one. For their kids. Wow, slow down brain!

"Okay Pumpkin." Rick breathes as he does relax his grip on his child. He doesn't look at all sorry and it's not an apology for his actions, for missing his daughter.

"S'okay Dad. Just try not to do it too often. I'm not seven anymore" Rick nods, muttering "Don't I know it" under his breath.

Kate knows how much this means to him and she bides her time, waiting to escort them back into the house now that the extended hug has been broken. Except Alexis has a different idea. Kate was surprised to find herself in a hug with the college student. Oh. This hasn't happened a lot outside of the stressful scenes at the hospital.

She felt the whispered 'thank you' against her neck as Alexis releases her and steps back.

Hyper-aware of Rick's gaze on them, she lets her eyes show the younger woman how much this means to her. Alexis only momentarily falters under the strength of her father's partner's gaze. She feels her father's hold on her arm increase perceptibly, he too aware of the significance of this.

At that moment, the November wind chose to remind them they were all still stood outside the door. Rick broke off to stroll to the car to thank the driver who had unloaded Alexis' bags and send him back to the city.

After getting Alexis settled into her room, which unsurprising seemed to require her father's personal attention, they all headed to the kitchen where after a brief review of the fridge contents, they had decided to order takeaway. Kate had let Rick get away with that under the auspices of Alexis's visiting despite him knowing full well about the weekly meal plan still having two days to run, and there being enough food for a simple meal.

They had settled on Indian food. Alexis didn't mind Chinese, just she wasn't as addicted to it like her father, or Kate for that matter. Rick of course knew just the place, even in the Hamptons, and as ever, there was too much food ordered. When the delivery man had departed with his excessive tip, Kate secretly despaired to herself of trying to get Rick back onto the diet after Alexis had gone
back to New York. Perhaps she could send the Indian leftovers – or at least the richer dishes - as well as the planned treasure chest from Ambrosia back with Alexis? In the end she had been pleasantly surprised as Rick self-moderated his intake of some of more carbohydrate loaded dishes, although he couldn't stay away from the onion pakoras. These delightful hors d'oeuvres were rich with spices and even Kate had to concede she found the seemingly simple fried dish delicious. They had all laughed at the prospect of 'onion breath' but as it would be shared by all, so all indulged. There certainly were no pakora among the leftovers sitting in the fridge.

Still they had enjoyed a veritable feast of the food amid family conversation and laughs. Alexis nursed a single glass of a light Rosé through the meal, and Kate had done the same rather than open a different bottle despite her preference for red or white and not in between. Rick stuck to water. Whilst he was now allowed a limited amount of alcohol with his reduced medications, it had the side effect of making him extra tired as he and Kate had discovered earlier in the week. And tonight he was determined to stay up to spend as much time as he could with Alexis.

Kate planned to leave the two alone for a major part of the evening, even the weekend if need be. Alexis needs this. The time to connect with her dad and prove that he is alive. Rick too, although he had been more reluctant to articulate that desire. He's still guarded and more than a little uncertain, and she doesn't want or need him to be. So this weekend is for both of them, and she'll help in whatever way she can, even if that means staying out of the way.

Having cleaned up after dinner, they have no long settled in front of the big projector screen when she gets a text from Esposito asking if she could call and it makes for the perfect justification to leave them to their Daddy/Daughter re-bonding. She had excused herself to the Kitchen, and rung back. Espo needed a minute to find a quiet and private spot – he was obviously in a bar – and his news wasn't encouraging as he related the events surround the missing hacker. Just like her colleagues she doubted the official tale provided by the Federal agent. She and Rick had discussed the possibility of just such an outcome, still it was disappointing. She considered her options and decided to tell them in the morning, sparing the current bonhomie. She thanked Javi for the update and just as a she hung up she could have sworn she heard Ryan's voice in background. Strange, Ryan always had 'date night' with Jenny on Fridays unless on shift, especially now that they were trying for a baby. Thinking nothing more of it for the moment, she took the opportunity to check in with Lanie too.

She returned to join them. In keeping with desired mood it was comedies and light themes only. Nothing heavy. So Kate had observed them provide dialog, sound effects, even actions through Blazing Saddles, and then Roxanne, occasionally joining in and all too often laughing alongside their antics. But it wasn't always frivolity, there were moments of silence, and half-started phrases, stutters of sentences, evidence of the healing outstanding. Alexis had borrowed into Rick's good side and left Kate with his right side and the need to carefully judge any contact. She didn't mind in the least, taking Rick's right hand and gently caressing it as the evening progressed.

After the second movie she had left them to it. Retreated upstairs. It had been lonely in their bed on that Friday night. Cold too. Nothing to heat the space where he should be. She tossed and turned and eventually driven from the bed around 3am by the need to at least check on him, she finds them asleep propped up on a pillow mountain in front of the still on big screen. Locating the universal remote she hits the master off button and they don't even stir. Closing the door, she navigated her way through the cold corridor and upstairs. As she returned to their bed, another resolution forms in her thoughts, a promise to spend as few nights apart as possible. For as long as possible. They had wasted so much time.

He was upright and moving. Stiff limbs, back muscles protesting the lack of a mattress, Rick was
feeling the effects of his – admittedly reasonable sleep – without a proper bed. Still he wasn't going
to admit it, even if he actually seemed to be creaking this morning. Plus there was the other
considerations which outweighed that. He had got to spend the evening and night with Alexis.
Something he hadn't done for a long time. Too long by the judge of it. His daughter who was by
nature bright and indefatigable, but had seemed so afraid and yet strong at the hospital, now
seemed skittish and fragile. As much as he knows he's not right and needs to get better, his parental
instinct overrides all else, and he'll focus a lot of his energy of on getting her right. And then
because he knows what she really needs is him to be healed, he accepts that he has to make himself
right too, because if he isn't okay then none of the women he is so fortunate to share his life with
will be. He also need so acknowledge Kate's decision for daddy/daughter time.

His thoughts are interrupted by a collision of bodies as Kate, who had so gracefully and selflessly
given Alexis and him time and space last night, gives him none now.

"Good Morning Babe." Her kiss is hot, demanding, and probably not at all appropriate given his
barely still a teenager daughter is a few steps behind him. Neither of them care. She tastes of
coffee, and mint (she's brushed her teeth), and has one of his oversized robes on over her sleep
uniform – leggings (shorts or his boxers in warmer weather) and a t-shirt that slides dangerously
off one shoulder to expose her further to his gaze and nip of his teeth – unless your teenage
daughter is standing right behind you, no doubt rolling her eyes.

"Hey Gorgeous. Good morning to you." He actually, really did creak as he stretched more body
parts, feeling the tweak of discomfort as this body automatically tried to include his right shoulder.
Fortunately the strapping holds everything in place, and after a second the pain abates.

Since hospital, Kate has been carefully moderated her own comments regarding his condition,
trying not to tease him too much but still she couldn't resist something. "Not your greatest idea to
fall asleep on something other than a bed, Rick. Especially the floor." She adds for extra measure.

"Not the first time he's done that." Alexis confirms from behind them as they stumble – Kate still
hasn't released him - towards the kitchen.

"You too." Her father comments on her betrayal of past misdemeanours. "Is it pick on the invalid
day?" he challenges.

Kate takes him on. "No." A beat for comedic timing. "No more than usual. But then I'm not the
injured one."

"Or the old one." That barb from the red head who garnishes it with a lightening poke of the
tongue, which he catches as he turns his head towards her as she draws level with him and Kate.

He tries his best to look offended but there is too much love in his eyes for his girls. Alexis sees
that quite clearly, Kate too. They've been so bad at hiding their love that Alexis doesn't quite
understand how the entire world didn't already know. They were doubly hopeless in private. Maybe
the world did, and they were the last to acknowledge it. That would make sense.

Still tramping into the kitchen nothing mattered so much as the awareness of how much this felt
like family. Alexis smiled to herself as she watched her Dad and Kate start to prepare breakfast, all
the time touching and looking at each other, half-spoken sentences mentally finished or actually
completed by the other. Hopeless. Absolutely hopeless. And she finds she likes it, so long as they
keep it mostly PG with her in the room. Her objections long since overruled by how happy the
couple are.
As the morning went on, Kate was surprised by how much she had missed Alexis as well.

They hadn't seen much of each other in the first six months in part due to Alexis starting college and being on campus in a dorm – even if it is the same city - but also the demands of work and, well, spending every moment she could steal alone with Rick. When they had been together, Alexis had been polite, even warm, if a little reserved and reticent, mostly on her Dad's behalf Kate thinks. Kate understands that. She too felt the need to prove her commitment to Rick. Alexis appeared happy to be the judge of her too. For once in her life Kate accepted that where normally she would push back, unable to accept someone else's ruler over her relationship. Even her Dad had learnt to stop. She had shut him out of Will towards the end when her fears were being realised, not even given him an insight of the handful of others since, until finally Josh. Given the length of the doomed relationship, Josh and her Dad had met a couple of times but never got beyond the pleasantries phase. In part Kate suspects because her Dad, even before her, knew it wasn't going to last. Not in the face of her unsaid love for Rick Castle.

Still Alexis was slowly coming round, perhaps a touch faster given the events of the last few weeks, and Kate was happy for that to continue to evolve naturally, and to not force the pace.

On the face of it, Martha had been more accepting of them, but that too had been deceptive. She was fiercely protective of her son and there had been several frank exchanges in the early days after the Grand Dame and Alexis had returned from their European trip. Nothing overt or angry, the actress had settled for direct, blunt even, questions and then left it alone seemingly satisfied that her son was no more at risk.

Any awkwardness around them had long past and what struck her now was the rightness of this. Of sharing homes and being a family.

The Ryans', Queens, New York, almost 10 am.

"Shit!" emanated from his mouth before he could remind himself he was crashed on Ryan's couch. He could smell coffee. And Lavender. Jenny! 'Shit' at least that one was internalised he thinks. Sure enough when he opened his eyes there was the amused blonde hovering almost right next to him with a cup of coffee, and a look of concern.

Javier Esposito had a hangover, a mouth that tasted stale, and breath to bring down a buffalo. He was on the Ryan's couch and his partner's irrepressible wife was waking him with coffee. He shifted slightly to get things moving and then sat up feeling his back twinge. A shame that the spare bed was out of commission, and their couch was on a similar scale to the apartment. The Ryans' nice but compact apartment's second and currently unoccupied bedroom was currently in a state of transition to nursery, even if Mrs Ryan wasn't actually pregnant yet. And he really did not need any more updates from Mr Ryan, or Mrs Ryan too for that matter, on how that process was going.

"Good morning Javier." Oh he's in trouble now. The full name meant he was going to get a lecture, or worse. Mothered. By his partner's wife. Who was actually really, really good at it, even without her own children yet.

"Why Javi?" Crap here it comes.

"You're his best friend, a great and loyal partner. You're smart and attractive, a great dancer, and yet not as happy as you could or should be."

He goes for deflection. "Good morning Jenny. Thank you for letting him come out last night. I'm
"That's okay Javi. To be honest our recent date nights have been decorating the guest room. I think we both could do with the break. My sister came over instead." He wants it to end there before she goes deeper. Where's his partner to rescue him? Oh he hears the shower and thankfully muted but still detectably off-key singing, no rescue option from the currently singing detective.

Jenny motors on. "Kevin says you're dating someone at work but not Doctor Parish. I thought you liked her?" As the only one not actually involved in their line of work (damn he even included Castle in that group), Jenny Ryan is somewhat removed from their group and the need to maintain boundaries, professional or otherwise.

He conceded defeat. "I more than like Lanie, and think that's the problem. She, I, we don't know how to feel about this. We try and something gets too much and it just spirals and I can't control it. Lanie can't either and we both like control. And…" He peters out. That's the most he's shared with anyone about his stop, start, stop, wants to be more 'thing' with the spicy ME.

"I'm not going to try and mother you Javier, you need to work things out for yourself. But at least be honest with yourself and don't leave it too late. It has been hard enough watching Detective Beckett and Richard Castle dance around each other for years. Don't you do the same."

"Yes Mom."

"Oh don't you sass me. I still haven't tweaked your ear about last night. I let him go out and he follows your lead. You're responsible for leaving me with a husband who is good for nothing this morning. Or last night."

He holds his hand up. "Jenny. Please. Please just no more about what you two do for baby making. Okay?"

Jenny doesn't even look bashful or the slightest bit embarrassed. "Alright lecture over. So did you want oatmeal, or pancakes?"

"Just some toast and some more coffee would be great, thanks Jenny."

"Coming up. You can use the shower after he's finished his solos in there, but the water might take a while to heat up." She rolls her eyes as she rises and he watches as his partner's wife moves off to the kitchen. He wants this someday, soon he hopes. He has some decisions to make. Something he should have done a while back. He only hopes it is not too late to give it a shot. Hell it would probably crash and burn but it had to be worth trying. Of course that would depend on Lanie Parish. It always did.

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The Hamptons

They spend rest of the morning being a tad lazy, as if reluctant to shake off the last vestiges of sleep. Or get out of their night clothes. Until Alexis made the first move heading for a quick shower, and returning before Kate and Rick could even drag themselves out of arms reach of the coffee pot.

Alexis had gone fully into nostalgia mode, wearing a slightly tired but comfortable and familiar brown and white jumper than even now almost reached her knees and some very long socks.

She had also gone hunting in Rick's study and emerged with some family albums, apparently randomly selected and most of which included herself, but there were a handful which pre-dated
her.

Kate is intrigued by the prospect of getting a look at old photos of Rick, and visions of a much younger Rick. Since becoming a couple he had somehow magic-ed most of the offending albums into hiding at the Loft and denied Martha her chance and the embarrassment. Of course removing even such a significant visual aid had been no impediment to the Grand Dame who had carried on regardless, often reducing her female audience to tears of laughter and well Rick to a flustered state of half-words and swallowed indignation.

She's sure Alexis is going to take it much easier on her Dad this time, and she enough she does. They ease into it with a couple of more recent albums from the time after Kate had already met them.

She surprised to see a couple of candids of her around the breakfast bar from the morning she returned Martha's jewellery – which was confirmed that morning as being real, one of the few things saved from the fraudster last husband. Even though it was early days, she looks happy, a light in her eyes that was honest and just a little bit open. Just like the look on Rick' face in the last shot. It's not lust, nor love. She lits her head just a little momentarily lost in contemplation. Intrigue. That's it. He's intrigued, curious, and it makes his face come alive, the cerulean eyes inquisitive and yet there is more in that expression. She turns to him and sees everything coming back at her. Oh how could she have ever doubted him? Now there's so much love, more than a touch of lust, and the curiosity unbounded. Theirs is a dance that's never going to end.

"That was me," confesses Alexis. "Used my phone. You were distracted retelling the story of the red carpet, the dress, and the case. Even then I knew you were different. I had told Dad as much the night of the book party. He tried to keep his dating separate from me, home, even Grams, although he usually failed on the last part. Yet there you were in our home, and although we didn't know it, destined to be part of our family."

Kate blinks the tears away, reaching across to squeeze Alexis' hand. Rick's looking on with so much pride and eyes just as misty too. What is it with the Castle's and fate? She had stopped believing when life had been so cruel to her, and yet they've had their own challenges, and they still believe. They make her want to believe.

Rick leans forward and turns the page, and they move on. Still there are enough new bits of information from events she wasn't aware of. Things she'll be a part of in future.

And then they're off down into pre-history and encountering a far different Rick than she knows now. It appears to be a random assortment of years. The first is him aged around five with lots of back stage photos and cast shots. He's stuck between the puppy fat and boyhood but it is the eyes that even then steal her attention. Full of joy, interest and just a touch of devilment.

Then him around ten or eleven. Cute, really cute. Still a boy but the first traces of evidence of the man he will become. The eyes are different, just a little more guarded, as if he's begun to learn that not everything in life is fair and rosy.

They skip his high school years, Rebecca and other events. "Another time." Comes the promise. She'll hold him to that. She wants to know all of him.

Then it's college. Oh he's filled out and the darling of the dating scene. And some shots clearly show that too. Him with a partially buttoned shirt, imposing chest on view, and a gaggle of attractive girls around him.

There are a handful in uniform from his Army cadet days. She clearly recognises a younger Tim
Matthews grinning beside an extremely dashing Rick Rodgers. Some in field gear with rifles, obviously taken during training. One in his dress uniform with an officer pining a rifle badge for marksman ship on his chest. This Rick is ramrod straight at attention, a serious face and only a hint via his eyes of the pride and satisfaction. He may claim to be uncomplicated and an open book but he's got just as many layers as her, some are just concealed differently.

The final cadet photo show him with a group of peers, all laughing and smile and there in the background she can see his clearly nervous drill sergeant.

"My farewell parade. He congratulated me on making the right choice for the US Army when I announced I was terminating my enlistment in the ROTC." He chews his lip for a second. "I enjoyed soldiering and even the leadership side. I was serious and focused when necessary but I did enjoy the odd lighter moment when it was apt. I'm not sure how I would have turned out if I stayed at it."

Then something she still hadn't got comfortable with. Pictures of Rick with Meredith, looking happy, partying, kissing. Damn she shouldn't be jealous, hell she was not even at the age of consent then. When Alexis was conceived. She could hardly lay claim to him back then. Especially in light of her constant denials to make any claim when he was there, hers for the taking for so long. She skips quickly through and neither Castle comment at this.

The albums have been selected randomly. There are plenty more. Pictures with fans, other authors including the infamous Gotham City crew, some of the people she now knows form a small circle of trusted confidants if not outright friends. Nothing from his time at the CIA. No pictures of Sophia Turner even though he dated her.

She picks up an album with what looks like a six year old Alexis and continues to flip through until she comes to an image that bring her up short. The composition seems innocuous enough. Alexis playing in a yard with two older kids, one maybe two older, the other perhaps four years senior. Except she knows that yard. She knows the kids. Rebecca and Mary. They're not kids now. Like her they had to leave behind any vestiges of residual childhood, blown away by the awful reality of losing a parent in the most violent way. Alexis is in her Captain's back yard playing with Roy Montgomery's kids.

She knows she's shocked, and Rick, probably Alexis can see that.

"Kate?" He's all concern.

"Not now Rick." She's fighting back tears. This shouldn't be the shock it feels like. He's told her he knew Roy from before he met her. Before he started shadowing her. "Later please. Can I ask later?" The kiss to her forehead affirms so.

She had regained her equilibrium and spent more than an hour exploring through Castle life. "I'll be calling your Dad, Beckett." Promises Castle with a view to obtaining photos of her life before them. She knows her Dad will gladly cooperate, perhaps even the more embarrassing ones. Oh God! Perhaps it would be better to get it over and done with.

Rick has stepped out to the toilet. And Alexis had wandered away to do something unsaid. She is idling flicking through the pages of an early photo album, and has gone back to a particular picture numerous times. The color image is slightly faded through time but the image presents a clearly besotted father, all misplaced hair and bleary eyes but so in love with his flame haired daughter. Tracing her finger respectfully over the slightly curled photo-paper she envisions their own future family albums, with her and Rick sharing the pages with new family members.
Alexis had seemingly returned unnoticed by her, and arrives by her shoulder just in time to catch her fingers lovingly caresses the image of the obviously smitten new dad. The awe is transparent but she knows him well enough to detect that stubborn, determined streak as well. She knows she's looking at evidence of a man, her man now, committing himself to a lifetime's responsibility for his child.

"Don't wait too long."

She doesn't start too much and acknowledges her. "Hey Alexis." Plus she can be brave. "For what?"

"Having kids. If you want them." She drops down beside her. "It would be nice if dad is still active enough for them to have what I had. He was, is, the best dad. I can't think of anyone who comes close. Who shares that joy of life and discovery, who is willing to sacrifice everything for you."

She touches Kate's shoulder. "He was left to do it on his own a lot of the time. He deserves a partner, someone to share that joy and responsibility if he does it again."

Kate doesn't splutter, or even hesitate with her response.

"Alexis, I know that. But can we at least do this in the right order? Plus this is a conversation your dad and I barely had when deciding about the Captain's ultimatum some weeks ago just before he was shot." She's still surprised she can say that without breaking into tears. Indeed that she can handle this conversation without fleeing.

Alexis nods but still seeks clarification and pushes her. So very Castle. "Married?"

"Yeah." A heartbeat, a big one. "Well engaged first." Kate looks wistful. "I'd really like to be engaged even if only for a little bit."

Alexis is nothing but persistent. "What are you waiting for?"

"The right time. At before you it's not a complicated formula or a whole bunch of conditions. But we do have some goals. For us that really means your Dad getting better. And I know you've noticed. But he's not himself. The experience has hit him harder than he lets on, and it's gonna take some time for him to get back. He will, and I'll be there for him every step of the way, like he wanted to be for me. We've learnt from our mistakes, my mistakes. And when he's better, then we'll take that step. It's not if, it's when Alexis."

"You're right Kate. Dad isn't the same. It's like he's second guessing everything. He does overthink and worry but normally his optimism wins out. At the moment it isn't. Now I don't think it's too bad but he's not entirely himself, and I think that's okay so long as it is temporary. It is temporary isn't it? My Dad will come back to us?"

"It will be." She knows him. And she had trust in him. His love for his family, for her, is his greatest strength. He will overcome these obstacles.

"Good." She takes Kate's hand and squeezes. "I want you to know that I am okay with that. I really am."

"Thank, that means a lot to both of us."

"Can I ask you something Kate?"

"Sure." She wants to surrender to the temptation to qualify it but doesn't.'
"How do you do it? Have such great faith in him?" The hand which had been on her shoulder slips. "I mean he's my Dad and he's never not been there for me. I have a lifetime of evidence. But how do you know?"

"In part because you Dad has been that rock for me. The one who believes in me. My Mom was one like that, and my Dad is that again, but in a way parents matter but at the same time don't really count. Perhaps it is that innate instinct to bond and build new families.

"But also because he's my partner. We do all this – not just work - together and we've survived so much. And we've done that over the years, even when not together. Building that bond and that trust.

"Look Alexis I love you Dad beyond measure. The forever kind. One and done I call it. That's your Dad for me. I know he sometimes wishes he could say the same thing, but there are things in his life, foremost you, that he would never trade that heartache and uncertainty for."

"I think I understand. But how do you know?"

"What? That he is the one?" Kate purses her lips. "I once told your Dad. All the songs make sense."

"Yeah he told me. It did seem right at the time with Ashley, but then it faded."

"And yes you're correct, sometimes it's not right. Or rather not enough. Or just temporary. But it doesn't mean you shouldn't embrace it. It was one of the important lessons that your Dad first re-taught me. One that I had forgotten since my Mom died. That I should have fun and enjoy life. And I'll admit that I didn't understand it properly at first. I dated other men seeking that happiness. But I never loved them. It just took me a while to accept that what I needed was the happiness that only Rick could bring me."

Alexis breaks her gaze from Kate, startled by the intensity and honesty of the confession.

"You need to know the person, accept them and cherish them for all their characteristics, even the annoying ones. And for me, it really hit me not long after you and Martha got back from Europe and we had finally told you we were together. Your Dad wanted to spend some time with you just before you started college, and I didn't begrudge that but I missed him terribly. It was so sappy, especially after we had only been together a few weeks, but then I thought about and forced myself to continue to be honest with myself. I know suspected for some time, long before we actually became a couple, and I had found it to be true. Quite simply for me it is that commitment and opportunity of going to sleep with someone and waking up with them every day, and knowing it is what you want for as long as you can be."

"And being here alone is helping him?"

"He's not alone. It's helping both of us Alexis. Rick's healing and we're learning each other just a bit more. Once he starts physio the physical side of his recovery will pick up pace. It will have tough moments, but I'll do my best to get him all the way back." To you she leaves unsaid.

"Thank you."

"You don't have to thank me. But can I ask a favour of you and let me discuss these things with Rick first before we talk again?"

Alexis doesn't trust herself to speak but her eyes are full of determination and respect.
Eventually they decide it is time to get a move on and get out of the house. They have things to do. Cursory showers and casual clothes are the order of the day. As they assemble in the kitchen, Alexis watches as Kate clips the holstered Sig to her belt.

"Is that necessary?"

"I hope not." Kate turns to face the younger woman. "No specific reason. But we've not had a satisfactory answer as to why we were targeted. So I'm, sorry we're taking reasonable precautions."

As ever her partner backs her up. "Just like we did for you with Jane, Pumpkin."

"So this has nothing to do with the phone call last night?"

"No. That was just one line of the investigation panning out. But honestly, I don't believe there is a real threat. We would take extra precautions if we even suspected there was."

"Kate's right Alexis. We wouldn't downplay any threat to people we care about."

"Okay."

They exit the house and troop into the garage and within minutes are on the way with Kate at the wheel of the SUV. They are heading into town with the intention of having a late lunch, and then raiding the shelves and cold storage at Ambrosia for Alexis' study group and for the two of them for the week.

Guided by the Castles, Kate navigates the SUV through the new town and soon has them at their destination. Having parked off the road in the tidy customer car park at the rear, Kate gets her first opportunity to scope out this culinary nirvana. Ambrosia is actually two older single story buildings joined by a fully enclosed walkway cum extension. The stone and brickwork is weathered but well maintained, vines and creepers adding color to the muted red of the time and element faded exterior.

Alexis is first out of the car. "The store plus deli is to the left, and café with seating which extends into the covered area on the right."

Kate has a dressed simply in jeans and a grey polo-neck, with her hair in simple tress. Rick is likewise dressed down in jeans and plaid shirt with a loose jacket covering his still strapped right arm and shoulder. He has a beanie on his head, and he only partially looks like Rick Castle attempting low-key. As it's not summer, sun glasses would simply be a pathetic attempt at disguise. Of course his height and this strapped arm are not helping.

Whilst trying to keep Rick incognito is one thing, trying to disguise Alexis and her long red locks is another thing entirely. Especially here where everyone seems to know her. Two people call out greetings to her by name before they even enter the door. None remark on Castle and she relaxes just a little, still feeling the reassuring presence of the pistol at her side.

Homespun is the most apt term for what she encounters inside the doors. None of that near surgical Spartan fitting of modern establishments, nor the fake folksy of retro places. It is just an enticing balance of the homely and the practical.

Sure enough Rick spies the manager, Marcus and with him today are his parents who whilst retired still own the place. Introductions are made. Kurt and Athena Gunthendral are charming and sharp conversationalists. They gently probe Alexis on how college is before even more gently wishing Rick a full recovery in quiet tones that maintain their privacy convey more than simple politeness.
Good people is the phrase that springs to mind for Kate before they are ushered towards a table and the promise of lunch.

Their corner booth has secured them a peaceful meal. Sure, one of the wait staff had done a double take at their little group, but a wink from Marcus confirms that the individual will be encouraged not to share their observations on who is dining there. The place is busy, full but not quite packed, although Alexis assures Kate that it is often so in summer and holidays. Service is efficient and friendly and it is not long before they are finishing their almost unbelievably yummy meals of lightly spiced Thai pumpkin soup, and open sandwiches on artisan bread, and about to nurse their hot chocolates (no marshmallows Rick!) a little longer, when someone recognises him.

"Oh. Wow." The interruption comes from a woman in her forties but dressed a decade younger, not quite carrying it off despite clearly working at maintaining her body. That she clearly recognises Rick is almost less of a surprise in that he surprisingly recognises the woman too.

"Wow Megan Trailor." He's almost perfectly polite and neutral but Kate knows him. There is a tell in the way his voice shifts just a little deeper on the surname. This isn't a friend.

"Richard Rodgers or would that be Rick Castle?" Not a question. "Or can I still call you Ricky?" Not sure that was a question either.

"Rick's fine. How are you Megan. Is it Trailor still?" A little bit of bite back.

"It's Trailor again. You're familiar with that concept even if you didn't have to change your name because you're divorced." Wow talking about snappish.

"Oh look that's rude of me. Megan, this is Alexis my daughter and Kate, my partner."

She might be waspish but she's still polite enough to shake hands. She reaches a hand out to exchange greetings with each. "Nice to meet you both." Both settle for nods in response leaving the conversation to Rick.

"Do you mind me asking what you do now Megan? I remember at the Academy your plan was to go into the family business."

"I did go into the farming business but we got out of agriculture more than a decade ago and into property development in rural areas. We buy and prepare large blocks of land which we sell to developers. I leave it simply at admitting that business is very good. And I don't need to ask what you do Rick. I had to admit that I was surprised to see all that the dreaming in class, well when you were there, paid off. Along with a good dose of luck of course."

"Thanks." Rick's keeping it monosyllabic, clearly there is some history between them.

"I haven't seen you at any of the reunions. How come? I mean it isn't like Ricky Rodgers wouldn't want to come back and gloat a little bit about making good."

"Not entirely sure I would be welcome. Principal Duncan issued a lifelong ban, and the last I heard he was still their crushing the free will of any student who crossed his path." That he's not the youth he was remains unsaid but Megan doesn't detect the vibe at all and carries on oblivious.

"Oh he is still there. I don't think he'll every forgive you. I'm not sure I entirely do. Anyway I have to go. Bye Ricky. It was nice to meet you Alexis and Kate."

"Goodbye Megan." And she's gone with sense of relief.
He turns to his family. Alexis has a barely supressed grin, clearly not the first time she has witnessed something like this. Kate has a schooled face, but her eyes flash in repressed anger. She hates when Rick down plays his achievements, and worse when he lets people belittle him.

"I guess you want an explanation." He doesn't wait. "Um…she was Class President in my senior year at Faircroft Academy.

"Still doesn't explain the grudge, Ricky?"

"It was her Dad's cow."

"What?"

"It was a prank I organised to put a cow on the roof of the academy. It came from her Dad's farm, well one of them. I co-opted two of her brothers into borrowing and driving the truck we needed. Corrupted is what her father called it."

"Her Dad's cow?" Alexis has clearly never heard this particular story.

"Well it's not like he didn't have thousands." At their combined scowls, clarifies. "Of cows." Two heads shake in resignation. "And it wasn't hurt. We had worked out how to get it up and down with injury. I'm sure the American Humane Society would have approved."

"Castle." Kate's voice carried all the disappointment, disapproval and grudging appreciation his mother's had all those years ago.

"Anyway, her Dad thought it was funny, but Megan saw it as a personal insult and persuaded her mother to threaten her brothers to recant their admission of participation, and with that they made an example of me. And well Principal Duncan already hated me."

*Oh Castle.*

"Did you date her?" This from the daughter.

"Alexis." His mortified face. "God No! Which bit of she didn't like me did you not get? You believe don't you Beckett?" He's looking for backup. He's so cute when flustered and clearly telling the truth.

"Do you think she'll tell?" That they're in the Hamptons, hiding here.

"No idea. It's been more than twenty years. I guess I hope she's let it go, or at least enough. I suppose we should warn Paula just in case news breaks."

"Do it later Dad. It won't matter either way really."

Alexis snaps them out of any introspection or retrospection by recounting tales of her own from this place. How they have no favourite spot, sitting wherever the staff can seat them, often waiting along with everyone else for a table to free up due to the popularity of the place. Kate's favourite story is the of a summer storm and Alexis regales them, and her particularly, with how when a freak thunderstorm drove everyone inside and with no power, and every space taken, her Dad had told stories for an hour or so to keep the children distracted. How he had cleverly turned phrases to draw their parents in and how reluctant and disappointed almost everyone was when the power came back on and the rain stopped, and stories came to an end.
Having finished lunch, Alexis leads them into the second part of Ambrosia and the impact to their senses is phenomenal. The kaleidoscope of colors with the softer hues of the furnishings, the olfactory assault from fresh produce, the layers of meats and cheeses wafting through the space. Kate finds her own self-discipline wavering in the face such awesome scrumptiousness. Fortunately Alexis is organised and has a list – no deviations – and they pretty much stick to it with only a couple of smuggled surprises in their shopping trolley at checkout.

Rick calls Paula on the drive back. His veteran publicist is not surprised, it's not the first time he's called to warn her of a potential story. For her part she gives the group a heads-up that some media organisations are actively seeking his & Kate's location.

After arriving home – no one thought to call it otherwise - and putting away their groceries, Alexis had insisted they go to visit Louis. His residence is close, one of Rick's near neighbours but given the neighbourhood, it was still a comfortable fifteen minute walk to the imposing mansion that stood one lot back from the sea on the other side of the road. The grounds were smaller than theirs but the house far more imposing. Three stories, a turret even, glorious facades with carved features, mainly of nature, and pretty flower boxes on the upper stories contrasting with the wrap around veranda on the ground floor.

The door opens before they make it up the perfectly manicured path. There is a flash of red one party member breaks away to greet the man still mostly hidden behind the door.

"Ma Oncle!" Alexis breaks out in more than passable French complete with correct tonal pronunciation. Kate is impressed.

"Mon Cherie!" the sprightly gentleman who emerges from behind the threshold embraces the red head, kissing both cheeks in quick succession, before swiftly greeting Rick with an open embrace. "Richard."

"And you must be Martha's Katherine." The way he says it stays any thought of protest from her as her takes her hand and draws her to him. It is clearly a compliment of the highest order. Louis knows Martha and whatever Rick's mother had told him had clearly left a lasting impression although they had never met until now. Her request to "Please call me Kate." is innocuous against his perfectly choreographed lifting of her hand to meet his half-bow and the kiss was weighted with utmost precision.

"Taking notes Richard?" he sly enquires of her man. "Frankie gave me plenty of lessons never you mind, old man." It would be cruel out of the mouths of almost anyone else but it carries history, and affection, respect and humour.

"Behave you two" chides the youngest member of their party. "Or I'll tell Grams."

As they are led into the sitting room, Kate has the opportunity to question Alexis briefly.

"French?"

"I've always wanted to go back to Paris. But this time when it was my own choice." Kate remembers the tale of Meredith taking an unwilling and airsick Alexis to Paris for the day. "So I've studied the language and culture, and of course Louis is the perfect person to learn with too. I got three days there with Grams after graduation but it wasn't enough. I want more time there."
"Well who knows when you'll go back next. But don't miss out on life."

They spend an hour or so chatting. Louis even humours Rick and perhaps because of his recovery doesn't recount any tales of his teenage years despite Kate's dramatic batting of eyelids. However, there is a gleam in the eye when the former Broadway producer promises Kate 'Next time' and perhaps Alexis too, although Kate suspects those may have already been shared based upon the conspiratorial look between the two.

As they walk away, heading home, Rick and Alexis holding hands and nattering like conspirators, Kate falls a step or behind and takes a moment for herself. She ponders the diametric of the lives she witnesses not just here but in her chosen career as a homicide detective. Of love and loss.

Louis is clearly broken by the loss of Frankie, but so joyful of the time they spent together. His tale of how they were friends so long resonates with her. Louis had admitted they waited too long and missed the opportunity of a biological family.

The parallels are there. They always have been. She's not missing on anything anymore. Just ahead of her is everything – well not quite but almost - she wants. Suddenly darting between the two she breaks their connection and seizes their hands in hers. Her surprise intrusion is greeted by shoulder-nudges from the pair, and they complete the journey home as one.

After their feast the previous night, they had decided on a lighter meal whilst at Ambrosia. Their simple supper is a Moroccan salad – couscous laced with spices, apricots, basil - and barbequed fresh prawns in lime and tamarind. Kate runs the barbeque as Rick is still incapable, and he watches with not a little awe as weaves a spell with the food, the delicious flavors enticing their taste-buds before the first bite.

"How do I not know this about you?" He's far to close, the voice far too deep.

"A girl likes some secrets lover-boy." Her tease is has a goodly amount of come-hither with it.

"Semi-traumatized teen still in the room." Chides the witness from her corner, nursing a suspiciously dense text book and a soft drink.

"Sorry" issues simultaneously from both to be met with further resignation.

"That's still kinda freaky and cute at the same time."

Kate gets them back on topic. "Right dinner is ready. Rick please get your pills. Alexis and I don't care if you crash but we've both seen you fussing with your shoulder for the last few hours."

Waving his good hand in defeat Rick locates his prescription medication and throws the correct dosage down with a chug of water.

**Manhattan, Saturday evening**

Tori Ellis was dressed up. A nice dress finishing just above the knee, new heels, her winter coat on the back of her chair. She looked good. Real good. Not Park Lane, but cocktail hour at least, more certainly night-club and crumpled sheets hot. She knew it. The two guys brave enough to approach her and have the courtesy to ask her to her face if she wanted a drink/was waiting for someone, knew it too. There might be others but they were too chicken-shit to ask. She got that a lot.
It was what she liked about Javier Esposito. He wasn't chicken-shit, or least he hadn't been. But now she was waiting, way beyond what was acceptable. Eventually just as she's beginning to push beyond exasperated he arrives.

She could tell it wasn't going to go well.

She's dressed for the night. He's dressed for well, not her kind of night. She knows he can dress how she wants him, but not this. If this is a message he's sending, she gets it. Loud and clear.

Javier Esposito is dressed like the end of a work day. Smart business, maybe a little street casual.

"Hi Javi." Her greeting is level and neutral.

"What do you want Tori?" Shit he's on edge, and it comes out harder, much harder, than he means. No apology for his tardiness.

Still she doesn't let him get away with that. Her scowl says so, and he has the decency – he is a good man at heart - to look apologetic and say the words. "Sorry Tori, it's been a long day. I didn't mean to bring work with me." She nods, and he repeats the question. "Hi Tori. Sorry I'm late." And then before he can chicken out. "What is it you are looking for?"

His honesty deserves a straight answer. "Friendship, some fun, good food, great sex. But I don't want a serious relationship. Now." She takes a second before continuing. "Look if we build to one fine, but I'm not there at the moment, maybe a while." Damn that's the most honest she's been with anyone for a long time. She really likes him. But does he like her enough?

She turns it around, questioning the detective. "What do your want Javier?"

He doesn't get to answer immediately as the waitress interrupts. Two beers ordered, she departs and still he doesn't speak immediately.

"A serious relationship. Building towards a future." He stops and pushes his hands against the side of his head, and Tori can but help appreciate the muscles. He has a great body and good moves. If he notices her eyeing him up, he lets it pass as he finds the words. "I guess I want what Ryan and Jenny have. Even what Beckett and Castle have."

"So we're not on the same page." Tori confirms. She's so not ready for that. For a lifetime. Once she thought she was and that still hurt.

His response. Well it's not a question.

She's not surprised.

He own answer doesn't need saying. The flash of pain in her eyes, the straightening of her posture all says 'No' for her.

"You've been distracted anyway." He doesn't respond to that. There's nothing to say. He can't deny it. He and Lanie had comforted each other after Castle's shooting. The sex had been a seemingly natural evolution that night. But they hadn't really discussed it and Lanie's mixed messages confused him.

"Look, it's fine, we're not exclusive, and it's clear you have feelings for her."

"But I want to be."
"Not me Javier. I'm not at that place. I told you about my previous long term relationship. How it almost wrecked my life, changed my plans. This job I have is getting my plans back on track. Giving me achievable goals. I'm having fun. I want to have fun with you if you're willing."

He looks down. "You seemed to be in this at the beginning. It was good. I thought we were good."

"We were."

Past tense. So it was over. She had more than enough evidence before then, this is confirmation.

Before either of them can speak further the waitress appears with the beers and a bowl of bar snacks.

Fuck she hoped this wasn't going to make it awkward at the precinct. Captain Gates had pulled her aside a little over a month ago and warned her. She got the impression it wasn't in an official capacity and that the Captain was looking out for both of them, the detective and herself. Tori is pretty sure that the Captain was far more astute and observant than most of her team believed.

They nurse their beers in near silence. Not even bothering with the banality of small talk.

Her mood destroyed, and despite her intention to keep things light and simple between them, it fucking hurts at the moment. "Can you at least take me home please?"

"Sure." She doesn't like taciturn Esposito. She can't read him. She needs the tone of his voice to gauge his mood that and to see his eyes which have been fixed on his beer for most of the time. Not that she needs to know anything else tonight. Or wants to.

Finishing their beers, they stand, as he tosses down some money, and unconsciously takes her arm to escort her out.

Their audience probably thought they something else planned based on the wolf-whistles and comments. Espo's badge and pistol flash in the half-light match his scowl, and the comments die off before they reach the door.

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**The Hamptons**

It's not even eight thirty and Kate had dragged her near catatonic father to bed. She doesn't even mind.

Alexis had learnt many things, not only from her Dad, but also his colleagues and friends at the Twelfth and the OCME. At one time Kate Beckett had been foremost amongst these teachers, alone with her BFF Doctor Lanie Parish. Kate Beckett had fallen - a little, but previously quite far - from that pedestal, the one that Alexis had – she realised now – unfairly placed her on. But now she was beyond beginning to understand how that was so.

Starting college and throwing herself into that new challenge had robbed her of many opportunities to observe her father and his girlfriend. Still she had seen their interactions on earlier occasions, but anything of their love she had witnessed before pales to now. Here in the privacy of the Hamptons, it hung on everything Kate did. The woman's love for her father. From the little touches, the glances, the banter and interplay. The simplest things to the most complicated. The silence and the words. Everything unsaid but still promised.

They had been close, almost perfectly in sync in the Loft on those occasions Alexis had made it back from the dorms. But here it was different and not just because of her Dad's injuries. The Loft
was home but the Hamptons was previously theirs – hers and her father's. Sure Grams was around more these days but in the beginning it was just the two of them. Now it is Kate's too, and where she thought she would object or judge, even just a little, she hasn't the desire to be jealous of the place Kate Beckett is making in their family, in her father's heart. In her own she admits.

Not when instead of jarring, or at least stuttering, instead the couple had adjusted, even inside a week, and the symbiotic nature of their existence was all the more powerful for it. Still she notices how familiar Kate is with this house, previously their summer haven. She knows where things are in the kitchen, the floor board on the landing that creaks, and the best seat at the breakfast bar – the one facing the ocean which even in winter hints at the expanse of steel blue stretching beyond the horizon tempered by the equally grey of the winter sky. In summer it's a revelation. Like a painting.

For her part Alexis has also been reassured that there are things she too knows. Foremost was that there was always a place for her in this family. And not just because both her Dad and Kate had told her so, that her place amongst them was never in doubt. She feels a momentary stab of bitterness at herself for even contemplating the petty thoughts but she had a long history of being disappointed by the women in her Dad's life, even her mother, or stepmother. First stepmother she wry notes as she recognises that this person with them will be her next and please let it be last stepmother. The disappointment hurt every time, even though it was almost always unintentional - her Dad would never abide those that intentionally tried to slight her (or Grams). Kate is different because she is the very epitome of intentional. It's who she is. The thinker, the planner, the deliberate one. She choose her Dad and his family. She not a quitter, she is dedicated. This is for good, forever, and this Alexis finds is entirely to her satisfaction.

**Union Square Café, Manhattan, 9 pm Saturday Night**

Tom Demming has been getting his life back on track. Professionally it had been good for a while. A promotion to Detective First Class, and in the running for taking over the Robbery squad. But personally not so much.

He'd been an idiot to even think about trying to hook up – again - with Kate Beckett. If he'd been even slightly rational about it, he had to have known there was much more to her relationship with her writer partner, even before she confirmed it to the world. After all she had broken up with him once before because he wasn't what she was looking for. Then to cap his most moment of ignominy, he'd been a drunken idiot at the Old Haunt too, which of course turns out to be Castle's very own and owned drinking hole. Not the best couple of weeks in his life.

So he had done the cop thing and tried to compensate by throwing himself back into work but that had not resolved anything. At first. Then as the Robbery team had been given responsibility for the post-processing of the recovered stolen artwork that assignment had bought him into contact with Serena Kayne. Just like Kate Beckett she should be way out of his league, except she also didn't act that way.

Of course, in a somewhat cruel twist of fate, but somehow unsurprisingly, he found that the stunning and smart insurance investigator knew Beckett and Castle from a previous case. Was there no escaping the dynamic duo?

And yet weeks later here he was on a date – he had even checked with her to be sure - with self-same stunning and smart Serena Kayne. Although she had been somewhat of a tease at the start of what he knows now is her second appearance at the Twelfth, she had been nothing other than entirely professional in her work. Something that Tom Demming has reciprocated much to her appreciation. Not that he hadn't appreciated the smart dressed woman when he hoped she wasn't
looking. Although he's pretty sure that she had caught him out at least a couple of times.

This evening was her way of saying thank you to the Robbery Detective for his efforts in wrapping up the paperwork and legals. They had agreed to go 'Dutch' and that didn't bode well for his wallet. This was a very upmarket restaurant that he would normally been seen nowhere near. But his pride meant sharing the bill. Plus her tight skirt, silky cream blouse with more than a hint of cleavage and ruby lipstick was worth it on its own, even before she opened her very smart mouth.

They hadn't been seated long before a sincere looking and apologising Serena had stepped away to take an urgent call in private, and whilst Tom was waiting he took a moment to take in the restaurant now that his focus wasn't immediately on the person opposite him. As a cop he scoped the people first. Mostly couples with the odd larger party. All reserved and talking quietly as the wait staff glided around in their pristine white uniforms.

It was his second sweep of the room that broke the comfortable relaxed atmosphere of the evening for him. He observed some familiar faces at a table in the corner of the restaurant, a table whose location was clearly designed to provide more privacy than the majority on the open floor.

The jarring sensation is coming from recognising Councilwoman Glaser, who along with Congressman Dike, were closely aligned with Senator William Bracken, rumoured to be under Federal investigation. Glaser was such a Bracken loyalist that she was often openly identified as his City Council lackey. But it is the person opposite the councilwoman that really attracts his attention. Lieutenant Carmel Davies of IAD and on secondment to the Ethical Standards Professional Integrity unit is seated at the table and from the motion of her arms and the posture of her body was engaged in very direct conversation with the councilwoman.

This is the very same IAD Lieutenant that had rocked up to the Precinct waiting to investigate Beckett's team. The one very one that Captain Gates ran off. It had taken days for the coffee machine discussions to die down and well the new found respect for their Captain remained.

Focusing back on the unlikely pair, they're being very animated. Extremely so.

He's not close enough to hear the conversation but likewise, he's close enough to take a snapshot with his phone without being detected. Then Serena is back and the next two hours pass-by more than amicably.

Several times during evening he observes the distant table. If Serena notices she doesn't make an issue of it until they are waiting for desert.

"Tom, are you 'copping out' on me again?"

"Sorry? Pardon?" He's confused and then he gets it. "No!" He rethinks the question. "What does that even mean?"

Serena smiles. He swears there is a touch of seduction there too. He does feel the attraction.

"Your second nature. You spot something that jars, stands out and you investigate, or at the very least observe closely." The twitch of her eyebrows conveys her amusement as does her wry smile.

"You've been glancing at that corner table on at least six occasions this evening. Am I not interesting enough for you Tom?"

"Serena, that's not why I am doing that. You're both more than interesting and attractive."

"Hmm, nice recovery Tom." Her accompanying grin turns slightly feral. "So who is sitting at the
"table with Senator Bracken's tame councilwoman?" Serena is well informed especially for an out-of-towner. He should have known.

"Her name is Carmel Davies. She in IAD. That's.." Serena cuts him off.

"It's all right Tom, I know what IAD stands for."

"She's a Lieutenant, and is on assignment to the Department's Ethical Standards Professional Integrity unit."

"Wow, what a mouthful. I take it she has been nosing around the Twelfth."

"Yeah, she came in to investigate Beckett's team but Captain Gates kicked her out and demanded they follow proper procedure if they wanted to return."

"Oh. Detective Beckett certainly seems to attract her share of attention. Anyway I'm sure you'll make the right decision about what to do with your information." And then just as smoothly the insurance investigator turns to conversation back to more immediate and personal matters. Tom finds that he really does enjoy her company and by the time they have finished desert and split the bill, he's summoned the courage to ask her out again. She smiles, the dimples shine and she acquiesces whilst warning him she's out of town for a nearly two weeks for work but she'll call before she returns.

When they part at the taxi rank, her kiss starts at his cheek but ends at his lips. He doesn't even care when next shift, his team give him grief over his ridiculously happy demeanour, until he remembers he needs to report his observations from the restaurant.

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**The Hamptons**

Alexis has retreated to her bedroom to do some preparation and organising for the study session tomorrow, and Kate takes the opportunity for some alone time with her man. Unfortunately Rick had crashed after taking his medication. Kate takes the time to curl in beside him and read certain that he'll wake up before it is too late. Sure enough by eleven he is awake and unable to sleep for the moment.

Pulling on robes they head downstairs and collecting glasses of wine, they head into his study. With the lights dimmed Kate takes the chaise longue and Rick his familiar chair. The chink of glasses saluting marks the start and now they are facing each other.

"Tell me about Roy?"

"What about him Kate? You knew him as well."

"Yeah but as we know he kept secrets, sins, from us. And I forgave him Rick then and since, but there is more isn't there? More to Roy Montgomery and there's a story of how a hard-working, sure not blue-collar cop came to be friends with Rick Castle, author, millionaire, Page Six celebrity, Dad?" The last is clearly on the money judging by his reaction. How he is so good at poker still surprises her.

"I gave you the gist of it Beckett." He's just a little defensive.

"But not the heart of it Rick. I think I would like to know. Can you tell me how you knew Roy before I even did? Help me understand. Please." She's pleading not begging.
He nods, almost imperceptibly, but after being partners for slow long even the most nuanced of signals is apparent to the other.

"After Alexis's kidnapping." The pause is entirely like him getting into storyteller mode as he arranges everything in his head, gets the order of events, characters and even the words and phrases he uses. But tonight they fail him and he settles for the bare truth.

"Remember I told you how a representative of the Mob came to me? Well it was an arranged meet. One of their venues. For them to apologise for the unsanctioned actions and how appropriate measures would be taken.

"Turns out the meet was compromised and we were seen together. A CI fed the information through to their handler. But no one thought more of it until the bodies of known wise guys started turning up – well one of them did - or didn't in the case of the others – who no one had any confirmation of status, alive or dead. Suspicion tended towards the later. That there was no other violence or crimes pointed to some form of internal disciplinary action.

"Roy was a homicide lieutenant back then. Not long promoted and stationed at the 43rd Precinct. He was assigned to investigate the homicide of one Zack Farina. His was the body that actually turned up in the River.

"The wheels works slowly so it was about three days after the body being found before Roy came to the Loft and interviewed me. Gave me the option of a lawyer, there or at the station. I choose not to take up my right. I initially bluffed it. Or at least tried to. But Roy saw how I was with Alexis. And how she was. Somehow he worked it out. There and then. He was a good cop, good instincts. He didn't call me up on it that day. He left to make more inquiries.

"Then before he could confronted me again, I was also reported for my behaviour at Alexis' school. Fortunately you can't be charged with stalking your own kid. But I did freak not a few of the staff, pupils and parents. I just couldn't let her out of my sight." Kate moves in closer to not only hold his hand, but the man too.

"The night before Roy came back, I also had a relapse – trying to control my anxiety. Didn't work obviously and left me still wired and just a little amped when he turned up the following day.

"He asked me if there was anything I wanted to say. I caved. I gave him the whole truth, unabridged. He just listened. There was no judgement, no pressure, but no handcuffs. It was such a relief.

"That night Roy took me in hand. Got me off the pills and cutting back on the booze. Guess you could say he scared me straight.

"Same time he was doing that he sorted out the investigation. Turned out he knew other contacts in mob. They had made clear that I had nothing to do with the deaths. They even had two guys go on record. The other stuff related to freeing Alexis, well none of the 'victims' was around to make an official compliant, and only Roy seemed to have guessed what transpired. He never made an official record of it.

"He caught up with me from time to time to check-in, and then a few months later, when I was doing better, he invited Alexis and I to lunch at his place. To meet his family. His kids were a little bit older than Alexis but kind enough to play with her. Gave me, us, a chance to be normal. Alexis took it with open arms. She rebounded pretty well, but still I wasn't having much success in getting myself all the way better. Roy told me some stuff about his army service and early days in the police. Told me how he had overcome difficult experiences and managed the memories. How he
compartmentalized and coped, especially with the guilt."

Kate has leaned forward into him at this last information. "He never told me more Kate. Nothing that might hint at his own flawed past and his burdens and sins." She kisses his lips.

"It didn't get me all the way better straight off, it took a while. But he started me on that road to recovery. Kate, Roy saved me, and by extension Alexis. So any debt I owe is in perpetuity long before I knew what he did for you.

He gently slips his hand from hers and locates his glass, raises it to his lips and gives a slight salute. "To Roy."

"To Roy." Kate echoes her man, fighting back the tears as she stores more insights into the triumphs and tragedy of Roy Montgomery, the man she will always think of as her Captain.

They finish their wine in silence. Rick is fading again, and so Kate takes him to bed, stopping on the way to knock on the Alexis' door to wish the girl a good night. They find the student dozing at her desk, the previous late night and maybe the stress of the last few weeks clearly getting the better of her. Still she shakes herself off, rises and embraces both Kate – who is still somewhat surprised but pleased by the hug – and her father, wishing both a good night and promising to actually go to bed this time.

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**Manhattan, 7.33 am Sunday Morning**

Miles Gold, Senior Auditor for the New York Banking Commission, and covert information broker to whoever paid well enough, would never get to spend his off-shore wealth so diligently hidden that neither the FBI, his wife, nor any of those who hired him would find the stashes after his death.

Walking Mitzi and Myki – his two predigree Border Collies was a Sunday morning tradition come sun or rain or more inclement weather. This morning there was a veritable pea-souper with limited visibility. He was following his regular Sunday route along the park. He preferred the sidewalk rather than the park where too many other dogs, and their owners, intruded. So he was navigating his way along what is a pleasantly clear pavement, skirting the kerb when suddenly both his dogs pulled to right, and with their leashes suddenly taunt he had followed them, caught by surprise.

The delivery van was on its regular Sunday morning home delivery route with its regular – 'twenty-two years Sonny' – driver. The male walking the dogs had simply appeared out of nowhere in the fog. There was little time to react. The man was right in his path.

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Bae Dea-won, former Special Forces sergeant in the armed forces of the Republic of Korea, watched the New York police with open interest. The police for their part ignored the tourist couple apparently awestruck by the fatal traffic accident they had witnessed. At least they were shocked or classy enough not to take pictures or selfies.

Terry Knickman was a seven year NYPD veteran and loved the beat. No desk for him. The street cop from the 47th Precinct had already taken the statement from the couple, two of a half dozen witnesses who saw something. Only the husband spoke somewhat limited English. He had translated for the wife. They had provided passports for ID, the officer had given them a cursory glance before recording the names and handing them back to the wide-eyed couple. Then a few minutes later sent them on their way.
Patrolman Knickman would have been surprised at the sudden improvement in the English of both members of the couple just two blocks from the scene of the accident.

Sergeant Dea-won – he still thought of himself as Sergeant - shook his head in disgust at the lax attitude of the police. He could have easily disarmed any of the nearest police officers and used their own weapon to shoot all 7 of them plus the coroner's team of 3 within five seconds. Or maybe a little slower, he wasn't in the same peak condition as during his military service.

He palmed the dog whistle in the inner pocket of his light weight jacket. The Americans called this winter, but it was nothing like a Korean winter. Soft. They were so soft. Even the simplest of tricks could kill a man without a weapon here. He had done that plenty of times. Killed a man, or men. Occasionally a woman. With his hands, with knives or guns. No doubt there would be more before they went home.

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**The Hamptons**

It was later than usual. Both were still curled into each other fighting the morning when Alexis cautiously knocked and opened the door but didn't pop a head round.

"Hey Alexis. Rick didn't have a good night."

"Good Morning Kate. Is Dad awake?"

"Morning Pumpkin." Still sleepy and raw. The first just after they had gone to bed and fallen asleep not long after midnight had been proper night terrors that Kate had nursed him patiently back from. The second merely a nightmare but between them had left the man and Kate drained and in little mood to do much that morning.

"How about I make some brunch? There's some Turkish bread so that and some scrambled eggs, a little bacon and coffee?"

"Sounds good Alexis. I'll get your Dad up and we'll meet you in the kitchen.

Alexis has come fully into the bedroom. She halts suddenly aware that Kate is topless, only a pair of boy-shorts for modesty as she leans in to whisper something to her Dad. She can see the scar that traverses her left side, the vividness faded by time, but still evidence to how close it had been for Kate.

Him too. Likewise she can see her Dad’s injured shoulder which only has a lightweight bandage and through the strapping she can see the patch work of healing skin not yet morphed into scar tissue. She remembers the mention of surgery to repair much of the skin damage. He probably should but she doesn't want him anywhere near a hospital again.

Kate waves her in even as she pulls a t-shirt over her lean torso. Up close her Dad looks worse that he sounded but she presses on embrace him. "Morning Daddy."

She feels a long limb snake over her shoulder and Kate's voice is quiet, determined. "We sleep like this for the contact. As much of us, and only us as possible. It does help. The contact. Grounds us and really does reduce the chances of a disturbed night. But not always I'll admit. Last night being a case in point but I'll regret not having that option for my own recovery."

Alexis can only nod and swallow before eventually forcing out " I'll go start on the food. See you in the kitchen?"
Kate bites her lip. She sometimes forgets that Alexis is barely out of high school and that near death experiences, even the simply complexities of a serious relationship are tough to handle.

**Capitol Hill, Washington DC.**

James Court had met with him for brunch.

The news from New York was good. Well mostly if you considered that the FBI was still investigating. Still some lose ends have been tidied up.

Miles Gold, the auditor at the NY Banking Commission was taken care of. James Court had been exceedingly efficient with that one and had raised no objections when Bracken requested it.

On the legitimate money front, his business deals were progressing. His allies would wrest control of certain key developments from the mayor and his supporters and in turn he would lock in more support and money which all equated to power.

On the definitely illegal money side, Vulcan Simmons was still a pain in the neck but had actually been well behaved in the last week or so. Keeping a low profile was anathema to the man. Almost as if he knew his behaviour was being tracked by more than the police. Court more than suggests that Simmons is using the police surveillance as an attempted means of defence. Of course it was merely postponement of the inevitable.

The Silva family were keeping a lower profile still, as they nearly always did, and he – and Court - felt it wise to leave them alone for the moment.

Also they both had federal tails that were still active and tracking them most places, slightly hampering normal operations.

As he drove away from his meeting with Bracken, Court replayed the last forty-eight hours. A flight to New York on Friday night, further intimidation of the pathetic lawyer, additional monitoring on the completely untrustworthy Vulcan Simmons and the conclusion of one clean up job. After making arrangements in New York he had returned to DC that morning. He had taken his time to drive from New York, stopping at a small B&B out of the outskirts of anonymous town on Saturday night. Travelling by road was slower than flying but also meant that he could slip the observation net Bracken and his organisation were under. The move will have surprised the surveillance team and they would have been too slow to react and organise an effective response.

Now back in DC, he was aware of the FBI tail, long before he actually ID'ed the specific car. They never deviated much from the playbook. As a regular contact with the Senator he would be on their radar. He kept up his regular schedule and appointments. He had decades of experience obscuring his real work in the banality of a seemingly mundane life.

He his brunch appointment with the Senator had gone well for once. None of the usual demand for intemperate action and fanciful results. Still that was only temporary, no doubt bought about in the almost unnatural lull in the investigation into the Senator and also a waning of immediate press interest. He had no doubt the Attorney General and his team were merely biding their time, probably reviewing the evidence, and that charges for real crimes would follow. When they did all bets were off. Bracken never responded well to that. He'd make mistakes. The type that could cost him his freedom, even his life. He hadn't worked for so long to be undone now. Even US Senators can be eliminated. Especially if shown to be corrupt and venal.
He even had the solution for that particular action. The Koreans had come through for him this morning. He normally kept them in reserve but for that particular job with the banking regulator finesse was much preferable over outright firepower. They had been in country a couple of weeks, preparing, scouting, planning. As ever their execution was near flawless. He wishes he had known about them for more than five years. More importantly Bracken didn't know about them. They would be a double edged blade in his hands when he finally took action against his current master.

Hamptons, Sunday 2.20 pm

The crunch on the drive way announced the arrival of the town car to take Alexis and her bounty from Ambrosia back to the city. Two cool boxes were stacked along side Alexis' weekend bag and backpack. Kate had also sneaked the more waist-enhancing leftovers from the Indian into a cooler bag too without Rick noticing.

She wraps him up in her best hug.

"Take care Dad."

"You too Pumpkin. Thank you for coming to stay this weekend."

"You don't have to thank me Dad. It's been great. I needed a break too. I needed to see you as well."

She borrows in again, reluctant to let go but she does but only to embrace her father's partner.

"I know I've not said this enough. Kate, I so glad you are part of our lives, especially for Dad."

Easing her hold on Kate but not releasing her Alexis looks at her father. "Dad, I don't think I have ever really told you how proud I am of what you do with the Police. You make a difference for a lot of people, and this family, and for yourself. And I'm sorry if I have sometimes failed to make it clear to you how much that means to me."

Kate says nothing, simply gives Alexis a peck on her cheek and then hugs her properly. Then as Rick was distracted directing the loading of the town car, she whispered something in Alexis' ear.

The girl starts and then grins back at Kate.

Rick was sure Alexis was still blushing as she waved as the town car headed down the drive way.

"Come back inside Rick." She tugs his good hand but he resists for a moment, and then pulls her to him.

"Thank you Kate."

"What for?"

"For being so great with her. For helping her. She shouldn't always need to come to her father, or want to, and well I know haven't always been so good at letting go, but knowing that she has you and Lanie as well as her uncles to go to, well that makes it a hell of a lot easier."

She blushes and still bullies him just a little.

"Come out Writer Boy. Back in the house. The wind has picked up and it's getting chilly. I know just how to warm up."

He had been disappointed when Kate's method of warming up hadn't involved a bed and a lack of clothes, especially as the first place she led him was their bedroom. But only to change with a
couple of moments of distractions, not all his. She had taken him through to their exercise area and run him through the full programme of stretches and restricted motions he had been neglecting whilst Alexis was there.

Still he had to admit that the cool down had been worth the wait. The Hot tub was a worthwhile investment, and the exterior stairs to the balcony off the master bedroom? Priceless. Especially if completely a naked streak to hot towels and then your bed.

She collects their gym clothes later under the cover of darkness, and pulls the folding lid over the hot tub.

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**Washington DC.**

For the first time in a while William Bracken was enjoying his food. He was dining with Ben Moss – the chair of one of the largest Super-PAC's and man who believed he had at least partial 'ownership' of the Senator through his donations. Certainly the man's unthinking arrogance and nonchalance betrayed this mindset as he believed he was issuing welcome *advice* and instruction even. Bracken believed himself to be the junior senator in name only. But for the moment he would indulge the man his foolish delusions and enjoy his food. It was truly excellent cuisine and the restaurant was deserving of the high praise and stratospheric prices but the latter was of no concern to him as Moss was paying.

Of course Ben Moss was unaware that the Senator had his own source of funding, far in excess of anything legal and more than enough to buy any office – voters permitting of course - so long as it was undetected. He was merely using Moss's Super-PAC to provide a cover for the illegal money coming into his campaign.

Moss for his part was there to check on his *investment* after the rumours began circulating. An experienced banker and money trader he had moved into politics with the same ethos he made his billion or so dollars, and he didn't cut out at the first sign of trouble. He embraced it and took the risks. Transitioning into the politics he had identified an opportunity and had back the originally unfancied Tea Party as a source of considerable potential. Unlike most he revealed in the lack of uniformity and chaos until it has failed to come to heel, and serve his purposes. Like his finance career he changed tack and a new strategy emerged where he sought more moderate candidates to back. Bracken was ideally positioned in the middle of the road for the party. Of course he didn't appeal to vocal minority on the wings but when it came time for the ballot box he had already demonstrated in New York that he enough appeal to the centre and ability to get floating voters to back him.

But most of all Moss fancied himself a 'kingmaker' and wanted to get firsthand knowledge of Bracken's state before making a decision regarding cutting his losses, or playing on.

Bracken had no intention of bailing out or letting Moss even lean that way. So his job tonight was to assuage Moss’ fears and reassure him that he was worth continued support. He would continue the game until something permanent stopped him or he won.

There had been a near miracle this week when the news didn't break. The Feds were obviously bidding their time, trying to build a water tight case. Bracken knew it was self-denial but still it almost tasted like a victory of sorts.

For now.
The Hamptons

They're reclining in bed watching TV (of course the TV drops out the ceiling from a concealed hatch) complete with surround sound (hidden speakers) and every possible source of content when Kate's cell vibrates thrice in quick succession.

Incoming texts.

Alexis he thinks.

Kate picks her phone up. Swipes the screen with a casual deliberation.

He waits just, right leg gently agitating in impatience.

She smiles to herself, a blink, a small frown or is it a serious face, and then finally a suppressed giggle. Before he can actually demand the updates she passes her phone over to him. He scrolls through the three texts in chronological order.

'Food a hit. Study group went well.'

'Miss you both. Thank you.'

'You can show this to Dad before he decides to chance stealing your phone and you have to shoot him.'

Her texts are grammatically correct as only a bestselling author's child would do. His daughter.

Passing the phone back he brushes her lips with his.

"Thank you Kate."

"This weekend has been just what I need. And I did need to have Alexis close. I think she did too. And don't think that I don't appreciate whatever it is you did to ensure she made it here. For both of us."

"Anything Rick. You should know that by now. And it's okay. Especially to miss your daughter

"Still I feel I can take on the next week now. I'm not looking forward to the physio and rehabilitation but I do feel I may be ready."

"That's good babe. We're going to do this together."

"No other way. You've got me forever now Kate."

"Right back at you Rick. I'm looking forward to our forever. I love you."

"I love you too Kate."

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note
This took way too long. It didn’t want to cooperate. My life didn’t want to cooperate. It still isn’t really but regardless here we are with Chapter 65.
In scant compensation for your patience this one is nearly 16000 words long.
As ever I look forward to your reviews and feedback.
I apologise for not following up and responding to recent reviews and messages but I wasn't in a place to be able to do so. Going dark was a necessary survival option for a while.
In the expectation that there is very little chance of Chapter 66 ‘Not Alone’ gracing your screens before the festive season hits full tilt, I wish you all peace and safety and hope you have the opportunity to celebrate with your loved ones and friends.
Previously: The successful weekend behind them, Alexis is safely back in the City, and now Rick and Kate can focus on his recovery.

Disclaimer – Naturally I don't own Castle (Beckett does). Legal stuff probably applies too.

The Hamptons, Monday morning.

The robe keeps the worst of the morning chill off. The ski socks work well to keep the tootsies warm even if it is not exactly the most elegant getup, less geek and more gook.

He leans against the door frame, not quite still in the room but not yet departed.

He's watching Kate sleep.

She's burrowed deeply into the covers but arch of her face remains exposed, and a wash of long hair fans out covering the pillows. Even in six months he has a head full of such imagery but it will never be enough.

He does it a lot.

Watch her.

Not just sleeping.

Hell since they've met he's watched her, observed her, and stared at her when he could (get away with it). Or not.

But nothing has prepared him for this.

For her.

Not his imagination.

Nor his fantasies.

His day dreams, and not so day-dreams too.

Nor the forlorn, obstinate hope that kept him with her even when she was in a relationship with another man.

Nor any other relationship he has ever had. He wants no other. This is it.

Ever since they've been together.
Being able to see the private Kate.

His Kate.

He'll never share this.

No matter how much might leak from Detective Beckett into Nikki Heat, this is far too personal for either of them to share.

Even now she's guarded, not unlike him although in different ways, and he wants to keep this her for himself, or at least their families if he must share.

And she trusts him with this. With her. The real Kate. With her secrets, her hopes and fears. Her love. It is far too precious to ever betray or share unless she wants it.

She shows more than glimpses of it with his, or rather their family. He catches his mother entranced by this previously unknown Katherine. And Alexis, well Alexis in awe of Kate Beckett almost like she was in the beginning. But for different reasons. The blind hero-worship long since given way to tremendous respect for her strength, integrity, and devotion tempered by the reality of sharing time with the person not their persona.

He's a little in awe too.

Fuck it! A lot in awe and more than a lot in love. Totally. Besotted. Entranced. He wants to propose. She's not opposed to the idea. Just he needs to get better. And he will.

But he's afraid too. That this is all too good, so nearly right. Not quite perfect – yet - but still so much more than he's hoped for. So much so that it's terrifyingly like a dream and that one day he'll wake to the nightmare. Or worse he'll fuck it up. Like his previous marriages, other relationships – Kyra – that never fulfilled their promise.

As if sensing his mental uncertainly his own body betrays him with a sudden flare of discomfort from his shoulder. He should be grateful for the improvements and the times when the ache – dull or not – doesn't remind him of his injuries and latest near miss/lost chance.

Taking that as a sign, he takes one final glance before sneaking out.

He'll let her sleep longer. They had both been disturbed by bad dreams overnight. Finding each other awake they had talked briefly around three before drifting off together. As ever they are always careful to categorise the disruption to their sleep. Night terrors are worst, when there is no convincing their subconscious that it isn't real and waking from them is scarcely better. Nightmares are not so bad but it epitomises what they can face when these are sometimes merely footnotes on from their nocturnal bête noire.

In other times, well now if his right hand connected to his not-quite-so-mangled shoulder worked properly, he'd let the inspiration drive him to his study or wherever his laptop is, writing Nikki or simply drabbles or if coherent his deeper thoughts. But with this current disconnect between his fingers and his mind, the drive takes him elsewhere this morning.

Coffee first. Definitely coffee.

For a big guy he kind of skips his way to the kitchen ignoring the elephantine thud of his own footfalls on the stairs and wooden floors. He knows that Kate is perfectly capable of ignoring his less than elegant progression if she so chooses, although he has to admit she has a pretty mean – in a totally gorgeous way – poker face.
There are ghosts – mainly the friendly kind, but not always - everywhere in this house. He half expects his daughter – a younger facsimile at least - to appear from around a doorway, hurtling into him with protestations of love, exasperation, and promises or entreaties of fun. Aside from the odd occasion hiding here on his own (hey he's allowed the occasional wallow of self-pity), or even more scarcely with a female companion, there is only the few weeks from that summer at the end of their second year when Gina was here – not that she cares for the sea, and the house was merely acceptable for the status it signified - that compete with the overwhelming dialog of him and his daughter here. He wants new memories for this place, and the Loft and his head. Memories with her.

He pushes through the door to the kitchen and the wave of warmth from the heating (automatic timers are a godsend) has him shedding the robe leaving just the plain (for him) black silk boxers and Return of Jedi t-shirt.

He starts the process of making coffee on autopilot. Before long he's slouched against the breakfast bar inhaling the aroma waiting for his fix.

He couldn't be closer to Alexis than if he had wished it. It's made letting go just that little bit harder than he ever imagined. But he thinks he's done okay with that. With Kate's help.

She won't accept his praise for helping Alexis in the same way she barely tolerates his unashamed gaze. She might still call the staring creepy but he'll live with that admonishment, sure more often than not that she doesn't mean it that way, not anymore. Half the time he's sure she didn't really mean it before too. But he can never be certain. The mystery that is Katherine Houghton Beckett.

The coffee helps. When he gets to a second cup, he'll balance two on the small tray and take it upstairs to their bedroom and wake her, if she isn't already awake and merely hiding under the covers. She does that. It surprised him at first. That she could be just as reluctant as he to leave the embrace of their bed and the glorious cotton sheets that felt like silk.

The heat rising from his half-drunk cup curls around his clenched palm. He wasn't even aware he'd squeezed his right fist tight. He's tense, slightly on edge about the start of physiotherapy today but also because the frustration continues to get the better of him. Almost dying really does clear the head, mind altering drugs aside.

He wished he'd been braver with her. So many times before now. His heart was already committed, surely risking that little bit more, and actually asking the questions at various times was such a small step? But he honestly knows it wasn't. The chasm was short but so deep if not quite bottomless, and the consequences of failing to negotiate that leap was too much for both of them. So they had both mutually pulled up and refused that final jump but ever itching closer. Until then handful of steps remaining was so palpable they could feel it pulse from each other. So close. And then it all seemingly fell apart around her mother's case, and he lost faith in her and him. Temporarily but still shattering. But she had been the one to finally put the faith in them and take that leap across the void for both of them. Whatever else lies at her feet during their long dance, he had been the last of them to try to run, and he owes her for chasing him.

He had asked his therapist why they had struggled so much to communicate. They were both smart, attractive people with a history of dating and relationships so why could they fail so spectacularly with trying to be with each other when they could work so well in solving crimes?

Of course he got more questions back. Familiar questions. Ones he knows so well but still hid from the challenge. She had been the same too, her fraught confessions from her own therapy a close echo of his own. Both of them choosing to cling to that friendship least romance drive them apart.
The absolute fear of loneliness.

It was never a new feeling for him. For a long as he can recollect, he had been alone a lot of his life.

He spent an inordinate amount of his childhood playing on his own with nominal adult supervision. Certainly no children of a similar age in the travelling shows of his early childhood. Still his Mother wasn't obtuse, she observed and did her best to help him find the right environment even if it had meant a constant procession of nannies, minders and schools including boarding school for a while.

His stories were born of his survival mechanism. He learnt from his mother's peers how to craft and shape his tales and to deliver them. Initially for himself but slowly with others. It had taken Rebecca to convince him that his stories had merit enough to share. Yet it had taken Damien Westlake to give him the confidence that his writing was good enough. That he was good enough. Both as an author and as a person. Whatever his school friend had done, he would owe him for that.

He clung to that belief through all the rejections for his writing until he got an affirmative. Proof positive that his childhood had shaped him. Confirmation that he was the best sort of fantasist. The kind that paid. Better, a hell of a lot better. Still he wonders – less now - what he would have been if he hadn't become a writer.

Yet that was all taken away from him but fate. There was Meredith and all too quickly she left him alone with Alexis. He should be grateful but it was a long time before it felt less than betrayal and abandonment. The life of a single parent is often lonely, even if you have money. Then as Alexis grew she became his best friend and the banisher of his loneliness. Until as a teenager she started to seek her own life, and he found little consolation in a second failed marriage or liaisons meant more to the media than him.

Then that fateful night when something different happened, and he met Detective Katherine Beckett, and so their dance began. Mostly a duet, sometimes a solo, or an ensemble, until finally he wasn't alone. Partners. And he had every intention of repaying Kate's leap of faith with a commitment of his own. A lifelong one.

Of course it helps tremendously that they actually say the words. Hearing and speaking 'I love you' and not just when the other or both are dying is far more appropriate, and romantic to boot. His mother had told him so, and loathe as he is to admit it she was right. So they do it constantly now. Even if his mother does continue to gloat.

She wakes without him. His absence is more than the loss of warmth and bulk nestled alongside her. It is still too soon. So for now it is alarm bells and irrational fears, a lurch of her stomach, a momentary frisson of fear.

She knows her triggers are unnecessary – most likely. Still it takes a moment or two for her nerves to settle, for her to tamp down the irrational. In that time she's in motion, throwing back the covers and looking for a robe – they've been using deep-blue matching unisex robes made of heavy cotton towelling. Sized for him, she doesn't mind being buried in hers. It makes for an entirely satisfactory mobile blanket for curling up in especially with easy access for a partner.

Huffing she lets the disappointment bite. Oh Rick has taken the one she was using last night. Lazy sod. A quick diversion to the en-suite bathroom locates the other thrown aside on top of the laundry basket. No doubt where he dropped it last night. Still for a man he has surprisingly few
faults, in the domestic cleanliness stakes at least. Being a single Dad had cured him of that she supposes. Quickly pulling it on and foregoing footwear or even a toilet stop she goes in search of him.

It's near fortuitous timing that she comes through the kitchen door wrapped in an identical robe just as he puts the finishing touch to her cup of coffee with the laden tray still sitting on the bench. Trying to embrace him and kiss him whilst he is precariously carrying a tray one handed is fraught with opportunities for his dorky lack-of-coordination.

Much as she loves Martha and Alexis, the sheer joy of being able to run her hands over all of him is not one she is comfortable sharing. She loves their alone time, as she does him.

She corners him against the kitchen bench. Unsurprisingly he's not resisting her smaller mass backing him up.

"Good Morning my love." She arches her feet to rise up to kiss him. "Missed you in our bed."

"Hey. Good Morning Kate. I love you too." He rocks forward just enough so that his height reduces enough for him to kiss her upturned lips. "Didn't want to disturb you."

The White Residence, New Jersey

Her charges – big and not-quite-so-small-anymore - safely out the door, Suzanne swigged the last of her almost cold coffee and prepared to complete her transformation from mom to lawyer mode, all without leaving the comfort of her own home. Without commuting across the bridge (well at least not today) in the coming of the masses. Still despite her domestic location she didn't lounge around in sweats and baggy jumpers. Nice slacks and a polo shirt. She had discovered early on that successful home working was a lot about mental attitude and house-wear was a definite no-no.

She had responded with faint hope to the somewhat cryptic advert placed in the Journal of American Law by Steve Mathers all those years ago. It had been a spur of the moment thing for the then becalmed lawyer barely able to manage the struggle between work and family. Her chance decision had paid dividends. It had been a Godsend. One of the best decisions of her life.

She has an easy working relationship with the lanky, and laconic commercial lawyer. They complement each other and have grown their partnership and business as a result. They have a handful of key clients, one of which is very special and doesn't he know it, and coterie of occasional customers who enthusiastically fill any gaps. Critically, the arrangement allows her to work from home at least a day or sometimes two, a week, to have late departures so she can organise the kids and her husband, or get away for a school event.

Steve handled all the commercial side, especially with RCE unless he needed the extra hands. She didn't mind that as commercial law was a dry as Hell. She got the more personal stuff. Of course sometimes clients need her to meet with them breaking up her cosy little domestic routine but she can handle that now. More-so now that her husband, his workaholic tendencies tempered by harsh reality of being let go two years ago, and after some time finally finding a new job. Being first in and last home didn't protect him from redundancy, so now he balanced life for their kids, and them, just that bit better.

She called herself a personal lawyer – as opposed to a corporate lawyer. Steve laughs at the assertion but he's never disagreed. Regardless she's scary enough in her power suit when she dons it.
Visitors to the house are almost always surprised to find that the comfortably furnished and well equipped home office belongs to her and not her husband. The workspace is tidy, just a handful of personal items, and devoid of distractions. She can't manage that level of temptation. She often wonders how Rick Castle managed to be so prolific given the amount of 'toys' Steve tells her almost dominate his workspaces.

Checking her emails, she quickly finds the report she was waiting for. The leasing agent in California had been extremely punctual with updates on the situation. Still she wasn't looking forward to calling her client, a young woman who didn't deserve this.

She had been Alexis Castle's personal lawyer since the girl was thirteen. The young woman had a wise head on her shoulders, and was far less effort than her father. Although Suzanne had long suspected that Rick Castle merely plays at being troublesome for his own amusement and sometimes that of others, and otherwise he had a very sensible business head. When he had wanted Alexis set up with her own investment portfolio, he had approached her rather than Steve to help manage the investment portfolio. She has been surprised but was persuaded by his argument, not least of which was that Steve's unerring efficiency which left almost nothing for a client to do. He conversely wanted competence but also for his daughter to have to learn and garner her own experience managing a portfolio.

Usually it was relatively painless but today that responsibility included fielding further attempts from Meredith Lee to contact her daughter. Alexis was clearly rejecting any attempts to contact her first hand. A fact the student had merely alluded to in their conversation last week. Suzanne was actually a little impressed by the restraint being shown by the first Missus Castle. The calls might be a little insistent but they were polite and respectful this time. Perhaps there had been some lessons learnt. Still the woman persisted when her direct representations were rebuffed and she had used the local leasing agent as the courier. Couched in the form of requests from the tenant to the landlord these had to be addressed. Meredith had a considerable degree of native cunning, and Suzanne was not at all surprised by the woman's resourcefulness and attempts to resurrect contact with her daughter.

She had a copy of Alexis' college schedule on her computer. Pulling up the chart she could see that there was a free period between eleven and twelve-thirty. She could call then, or she could try to catch her before the class started. There was still ten minutes.

Making a spur of the moment decision she hit the speed dial on her VOIP desk phone. The call was answered almost immediately.

"Good Morning Alexis."

Twelfth Precinct, 9.05 am.

Tom Demming had got in early. Well earlier than usual.

He had hoped to catch the Captain before too many of the day shift had arrived but there had been no sign of her. Instead he had been waiting up in homicide for over an hour. Eventually one of the uniforms took pity and mentioned that the Captain had rung in saying she was diverted to 1PP and would be in shortly.

He had been tempted to leave but he knew if he didn't do it this morning his nerve would fail. Still he was on the verge of heading down to Robbery when the Captain strode through the office. He pushed off from the still vacant desk he had appropriated and moved to intercept the Captain.
"Excuse me Captain, do you have a minute Sir?"

"Demming isn't it?" His confirms more with his eyes than the motion of his head. Still she waves a hand in the direction of her office. "Enter Detective."

Captain Gates keeps her face unreadable as the detective waits for her to follow behind. She enters the office and then he reaches across pulling her door closed. She drops her bag on the desk, and reaches inside for her Sig and removes it to place it in her top right drawer.

"Sir." He stumbles, nerves?

"Well spit it out Detective."

"I'm not sure about this." Her expression leaves in him in no doubt that she's not impressed.

His back straightens. "I observed Lieutenant Davis from IAD meeting with Councilwoman Glaser on Saturday night. In my opinion they were not simply socialising." Not that a city councillor and a cop, even a lieutenant were a natural fit anyway.

"What do you expect me to do with the information Detective?"

"Honestly, Sir I don't know." He's silent for a good ten heading towards twenty seconds. "Look it just felt off. Davis was really quite animated with Councilwoman.

"I'm going to need details Detective. Time and place? Any other witnesses? Any other evidence? Did you hear anything?"

He relays the restaurant details and catches the sharp look the Captain gives him. He notes her disappointment when he admits he wasn't close enough to hear anything. He finishes as positively as he can by holding out the USB memory stick.

"I have a couple of phone camera shots. I was on a date. She recognised the Councilwoman without prompting."

"Who?"

"Serena Kaye. But she's out of town for a couple of weeks. She did offer to provide a signed statement or phone interview."

The Captain looks more thoughtful at that news but gives nothing away except for a pointed look behind him towards the door.

He turns to leave.

He tries one more time. "Look Captain, I know how it looks. There is no hard evidence of anything illegal. It's just that my instincts tell me otherwise. I'm sorry to put that on you."

She nods curtly and he completes his turn to leave, assuming he is dismissed, until she surprises him.

"One more question Detective."

"Sir?"

"How was the food? I've been trying to persuade my husband to take me there."
The Hamptons

Breakfast done and cleared away, Rick didn't have long before Robert Aves was back. And this time it was for real. His entry into the house took two trips as he brought in the equipment he required.

First off was a check to ensure Rick was okay to start his physical rehabilitation program.

It was a like mini-field physician kit complete with monitors and tests.

Robert was damn thorough but after twenty minutes he had declared Rick healthy enough to commence physical rehabilitation.

Following all the preliminary tests, Rick had stripped off his sweat shirt and was down to a grey cotton tank top and the bandage and strapping was left off the shoulder for the moment. This was first time the wound area had been exposed for any length of time. The skin was red and if-not-raw then damn close. Kate had been making sure they followed the proscribed care and treatment of the wounded area, principally applying the antibiotic cream that protected against infection and helped the scar area not harden. And of course wrapping and strapping too.

Just twenty-four days since he was shot, Kate thinks it doesn't look too bad. Confronting, yes. She can remember her own reactions to her scars. She remembered how her wounds were. The small scar on her chest paling into insignificance when compared to the incision made in her side and that scar left that remains. A scar than even more than 18 months later can pull and be tender if she is not careful in spite of fading from an angry red line to something softer. Yet, despite the size differential it is the smaller of the two that holds her attention most times. It is the one she can really see. The one that confronts her in the mirror and in her head.

Robert spends the next ten minutes gently moving Rick through a direct assessment on his shoulder and details what the recovery path would be like. It is not without discomfort and some brief moments of pain yet Rick does little more than pull a face. She finds she misses his good natured whining.

"You've done well in the last week Rick. The shoulder is showing good signs of movement. It is obvious that treatment plan that Kate has been helping with is working.

"The main risk is from overdoing it. A minor strain might set you back a few days, a moderate one a week or two. Anything more could see you back in surgery."

Rick blanches at that. Kate too. Hospitals are anathema to both of them at this time. Even though they know he has a check-up back at Bellevue a week on Friday. They could manage that but nothing more.

"Yes we'll work on your shoulder to rebuild the musculature and restore mobility and flexibility. With the great surgical work done that shouldn't actually be too hard from this point on so long as we pace ourselves.

"But I wanted to also address your general health and fitness. Specifically looking at your core strength and stamina. Core and cardio if you will.

"Middle-aged spread is one way it is described. That is in part because of changes to the body and lifestyle as you hit those middle years.

"You're heading towards your mid-forties Rick. Now every person is different but ideally you should be able to run 2 – 5 miles at a reasonable pace. Do you have any idea about how far you can
actually run now? Sorry, I mean before the shooting?"

Rick's shamefaced shake says it all.

Kate feels partially responsible. They've spent so much time inside seeking to hide their relationship from almost anyone else, and aside from sex, their primary recreation together is probably dining or watching TV or a movie, often with a snack at hand. Hardly active – aforementioned sex aside.

After the first two months she had forced herself to get out and run more, even in the heat of summer simply to stave off the impact of so much rich food. She didn't do anything for him specifically. Plus he needed to write otherwise dividing his shrinking availability between the Precinct, his family and their bed.

Also with them trying to keep the relationship secret outside of their family and friends they didn't go out together. She could hardly take him running. That would have raised too many questions. Same with a gym.

"Detective Beckett here is proof of how important physical fitness is for surviving and recovering from serious, well let's be blunt, life threatening injuries." Kate starts at that. Rick as ever simply looks impressed at her achievements.

"Our cultural places a lot of emphasis on strength but not always in healthy ways. You're a big guy Rick and there are unfortunately plenty of ways for fat to develop on your sort of frame. Failing to exercise to maintain the muscle tone is one cause.

"But there is also a propensity towards overeating. As a nation we have a real problem with it. You strike me a man who likes his food."

"Yeah." The admission hurts.

"Look I ran through your charts from the hospital. You are a good twenty pounds plus overweight. More really. Also some of the leading indications for other problems are just starting to spike up. A couple of these here point to potential liver issues. Not alcohol related I might add, but weight related. Over consumption makes your organs work overtime to process it. It's not just your heart. Liver, kidneys, and a whole raft of other components get the short end.

At the near look of horror on Rick's face… "Bet you never expected your medical record access to be abused like this?"

Kate is doing her level best to show some sympathy or perhaps a touch of empathy but in all honesty is struggling not to laugh just a little. Rick does faux outrage with the best of them but this is more than a touch real.

"Look there is some good news. There was no sign of cardiovascular disease. Cholesterol is nicely within range. I'm guessing you eat well in terms of quality and the ingredients are good. Every little thing helps.

"What we are going to do is get your shoulder back into shape. And you."

The session is almost over and despite the lack of heating, both Rick and Kate are sweating in the converted training room. This time Robert has given Kate more to do in recognition of her fitness levels and lack of injury. Rick is also regretting the breakfast Kate had prepared as the omelette with ham and peppers is repeating on him adding to his sweaty indignity.
"It's a shame you don't have any decent stairs."

Castle stares at Robert with a combination of still growing dislike and shock. The stairs in this house are great. If he was in real estate he could wax lyrical about the stairs. Poetry even. Well maybe not that extreme. Still it was almost the final straw.

Apparently his surprise was obvious. "No. GOOD solid stairs, cement ones. Good for the running up and down of. Or double jumps. Excellent for cardiovascular development."

He would argue the point but just at this moment Rick is pretty sure his cardiovascular system is about to collapse or at the very least exit his chest, so the only sound leaving his mouth presently is the wheezing of breath as he sucks down oxygen. The only slight degree of satisfaction is that Beckett is likewise sweating beside him, breathing a little hard, even if she looks far more composed, not to mention more than a little sexy.

Of course she catches THAT look and he receives a non-too subtle smack to the arm that has Robert laughing. "I'll be out of your hair shortly, and you can work off any excess energy however you like."

Kate merely groans and Castle has insufficient motive power to raise a single innuendo or leer.

The soak in the hot tub is great. They or rather he - Kate already looks ready to go again - have a full day to recover. Robert will be back on Wednesday. Three days a week for the next month.

A little later and he can already feel the ache in his shoulder. Actually there are aches all over. Just the pain in his shoulder is deeper, sharper. He tries to focus on the other parts of his body. Better than the so nearly ruined shoulder that almost claimed his life. He really hasn't exercised much for a while and nothing like the routine Robert put him through. His body is protesting the shock introduction of so much exertion and strain, even when carefully planned and tailored.

Their late lunch of salad and tuna was punctuated by his Mother's daily call to check on progress. Kate of course thought it was sweet. Rick simply settled for glaring at her, biting his tongue rather than raise the issue of how she would have reacted to over inquisitive mollycoddling when she was recovering. He is actually disappointed in himself for even thinking of it. They've come so far and putting the mistakes of the past firmly behind them.

Kate speaks to her dad less frequently. Having lived apart for so long, that daily need to communicate is not as pressing for them. He is careful never to push. Kate is fiercely protective of her father, and he of her. He likes to think that he is included in their little group, certainly Kate has let him in a long way, but still he practises caution, fearful of crossing or upsetting the balance she and her father had found since his sobriety.

Pushing the Public Service Manual to one side, she admits defeat. Sure she wasn't expecting literature but the damn thing was desert dry. Not to mention contradictory. Rules and guidelines based on common sense seemingly undone by complete senseless petty drivel known as regulations.

Looking down at her watch she noticed that it was almost five. Wow! She has been lost in study for almost three hours. What she wouldn't give for a good murder mystery.

Talking of murder mysteries where's her author? He's hasn't been round to even sneak a kiss, let alone attempt to annoy her. That's so unlike him. Especially as he can't write, or play games.
Perhaps she can make her extended absence up to Rick.

She won't call out to him. Hopes for surprise. Perhaps one his less than manly shrieks. Padding silently on socked feet she covers the downstairs with no luck. Upstairs it is.

Entering the bedroom she comes to complete halt.

Surprise it is.

She's found him.

Oh no shrieking of any sort just now.

His face is mashed into the pillow, drool on the edge of his chin. He's out cold. One huge arm, bicep straining the sleeve of his t-shirt, splayed out, the other tucked in, still strapped, at least for another week or so.

He did good today. He has a long way to go but it was a good start. He was focused. Took the information from Robert, even the negative stuff, seriously. He worked damn hard on the exercises. Barely complained.

She bites her lip in silent consternation. She came up here to distract and reward him with sex but he needs his sleep more. Oh well what he doesn't know he missed won't hurt him. Her on the other hand, she'll admit to being a little miffed at missing out.

Sure she likes sex. Always has. From early on she had been able to separate the emotion from the physical act. Able to enjoy the endorphins and the release without the other more intimidating stuff. Rebel Beks. Her lips curl in memory. Different time, maybe a different her. But with him it's impossible to separate the two. It so awfully fluffy that she's certain that she will never be able to fully share the extent of this. Perhaps not even with him. Certainly not Lanie. Although she thinks Lanie can guess well enough. There is enough evidence for the ME to draw conclusions. Then there's her own intimate knowledge. Rick is really quite talented and together the two of them are almost freakishly great at sex. Her suspension had been served out in blaze of bed sheets, lingerie, delightful soreness and 'lust goggles' as Rick called them. They may have slowed down just a bit but God they were so good together.

Bring her attention back to the man blissfully asleep before he, she can't but help smile.

He's adorable. In every shape and form. She doesn't just tolerate those little foibles that are his own personal stamps and character, she loves them, cherishes every moment when she learns a new one. Yes even bed drool but it is not one of her favourites.

She'll leave him to his restorative slumber. Go make dinner and then wake him.

She'll save the news they missed out on naked time for later. Perhaps they can make it up to both of them in the morning.

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**Attorney General's Office, Washington DC**

He felt pretty good. Getting a commendation from your new boss for your first case is always welcome.

They had wrapped up their paperwork and briefing of the lawyers last week, finally finishing up
late last Thursday. The Chief had given him and Rachael the Friday off. He had crashed for the first day and then finally got up and enjoyed the weekend. Saturday, he had spotted the guys a couple of games at a sports hall, splurged out a huge Mexican meal with a couple of them. Sunday had been laundry and chores, even though his tiny apartment took very little maintenance.

He had rocked into the office this morning looking and feeling sharp. The just received official stamp of approval from their leader was the cherry on top.

Leaving Villante's office he had waited until they were in one of smaller meeting rooms, just the two of them, before asking the nagging question he dared not ask the Chief.

"So what's the holdup Rachel?" They had agreed to use first names when it was just the two of them. Less Boys-Club, more collegial. Nothing else, nothing more. Rachael had been extremely firm on that.

"Politics." The term doesn't exactly spit from her mouth but it isn't a tone of endearment."

"Pretty much our job isn't it?""

"Not meant to be Will. Not meant to be." She takes a double-handed swig from her coffee, wincing slight at the hot bitter passage. "What we're doing is waiting for clearance from the AG.""

"So apparently you don't just arrest a sitting United States Senator." The observation is more than a little redundant.

"Actually it is quite a bit more than that."

"How so?"

"We're making him expend political capital to hold off the charges. It doesn't change the evidence, which is conclusive. The fact is we are going to charge him. He'll be arrested in camera. Nothing like a good political perp-walk to put the final nail in a politician's career. The fact we haven't move yet has nothing to do with our evidence. It's strategy."

"Bracken took some hits when the rumours began. But when we didn't immediately move in, he began to try and fix things. Now he doesn't know how much we have on him. So it is all guess work on his side. He has spent the last week calling in favours and expending cash and other resources in a fruit endeavour to protect himself."

"When he is arrested he'll have even fewer friends to call upon. Believe you me nothing like a good criminal case to send them running. It is a whole other league to the usual scandals – sex, infidelity, drugs, even corruption to a certain extent. Well they can often ride those out. Murder, possible treason, not so much."

"Oh."

"Told you it was different game here Will."

"Not a game. Real life."

"Yeah maybe. But best to play it as a game if you want to come out the other side relatively unscathed."

The Hamptons
They are finishing dinner when Rick's cell phone rings.

It's Paula.

Kate takes their empty plates to sink as Rick answers.

"She's demanding to be put on speaker phone." Rick states holding the phone away from his ear. Kate can hear the clipped, loud voice from yards away. "Apparently she doesn't trust me to convey the information," he adds as he enables the speaker.

"Damn straight I don't."

"Hello Paula."

"Hi Kate."

"What ya got for us." He is so used to her precise language and commanding voice that he forgets she's a New York City girl at heart and even if she is Manhattan not bridge and boroughs she can carry herself off as one if she wants.

Paula responds in best intelligible New Jersey-ese. "In short youse both owe the New York Times an interview."

"Oh. She did go to the press." Rick blurts.

"If mean Megan Trailor. Yes she sure did. But lucky for you two, I would guess that she's a bit of a snob and instead of going to the Post or a gossip rag, she bypassed the Ledger - probably figured then for Rick's fan-club – and went straight to the Times.

"Fortunately the Times doesn't run without checking. So they called me." Both Rick and Kate sag in relief. Paula will have this fixed.

"So where was I?" Paula echoes through the room.

"Oh yeah, I got the story killed." She is entitled to the gloating tone. Their faith is well placed.

"Plus youse all are lucky that the dumb arse idiots in that reality show train wrecked again. So the trash papers are temporarily focused there."

"Still why doesn't she take it somewhere else? Try the Post or some trash paper?"

"Well that where having contacts comes in. Turns out the family real estate business has made an art form over the last five years - since the daughter took over - of buying foreclosed farms to convert to commercial or residential real estate. Seems they are willing to push hard on families and somehow get the lenders to not give their customers any leeway. The Times has a less than flattering article in development. So if it doesn't see the light of day for a while then she doesn't try and peddle your whereabouts to anyone."

"Paula! That's wrong. That's too much of a trade-off just for own privacy." Kate has a very strong sense of right and her protesting that the arrangement appeared at face value to be detrimental to others just reinforces Rick's respect for her on all levels as a detective, his partner, his everything.

"Oh don't sweat it. The article isn't ready for publication but when it is, it will be published regardless."

"Sweet. Thanks Paula. Just out of Interest, who exactly do we owe interviews to now?" He's lost
count and he is pretty sure Kate has been mentally skipping or doing her level best to ignore future media commitments.

"Cosmo, Ledger, now the Times. That's just the print media. At least two local TV news channels, plus the three majors. And that's just the ones we've committed to. The list of invitations is much longer."

Rick almost laughs at the 'deer-in-headlights' look that Kate wears momentarily, but the glare that follows it is more than threatening enough. Still in the space of weeks they have gone from deeply private to fully public because of his shooting and there is more to come no doubt. Despite Kate giving that one press conference he knows she isn't comfortable with this.

"He's worth it Paula." She wraps her arms around his torso. "You're worth it Rick."

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**Tuesday**

They woke together. Even after spending the best part of six months in together at night it still knocks them both for six some mornings. They'll just lie there savouring the proximity.

Except this morning Kate was fired up and ready. She did not even grant Rick the slightest opportunity to wake properly before she was upon him. Purposeful and naked, Kate wasted no time in making up for the previous day's lost opportunity.

The weather was fairly miserable after breakfast but regardless Kate cajoled Rick out for a walk along the beach to stretch and warm his tired muscles with the promise of a hot tub session. By the time they returned any thought of the hot tub was gone in a growing gale and them fighting sideways rain.

She tried not to laugh as the filthy sideways look Rick shot her as they divested their wet layers. Taking his hand she led him upstairs where they filled the huge en-suite bath instead. Kate returned to the kitchen briefly to make hot chocolate, and they didn't emerge until the cooling water finally motivated them to move.

Rick spent a lazy afternoon in front of the big screen idling flicking through movies he's seen before but knows well enough that he can watch without effort. Meanwhile Kate was ensconced in the study with her course work.

Later that night Alexis checks in with them and they're both relieved that she sounds upbeat and positive. She's had her first assessments back for coursework since her return and the marks are all at the upper end with just one dipping a little. He makes all the right positive comments but is still surprised when Kate takes his phone without so much as a 'please' and wanders off with it for a private chat with Alexis before returning just a couple of minutes later so they can sign off together.

"Kate?"

"Rick if anything was wrong I would let you know. She just needed a bit." She looks a touch abashed. "Just wanted a different perspective on some things. I could help and believe me this is something better that a dad doesn't have all the details for."

"I trust you. I trust Alexis. But you know I am going to worry about that."
"I know. That's what makes you such a great dad. But this is me telling you that this one is all in hand." She takes his hand. "Now let's go watch some TV in bed. You still have to teach me how to control all this stuff."

He doesn't sleep well that night. Eyes closed, but mind wide open. Having a vivid imagination really sucks sometimes.

But he doesn't wake Kate.

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**Wednesday 6.45 am. Capitol Hill, Washington DC**

"Senator Bracken."

He pauses half-way up the lobby stairs. Damned if he was sneaking in the back way. Of course the downside was the press. Even at this early hour.

He allows the single crew to approach.

"Good Morning Senator," the reporter continues without waiting for any salutation. "Do you have any comment on the rumours that have been circulating the Hill the last ten days? We have also heard whispers out of New York too. All regarding campaign finance and other possible breaches of regulations. Do you have anything to say regarding an investigation by the Department of Justice?"

He regards the conservatively dressed reporter with short brunette hair. One of his key skills is an enviable game face, one that keeps his countenance placid and his tone business like but level.

"Good Morning Carly." He can't but help notice the junior reporter preen a little at being remembered. So weak, so easily influenced.

"I can honestly say I have not been notified of any such thing."

"So you deny it?"

"There is nothing to deny. And of course I totally refute any such insinuation regarding any wrongdoing."

He makes sure his face is straight on the camera and eyes centred onto the lens.

"Like all my colleagues – on both sides - I will admit that fund raising is a challenge in this day, but while politics is a tough game I am more than up to the challenge at any level."

The reporter was not done. "How does the accusation impact your plans to seek your party’s nomination for the Presidency?"

"Young Lady," his voice did not quite maintain the required level tone and viewers got a brief glimpse of New York's junior senator's eyes narrowing momentarily before he continued smoothly, "I have made no secret of wishing to serve in higher office should the opportunity arise." He half turns to give the reporter a smile and offers his hand. "Now if you will excuse me I have a meeting to attend.

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*Office of William H Bracken, Senator (j) for New York, Capitol Hill, Washington DC*
Matthew Weston knew his time was coming to an end. Just like his employer's. Two more staff including Mary Kniff had quit in the last two days. More accurately they had fled. A wise decision. Unfortunately not an option open to him.

"Excuse me Senator."

"Yes, what is it Matthew?" There is never a good time to ask, but the Senator is snappish, his already televised run in with the reporter this morning had not helped the man's perennial bad mood.

"My brother."

He is cut off.

"How is Peter?"

"Not good Senator. It is confirmed that he has bronchitis and it is affecting his breathing. Oxygen helps a bit but in his weakened state. I was wondering if I may take some time to visit him at the hospice tomorrow?"

"Of course Matthew."

"Thank you Senator. Your support for Peter over the years, well it means everything to me."

"Your father was a loyal employee and your parent's death in that accident a tragedy. It was the least I can do to ensure that both their sons are looked after. I just wish that there was a different outcome."

"So do I Sir." Peter had faced so many challenges with the crippling injuries caused by a bicycle accident more than a decade and a half ago, the cancer was just the final test, one he wouldn't pass. "But I do appreciate everything you have done with assisting with the care and treatment."

Of course it played well with the voters. Congressman takes responsibility for financially supporting orphan brothers after the tragic death of their parents in an automobile accident. Bonus points for one of them being physically and mentally disabled just two years before the parents died. The other brother is sponsored through college and comes to work for the Congressman turned Senator.

Could almost be a bitter-sweet fairy tale of some sort if it wasn't such a fucking dark nightmare from which he never expected to escape. Still he would ensure the villain went down too.

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**The Hamptons**

Wednesday morning brings the return of Rick's least favourite torturer of a non-criminal variety. Robert seems to reveal in the not-quite-mock hatred and admits he must be doing something right.

Still Rick feels a little better during the session. The movements and exercises are no longer totally alien to him. Despite his body still retaining echoes of the stress of Monday he actually executed most of the exercises with only minor corrections from Robert, even if it is pretty much entirely graceless. Or at least feels so to him. Kate is nothing but encouraging and keeps largely silent, mindful of encroaching on the physio's space.

Beckett of course motors through the exercises. Her ab work is especially impressive. She is lean but not thin. He knows firsthand about the layers of muscle that compliment her steely detective
persona. She relies on coordination, training and smarts to outmatch bigger, stronger opponents. He's not seen her spar against anyone at the Precinct for a long time, but she does attend mixed martial classes at least weekly if her schedule allows. His presence is banned from even observing those classes and he respects that particular boundary, even if others are somewhat looser.

Of course he is innately curious about it. He knows how attractive she is, drawing every eye to her, especially in tight workout gear. She dominates the room and men and not a few women openly appreciate her. Something she simply takes in her stride, except from him. He she always rebuffed, even before they mastered the art of innuendo and subtext. In hindsight he should perhaps have picked up the signs and pressed his luck. But he's here now with her, and they're going nowhere.

She still looks womanly but he knows it is deceptive. A lot of it is down to her training but he envies her almost nature grace, reinforced by excellent reflexes and a never-say-die attitude. One of her many qualities that makes her so extraordinary and him the luckiest man alive.

Kate checks in with Clare, disappointed to find Taylor Matthews has no more work for her for the moment, condemning her to frustrating hours of study for the Civil Service promotion exam. Rick does a really good job of keeping himself occupied even though he can't write or play games. He really doesn't bother her very much.

Somehow she can't shake the feeling that their private little bubble is going to burst. She brings the Sig to bed with her. If he notices, he does say anything.

He doesn't sleep well again.

Again he doesn't tell her.

He doesn't really know why.

He wishes he could tell her.

Another night where his demons win.

**The Hampton, Thursday.**

He hits breaking point that morning just after breakfast.

He was sore. The shoulder throbbed and the raw wound etched a permanent reminder of how close he had come.

He was beyond tired. He hadn't woken her last night when the terrors came.

He fought them alone.

And lost.

Alone.

This morning he had a headache that nothing could touch.

The demons ride him.

She offered nothing by support and love.
He refused that.

Rejected it and threw it back in her face.

Demons cackling all the time.

He regretted the words before they had even formed in his head.

That wasn't the worst thing.

Worse was that the things he said weren't unthinking.

They were structured, logical even, and designed to hurt (her), and God damn it they hit home.

She has an excellent poker/police face but even that couldn't prevent the hurt he inflicted lying naked around her brimming eyes.

Then the guilt hit him and he ran.

Alone.

With his demons.

He returned back almost two hours later.

Drenched to the bone. Despite the waxed waterproof he snatched whilst fleeing through the kitchen exit.

Turns out demons aren't particularly water proof. Not against a good near winter gale off the Atlantic.

He comes through the kitchen entrance that he exited just hours ago.

Starting to shuck his sodden clothes, he isn't quiet. Belt buckles bank and clatter. Boots kicked off ricocheting off cupboards.

She has heard him and appears by the doorway to the corridor.

She has his mobile in her hands. He hadn't even noticed in his haste.

The two of them halt, both eying the other, swaying slightly as if fighting the magnetism that arches between them.

Wordless.

Because really he has nothing that he can say to apologise for his actions.

He would have remained there, dripping and cold, but then he saw her eyes. Leeched free of anything except pain and love, desperation and fear.

He reticence abandons him, and he makes to move forward and bring himself to her.

She hangs back as if afraid of him.

Maybe it's a good idea. He's been a little afraid of himself in the last few hours. Doubts himself just a little now too.
She takes in his soaked clothes and motions with a single hand for him halt and to stay within the warmth of the kitchen.

He retreats just a step, and somehow knowing what she wants, he completes his strip. He struggles with the jumper, right shoulder strapping all entangled.

He looks up and she's not there. Just him alone in his damp boxers, chattering teeth at least evidence that his mouth still functions at some level.

Until she is there again, returning with two towels and more – dry - clothes for him.

There is no stopping her as she strides across the space separating them and crashes into him.

Part of the chill flies from his weary bones just with that first physical sensation of her embrace.

Then she steps back and he sags at the loss.

She says nothing, just big wet eyes. Not afraid but not strong either.

He wants her to be angry with him.

Instead there is no judgement.

The guilt alone almost breaks him.

As she hands him his first towel she touches him again. Glancing at first, just the back of hand. Fire races up his limb and bursts through him.

It is too much for both and the mutual embrace that follows is shocking in its force and compassion.

He breaks again.

This time he doesn't progress past sobs.

He has insufficient energy to howl in agony like his heart wants.

Certainly no composure for words.

She clings to him all this time.

She dries him and dresses him. Each movement so certain and calm but nothing said.

All the time he can't say it. Can't bring himself to apologise when every part of his upbringing, every lesson from his Mother and his life instructs him to. He has no voice for this. No voice for the shame and weight of his demons.

She waits with him. For him.

He is not alone.

Eventually she moves apart. He starts at the loss of contact.

"Rick?" It's okay. Just going to make us some hot chocolate."
He finds his voice. "It's not. Okay. It's really not and I don't know what to do. Kate?"

She's back in his arms before he finishes.

"I almost left my daughter Kate. So close to an effective orphan. It just... it just.., I can't..."

She burrows all the way in. As close to his heart as she can make it.

"I think about giving up a lot. A lot more than I used to. You know. After a close call. Freezer. Dirty bomb. Tiger." Another time he'd make a joke, they would make light of it. But too many times they have and too many times they nearly haven't been able to.

She leans up from his chest and kisses him.

"Me too Castle. I almost lost you too."

It is some time before they can make the hot chocolate.

Taking their hot chocolates into the Library they curl up under one blanket. Each with one arm free for their drinks.

She doesn't push him.

He chooses to hold his words in and instead he cries it out with her beside him.

Eventually he falls asleep.

She doesn't leave him.

Kate had palmed Martha off when she rang earlier while Rick was gone. Now she rang again. Peeling away from her still somnolent lover, she steps just far enough away to avoid disturbing him but still keep him in sight.

"Can I speak to him?"

"He's sleeping Martha."

"I would like to speak to my son." Oh she's pulling the mother card.

"Sorry I'm not waking him." God she loves Martha but sometimes, well just the boundaries are a bit too close and the woman's well-meaning advice can be counter-productive.

"He's not fine now but he will be Martha. We'll get through this."

"Katherine." She mostly loved Martha form of address for her, except for now when it sounds a little too much like she is being chided, lectured on what is best. "I do trust you with my son."

"But you worry. So do I Martha." She can be direct, she needs to. "But I am here with him and we're working through it. There's no secrets that it is going to be tough at times, but I've told Rick, Hell I've told the world, that he is it for me Martha. My forever, and I'll do anything for him."

"I know that Dear. I apologise, but a mother worries. And well Richard, he can get himself into a lot of trouble."
"No apology is necessary. When Rick is feeling a bit better he'll call. Tomorrow would be good. Okay?"

"Thank you My Dear. Give him a kiss for me. Good night Katherine."

"Good night Martha."

When he wakes she is there with him.

"Hey." Soft and gentle. No probing, no demand for answers, no chiding for scaring the shit out of her. She's still scared of course.

Just like him.

"Your mom rang."

"What did you tell her?"

"That you still need help and that we'll get it. We'll do it together."

"Thank you."

She leans in and kisses him sweetly.

"Kate?"

"Hmmmmm?"

"When we go back to city next week I want to go see my therapist. I'll see if I can get an appointment for before or after the hospital check up."

"Sounds like a good idea Babe."

"Kate? Will….will you come with me?"

"Of course. I'd be honoured.

The Hamptons - Friday

They wake together that morning.

As ever she is faster to wake and come alert. She waits for him. Soon he is awake too, his eyes open but remain unfocused, his usual often exuberant presence absent. It is like losing a part of herself.

But he is there. Beside her with his left hand lazily stroking her side. The physical contact gives her hope and strength.

Summoning up the courage she asks him if he wanted to cancel the physio session.

He's mute for the moment. Merely shaking his head.

She doesn't know what to do next. It's not awkward per se, simply stalemated. Something they had experienced so many times before. Before them. They are better than that. Better than this. But Post Traumatic Stress is not something lightly addressed. She still carries the echoes of hers,
maybe she will for the rest of their lives. She would have given almost anything to have spare him the same first-hand knowledge.

In all the time she's known him, this is the most, well pretty much the only time his words have failed him to such an extent. Sure there have been things unsaid, mostly between them, about them. But this is different. She wants to fix it but she wants to respect his choices, and support his decisions. She has made a lot of mistakes with Rick in the past, not given him the opportunity to choose, and her desperation to avoid new mistakes, or repeating old ones, seeps into everything she does.

So they lie there. Not quite entwined and silent still.

Until he isn't anymore.

He angles his body towards her, the movement disconnecting their legs, the sudden shift in gravity bringing their bodies closer.

"Kate." His voice startles her. She wasn't expecting it, not so soon.

Unbidden she responds to his voice, scooting closer.

He opens his arms and she completes her journey.

"I'm sorry. So sorry."

"Don't be Rick."

"I'm so afraid Kate." She pushes herself in further, waiting for him.

"I don't know how to do this. How to make it right. Do the things others want. What you want. What is best for me, you, all of us."

He sits up suddenly breaking contact. "You know my marriage to Gina went like this? Not sharing."

She brings herself upright and re-embraces him but still keeping his face in view.

"This is nothing like that Rick. You've been traumatised and this is natural. It's healing." Damn It. She'll fight for him. She's not giving up. Never.

"When I went to my Dad's cabin this was part of the reason why. I couldn't get you out of my head. But it was all so confused. Your words, the pain, the void. It took me time – too much time – and then therapy to make sense." She hopes she is getting through to him.

"I think you should see a therapist. It won't be easy, but it will be worth it. I'd give anything to spare you this if I could Rick."

"No Kate. I think you're right. I do need someone to help with the …demons." He looks at her, blazing blue eyes, intensity off the charts. "I want you there. For that."

"Of course Rick. What else do you need?" She hesitates, afraid to ask. "Do you need space? Rick, because if you want……?"

"God No! That scares me more than anything. Kyra and Gina both used that term and it signalled the end."
His head sags, eyes downcast. Her man child looking so much like a lost little boy. The voice is small too. "I need you more than ever Kate." He half-sobs. "I just don't know how to ask for so much."

"Of course you can ask Rick. My wall is down and I damned if you're going to get one." She lifts his chin up so he can see the conviction in her eyes.

"Never an end with us Rick. You know that. Right?"

She takes his face in hands, gently palming the stubbled cheeks. She kisses each tear from his face.

"I love you Rick. Just like I told you that first night. I've loved you for a long time before then, and I can only spend all of our time together showing you how much I do."

"I love you too Katherine Houghton Beckett." His lips seeking hers briefly.

"You are not alone. Rick. We're never alone."

Robert was back.

He could sense the recovering mood amongst the pair. Not quite tension, certainly not between the two who are almost merged into each other, but there is the aftershocks of something hanging around. He seems to take a minute for quiet inspection of the pair but doesn't ask anything.

He didn't change his routine or take it any easier on Rick.

For his part Rick bites down on the pain and sore muscles and pushes through. The focus on the physical helps. His mental gymnastics suspended in favour of his far less impressive physical ones.

"My speciality is bodies. But plenty of my customers need help mentally too. Rick there is little doubt in my mind that you will need professional help as we progress.

Kate bites her lip, uncertain how much her partner wants to share.

"I've been having trouble sleeping. Bad dreams, worse actually. Overwhelmed me yesterday." He's brutally and bluntly honest. "I've got an appointment next week on Thursday afternoon. We were going back to the city for Friday for a check-up at Bellevue but we'll head up a day early."

"Thanks good Rick. I know this sounds like platitudes but it is a process. Sometimes you just got to put the work in. You're lucky you got Kate to share it with."

"I am lucky. But thank you for your concern.

**Homicide, Twelfth Precinct.**

The Chief of Detectives had been rightly dismissive of the scant information that Tom Demming had brought to her attention. She of course had shared it with the Tom Delaney in light of their shared pasts on Operation Integrity. He in turn had discussed it with Rod Hawkins, Assistant Commissioner.

Being ambitious and making political connections was not a crime, more of a necessary evil if you aspired to anything more than patrolman or a gold shield. So by default Lieutenant Carmel Davies wasn't exactly out of line in associating outside of hours with a city councillor. But Councilwoman Glaser was Bracken's and a long term foe for certain elements of the NYPD and their associates.
The phrase 'no smoke without fire' came to mind. Just that for the moment, they couldn't find a suitable 'fire'. Still they would be on their guard. Years of experience told them that something big was going to happen, and they would need their 'A' game. Just a shame that Demming didn't actually hear what they were saying. Still it had taken some guts for the Detective to take a chance and bring his observations to her attention. She remembered that he had apparently dated Beckett a couple of years back. Seriously what was Roy thinking? The place was like a soap opera sometimes.

Glancing out into the bullpen she spotted Detective Ryan leaving the Electronic and Information Intelligence office. That reminded her that she needed to have words with Tory Ellis and Detective Esposito. It would appear the two of them had managed to screw up their little Soap. Even with Castle and Beckett absent, she still felt like she was trying to maintain order in kindergarten. At least when Beckett and Castle were here they mainly maintained a professional demeanour which is more than can be said for the two who have be glowering at each other all week.

Time to use a little of the 'Iron' in her reputation. She had let a little of her guard down. Well time to put it back on.

The Hamptons

Looking at her sleeping partner she bit her lip.

Tomorrow was…..tomorrow was Saturday. It was also the Seventeenth of November.

She wasn't one to make a fuss over it. Or accept more than cursory best wishes from others. Even those who knew her. Exceptions in years gone by had been her Dad and Lanie. More importantly they knew her preference for low key. A drink, a slice of cake out of sight from anyone else who might know her. Private. Just like most of her life. While until he had come along.

As luck would have it the only boyfriend that had lasted long enough to be around for the day wasn't actually around as Josh had been in another country (as usual).

She's never shared it with Rick, not in any meaningful way until last year. That first year she had intimidated Ryan into keeping quiet and she had Lanie blackmail Espo in the basest manner possible even though it was long before the two had got together. It took until the second year for Rick to even find out the date – damn Roy for the soft touch he was - and even then she managed to avoid facing him as he had book signing commitment. The third year she was with Josh and whilst the doctor wasn't actually present in New York for the day Josh did take her for a romantic dinner on his return. It had been enough for him to settle for and her to accept disguised as something else. Castle was the perfect Gentleman, respecting her boundaries. Looking back she wished he had been a little less respectful. She and Josh were destined to crash, he could well have speeded the whole process up. Who knows what would have happened.

The fourth year Rick finally made something of the date. He surprised her. Not just with his actions but that it had been totally appropriate and in keeping with their gentle closing of the last of the distance between them. He really did know her most and best of all. He caught her at the end of the day when the bullpen was virtually empty. With no fanfare he had presented her with a non-descript box which upon opening contained the most perfect Red Velvet cupcake complete with an unlit silver candle with beautifully crafted wax flame. Whilst she was still taking in the contents of the box, he had checked for witnesses (none), had lent-in closing the final distance between them, and brushed his lips across her cheek whilst murmuring 'Happy Birthday Kate' into her ear before departing long before she could even react. She had stumbled home on auto-pilot and barely composed herself before Lanie was at her door for a girl's night in. She hadn't shared the cup cake
or the kiss with anyone. The candle with the beautiful flame lies wrapped in tissue in her memento box keeping company with the other trinkets Rick has gifted her over the years.

This year is different.

They're together. A truth that pretty much the whole world knows – press conferences tend to do that.

A state she is perfectly happy with. And happy with him. And him with her.

And yet he's different too, and not entirely in ways she or he wants. It is not his fault but it tempers her expectation of what she can, well, expect just now.

She thought he may have forgotten in the concern around his recovery. Especially with the week they have just had.

To be honest she kind of hoped that was the case, maybe just a bit. He could be a more than a little over-the-top and whilst it was endearing it could be a bit too much sometimes. She knows he tries to tamp down some of his excesses but still she will admit to not being entirely comfortable with the Castle/Rodgers show at all times. Dear God how was she going to survive Christmas?

She could easily forgive him losing track of the dates and forgetting especially with the recent post-traumatic stress events and that new uncertainty.

Of course she should have known better.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note

Belated Happy New Year.

Happy Australia Day.

Well that took longer than expected. Christmas, work (no days off except public holidays).

Whilst you were all waiting so patiently we have past the second anniversary for this story – Chapter 1 was published all the way back on 21 Jan 2013.

So to every one of my readers, new and old, thank you for sticking with me and this story. I've said before this started as a 5 or 6 chapter story with maybe 8000 odd words. It will end 80 chapters long with well more than 400,000 words, perhaps even close to half-a-million.

I have more than 20000 words written for the reminder of the story. The next two chapters are about half done so here's hoping that the make an appearance in the next month or so. The remaining chapters are all outlined (but subject to improvement and tweaking as I write). Believe you me I do look forward to finishing. Sometimes this feels more like a very long assignment than fun, but rest assured I will not quite and I will complete the story this year (now's there's an achievable deadline I hope).
Moments

Chapter Summary

Previously Rick’s recovery is proceeding, but not without issues they are facing together. As the end of the year approaches there are days of note to mark.

Disclaimer – Naturally I don’t own Castle (Beckett does). Now who owns Beckett? Now that’s a deep question. All the usual legal stuff probably applies too.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Early morning, Public Courts, near the Twelfth Precinct.

Somehow despite the city budget cuts and the entreaties of developers these public basketball courts just a block from the Twelfth somehow remained. Of course it helps that most days there are more than a few cops shooting hoops with varying degrees of competitiveness.

Who are they kidding? They're cops, competitive is a natural state. Unsurprisingly friendly wasn't a term often associated with that. Even with other cops. From the same precinct.

Kevin Ryan dropped to his haunches. Despite the seasonal chill and the early hour he was sweating through his multiple layers. What was he thinking? More to the point what the Hell was his partner thinking. ESPO!

He turned to glare at the man, but first had to take in frustrating sight of LT and Glencoe from Vice grinning back at him. Could they not tell his expression was a grimace?

The groan from beside him was sufficient reminder to check his partner. The self-same author of their current misfortune had roped him into playing two of the tallest officers in the precinct in a friendly game of hoops. Friendly? Yeah right. Castle might actually be useful here – if he didn't have a busted shoulder. And no coordination. And absolutely no ball skills. No strike that. Beckett! Beckett would be good. She's got skills. And she can distract any male. Oh that's dangerously close to a line he won't cross for more reasons than the nuns ever gave at school.

"So what's that?" He'll give Espo credit for not sounding beat as he raises his voice to challenge the opposition.

"You're down 3 baskets, which makes that thirty bucks." Smirks Glencoe. Equally tall beside the normally genial Vice cop, LT shrugs his shoulders, easy going as ever.

"Doubl…..murfff" Espo's attempt to increase the wager was interrupted by Ryan's gloved hand.

"Are you trying to get me evicted to the couch permanently?"

"No. Why?"

"Just because you aren't getting any, don't cock block a partner dude. Cause if I lose any more money on one of your wild bets Jenny will suspend my privileges."
"See that's why I'm not married," Espo looks slyly at Ryan, "Anyway aren't you trying for a baby?"

"She's happy to let my stocks replenish."

"Too much detail Irish."

"Irish?! You call me out, and you're not even dating Javi."

"Minor technical detail."

"Hey are you two gonna play or do you need a room?" LT normally wasn't one to taunt but this was too easy, too hard to resist.

"You two are going down." The Latino turns his attention back to the game.

Glencoe is much more of a mouth, "From where we're standing we're looking down anyway."

"Fuck it. Double up?! Or are you girls chicken?" Fighting Irish indeed. This was going to get messy.

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**The Hamptons.**

Kate Beckett woke to find herself alone in their bed. She's a fast waker but these last few weeks had scrubbed a little off that usual decade plus enforced efficiency. Still her mind supplies valuable data even as she stretches out the cricks. Today is the seventeenth of November, she's in the Hamptons, but where's her partner? Taking a single deep breath she calms herself. She won't panic or even worry. There may be a simple, logical – no scrub that this is Rick - there may be an explanation for his absence.

She was never quite sure which Richard Castle she would encounter when she woke but she was certain she loved and generally cherished every one of them, even the ones that made her grind her teeth or on rarer occasions cry.

She rapidly replayed the events of the night. Just two standard nightmares – Jesus how bad is it when nightmares are classified as standard and accepted as routine? Still only two nightmares was an improvement, and they had both woken at each event and snuggled, whispering comfort to each other before slipping easily back to sleep.

Raising her head she spied his bedside clock. Later than usual. Good. Sleep recovered. So where is he? Whilst she was still internally debating what to do she heard the crunch of a vehicle on the drive way.

She springs from the bed, her hand seeking out the metallic reassurance of the Sig in the bedside drawer. No time to dress, she attempts to pull on the dressing gown she had purposely deposited on her side of the bed last night with firm, direct instructions for him to not use this one. Left arm goes in first, and then she attempts to repeat with her right arm only to find that her hand won't fit with the pistol still in it. God if he was here she'd be mortified and he'd be laughing. Swapping the pistol into her left hand she thrusts her right arm through the sleeve.

Before her hand has cleared the exit at the top of the sleeve she is off and running, transferring the pistol back into her primary hand as she moved on autopilot.

She skids to a stop at the top of the stairs. She has a good view of the spacious entrance hall.
She is already too late as the thud is the front door closing. However, the absence of any other noise seems to signal a lack of threat. Sure enough there he is below her in his matching robe. He's carrying a heated catering food container in his left hand.

Habit ensures she completes her scan and threat assessment. One annoying male of the ruggedly handsome and moderately infuriating kind. Mostly harmless. No other visible or audible threats.

Oh this was embarrassing. Sort of. Well not really. It wouldn't be the first time. He'd learnt the hard way less than a month into them that it was wise not to try and creep into her apartment without warning.

The she remembers where she is, in just her sleep wear, a robe and holding her pistol. Her right hand darts behind her back. Just in time too. As if by sixth sense he looks up and spots her.

There is a small frown – one she deduces is for being discovered/ found-out/busted – before a beaming smile flashes into place. She knows all his false ones for media and people he doesn't actually like, or merely tolerates, this is the real thing. The one that makes her heart skip and that sensation pool in her stomach (and lower), her lips go dry and her tongue-tie.

This is awkward because there is nowhere she can safely deposit the pistol without giving something away. Time to woman up. Plus maybe she can distract him. She straightens, posture sharpening up, and she gets moving.

She makes her way down the stairs. If he has observed her hand and the pistol she is attempting to shield from him, he makes no comment.

Before she gets to him he gives her one of those smiles that melts her, and then without so much as a 'good morning' or a kiss turns and heads for the kitchen, waiting until he was approaching the entrance to glance behind and ask "You coming Beckett?" Oh that man!

Of course he has ways of completely disarming any potential onset of a scolding or bad mood, and what greets her in the kitchen is a sure fire winner. He had paused just inside the door after teasing her, she hesitates just in the hallway catching a good look into the familiar space.

The table is set for two. A pair of candles flicker, good crockery and silverware. Lights dimmed. She can smell something good. She kicks forward entering the room.

"Happy Birthday Kate."

"You remembered?" Of course he did.

"Of course." He's never letting her be needlessly alone. He can give her space when she needs it, but he can be there for everything else. Always.

"I was going to bring something to you in bed before inviting you down." He's matter-of-factual, no disappointment apparent in his speech. "But you're up and here now. So the kitchen is okay Love?"

"Kitchen is good Castle." She leans into him and give him a quick kiss. She'll let the sweetheart endearment pass for the moment as she follows him into the warmth of the room.

She's not ready for this.

She's in her sleep wear, morning breath, un-caffeinated, oversize robe flapping open, her pistol slapped quietly on the bench behind her despite her effort at stealth. She'd caught his eye flicker
but he remained poker-faced and silent on the matter, then the sparkle was back.

There was no stopping him.

She stilled any thought of protest. She can accept this. For him, and more so for herself. One of things she promised herself on the swings was letting go of negative traits and unlearning behaviours conditioned by her past. Moving forward with him. Committing to him, to them. Wholeheartedly.

First, there was a single pink rose. Presented with just a touch of a flourish.

"Happy Birthday Kate."

A real rose despite the season. The base colour is closer to white, the perfect petals infused with a deep red that blends in the further from the stem it travels. It is exquisite. Expensive some part of her brain shouts out before being drowned by the rest that goes for romantic instead. He could have got her thirty, maybe a hundred, a thousand the stuff of nightmares. Instead he got her one. One perfect flower. Romantic is right on. He knows she's not a believer in the symbolism of flower colours. Or much of a fan of the transient beauty of these plants. This is the best compromise.

She rewards him with a kiss and murmured 'thank you' and waft of hot air across his ear.

Next came a card.

"Happy Birthday Kate."

The envelope simply has her initials on in 'K.B.' unadorned except for his temporarily stuttering hand. She accepts it from him with an open smile and trail of a thumb over his hand feeling the emotions arch between them. These moments, so many of them, every day and night, providing proof to her, evidence of them, and certainly for forever.

She opens the flap and pulls the card free. It matches the rose. Predominately white with broad strokes of deep red in the free-flowing artistic calligraphy that adorns the face.

Simple, elegant. On the front was the outline of a flowing heart drawn from one continuous sweep of an artist's brush, containing the beautifully crafted words 'Happy Birthday' within the centre. She opens the thick card. There is no poetry, or pre-printed corny declaration. Instead there were four words, stark and strong on the page. An in-elegant, wrong-handed scrawl no doubt executed with extra, effortless carelessness.

Kate.

Forever.

Love.

Rick.

Her heart skipped a moment as she verified there wasn't a question mark after the second word. No. Good she thinks. A proposal now was something. Something what? She wasn't ready for it? No, wait that's not right. Yes, she was, she realises that no. Him? No, maybe not at that. They had been both definitely nearly ready. Almost at least. What would she say? She pushed that question of herself back for a moment. What about him?

She knew now that he wasn't ready. He was suffering from some form of post-traumatic stress.
following his shooting. They didn't need a formal diagnosis to know that. Kate's own first-hand experience, the expert view from Robert the veteran physio, their own logic all told them that. He needed help for that. Just like she hadn't been ready right away to face everything, he wasn't now. He was in a similar place to where she had been, not the same, enough differences, ying and yang but still them. It would be churlish and selfish of her to ask anymore of him than she could of herself. Plus now they were together, they had each other. The next step could wait a while longer.

She would offer him everything of herself but wait for him. Wait while he was still healing physically too. Sure it was not far in the scheme of things but not quite close enough.

She thought this is all in the handful of beats required to position herself close enough to seize his head with both hands and mush his hair whilst she kissed him. Both acts quite thorough.

Excellent he was quite speechless after that. Bed hair without the nakedness. She'll fix that later.

Except he wasn't done yet.

He had something else. Picked it up whilst she was momentarily lost in thought.

A present?

The final act.

Oh he loves his little party tricks, the magical sleight of hand.

When he brings his right hand forward from behind his back.

But it is more than magic when her heart nearly stops.

It's a small box.

Small and intimate she remembers telling him.

This is it?]

Then she notices the extra details.

Important ones.

He's still standing.

The box shaped gift is exquisitely wrapped.

Even with two working hands he wasn't that good. He wouldn't get a store to wrap something of that magnitude. Alexis? Even so surely he wouldn't ask to?

"Rick!?!" Issues from her, low, intense, if not menacing then at least mildly interrogational.

His eyes go wide. The words he was about to say lost on his lips. His orbs bounce from the compact wrapped box-shaped gift in his hand, back to her face, and back to his hands.

She can almost see him sag before the smile returns including the eyes.

"Happy Birthday Kate."

He offers her the gift-wrapped box.
She was tempted to snatch at it but resisted. So she paced herself small calm movements to collect the gift and to peel the paper off. A white sleeve surrounded a black case. She rotated it to find the label. It was a DKNY box. Not Tiffany's or some bespoke jeweller.

Not a ring.

Yet her hand shook just a little as she slid the black case from the sleeve.

She had regained control but if pushed she'll admit to remaining slightly nervous whilst she flipped the lid.

So it wasn't a ring but oh it was gorgeous.

A ladies dress watch.

Simply elegant.

Silver.

No diamonds.

The small round body with hours marked in silver Roman numerals on the cream face.

She slipped her Dad's watch from her wrist, laying it carefully on the bench. Beside her gun.

It took a second to work out how the clasp – any of the links with the DKNY embossed - worked. Then the strap was open and slipping over her hand. Pushing the clasp closed she is not surprised to find it fits her perfectly. He has always done this. Get her things that fit her so well. How well he knows her and cares for, even when she refused or hid from admitting it. She is much better at it now, letting him to her life, her heart, her pain, her future. Their future.

Holding her hand out, she admired it. It was a lot smaller than she was used to. But it did suit her, especially if she was dressed up. Hmmm, she has her suspicions.

"Thank you Rick it's beautiful."

"I needed, wanted to get you something. And well recent events had kind of made doing it myself difficult. I had some help. I knew what I wanted to get you. Alexis did the leg work. Bought it with her this last weekend.

"It's beautiful and more importantly it suits me." She raises her arm to model her new dress watch one more time. Lowering her arm, she takes his hand.

"I'll have to thank Alexis too," her tongue toys with the edge of her lower lip, "You know for a moment I thought…."

"Kate." He interrupts her, and for once she lets him. "God, I didn't realize until the moment I bought it out from behind me. Look, you know I would never tease you about something as important as that Kate. You're a one and done girl, and that includes the proposal, so trust me when I ask, I'll do it right. It is the least you deserve. I'm sorry if it….."

It was her turn to interrupt him. "No Rick. You didn't do anything wrong.

"I know when you ask I'll be more than ready." She wants to say she's ready now. She really is, but she more than suspects that he isn't quite. That his road to recovery still has some way to travel.
"Of course my original plans had us on a tropical beach somewhere. You in a bikini. At least in the beginning."

"Hmmm, whose birthday again?"

"Hush, I'm telling a story." Damn him, he knows she wants to hear it. "Well I was there too. In our private cabana. Cool cocktails with fresh exotic fruits, coconut oil, a massage table, sea breezes, a good book, left open at a particular scene. Did I mention our PRIVATE cabana?" His voice is low, ever so dangerous.

He kisses her, and she tries to follow his retreating lips before admitting. "I could be persuaded."

"Another year. Hell we don't even need to wait for a birthday."

"Cops don't get a lot of time off Rick. Even if their boyfriends are millionaires"

"You're one too now." Oh shit! She hadn't exactly forgotten but she had pushed it to the back of her mind. She had never considered her mother's trust fund her wealth, and so had convinced herself that she was a public servant abet with a trust fund purchased apartment and a slightly better than average wardrobe.

"The story?"

"Oh, sorry" Grinning idiot. "So there we are in a tropical paradise, just the two of us…

Breakfast was delicious.

He had arranged for it to be delivered from Ambrosia. That was the crunch on the drive way, the closing door that had culminated in her moderate mortification after dashing for him, half-dressed gun in hand. The morning had improved substantially from there. Kisses, cards, a present, and now a gourmet breakfast, more kisses.

To start she is presented with a pink grapefruit half topped with small pieces of fresh tropical fruit. Accompanied with fresh pressed grapefruit juice. The two versions of the tart fruit shouldn't work but she loves the bitter bite of the drink and it contrasts nicely with the sweeter essence of the pink grapefruit and burst of tropical flavours from the other fruit.

She beams at Castle. He has chosen well.

Clearing their bowls away, he retrieves the next course from beneath the warmer.

Eggs Benedict with that brilliant hollandaise sauce from a separate ceramic container so not as to be tainted with any plastics, and still the right temperature and consistency across the top of the eggs, ham on fresh baked English muffins. Another excellent choice and she rewards him with a slightly off-centre, hollandaise-tinged kiss. Somehow she resists the temptation to coat his upper lip or nose with some of the fabulous concoction and then lick it off.

Of course it was accompanied by fresh hot coffee. Her hum into the steaming cup is all the appreciation he needs for providing her with favourite hot beverage.

Clearing the plates he is back again with more bounty from beneath the warmer.

Somehow she found room for one of the perfect buttery croissants and then a half of a pain-au-
chocolat too. Washed down with just a little more coffee.

She wants her thanks to be much more profuse. However, the weight of the rich food in their stomachs precludes any form of birthday celebration or gratitude more energetic than a mumbled 'thank you' and brief, mostly chaste kisses for a while.

After cleaning up with Kate firmly anchored to the stool – 'not on your birthday Beckett' – they leave the warmth of the kitchen and retire to the library. Rick locates a couple of pairs of long socks, and along with their robes, and a couple of throw blankets soon have them flaked out on the huge couch with full stomachs, sated and sleepy, the warmth of their food more than sufficient compensation for the cooler temperature of the big room.

"Hey Kate."

"Yes Rick."

"Happy Birthday Babe."

"You're doing it." Again.

"Doing what?"

"Don't play the innocent Rick. Not fooled for a second. Nor am I falling for you slipping in those little endearments."

"So that's a no on the 'sweet-cheeks' then?"

"Most definitely if you ever want your hands on my sweet cheeks again."

"Understood Birthday Girl." She backhands his chest gently.

"Oomph!" Bad over-actor seriously. Martha obviously never coached him in that arena. Or he didn't pay attention. Likely both.

She turns to him and he reciprocates the focus of attention. "Thank you Rick. It is a lovely start to my birthday."

"Kate….."

"Did you make other plans?"

"I already knew that you marked your birthday quietly but that you didn't really celebrate your birthday like us Castle's do, well except for my mother who obfuscates hers, but she still has a party.

"I actually asked Lanie for some advice."

"You did? Why?" She changes her mind, she doesn't need his answer so she reaches a finger out to gently to still any reply.

"I remember last year. It was the best birthday I'd had since I was nineteen. I know we weren't together and that's all on me but that one perfect cup cake, the candle, the kiss on the cheek, all the forethought and kindness that went into marking that day in private for me, well it is one of our special moments, and a wonderful memory Rick. I'll treasure it always. No matter all the other things we do with our lives. It's one of a continuous stream of things you've done to prove how much you care and how well you know me Rick."

You don't need advice on how to treat me or
"If we weren't here (and you weren't shot) how would today have gone?" She wants a story.

"Well it's a Saturday and if you were off, and I hope that your were able to take the day, then a quiet breakfast in the loft as no one is up early on weekends, dead bodies permitting. Maybe celebrate a little," a wink, an arched eyebrow, "help you mark the day in a special way. Then lunch with the family. Maybe in the evening a romantic meal for two, somewhere low key and then I'd bring you back to our place."

"And now? Here?"

"Well to start, I think that once you feel that you won't sink like a stone then a soak in a bath with lots of bubbles is called for. Some champagne, chocolate, a good book and company if you want it."

"Sounds perfect."

They are still half-dozing in recovery mode when her dad calls. She doesn't even remember pocketing her cell in her haste to check on Rick. But there it is in her robe pocket.

"Hey Katie. Happy Birthday!"

"Hi Dad. Thanks."

"Is this a good time? Rick taking care of you?" The two questions run together.

There was a time when that sort of conversation and the merging inquiries might have been embarrassing, possibly even mortifying but she's more than that now. Plus she knows her father, that's not his style. That sort of teasing was solely her mother's domain, her father much prefers to tease the boyfriend, not the daughter.

"He's been lovely. A card, present, breakfast. And for him not extravagant or outlandish. Perfect really. He knows what I like and he is so good for me, to me."

"Yes he is Katie." Her dad says so much with four three words. "You deserve everything he does for you."

Her normal instinct would be argue the point, but it's fruitless. Her dad is stubborn and Rick is another level entirely when he needs to be.

She feels the brush of his lips against her cheek. She turns her focus to him, and he points upstairs and mimes turning taps. She nods and gives him a shy smile. He's going to prepare the bath and give her some privacy with her dad. Sweet, sweet, thoughtful man.

He leads her to his, she still struggles with their, bath. It is unique, half-sunken into the tiled floor. To be honest it is more of a two person spa than a bath. It has jets, and seats. And space. She's used it before. But it has never looked like this.

It is a sea of bubbles appears to float suspended across the entire surface. It's more than inches deep, at least half a foot, maybe more.

Dozens of tea candles (real ones this time) flicker with a faint breeze of the subtle incense, there is
no music yet, but she knows there will be some soon.

There is a glass of champagne already the edge, slices of strawberry suspended in the bubbles, the bottle chilling in the ice bucket, more fresh strawberries (in winter!), dark dipping chocolate, her Kindle and a small stack of assorted books (none of his) of the paper kind.

She is out of her robe and night clothes in seconds. She sneaks a look at him, stunned into immobility, and she flings a few items at him, smiling all the time.

There is a flash of more than appreciation, his eyes darkening most definitely as she tries to interpret the look on her boyfriend's face. Leaving that little mystery unsolved she's settled into the warmth and encased bubbles and he's still frozen there.

"Get in here Rick."

"Yes Ma'am."

She'll let that one pass for the moment. He's insolent and infuriating without breaking sweat but so sweet and charming too. God she loves him so much.

And this. This was more than she could ever have hoped for. More than she would ever been able to accept before him, and all his endeavours to make her happy. It so clear now that for years all he had ever wanted to do was ensure that she was happy, that the awful miasma of her mother's murder be massaged away.

Her birthday. Her formerly favourite day, the one she spent for nineteen years with her mom, a day that was for a decade plus unbearable, barely marked lest it re-open festering wounds. But now he's helping her live and be everything she wants, what her mom would have wanted too. She always believed in evidence, of needing proof, but here and always she had everything she ever needed to show her that magic does exist. He's fixing it. Fixing her and at the same time making them. Magic indeed.

Twelfth Precinct.

They had been out seeking to re-interview witnesses to the cold case they were working. Almost half a day and no progress, returning empty handed to the Precinct. As luck would have it, or rather their lack of any, they had barely sat down with coffees to warm up before Gates exited the elevator.

Any false hope of remaining incognito was vanquished the moment their Captain, glanced their way and altered her trajectory to her office to pass directly by their desks. She barely pauses.

"Good morning Detectives."

"Sir."

"Good morning Sir." Ryan's response is some mumbled on account of his bruised and swollen lip.

"Is Detective Ryan okay Esposito?"

"A minor sporting injury Sir. He'll be fine." There that's the truth.

"I'm not so sure. I take it his wife hasn't seen him yet." Ryan's pale face blanches further, if that
was possible, making the rather deeply purple protuberance on his mouth even more pronounced.

"Thought so. Much as I appreciate you defending each other and the reputation of Homicide, let's try to keep the friendly games to level where no one actually calls the cops. Or rather more cops."

"Sir."

The two partners share a look. Busted. Where's Castle when you need someone to distract the Captain? God they miss him. Beckett too, but when in need of misdirection or a scam there is no one better than the writer.

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**Hamptons. The Bathroom.**

The champagne bottle is inverted into the ice bucket in statement. The strawberries demolished and the chocolate dipping sauce considerably diminished not to mention a tad water logged. In contrast the discarded books survive, having been pushed or gently tossed to a safe distance from any flood plain. The handful of tea candles still lit stutter their last, gasping against the exhaustion of their fuel supply.

The water is tepid now. Two refills from the hot tap was more than enough. They're nicely pruned and it really is time to get out.

She is ready too. More so because she's also nicely sated from the semi-submerged sex that occurred between bath tub refills one and two.

Almost even better he had continued his demonstration of the progress in his recovery by performing several acts for her that involved both hands, the most recent of which was washing her body and hair with those surprising gentle meat hooks. She loved his hands on her - not just in sexual way but from the intimacy as he did the simplest things for her so carefully, worshipping her body and their connection.

Then it was her turn to wash him. She was quicker, the coolness of the water even with the reflected glow of the heat lamps was indicating it was time for them to get out. She was almost done when she reached his right shoulder. She carefully maps out the region around his upper torso, her progress slowing as she approached the still healing wound. They can get the skin damp now but it is still advisable to avoid hot water making contact with the fresh epidermis. And painful to boot too, sensitive to pressure or heat. In this situation the barely warm bath water is perfect.

Sometimes it feel like every significant event in their relationship has to be marked with scars. It's not true of course, but it doesn't stop the sensation that sinks it, and feels exactly like that.

She stands and extends her hands to him and together they step out of the bath grabbing huge cotton bath towels off the heating rail to wrap themselves in.

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Her hair fully dry and rounded up in a lose ponytail, clad in leggings, t-shirt, and baggy hoody, she seeks out her phone.

Her dad had already called that morning, but there is one other person she speaks to without fail on her birthday – well excluding Castle and his family now. Sure enough on exiting the bathroom she retrieved her phone from the dresser and there waiting for her was a text message from Lanie, and a voice message too. There are also texts from the Boys. Missed calls from both Alexis and Martha. A brief voice message from Martha, and a – voice message and MMS - from Alexis.
She'll get to all those later. She doesn't even listen to Lanie's voice message as she calls her best-not Castle-friend back straight away.

"Hey Girlie!"

"Hi Lanie."

"Happy Birthday Kate."

"Thanks Lanie."

"Soooo?"

"Sooooo what?" Whoever said mimicry is the sincerest form of flattery was BS-ing. But she knows it will fire up her girlfriend.

"Nah. Not a chance Katherine Beckett. Stop trying to distract me."

"Sorry." She sounds desperately insincere to herself.

"No you're not!" And down the phone line too.

"Guilty."

"Right so using that confession of guilt I would like the details. So what did Writer Man do for your birthday?"

"He's recuperating, what makes you sure he did anything?"

"Oh no you don't get to dodge. After all these years we all know him well enough – some more than others - to know that he would have had some great plan. Something over-the-top too. Most likely."

"I think you're right. But it was sweet actually. Low key too. At least so far."

"Hmmm, not hearing any details Kate."

"Pushy."

"Oh please I've had to drag the real details out of you for years. Damn you didn't tell me about Josh for almost a month. You tried to hide Castle but that was always doomed to failure."

"Can we change the subject please? But before we move on, different reasons for those you know that Lanie. With Castle it was because we wanted it to be just us for a while. He deserved that."

"You deserved that too Kate. We were all rooting for you anyway. But sure we can change subjects, just give me the facts."

"Okay. He let me sleep in, and by the time I woke he had breakfast delivered," she can skip over her alarm at the sound of the driveway and her pistol packing dash, "from the local deli I told you about the other night. It was all fresh ingredients and fantastic. Oh and he had this singular striking white/pink rose, and a card. Both were so thoughtful and careful. He just knows me so well Lanes."

"Oh Girl, you know I'm so happy for you. Both of you. You deserve each other despite being mutually stupid about it for so long."
"Gee thanks Lanie. We got the memo. Way past that now."

"Did he get you presents?"

"Yes. He did and it was just as perfect. He got me a dress watch."

"Was it from Tiffany or an expensive Swiss one? That Tissot you lusted after a few years ago? Diamonds?"

"I did not lust after it. I just greatly desired it for a couple of days, during my waking moments. The watch he got Lanes, it just shows that knows me better than anyone. It was from DKNY. It's perfect though. Simple, elegant and it suits me to the T. He had Alexis pick it up and secretly deliver when she came last weekend. The price doesn't matter, it was all the care and thought into picking the ideal present for me.

"I suspect there may be a romantic dinner on the cards tonight. The watch kind of calls for wearing out."

"Hmmmm, you keep me in the loop on that please. Any signs of a dress?"

"Hmm, nothing yet but wouldn't put it past him to pull off his fairy godmother act. I didn't exactly bring anything too flashy up with us."

"And what did he follow the watch up with? Cause I know the both of you and even on his best behaviour that man is going to have had other plans for you."

"Oh he did have plans. He ran me a huge bubble bath with champagne and strawberries and candle light."

"I still have trouble reconciling this sappy romantic I am talking to on the phone with Detective Kate Beckett."

"I know I have the same issues sometimes but I wouldn't change it Lanes."

"So what else did he do?"

"Me."

There is a prolonged silence down the phone.

"You?!" Her best friend is not exactly incredulous. She knows the two have sex, a lot of it based on her observations as well as what Kate shares and sometimes Castle, that man has the worst I-just-got-laid denial face of all time. It's the smirk that gives it away. But it is a sexy smirk she concedes not that she'll share that observation with his woman, her friend.

"Your hearing is perfectly fine Lanie. He did me."

"Whose birthday is it again?"

"Mine," she's absolutely certain of that. Her friend should be too. "Oh Lanie, Rick did a more than exemplary job of making sure all the birthday girl's needs were attended to."

"Well good for you."

"Yes he is."
"Sap. Who are you and what did you do with my hard-ass girl?"

"Keep telling you I'm going to marry him."

"Well that needs a certain thing to happen doesn't it?"

"You're right of course. And just briefly this morning I thought maybe….

She loses track of the time in conversation with Lanie as they talk intentions and questions.

After finally exhausted all potential conversation points, or at the least the ones she would do over the phone Kate finally signed off with a promise to call again soon. Lanie had wished her a final happy birthday.

Next she responded to the texts from the Boys. Their replies to her admittedly belated messages border on the edge of appropriateness, teasing her with inquiries as to what took her so long. She sensibly doesn't add fuel to that particular fire. Some things better left unsaid with her brotherly partners. Which got her wonder where her fair less brotherly partner was.

But before she can go seek him out she needs to return Martha and Alexis' messages. Realising that Alexis is likely to be the longer conversation she tries Martha first.

It rings out and goes to voice mail. Kate leaves a brief thank you message and a promise to try later.

Her call to Alexis is pleasantly different. The call is picked up on the second ring and an almost giddy Alexis hurls a 'Happy Birthday' down the line before she can even commence her greeting. She finally gets enough of a window to thank Alexis for her contribution to the dress watch and does her level best not to tease the young woman when she becomes sweetly tongue-tied at that.

She finds him in his study. He's distracted. She thought maybe he was trying writing again but there is no clack of the keyboard (he has an external mechanical keyboard 'they're making a comeback Kate') even at a reduced pace for his injury. He had tried the other day and managed a couple of sentences before calling it off as too much, too soon.

"Hey" She announces from the doorway. He lurches, seemingly startled and half-turns before switching back to the big screen in front of him.

He has the 'The New York Times' website open. She catches sight of the title as he scrambles to minimise the browser window.

'Help or Hindrance? Legal or Liability? What are consultants contributing to the NYPD?'

'Oh Rick!' Her heart plummets for him even as he puts on his bravest face.

"Hey Birthday Girl." He goes for light.

He gets Stony Face Beckett. "Talk to me Rick."

At least he doesn't try to deny it. "Sorry Beckett no can do. It's your birthday," by way of explanation.

"Rubbish. Don't you dare go back on your word Rick. Honesty remember?" His head drops. She'll wait him out if need be. Birthday or not. He's more important.
He stares at his feet for far too long before raising his head so she can see his face clearly for the first time since she entered the room. He's hurting. He's such a kind hearted man, a big softie if he can get away with it. She used to worry that the darkness of her job would change that. Then it became their job, and he her partner, and she still worries but less about that because somehow Rick Castle, at least most of the time, is such a force of optimism that he can overcome almost any negativity. The same determined mindset that kept him going amidst all those rejections from publishers. He's also stronger, not just in spirit, and braver than any, even her, initially gave him credit for. She doesn't like how close to actually dying he had to come for this traits to be recognised by others. But as she knows even the strongest person has their breaking point and their weaknesses.

"Beckett, I'm sorry." She cuts him off. The silly fool was trying to apologise for nothing that was his fault.

"What does it say?"

"It's an opinion piece on NYPD consultants. How we may not be the greatest thing since sliced bread."

"No. What does it really say Rick?"

"The article more than artfully - it's the Times after all - implies we, and they're at pains to name myself, VanBuren and Glass who assist with financials, McKendrick for SVU and a few others, are vain glorious self-promoters who pose more risk to the NYPD than any illusionary benefit. They point out that the murder clearance rate remains largely unchanged. Same for the other fields. Even illustrate it with the CompStat reports for the period."

"Did they drill down and provide the CompStats for the Twelfth? I'm guessing they didn't. Our rate was good before you Castle. It's been great with you." She is up close to him now and gently lifts his chin. She leans in and kisses his brow, almost supernaturally attuned she can detect the slight salty taste of his now absent tears. 'Oh Castle'.

"As I said it is very artful. Doesn't specifically reference the cases we have assisted on. Just shows that the numbers remain largely unchanged. Ironically it names the consultants but there are no directly attributable quotes to their NYPD sources but we don't need to guess who had a hand in them."

"So do you want a rebuttal?"

His head shake is so slight she could have interpreted it as shaking out his bangs.

"I think I told you that for years Gina and Paula, especially Paula wanted to publicise my time with the NYPD." Kate acknowledges him, she remembers. "However, I don't think I've ever explained why. Initially I didn't support that because it was too early, and it really was research and background. Despite appearances I'm not usually one to make huge leaps without my research. During those first months I'd didn't feel confident of the outcome. Sure you had me intrigued," his eyebrows twitch a little with that observation, "but at the same time you made it very clear that I was too flippant and more than occasionally irresponsible. And I will always be grateful for that. It was part of what influenced me to consider what I was doing not just with my shadowing of your team, but the book. Then with my life and slowly, I'll admit to being a little slow on the uptake sometimes, I began to make changes."

Kate wordlessly caresses his hands, keeping her hazel orbs fastened on his flickering baby blues.
"The first time I gave in to the publicity thing was the Comso article that was linked to the Heat Wave launch. I was so keen to have a legitimate way back into the Precinct that I didn't stop to consider the impact on you. I'm sorry for that, I should have apologised back then."

"I hated that. I think I may have hated you too," she squeezes his fingers a little tighter, "just a little, but I think even then I was confused about you. So many contradictions. I'm not sure I would have accepted any apology that day. Especially not with those two models all over you. Can I confess that I was split between anger, outrage and a touch of jealousy?"

"Fair enough. I was pretty confused too. But it was during that second stint that I came to see that publicity could be negative. Especially as I came to realise just how private a person you were Beckett. I was still acting Richard Castle in the press occasionally but I was really beginning to understand that there was no such thing as all publicity is good publicity. I knew that already of course, having kept Alexis out of the press for so long.

"After Coonan I forbade Paula from putting that in the press. She thought I was being sensitive about being a victim. It wasn't that Kate. It was so personal to you. It didn't need to be shared outside of the family. It was bad enough that in saving me you lost a real lead into your Mom's case, you didn't need the jackals sniffing around."

"Thank you for that. I never knew that. But I guess in hindsight I did wonder how a death in a police station got so little coverage."

"Paula has witchy media skills as she continues to prove. But Montgomery had a big part to play in that too. Pushing up the channels to One PP and getting them to accede as well to supressing as much of the story as possible. Of course at the time we had no concept of him having any other motivation other than protecting you and the NYPD."

"Oh God Castle. I've thought about it a bit after finding out and the hangar and then my shooting. But what if it was more? What if Coonan knew Montgomery?"

"Kate, I don't think they knew each other personally but I think they were both aware of the other. I doubt Montgomery knew the name. He would have passed that on to his handlers. We were all caught off guard by Coonan's revelation as the assassin. But if I think about it I'm sure Coonan had to have known of Montgomery, especially as he was the last serving member. But I reckon Coonan and his ilk would not have known that Montgomery was undercover then. Yet somehow they had enough to force his hand.

"Family. They threatened his family." Her response is not a question. They both nod in acceptance of the statement of fact. The very thing that often keeps them centred and on the right path is also their greatest weakness.

"So why does this particular attack hurt so much Rick? You didn't seem so effected before?" Kate references the previous press attacks from weeks ago, some of them they now know were deliberately orchestrated against them.

"I think because over these last two weeks I've come to realise just how much being a consultant with the NYPD, with your team at the Twelfth means to me Kate. I'm totally invested in it. Whatever happens it is going to change and I'm going to miss it. Although I choose to walk away twice, over Demming, and then your mother's case, the rest of the time I consciously choose to stay or fight my way back. It still surprises me how much a care for the job as well as the people." He's looks directly at her as he finishes. She knows he cares, did for a lot longer than she should have done before letting him in.
"I do understand that. I feel the same. But Love, you're wrong on a couple of things. Firstly it's not my team, it's our team. You're a big part of it. And not just because the Boys and Gates owe you their lives. Not the first time for Espo and Ryan, I know, and they've returned the favour as well. But aside from the life or death moments, the time and contribution you make to solving cases, we're all better with you.

"And the changes are going to apply to me too. We discussed this. Things change and selfish as we want to be holding onto the certain, the predictable, maybe they'll be better too."

"And I understand that, and before I go any further, I need you to know Kate that above beyond all of that, I need you in my life, as part of my family. My family is my foremost concern and consideration Kate, and you're part of it now, and more so in the future. You and Alexis mean everything to me. Just so I can be clear on that."

"Right back at you Rick. I was so afraid of losing what we built as partners that taking the step to being lovers terrified me. Some days it still does because of the intensity of the emotions you and your family invoke me."

"Our family Kate. And one day soon that will be official. And before that I will ask that question and put a ring on your finger, I promise. Forever right?"

"Forever."

She kisses him then. A girl can get a little make out time on her birthday.

Kate encourages him to call his daughter and she smiles at the spark that jumps in his eyes. She's certain enough now, of them, that she no longer feels that hint of insecurity at the way he melts at the merest mention of his daughter. He starts talking in her presence but he wanders off in a daze lost in his daughter's voice, and she lets him go.

She takes the opportunity to read the offending article in full. Rick was right. It was artful. A first class hatchet job with inside information fed to the author. She makes a mental note to chat to Paula on Monday. She'll pay any price for him and their family. If she needs to front the media again so be it.

The weather is unseasonably bright, and whilst not warm, it requires fewer layers than usual to allow them to enjoy a light lunch of soup and soda bread outside overlooking the beach.

After lunch Kate encourages Rick to do his stretches and lighter exercises that were somehow neglected during their morning frolics. She finds him more than amenable to the suggestion even without inducements. She's proud of the way he is taking steps to recover and improve.

Afterwards they take a nap with actual sleeping.

She's well aware he has something planned for this evening but strangely she finds she's okay with the idea of a surprise. She's trusted him so far on this day and it has been great. She won't do half-arsed 'hasn't turned out too bad at all' because he deserves all the credit he gets.

She had been expecting something quiet and low key just like all their previous dates. She had some smart clothes with her but nothing excessively dressy.

When she catches sight of his suit and shirt hanging in his side of the walk-in robe, she suspects...
that this may not be the case tonight.

It is absolutely confirmed when she emerges from the bathroom biting her lip in indecision to find the box waiting for her.

Of course, he had gotten her a dress.

No fairy tale reference this time.

But it was still a tall white box.

Despite the years and the changes between them, opening the box had the same impact as the first time, just magnified because not only does he have excellent taste, he knows her so well, better than anyone ever has, and this causes her heart to swell and the well other areas to react similarly positively.

It's sublime. Really that is the only word for it. She wouldn't have chosen it if on her own, but if shopping with him, she would maybe have been persuaded. Or surprised on her birthday, that too.

It's got classic styling from the broad shoulder straps down to shallow V-neck that still offers plenty of cover for her bust and scar, and reaches down to the floor before she put shoes on. There is a slit on the right side but it is surprisingly modest given his regular and open appreciation of her legs.

Oh and it's purple. Gloriously purple. And there is no earthly way they would fail to be noticed with her wearing this.

Naturally it fits perfectly and soon she has her silver heels on and dammit they feel good. The extra inches empower her. She's missed her heels these last few weeks, sticking to flats or trainers.

Her make up done, she's sexy and sophisticated and decides to act out a little. Hey it's a girl's birthday privilege. Plus he'll love it.

She strides up to him, and damn him, he's looking fine, the dark tailor cut suit she spied earlier, that hugs and hints at the man beneath, his own dark grey shirt with veins of matching purple running through them. His arm is unsupported tonight. They're going to see how he goes this evening, and if necessary the light-weight sling sits in his overcoat pocket should he need it.

But all that is for later because now she has his full attention, his eyes burning as they race across her.

"So what are we doing this evening Misteeer Cazzzle?" She leans in to brush her torso against him and he involuntary tries to follow as she steps past and turns to him again.

"Hey not playing fair Kate, or is that Katrina?"

She runs a finger nail along his freshly shaven cheek, and leans in, savouring his cologne, her heels equalizing their height. His aroma tingles her senses in just right places. She makes sure hers reciprocates.

He swallows. Arousal? Nerves?

"What are you up to Richard Castle?"

"Kate." Oh he's nervous. She'll leave checking his arousal until later. It would be too cruel
"You surprise me good Misteer Cazzzle. Okay?"

"Okay." It takes all her detective training not to smile at the obvious way he almost folds in relief.

A familiar looking town car picked them up. The cheery face of Michael behind the wheel. He waves through the rising partition and they manage to acknowledge the man before it closes.

Despite her earlier acquiescence Beckett is not going quietly. "Hmm, Castle what is one of Time and Motion's town cars doing in the Hamptons?"

"Well they are my favourite car service."

"Still there are local services we could use. Or a taxi." Oh his face. He's normally pretty egalitarian but there is something about the Hamptons that makes him not the guy who relies on taxi's in the city.

"Wouldn't be the same." He doesn't want to concede that they were already in the Hamptons. The detective would want to know why and who had been the passengers.

The car moves off. It is clear Michael knows where they are going without instructions from Rick.

It was a short trip down the Montauk Highway into the East Hamptons proper. They haven't really been out much, and so this is all new for Kate. The mystery is compounded by the darkness that closes in. At least there was no blindfold.

He's still nervous.

She trusts him.

The car slows and then pulls in, and Kate gets a glimpse of the white two story wooden building lit with some low-key exterior lights. A single sign hangs at the front but she can't make out the name.

Oh. It is charming. Low set. Old, like hundreds of years. And did she mention charming and so authentic? But not flashy. And there's no press, or anyone in sight. He's done good, but she can't find the words to tell him so a quick kiss to the cheek and a winning smile is a more than able substitute.

She's still seeking the right words as the door opens, and Rick steps out before reaching an arm back in and she is led from the car and in a handful of steps straight through the entrance into the restaurant. Her first impression is reinforced by the interior. This is old, by American standards, and retains much of the original decoration and charm.

They pause for a moment as Rick speaks to a smartly dressed lady in her mid-thirties who is waiting, seemingly for them. Then instead of being ushered forward towards the dining room she can see in the distance, they are guided straight towards a doorway leading to what could be a small function room, or possibly waiting room to the side of the reception.

As the door opens 'Happy Birthday!' rings out.

Damn him! Surprise party!
It's a small but vocal crowd. Martha of course, and Alexis, slightly more circumspect. And then the more reticent pairing. Her Dad and – oh- Valerie, his girlfriend. Still taking some adjusting to the last fact she concedes to herself.

Now she can understand why Rick is so nervous. Her Dad is here with Val. And Martha and Alexis. Oh this could get really interesting. It is by definition a family dinner and Rick has invited her here. As her father's girlfriend. She can understand why he did it. He's very respectful and not a little afraid of Jim Beckett. More than her?

Out of nowhere, she flashes back to their first family dinner with her Dad and Martha, and no Alexis, that had thrown up an issue or two which had taken a while before they could even smile, let alone laugh about. She wonders what this gathering will throw up.

Then she turns her thoughts back to Val. She wasn't really upset by her presence. It would be churlish to hold a family meal without her father's significant other. Girlfriend dammit. She can call Val Dad's girlfriend. She can be grown up about it.

Although it her birthday, she won't let this be about her. She had sworn off that selfishness, and the self-centred, over-righteous focus that previously dominated her life and poisoned her relationships. It had taken nearly dying – again – and hanging from a lot of stories up to give her the perspective about what, and more so who, was important.

She snakes her arm into his and pulls him into her so she can kiss his cheek and whisper sweet promises of payback and acceptance in his eye. She can feel the tension leech from him and his smile blooms.

Then Martha is there sweeping her into a hug, and breaking her connection with Rick, with a seriously jangle of bangles, who make as such visual impact as aural, before stepping back to give Alexis her turn. Then it is her Dad and Val approaching. He gives her a good hug and a kiss to the cheek with a whispered 'Happy Birthday Katie' before stepping back. She and Val both appear nervous, and in the end their mutual arms-length grasp/hugs seems to satisfy both of them.

She's back at his side and even so subtly knocking his hand away from where he thinks is slyly stroking the silk of her dress. "So where exactly are we Rick? You did such a good job of distracting me that I don't even know the name of the place."

Her boyfriend barely gets to breath in preparation before he is pre-empted by the smartly dressed woman who has returned.

"Good Evening Miss Beckett."

"Welcome to the 1770 House Restaurant and Inn."

"We would like to wish you a very happy birthday and we do hope you enjoy your celebration with us." "My name is Mia and I will be serving you tonight."

She gestures with her right arm to reference their surroundings. "You are standing in one of the oldest buildings in East Hamptons. Originally built as the home of William Fithian, the building dates back to 1663. It was in 1770 when the house was converted into an inn and started the tradition that gives us our enduring reputation for warmth and welcome. The inn has retained much of its original architecture and colonial charm including the steep wooden staircase, exposed ceiling beams and we have a book-lined lounge with antique fireplace, and a tavern downstairs."
"When you are ready we have a table for six waiting in the far corner of the restaurant."

Kate and Rick hand over their coats to Mia, the other party members appear to have already discarded theirs.

Mia is back in about a minute and quietly leads them back into the lounge area and through to the restaurant.

Cosy is the most apt term for it. The place is all cool tones with imparts a friendly warmth, relatively close set place with a hum of conversation from the other diners, some of whom look up as they pass. There are no pointing fingers or cameras in view but any hope of being low key is of course tested by Martha's exuberance and dress sense which attracts the attention of a number of diners. Scanning the new party naturally leads the eyes onto the imposing tall couple at the front of the group. The powerfully built, tall man with the familiar features and charming smile would be cause enough for closer inspection, but the striking brunette in the purple dress is the clincher.

There is a noticeable pick up in the volume of the chatter in the room, and whilst there is no outright pointing or thankfully cameras, every single member of the group feels the collective eyes of the room on them.

Their table in the corner is not quite secluded, but as it is the restaurant is not too busy tonight there are two empty tables beside theirs. She wonders if Rick had reserved them for privacy. He had done that once before at their second ever date night out. This is the first time they have been out since the shooting, and prior to that they had only made a handful of visits to establishments selectively chosen for their discretion. Tonight marks their first experience of dining out in public as a couple. She's glad it is hear in the relative anonymity of the Hamptons and not Manhattan.

Kate is at the head of the table flanked by Rick on her right and her dad to her left. Val is next to her Dad and Alexis is seated next to Rick with Martha opposite Kate at the other end of the table.

Mia delivers two carafes of water and the menu's and then briefs them on the night's specials.

Whilst the group peruse the menu's they exchange chit chat. Val and Jim reveal they were staying the night in the Carriage House attached to the Inn. They had driven up in Val's car, a very nice Mercedes S class Jim observes, and Rick is briefly dragged into the conversation as he regularly uses one of Time and Motions S class cars for his own transportation, reminding Kate they had used it to go to the Hamptons. Val gently teases that she actually owes hers leaving Rick spluttering for a moment to the amusement of their dining companions.

When Kate learns that Alexis and Martha were taking the town car service back to the City, she attempts to invite them to stay at the house.

"I already tried. Alexis has another study group tomorrow and Mother has an assignation."

"Oh Richard you make that sound like assassination." Martha accuses him.

The twitch of his eyebrow, nor the curl of a smirk doesn't deny it.

"Oh really Richard. I'm going to talk to someone who appreciates me.

"Good Luck."

Kate smacks him gently. "Behave. This is not like you." Well it is just more than a little but it is as if he's still nervous. She'll settle him down so they can have a good time.
Mia was back for their orders and after the rest of the table conceded to Rick's experience with the wines with Jim and Alexis adding their non-alcoholic beverage requests.

Meanwhile the conversation flows easily starting with enquiries about Rick's health and recovery. Naturally this was inevitably followed by questions about Kate's mental health. She declared herself sane and not at all stir crazy in spite of Rick's exaggerated pout.

Mia returned with two bottles of wine – one each of white and red. The red was of course a Chateauneuf du Pape, this one a 2009 Domaine du Pegau which at two-fifty a bottle represented about the best value for a good French red on the wine list. Kate had remained silent and merely raised an eyebrow in disbelief at some of the prices. She particularly remembered a 2003 Château Mouton-Rothschild Bordeaux that she and Rick had shared on a roof top picnic during her suspension. The 2000 vintage was eighteen hundred dollars here!

As ever Jim was sticking to tonic water with a slice of lemon and Alexis was nursing a Lemon, Lime and Bitters.

As he raised his glass Jim remarked to the table "Well it's a good thing that I am sober, I can't afford to get drunk with Rick. Not at these prices."

"You can see why students like me would drink beer or spirits."

"Well Alexis, it is different in Europe or South America. Australia and New Zealand too. They have plenty of good wines at reasonable prices, and by that I mean well less than fifty dollars, often half-that."

"At least the white," an American Sauvignon Blanc, "is more reasonably priced. But Rick is right. On my trip to Europe I found that wine was pretty much the universal drink. Obviously in places like Ukraine then there were lots of spirits too."

"You certainly acquired a taste for vodka after that trip Katie."

"Only good stuff Dad. I really didn't drink that much. But I think it is time to change the topic of conversation after I check with Val. Red or White?"

"I'll try the white please Kate. Not much for red wine. Never could get past the initial taste of the tannin. Just too bitter for me to ever appreciate what followed."

Service was snappy and prompt to the point of near perfection, and soon Mia was back with their appetizers. There was a large platter of fresh warm bread with olive oil and butter on the side. Rick and Kate were sharing a plate of local oysters, and the others stuck to variations of salad with the baby beet salad being the standout after a round of taste testing.

Martha had been tempted by the Thanksgiving special of pumpkin soup but as she admitted with the actual holiday coming up, she'd soon be pumpkin-ed out. Rick was on the verge of a joke before the joint flat stares of his daughter and partner had two of the other three table members sniggering. Val's perplexed look was rapidly resolved when Jim explained Alexis' childhood nickname.

The food was very good and well-presented but not in an extravagant manner. Once they had finished their plates Mia was there to clear them away promptly. She had a wicked sleight of hand, and somehow the bread platter was replenished in-place during the trips to reset the table for their mains. Kate was impressed by Rick's self-discipline in the face of the oven fresh olive bread which
every other table-mate but him indulged in.

The conversation flowed and ebbed naturally for some time until talk turned to the forthcoming Thanksgiving holiday just five days away on the next Thursday. No one seemed to have any particular plans. Alexis wasn't keen to experience a dorm version of Thanksgiving with more beer and stale chips than turkey and pumpkin.

"I have an appointment at Bellevue for a check-up on the Friday morning. So we'll be back in the city." He looks to his girlfriend and in one of those moments he and Kate share that familiar mental mind-meld and she speaks up.

"I think we should have an expanded family gathering. Invite the Boys and Lanie as well as present company. What do you think?" She asks directly of her boyfriend.

All eyes turn back to Rick. "I think that's workable. But what are their shift patterns? No point arranging it if they're not available."

"Oh damn, a couple of weeks away from work and I'm already forgetting basic stuff. I'll check with them tomorrow. If we can't do Thursday, then Friday or maybe even the weekend. After all it's not like we have to be a particular place."

"You know Katie, it almost sounds like you're enjoying this extended break."

"Well Dad, apart from my recovery after last year, this is the longest I've had off work since I started at the Academy. And despite the reason for the break, it has been good. We're both benefitting from it." She reaches across to take Rick's hand and squeeze.

"I'll second that. It has been good for both of us. So that's decided? A Thanksgiving meal at the Loft. But we're out of town so getting everything...."

A theatrical jangle of bangles draws the group's attention. "Please leave that to me Dears. I'll take care of the organisation."

"I'll help too." Alexis' offer is clearly aimed at the both Rick and Kate to ease any concerns around the type and standard of food being offered. Martha's culinary efforts are as esoteric and palatable as her dress sense. A mixture of hits and misses.

"Thank you Alexis, but only if you are sure you can spare the time."

"No problem Kate, I only have class on Friday morning. So I can use the afternoon and if we don't have it on Friday night then it will more time to prepare anyway."

"Sounds good. Dad and Val, would you like to join us?"

"I don't want to intrude..."

"Nonsense." "Absolutely not." "You're more than welcome."

The mass of polite protests drown out Val's response.

"Thank you, then I would love to accompany Jim and come along. But I think in the spirit of Thanksgiving we should all contribute. I think that by doing so it would also help lessen the load of organising and I know from what you have told me, Kate and Rick have a busy schedule back in the city. So could I propose we all bring a dish or something to add to the occasion?"
Alexis already has her phone out. "That's a really good idea. I'll coordinate all that. I'll have to make sure I have your contact details please Val, or shall I do everything via Jim?" The last is a little teasing. Fortunately for Kate's Dad, the dreaded deer-in-headlights look needs only be temporary as Val pats his arm and assures Alexis she's still her own woman whilst the others struggle to suppress their smirks.

"So that's settled then. The only thing to be confirmed is the availability of the others and that will most likely set the date. Shall we provisionally aim for the Friday night?" Kate wraps up the discussion just in time for return of Mia and two helpers bring their mains.

Kate had selected the local Duck breast which was perfectly pink and melted in her mouth along with bitter sweet orange and fennel conserve. Martha had picked the same dish.

Likewise Rick and Alexis had doubled up and gone for the pan roasted chicken with porcini risotto. A restaurant favourite states Alexis with a sideways reference to the online reviews.

Jim Beckett has always loved fish and had gone for the Scottish salmon less the proffered roasted Brussels sprouts – a good call Val confirmed as she tucked into her Monkfish medallions with baby bok choy.

Conversation died off a little as the table concentrated on their meals, or at least until the sharing of tastes between Rick and Kate, and then Val and Jim and finally Alexis and Martha 'just so we're not the odd ones out.'

Eventually mostly empty plates were pushed away with the cutlery centred in the occasional remnants of the meals. As ever Mia popped up to enquire if they were finished. At their confirmation she started to clear the plates and suggested a break before desert, an option the entire table accepted.

Jim had noticed it not long after Katie arrived but it was only when they had a break after their mains that he took the opportunity to inquire about the simple and elegant dress watch that gleamed on her left arm in place of a watch he had lost all right to claim but normally sat proudly on his daughter's wrist.

Jim knows Katie had been shopping with friends, notably Lanie Parish in the past, and she had told him how she on occasion had admired similar watches but never really had the inclination or need to purchase one. He had no idea of how Castle could have got the information from her but knew he was persistent in all things Katie. Jim also knows they certainly hadn't been in any jewellers or department stores since they got together. Instant celeb fodder Rick had told him.

It wasn't expensive. Certainly not by the standard Rick could afford. But that didn't matter as the true value lay not in the price tag but in the thought and effort behind it. The time spent looking for a suitable gift, contemplating what she would like and that suited her style.

Rick knows her so well. Probably better than anyone, even Johanna. More than that is the unbreakable trust they have built, the kind that can last forever. Their partnership had prepared the way for this, and those previous breaches of faith by each had in the end been part of the foundation for what is now unbreakable between them. Jim smiles in recollection of her early rants about the writer and how even then he could tell there was something about the man that more than intrigued his daughter and ultimately allowed her to want everything with the man.

Kate rises to go the lavatory and Jim takes the moment to stretch his legs.
Her two men were waiting for her on return. Rick was holding a crystal champagne flute filled with was obviously a new acquisition to their drinks. A glance spotted the ice bucket and new bottle by the window. She accepted the slim stem into her right hand even as he brushed her cheek with another kiss.

Her Dad was also waiting for her return, and with a singular purpose he catches her left hand. And with a slightly exaggerated squint he examined the watch close up.

"I like it. It suits you. I know you have an affinity for my watch but it doesn't really go with evening wear. Even I have a dress watch for special occasions."

"Perhaps I should have that one too?" She's teasing really.

"I think not Katie. You have one of your own now, and the man to go with it.

"Yes I do."

"He would do anything for you Katie."

"I know. He's the one Dad."

"I think I've known for a while Katie. Your mother would be so happy just as I am. Just don't leave it too long for the grandchildren."

The bubbly stuff almost squirts from her nose as it goes the wrong way. She manages to avoid choking but is still a little red faced. The rest of the table swivel to check on her and she waves them off with the champagne flute.

Momentarily unable to speak she settles for a toned-down death glare.

"Oh Katie. I was almost immune to your mother's, and no matter how many times you tried that as a teenager it rarely worked. What makes you think it would work now?"

"Dad!" She finally squeezes out. She's just grateful that Rick is the corner talking with Martha and Alexis.

Val intercedes as she joins them. "Jim, try not to bait your daughter. It's her birthday after all."

"Excellent point thank you Val. Be nice Dad."

"Where's the fun in that?"

"Jim!" She pulls his arm. "Please excuse us a moment Kate, I need to talk to your father," and with that she hauls him off a couple of yards.

Kate just rolls her eyes. Her Dad still has eyes on her and he smirks back until Val slaps his arm and leans in to intimidate him. Kate suddenly decides she doesn't want to know what Val is threatening in those intimate whispers into his ear. She remembers similar discussions ending with her Mom doing the same to her Dad, usually followed by a certain door closing, and her turning her music up.

She feels the arm around her.

"Hey." She mumbles even as his lips descent for a quick brush of hers.
"They look good together." He offers.

"They do." She finds that she likes Val, and more importantly she likes what Val does for her Dad. She smooths his somewhat rigid demeanour, softens that wall he had erected once he had overcome his first failed method of surviving without her. She concedes that in some ways they did have similar coping mechanisms to deal with the loss of the woman they loved.

Turning to her man, she quirks an eyebrow and raises the flute in question.

"It is most definitely a celebration. And you deserve it.

"I presume I shouldn't look at the bill then."

"Probably a good call. Desert is organised too."

"Figured as much. Let's see how well you know me Writer Man. There could be a lot riding on this."

"Oh really? Like what?"

"You'll have to wait and see."

Desert turned out to be a shared platter with a selection of sweets all of which were delicious and sufficiently Moorish to ensure the contents were summarily scrapped and possibly licked clean.

With their individual desert plates are empty and their wine or drink glasses nearing the low tide mark, Kate notices that Mia refrained from her previous prompt service to give them some more time to themselves.

She's leaning in to him.

"You okay Kate?" He's so close he almost breathes that into her ear.

"Oh. Yes of course. Very full. Very happy. It's been a good birthday. Just sitting here soaking it up. Family, it's more than nice. Thank you.

"Hmmm, sobremesa." His hum gives way to a pitch low pitch rumble and he even nails the pronunciation.

She smiles, beckons with her head to draw him in for a kiss. "Hmm, I agree."

"You know what sobremesa means?"

"Uh hmmm, yes I do Rick. Spanish word. The feeling at the end of a big meal where you are content and just at peace with the world."

"You're so hot you know that?"

"Oh I think I do."

"Can I show you how much I think so too?"

"Later. This birthday girl still wants more presents," she waves at the small cache of bags that haven't yet been presented by her tablemates.
"Okay. Coffee and gifts before we go?"

Well duh.

Rick steps away to talk to Alexis and Jim. Martha is nowhere to be seen, probably powdering her nose.

She takes a sip of her coffee, and turns to find Val easing into Rick's seat beside her.

"I did want to check with you personally that my presence here was fine? Rick was adamant that this was a family occasion and I was invited. He actually intimidated Jim into ensuring I came."

Kate raises her eyebrows at that but she has come to recognise how surprisingly single minded he can be if necessary.

"You don't need to check. I was a little surprised by the news but I have had time to reflect and I am happy for Dad and for you. So no objections from me. You are welcome."

"Thank you."

"It's only fair Val. They adopted me long before I actually started dating Rick." Val smiles in understanding as Kate continues, "Of course I was in total denial about how much I loved him and fought it for so long, I am so lucky that he waited, and that his family were still so willing to accept me."

"He's a very singular man. I've never met anyone quite like him. But I don't think it was as simple as you make out Kate. They love you but there was some adjusting to be done."

"Still is. I am and well we are a work in progress. Alexis is very protective of her father. I had to plead my case to her after I didn't handle some things so well. Martha was different but no less determined."

"And now you're keen to ensure the best for your father."

"As I said when we met for coffee, I am still adjusting to it. It is disconcerting on one level but I am happy for him. Dad deserves someone to share his life with. His struggles after mom died strained things between us, and whilst it is a lot better they've never been exactly like before. Again Rick has helped here too drawing Dad into the wider family."

"I am grateful to be included tonight. I was originally resigned to forcing Jim to come on his own, but as I said Rick was insistent that I come too. That man of yours simply asked Jim to answer one question. Was our relationship a short term thing? I hope you know our answer. Still I didn't want to intrude or overstep"

"Val, you're not. Please don't think that."

"But I've seen the way you look at me Kate, especially when I am with Jim. And you bite your lip."

"You misunderstand," she seeks the words to explain because it would be so unfair to leave this person with the wrong impression. "It's not because you are an intruder. The opposite really. I think it is because you're so much like her. Professional. Intelligent. Driven. Opinionated. Beautiful. I see the two of you and I almost see my Mom. But it's not her. But the memories are so strong, so vivid."
Val swallows back, blinking. Her hand reaches out to grip Kate's left forearm. She's a legal warrior with a fearsome reputation well earned, but her words fail her here, left inarticulate by the emotions. The bridge that the younger woman appears to be offering her.

Kate's own eyes are dangerously moist. "It's a good thing really. Dad looks happy. And you do to. And the memories of my Mom are mostly happy ones these days. The two of them together. And Dad looks like he is close to that again. I could never want him to deny himself a chance of love and companionship. He deserves to be happy. I think you do that for him."

"He's a very good man. My marriage to my ex-husband was primarily one of business convenience with a fiery attraction that burnt out. In the end we argued too much and business got in the way, and that was all that was left business. Although Jim works at the firm too, we work cooperatively and share a different partnership. We were colleagues and then friends, and then well I don't have the words. We were terrified of taking the final step. Now we have we wonder why we took so long." Kate huffs a laugh of recognition at that, and Val's steady gaze shows she understands. "Jim is so loyal to your mother."

"But it shouldn't be at the cost of living his life or loneliness. It took for me to almost lose my own life and put people I love in harm's way to see that."

"Well I certainly hope we've managed to get the necessary perspective without that degree of challenge."

"I'm grateful you have too."

It is gone ten when the town car drops a tipsy Rick and a tipsier Kate back at the house. Rick had called settled the bill and had the town car waiting whilst Mia fetched the coats for the Martha, Alexis, Rick and Kate. They had bid farewell earlier to Jim and Val who were staying in one of the suites at the Inn. Rick had extended an invitation to the house but both declined saying they were heading off to visit a friend of Val's on the other side of the island before heading back to New York. A raincheck was promised.

Rising back to the house in the car, Kate is just a little giddy and teasing Rick who appears painfully aware that his mother and daughter are in the car with them. For her part Alexis is just a little giggly herself – after sneaking a flute or two of the champagne towards the end. And Martha, well Martha is perfectly composed and yet somewhat loudly discussing plans as the night is still young, not that it will be by the time they make it back to Manhattan and drop Alexis at the Columbia dorms. She'll find a party or event to crash.

In deference to the chill of the night, the balmy weather of midday unsurprisingly lost to the season, the two remaining passengers bid their adieus from the comfort of the town car before their journey back to Manhattan.

By some form of miracle they have made it upstairs but only as far as the master bedroom door. She lost her heels on the landing. He'll need to be careful in the morning or might find them the hard way. Kate has something else planned. Mindful of his shoulder she backs him into the door frame. He goes meekly or perhaps willingly is more apt given the work his hands were putting in against her sides.

"Just whose celebration is this?" he managed when they break for air.

"Hmm, shut up Mister Castle."
"Yes Miss Beckett."

"Smart Arse." This sneaked round his tongue somehow.

Needing air again he pulls away. "I thought you liked my arse."

"If you don't shut up and kiss me again, I'll kick your arse."

He wisely says nothing further, but his eyes gleam with the further barely supressed repartee. As he leans in to comply she pushes him back into the room and quickly onto the bed. It is not the most graceful landing but he is ready for her. Except she doesn't follow. His surprised expression garners nothing initially. Her only response for now is a slight shake of her head as she navigates her way into the room and towards the walk-in robe.

"I'm hanging this up," waving her hands over her classy dress, "I would like to wear it again sometime."

Oh.

Sometime later…..

"Happy Birthday Kate."

"Thank you Rick." She nuzzles into his chin. "It was everything I would want of it. You know I don't like to make a big fuss over it. So it was perfect really. It could have been just you and me, and that would have been perfect too."

"Just so long as you're not alone."

"We're never alone now Rick. We have each other."

"Hmmm. We do."

"Forever Rick."

"Yeah. Sounds perfect." His voice is a little dopey. She is running out of time before he falls asleep. The alcohol and energy exertion taking their toll on top of the injuries he is still fighting and winning to recover from. His eyes settle shut.

"Rick," More urgently, "Rick!"

"Hmm, yes Dear," his eyes are open – not quite fully - once more, ".....Kate."

"If you had asked me. Tonight. I would have said yes." There got it all out. Not exactly graceful or nerveless. His eyes are definitely fully open now.

"I'll bear that in mind." He is fully awake and smiling, no make that grinning at her. Not the cheeky, half-boy teasing. Happy. This is the open loving man. Her man. Slightly cheeky and infuriating too and she can't but help love that bit of him just as much as the rest.

He's sat all the way up now and he can lean into her. He kisses her. Not hard, not lustfully, just determination, sweet and well loving.

"I think I know that Kate. I'd love nothing more than your answer. But I'm not ready." He keeps his eyes on hers. "My head and body are not where they should be for both of us." She squeezes
forearms and trails her hands up to cup his face. "I think now I have a greater appreciation of what
you went through. Why it took you time. That's all I need, some time and you."

"Of course I'll give you time. It does mean we can't continue to have wonderful moments like
today and make great memories together. You've got me Rick. All of me now, for longer than I
deserve."

"You deserve nothing less than all of me Kate. But just the same I love our moments and making
memories with you Kate. Maybe one soon will make one for everyone to see."
He kisses her again before sinking back into their bed. "Goodnight Love."

Chapter End Notes

Due to an obvious lack of planning, I suddenly found that my story didn't align with
key dates during the timeframe I wanted and so there was some judicious editing and
adjusting. I hope it worked out.

This chapter was originally meant to encompass a lot more than the single day – 17
November or more importantly Kate Beckett’s birthday. But in the end it grew and
became a monster in its own right. So I dropped some content out of here and into the
next two chapters (which will be smaller, honest).

Cheers
Memories

Chapter Summary

Previously: Their getaway to the Hamptons is helping Rick is making good progress with his recovery, and further strength their relationship. Despite his recuperation Rick has surprised Kate and they celebrated her birthday with their family. Elsewhere storm clouds may be gathering.

Disclaimer – Naturally I don’t own Castle (Beckett does). Now who owns Beckett? Now that’s a deep question. All the usual legal stuff probably applies too.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Early Sunday morning, Park Avenue, New York.

Even early on an overcast mid-November morning the view was worth it. Of course behind the double glazing there is none of the actual chill in the air conditioned warmth of this lofty expanse.

David Bracken enjoyed his life. He hadn't always. Seemingly condemned to lesser significance as the second son of a formerly wealthy and powerful family, his own father's failures and the very meanness of the man meant his childhood had been miserable. Then his mother left when the money did. Then his brother failed in a manner not acceptable to his father, and to his horror he found himself promoted. For a long time it seemed a fate worse than second. And his brother? Well his brother became something altogether different and worse in many ways than their shared progenitor.

But now, aged forty-seven he had it made. This place was a statement of that. He owned it outright now. Didn't care that the sensible thing would be to lease or pay a mortgage. Forty-five million plus a little over twenty grand a month in other charges. The Bracken family, or at least this part of it was back in the game- big time. Unlike his father or brother he had no political aspirations. His brother was welcome to that sinkhole of venality. He liked his world where it was a simple straight up count - did he have more than before? The answer so far was an unequivocal yes.

There is a slight noise behind him, and he turns to smile at the woman coming to join him at the window overlooking Central Park. At first appearance his wife is every bit the socialite the press painted even first thing in the morning. The neatly swept hair, the unrumpled silk robe. However even if he had married for social position and status, surprisingly love had blossomed with the cool blonde beside him. Jennifer Davies-Knight was the daughter of a Surgeon, and a Wall Street Lawyer. Always destined for better things, she went to Yasser and had a degree in Anthropology. Despite this and her parent's professions she had set her sights on being a trophy wife. It was a career and role she excelled at. One she was comfortable and secure in. One that had taken him a number of years to understand and accept fully.

When David had met her through mutual friends he had been well aware she was out of his league. Still she had accepted his invitation to dinner on a whim she explained later. That first date was a revelation. His usual uncertainty somehow insignificant in the presence of the well-educated,
delightful conversationalist, funny, and striking woman. His first-date bubble had truly burst when on their second date he had been shocked to find out her aspirations seemingly capped as a life as someone's arm candy. So much so that he hadn't called for days struck between booming infatuation and disbelief.

Amazingly he had his despised brother to thank for their continued dating and relationship. When William had taunted him about his lack of a third date or actually doing anything other than kissing her cheek they had fought and as ever it was a bloody draw despite no blows actually being thrown, just more permanent rents in the failing fabric of the Bracken family.

Despite the lack of physical injury he found himself teetering unthinkingly outside her apartment – he had her address, having dropped her home after their second date. Opening her door to him, she took one look at the pale apparition who appeared so anaemic as to be bleeding out, and Jennifer had invited him in. He didn't leave for two days. Brutally frank negotiations and other activities had been mutually satisfying. Returning to the apartment he shared with William he merely announced he was moving out, giving no further details. He so greatly enjoyed the look of complete surprise on his brother's face that he completely forget to throw the fact that he had more than kissed Jennifer. He decided he liked it that way. His brother had an awful way of bending other's confidences to his favour.

Through the years his brother had made a special effort to be disruptive. William had arrived late to their wedding. Missed the baptism of their first child, and would never receive an invite to the second's. After years of staying largely silent in public he had finally confronted William the year his brother moved on to the real politics and away from New York DA's office. Their argument was meant to be private but witnessed through the slipshod walls of the campaign office by the entire team and Jennifer.

Jennifer, it turns out was impressed by that fire, and their second child, Megan, had been a direct result of their post confrontation coupling. The second benefit was that William backed off, needing to be seen as family friendly, in public at least.

Until then he had been making gradual progression in his financial career but from that day he discovered a drive his father had once so clearly stated would never exist. David learnt to be in more in control and what worked for him in the bedroom made a difference in the office too. He turned round a loss making team, started to make serious money. Before long he was promoted out into a bigger division and given his head. It paid off spectacularly. Their views of New York attested to that.

He's thinking this all through now because he knows his brother will call. He will demand something. The price as yet unknown. He knows this because James Court had rung him last night to ensure he would be available and wouldn't decline the call. Now that man scared him. All the more reason to fear what his brother was and how he had such implacable soldiers at his beck and call. What did his brother want?

Jennifer took his right hand in her left, and squeezed gently before leaning in to him. She was more than content with and often still amazed at the man beside her. He was nowhere like her preferred type growing up, and he was so different from what she had imagined she would settle for except for the wealth - which he had earned. And his family – something far worse than any of her childish fears.

The gentle ring of his cell broke their mutual introspection.

David looked at the screen. Unsurprisingly it was an unlisted number.
Jennifer leant in and kissed his cheek before stepping back, she had no desire to hear the voice, let alone the words.

Swiping to answer he lift the handset to his left ear.

"Hello Little Brother."

"You don't get to call me that."

"Sure I can."

"Right then Bill."

"You know I don't like that."

"I don't care. What the Hell do you want?"

"That's no way to talk to your brother."

"My question hasn't changed. What do want? Your minder made it clear I had no option."

"Ah yes, I trust James was sole of courtesy."

"Get to the point." Court's menace still lingered.

"Simply really. I need you to arrange for the banks to pull the line of credit and support for the Mayor's University Heights project."

"Sorry. What?"

"Do I need to repeat myself?" He sounded scarily like their father just then. And equally implacable.

"No I heard you the first time. Why should I?" Defiant. "The deal works for us whether the Mayor's or the competing bid that your lackeys are pushing goes ahead."

"I need the funding for the Mayor's project gone."

"Well Bill why should I? Word is that you are under investigation." Got him. No response there so he pressed on. "You've somehow managed to hold off the wolves, but there are federal agents all over the city and especially in and out of several banks and Banking Regulator's office." The barely supressed expletive whispers down the line but he gets no satisfactory for what follows is his worst nightmare.

"David, you remember what I told you that day?" The last time they had met in person. At their mother's funeral.

"Fuck you!" His own hurled expletive brings Jennifer to his side. She pushes the phone down from his ear and enables the speaker just in time to hear her brother-in-law, not that she'll ever acknowledge that relationship, cross the line. Again.

"Maybe. Maybe not. But you'll have no one else. I'll make sure of that. You were so ready to fill my shoes. Will you want to if there is no one to share it with?" The menace is unmistakeable.

"I used to wonder if you needed therapy but you're way past being salvaged. I used to think that it was the shemale taking you up the arse and you enjoying it that broke you somehow. The truth is
you were always broken, never treatable, you should have been put down." *Like the animal you are.*

"Oh Little Brother, she's with you isn't she? You only ever barked back for her."

"Yes I am you prick. But he'll do what you want but stay the fuck away from us." Jennifer needs no one to fight her battles.

"Well it appears that wifey knows what's good for the family.

"We're not family. Don't ever call again."

"It will be my pleasure. Goodbye Little Brother, and Wifey." And with that he's gone.

Jennifer snatches the phone before her husband can hurl it against the wall.

"David. We can't let this stand. We should call someone."

"Who?" He shakes his head, "Even if we do he has his goons to extract retribution. Worse they're not actually goons. They're professionals. I did some checking. Court is ex-CIA, rumoured to be connected to some black ops community. I imagine the men they use are professionals too."

"What are you saying?"

"That we have too much to risk going to the authorities. And anyway who would we go to? I know him. He corrupts, bends, turns, twists."

"So what he is asking, is it illegal?"

"No. No in itself. We can call the loan in. We don't have to explain. We even have reasonable grounds at the project has stagnated for a number of years. The funding is being propped up by a group of the Mayor's supporters as security. If we calls our loans in the rest will follow. Kind of like lemmings."

She kisses his cheek. "So you'll do it?"

"I shouldn't but I don't think it makes a jot of difference to his eventual fate." He scrubs his hand over his head. "But it will keep us alive longer."

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**The Hamptons**

A naked Rick was last to wake and rise this morning. Turns out the Birthday Girl's desires were suitably demanding. Some adjustment had been made for his injury but suffice to say Rick had earned his uninterrupted sleep and lie in.

Of course Beckett was already up and moving. He was far more used to this version of the woman he loved above all the others. However, he would gladly admit to being equally intrigued by the one who snuggled under the covers and found almost any excuse to not get up. Their lives were not generally compatible with the latter but he would take every day he could get like that. The last few weeks had given them a glimpse of a different life. One his, no their, money could make happen if they wanted.

Meanwhile nature called and he had a slightly fuzzy taste clinging to his mouth that also needed imminent remediation. Blergggh!
Throwing on the eponymous blue robe on he wandered into the en-suite to perform his morning duties, and attempt to chase the mouth demons away. Emerging some minutes later he finds Kate returned and tucked up in bed once more, the aroma of coffee teasing his nostrils, a mug secured in worship between her hands. Her brunette locks caress her face and her teeth gleam as she smiles at his appearance.

"Good morning Rick."

"Hi Kate. How long have you been up?" Slipping his robe off and letting it pool on the floor, it's too chilly to stand there naked for her to peruse and appreciate for more than a brief moment, but even as he re-joins her in their bed he catches the spark of interest in her eyes. He's a forty-something guy, he can be excused a little egotism if his naked form gets the hottest woman he'll ever know a bit heated.

"Long enough to make the coffee and miss you." He honestly still struggles to pick the between tease and the real compliment. Her smile and the twinkle of victory confirms which game they're playing this morning. Maybe. She's remarkably Sphinx-like when she wants.

"For the record I missed you," he half yawns, "Once I woke from the sleep of the dead."

"Well you earned it. Thank you for last night Rick," somehow he stills the eyebrow and the smirk is barely a tremor, "Thank you for all of yesterday."

"Honestly it was my pleasure." He stutters briefly, "All of it. Not just the," he pauses

"The sex," Kate fills in for him.

"Yeah that," frowning momentarily fixing the words, "sex on one level but our connection makes more than that."

"Hhmmmm, it does Babe." She casts a lascivious gaze at him.

"Hey no fair! You give me that smouldering look and call me 'Babe'. That's…that's…"

"Hey this should help," she passes him his own cup of coffee complete with a milky foam heart on the top. That's distractingly sweet and so not kick-ass Beckett.

As he takes the mug she bursts into action. Putting her own cup down, she grasps and guides his arm to place his all the way over on his bedside table. Once certain that the mug and contents will complete their journey safely she rises over him and sinks down astride his legs. Holy Crap!

"Oh Wow. That's quite the." She kisses him effectively silencing his praise of her barista skills as he takes in her fully naked form pressing against his.

"Good morning Babe."

Double standards indeed.

He's not complaining.

Not until later when he realises their coffee has gone cold, and it's his turn to make more.

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Elsewhere in the Hamptons.

Jim Beckett wakes in a strange bed. It takes him a few moments to remember he is in one of the
guest suites at the Inn. He doesn't even have the excuse of alcohol to explain the delayed recall. Old age, something always goes first he muses.

He hears the sound of water and sits up looking for his absent bed mate.

Val emerges from the bathroom, her long creamy white negligee contrasting against her skin.

"Good morning James."

"Oh very formal this morning Miss Valerie."

She leans in to kiss him. Minty fresh and extremely appealing. God he had missed the intimacy with another person.

"So what is the plan?"

"Well we have some time to kill here and then we'll make our way to my Great Aunt's for lunch."

"This is your Great Aunt Esmeralda right?"

"Yes, she was a late child, very late, a surprise so to speak. She is only a year or two older than my mother."

"And she is your inspiration for law school."

"Not just law school, but any school. I was a somewhat flighty child and my parents despaired of me at times. Esmeralda showed me everything that could attained with application and hard work."

"Why do I feel a 'but' coming on?"

Val laughs. "You're right Jim. Her daughter, my aunt, Chloe, who is really a just year younger than me, well we do not get along. She had the same lessons and encouragement from her mother but the result was a little different. She'll be there today. We really, really do not get along."

"How so?"

"I'm not sure I want to spoil the surprise."

"Really?"

"Well James if you want to, if you insist on asking after other members of my family, well you might just miss out on this particular lady."

"Brazen. Absolutely brazen."

"Oh no Mister Beckett. Brazen is this." With that she drops the straps and the top of her negligee.

As his mouth closes in on hers he will admit that the negligee really did complement her complexion nicely. However she wore it.

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**The Beach.**

Reinforced by breakfast which included actual bacon – reward or motivation Rick isn't quite sure - Kate had cajoled him outside for some interval training. There is the threat of rain but it is not present yet.
Distracted by post-coitus bliss reinforced by bacon and their ever-present coffee, he hadn't really paid precise attention to her explanation for the interval training. By the third set, he fully understood her plan and the execution.

For her part, Kate was impressed by his sticking at it. They're doing two hundred yard legs, first at a fast walk and the next at a brisk jog. So that's four hundred yards for a set, and then they repeat.

They've done two sets down the bench and have turned round for the house finishing a third set. The final fourth set brings them back to the foot of his garden overlooking the ocean. Kate retrieves the pair of water bottles she stashed there earlier and passes one to Rick.

Taking a swig from his, he sinks on the exposed concrete of a foundation for one of the fence posts, the sand having been eroded by the elements, his chest still heaving and sweat pouring from him despite the cool weather.

Kate sinks to her haunches in front of him, her own breathing measured and calm, barely a sheen upon her brow.

"We've made good progress here Rick. Not just with your recovery but us."

"You're right Kate. Being able to have time to ourselves has been priceless. I love Mother and Alexis but being able to dedicate myself to you and our relationship, well I've never really had the luxury since college, and even then it was different with Kyra. We were still finding our feet in life, and I think that ultimately it reflected in our relationship." He still finds the idea of discussing his previous relationships in any detail with her almost totally alien as if every instinct screams at him not to. After all it had never worked before. Almost always the total opposite effect too. Certainly with Gina who took anything pretty much the wrong way to the extent that not speaking to her became second nature. Hardly surprising his second marriage collapsed.

Kate does not waver. She keeps her eyes engaged with his and reaches a hand for his left forearm. "It's the same for me Rick. I specialised in hiding in relationships," with 'men I never loved' remains unsaid but accepted between. "I know we have some distractions with my study and the odd bit of work for Taylor Matthews, but otherwise it's all for us. It is new for me. We didn't have this experience for ourselves before now, the closest was our enforced hideout at the beginning. Nor have I with any other relationship.

"I think it is important to recognise that we still need our space too. I know I still need some, and you do too. If only to write. For me it is to decompress and not some much work through my thoughts as banish them.

"We're leaving behind all those secrets and unsaid things that crippled our chances before."

"Not chances now Kate. Certainty."

She nods slowly, shyly looking away for the moment. He looks at her intently. Waits her out until her gaze returns to his.

"Did you want more Kate?"

"More? What? No, of course not! My birthday was great. Sorry if I made you assume otherwise."

"Don't be sorry. And I'm not assuming anything. But it is okay to want more. To seek a definition of where we're going. So I want to assure you that I want that too. I will propose. But I don't want it to be borne of anything other than love and a desire to be with you to the end of our days. I told you yesterday that I wanted it to be right."
"So do I Rick but I don't want you to second guess yourself or wait for the perfect moment that may never come." Then she's more than serious. "Babe, we've almost lost each other or both of ourselves too many times. I don't want 'what if's' I want that certainty. It doesn't need a picture post card moment. Just you popping the question would be enough."

"God so do I."

"Good then let's not wait too much longer. I want us to decide things at our own pace and preferably without others or events forcing our hand."

"Sounds like a good idea."

"No."

"No?" His voice really shouldn't squeak like that.

"It's a great idea." She extends both hand to him and taking his she helps him up as she rises from her haunches.

"But do you know what's almost as good?"

"I'm going to regret this, I know it."

"Good Boy Rick. Another four sets of interval training. This time let's see if we can up the pace a little for both the walking and the jog."

She'll excuse him the groan as they turn and head up the beach once more.

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**Washington DC.**

He was trying to work out what to do with his first full day off since joining the AG's team.

He was very self-contained, and his home was too. Despite its diminutive size with a shared kitchen/dining/living room, one bedroom, and single bathroom with a shower, his apartment has its own small utility room with a washer/dryer so he didn't have to share with others. He liked it that way. He used a lot of long life products and managed everything with an order and precision that had got him into the FBI in the first place.

Yet despite the structure it often felt like he wasn't living. That he hadn't really since New York, before Boston, before breaking Beckett's heart. Well that last was one thing he no longer needed worry about. Her heart was well and truly mended now. He chucked the colored wash on and headed for the buildings gym. He'd rather sweat that think about the shortfalls in his existence.

He's back and showered in forty, and it's still nowhere near lunch time. Not long after he's got his laundry on to dry, and then his phone rings, solving the rest the equation for him.

"Sorenson."

"Good Morning Agent, this Assistant Director Villante. We need you in the office in 60 minutes."

"Where's McCord?" Normally she would make this call. Why is her superior calling?

"I'll explain when you get here."

The tone, the abrupt nature, the lack of explanation for his partner's absence means he's in the
Henry's Café, New Jersey.

It's early enough and the weather still seasonable enough that the usual crowd of bikers is smaller. At least it's not wet – yet – today.

He loves the fit of his leathers but he hasn't had the chance for a while and he needs to lose a few pounds. Not the easiest thing with an office job. Looking around he misses her the first time. She's not out with the bikes. Instead he finds her inside, and approaches.

"Hey Lady B."

"You're the only one I let get away with that." Her smile belies any possible sense of offense from her words. The half-hug.

"Sure Sis. How long have you been here?"

"Thirty minutes or so. Second coffee," she waves her hand over the mug in front of her. "Couldn't sleep."

"So what's the deal? Not that I don't love riding with you."

"You're chaperoning me."

"Really?"

"Yes really."

"So?"

"The Doctor."

"Doctor Dimwit?"

"He's not. Just a bit confused and maybe still a little heartbroken."

"Even so. You normally would give him a first shot. Let alone a second. Didn't think he was your type. You don't do pity, especially not pity fucks." The scowl tells him more than his sister would want. She really likes this guy. He doesn't know why, but then again he is hardly an expert at human interaction and attraction.

"I have my reasons."

"Which you're not going to share. I know." He looks at her, "For what it's worth I will give him credit for tracking me down to try and make things right. I didn't even know he was Charlotte's brother until he mentioned it."

"You know you two met once at a party."

"I don't remember it. Was that when you were dating Charlotte?"

"Oh Harry, I love you but don't romance it up for me. Really I was only ever fucking 'Lotte."

"Oh thanks for clearing that up. Again. Anyway I still don't remember him."
"Probably because it was the party with the brunette, um Sophie and her yummy Japanese friend." She loves how he still blushes like a virgin. Not that he was. Certainly not based on what the two girls had shared the following day. She would admit to being proud and slightly grossed out that her brother had performed so well.

He receives a straight black coffee and then realises his sister is not staying at the bench. She is in motion, coffee in hand, and she wanders out to the parking lot. There is a small gaggle of riders and bikes taking advantage of a comparatively balmy and still dry day.

"I assume he is coming?"

"Anytime soon. I told him about now. He seemed to know the place."

As if on cue, the sound of an incoming Japanese superbike alerts them to an imminent new arrival. "That's him I think." Beatrice recognises the distinctive sound of the Yamaha. The sound mutes, the rider no doubt caught at the wickedly long set of double lights at the nearest junction.

"How are the roads where we're going?" Harry is back on the business.

"Mostly dry, a little damp from yesterday rain in places but no ice thank god. Should be good so long as you don't have your full race slicks on." He shakes his head in confirmation.

Beatrice frowns and scans the lot. She looks around seeking his red MV Augusta. "Harry, where's your F4?"

"In the garage." She's almost palpably relieved at his answer. She loves that bike. He looks out of place on the large superbike until it starts moving and then they are as one. She's actually jealous of him, even if she does look infinity hotter astride the saddle in her leathers.

"So what are you riding?" The question needs to be asked.

"You'll see," he waves his hand in the direction of a large group of riders clustered around something near the end of the line of bikes. It's not an uncommon thing to see a group eyeing up a new or interesting bike. This group looks bigger than usual, and there is a wave of excited chatter emanating from the group, sounding an awful lot like awe-tinged.

"Come on Sis you can take a look." He pulls her free hand with somewhat childish enthusiasm.

"Excuse me, coming through."

"Hey Dude," a heavy set, bearded type protests as Harry tries to thread his smaller mass past him. Behind him his sister glares from her superior height. The beard backs off a little.

Harry decides it is time to speak before a misconception turns ugly.

"Dude. That's my bike you're ogling. Don't drool on it. Thanks much-ly." The bigger guy retreats in surprise, and Beatrice catches sight of what has the crowd enraptured.

"Holy Shit Harry! You brought the CC."

He manages to get "Yeah. I did," out before his sister wraps him in a death hug.

"Still no letting you ride it," but at her pout he relents, "not just yet anyway."

"It looks like sex." Her statement is pretty much correct. The bike is slightly glossy midnight black except for the duller matt black of the carbon fibre fairing. Along with the F4 lettering there are red
highlights on the fairing, tank, wheels and behind the saddle. Every component is clean and gleaming. This bike has had a hell of a lot of TLC.

"Rides like it too," her brother enthuses, "I can't wait until the weather is good enough for track days."

"I'll be there."

"Maybe I'll relent and let you ride it by then.

"You going to keep the 2010 F4?" The red sibling of the bike before, her brother's usual ride.

"Yeah, still love that bike and willing to risk it in the city now. Not like that," her indicates his new bike.

"Entirely understand," she reached across to ruffle his hair, "color me jealous but I still love you little brother."

"Only 'cause you want a ride."

Yeah she really does. But any further thought along how to manipulate her brother is lost as Josh's Yamaha finally comes to a stop about 10 yards away and she sees the helmeted head lock onto her. She can't help the exceedingly uncool arm raise and hand wave that she instinctively gives. Harry is right. She does like this guy a lot. She just wishes she knew why.

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AG's Office, Washington DC

The occupancy rate is much lower on weekends, but the dress code not much relaxed. So Rachael McCord stands out. She is wearing jeans and a dark blue FBI t-shirt. The zip on her training jacket is undone. She's leaning back against the outside of the break room wall.

Despite the very relaxed and non-regulation attire it is the bruise to her left cheek and the cut above the same eye that draws Agent Sorenson's attention.

"Shit McCord! What the Hell happened to you?" He closes the gap but is careful not to touch his supervisor slash partner.

"Hey Sorenson," she wafts a hand in his direction as a greeting. "Got jumped in my apartment."

He nods, taking a moment to compose himself and follow his senior's lead. Could be a lot worse. But that's unsaid between them. The law enforcement code is often stupid and petty but it means well. Brusque, making light of injuries and what ifs. It's no wonder that many of those who make it to retirement are afflicted in one way or another.

"I know you are tough Boss. But that looks like it hurts."

"It does." She sags a little, and takes a couple of steps back into the unoccupied break room. It is entirely deliberate and he follows drawing the door too. With him inside she drops the mask and lets herself fall into the nearby chair.

He sinks down into the chair next to hers, never taking his eyes off her.

"I was home asleep. Heard a noise. Took a moment or two to shake myself out of it, been tired you know, then more noise, closer, but before I can even get my gun from the drawer, the bedroom
door was opening. Saw two shadows. Really went for my gun. Last thing I remember. Woke up like this."

"Not pretty." He grunts.

"Thanks Sorenson. Whoever did it was a professional. Paramedic said it was a clean take down with minimal damage. Whoever it was, they were good enough to know me unconscious but nothing more."

"Still I'm glad you alive."

"Me too."

"So?"

"Nothing taken. Gun, backup piece, ID, phone, laptop all there. Same with my personal possessions."

"That doesn't add up, their frowns mirroring. "Something added?"

"You mean like surveillance?" He nods.

"Being looked into now."

He's still frowning. "This doesn't make sense."

"You know, that's just what the investigating agent said as the paramedics finished with me. But I wasn't entirely sure what exactly he was talking about."

"Who was the agent?"

"Said his name was Stack"

"But you didn't recognise him?"

"Well that's the strange thing. I didn't know the name, but I swear I've seen him around before. Just not the name. Older guy, tallish, lean. He had slight air of menace if you know what I mean."

"Doesn't ring a bell. There are a lot of agents." He leans in closer, "This is all connected isn't it?"

"Yeah it is Will." She actually looks apologetic for having dragged him into this, even if the use of his first name hadn't given it away.

"I got your back McCord. I'm in this."

"Thanks partner."

Henry's Café,

Two hours after first pulling up Josh Davidson is back at the café and well he wasn't merely impressed. He was awestruck. Beatrice was a very good rider but he brother is a class, or two, above. Harry turns out to be a manic motorbike rider. A bit of a bike buff he's seriously impressed with the man, and that was even before Harry turns out to own one of the rarest motorbikes on the planet.
He's clustered in tight with Beatrice in a corner booth. It's kind of cozy and he likes it. She's letting him remain in proximity and he's desperately trying not to over think it. Her talking about her brother helps with the distraction.

"They call him 'Hairy' and it has nothing at all to do with his body."

"I can appreciate that. How the Hell did you even fit the bike into those spaces?"

"Don't ask me Josh. He does it, I don't." She touches his arm, and he finds he likes that.

"He taught me to ride. Back when my parents were fully against it."

"So what did you do for him?" He can imagine the horse trading. He and sister did the same, even if she almost always got the better end of the deal.

"I taught him how to get rides so to speak." Josh makes a puzzled face and then a slightly shocked one as he works it out, and she slams his shoulder. Hard. "Not like that! Well not exactly," she huffs.

"Got him some introductions and gave him some pointers. Sure he might have got the odd pity fuck to begin with, but who hasn't? He gained self-confidence. Nerds weren't always sexy – even if they rode well - so it helped him a lot. Then he had a regular girlfriend through much of college. But she went to grad school on the West Coast, and they did try the distance thing but it didn't last."

"Now?"

"On his own. He works a lot. He doesn't share and I don't really ask."

"Really? I mean you seem like the involved type. Especially for family." He means it as a compliment.

"We learnt a lesson early on at college. He briefly dated one of my exes. She was kind enough to provide a detailed compare and contrast between the two of us. For both of us. At the same time. The only thing she left out was a Powerpoint presentation."

"Oh. Awkward." He looks at her eyes crinkled in consideration. "Kind of hot too."

Her elbow is most definitely sharp and not gentle.

"Definitely mostly the first for me. More like ugh. So we try not to overshare."

She tracks Josh looking past her once more. The view outside looks directly on Harry's new bike. He is staring at the bike again.

"Are you in love with my brother's bike? A girl has a right to know."

"Of course I am. I am mean who wouldn't be," Josh doesn't even try and hide his near lust for the sleek black sex on wheels. Even now there are admirers staking out the bike.

The voice of the owner of the bike in question breaks there comfortable tête-à-tête.

"A totally refurbished 2008 MV Agusta F4CC Claudio Castiglioni. One of only a hundred ever built. This is number seventy-one." Harry sits down opposite them, perching on the stool. "Came with the Trussardi leather jacket and an equally unique, only-a-hundred-ever-made Girard-Perregaux watch with the matching seventy-one serial. And yes I did get both items as part of my
"Good bonus this year Harry? I mean this bike cost more than a hundred grand when it was launched." Beside her Josh blanches at the cost.

Harry laughs, "Yes I did well, but even so it was a big purchase."

"I can believe that." Josh is awestruck but still inquisitive. "How did you fit through those gaps today? Not to mention the balls to ride something that expensive like that?"

"I was never any good at physical stuff at school and was resigned to being a typical nerd when my sister, obviously the anti-nerd despite her smarts, dared me to try riding. After getting over being scared shitless, it became more comfortable. Rapidly I got better and it felt instinctive. Turned out Lady B – not that you can call her that, and live - was self-motivated. My learning and surviving meant our parents had less grounds to stop her learning. And they – that's the parents and B – made me teach her. I've never been so scared in my life I can tell you."

"I think I can understand that. You've met my sister haven't you?"

"Oh yes, but I think now I want to hear about you."

"Oh."

"Well I'll leave you boys too it. I'm going to catch a few people I know," and with that Beatrice is up and gone.

Josh launches into a summary of his life. Unlike Harry's boss the man keeps to the facts, with little flair for the tale or distraction for that matter. Still much as Harry appreciates it, it isn't exactly what he is asking after.

Josh is midstream about his overseas charity work when Harry interrupts."

"But it turns out volunteering overseas doesn't pay off your loans."

"Not really what I was asking about Josh."

Give him credit, the man did look nervous.

"Oh man this is difficult. I mean you work for HIM," he scrubs his hair, "Richard Castle."

"Look you want to date my sister not my boss. I don't really get a say in that. Not usually but you were an arse last time. So explain to me about Kate Beckett."

Josh's face is a mask. He's clearly trying to figure out what he should do.

For his part Josh wants to be honest but there is also the consideration of how much he should share. Sure this man worked for him, Richard Castle, but still he feels a loyalty to Kate. She may not have shared all, but she did give part of herself over to their relationship and he doesn't want to betray that.

"Kate Beckett is an incredible woman. I've never really seen her in her job but I can't imagine her as anything else than great. I mean she's stunning but very clever too. She's beautiful, graceful, and intelligent but smart also, driven. Any man would be attracted. We got along pretty well, more so in the beginning. We had a common interest in bikes and shared the same dedication to our jobs. She's much more esoteric, loves culture, reading, the arts than me. We had a good time but we
started to drift apart.

"But I am as much to blame as her. I didn't commit. I constantly took overseas trips. I didn't think it was an issue because I told her up front and she seemed fine with it. Thought she wanted that too. But after about 6 months something changed. She said she had some tough cases but didn't share. I didn't push, she didn't seem receptive to that. She seemed to bounce back but slowly on occasion she was a bit more withdrawn than before. Eventually she told me about what drove her.

"Then there was him. Richard Castle. Her partner. Her friend. Seemed he knew everything. He was obviously more than attracted to her. Who wouldn't? I knew she was attracted to him. But she was fighting it. I thought that meant we had a chance. I think she tried too. She would never cheat on me. Or anyone. Not in her character.

"In the end she broke up with me. I had been willing to propose. To show my commitment. To stop overseas trips. Last throw of the dice. Desperation really. In hindsight not real smart.

"But I learnt lessons from that. It was almost a year of both of our lives in a relationship that didn't go anywhere. So after I did one last long trip away to escape and help clear my head. Then I came back but not New York straight away. Worked in Boston for six months. But wanted to come home to NY. Managed to get a job here at Bellevue. On staff. Management as well. Committed.

"So that's my story of Kate Beckett. I thought you want to know more about your sister."

"I wanted to make sure you were over whatever it is so that it doesn't end up hurting my sister."

"I like your sister a lot. I don't care about her past. Hopefully she thinks the same for mine. I would like for us to try, to see how we go in a relationship."

"I don't get to decide that."

"Harry, that where I think you're wrong. She obviously wants your appraisal of me."

"Maybe. Look I shouldn't' like you. You hurt my sister, but despite the initial arse-hat perception, I think you might actually be a decent guy. Whether you're good enough for my sister is something she'll work out. I will say you're not her usual type, unless the piercings and tattoos are all under the covers so to speak.

"Thanks I think. But no to the piercings and tattoos."

"Okay Josh. One final thing. I don't want my working for Richard Castle to be an issue. She's not really part of that world. You might be lucky and get to date her, not me."

The man nods. "Harry, I understand that. Last thing I want. I am interested in her. I'm looking forward not back. I want to make new memories, not agonise over old ones."

"Reasonable answer. It's all down to her of course."

Josh knows that it is not. A lot rest with him. To make better decisions this time. To be more considerate. Less selfish. Just maybe it will work out.

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Gates Residence

There were no kids this weekend. They were busy elsewhere with other commitments, their lives. Something their parents were conflicted about. Alone time was great but even though the kids were
fully grown adults their absence jars in the space of their house and the residual echoes of past family chaos linger in their memories.

The dining table is covered in the newspapers, two piles of student papers for grading, and the latest Lee Child novel as distraction for her husband instead of marking. She can barely stomach crime novels unlike her husband. Although she has read the first two of Richard Castle's Heat novels. They're better than most, even without the connection to the Twelfth. She dreads what happens if he introduces a new Captain to replace Montrose.

"What did you want for lunch DM?" If any of her command could see her now, aside from shooting them (justified homicide), she would never live it down. Her most comfortable worn track pants (in blue) and a purple fleece worn silky smooth by the years. Actually it's an improvement on her morning attire which features a dressing gown and slippers that wouldn't pass muster for a charity shop but carry too many memories for her to ever relinquish willingly.

"I fancy some of that leftover meatloaf and a hash Vicky."

"Well it will be salad for dinner then DM," she pushes her glasses down her nose, "unless you want to earn something else."

"Salad is fine by me Vicky," he stares challengingly back, indignant and bristling, "although the last time you said that you took me for a six mile walk."

"I know dear. You moaned about it for days," still with her glasses perched on the ridge of her nose she cocks her head to the right and stares right back, "you want anything else, you'll need to get off you behind."

"But it's Sunday!"

"Thought as much," her glasses are pushed back up and she lifts the paper even as she assures him, "still love you as insufferable as you are."

He smirks into his book, procrastinating his resumption of marking his student's papers. Lee Child is a particular favourite of course. He and Montgomery never knew anyone quite a singularly hard-arse as Jack Reacher but he's an amalgamation of the military police they served with.

She enjoyed lunch. Her husband was heavy with the spices and the taste still lingered, teasing her tongue and senses, after-still receding into memory. She takes another sip of her beer – meatloaf and hash was hardly something for any grape vintage to accompany – and resumes her perusal of the finance section of the paper attempting to get some understanding of the financial markets. She solves crime, she should be able to deduce patterns and make decisions about their finances. She can't believe sometimes how fast the prospect of retirement has overtaken them. At least she should get to retire. Tutting internally she chases that thought away and turns her attention back to the stock market.

A little later and they've cleared the dishes and she has abandoned the futile search for financial security and is looking through the personnel files and the case notes she had bought home with her.

"You want to tell me what's going on Vicky? Those look awfully like NYPD personnel files. Did you re-join IA or something?"

"Something."
"Can you share?" He's entirely used to her monosyllabic responses. Patience is always the best response.

She gives her husband a grateful glance before quickly running his through the outline of the case and how she has come to be investigating the IAD Lieutenant.

Of course she had used her IAD connections to run a few checks of her own.

On the face of it, Carmel Davies is a lot like her. At first glance. Female, black, great Academy scores, excellent rookie and deployment reports. Fast tracked into IAD. Excellled there. Promoted to Lieutenant. Except. And there's the kicker. Except, that sometime back she had accepted and accommodated outside interference in a case. Comprised the cast iron ethics that were necessary to survive IA and eventually leave with integrity and be able to work elsewhere in the police force. It probably didn't even seem like much at the time. That was how insidious it could be. Victoria Gates had turned down a number of such attempts herself.

After disappointingly little work it is clear that Carmel Davies is beholden to the Councilwoman, Glaser. Glaser is Bracken's apprentice. Never destined for the big show either federally or even within NYC but she is powerful in her own way. She has done small things to advance Davies' career and in return Davies has assisted in some way. The kicker was this special Ethical investigation team. It was over and above IA. It was political and hand been opposed by the police command and many others. However eventually it got off the ground backed by a former assistant DA, the Senator (J) for New York. A key member of the supervisory committee was Councilwoman Glaser. Davies had been appointed without the usual horse-trading and hoop-jumping. Someone was looking out for her. But there was always a bill that would come due.

Some considered it politics and expediency, Victoria Gates would only ever describe it thus – unethical, borderline illegal or actually so. The man opposite her knew this, had always known this and loved her for it.

"You know Vicky, I had hoped you left that all behind when you replaced Roy and left IA. But I was wrong wasn't I?"

"Yeah DM. I'm sorry. As a cop I don't think you can ever leave IA behind, it follows you, regardless. But I think that, well this time it may be worse. I do appreciate and admire both Beckett and Richard Castle, but they are at the centre of something extremely foul and vicious. Big too. Now they are the targets, maybe even the victims. I suspect that it is not done yet, and that there is more, possibly worse to come. This is national, federal, and I'm so far out of my league."

She closes the distance to her husband and snuggles into him, feels his arms come around her. That solid core, the solider/lawyer, the man his students never see, except that even now he carried it with him just as Roy had, just better hidden, less use for it, thank God.

"And Babe, I'm so sorry for that. For dragging us back towards everything I thought we had left behind."

"Vicky, there's no blame on you for that, for doing what's right. I don't blame Roy for his choices, and I can't blame my wife for hers. He introduced us, give me everything I wanted. I just wish he'd been more of a realist and less of a hero. If for nothing more than Evelyn and the kids."

"That was never him DM. But he was right too. We couldn't take that son-of-a-gun down then. Not with who his backers were. Maybe still are. We never clearly identified them, maybe never will. We should have done what we could. Our procrastination has cost a lot of lives and put so many at risk."
"Wasn't you decision Vicky."

"Still doesn't make it hurt less."

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**Sunday Afternoon, The Hamptons.**

Faced with self-induced guilt – a weapon her mom was most effective at leveraging, and another legacy that remained with her always – she had picked up the official NYPD study materials, and resumed her work for the New York Civil Service Exam. Kate found sitting at the small dining table in the kitchen a most effective learning place. Essential studies aids – water, coffee, snacks – close to hand.

After kissing her forehead, Rick had grabbed some water and headed to his study muttering about 'edits'. Kate let the momentary frown show once she was certain he wasn't able to see her. He was not up to using a keyboard properly yet, certainly not for any extensive period with his writing. Any prior attempt to do so merely resulting in frustration, and not a few swear words. Impressive as his profane vocabulary was, she rather he didn't exercise it today.

Recognising that Rick was giving her space for her studies and removing his distracting presence Kate forced herself back to her books.

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After an hour or more by her internal clock Kate knew she would give in to the nagging desire to see him soon. A check of her watch showed almost two hours had passed.

She gave in.

He wasn't in the study in fact his computer showed no signs of being switched on.

Heading through the side door she confirmed he was not in the main library.

He wasn't outside. The weather closed that option off, rain gently sluicing down the windows.

Upstairs then.

First port of call was a no show. He wasn't in their room. She liked that term. A lot. Another thing she wasn't giving up. Ever.

She proceeded down the hall.

Nor in Martha's room.

Crossing the hallway back towards the seaward side, she found him.

Alexis' room.

She should have guessed. Tried here first.

Her man was asleep on top of the bed covers.

Her foolish anxiety assuaged, her heart didn't let up even as she gazed at him.

He looked good.

Calm, settled.
Much younger too.

He looked comfortable.

Unguarded.

It reminded her of the first time she really got to see him like that. The night of the storm. Their beginning, or at least what she considers their true beginning, their first night together without the wall, her wall she corrects, and the lies, well-meant lies but untruths that hurt both regardless. Yet all that was swept away, abolished by the ultimate confirmation that their connection was more than metaphysical and that physically that were extremely compatible.

Flash back - Their first night.

The time for serious words was past, they needed no more mea culpas, and they navigated their way to his bedroom in comfortable silence with only wandering hands to communicate. It was entirely a 'them' way to begin their new journey together. Leaving behind the apologies and hurt to fall aside like their clothes.

Round one was frenetic, desperate, competitive even, teasing, intense, and yet so perfect. There hadn't really been any fumbling except to remove her overly clingy wet clothes. Getting her sodden jeans off her legs had led to playful tugs, giggles and several bad puns that rapidly gave way to groans of a different kind. Thereafter there had been lots of words just barely any sentences. They knew each other so well that the discovery of each other's bodies was nothing short of magic. Years of expectation surpassed by actuality, bettering dreams, making indelible memories, letting go, and committing to themselves. They had both clung to their naked partner afterwards, unwilling to let go, so fragile still.

Slowly they found their words, and then came the confessions of how long it had been for each before this, their last first time. For Kate it was eight days before she was shot so just over a year, something routine, almost remote with Josh, another exercise in avoidance. Wrapped in his embrace she feels rather sees Rick's grimace, but this is the truth of them now. No holding back. For Rick it had been Gina, even longer then. The air stewardess had not made it to bed, or anything past half-hearted kisses trying to burn away, even temporarily, the desire and hurt. He sounds lost so she takes a leaf from his book, going for levity and nervously Kate half-teased him as to whether there was tongue? Only a little but it felt wrong he answered, bluntly honest and sounding ashamed. At this point he relaxed their embrace so they can see each other's faces. Cupping her cheeks, he explained that Jacinda had stayed at a nearby hotel and they met up again purely because she was interested helping in the case, wanting to do something 'Nikki' couldn't solve. Kate had taken his hand and kissed his knuckles trying to convey that the unnecessary forgiveness he didn't need for yet another of their lost moments. She was in no position to judge, two physical relationships with men who weren't him. Not that those really mattered anymore. They were absolving each other of any shared blame. Their separated (mostly) pasts mattered far less than their future together.

Then Rick had left her momentarily to get Kate some painkillers and water, Kate unabashedly watching his naked form stride from the bed. She watched his return too, biting her lip in such a manner as to nearly provoke something other than cuddles. Somehow they had calmed and drifted off to sleep together.

Round two had started unexpectedly. She had moaned in her sleep, the beating she had taken from Maddox, the man who had shot her a year before, was revealing itself, slowly but certainly, blossoming on her skin and aches beneath. Rick had woken, and had instantly known. He had
gently eased her from her restless slumber, picked up and cradled her naked form, and carried her into his en-suite bathroom. Once her heart had recovered from encountering the shadow of the bounty hunter's Mandalorian armor in the dark, and then adjusted her eyes to the subdued lighting that followed, her lover had effortlessly lifted her on a towel he had thoughtfully placed on the cold marble sink top. Then in a moment so precious she would never share, he had taken a warm, damp cloth and so reverently and carefully cleaned her from top to toe including her most intimate places. Executed with such profound love and gentleness, it had undone her totally, and she had wept, her body shaking against his warmth and comfort. She had never told him how much his actions evoked memories of her mother's own tender care, but she often imagined he would have known. With tears tracking his own cheeks he finished with a gentle kiss to the lips and lifted her into his massive arms to return to their bed.

If he thought they were going to back to sleep he was so wrong. On reaching the bedroom it had Kate been to take the initiative pushing him and down and showing him a trick or two (without the ice cubes for now). They finished with Rick in control, and Kate found that she willingly surrendered herself totally to him. Rick in return took nothing from her but gave her more as he shared all of himself, repeating those words of honest devotion. The same words he first said to her a year ago in possibly the worst circumstances, and in that perfect moment Kate freely gave her own words back to him.

No sooner than the words 'Rick I love you' left her mouth, and the room still echoing her confirmation that she reciprocated his devotion, he had ceased the last tremors of his climax and simply crashed hard against her, weeping tears of happiness and relief. Her own tears pooled as she had held him until they slept again.

They had slept longer this time but had still woken on the cusp of dawn to partake of each other once more. It was Rick who had woken to discover his partner silent regarding him with such deep adoration it was unsettling. He had merely resorted to muttering something about 'creepy staring' but that got no response from her except for an explosive kiss. Now increasingly comfortable with their naked forms they had explored a few boundaries and left each other with heaving chests and the inspiration for a question Kate posed later. Thoroughly sated, Kate found herself conceding that his reputation was more than deserved. Rick's unending grin was more than sufficient confirmation about his experience.

And round four? Round four had been interrupted before it had got started – not that should have expected otherwise given their history - by the unexpected arrival of Martha and under-the weather Alexis, and so soon by the dramatic events culminating in her showdown with Bracken. When they finally started round four it was different venue. It was at the sanctuary of her apartment in their bed. And this time the words 'I love you' flowed freely, before, during and after. And had done ever since.

Her eyes closed during her internal replay Kate Beckett was about to debate herself about the wisdom of waking him when that voice intruded.

"Hi Kate." She starts from the doorway, and moves towards him even as he continues, "Sorry I must have dropped off. I came in here missing Alexis…..and well, here I am." He's all consideration and apologies. She doesn't want any. Apologies. Too many of those in their past. And he needs his partner.

"It's fine Rick. I'm glad you're able to sleep peacefully," she leans into kiss him, "Hi, sleep well?"

"Yeah I did," he smiles even as he sits up and tries to follow her lips with his, "I do feel like I am moving towards the home straight. That we are too."
"That's great Babe."

"Hmm, still not entirely sure how you get to use endearments on me, but if I try I get threatened."

"It's a mystery."

"Sure is."

"But do you know what isn't a mystery?"

"I have no idea.....Babe." There she goes again. Outright tease.

"That I love you Kate." Two can play that game. His weapon is utmost sincerity and the words 'I love you Kate', gets her every time.

From the awestruck expression on her face, it's a sure fire winner.

"And I love you Rick. I'm still sorry it took so long to tell you."

"No apologies remember? Could you imagine how pathetically laughable it would have been to bottle those words up inside us any longer. They were unsaid for so long, then blurted in the most awful of circumstances. Then again we failed and left them unsaid for so long. We so nearly screwed it up."

"But we didn't."

"And we love each other. In all ways, for always."

"True, I love you every way Richard Castle."

"I know, and the time you first told me, well that's one of my favourite memories."

"Of course it is. The words or naked part?"

"Both. All of it."

"Good answer."

"Deserves a reward don't you think?"

"Hmmmnnn, I could be persuaded. What did you have mind Lover Boy?" He can't even be bothered to fake outrage at her blatant use of of an endearment in a clear case of double standards.

"Well I've had a nap, and I fell refreshed despite the interval training this morning. How about a light workout followed by a make out?"

"Dreadful use of language for a writer but a great idea."

"Can I record that for posterity? You know to share with someone that you said I had a great idea."

"No."

"Meanie."

"Say that again and ...." the threat is left unsaid.

"Yes Dear."
"Rick!"

"What Dear?"

"Let's go get changed before I change my mind about the work out."

"Okay Sweetcheeks."

"Rick!" The growl is less than playful. Exasperating man!

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note

Real life is a challenge in some areas for me. Blissful in others. Nothing in between which is a shame as that's generally the place when and where I write.

If you're still with me here, thank you. I appreciate your support and feedback.

This is shorter than intended but the end point seemed natural and it means that that the next chapter is actually almost complete.

One final comment.
The 'I love you's.' I never subscribed to either of them not saying the words until 'Still'. Just so contrived, artificial and false, especially for such a great love between them. My version has them saying the words to each other that night of 'Always', and with regularity thereafter. Maybe not outside their private lives at first, but eventually they do, because there is not greater confirmation that sharing with the world that you love someone.
Sunday evening, Washington DC

James Court hung up on the caller. The call came from a secure burner of course. Encrypted and frequently replaced. No risk was too small. That is why he had his Asian tigers. Professional, discreet and usually effective. But not this time.

Shaking his head he took a deep, calming breath. Damn that had been close. The lead federal agent had been home much to the surprise of his team. And him. His informant had indicated she would be back in New York along with her new partner, a recently transferred FBI agent. The informant didn't usually make mistakes, certainly not of this magnitude. Fortunately the Koreans were experienced, very experienced. Other than disabling her, they did no damage, nor left any evidence. Something to be thankful for. Still the law of averages had almost caught up with them, and on such a simple mission too.

The plan to plant surveillance devices in the agent's home was abandoned. Another potential intelligence source lost. Mind you it may have some value as a distraction. He knows that having nothing to go on would frustrate the AG's team, and the FBI, would no doubt have been called in as well. Also they would waste time in a fruitless investigation. But it was too close a call. He needed luck to go his way.

The odds were stacking against him. Bad enough that Bracken would seek to have him silenced if, sorry make that when, the whole house of cards came tumbling down, if not before. Then there was the authorities, the multiple law enforcement agencies. Normally their balkanisation made an effective ally against being caught but 9/11 had changed that, and now the case was sequestered with the Attorney General’s office, one of the few places he clearly didn't have reliable contacts and informants. Finally there were the criminal partners, the Silva crime family back in the New York. The very the root cause of all this. Along with William Bracken of course. Both of those parties had never shied from unequivocally stating their self-interest and putting it first.

What he would give to go back to that moment and make a different decision. It had been a long time ago. He had just left government service – Army, and then CIA - with grand plans for a comfortable if not maybe not rich life in private enterprise, but the market downturn had surprised him. At the time he lacked the contacts, and nuanced interpersonal skills to get a job inside the Beltway here in Washington. However, his less diplomatic skills were still sharp, and after a quick call to a former colleague found himself in New York doing some borderline protective and intelligence work for, well to be blunt, a lesser Italian mob family. You had to give the Silva family credit. They were astute. Keeping to white collar and less visible forms of income as opposed to drugs and racketeering. Low profile, cautious, discreet and measured, he found himself
liking the head of the family and a little less so the more firebrand daughter.

The work had been so innocuous. Help clean up some tenancies in what could be a desirable and profitable apartment building. He was to provide the calm measured approach with a hint of intimidation. It went without a hitch until he opened the door on a well-dressed man giving a working 'girl' what looked like a hot shot.

It was then that he had made the fated decision that tied them together to this day. The man was surprisingly far to composed almost serene, and for some reason he gave him the time of day where he should have simply reported him to the police, or turned him over to Silva's enforcers.

Give him credit, William Bracken didn't panic or back down. He certainly could marshal a logical and persuasive argument. So much so that James Court made a decision, one which he could never quite fathomed, and he had let the man go.

Of course, he wasn't alone in working the building, and word got back to the Silvas. Unlike him, the out-of-towner, the Silva family knew exactly who they were dealing with, and they immediately sought advantage. Once again Bracken didn't back down. And so an accommodation was reached, first with Bracken and then with him. As the root cause of his entanglement Bracken hadn't even paused before dragging him into the mire, and it was an arrangement Court believed felt was like he doing a deal with the devil. Damned either way. A belief that had been proved right by the passage of time and the stubborn egotism of William H Bracken.

It was most likely going to get him killed or locked up, and he wasn't sure right now which was worse. Not that he was given a choice in the matter.

And his role over the years? Well as the initially unwitting conduit for this arrangement, he became the go between so that Bracken could keep the Silvas at arm's length, both as the DA and then as politician. Sure he had adapted and managed to rise above the level of mere courier but at the end of the day that is what it often felt like. Now he was pretty certain they have certainly fed it and at times encouraged it. They were too late in recognizing that they could never control it.

He was having a frustrating week. Attempts to get intelligence were not working and he was partially blind, particularly on key areas. He still didn't know how much the Feds had on him, and on Bracken for that matter. Although his employer was not his primary concern at this time. He was fairly certain they had more than enough to eventually move. But you didn't just arrest a sitting US senator. There was ground work, and briefings, and then the press to arrange. Bracken would get his just deserts, he didn't want to get his alongside the man.

He turned his thoughts to Matthew. The Senator's aide was nearing his best by date. A shame really as he was smart and loyal within limits. But the young man was also finally breaking under the strain of his disabled brother's imminent death. At that point the Senator's increasingly tentative hold on Matthew was dust, and well that wasn't good for him as the Senator's long term fixer. Matthew knew things and could place him at certain key events. More than anything else his real problem was that he could not act until Bracken was firmly in the government's sights and hopefully just entering custody. The Senator kept things from him, and he was fairly sure he needed the aide to get that information. To be certain. Unlike all those missions for the government, there was no backup here. He was on his own, and his plan and execution needed to be flawless. Or near as.

Timing was going to be everything in this one. Whatever happened he would give it his all.
Columbia Dorms

"Good night Dad."

Alexis ended the call with her father. She wasn't guilty about trying to get him off the line. They had seen each just last night plus she had two assignments due this week and a major test worth a third of one course the week after. She and Grams hadn't arrived back in until close to one in the morning and she had sacked out without even removing her makeup. Panda eyes had greeted her in the morning and her pillow case would need several washes to recover.

She had spent the rest of the day working whilst most of the others on her floor enjoyed a lazy Sunday. College had been a big step up from school. They were far more independent and had to be more self-motivated and organised. Something she was good at. Most of the time. If your Dad isn't getting shot, your boyfriend turns out not to be – well a lot of things, and you get a bodyguard for a little while. She finally felt she was putting those behind her.

But there were also countless lesser distractions and that didn't even include the social life. Well she had that out bit of her system now. Along with the parties, and the sex. She was discovering that she really liked sex, but the distractions and issues that came along with it, well they were perplexing at times. She'd never tell him – at least not for many years - but her Dad had been right when he warned her about the complexities of adult life. And now she knows what she wants. She wants what her Dad and Beckett have. That boundless love and dedication. Not now of course. She doesn't have the time for it. But she knows she wants it, and sets a promise to herself that she will. Like all her undertakings it is one she will strive to succeed at.

Still it was nice to speak to her Dad – and Kate for a few minutes – for a while. The break from school work was good. She thinks her Dad would never survive – academically - at college now. Too many distractions. The mere challenge of the internet had derailed plenty of writing sessions in favor of 'research' at home. At college he'd go crazy trying to keep up with as much as possible, and study at the same time.

But she would give her Dad credit. After the initial cringe-worthy drop off at the start of year, he had been pretty good about visiting her. Always calling ahead and not coming too frequently. In fact Grams had been to visit her more often.

She wonders if Kate had an influence there. Aside from the obvious ones about 'alone time', or in the Castle household as her Dad complained 'not-so-alone-time'. She knows Grams has hinted, unsubtly of course, about needing to give the new couple space. Alexis had firmly adhered to ringing ahead before any visit. The two of them could not be trusted at any time of day unless Kate was working and even then her Dad was known to try and corrupt the detective. She wasn't entirely satisfied that the self-same detective tried to resist too much, or wasn't capable of her own temptations.

Kate too had popped in to visit Alexis a couple of times, once when a case bought her nearby. So far she always came without Dad as the two of them were still in the 'keeping it private' stage. Fools, the both of them. Love-struck fools. Well at least that silly masquerade was done with. Anyway Kate's visits had been good. Alexis could perhaps understand the nervousness but Kate had tentatively offer small nuggets of advice on college life, along with gossip and idle chat, and Alexis had found she liked that. She didn't need a mom but having an experienced woman offer some sage suggestions was nice. Plus it turns out that Kate Beckett has some really interesting tales of her teen years and college which she was happy to share in confidence so long as it didn't get back to her Dad.
Forcing her concentration back to her psychology text book she still had a couple of hours work to get this draft paper suitably ready for first round review by Professor Glores whose reputation for exactness was only matched by the biting sarcasm of her marking commentary, and the latter was something Alexis was keen to experience second hand from some other unfortunate's paper.

**Washington DC, Sunday late.**

Damn it. James Court wasn't answering his phone. Either of them. It was deliberate no doubt.

No, damn HIM. Now was not the time to go incommunicado James. He wasn't finished with the man. He needed Court now, and in due course he needed Court dealt with. But at the right time. Same for the Silvas. Another lose end to tidy up. But first things first.

He dialed the private line for the Operations Manager at Orantis. A former senior employee of a handful of PMCs, he was entirely mercenary, a trait Bracken had no qualms about, as he had more than enough money to buy and secure the man's loyalty for long enough. After three rings the line was answered.

Pleased that at least one party was available as expected, it merely took a less than three minutes to ensure that two teams from the 'blacklist' were to be dispatched first thing tomorrow to DC for his sole employment. So within twenty-four hours he would have some additional manpower answerable only to himself. What he did with them was his business alone. He more than suspects that if the Operations Manager knew he would not have sent them. Still the man may be curious but he would compartmentalize and keep that from anyone who might influence what was going on.

Mentally setting the previous task aside as resolved for the moment, next was a call to his steadfast ally in New York.

Councilwoman Glaser sounded worn down. He didn't delude himself that he didn't sound the same to her. They had known each other long enough. Not that he would ever ask her opinion. About anything. He didn't have to. She was rusted on to him, if he went down so did she. When he went down, he self-corrected. This sudden onset of black reality really was quite refreshing, almost to the point of amusement. But William H Bracken was not the laughing type. Except for the camera when carefully constructed dry humor was acknowledged as passable by focus groups and the press.

"Gloria, I have it on good authority that the banks will withdraw their funding for the Mayor's plan for University Heights on Monday, or mid-week at the latest."

"So you want the Planning Committee to make their revised recommendation and send it to council for final approval?" There was an edge of excitement there. Grasping at hope. At the prospect of some normality. Desperate people could do desperate things. But Glaser would never turn, so thoroughly his that the mere moment of contemplation was futile in of itself. Gloria Glaser was his long before she became a councilwoman and she owed all of that to him too.

"That sounds like an excellent idea." Neither of them need to discuss what exactly the recommendations would be but the Mayor will not like them one bit. Nor will the mayor's celebrity backers and pals, the ones propping up his attempt to redevelop University Heights for the downtrodden locals. The other plan made show of concern for the locals but was intended to perpetuate their place in the food chain, just better housed but still contained and managed. In their proper place.
He brother had once thought like him, but since acquiring his riches he had turned his mind to philanthropy, that ultimate dichotomy of the wealthy. No doubt influenced by his bitch of a society wife. A waste. If they want it, let them fight for it. Like he had. This nation's greatness was built on the strong and decisive taking what they wanted. So a few fell by-the-wayside, or needed pruning away.

He half-contemplated striking out at David but he'd leave his brother out of it. Just this one time. Maybe later if he has time. He laughs out loud. It sounds macabre even to his own ears. He should care but he won't waste time on the ineffectual and weaknesses. He doesn't have the time, nor the inclination. If only he never had to lie at all. To deceive. To hide his true self.

He wasn't stupid or delusional. He was never going to be President now, or even remain a senator. Only his skills at dissembling and disguise had got him this far.

He wonders what the Attorney General's office is up to. He fully expected them to be at his door by now or even 'leaking' to the press.

Fools, he would take advantage of this lull. This was no phony war, nor some Queensbury Rules boxing match.

He had a war chest. A veritable treasury of funds. Funds which he would no longer need to run a campaign and buy his way to the office, the highest office in the land. He could go another route. He actually begins to wonder just how much death, destruction and terror his money could buy. It was tempting to find out.

Actually staring down the prospect of losing everything was refreshing. He had so little to lose, it made him braver, bolder. And if he did go down it would be with all guns blazing.

His enemies should fear him. He would give them reason to. They would remember the name William H Bracken. He would give them cause to.

The Hamptons

Kate was asleep before Rick. 'Mmmm tired Babe' she had mumbled into his shoulder as they watched TV in bed. Rick had kissed her forehead and wished her pleasant dreams and she had rolled over and sunk into slumber without some much as an acknowledgement.

Rick found that he didn't mind. He was still a little amazed at how secure he was regarding their relationship, and he was pretty sure Kate was too. Almost no second guessing, and definitely – well so far - agonizing over matters small or large. It was a novel circumstance in his experience of significant relationships. They knew where they were going, and that certainty more than anything grounded him. He was able to be his true self, and Kate was too. He had long guessed at some of her hidden traits and foibles and being and now living together had exposed a few. How she's so structured and organised in her profession, but loves nothing more than unplanned and somewhat lazy days once the chores are done. How she sometimes needs her alone time in contrast to his need to surround himself with family, but how equally she'll emerge from her solitude and wrap herself into him, insinuating herself in a manner both comforting and very distractingly alluring all at once.

He had read for a bit on his tablet, please that his shoulder no longer interrupted and he was able to resume his right handed swiping. This was not for distraction. Business. Steve's latest updates and Harry's too. Although he pretty much left the day-to-day running to his team at Richard Castle Enterprises, he wasn't unaware of RCE's operations. And right now, there was a considerable risk
clouding the coming days. He hadn't mentioned much to Beckett, this was about money after all, one of the few topics they still had trouble discussing despite all the improvement in their relationship and communications. He, no 'they' he corrects, could become considerably less wealthy in a matter of days. As one of the original backers for Bob's Washington Heights renewal project – University Height – he had used RCE to step in and provide collateral for the project when it was held up interminably in planning approval and the pool of initial backers had slowly drifted away. Now RCE carried responsibility for a bit more than one hundred and fifty million dollars, maybe as much as two fifty. That was a hell of a lot of money.

But that is a discussion for tomorrow. Right now Kate Beckett is flaked out under the covers beside him, and it was time for him to join her.

Pushing all thoughts of business aside, Rick slides under the covers and settles down next to her.

These are the moments he cherishes. Just the two of them.

He used to dream of being able to kiss her. And then - once he actually had, and she him - to be able to kiss her again, because one time was never going to be enough. And if he admits it much more than simply kissing her, often. Now he gets to do all that, and everything he never considered with her. With her willing cooperation and participation. But he still wants more.

Now that is a discussion he's willing to have with her any time.

He just needs a ring first.

It takes some self-control not to sneak from bed and go online shopping. Plus he needs to do this in person. His last ever ring, and her first and only. Not something you shop for online. His puts that thought to one side. Instead curled up with their mutual heat he falls asleep next to her dreaming of the question and her answer.

The Hamptons

Monday morning dawned with Beckett's alarm dragging them from their slumber at six thirty. Both were still a little punch drunk and discombobulated, so much so that even after showers and a quick breakfast of hot oats and coffee, eight am arrived before they knew it.

Eight o'clock marked the return of Robert Alves. And today he was a man on a mission. Gone was the genial guide to Rick's recovery from surgery. The former soldier made it adamantly clear that the time for mollycoddling was over. It was time for Rick to step up and give his body a test. Within minutes of arrival he had them both in the gym warming up. Despite his unequivocal mindset Robert had given them a choice of warm up method. Rick had plumped for familiar and jumped on one of the two treadmills but Kate ignored the other treadmill and went for the elliptical this morning.

Rick started with his walk which Robert quickly elevated to brisk on the minute mark, and the a further sixty seconds later to jog. No sooner than they moved to a fairly quick - for Rick - pace than Robert appeared right by Ricks side and let rip.

"Rick we've started on the path. But your rehabilitation program starts for real today. From here it begins to accelerate quickly, and I expect to have you at more than sixty per cent in a couple of weeks. The pace of recovery will slow from that point but I would like to think within a couple of months – say early in the New Year - you would be considered fully own recovery is good and by and large your own diet and exercise regime is helping too."
"Thanks. I think."

Kate observes how Rick answers naturally without any shortness of breath or stutter. His physical health is improving, and she lets Robert know.

"We've been working out a bit ourselves too. Rick's improving nicely on the cardio front, and the rest is good considering the limitations of his injuries, Robert."

"I hope you don't mind but I'll judge that for myself Kate. I don't doubt the effort you have put in, but the program we have for Rick needs careful tuning and guidance as well as planned exertion to maximise his recovery and avoid setbacks."

"You don't think I know that!" She didn't mean to sound so bitter, but it's still only a year and half since her own, and some days, especially with the seasonal chill, her scars still tug and the ache throbs away even if less than it was, dragging back memories of the pain both physical and from her self-enforced exile. Even if the man means well and the real subject of his attention is Rick, her choices, and the ramifications still linger. A limitation that will only fade with a lot of time.

As ever Rick goes for peacemaker, "I understand what you intention is Robert, but we're not first timers here. I've done recovery for a blown knee whilst snowboarding, and a few other injures. And Kate well you know her history."

Without breaking pace on the elliptical Kate still huffs and gives the older physio a withering glare. Robert doesn't back down in the face of her sternest detective look but he tries to mollify them well aware that two alpha types like this are a dangerous combination especially as they instinctively back each other up. "I'm not trying to break you or belittle you own efforts. But careful focus on what I set out over the next few sessions will be on considerable benefit to Rick's recovery."

"Well about that Robert. We're heading back to New York on Thursday morning. We have appointments we need to attend." At this point Kate slows her forward motion on the elliptical and is soon gliding backwards with her hands clasped behind her back almost like ice skating. Whilst doing this she has her gaze directly on the physiotherapist who actually appears to wilt a little.

Rick momentarily loses focus, entranced by her elegant and natural movement, until Robert speaks up. "I thought your hospital check-up wasn't until Friday Rick?"

"It isn't but I have another appointment I need to attend on Thursday. Kate too." His tone leaves no room for negotiation. Accepting the futility of any attempt, Robert does not try. He'd seen the same thing in Mogadishu with Rangers and SF operators on that fateful day. Determination, comradeship, bloody-mindedness. Although young and green, it had stayed with him to this day. The curious mix of envy, empathy and sympathy for those so driven. Rick Castle may not be sworn officer but it every other way he is a cop and along with the formidable Kate Beckett, the two of them are partners to the hilt.

He glances over and Beckett is accelerating forward again, her long lean legs moving in cadence with the steady pump of her arms.

"Okay so how about we go back-to-back for three days, today through Wednesday? Does that suit you? And we can develop some stuff Rick can work on until I see you again the following Monday."

"Sure." Beckett's "Yep" with the popping 'p' catches them both by surprise as she springs a dismount from the elliptical and watching her execute a perfect landing almost causes Rick to stumble and fly from the treadmill as his right foot clips the edge of the machine where running
Robert reaches past him to up the pace on the treadmill. "Two more minutes Rick and then we'll see how that shoulder is doing." If he lives that long.

Richard Castle Enterprises, Manhattan, Monday 9.50 am.

The big man is balancing a tray of coffees and pastries, an old school briefcase, and his umbrella. Together these are defeating his attempts to open the door to the reception area.

"Hey good morning Terrence" Harry has only his bike helmet in one hand so he opens and holds the door for his colleague.

"Bite me Harry. It's Monday. It's so clearly not a good morning. It's cold and raining, and we never have meetings on Monday cause the traffic sucks worse than any other day of the week. Except Friday afternoons."

"Well it's good to see you too Terry."

"You're lucky it has been so long I forgot how much I dislike you and bought you coffee and donuts instead. Or maybe because Steve invited me, I'll give them to him."

"You're the Man Terrence!" as Harry puts his helmet behind their reception desk and uses takes the tray leaving nothing to chance as the big accountant has been known to actually act on his ramblings. And these are good donuts.

"Stop sucking up Harry."

Harry leads the way, and opening the door with his free hand he enters the small room when the other member of their management group waits.

"Hi Steve."

"Terrence. Sorry to bring you on a Monday." The big man just glares at Harry before depositing his brief case on the desk and opening it to remove a folder full of papers and a notepad. The lawyer chuckles at Terrence's unsubtle attempts at intimidating the junior member of their team. In that time Terence is set and ready to go.

"So how bad is it?"

"Sources tell us that the banks are going to call the loans within the next few days. The process kicked off this morning with a memo from the head of projects at Charter Towns to his risk management teams. It will take a couple of days but the reviews will be unfavorable. Not enough security, not progress for more than three years, no sign of the funds to actually complete the purchase and redevelopment.

Harry leans forward. "We expected this. But I have to say, Bracken's own brother, purportedly and reportedly estranged, doing the dirty work is a surprise."

"I don't doubt that the Senator has a lot of pull. And anyway it isn't really dirty work. He would be entirely within his rights even duties and responsibilities to point out that the Mayor's project for University Heights is stalled in planning hell, and the funds to fully develop it are not readily
available and the financial guarantee is a few hundred million short of the required equity.

"Still I wouldn't mind the opportunity to say told you so." Terrence adds, this time glaring at both of you.

Harry laughs. "Don't even try that and you know it was Rick's decision and he took full responsibility.

"Well that was when it was fifty million, and not the two-fifty plus we are exposed for now."

"So that the damage? Surely it won't cost us the full two-fifty? Harry almost squeaks the last.

"It's more complicated than that. If they call the loans, the banks will likely settle for a percentage for quick resolution.

"Well we've isolated the personal stuff. That is all safe. Absolutely no risk." Steve assures them.

Terrence as ever is less upbeat. "However for the commercial operations it is not so clear cut. At the very least a large chunk of the commercial real estate portfolio is at risk. That's the assets that are acting as security for the loans."

"Can the Mayor not do anything?"

"Unlikely. His political capital is nearly spent. There is no real backers for his project. Outside of Rick and RCE anyway."

"What about Rick's idea?"

"It has possibilities for the actual redevelopment and the land. But at the end of the day we'd still have to sell a lot of assets to create the turnover to allow the tax deductions for the gift to work. Again that will cost us a substantial chunk of the commercial portfolio to get there."

"So who gets to tell Rick and probably Kate Beckett they're about to get less rich?"

"I think that's your job Harry."

"Thanks Steve."

"No problem. Any chance you can return the new bike? Bonus might be pretty lean this year."

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Martha Rodgers School

As she watched some of her more advanced students strut their stuff, she let her mind wander just a little, even as she mentally recorded little bits of their performance for feedback.

It was still surprising. That the school was going well. She had been a star for such a little time during her career. More of a long lasting fixture, and she had done well financially, schooled by the lean years before and after. All until that last husband, the most spectacular of her many mistakes.

She never regretted Richard. Never a mistake. She wasn't a naïve teenager, almost twenty-four when he was conceived. Not a mistake. She had often told him that. She was never certain he always believed her. But he never contradicted her. Even during his teenage rebellion and the arguments he was always careful never to take that from her. Even with he was hurting from the taunts of 'bastard'. He always defended her, never himself. Still that bought him enough fights and too many beatings until he outgrew most of his contemporaries. Even then he never handed out
beatings. It was not in his nature. Fiercely protective of his family, but also kind hearted and optimistic, willing to believe the best of almost anyone. Sometimes at a cost to himself.

The cessation of music and movement brings her back to the moment.

"Thank you. That was much improved. Celia you're still leaning too much to the left. Travis, Mikala will not explode if you hold her closer Darling. Plus she might like it. You too," there are sniggers from the group. Travis wouldn't know what to do with a woman in his arms or elsewhere, "And Maria that was lovely Dear. Spot on.

"Now I have great news. Marie, George, and Trenton have all been successful in their recent auditions. Marie and George are joining the chorus line for The Lion King. Trenton has been selected for the cast of a new as yet unnamed production.

"Darlings, please take a bow," Martha waves forward her abashed students. "I am so proud of you all. The hard work, the deprivations and sacrifices. It does pay off. And it gets easier once you have your break. But it is never easy. Please remember this." She catches a few scowls and some even more carefully crafted faces. She doesn't mind the cynicism or denial. Lord knows she did enough of that herself. But she will always do her best for her students.

"We will celebrate this week. I will let you all know what is arranged. Now we shall break for our repast and resume in forty-five minutes."

There is a general acclamation from her audience for both the successful students and for herself. Damn her foolish pride but she'll take the plaudits they're giving. After almost a life time of acting, she'll bask – momentarily of course – in the gratitude of her charges and she'll secretly thank them for the joy de vivre they return to her. Richard had once asked her why she kept acting or at least auditioning, and running this school. She had replied that it was in her blood. She wasn't sure that he understood. At the time she first told him, she didn't fully understand herself. But here with these young individuals she gets far more from them than she can ever share. The income from her school is a mere trifle compared to youthful vigour they impart back to her. There is no money that would induce her to give this up.

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**The Hamptons**

Robert has gone for the day and they're back in their bubble. Just the two of them.

It's the mid-afternoon and they're just hanging out together reading in the library sharing the same long couch, track pants and hoodies, throw blankets, and footsie. Of course there are differences – his mock outrage when her foot sneaks higher, her hot pink, close fitting sports top that adorns Kate as opposed to his baggy, well-loved and worn deep blue Batman hoody that buries even him.

She loves this. Wants this almost more than anything in her life, and even though they have talked about children, she wants this – just the two of them – for a little while longer. She's being selfish, but it is as much for Rick as it is for her. He deserves it, and she finds that she strives every day to give him back just as much as she can of the happiness he has bought to her life. He told her that she made him a better man, and want to be more, well the same was more than true for herself. And it was even better with just the two of them. She can be Kate, not Beckett, and he was just Rick, not Castle or Ricky.

Hiding away in the Hamptons is not a permanent option, well maybe it could be with all his, no make that their money. But it is not who they are. He doesn't have to work but he does. And not only the writing and his investments, but put his life at risk for the NYPD, for the City, for her. She
has other options but she loves being a homicide detective. She knows that the reckoning is coming, perhaps even soon. Bracken will be exposed and face justice for her mom's murder but no longer is she willing to pay any price for that. There is balance, a counterweight to that relentless pursuit of the truth that blighted and blinded her for so long. She finds herself contemplating a future beyond solving her mom's murder.

Not long after her face off with the Senator in the kitchen, less than a week into her suspension, she and Rick had discussed what she – and him too she had insisted – would do once Bracken was arrested and facing trial. He had said nothing, waiting her out, as ever. She admitted that she didn't use to even think about it, so focused on that goal she could never see beyond it. But now she could. It was not entirely certain at that time, they were still so new, and the discovery of each other so nearly overwhelming there was little room for the comprehension of anything else but she did want to continue to serve in role that made a difference. He had merely promised to be by her side.

The lightness of being that comes from being so open, honest, still surprises her. It had been so long she had forgotten what it was like to live unencumbered by loss and the fear of losing. Since her Mom, her instinct had been to guard and keep close her inner most thoughts, hold herself back, reserved, reluctant, risk adverse and uncommitted. Unsurprisingly this had doomed her previous adult relationships, especially with Will and Josh. Tom she didn't get that far into it, and with Josh there was never really a chance not if she was honest, which of course she wasn't for far too long. With Rick, now and ever really, there is none of that. Once they started being honest with each other.

And she had made him wait so long. Longer than they needed to. She sees that clearly now. She's told him tantamount to a confession and as seemingly ever he's forgiven her already, probably before she even raised it.

She loves him so.

The man, her man without any shadow of a doubt, is not without his faults. God she saw, or worse, imagined enough of them for a long time. But the good in him, the good that he does, far outweighs those minor, well mostly minor, defects. She sometimes chides herself for those observations, especially those they exchange them out loud but that too is part of them. The snap and repartee between them. The wordplay which at least now can turn from mere verbiage into genuine foreplay and more.

Her lack of interaction for the last few minutes is noticed as almost always. Rick seems to know what she is thinking and with some gentle humour and perhaps a little teasing and provocations he gets her out her introspection. Abandoning their books for the moment they head to the kitchen.

They've quickly reheated some of the pea and ham soup from lunch and dropped it into mugs. Rick flicks the TV on whilst they snack. It comes up with the local ABC affiliate and the channel is left unchanged.

When the afternoon news break comes, Rick turns up the volume and they listen to the local news for America's greatest metropolis. However, the fourth news item strikes them cold without any warning.

In Washington DC rumors continue to circulate that Federal authorities are close to acting against a national political figure in relation to serious criminal matters which could include the commission of murder and the conspiracy to commit murder.

Fueling the rumors is the news that there is an unexpected meeting of the Senate Ethics
Committee scheduled for tomorrow. Attempts to get any statement from the Senate leadership have been rebuffed.

Sources are also hinting that the Senate leadership has already met with the Assistant Attorney General. Now we have no confirmation of this but it could well be a significant development. The Assistant Attorney General has responsibility for the group known simply as the Attorney General's Taskforce. This unit has been given sweeping responsibility for the investigation of a wide range of activities without restriction normally faced by single agencies.

In the last week our sources are reporting – again much of this is as yet unconfirmed – of groups of agents from that task force and other federal agencies including the FBI working on the case in both Washington DC and New York.

When the rumors, and we must reiterate that at this time they are only rumors, first broke more than a week ago there was a rush of media briefings and appearances by the majority of the New York representatives all anxious to refute any suspicion.

Conspicuous in the lack of, well anything, was Senator William H Bracken.

At this point the news cast runs a brief segment of the Senator on the steps of the Capitol being 'ambushed' by the young female reporter.

We will continue to keep you up to date with this unfolding news story.'

"Kate?"

She had wanted to be the one that takes Bracken down. For years she dreamt, fantasied really, about taking down the nameless monsters behind her mother's murder. A rabbit hole was too pat a term for the hell she went through several times, would be going through without Castle. He had saved her, and was saving her now.

Thanks to Castle they now his name. And now she has moved on further. She still would like to be there but she finds that she doesn't have to be the one to actually arrest him. She'll get her say and her opportunity to get the justice her mother and her colleagues deserve. That Roy deserves.

There lack of focus on his is part choice and part necessity. Given the threat the man – she refuses to call him 'Senator' – poses to them he is barely mentioned in their day-to-day lives. In part it is a survival mechanism to avoid succumbing to paranoia. But that is not entirely true. They'll never forget about the threat that he poses but they have been focused on themselves and Rick's recovery. Also the deal she literally struck with the Senator at gun point has held so far. They were never naive enough to believe it would hold indefinitely but with Taylor Matthew's also watching their backs they were relatively unperturbed by the prospect of any imminent threat.

"Rick…," her voice wavers just a little. She puts her full gaze on him, "Rick we don't know it is in relation to him.

"Beckett." It is all he needs to say. They both fill in the rest of the blanks. Of course it is HIM.

"What do we do Castle?"

"We keep everyone safe. I'll call Clare."

"Actually we'll do it together. Okay Rick?" She can also feel the relief running off him. He trusts her with everything in his life including Alexis and Martha, but somehow even that trust can be shaken by the demon that torments her.
She already has her hand on her Taylor Matthew's phone even as he finally speaks to agree.

Twelfth Precinct, around 3.15 pm.

Detectives Second Class Esposito and Ryan were waiting at their desks. Again. For their partners (pro-temp) Detectives Second Class John Sullivan and Henry Blake from the Twenty Eight. The two were already notorious for their slight extension of the duration of 'lunch hour'. There had been some slight ribbing but no bites so the teasing had eased off as aside from this one foible the two appeared entirely capable and competent detectives. They did the hours the job needed and if they occasionally took a little longer for lunch it was never with an active case. Today was just follow up paperwork and some more depositions for the District Attorney's team for an old case that got solved just before it went totally inactive and moved to cold status. Not being required, Sullivan and Blake were stretching their extended lunch out just a little bit longer.

That Sullivan had seniority had not rankled too much, and they had fallen into a simple arrangement of retaining their primary partnerships for most tasks and teaming up and occasionally splitting into different pairs when the situation required. The outsiders had been initially puzzled when told about the Captain's rule regarding checking in and no solo operations until the tail of the Tiger was recounted. Despite the possibly chaffing restrictions of having to report in, the humor in the precarious situation that Castle and Beckett got themselves in had been appreciated.

"Espo want coffee?" Ryan offers just as both their phones pinged with messages.

A quick exchange of screens confirms each has the same text.

'Break in case maybe imminent. D Unpredictable. Exercise caution. CD. Ps Esposito don't abuse this number.'

"CD?"

"Clare Dunne I reckon. Taylor Matthews."

"Course it is. Looks like a lot of people are concerned. Reckon Beckett and Castle are concerned too. Should we be?"

"Don't know. Anyway what's up with last comment Espo?"

"Ryan," Espo's voice is tight, lower and quieter than usual, even as his partner fixes him with a concerned gaze, "well I may have made some inquires, off the record, about career options or opportunities."

His face falls, "Javi. I know getting passed over sucks, but you'll make First grade." The hurt in Ryan's tone made it clear what he felt about the news of his partner considering another career especially without consulting him.

"Ryan…"

"What's up boys?" With that interruption the return of the late-lunch team and terminated the conversation for the moment. They're drawn back into their latest case. Ryan won't forget though, Esposito knows he's not getting out of a very awkward conversation. If not tonight then soon. He's going to have to explain and share with his partner about without something he should never have kept secret.
The Hamptons

They're both still in the Kitchen and attempting to distract themselves from the implications of the
newscast. Clare has promised a rapid review of the threat situation and an increase in security on
Martha and Alexis if so required.

Kate has got her study books in front of her, but her eyes keep drifting towards Rick who is doing
the NY Times crossword and using a pen for the first time in weeks. She tries not laugh when his
attempt to make a correction accidentally tears the paper.

"No peeking Beckett. Do your homework."

She sticks her tongue out at his chiding. Irony on so many levels from the master procrastinator.

Eventually they both give up on their fruitless efforts. She makes them some green tea with a little
honey – she can't deal with his screwed up face when dealing with the lack of sweetness in his hot
beverage.

Sitting beside him she tries not laugh at the torn paper and the scribbles. Even her gentle smirk is
met with scowls. He gets a healthy dose of melodrama from his mother. She broaches a subject that
has been on her mind for some time.

"I sometimes wonder what it would have been like if we had met and been able to have a
relationship without the police work, the risks, the hurt, and the ongoing threat."

"I know, or at least I'd like to think that we could be as extraordinary together regardless. But Kate
I don't regret it the way we met and even how long we waited. It wasn't exactly dull although some
of the heartache and actual pain could have been skipped."

"I'm sorry for that."

"Don't be. Hurting that much proved to both of us just how deep our partnership was and the
strength of our bond."

"I have no doubts. You've convinced me of that for a long time. But the what if's sometimes get to
you. I was thinking about how we could have meet if I didn't go to your book launch party to
question you. Regardless of how we met, you would still need a way to get past my defenses. It
wouldn't have been easy."

"You would never be easy Kate. I don't want easy. And I never give up. Never on you, with you."

"I know that now. I just didn't early on. But I have for some time. I just needed to be sure. I'm sorry
that took so long for me to be certain."

"Nothing to forgive Kate" and he kisses her with more care and devotion than she has ever
received.

"So if not a cop, or even a lawyer, what would Katherine Beckett want to be doing?"

"Oh I don't know Rick, so many choices but more importantly however would our paths cross?"

"Well…" the eyebrows come into play, and she kisses him silent before his ideas on alternate
careers and sure-fire innuendo could make trouble.

Of course this only delays the inevitable.
"We might have met at sex addict's counselling, or maybe some you were under cover at a club."

"Rick!"

Soon the physicality of Robert's harder training session that morning finally caught up with Rick and shortly after their latest little heart-to-heart and what-if session Kate found his attention flagging and his head nodding a little.

Grabbing bottles of water she hauled him up stairs for a nap. A couple of painkillers complete the process and soon he's snoring gently under the covers. There was a time when this would have annoyed her but now she found it endearing.

She was tempted to join him but didn't really feel that tired, and whilst she watched him for a while, she eventually gives that up and heads out onto the bedroom deck.

There is a measure of protection from the chill wind here, and wrapped up in a blanket, Kate nurses her bottle of water, and lets the elements distract her. Despite this, somehow her thoughts drift back to their beginning, or at least what she considers their true beginning, and the events after their first night together, and a life without the wall, and the lies.

Beesley Wax and Drummond, early evening.

Jeff Beesley had limped into the office that morning. His glare failing to still the looks and whispers, certainly once his back and his attention was turned. His histrionics and demands did little to calm nerves and any sense of a positive future for the firm was much diminished just like his authority.

By late afternoon even Jeff could no longer ignore the rumblings of discontent. He called a management meeting for late that day and sent the PAs scurrying to coral and inform their bosses.

Both Val and Jim had been out all day with morning and then lunch meetings with clients. They had arrived back in the office at almost the same time meeting up in the building lobby before riding the elevator up together. Val's secretary was waiting at reception for her, and before they could part ways in the lobby, Val kissed Jim quite capably in front of a good half dozen of the staff. Jim stumbled his way back to his own office, still in shock after Val opening kissed him in reception in front of quite a few staff. By the time he reached his own office, there was a knowing look from his secretary to leave him blushing. The office gossip network was probably faster than their computer network.

Jim lost track of the rest of the day and around seven thirty was considering heading home when instinct made him reconsider and wait for Val to finish the management meeting. Shutting down his computer he decided to wait outside the main conference room.

It was a good call because some ten minutes later Val was the first out of the door. Jim stood and moved to meet her. Before he reached her he could clearly see that she had been crying. Was crying.

His Val was crying.

Instantly draw to comfort her, a small part of him fires up, righteous anger building at the likely cause of her distress.
She was as tough as nails in many aspects, just like his Katie, but it just meant that when they did hurt openly it was all the harder.

With his arms around his girlfriend, he brushed his lips over hers and kissed her tears, before lifting his face to sternly gaze at the others leaving the partner and management meeting. The handful that could meet his eyes were at least contrite.

Fearful of his own reaction should he encounter the pathetic excuse for a man he had no doubt was responsible for this, he whispered, "Come on Val, let's get you home and then you can tell me about what made my girl cry."

"Your Girl, Mister Beckett? Who give you permission to be so possessive?" That was the response he hoped for. A little sass and fire.

"I think you did. Clearly demonstrated so in the very reception of this very firm." Despite being in the office he pulls her closed and kisses her full on the lips. What's good for the gander is good for the goose in a manner of speaking.

"Hmmm." She relaxes into his arms, and stills, simply taking as much comfort as she can before muttering back, "I said nothing about being yours, I was implying and demonstrating you are mine."

"Oh." She wins. Again.

"I just need to go back to my office and clear up, and then we can go." Slipping out his embrace she slides her right hand down his left arm and takes his hand. So attached she sets off for her office, pulling him along with her. He really doesn't mind her winning.

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**Tuesday, late morning.**

Due to their plans for the end of the week, Robert was coming every day Monday to Wednesday as agreed yesterday. Given the impact of the previous day's session Robert had decided to treat Tuesday as a recovery day. Not that Rick or Kate thought so. Rick was certainly vocal enough about hitting his limits. Kate was proud of the way he hung in there though.

Not long after Robert had left, and her man was flaked out before lunch time. This time he actually made it as far as their bedroom without Kate dragging him there.

Kate once again watched him for a while. Perhaps she should go call Lanie. It would be her lunch break soon. It would be good to catch up with her and perhaps share some gossip. Maybe she good gently find out what was going on with Lanie and Espo. Now that would require some careful investigative work. She settled in beside Rick, careful not to disturb him, and leant in to kiss his forehead. Of course disturbing him was actually quite hard as the man could sleep through almost anything.

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**Flash Back – Lanie!**

Kate had ignored Lanie during her suspension. Well that was unfair, ignored was the wrong term. Avoided was more accurate. More so that she was focused and concentrating as much as possible on Rick and them. It was what he deserved, her too, even with her guilt for making him wait and suffer so long. But he wasn't allowing her to linger on those thoughts as they remained preoccupied in more than making up for the past. It wasn't just between the sheets or without them. The sex was incredible, amplified by their connection. But it was also the revelation about the true extent of
being in a committed relationship with Rick. It knew no limits, crashed right over her boundaries and colored everything. The old her would have been scared by the intensity of the emotions and yet being fully with him now was so comforting and not at all confronting. It was so new but it wasn't. Her fears about what would be like were nothing in comparison to the natural joy of being together.

With Martha and Alexis off in Europe celebrating his daughter's graduation they had made full use of both his and her places. Or rather their places. That had been established between rounds two and three after she had said the words and Rick held her eyes and confessed that this was 'it' for him and had cried when she confirmed the same for herself. Unwilling to risk bursting their private bubble through discovery, they traveled singly in public between each other's places, Rick fulfilled a few business commitments and a book signing solo, but they always spent the night together, and as much of their days as possible. She actually felt gratitude for the Captain's part in forcing her to finally choose, and make the right choice. Even for the suspension.

Somehow she had managed to convince Lanie that she was okay, well with everything. Her being suspended, especially following so quickly on from her resignation and the equally sudden rescinding of the resignation. See told her friend that she simply needed space and whilst it was an echo of the year before but this time she had taken the time and care to explain herself more fully, only leaving out a major detail or two. Which had been hard when Lanie challenged her about Castle but somehow she deflected just enough.

She had refused to meet with Lanie – so certain that the ME would take one look and bust her. She told her she was working some things out for herself. It was actually correct but that had earned a reproach from her friend along the lines of 'have you learnt nothing from last year?' Kate tried to assure her best friend she had. If only she knew. Still she wouldn't meet up, so the ME remained more disappointed than suspicious. But even if she could fix the sex hair, the glow and happiness in her tired eyes (the man – and her – had been relentless and their proximity in a bed or anywhere inevitably resulted in one thing) were a total giveaway. So she chickened out and hid away with her boyfriend/lover/writer.

As it was she barely kept it secret over the phone. But she managed it somehow. The trick was never taking a call with Rick anywhere near. He had delighted in feeling her up one time with Lanie on the other end of the phone conversation. He had been smugly silent whilst teasing her relentlessly and effectively that she had almost hung up on Lanie without so much as goodbye. Her retaliation was not really punishment and had done nothing to wipe the smug look off his face, although based on his continued performance he was entitled at least a good chunk of his egotism.

Her suspension ended just before Alexis and Martha were due home from Europe, and Kate set out to face the world whilst still trying to hide the new depths of her partnership with Richard Castle. By lunch time Kate had conceded that may well not last their first day back. First he forgot her coffee which Espo and Ryan both picked up on but fortunately those two were still re-finding their own partnership, and remained distracted by the residual bitterness of events leading to the suspensions. Secondly, well Rick was a terrible over-actor. But somehow that worked, and the boys never busted him, or maybe misread it. Lanie had never fallen for it before or then, or since. Lanie had been right on her first thing at the crime scene, noticing something different but unable to pin it down. The relief of course was very short lived.

Somehow she survived the morning encounter but visiting the morgue that afternoon with Castle had been a major error. That was Lanie's home turf. And the ME had be graced with time to think through her observations and instincts. Plus aside from Castle, and her Dad, no one knew her better.
Kate remembers how on leaving the morgue she had confronted Castle, mimicking his 'Who's the Guy?' after Lanie had challenged her on her glow with the 'You're having sex!' comment. Lanie's shriek confirmed that she knew and they were busted. She had rounded on him for that. "Really what was going through your mind when you said that?" "Um....nothing". She huffs, eyebrow reaching for her hairline. "Umm, us having sex." "Yeah well I'm pretty sure Lanie picked up on that too."

Minutes early in the morgue the exultant ME had made demands of her own. "Lunch. You plus me. In Private. Ditch the man-candy." He doesn't even look offended. In fact he might be preening a little.

"Bad idea. My place after work."

"Deal. You better not welsh!"

"No chance. When have I ever welshed?"

"Okay."

She had leaned into Rick pushing her hands onto his extensive chest, "I'll need a rain-check Babe, but perhaps later?" His grin was all the answer she needed as he pecked her on the lips then turned and exited giving her a moment with her best friend.

"Girl, midnight booty calls?!

"So not booty calls Lanie." She runs a hand through her locks, working out some of the exasperation and nerves from discovery. "But now's not the time, and here is definitely not the place. Tonight at my place. And I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner. We're just trying to keep it under wraps."

"Well, you'll need to get him to work on his 'I just got laid' face. Yours too. The glow is positively sickening."

"Yeah, well a bit at time. You should have seen the sex hair. Only just got that under control."

"Yours or his?"

"Tonight Lanie!"

She had barely managed to police up some discarded clothing (his and hers), and sort the furniture out before her best friend had bustled through the door without so much as a hello. They hadn't even sat down before the rapid fire questions commenced.

"So.....Richard Castle? Damn it's about time Gurl! So how is it?"

"Hi Lanie." She gets an eye roll in response.

"Don't give me that. You and Richard Castle. After years of me telling you to, you finally see the light. How is it?"

"Well one day I'm going to marry him." Well fuck! Talk about caving in under next to no pressure, and giving the game away.

Lanie is too shocked to respond. So Kate takes the opportunity to clarify that clearly shocking – for both of them - opening statement whilst retreating towards the kitchen and alcohol.
"I love him, Lanie. I love Rick. And I just know that this is it. So yes one day I am going to marry Richard 'Freakin' Castle.

"You've told him?" Lanie finally gets some words out. "Really?"

"Yes! That I love him. Repeatedly."

"Oh my God! You never?!" Then the ME changes tack back to matrimony. "And him?"

"Oh yes repeatedly. And more."

"More?! Has he asked?"

"Yes I did tell I love him, and he has too. But that's a no for him proposing. We're not quite on the marrying or engaged bit. Just yet. However, we have talked about forever and used our word, 'Always', but not specifically talked marriage per se. But I know we're on the same page."

"Wow. Are you sure you're Kate Beckett? The one with commitment issues?"

Kate doesn't even bite. "Yeah, I know. But this is so different. We know each other so well. All that time fighting it, but this isn't just physical. It is everything I never thought I could have Lanie. I catch myself being sappy. Before I'd chide myself, make some snarky remark, step back and even sleep apart."

"Oh Girl. It's not sappy. It's happy. You're happy. Really happy if I am the judge." The arched eyebrow conveys just the sort of happiness her best friend is thinking of. Kate doesn't even blink in response but she knows what is coming.

They have finally made their way into the open kitchen area where Kate has wine waiting. Along with snacks.

Lanie takes her glass, and tips it in silent salute to her best friend. "Oh this is good." She appreciates as she raises the glass again.

"So how is it?"

Kate just blushes. She takes a sip of her own wine, Oh this is one of his bottles, the same wine as she shared with Rick just last night. The taste of it triggers memories, very fresh memories. She almost slams the glass down on the bench, and brings her left hand to her lips, blushing as she does.

"Sorry Lanie." She stammers out. "I can't. It's too new. It's too much for me to share. I can barely process it myself."

Lanie isn't her best friend for nothing. She lets it pass. For now. From the sounds of it there will be plenty of opportunity for the details later. A lifetimes worth if she is any judge of them.

Still she has a reputation.

"So you've basically had the last couple of weeks off work having sex with your boyfriend? Lotsa sex. Good sex?" The last isn't really a question.

Kate initially nods but then shakes her head. She'll ignore the last for as long as she can.

Lanie's own question in return is a quizzical expression.
"Yes but no. I've had the last few weeks off work, suspended without pay, being with and making love with my partner. My life partner. Hell, my everything partner."

"So what can you tell me?" Lanie pushes for something. "I can see the changes in you girl. If you are going to try and keep this secret you're so going to have to work on your game face."

She blushes again and remains resolutely silent.

"So has he changed?" Lanie tries a different approach.

"Oh no he's still the 9 year old on a sugar trip."

"But not all the time?"

"No he has his moments." Kate doesn't elaborate.

"Still drives you crazy?"

"A different kind of crazy Lanie. I like it. I love it. I love him."

"Well that hasn't changed then." At Kate's incredulous look. "What? Was it meant to be some secret that he drove you crazy in the best possible way? That you both did the same for each other?"

"Yes. No." Kate concedes defeat and takes a big swig of wine. "Maybe."

"Well I can drink to that." Lanie smirks. "To Kate and Rick. Crazy in Love."

Kate chinks her glass with Lanie's. This is going to be a long night. Rick will need a proper rain check. She's going to regret this in the morning for all manner of reasons.

"Seriously I'm so happy for your girlfriend. You deserve everything and that Man does too. Waiting all that time for you."

"Yes he has been a saint, I often think I don't deserve him. But you have to do me, us, a favour. Keep this quiet. Even from Espo and Ryan. If Gates....."

"Kate, of course I will, but all this you're telling me, it can't, won't stay secret for ever."

"I know, we just need some more time."

Sighing a little Kate recognized that her friend had been right. Looking down at her sleeping partner she brushed some hair off his forehead and kissed him there, and then rising she went in search of some coffee and warm spot to call Lanie from. Maybe she could get an update on where Lanie and Espo were in their dance.

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**Washington DC, Senate Offices**

Twenty minutes.

It was more than twenty minutes since he had arrived at the Senator's office.

Twenty fucking minutes kept waiting. Like some minion.

Matthew was pretty much unapologetic. That would not do. The aide should be afraid of him.
Instead he was channeling his boss when he had no right to be so cocky.

Yet here he was still waiting outside the inner office.

James Court knew was being taught a lesson by the Senator. Normally this was the sort of lesson he shrugged off. Petty. But not like the Senator at all. He wasn't going to let it stand.

Just then the door opened.

"James can come in now Matthew."

"Hello William. Can I ask what you are doing?"

"With reference to what exactly?"

"After all these years don't you think that is a little mean-spirited and unfair?"

"Not especially. You didn't answer my calls on Sunday. I don't need an explanation but I need certainty. That was not reassuring at all."

He won't make excuses. "I had some other matters I was attending to."

"Fair enough but don't expect me to wait."

"Why are you doing this Bill?"

"Why? I feel free. Uninhibited by any need to pretend, so I have been engaging those who would oppose me. They should consider themselves lucky it is only mild obstruction and not anything more significant or permanent.

Court knew that Bracken had successfully blocked two lines of investigation into his malfeasance. But they were mere footnotes in the inevitable onslaught that would bury him.

"William, I would strong advise against any further presumptive action."

"Well I'm not sure I like that advice. Plus I am not deluded. I know they will come for me. I am merely setting out my stall. They will not be able to complain I did not leave them ample warning signs of the consequences of challenging me."

"So what is it you need me to do?"

"We need information James. Without it we cannot make decisions."

"And as I have explained the AG's Task Force is a tight group and they have this locked down. My source gets only fragments."

"Well I have a possible in."

"Possible?"


"I'll let you know how it goes William. Now is there anything else?" Court knows this entire farce has been an exercise in power projection by the Senator. But he'll not respond. These days there are
much bigger things at stake. He does however have one last attempt to make, if only because the man opposite when not harboring plans to have him neutralized had been the closest thing to a friend and peer for almost twenty years. "Anything more I need to know Senator?"

"No that will be all James. Thank you for coming in. I look forward to your report soon."

With that Court was dismissed. And with it another nail in their mutual coffins.

If Bracken thought he didn't know about the Orantis teams freshly arrived in DC, well the man was a fool. Court had Orantis thoroughly penetrated, well mostly, enough to be effective. Sure Bracken had bought the Operations manager but that was an expensive white elephant. Court had simply gone direct to the key foot soldiers offering them money and a more than slim chance of avoiding whatever federal calamity was about to befall them. However, one team at least had gone dark before he could reach out to them. Something for him to attend to later. He most certainly did not want rogue elements cutting loose here in the nation's capital or elsewhere.

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**The Hamptons**

With their trip back to Manhattan imminent Kate was keen to make sure the plans for Thanksgiving were locked in. Alexis was reporting back regularly by text and email. Everyone had confirmed attendance and their food contributions were being coordinated by Alexis.

He had missed Halloween. He hadn't said anything but she knows it must disappoint him.

She used to wonder about the exuberance of his embrace of festive occasions both actual and less formal. She knows now of the importance of holidays and celebrations to the boy who didn't have much of a family or stable life. She's sure Martha denied him nothing in her power but still even in the man she lives with there was evidence of that uncertainty. She doesn't want him to have those doubts. Most certainly about her, them, but also about anything. He's nothing at all like the cocky, egotistical (play)boy she was so disappointed with on that first interview (not their first meeting). There are depths and layers that continue to intrigue, surprise and sometimes simply astound her.

She knew he was wealthy, it may have even influenced her misguided and thankfully futile decision to try and keep him at arm's length, but he's more than wealthy, he's rich. As in never have to work another day of his life rich. But he does. As a writer, but also as her partner. Unpaid, at risk, too many near death experiences. More evidence of the real man, the good man.

And now's she rich, equally so, it would seem. Yet she can't see herself giving up her job. At least not now, or rather not yet.

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**Late Tuesday afternoon**

Rick's phone was ringing, interrupting more shared time in the kitchen.

Rick put his iPad down, and reached for his phone.

Caller ID told it was Bob. Mayor Bob. At Kate's arched eyebrow he lifted the handset to show the caller ID, and swiped the speaker on.

"Hey Bob. Not so good news eh?"

"For a writer that's a little understated isn't it?"
"Maybe. Perhaps I'm mellowing. You know becoming more serious." It might have even seemed part way possible if there hadn't been a snort of disagreement from immediately by the handset.

"Ah you have company. I take it that is your much better half Rick. Good afternoon Detective Beckett. I take it we're on speaker phone."

"Good morning your Worship. But perhaps if you'll call me Kate, I'll address you as Bob in private. How does that sound?"

"You got yourself a deal Kate."

"So what has got you all riled up today Bob?"

"That Glaser woman is pushing all my buttons Rick."

"That's not exactly new. But how is Senator Bracken's attack dog getting your goat?"

"She's, or more likely her boss, has managed to get the banks to withdraw their support for the University Heights project."

Before Rick can comment on that Bob continues, "And she's holding a press conference with the other syndicate of cronies later today to announce that their plan will go the planning subcommittee for fast track approval. Essentially they're saying that they are ready to go to work and comparing that unfavourably with the four years of delay."

"Oh shit that's not fair! So essentially after holding us up in approval for years, they'll make us look like we can't fund or manage the project."

"Doesn't matter what the truth is, the perception will hurt us. Pretty much everyone wants the work started. It should have been finished by now. So even if it isn't as orientated for the low income social housing, something is better than nothing."

"Not the only thing that's going to hurt Bob."

"Rick, I know you are exposed. I was led to believe that you did have it somewhat firewalled off."

"I won't end up on the street, but my plan for buying a small Caribbean nation as a retirement home will be out of the question."

"How much Rick?"

"One-fifty, maybe two hundred all up. Perhaps two fifty if it is really bad but I think my team can limit the worst of it."

"Million?!" Beckett actually squeaks. Man they need to have that chat about finances.

"But my team have some ideas and they will be back to me shortly. I think we may have a way out that doesn't financially cripple me and gives you something to work with."

"God, I hope so Rick."

"Good Afternoon Federal Bureau of Investigation – New York Field Office."

"Good Afternoon, could I please speak to Special Agent Sorenson."
"One moment, please hold." A twenty second pause gives way to a further request for patience, "Sorry can you please hold for longer."

"I can wait thank you."

After nearly two minutes of gentle torture by the canned muzak, the operator is back.

"I am afraid Special Agent Sorenson is not available."

"Would it be possible to leave a message for him?"

"I am afraid not. Special Agent Sorenson is no longer with the Bureau."

"Oh, I am sorry to hear that. May I ask what has happened to the agent?"

"I am afraid I can't disclose that Sir."

"Would you at least be able to confirm that Special Agent Sorenson is well?"

"Agent Sorenson is well as far I am aware. I am afraid I cannot disclose any more information."

"Thank you. Good afternoon."

Washington DC.

James Court hung up.

He fingered the FBI business card Bracken had passed him at their last meeting.

He had to credit Bracken's ability to identify and target people that might be of use. Agent Sorenson had saved the Senator's life in the failed bombing in New York. Even whilst publicly thanking him, Bracken had sought to maximise the potential value from this man.

He had called simply trying to get an inside line. Instead, former Special Agent Sorenson of the FBI is not available, and now?

He couldn't go again at the woman from the Task Force. Rachael McCord his memory supplied. His source hinted at a new partner. Perhaps it was even Sorenson.

Now he had a new candidate to follow up, and he needed to do it soon.

He was running out of time.

Something was going to give.

Chapter End Notes

Disclaimer - Expired due to the extended delay in publishing this latest chapter.

Sorry. Thanks for sticking with this. 11 chapters to go.

Your reviews, thoughts and comments most appreciated.
The Hamptons, Wednesday morning.

He's going to blame Robert. Even though the man was not here to receive the approbation first hand. The physio had rung earlier to apologize for his non-attendance due to a family emergency. Naturally Rick was more than happy to let him do so, family was absolutely the first priority. However, any hope that Robert's absence meant skipping training vanished with the stern gaze of his lover beside him.

When the physio had recommended a second treadmill so they could run together, 'good for motivation', he had of course nearly instantly arranged it. He having more than second thoughts.

Red faced, sweaty, sucking in air with each labored breath Rick slowed suddenly and practically dropped off the decelerating treadmill just before it stopped.

He doesn't have the energy to blame himself.

Two and a half miles. He should be celebrating. First he needs to breathe, and wait for his heart to stop trying to burst free of his chest.

Kate is still moving, running, and as he glances towards her, she is looking over at him, her face a brief flash of concern that makes him want to reassure her, so he stands taller and that helps the intake of air just a little. His injured lung isn't at full capacity but whatever miracle they worked in surgery seems to be holding up. It was mostly his previous lack of fitness that is the root cause of his current state.

He would be prouder of his achievement if he wasn't still struggling for breath whilst she is still running upright and purposefully. And much faster than he did. He moves closer so he can see the display and take in her read out. Damn, four miles for her. She's run four miles in the time he's interval trained to two and a bit, and she still looks fantastic. He on the other hand is beet faced,
and feeling sore. And stationary. He steps back on the stationary treadmill so he is parallel to her whilst recovering his ability to speak.

"Almost done Rick," she extends a hand to touch his left shoulder even whilst running. "You did good babe," and with that she puts her ear piece back and turns forward focusing on her own run. Five would do nicely.

**New York, Club Lucky, way too early.**

The girl dipped her head in gratitude at his tip. He watched her stalk away. Hot pants and heels. Despite the view it was still way too early and he needed more coffee.

He certainly did not need any more overt security. Four bodyguards in close attendance, weapons only partially concealed beneath their coats. The extra precautions was a bit in your face but was pretty much essential. Not to mention the far less visible precautions he had also taken. It was costing him a pretty penny but thanks to Future Forward he could afford it.

Vulcan Simmonds was never a fool. He knew what he was getting into from the get go. Lots, and lots of money was the real big plus, the everyday business risks not more than usual, in fact quite a bit less, but the real kicker came from his own partners. Bracken would have him killed as soon as necessary. And that time would be soon. However he wasn't afraid of Bracken, especially as the Senator's star seemed about to wane.

Nor was he afraid of the Silva's. Posturing, weak boutique wannabe Mafioso. They had little to touch him and he had more manpower and firepower. They were however survivors, like him, so he would at least give them the respect that deserved. You didn't survive against all the forces arrayed against you unless you were smart and ruthless.

What scared him was one man. Or perhaps not just one man. James Court, or more accurately James Court and his assassins were what really scared him. The former soldier and CIA paramilitary or at least CIA-affiliate was the driving force behind the mega success of Future First. Oh the bitter irony that the Feds were seemingly merely pursuing Bracken for campaign violations when he was responsible for commissioning and receiving the proceeds of the biggest heroin smuggling ring in the North-East. And all the associated criminal acts commissioned in respect of that including murder, extortion, and corruption.

Dick Coonan knew of James Court and had been respectful almost afraid when mentioning the man. Yet Coonan lacked any of Court's finesses. His method was brutal and direct. The Beckett woman and her cohorts, the others, even Coonan's own brother (although that was totally off the books). Still those had been commissioned by Bracken and Court had shutdown Coonan and his thuggish behavior. Replaced it with dispassionate analysis and when necessary low-key action. It was pretty much Court alone who had been responsible for enabling the success of Future Forward by smoothing out the issues without drawing attention. They had gone from strength to strength, success breeding success.

Now though, it was almost time to get out, take his cut (or as much of it was prudent), and head for relative safety of a non-extradition country. It was times like this that he was grateful for being black. So many more nations where his skin color would blend in along with the anonymity millions of greenbacks could purchase.

So long as he stayed alive. Meanwhile perhaps Hotpants had a friend or two, and that way the morning wasn't a total bust.
The weeks had been frantic, and James Court had been obliged to call in a lot of favors to keep the forces arrayed against them at bay. Not to mention he had used a fair amount of borderline intimidation to try and stem the inevitable. That sort of action is fine for criminals but is not conducive to a long career in politics. And despite all of this the whispers had risen to a dull roar in DC circles, and yet somehow he and the Senator had managed to assuage some, just barely enough if he was frank, of the concerns using a mixture of bluster and legal threats some of that noise had diminished for want of any real information, or more specifically confirmation.

The phony war and standoff with the Department of Justice was a source of confusion for the veteran CIA man. He may not have understood how DC worked when he left the Agency but now he did. Surely the Feds had the evidence that he knew that had recovered. What more did they need? What were they waiting on?

Eventually something had to give, and ultimately it was Team Bracken's confrontational defense that undid them. One of the targets of Court's heavy handed blocking decided that they wanted a little payback. So in true Washington style they went to the press. They didn't have enough to truly sink the Senator but it was more than enough to break the shackles holding the press back. As a member of the House Ethics Committee they had his name specifically referenced as the suspect, and clear the fact that there was an active Department of Justice case with possible criminal charges pending. So when one news channel broke the story of the investigation into Bracken with just that context for the source, the undeclared truce between Bracken and pretty much everyone else was well and truly off. The scale of the investigation was such that even the best fire-walling by the Department of Justice and the FBI had failed. Simply too many people knew something. Including the press. And now the public.

The final result is that by the end of the day, Senator William H Bracken, of New York would be publicly named by multiple media outlets as the prime suspect in a multi-jurisdictional investigation into campaign finance violations, and other possible criminal charges.

Richard Castle Enterprises, Manhattan

If Bracken's team were having a bad day, it was equally subdued in New York where the banks had formally called in the loans for the University Heights project. These were primarily secured against RCE's commercial portfolio. Despite an expectation that it was coming the actual confirmation was still a blow to the usually laid back and confident team.

There in the RCE offices, the team convened and prepared to lose control in the most graceful (or maybe not) and least costly (definitely) manner possible.

Using the office's video conferencing service, they made the call to their boss.

"This is he." Beside the author, Kate nudges him in mock exasperation.

"Hey Rick, its Harry. Steve is with me and Terrence is conferenced in too."

"Hey Guys. Kate is here with me, so I'm putting you on speaker on my end okay?"

"Hello Miss Beckett."

"Oh God. It's Kate please. We've met Terrence."

"Okay Kate."
"You two both ready?" Steve cuts in.

"Yeah." "Yes."

"The banks have made calls on the security for the loans for University Heights. We were expecting it and have made the best preparations we can. I'm going to run through the plan again and will need you to confirm your acceptance Rick."

The next 15 minutes are largely baffling for Kate. She had the basics of economics but frequently with their investigations Ryan and perhaps a little surprisingly Esposito had often taken the lead on the financials. Well at least until Rick came along. She had never really questioned his seemingly encyclopedic knowledge but she is beginning to understand where this particular area of knowledge in economics and business finance comes from.

"Excellent work team. Let's go with it. Steve can you the bankers and once they're done can you please call the Mayor's team."

University Heights, 4.00 pm.

The area looked exactly like it was. Run-down, socially and economically challenged, and in desperate need of regeneration more than a decade or two ago. Boarded up shop fronts, homes and a generally decrepit miasma lingers.

Councilman Deyon Marshall completed his opening address. A local like most of his constituents he had only briefly escaped for college before coming back to serve his community for the last twenty-four years. Now no one bothered standing against him as even his staunchest opponents could only concede in the face of his non-stop efforts for this forgotten patch of Manhattan.

The attendance at this impromptu press opportunity was only possible through Deyon's organisation and local pull. Smiling as he drifted back allowing the Mayor to step up to the microphones with Bob Weldon, pausing only to shake the hand of the long serving councilman and between mutual smiles exchange a few off-mike words of thanks.

Bob Weldon had not had the best couple of years, and his greying hairline and shallow cheeks were signs of the strains he had endured. His plans to run for higher office thwarted before they could begin, he had lost key staff, and backers. He had managed to hold on to his party's nomination and had seen off the challengers to be re-elected for his third term. All indicators pointed to it being his final term. Still even if partially lame duck, any Mayor of New York still carries a certain degree of authority, and as he steps up to the mikes he looks the part.

"Fellow New Yorkers." The wind does it bit driving the chill through even the thickest coats.

"Here we are on a blustery New York day, and I guess I should thank the rain for staying away. I'd like to think I've learnt enough over the years to not try and claim any credit for that. Even if I did I am sure it would change just as quickly.

"Behind me is the old warehouse complex that has lain dormant for too long. This alone is a cause for regret given the great wealth in this great city and the demand for affordable housing. It is especially distressing that a prime opportunity to help correct that imbalance has been unfulfilled for a number of years.

"It is my lasting regret that we have not managed to deliver what I once hoped would be a model example of social housing and regeneration. I fully acknowledge that this project has spent far too
much time with no progress. For that I apologize. Regardless of the causes, it was on my watch, and I take responsibility.

"However, today I am pleased to announce that the University Heights Urban renewal project will be resubmitted to the City Planning Committee next week. I have high hopes that this time the application will be approved promptly, and proceed without further delay.

"So you're probably asking what's changed.

"A group of anonymous benefactors has gifted the land and property to the City of New York. Now this donation comes with some strings including a caveat that requires the City to hold and maintain the land for the designated purpose of low income housing, with low foot-print commercial and two parks and four other public spaces for at least 99 years.

"As a result of this extraordinary generosity has reduced the capital investment required from the City budget by around forty per cent. And this figure may reduce further if other citizens and organisations also sign on as benefactors. Now I hasten to add that there is no obligation for others to do as what has already been donated has put the project well within reach of feasibility even in these tough times. But we welcome anyone else wanting to contribute.

"In light of the significantly reduced costs, I fully expect this revised proposal to meet all the stringent requirements and be submitted for, and receive formal approval.

"I would like to thank the organisations that have so kindly donated their money and time over the years to this project. It is no secret that it has long been an ambition of this administration to ensure that the regeneration of New York applies to all boroughs and districts. Nine-Eleven was a great blow to this City but parts of the city had been suffering a long time before then. With this project we hope to provide impetus to a raft of other projects and programs for the citizens of this great city.

"I want to reach out and thank those supporters, who have as a group asked to remain anonymous, who in collation with the city will give New York on of the biggest ever urban housing projects based on a partnership of hope. It cannot address all the needs many citizens, but I am confident it will provide a great example for other projects to follow. In particular to address the inequity that sees groups of our fellow citizens still struggle to access affordable housing and other facilities that should not be beyond the means of their incomes, nor require them reside so far from their workplaces.

"Thank you."

There is a ripple of applause despite the relative sparsity of the audience it feels genuine. The Mayor's own answering smile and wave is equally genuine. This day has gone better than he could have hoped. He has a few people to thank in private.

Switching his TV off, David Bracken did not need a mirror to know how pale he must look. His carefully acquired tan bleached out of him by the Mayor's bombshell news conference. That tremor in his hand was back too, another childhood symptom he had thought banished. Part of him wanted to scream and throw things, another more honest part, wanted to run and hide.

This was not how events were meant to transpire.

Already there in his inbox was the email from one of the senior managers at the lead bank explaining how when their legal team moved to sequester the assets guaranteeing the loans, the
holding company had instead offered a very different proposal. One where the not only those assets but a number of other viable commercial properties were sold them at effectively a knock-down price. Such a decision was in the remit of that managers' authority and from a business perspective was effectively a no-brainer. The bank did not have write off bad investment against nothing. Instead they had new assets with real capital value with minimal cost as the value of the loans was already depreciated and lost in their eyes.

He had to credit the team on the other end. Good poker players. He momentarily wondered who they were. The main holding company was an off-the-shelf shell construct which in itself was not a surprise but whoever was behind it obvious had some smarts.

Whilst he could not fault the business decision nothing answered the terrifying question of how his brother would respond.

Not far from 'Smoker's Corner', New York City Hall.

Gloria Glaser took another drag of her cigarette. A habit she couldn't quite shake over the years. But then she wasn't the President, nor did she have a scary spouse to cajole her into staying quit. Her own lonely life yet another low-tide indicator of potential unfulfilled.

He would be calling any minute now.

She had tried to call immediately but his aide Matthew had insisted he was unavailable. She knew what that meant. Unfavored. His favourite form of minor discipline for those who served him was to make them wait. Woe unto anyone who experienced any other form of William Bracken's displeasure.

She could not have predicted the events of the day. This was not how it was meant to go.

Not just the Senator, the other participants in the alternative project, including some serious donors, would also be more than annoyed as the sudden collapse of their plans. Of course their response would contain nothing of the real threat that the Senator's did.

Taps, Washington DC, Wednesday night.

Will Sorenson watched the attractive woman who had just offered to buy him a drink walk away. He had been polite but cool and that had been enough for the offer to be withdrawn with a shrug of disbelief. He could understand that. She really was attractive. He could see the barman looking at him in disbelief.

The bar was just a few blocks from his apartment. He occasionally stopped for solitary beer and more rarely a chat with a few of the regulars or the bar staff. This evening there was a very different clientele – a group of nine women in their thirty and forties, well dressed and a little loud. He had initially steered clear but the very attractive woman he had just dismissed had made eye contact and then come over.

Over the last few years he had dated but nothing long term since leaving Boston. That had been Patricia, the one after Kate Beckett. She was a teacher and wanted a commitment but his job, and his own inclination made that sort of relationship problematic. He was okay with that choice, now. Most of the time. Of all the more recent flings, the best was Sylvie. They had met during his time in Europe but she had wanted it to remain casual and the remaining three months duration of his assignment ensured that too.
After Kate he had reconciled himself to a career and probably no long term romantic relationship. He had once thought her the same especially with the burden of her mother's case. He knew there was a connection, definitely an attraction, way more than something, between Kate and Rick Castle. But he had believed the celebrity author would only want a conquest and move on. And he knew Kate wasn't like that so he was confident she wouldn't succumb. Nor did she need anyone to protect her so he had kept out of it, mostly, except when being provoked or poking Castle back on the two cases they crossed paths on. He had deliberately steered away from both in his subsequent visits to New York.

His new partner was everything he wanted but also didn't want to be. Rachael McCord was dedicated to the Task Force. Putting the job ahead of relationships, of herself. He wasn't entirely sure that was him, not to that extent. McCord had warned him of that during recruitment. Still he had signed up.

Looking over he spots the woman glancing his way again, almost glaring. Perhaps on another occasion he wouldn't have turned her down. She was a very attractive woman. But right now he was in the middle of a very big case. His first for the Attorney General's task force. Plus for the last day or so he's sure he's been under observation. He's not been able to catch sight of his watchers. His surety is partially based on his lack of success in detecting them. Whoever they are, they are professionals. After McCord's home invasion he's suitably on edge. They all are. There is a threat and above all else he would put the safety of a member of the public ahead of a good time, even if she did end up thinking he was a cold fish, or worse. Deciding it is time to get on the move, he drains his beer, chucks a twenty down to cover his two drinks and a tip, grabs his coat and heads for the door.

The chill of the wind hits him even as he completes pulling on his coat. He was going to walk the three blocks but the inclement weather and chance appearance of a cab changes his mind.

"Taxi."

"Subject is on the move."

"Shit. He's getting a cab." A momentary pause whilst the secure radio is lifted to the second observer's lips, "Can we get mobile cover now?"

Spotting the former FBI agent climb into the taxi, the watcher is momentarily panicked before his partner spots the dull sedan as it turns the corner onto the street and taps him, with a sigh the now seemingly satisfied the pair slink back towards the dinner and warmth.

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**The Hamptons**

He is awake again. Kate sleeps on by his side, curled in a fetal position, her body radiating warmth of all sorts, pulling him in. But he will not disturb her, and somewhat surprised his restlessness has not attracted her attention. He blinks, and breathes in through his nose, and wills his eyes closed and his body motionless. Maybe it would not be so bad this time.

Of course his brain will not cooperate. So rather than passively wait for whatever randomness may come, he concentrates on what he needs to do. Who he needs to be.

Not easy with a fervent imagination. Ego much Rick? At the heart of everything he has always been a storyteller. That would never go away, at least he believes so. Of course a perennially active mind is not always a good thing.
It was an outlet for his imagination, for the stories that filled his head since before he could remember. It was a release, and sometimes a necessity. The stories in his head varied a lot. It often surprised him how different they could be. He couldn't imagine not writing, even when the dreaded writer's block had him. He had made lots of money yet even so he would continue if only for his own and maybe Kate's personal consumption.

What he knew now was that currently mixed in with those healthy stories and dreams are ones that threaten his, and by association those he loves.

So not for the first time he'll be undertaking therapy and seeking guidance and solace. But this time it is different. Now he has his partner with him. Someone who he trusts with everything and they're doing this together.

That thought alone settles him, and rolling in towards Kate, he leeches some of her heat and eventually finds a more settled slumber.

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**Thursday Morning**

He is awoken by kisses. Which is a pretty damn good way to wake up in his opinion especially if the kisser is a limber and lithe brunette with love in hers eyes and torture on her tongue.

"Happy Thanksgiving Rick"

"Happy Thanksgiving Kate."

And then she was out of bed heading for the shower and he drifted back to sleep. Seemingly no time later, she was back and before he knew it she had dragged him from under the covers and into the bathroom. For a shower. Disappointing.

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After their weekend indulgences Kate had made a special effort to get them back on track in terms of food intake. She had come to realise very early on in their relationship that Rick's preferred diet was not survivable for herself, or for him really. Whilst they shared similar tastes and preferences, including a regular consumption of take out, her greater self-control regarding portion sizes, and ultimately her too frequent meal-skipping combined with her greater exercise had kept her trim prior to them becoming us. Despite his protestations copious amounts of sex was not an adequate substitute for a sensible diet and regular exercise. Not that she was going to forego the sex. It was after all simply phenomenal, and that in itself was quite a relief. Imagine if they hadn't been able to live up to all that sexual tension and verbal foreplay.

Rick had slipped more than a few pounds on since they first teamed up. She had never made an issue of it, either as it wasn't her place before they were together, or once they were, it did not matter. She loved him regardless and he did carry the extra weight rather well unless he chose poorly from his extensive wardrobe.

His shooting was wake up call for both of them, and for Rick it has prompted him to take an honest look at his body and how he treated it. His recovery program was not only addressing the recuperation from his injury but also his general health and the hospital had incorporated a diet into that plan. He has been amazingly receptive to some ideas and less so to others.

Breakfast was not a meal he was not inclined to compromise on. Kate loved bacon too but not every day, even if Rick's boast of a hundred-and-one breakfast recipes with bacon was valid. Plus pretty much everything else that tended to accompany bacon carried downsides too.
For Kate entering a relationship with Rick meant that breakfast was once again a regular part of her daily routine. In place of an occasional pastry (often courtesy of selfsame author), or an ad-hoc protein bar she was eating a proper breakfast regularly. One of her favorite combinations was muesli with a nice tart yogurt and some stewed fruit. She normally had apples or pears but since arriving at the Hamptons Rick had suggested rhubarb, and somehow Ambrosia had sourced some despite the season. The combination worked really well especially as she had carefully followed the handwritten instructions from Marcus Gunthendral at Ambrosia for cooking the fruit so it retained its texture and sour taste. This of course meant banishing Rick and his attempt to add sugar to the pot. He had reluctantly conceded that the flavors worked well and he didn't really need or miss any further sweetness. It was a small victory in an ongoing campaign.

So even on this Thanksgiving morning she did not relent in the face of some wheedling, pouting and sotto voce comments. Bacon was off the menu, if only because she knew from Alexis' updates just what a feast was planned for their New York gathering.

They had an appointment with Rick's therapist late on that afternoon. Kate hadn't yet decided if she would see her own therapist if the schedule and his availability allowed. Then on Friday morning Rick had a scheduled check-up at Bellevue. She had plans to drop into the Precinct which she had communicated to Gates and surprisingly the Captain had pinged her back with a request for a 'chat'.

After breakfast they packed for their trip back to the city, and with no morning session with Robert, they have plenty of time to prepare for their temporary return to New York for the Thanksgiving weekend. They will be travelling light as there is still plenty of stuff back at the loft and they plan to only be gone for two nights. Soon two light duffels rest by the front door along with the pack containing Kate's Taylor Matthews gear. Rick makes no comment seeing the Sig P229 once more strapped to her side.

So with a little time to kill before they head off, Kate makes a final pot of coffee. Some will go into their travel cups, and there is enough left over for them to enjoy in the kitchen. Whilst nursing their mugs they begin to muse, and it quickly transforms into an honest discussion about their close calls.

"Too many near misses. I know we joke about it. Keep a tally even. But fuck Kate the things we've been through, the number of times we've nearly died."

"You know you're pretty close to right-on-the-money with that. I am beginning to think that maybe being behind a desk may not be the negative I thought it would be Rick."

He wasn't going to speak, rather let Kate map her own way out, but he knows she's waiting on him. "How so?" But he'll still push her to speak what's on her mind.

"I've also been thinking about all the times we've come close to dying, either separately or together. Too many, way too many." His eyes betray just how much their near misses have scared and scarred him too. She smiles gently, letting all her love and trust in him flow out of her, and his own cautious smile echoes back.

"Now I'm not set on the path yet, and I'm not saying I'm ready to turn away from being a detective but what I am starting to see is that maybe stepping back a little, not being first through the door every time, might be good for both of us Rick.

"If I'm honest I know it will be an adjustment, and I'll fight it. A lot of the time. But I want you there, and this seems the most likely way to secure that future, and maybe improve our safety too.
"Please say something Rick."

"Kate." He pauses, regathering. "Kate. I don't want to be the reason for you to change or step away your chosen career path. I know that whatever reasons for you choosing it, it is a true vocation for you. You wouldn't ever try to stop me writing and I could never ask or do the same for you." He looks at her, holds her gaze, "There's more isn't there. Not just this idea in your head."

"Yeah Babe. There is more. Being a cop, and then more so as a detective was about more than serving the public, speaking for the dead. It was a way to pursue my Mom's killer. But also, worse perhaps, it was a way for me to hide away.

"You make me want to live. Not just for the life I might have had, not just being some lawyer, even a Supreme Court Justice. Or the life of a cop. I don't know how else to put this. I saw how hard it was for my parents, especially my mom, to balance the demands of career and family. The sacrifices they made. But I want that. I want the challenge, the commitment, the joy, even perhaps the sorrow. I want it all Rick. With you. 'Specially the joy."

He kisses her then, all mouth and heart. "It took me long enough to get you to see it, feel it too. I'll admit that sometimes I doubted that we'd make. So many close calls and near misses. Still does rarely, especially some mornings if I wake without you close Rick."

"Me too. I've never denied wanting you Kate. Well not at the beginning and for lot of the other times. But the men who weren't me, our lack of communication and my jumping to conclusions. There were far too many times my heart was breaking Beckett, even before I was willing to acknowledge it was you that held my heart totally. Not to mention some inopportune interventions from the Boys."

She nips at his lips, sharing some of that lingering protracted and delayed exasperation at their friends' unintended interruptions.

"Still we made it. I've told you before and it still true, more so if anything. You're Extraordinary."

"Only because you make me so Castle. Individually we're good, but together we're great. Better. The E-word even. Well so much more than great regardless. And I'm so sorry I took so long to get here. But right here with you is all I ever want. Loving you is all I need."

The gentle lilt of his head is all the question he needs to ask her.


"Okay not just you. I do want it all. The ring, the announcement, engagement, the wedding, life together and someday some mini-me's or rather mini-us-es," she corrects, "running around too." She's braver now. Direct eye engagement, a gleam of excitement, and a touch of lust too. But more than physical attraction, an existential longing for something she never thought she could have or even dream or dare to want. And she needs to tell him. How he enables all that. And now she can. Honesty really has been the best policy for them.

"Rick, these are all things I never thought I wanted or if I did want them, would never get to have them." She pauses, swallows, and takes his hands, still warm from their coffee.

"And I want them all with you. Only you."

"Hmmm, I concur." His voice is dipping, about half an octave lower already, near purring.

"God, I wanted that for such a long time. I thought that being able to share beds and time
together at work and at home would be enough. But it isn't. Hasn't been for a long time. Just how it hasn't been about the books for so long that even Espo could have picked that up, it hasn't been about getting you naked, probably for even longer. And I've been equally afraid but I want that Kate more than anything. A life with you. Our families."

"I know Rick. And I'm so sorry that it took me so long to get on the page."

"Doesn't matter Kate." He kisses her for good measure. A soft sweet kiss that is not enough for both. And yet he breaks for a breath, the essence of coffee, them, lingering in the smallest space between them.

"But you know what else Beckett?"

She nibbles her lower lip before leaning in and repeating the trick on his with devastating effects, yet somehow she keeps her focus and switching to his form of addressing. "No Castle, why don't you tell me?"

"For us to reach the end, to have everything on that list. We're going to need practice. Lots of practice."

She kisses him again. "We're pretty good at this. How much practice can we need?"

He groans and sinks back into her. "We need lots practice" He somehow gets out around their fused mouths.

"You mean we don't do enough?" She forces through their lips.

"Never!"

"Oh well then." He leans back in to pursue her with his own mouth but encounters her hand. His shoulders droop. Oh he's pouting. Silly sweet man.

"You know what else Stud?"

He groans in disappointment, "Time to go." It is not a question.

"Just a rain check Babe." Oh she's teasing and that's not fair.

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**Washington DC, Department of Justice.**

His desk phone rings. This is new. He is new. No one has called him before, the desk and extension only his since Monday. The phone is the latest technology with caller ID linked to databases and functionality including call recording, and even a number trace function.

He doesn't recognize the number on the caller ID. Hardly a surprise. However, nor does the database. He doesn't have enough experience with the device to know if this is good or bad.

He lifts the receiver by the third ring. "Hello."

"Special Agent Sorenson."

He recognizes the voice, "Oh...Good Morning Senator Bracken." SHIT!

Surprised at how own tone is level and not all elevated unlike his emotions. This is trouble. But there is no one else around to catch his use of their suspect's name. A frantic scan of the office
reveals no one in sight or hearing for him to attract the attention of. Remembering his training he
hits the button for recording and then starts the trace application too.

"I am sorry to call you directly."

"Senator I am not sure how I can help you."

"Don't be coy Agent. You're with the Attorney General's Task Force now." *Double SHIT!*

"Again Senator I am at a loss as to how you think I can help you."

"Quite simply I need something from you."

"Senator…"

The man doesn't let him to continue, "Nothing personal Agent. Nor illegal. You can relax. Well on
that front anyway." The chuckle does not calm him.

"I have a message for your superiors." Shit, so now's he's the messenger for a corrupt and criminal
politician.

"I am listening Senator."

He is glad he has the recording application running. He doesn't doubt he'll be believed but still a
little proof never hurt. Especially for this sort of brazen action.

"You have massively overreached your authority, and are dabbling in things you best not. This is
far bigger than you think you know or understand. You will bear responsibility for the
consequences which will extend far outside your office and place our nation at grave risk."

Will was dumbstruck. This was straight out of a movie. A bad movie. And despite what should be
the melodramatic ranting of a cornered man, he cannot help the fist that grips his gut.

"Good day Agent Sorenson." And with that he was gone before Will could recover the power of
speech.

Once he was certain the Senator had actually hung up he stops the recording app, he puts his
Bluetooth headset on and plays it back. Just to be certain it was real.

God! It was real. Quickly emailing the file to himself and McCord, he rises in search of his partner.
They need to mobilize. They were not in control. Bracken wasn't either. And that didn't bode well
for anyone.

Finally spotting his partner entering the office he waves vigorously to her and she increases her
pace towards him, face a sudden mask of concern.

How the hell had Bracken tracked him down? He was most definitely being followed. It was
linked to McCord's break in. What the hell was going on? And why did he have than horrific
realisation that events were almost certainly about to get a lot worse.

*Happy fucking Thanksgiving.*
Emerging from the elevator to the hallway it feels like home. To both of them.

"Hello Darlings." Martha is waiting for them as the front door swings open.

"Oh, I just wanted to see you both. I must be off shortly."

Rick brushes a quick kiss to her cheek.

"Hello Mother. Now if you'll excuse me briefly," and with that he dashes for the office and bedroom and bathroom beyond.

"Don't mind him Martha he's been bursting for the last forty minutes. It's just we didn't want to stop anywhere and be seen."

"Oh that's quite all right Katherine. He never did have a particularly big bladder." Kate shakes her head at that new piece of information. Martha of course carries on. "I want to thank you dear. He does look a lot better. Part of that is no doubt due to you. He's never been a particularly good patient." Kate can't suppress the guffaw that bursts out of her mouth. "Did I say something wrong?"

"Sorry Martha. No not at all. It's just that Rick is nowhere near as bad as I am. I was the proud owner of a 'World's Worst Patient' badge long before adulthood. It has only gotten worse."

"Oh dear. Well one can only hope that your children somehow manage to bypass both yours and Richard's predisposition for being difficult or I can foresee fraught times ahead."

There is nothing she can say to that Rick re-emerges as she is still floundering. His quizzical look unanswered as his mother makes her departure.

"Bye Darlings. I won't be back tonight as I shall stay with the Leonards."

"Martha there is no need to…"

"Katherine, I know Richard is going to see his therapist. I think some time with just him and you afterwards would be best."

"Thank you Martha."

"Pish, just take care of each other. Goodnight Dears."

"Good night Mother." "Goodnight Martha."

And she's gone.

They had time for a light snack before heading out. Neither wanted much to eat. Both intimately aware of how draining and confronting therapy can be. Sometimes to the point of being sick. So neither had an appetite.

Kate takes the wheel of the SUV and guides them out into the late afternoon traffic. It's not quite rush hour but given it is New York the traffic is dense and often unyielding anyway.

Beside her Rick gives directions but aside from that is unusually quiet and subdued.

It will be worse coming home to the Loft.
Kate was grateful for absence of anyone else at the Loft. For the innate peace and quiet that just the two of them achieve. She never expected that. For the two of them to coexist so serenely together. For his ability to stay quiet for longer than minutes, for her tolerance of him to achieve the same.

As the most recent member of the Loft's inhabitants she was careful never to overstep the mark, and to be honest rarely felt inclined too. However Martha's brand of parenting was unconventional and whilst it seemed to mostly work for Rick, Kate on occasion found her frankness and lack of discretion a little confronting. So this evening she was grateful for Martha's absence.

She had made them soup and toast. Placing the bowls on the bench she turned and looked for her partner.

"Rick?"

He wasn't in sight. She checked the study and no sign. The noise alerted her first. Their bedroom.

There he was sat on the end of their bed in darkness.

"Rick?"

"Oh, sorry Kate. Lost for a moment."

"That's okay. Easy to do."

"Yeah. Lots to think about."

"I made some supper. It's just canned soup and toast. Come and sit with me. Then we can talk. If you want."

"Okay."

Monosyllabic Castle makes her nervous.

She spends most of the rest of the evening slowing teasing words and then sentences out of him.

Then Alexis rang to check in with them. Kate spoke to her first to deal with the logistics for their meal before handing the phone over to Rick. She would be over to Loft around midday, and all the food preparation and coordination was in hand.

Alexis was sharing Thanksgiving night with a couple of her friends who couldn't make it home for the holiday. Kate feels proud of her, for her good heart and concern for others. It still confuses her sometimes, how despite the lack of formal bond, how proud she is of the young woman. Although her mind does add that one there would, not might mind you, be a formal bond as her step-mother. Not that Alexis needed parenting and well she had zero experience in that field.

After ten minutes or so Rick wishes his daughter good night, and finally appears willing to talk a little more.

"I'm grateful that you are seeing someone Rick. It's a big step. Even if you have done it before. Those who have not experience therapy tend to understate how difficult it can be."

"Still hard though. I just wanted to hide afterwards. Even from you."
"It was the same for me with Doctor Burke. It was a long time before I would ever schedule an appointment at any time other than the end of the day unless I was rostered off with no chance of being called out.

"Do you think I should follow his suggestion? To see a physiatrist with a better understanding of conflict trauma?"

"Doctor Burke is a NYPD official physiatrist and it helped that he understood the professional side of my work but he also helped greatly with the personal side too. But I don't think he would see you due to any possible conflict of interest. I am still on his books as a patient. But I am sure he could recommend someone."

"And aside from meeting him to thank him for all he's done for you I wouldn't want to intrude on that Kate. Plus I'm not sure I want or need one Kate. Sam has always been enough for me in the past."

"We'll take things at your pace Rick. Perhaps we could ask Espo. He had issues after leaving the service. He's not spoken much about them, but he has first-hand experience. He was a great help when I was relapsing following the sniper case. And I know you helped point him my way."

"Can I think about it?"

"Of course. What you need Rick. We've got all the time we need."

"We do." He looks at her with those piercing oceans. "Kate, I'm sorry. It's Thanksgiving and we're dealing with my issues instead of being with family."

"We are family Rick. It took me a bit longer to get there but that's what we are."

"Thanks."

"Castle. Rick. Partners too remember? We deal with whatever we need to do. Pretty sure Ryan and Espo feel the same way. Even Gates. You saved them all. And even without that you're their colleague, their friend, well maybe not Gates so much. But with her it's hard to tell. Behind that by-the-book front I think she's actually human. You shouldn't worry about needing to reach out."

"I'm with my partner. It's all I need for now."

"Same here. Now you ready to go to bed?"

"Yeah. Big day tomorrow."

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Friday Morning – Bellevue Hospital

Rick's appointment was at 10.00 am and even as Kate navigated the SUV into the Hospital drop off and pick up area her heart sank. There were a good dozen plus, maybe almost twenty people outside on a cold, blustery New York winter's day. Cameras and microphones abound. The Press! More than a few, enough to spill out and around the hospital entrance much to the consternation of two outnumbered security guards trying to shepherd them.

Maybe they were here for something, someone else?

Unfortunately not.
"Detective! Detective Beckett!?"

The SUV has heavy tint but at the sort of close the press are it is possible to identify occupants, especially if you apparently are expecting them. Damn media. She kept her face in check. Calm. Cop mode on. Even if her voice wavers just enough to belie that outward calm. "Rick?"

"Change of plan I think Kate. You drop me but don't park and come in. Instead head to the Precinct for your appointment with Gates and I'll call when done and we can sort out what happens then."

"You sure?"

"I'm a big boy. I can do this on my own."

"I know you're a big boy dear, but save that for later okay?" She smirks at him, just an edge of want tainting the humor. God he loves her. Of course now's not the time for that.

Then she's pulling up already, grateful the press are staying on the sidewalk and not crowding right into the car. She can see hospital security rushing towards them. For the briefest moment it's that night a month ago with her arriving at this same place with no idea whether he is dead or alive. She shakes it off.

"Kate. I'm fine. This is now." When did he become the one with the reassurance and certainty? "I'll see you soon, okay Love?"

"Yeah Babe. Love you." Her upper body jets across the space between them, her lips a little sloppy with the initial contact and all too briefly fully engaged and she is upright again before he can even respond.

He had been in the act of opening the door when she struck and that action continued unabated and when the door opens the world enters their bubble. The sound of camera shutters. Shouted questions assault them both.

He starts to get out of his side so she can make a fast getaway but she has other ideas.

"Rick!" She hides nothing in her call. Not the urgency, the fear, the desire, the honesty, the truth of them.

He hears it all and swivels to leans back in the SUV. He closes on her, and such a simple act has her heart racing. He lifts both hands, despite the sling on his right, to her face, and brings them together to make contact. In part it shields the intimate connection of their lips and oh so briefly tongues from the prying zooms of the paparazzi. But it's also them showing the world – in their own way – who they are together.

All too soon they break. "Call me when you're ready for pickup?" He nods and with a regretful smile he steps back still with eyes focused on her. She smiles back, teeth and tongue teasing him to get back in and race away from the baying behind him. Letting his eyes speak between them, he steels his face, resuming his public mask and turns to face the mob whilst closing his door.

"Good morning all." His cheery greeting is overwhelmed by the barrage of questions, although he hears a few voices offer their own courtesy in return.

He raises both arms, sling and all, and he has their attention focused on him. With him sealed off from her, Kate moves off, navigating the SUV slowly around a few bodies spilling onto the roadway even as the hospital security struggle to restore and order.
"I'm just here for a check up." He waves his right arm.

"As you can see I am making progress. I am very grateful for the efforts of the Emergency Services, the staff at Bellevue. And for the support and love of my family."

There is a sea of sound, waves of questions and he cannot discern which to listen to, let alone respond. He's almost at the door when he hears it.

"Do you love her?" For some reason this single question among all those being shouted in the cacophony was perfectly clear.

It is not perhaps the ideal moment, but when is it ever? And for the longest second he is determined to let it pass but he can't. More importantly they won't regardless. Checking his stride he catches the frown of the security guard trying to get him into the relative calm of the hospital, and he half-shrugs in apology and turns back.

He's not entirely sure who is more surprised. Him or the press pack.

All those opportunities when he never told her. Moments and chances gone begging. Never told their friends and family. Their colleagues. The world. He promised himself those moments wouldn't slip by. Not anymore. She's done her part. Surprised him, stunned him even by being so open, so public. It is his turn now.

The utter seriousness across his face renders the assembled press momentarily mute.

"There is no adequate measure of words to describe how much I love my family. I've been blessed with a great career writing, and even more so to have another role as a consultant for the NYPD. I have been fortunate to meet and work with a great bunch of people in the service of the citizens of New York. As an added bonus it also introduced me to the love of my life, the woman I see forever with.

"For the longest time I wanted Detective Beckett to be more than my NYPD partner. But I had some growing up to do, and believe it or not, words actually failed me many times." This invokes some muted laughter from the audience as the author chuckles deprecatingly, then he is serious again. "Somehow the moment never quite happened, eluding one or both of us. But we kept turning up, trying to help and support each other, building our partnership and trust. It transpires that my own desires and hopes weren't unrequited. How we finally took that step is too personal to share. But I remain amazed and grateful for every day we spend together. She is incredible. Both professionally as a Homicide Detective for the NYPD and as a person.

"Much to my surprise Kate was the first to publicly acknowledge what we have together. Our love," there he said it, "So it would be remiss of me to miss this opportunity to do the same."

He looks clearly into the lens of the TV crew directly in front. But he is only addressing one person. The camera lens captures the glow in his blue eyes, even hints at the complexity of the man he usually hides in public. He knows that the chances of Kate watching this live are almost non-existent but Paula will work her magic, and have a master copy for her, for them.

"Kate, I never knew we'd make it this far but I hoped for the longest time. From the moment we met you've had me intrigued and fascinated, and it didn't take long for me to become enraptured with you. Over the years together we have evolved – work partners, friends, and now everything for each other. My Love, you make me the person I've been striving to be and just your smile alone fills my heart with wonder. You inspire me and I'm proud to claim Nikki Heat as my favorite creation but at best she's a shade, little more than a two dimensional version of the woman I admire
and adore beyond all others. I've never been happier and I want it all with you.

"And I know that you've only just dropped me off mere minutes ago but I miss you and can't wait until I see you again. I love you Kate."

With that he turns away and passes through the still open door beating the questions about matrimony, proposals, pregnancy, all in no particular order.

Even as she pulls away Kate is voicing dialing Clare.

"Beckett?"

"Good Morning Clare. We've got an excess of paparazzi at Bellevue. I've just dropped Rick but we decided at the last minute that I wouldn't go in with him. Do you have any resources you can provide some cover for Rick?"

"Off the top of my head, I can have a team in two hours but I'll check and get back to you. But the threat level is low, I'm not sure there is much benefit. Can the hospital security cope?"

"I'm not with him. I know the hospital has security but even so…"

"Still can't shake that gut feeling Kate?"

"No. It's not that. I just. Well it's pretty much the first time with him out of my sight. And well…"

"We'll check it out. Where are you off to now Kate?"

"The Precinct. Gates asked if I could check in today so I'll do it a little earlier than planned. Rick will be disappointed not to go in but we can do that another time."

"Okay. I'll get back to you. And I'll see you both tonight."

"We're looking forward to it."

"Well thank you both for the invite. I don't often get an invite for a family event like Thanksgiving."

"It was Rick's call. We've invited our partners from the Precinct and Rick wanted to include you. Our extended family."

"Well I do appreciate it. Is it okay if I bring a guest?"

"Umm, sure."

"Don't worry it's not like that and I think at least one member of the Castle family will be happy."

"But you're not going to tell me are you?"

"You got it. Don't worry the surprise is not for you anyway."

"Not sure if that helps Clare but let me know if you have any concerns re security for Rick."

"Will do. See you at seven."
Paula Haas had been alerted by the buzz on Twitter but also by her media watch service which emailed and SMS'ed her anytime clients or key words started trending.

She was so glad that she had responded promptly. She caught the tail end of Rick's impromptu conference live. Her heart usually sunk when Ricky went rogue and off script on the red carpet but this one is so different. Perfect even.

Damn that was a good look Ricky. Perhaps they should work that into his public displays. The serious look, he wore that very well, and if he wasn't already hooked for life, he'd have a very disorderly line right round several blocks. Not that he had encouraged that for a while. She kinda missed those days. It was as a good as Shark Week. So long as she didn't have too much mess to clean up afterwards.

He looks good too. Much healthier, and fitter too.

A glance at Twitter shows it to be so. He's getting a rave reception. Kate Beckett is not so lucky. Sure there are a good number of positive posts but jealousy is a terrible thing, especially by those not actually entitled to any. Worse delusion is strong is a certain proportion of his fans, something he somewhat accurately pushes back onto Black Pawn and their marketing.

Paula is actually glad Kate doesn't have a Twitter account, or any social media actually. It would likely be unmanageable. His is nearly sometimes.

There is a ping in her mail box. Her contact at the news station is on the case and will courier over a copy of the master tape once it is edited. Paula knows that will include the unedited version as well. It will go into his archives.

Now for a good look at the social media. Twitter has him trending upwards. A quick check of the actual tweets is reassuring as well. Then she starts with the better fan sites. Derrick's Domain is run by a pair of sisters in their early fifties and is quite measured and sedate by the standards of the web. They have a news flash saying the author is back in New York and promising updates soon. Same too for Castle Fans, another long established site with a reputation for actually concentrating on his literature. Most of the others are still caught on the hop but this won't last. Paula fires an email to her assistant asking her to watch the usual suspects. Between her and Black Pawn they normally let most things slide except for blatant copyright violations and anything to do with Alexis. And really out there, make-you-gag content, not all of it smut.

Bellevue Hospital

Once inside the hospital lobby he finds a small reception committee waiting for him.

"Mister Castle." The well-dressed woman is familiar but he's momentarily lost the name, not even close to the tip of his tongue.

"Hello." A handshake.

"Karen White, from Hospital administration."

"Ah, yes I remember you. It's good to see you again. Sorry about the momentary issue with your name."

"Not a problem Mister Castle, you weren't exactly at your best last time. You look much much improved now."
"Even if my memory is a little ropey." He concedes. "This hospital saved me and I am very grateful for that. I do try to remember the names of people who contribute to something like that."

"We always appreciate heartfelt thanks. As for today, we're very sorry about that. The crowd outside. It would appear that your appointment has somehow been leaked. We will investigate. We did try to call and warn you but your phone went to voicemail."

"Oh," he's palming his phone and yes it's on mute. He'd hold it up in confirmation but the lock screen currently has a picture of Kate snuggled under rugs in the media room with come-hither eyes. She is actually clothed but the picture may be somewhat indeterminate about that. She'd kill him for showing or sharing that shot. Not that he wants to. "Well thanks for trying but my phone was on mute. Please don't be concerned on my behalf. It comes with the territory."

"Well thank you for being so gracious. Kamal and James" she gesture to the two uniformed hospital security guards, "will escort you up to your appointment. Please don't hesitate to contact me if there is anything we can do for you," she concludes proffering a business card.

He takes the card with his left hand and extends his right from the sling to shake her hand. She seems surprised but almost four weeks have gone by since he left hospital and he is getting better. The work with Robert and the patience and support of his family and above all Kate are urging him towards recovery. He leaves the administrator with a smile and a nod, both from the genuine category.

He departs with his two escorts and it takes most of the brief trip to the outpatient area for the trio just to relax. The two security guards are a little on edge and it rubs off on him. Suddenly he's nervous about what he might encounter here. He wants Kate with him but she is elsewhere. He hadn't given much thought at all to what news he might receive here. Maybe that was a mistake.

One of the benefits of celebrity is truncated waiting times even in hospitals. Rick has always been careful – mostly – to never wilfully abuse his relative fame for serious matters. Not least because he has a reputation as a 'good guy', something social media could destroy in moments. Paula had never shied from pointing out that his naked horse riding antics were a perfect example of what not to do in the age of social media. Hence his 'acting out' of late had been limited in the extreme.

Sure enough he is bustled into a consultation room and finds a veritable committee waiting for him.

His surgeon, Doctor Paul Creswell, the former army surgeon, one of the ICU nurses, Helen and Bellevue's rehabilitation coordinator, Terry O'Connell.

Terry had put him through a good set of stretches and some basic evaluation exercises including holding his right arm out with a series of increasing weights in his hand, finishing briefly with a ten pound weight.

"Well Rick things are looking very good. You are still a bit stiff in your movements but overall the range and strength is coming along nicely. Robert Aves is a good guy. He'll push you but he'll steer you right with the rehab. You just need to keep doing you bit but also monitoring so you don't overdo it. Also he notes you taken up some general cardio and fitness programs as well."

"I'm already feeling it. Can't say it is always a pleasure but I'm definitely improving. The movement range in my shoulder is increasing daily, and my breathing is quite marked better. I've been running on a treadmill and doing some core and strength conditioning. Kate, my partner, has been helping and guiding.
Terry holds his right hand out for Rick to shake. "I'm satisfied. You're making great progress. I'm going to leave you hear with Paul to go through a few other details.

"So physically you are making great recovery. Robert noted you had a little bit of a setback the first week but you adjusted and it has come good. Is there anything else you'd like to discuss?

"I've been suffering mood swings, some issues sleeping and bad dreams. I have been through some therapy before. I have discussed it with my partner and we think I may have a form of post-traumatic stress."

"It is not uncommon. You said you have had previous therapy. Do you have a mental health practitioner Rick?"

"Actually I do. Doctor Sam Clemens. Would you believe he's my mother's doctor and her recommendation too? Thank God for doctor patient confidentiality. But he has been good for me on previous occasions. I saw her last night with my partner."

"That's good Rick. Doctor Clemens is very highly regarded. I'll be blunt. The work you do does leave you vulnerable to higher than averages chances of mental health episodes. The sort of scenarios encountered by first responders and specialists such as homicide are not dissimilar in terms of mental health impact to that encountered in combat zones. And although I am a surgeon not a physiatrist I do unfortunately have a lot of experience in the mental as well as physical trauma members of our armed services suffer."

"Episodes? Is that the medical term?"

"Actually no Rick but it is a good coverall as every individual reacts differently even to the same stimuli. You've actually written about this in some of your novels. Derrick Storm has suffered post action reactions and whilst I wouldn't ascribe them as full blown post-traumatic stress disorder, what you wrote is generally accurate for coping mechanisms for healthy humans. Suppression or worse trying to ignore the symptoms is never good in the long run."

Rick was pleasantly surprised that the doctor has read some of his work. Not from an egotistical point but as a means of evaluating what he does for a career, and well maybe a little bit of self-satisfaction. He respects professionals, and those in such careers as medicine more so. Even practitioners like Josh Davidson. He may have resented the man for his relationship with Kate but even he had been able to separate that jealousy from the dedication and results the doctor achieved, although he would only ever admit under pain of death that he had more than googled the doctor when news of the relationship first broke.

"Sam, sorry Doctor Clemens, has recommended I consider seeing a specialist with experience of post-combat disorders. I'm not entirely sure. I don't think I need to but sometimes I second guess."

"Well Rick, it certainly is a possibility but it has to be your choice, guided by your therapist. I am not qualified in that area so I can only add that you should consider your mental well being in combination with your physical health. Given you progress on the latter, and your prior history, I believe the prognosis should be excellent with proper treatment.

"That said we will like to see you again so early in the New Year. We can set up an appointment now or you can call once you have a date and time that suits you."

"I'll do it now. My schedule is largely free.

Rick stands and extends his right hand. "Thanks Doc. I never wanted to find out first hand but I am
grateful for your expertise and dedication."

The answering hand shake is firm, the smile genuine, but the eyes of the combat surgeon reflect
that not every one of his patients made it. "Thank you too Rick. Nothing pleases me more than
seeing a patient fully recovered, or on the road to that, and enjoying life."

"I am. Enjoying life. It's pretty damn good right now. Rehab excluded, and you can tell my
torturer-in-chief that!"

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**Homicide, 12th Precinct.**

It was amazing how quickly the feeling of familiarity returned on exiting the elevator. There are
few people about and those that are simply nod in acknowledgement. She is grateful for the low-
key greeting and strides towards the cluster of desks.

She spied the empty desks. No sign of Ryan or Espo. Even from the shadow of the elevator she can
tell hers is not unchanged. She had no right to expect anything else, still the burn of the sensation
perplexes her. She knows about the two temporary transfers in to the Precinct to bolster the team.
Of course they would use her desk, space was always at a premium – Rick had never rated more
than a chair beside her desk. Of course they wouldn't change that now if they could avoid it. The
proximity is them.

As she gets closer she realizes that her normally composed and orderly desk is no longer so. Food
wrappers, notepads and pens mar the surface. No sign of her name plate either. Before she can
instinctively sweep it clean, Rosco – one of the semi-permanently assigned to homicide uniforms
(she was one of those once) – wanders over and explains that she had missed Ryan and Esposito by
about ten minutes as they had left on some follow-up work for a cold case. His interruption takes
her focus off attempting to clean her not-hers-for-now desk. Accepting that it is not hers or even
her missing partner's desk, she is relieved to still see his chair sitting there.

She is here today for a different purpose, and reminding herself of that she looks towards Captain
Gates' office. The door is closed, and well she is quite a bit earlier than originally agreed owning to
their snap decision not to have her wait with Rick at the hospital.

Rosco's interaction seems to have shaken a few people loose and she handles a bunch of polite
inquiries as to Castle's health and recovery as she waits for the Captain. Through her window the
Captain notices her presence and nods her head in acknowledgement. It is not an invitation to enter
yet.

Fortunately it does not take long for Gates to drop her glasses down her nose, stand and wave her in
with a small smile.

From force of habit she knocks even if she does not wait for permission to enter.

"Detective. Hello. Close the door please."

Gates gestures at the chair in front of her desk and Beckett resists the urge to sink into it for the
moment. This is not Montgomery. There isn't the years of trust and earned respect. Yet. The
Captain has been growing on her slowly. She'll admit to being reluctant to give the seemingly by-
the-book woman a chance until she had realized how unfair that was of her. Still it is definitely the
slowly thaw rather than a rapid appreciation but she thinks both of them understand each other, and
at some level appreciate that.
"How is Castle doing Kate?" The Captains casual use of Rick's surname only and her first name still sits awkwardly in her senses. Almost alien after more than a year of mostly by-the-book and seemingly stubborn adherence to that, she finds that she accepts the Captain's different approach, even welcomes it.

"Rick is improving slowly." She'll use his first name, clearly denoting their very personal relationship. She'll not hide anymore and will challenge anyone, Gates included, on his, and their behalf. "He has a hospital check-up today which is the main reason we're in town."

"And you are not with him?"

"No Sir. There was a large cluster of press waiting so we made a decision that Rick would go in alone and I would come here earlier than expected. I know Rick will be disappointed to not come here today."

The Captain's gentle nod indicates the chair again, and this time she drops into the chair at edge of the Captain's desk without waiting further for an invitation which would surely be a command. She sits up straight, strangely comforted by the contact with and support of the wooden arms.

"How is the Federal work going Detective?" The Captain changes subject.

"Very low key at the moment Sir. Mainly background research and some analysis. No field work obviously. Could I just say that I appreciate your support and backing on that." The tilt of the head is all the acknowledgement she expected or gets.

"Have you had time to commence your studies?" And again.

"Yes Sir. I started in full more than a week ago."

"Good. I believe these might be useful. I certainly found them so." The manila folder the Captain advances contains a moderately thick stack of sheets, and Kate takes the folder from the Captain.

"Thank you Sir. I appreciate the extra help. I will say that quite a bit of the material is awfully dry. At least so far."

"The nature of bureaucracy Kate. Still I found these notes to be quite helpful. Although it has been a number of years since my own examination, the syllabus material has not been significantly changed so these should be more than adequate with no need to be updated." She leans forward as she finishes her sentence, the glasses resting on the bridge of her nose, eyes locked on her subordinate.

"Look Kate there is a lot riding on this. More than perhaps you realize." The Captain's continued use of her given name was more than enough indication of that.

"Sir?"

"If you don't pass well and I mean really pass well, then you will in all likelihood not be offered the position and there will be further ramifications."

"I don't understand Sir." She begins to think she does, but wants Gates to spell it out.

Sitting back a little, Gates continues. "If you don't get your new position then it may prove impossible to get Mister Castle back at the Twelfth or the NYPD in any form of active role." The Captain is unusually expressive, a hand pushing back at a stray hairs beside her left ear. Kate has shot upright in the chair as her Captain continues.
"Much as the other officers, even myself, want him back, there is a strong argument from One PP for him not to be allowed back in any active role.

"His shooting prompted a major review of the situation that began under Montgomery and was never properly tracked or reviewed. At least that how it is being seen from many at One PP. The legal ramifications. The risk management. His out of left field antics. Some of his associations. Whilst the Chief of Detectives is supportive of your partnership and the performance, there are significant voices against. The Deputy Commissioner for one, despite being a friend, and well how-shall-I-say-it the far less warm Human Resources, Legal, and Internal Affairs." Gates takes a moment. "Well let's be diplomatic and say they remain unpersuaded at this time.

"Also even with exemplary test scores I am confident you will achieve, there will be others pointing at your recent disciplinary history which has been aired publicly – wrong I know, but still it is out there. It is no secret that the Department is slowing promotions. The entire City is, across the whole public service. Budget cuts of course. So there are already a pool of successful candidates treading water without a post. Quite a few more senior than yourself. Also many with existing command experience. And cleaner records. Some would be asking why you get special treatment."

"I don't want special treatment Sir."

"I do understand that Detective." She purses her lips. "But you have already received that. You continued partnership with Mister Castle, your unprecedented leave to assist with his recovery. These are both very much unique events. Talented as you are, even with your team's outstanding clearance rates, there is a strong case against you following your suspension Kate. You're an excellent detective but you went right off the rails with that one. It was personal to you, I understand that, but you ignored the chain of command, the field manual, hell even common sense. Only luck prevented you and Detective Esposito from being killed, and a civilian was killed by the suspect. Most cops are lucky to survive that, let alone be considered for promotion so soon."

"Sir."

Gates nods in recognition of the determination and contrition in her detective's voice.

"So you need to ace this exam. You need to keep your nose clean and stay out of the press if at all possible. At least restrict it to Richard Castle-centric fluff if you must."

*Oh that had to be killing Gates at least a little.* She fights the grin down. The Captain's slight twitch indicates that she may not have been entirely successful.

"Also keep you other job out of sight. I supported it as a way of getting you a legal carry permit as quickly as possible. We don't need any word at all of Agent Beckett breaking. But I supported it as a temporary measure. To be honest I want you back with the NYPD. It would be a great loss for you to move elsewhere. This was very much the argument from the Chief of Detectives and myself for granting your absence."

"Sir, I don't have any plans to leave the NYPD." She wonders what else to share with the Captain. Maybe now is the time to be building those bonds and trust.

"It transpires that having a relationship with Rick precludes me from the sort of career options with the federal government that I would aspire to. Also he wouldn't be able to work with me, as partners. It is a big part of who were are, and we both do not want that to stop. Somehow with the NYPD we are able to make it work. Or at least in the past. Obviously with full disclosure this may be more of a challenge in the future with the public and press watching but I hope that it doesn't
impact the results we manage to achieve."

She takes a breath, then charges straight into it.

"But just so I am clear on that matter, there is never an option that I will choose my career over Rick." That Gates does not look surprised at her pronouncement makes her wonder just how much the Captain could read from her. "That said neither of us want to quit at this time. So it is fully my intention to continue to serve the citizens of this city in the NYPD. *For the time being. Until kids, wanderlust, retirement.*

"Even so Detective, whilst you will be welcomed back you must understand that there is no guarantee regarding your promotion, or Mister Castle's full return. By that I mean the NYPD will not turn away the publicity opportunity Mister Castle represents but permitting him to have an active role in cases and notably fieldwork may be severely curtailed. The Chief of Detectives might be overruled. But ultimately the first barrier is your promotion. Competition for the reduced places is fierce. If you are not promoted then the status for our consultant will be all the more tenuous. Whatever happens I trust you won't take any presumptuous decisions."

"Sir?"

"Beckett, last time you resigned. Started a clandestine relationship with a colleague, almost painful as it was for me to label Mister Castle as such back then. And you deliberately hid it all from your Captain. For some months."

"Oh." She takes a deep breath. "No Sir. I guess not. We can't really hide it now can we? The press and all. Plus I've learnt my lesson Sir. Secrets, or trying to keep them, haven't ended well for my family. So I think it is safe to say that I won't repeat that mistake."

"I trust that you will. Very good Detective that will be all."

Dismissed Beckett is up and moving, manila folder curled in her left arm, but before Kate can open the door, the Captain adds one final thing.

"Oh Detective, a belated Happy Thanksgiving to you and your family."

"Thank you Sir. The same to yours."

Having finished his appointments, the hospital offered him the sanctuary of a small office to wait in with Kamal and James in attendance again. This time they are much more relaxed.

He messaged Kate to let her know he was done. Whilst waiting for Beckett to call back, Rick dialed Time and Motion. He wanted to swap their current SUV for another vehicle as the Jeep was blown after all the press caught him getting out of it earlier. The number plates would be all over the press. In a matter of minutes a swap out at the loft was arranged for tomorrow to time with their planned departure back to the Hamptons. This would give them a decoy as hopefully any press would follow the blacked outed Jeep and they would be able travel in anonymity in the replacement vehicle.

Her own errands done, Kate finds her herself at a loose end. After being in their own private bubble in the Hamptons suddenly New York seems so much more imposing. She wasn't keen to leave the familiar comfort of the Twelfth for the street.

So she made herself a coffee in the break room and hung out hoping that Maybe she'd catch the
Boys before she had to leave. There were some cursory exchanges with a few more she knew before her photo vibrated with a message from Rick.

'Done. Pick up? xRx'

Rather than message him back, she called.

Heading out in bullpen Kate caught the Captain's eye as she headed towards the elevator. The smile and nod are more than enough acknowledgement for her. It also fires her determination to ace the exams, not only for herself and for Rick, but for Gates and the Twelfth too.

As agreed she picked Rick up from the Hospital loading bay where he was waiting with two uniformed security guards. Before he stepped into the SUV Rick shook both by the hands and exchanged a few words. Kate liked this side of him. The genuinely nice guy who could charm and put people from all walks at ease.

The choice of the loading docks was in the hope of some privacy. One run in with the press was enough for now. Even using the back way was not with incident as they caught sight of a photographer with a long telephoto lens rushing towards the service area even as Kate turned out onto the street. There were a couple of flashes but the tinted privacy windows would ensure that nothing was usable.

Then it was back to the Loft to prepare for their belated Thanksgiving celebration.

They had decided on the Friday night rather than the Thursday because of Rick's appointment but it also turned out to be the right choice as Ryan and Esposito had a shift on Thursday night but not the Friday.

Martha was waiting for them when they arrived back home.

She swept first Kate and then her son into tight hugs. The composure of yesterday gone and replaced by an unusual level of emotion, even for someone as dramatic as Rick's mother.

"Oh Richard. Those were such lovely words. I'm so proud of you Son."

"Sorry what words?" She looks from Martha and then to Rick and back to Martha. "What have I missed?" She turns to her boyfriend.

"Ah, the press, well I was going to ignore them and all their stupid questions. But then some asked one I couldn't ignore."

"You spoke to them?"

"I, uh..."

"Richard perhaps we could show Kate instead. I am sure Paula is taking care of it as usual, but I actually recorded it on the news." Martha picks up the universal remote and turns the TV and DVR on. The local news channel comes back up. "Oh look darlings, it's actually on now."

Sure enough the show is coming back from adverts and there on the lead in is a close up of Rick at Bellevue this morning.

'Hello New York. It's Katie Courtney here with all the latest celebrity news from New York and
First up, New York's own crime fighting author and NYPD consultant Richard Castle is back in town for a check-up as part of his recovery following his shooting early last month. Our team was there at Bellevue this morning. There is imagery of the SUV stopping and Rick leaning back into the car, although their kiss is fortuitously hidden from the camera. Dropped off by his girlfriend, NYPD Detective Kate Beckett, Rick Castle takes some time to addresses the media.

The initial shot is of a quite stony-faced Rick heading into the hospital amidst a continuous din of questions. He is almost through the door when he stops and turns, and then speaks, his face no less serious than before.

Kate just sits there stunned. He's done it again. Of course he's good with words but it has always gone beyond the language. It is the content, the context, the phrasing, the nuances that speak directly to her heart. His commitment. First his written words in his novels and now in person.

Throwing herself into motion she is on him in seconds, pulling his head down to meet hers and pressing their lips together.

"I love you Rick."

So there is quite the gang at their home for their belated – by one day only – Thanksgiving celebration.

Clare was a few minutes early accompanied by her surprise guest. As promised one member of the Castle family was very happy. In fact Alexis was overjoyed to find her former bodyguard Jane at the door. Clare was forced to take quickly grab hold of the food Jane was originally carrying as Alexis was dragging Jane off somewhere private before they were even through the door.

Esposito and Lanie came together. Kate wonder if meant they were properly together? Well she was careful not to read anything into it, and would need to scope that one out and get her friend alone. But maybe not tonight.

Ryan and Jenny were there. In their familiar couple mode, never straying far from one another, attentive to each other. It would be vaguely sickening if Kate and Rick didn't put everyone else to shame, even the Ryans.

Talking of couples. Her dad and Val were punctual and also terribly together. It was no longer so odd to her, it seemed almost like a natural pairing. She was not so terribly conflicted by what that meant now.

The only really discordant note was Ryan and Esposito. Whilst it wasn't of the same vibe as seven months ago in the fallout of her suspension there is an undercurrent of tension between them. Neither are saying anything and this time it is Ryan acting the injured party. Damn another thing to sort out. But it clearly wasn't new and Gates hadn't mentioned anything – unlike last time – so maybe it wasn't so bad.

Their feast was a collective effort. Thanks to the coordination efforts of Alexis it came together beautifully.

They started with assorted nibbles provided by Esposito and Lanie, along with three bottles of wine that were strategically hidden from view at the point her Dad would be in the room.
Until he came back in the room and went straight to the hiding place and pulled out one bottle. "I haven't stayed sober because well-meaning people hid the booze from me."

Espo looked a little crestfallen. But her dad simply slapped him on the shoulder and smiled, Val beside him shaking her head in amusement. Despite this, everyone stuck to non-alcoholic drinks throughout the meal.

Despite Jim's insistence that they need not defer to him, the bottles of wine from before were placed in the wine rack for another day. Rick noticing Espo's wince, clearly he spent up a little bit over his usual for the meal. He wouldn't embarrass the man by offering to hand it back. Even Martha abstained. All the time Jim's protests that it wasn't necessary continuing to fall on deaf ears.

For the starter there was roasted pumpkin soup, with a spiced cream and a choice of garlic bread crumbs or gingerbread crumbs courtesy of Martha and Alexis. Rick of course plumped for both toppings!

Jim and Val had brought a white Bean salad with roasted vegetables including pumpkin, garlic, tomatoes, shallots, rosemary & bacon to accompany the main course.

The main course was naturally a moderately huge traditional turkey (organic) with sausage stuffing, cranberry relish, butternut squash, candied carrots (no Brussel sprouts – dear Lord no), and gravy plus biscuits. This came from Rick and Kate with a little help from a nearby restaurant. They have been cooking more but with everything going on in the last twenty-four hours, this was one of those occasions for Rick to play his 'I know a guy' card.

Desert came not only from Ryan and Jenny but also Clare and Jane. There was a pumpkin pie from the Ryans, and a fantastic white chocolate cheesecake with cherries from the two security specialists. Unsurprisingly the pie was Rick's favorite whereas Kate was heavily on the side of the decadent cheesecake. Quite a few dinner goers sampled both on their desert plates but still gave Kate and Rick a moderate amount of grief for feeding each other tasters of the other's desert from their forks.

After dinner they all settled into the main living area where there was a roaring fire and sparkling conversation to keep the atmosphere bouncing along even if all the guests sagged under the weight of their feast.

Rick was in his element, and showed no signs of tiredness whilst jousting verbally with his mother plus Ryan and Esposito who naturally teamed up against Rick despite whatever difference was between them. Both sets of conversations were almost instinctive and their speed of teasing barbs and witty rejoinders kept their audience amused.

Just as at Kate's birthday, Val was a little tentative with this new group. She stayed close to Jim even during the mingling phases but her rapier wit and sharp humor were apparent too. Esposito the unwitting target of several zingers during the course of the evening. Naturally Martha found that hilarious – despite her having been pinged several times just six nights ago at Kate's birthday dinner. Kate marveled at the ability of the woman to bounce back. The Ryans were charmed by the couple, and Kevin actually relaxed enough to call Kate's father by his first name.

For her part Kate didn't move too far from Rick. Snuggled into his side but sharing him with Alexis who appeared torn between her dad and spending time with Jane. The red head breezing over for a quick word or just to experience physical contact with Rick before heading back to wherever Clare and Jane were.
The young personal protection specialist was the quietest member of their dinner party except when she was apart from the group with just Clare and Alexis. With both there was a genuine rapport and obvious friendship. Kate and Rick had both quietly observed the group during the course of the evening. They had been surprised to discover that Jane was actually twenty-five when she looked barely old enough to graduate high school. She had a first college degree and was ultimately undecided on her long term goals although the law enforcement was a strong option. She had already passed up one opportunity to join the FBI. Both were keen to learn the story but Jane was un-forthcoming and whilst it would appear that whilst both Clare and Alexis knew neither was sharing. Kate let it go, and persuaded Rick to do the same.

The evening is drawing to a close and Kate still doesn't have the information she wants on either Lanie and Espo or indeed Espo and Ryan. The Ryan's departed first with Jenny blithely stating that Kevin's duties for the day were not done. The rest of the room at least had to good grace to not laugh until the front door had closed.

At least Espo relaxed a bit with Kevin's departure. Unless he was left alone with Lanie. Kate really needed to talk to her friend. She had only been away a couple of weeks and clearly missed some important and possibly weird developments.

Clare and Jane have disappeared off upstairs with Alexis. Lanie seems to be happy chatting away to Martha with Espo floating around between the groups. Rick of course somehow remains the center of attention at least for Kate anyway.

Lanie appears determined not to talk to Kate alone tonight, and she begins to despair of getting any information when she is confronted.

It's Espo of course.

He corners her one of the few times she's away from Rick. Her boyfriend in a huddle with the Val and her Dad recounting some tale she's not sure either should hear, and she had just taken a comfort break in the en-suite. Before she could re-enter the main living room Espo is in her face, closer than he would normally dare. She'll have to work on that when she gets back and reclaim her earned space and that edge of respect. Despite their friendship, Javi sometimes assumes too much.

"How is he?" That is not a simple question.

"Struggling a little Espo. Physio is hard. But he's committed. Doing well."

"Beckett." There is so much more in her name. The years, the experiences, the honesty that comes from being partners, seeing the other under stress or worse. He's calling her on her omissions. He's done that before, but she was too late that time.

"He has a form of PTSD," she admits. "A couple of bad turns, one pretty bad morning."

"Is he..?" He never finishes speared by the look in her eyes.

"Oh come on Espo. I can look after myself. I don't need protecting from Rick."

"Are you sure? He could hurt you Beckett. Not mean to, but he could hurt you."

"I know could but he won't. Not ever. But it's nothing more than words."

"Listen to yourself."
"I know his Espo. We wouldn't, couldn't. And he's getting treatment. We went to see his therapist yesterday."

"Oh." Espo deduces the full meaning of that. Not Rick's first rodeo in a manner of speaking.

Espo sometimes underplays Rick's abilities and contributions unlike Ryan who was always more readily accepting of the man and his talents. But Kate can hardly call him out given she was pretty much the same or worse especially given that she did it on a personal level as well for far too long. Not anymore.

"Yeah, but that stays between us. If Rick wants to share with others then we'll let him make that decision."

"Understood Beckett. You know I, well we, we're only looking out for you."

"I don't need you to go all big brother for me Espo. Not with him. Never with him."

"Okay." Hands up, it's almost like they're at work back in the bullpen. "But Ryan and I can still mess with him?"

"God." Shaking her head in mild disbelief. "Yes, you boys can, once he is back mind you. But you can still mess with him."

He turns to leave and Kate catches his forearm. "Espo, thanks for caring."

"De nada."

She only pauses for a second to consider if she should ask what's going on, she no sooner gets a fragment out, "Hey Espo what's going on with...." but he's already gone heading back to the remnants of the party. She's pretty sure he heard her too.

"Damn!"

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note

10 chapters to go.

It will be completed.

Your support, reviews, thoughts and comments are most appreciated.
Chapter Summary

After their brief return to New York, and their belatedly celebration of Thanksgiving with the 'team', it is time for our dynamic duo to head back to the Hamptons.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Loft, Saturday morning.

Kate was up early.

It hadn't been a late night despite their festivities and Rick had crashed as soon as he flopped down on the mattress, the events of the previous few days having drained the incomplete reserves of his still recovering stamina. Kate had joined him just as soon as she had stripped her makeup off, and together they had enjoyed an undisturbed night.

She had left Rick asleep in their bed. She liked that term. Their. Especially as it related to what they were becoming. Already it was so much more than she could have hoped for. Them. It was personal and possessive. Most definitely them. As she exited his office and passed through the main area on her way to the kitchen and blessed caffeine, she mused that if this was back in the Hamptons the kitchen would be the only other warm room in the house aside from the master bedroom. She wanted to do something to fix that, and soon. Here in New York, in their usual home, she could wear her cotton pyjamas and light dressing gown and not feel any chill, even in winter. Back in the Hamptons it would be thick socks, her woollen pj's and one of Rick's thick dressing gowns before she would set foot outside the main bedroom. Either that or a sprint to the kitchen.

But usual priorities first. Fresh coffee and then maybe the weekend papers. Some peace to read without Motor-mouth's running commentary.

As she was indeed still on her own, she tried it out a few words audibly.

"Theirs."

"Ours."

"Us."

She loved all those terms. Of course she was canny enough to keep the exact degree of her sappiness and the associated infatuation with the terminology of their relationship to herself. Her partner knew her pretty well, and that knowledge was getting deeper every day but a girl's got to have a few harmless secrets, doesn't she? God she hopes they are secret. Of the harmless sort. Not the relationship and life endangering kind. Those they had agreed were never secret anymore. Regardless if he were to find out, well it was the sort of thing he could – still – get insufferably smug about. Not to mention the teasing. The irrepressible child was never too far away.

Still their mutual infatuation wasn't enough to keep her in bed with him this morning. She was
restless. Full of energy and the need to do things. She was careful to confirm her own conclusion that she was in no way bored, especially of Rick or them, simply in need of something to do. She just didn't do idle well. Not in her nature. Never really had been except for a brief period of listlessness as a teenager that her mom had snapped her out of.

God she missed her mom. Some days more than others. She hadn't been away from home long enough – just one semester - to get into a routine of calling regularly. But she would give almost anything to be able to turn back the clock and have done so. To have been more attentive and communicative. Her mom hadn't pestered her about it. Indeed Kate had overhead her mom reassure her dad that it was just a phase and that they would resume that closeness of her pre-teen years in time. Time they never had.

Looking back through the kitchen she could see the first signs of dawn fighting the night sky out of the Loft's windows, she pushed those dark thoughts aside. The passage of time, therapy, and most of all the man who she planned to spend the rest of her life with, made that task more straightforward, achievable and believable than it once was. It helped that she could focus on their future and not the past. What she had not expected was the gift of being able to think of her mom and not have the memories so totally overwhelmed by loss and bitterness of the tragedy.

There were a handful of dishes and jars out of place in the kitchen. She did think about cleaning but it all honesty there wasn't too much left to tidy up after their festivities yesterday. Between their household and their party guests, a quick burst of activity and a commercial sized dish washer had taken care of most things. The large refrigerator was near bursting with left overs. They would take some back with them but it would appear than Alexis would need to take some back to her dorms, and even then some would go likely to waste unless donated.

Of course there was no sign of Martha. It was far too early and anyway she had the same aversion to domestic chores that Rick did for police paperwork. Deciding to emulate her, Kate grabbed the weekend papers from the front door, and returned to the kitchen. Fixing some fresh coffee, she grateful that both the Loft and the Hamptons had the same machines. And that she had paid attention some months ago when Rick found her failing to produce her morning fix, stubbornly ignoring the offer of help from Alexis, and she finally let him show her how to drive the device. Of course his hands on demonstration was very hands on and had Alexis retreating in exaggerated disgust and ordering them to ensure the coffee machines and the kitchen was sanitary before her next visit.

She was less certain of when Alexis might put in an appearance that morning. As a college student the young woman was starting to keep those odd hours that many did based around their class schedules and coursework submissions. And social lives of course.

Finishing her coffee, Kate grabbed her yoga mat from the storage by the laundry and ran through a basic set of stretches and exercises. She was just finishing up, and thinking about more coffee when Alexis drifted into the kitchen.

Glancing at the wall clock she sees it is 8.02 so Alexis probably set her alarm. Exchanging greetings Alexis by means of a waft of her arm and some disjointed mumbling, Alexis helps Kate locate some of the hard to find storage places for the few remaining dishes and jars she hadn't yet found the homes for. But before Kate can strike up more than a perfunctory conversation, Alexis is disappearing back upstairs with some buttered toast and a coffee muttering about the need for study and then more sleep.

Kate didn't mind the solitude, and taking her second cup of coffee – she would need a fresh pot when Rick awoke - sat back at the breakfast bar luxuriating in the warmth of the loft, ignoring the
The comfort of this home had been the trigger for a thought she had been kicking around for the last two weeks. And now she was decided.

If they were going to stay in the Hamptons for much more of winter then something would need to be done about the heating, or more precisely the lack of warmth in the sea front property. Yes she knows it is principally a seasonal residence but she's been freezing her Hennie off, and the heart of winter hasn't even arrived. She loved New York and the city and this loft were her home, but the Hamptons was where they needed to be for Rick's recovery. Plus the relative isolation, or at least distance from pretty much everyone else, gave them lots of alone time.

Sipping her coffee she kicks over ideas before padding into the office to retrieve her iPad. Time for some research.

By 8:55 she was decided on a course of action, and was also fed up of waiting for her partner. Time to roust him and get the day going properly. She had a little more than ninety minutes until she was due to meet Lanie for a private heart-to-heart conversation that she had managed to persuade her friend to agree to last night. So she just has time for a shower and quick bite with her boyfriend. She would hit him up with her idea once she was back from her meeting with Lanie, and he was full of fatherly bonhomie from his planned father-daughter morning.

Abandoning her breakfast plate and empty coffee mug, Kate brushed kisses across Rick's mouth and stubbled cheek before shooting off to meet Lanie with her hasty farewell to the bemused man still echoing as the door closed behind her.

Chuckling to himself Rick clears the breakfast plates and then heads for the shower. He is spending the morning with Alexis. Something they had agreed last night, some rare father-daughter time before he and Kate returned to the Hamptons, and Alexis headed back to the Columbia dorms.

They have large mugs sit steaming before them along with a huge triple chocolate and hazelnut muffin to share, plus glasses of water. So no reason at all for the staff to interrupt them for some time.

Kate had fought the urge to have another coffee and is in danger of inhaling the wicked hot chocolate steaming in front of her. Lanie's mug contains full strength hot chocolate fortified with extra sugar, Kate's is a sugar-free hot chocolate and no marshmallows – she can almost hear Rick's cry of 'blasphemy!' - and Lanie usually doesn't take extra so something is obviously not right to trigger the need for a sugar overload when combined with the calorie-laden muffin she so vocally championed when they were ordering.

This makes her mind up. Kate is not pulling her punches this morning. She was diplomatic last night so as not to provoke her guests. That is not required this morning.

Looking her best friend in the eye, "Lanie, can you please tell me what's going on?"
"With what?" Oh, she not getting out of this, Kate knows every avoidance technique, mastered most of them herself.


"And I know I've been away with Rick but I don't want you to think I've forgotten about you. We've still managed to have spoken a lot recently and you haven't given a hint that there were problems. And I am sorry, truly, if I missed something. But last night it became really apparent that there are issues going on for you, and I want to help if I can, and at least understand what is up or down with my best friend."

Silence. Guilt? What?

"Lanie?"

Her best friend's face crumples.

"Oh God Kate! It's all messed up." Lanie almost sobs as she gets the words out. Kate is almost relieved that something is actually wrong, and that it wasn't just her radar being off. Still a start it may be, but it is hardly illuminating. This is going to be hard work.

"Okay. This is me returning one of many favours I owe you for providing a friendly ear over the years. And I'll do it without the told you so's that peppered our chats after I finally saw sense with Rick." That admission falls flat with not even a flicker of response. But she waits. Years of interrogations have shown how patience can be rewarded.

After taking a good draft from her mug and hand wavering just a little near the muffin Lanie finally speaks. "Javi finished with Tori."


"Yes. I did want the opportunity. And I didn't want him dating anyone else. That night after the shooting well we just ended up in bed. All the good things we had before were there. He understood me, and I understood him. We spoke some but a lot of it was non-verbal too. We know each other. It was nice. Comfortable. Comforting. The sex was good too. Not that it was ever a problem. And afterwards we cuddled and slept together. Like at the beginning. It felt natural.

"But it didn't last more than a few days. Work got busy for both of us. But that was fine we understand that bit of our lives. And yet somehow we drifted apart so quickly. I know he didn't like the revelations about his suspension. I supported him, told him as much but he went all insular and macho. You know 'GI-Javi' and well Girlfriend you know how much I don't like that version of him. Eventually he snapped out of it but that renewed connection was not the same since then.

"And now when he's with me – which isn't often - it's so awkward. More than. So much tension. And not the good kind. More like you and Rick after the Mayor's case. Or just like pretty much any time before you got your heads of your behinds and into each other, especially after that bombing case."

Ouch! Lanie's not pulling any punches herself.

"He's angry and frustrated a lot of the time, and even though it is not directed at me – 'cause you know I wouldn't abide that – well that impacts us."
"And last night it wasn't just you with Javi either Lanie. So what's going on with him and Ryan? Why is Ryan so pissed? I could feel the edge between them, and I think only Jenny's presence kept it civil. In fact they were more than on edge last night. I can't remember Ryan being so obviously upset with Espo. Ever."

"It's all on Javi. His performance review was not great to put it mildly. Between the suspension and the press-leans he feels he is at a dead end for advancement where he is. He's looking at options outside the Twelfth, and even outside of the NYPD. Of course Javi didn't tell his partner. Not a thing. Ryan found this out from the Taylor Matthews lead. Being Ryan when he found out, he tried the quiet approach but got nothing so he forced the issue for once. But when they went for a beer to discuss it, Javi pretty much told Ryan it was none of his business. And then left after a single beer."

*Oh shit.* She looks at her friend's face. *Or Lanie's business obviously judged on her demeanour.*

"Oh God. This is my fault."

"What!? You've been with Rick. How can this be your fault Kate?"

"Our suspension over my shooter. Javi backed me and I let him get caught up in my crusade. I got him suspended Lanie." *and damn near killed*, "That's a pretty big black mark on a cops career especially if a civilian dies and the guy gets away. And then the negative stuff from the press leaks targeting me. That must be what it is. And much as I would like to say it doesn't matter I can so see the promotions board holding him back because of the suspension and the press. Then to top it I am still put forward for promotion and he obviously isn't."

"Oh Kate. He's a big boy and he made that stupid decision to back you up on his own, but somehow you both didn't die. Gates punished you both. You even quit – briefly - but you moved past it.

"He's actively talking about quitting and going into some form of private security. But Taylor Matthews have already turned him down. Did you know about that, or have anything to do with it?"

*Oh God.* "Lanie of course not. Taylor Matthews is a temporary thing. It was mainly just to get me a concealed carry permit whilst I am on leave from the NYPD as I don't have a concealed carry license of my own. But that's meant to be a secret.

"But I never knew about any approach to them. Plus I am low down on the totem pole for the organisation. My official role is analyst."

"I believe you Kate. But the whole Taylor Matthews shooting him down? Well that just made him worse, more convinced he needed to do something. Take control of his destiny."

"And he didn't tell Ryan."

There are a hell of a lot of echoes of hers and Rick's past failure to communicate. But that was all history, well in the past. She could not, or at least tries not to imagine a situation now where the two of them did not talk things through.

She can understand Javi's position. She herself had not infrequently thought about the next steps, of a career outside the NYPD. Once she been approached about a federal job not long after making detective following a multi-agency case that had ended well. She had turned it down flat at the time and given it little thought except with some of their cross agency connections that came up
during the last few years. A year or so later during a private moment, Montgomery had told her he knew about the offer as the feds had given him the heads up, but he had trusted her to make the right choice.

"Do you want me to speak to him, Lanie?"

"No. Please don't. It will make him even more mule-headed that usual."

"Alright, but Rick and I know firsthand how failure to communicate can make things complicated. And it doesn't have to be that way. It shouldn't be that way."

Lanie's glower gives her no uncertain idea about how her friend thinks. She should know that anyway after all the pep talks about her relationships. So that subject is closed for now.

"I think he is still feeling slighted about the transfers in and how one of them is in charge of the team. I don't think the new guys are being jerks or anything but is just another issue for Javi."

"What about Gates?"

"The Captain? I don't think she knows but from what I can gather she has actually been very supportive. This is all on Javi Kate. Not anyone else. Not you. Not Rick. Not Ryan. Not the Captain, or even the NYPD. This is Javi taking some limited information and interpreting in his own special way. This is all on him."

"Any yet you still want to try."

"I do. Help me, I do want to try with him. I have my doubts and I think we'll maybe not make it, hopefully at least end up friends with a past, but I can't not know."

"I just don't want you to get hurt Lanes."

"I'm a big girl Kate. I don't think it could hurt any more than where I am now. Anyway I don't want to talk about men anymore. Well except maybe about your dad. Actually more indirectly than that."

"My dad?"

"What I want to know is when did your dad start dating Valerie Wilson? The Valerie Wilson."

"The Valerie Wilson? You know who she is?" She'll deny Googling the woman herself. Unless of course someone presents her Internet search logs as a record, then she might have to fold.

"Duh. Honoured by the American Bar Association, twice nominated for lawyer of the year in New York. A promising civil rights lawyer who handled her own first divorce and discovers she is even better at that than her previous speciality. Moves to New York and within a decade is among the top five divorce lawyers in the city."

"And she's dating your Dad?"

"They work at the same firm. But you would know that, right?" Her friend nods.

"Anyway why do you know all this information about her?" Slightly creepy Lanie.

"Years back my uncle Francis – you remember him? – he was a civil rights lawyer too. And it turns out he was a friend of her family. Hell we even have some pictures of her family and my uncle with my mom and dad. She is much younger then – even before starting out in the profession. I don't
know her personally, well not before yesterday, and my uncle didn't keep in touch after her parents passed on but he and my parents still remember her. She was very impressive even at an early age.

"Wow. It's like that six degrees of Kevin Bacon thing."

"Hush. I want to know. It is serious? I mean dating and everything?"

"And everything. You want to know how serious? Val came to my family birthday dinner. They stayed in the same bedroom in the Inn where we had the meal."

"Damn. And you were okay with that? What was Rick thinking?" The questions fire back and Kate responds just as rapidly.

"Actually it's all right. Rick was very considerate. It took me a while to adjust and get my head round it. But only because it is not my Mom. Nothing else.

"But my Dad deserves some happiness and she makes him happy. Turns out that they fought the attraction for some time before giving in."

Lanie actually laughs. "Now doesn't that sound familiar? Run in the family does it?"

"Lanie!" She wafts a fist in her friend's direction but the punch is barely a tap.

"Maybe a little," she concedes. "I like her, and she reminds me a bit of my mom too. Smart, a little sassy, logical, a bit assertive maybe, and she obviously cares for my dad. That's all I can ask for."

"Oh look at you being all sensible about relationships."

She kicks Lanie under the table. Harder than the punch as the wince certifies.

"Oww! Alright. Enough." Lanie has her hands up in surrender, and launches into a new topic of her own.

"How's Rick? And not the polite party version from last night."

"Getting better. There is a way to go, and he has motor control issues in his right hand. He still can't type or use a pen or mouse for any real time. He's not said anything but he is a little frustrated about it."

Her friend's eyebrow twitches. "And you're helping with that."

"Yes. But no more details of that." Lanie looks a tad disappointed.

"What else Kate? I swear the two of you are worse than dead bodies to get useful information out of.

"He's had some nightmares. We both have."

Lanie stays silent. There is little she can say to that. Her friend has battled these demons even before they met. It is something that Lanie knows Kate had dealt with mostly alone with the occasional bout of therapy. Until Richard Castle came along.

"They are getting better – for both of us - but we recognised that we both should seek some counselling.

"That's not good Kate. Sorry I mean it is good that you are getting counselling but it is not good
"But it is getting better. It turns out we've been through this before, but separately. And this time, well now we're together and being honest with each other and communicating."

"I am so pleased for your Sweetie. You both deserve it. What you don't deserve is how hard it has been for the two of you."

"I know. I still want to kick myself for taking so long to see what was waiting for me. Who was waiting for me. I feel I don't deserve him sometimes."

"That's not true and you know it. And what about the other times?"

"Oh I still want to shoot him, sometimes, just a flesh wound maybe. But most of the time it is just so natural that I can't think of any reason I was so afraid of us."

"I'm gonna have to go with 'Told you so' Kate."

"I'll cop to that," as she reaches for a chuck of the muffin before Lanie finishes it.

"So you're heading back to the Hamptons?"

"Yes, this afternoon. Rick has therapy on Monday. Well most days actually. And I've got to knuckle down and study for the exam."

"When is the exam?"

"Not sure yet Lanes. I got an email last week saying that the December sitting was postponed. It may well be in the New Year."

"Will you be back for Christmas? What exactly are your plans?"

"I don't know. We haven't talked about it yet. We may stay at the Hamptons. A lot will depend on Rick." She suddenly realises she has an opportunity here to add another point to her case for installing heating in the Hamptons. "If we are at the Hamptons, perhaps you can come up. Everyone can come. There is plenty of room."

"Well I would like to see this grand beach house of his."

"Oh Lanie you have no idea."

"Well I would if someone shared with me. You know full disclosure Girlfriend."

"I've already shared as much as I will and anyway haven't you already see the goods." Whoops perhaps she shouldn't have said that whilst Lanie had a mouthful of muffin. The errant flying choc chip missed her though.

"Not nice Kate. Not nice." She frowns, "Don't smirk, it's not becoming."

At Kate refusal to drop her beaming smile, "You haven't told him have you?"

"Oh no. I'm not sure how he'd actually take it. Probably embarrassed."

"I used to reckon he would be smug about it, most men would be, but he's not really that guy is he?"
"No. I just wish it hadn't taken me so long to see that. Sure he has a life in the public eye but it is on the whole fairly low key except when doing book publicity." *Or getting shot is left unsaid.*

"What about Christmas? You normally work it."

"I don't know. I don't think I'll be back on active duty by then, and maybe it is time to change things. Make new traditions, perhaps revive some old ones. He and my Dad get on pretty well. Too well to be honest."

"That's because they both love you."

"That but my Dad is letting slip about a few too many of my teenage adventures. Sometimes without Rick begging for them."

"You're in so much trouble Kate. And you know what? I don't think you mind one bit."

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**The Loft.**

The movie runs in the background, ignored as the two occupants of the sofa talk.

"You spent a lot of time with Jane last night."

"And Clare."

"Yeah. And Clare." He'll concede that. He knows that he has nothing to be concerned about but he can play it along a little.

"What?" Her eye brow arches. "Really!?" Shakes her head. "No, you can't be worried about me and Jane?" She sounds rightly incredulous. She should be. They both know it.

He shakes his head, almost anxious to dispel any suspicion. He just wants her to be happy, and safe, and whoever does that he doesn't mind if it is male or female. She knows this too.

"And you can't be worried about Clare. I've known her for years. She's more like an Aunt."

"I know Alexis. It wasn't your sexuality or virtue I was concerned with." His daughter's left eyebrow arches.

"And anyway even you failed with Clare."

*Ouch that was a low blow.* "What!?" A glob of his spittle actually sails past Alexis' shoulder. Her eyes go wide.

"Clare told me."

"Told you what?" He gasps out.

"Jezz Dad!" She looks at him in curiosity, seemingly realising there is more to the story. "Clare told me she's never been with a man. Not even you. Although I am not entirely comfortable with the implications of the last part."

"Oh." He relaxes just a little. Still his dating life is not something we wants to discuss with his daughter. Especially his past dating life. Notably the failures or the frequency on occasion. Especially now.
"But she did mention something about a Top Gun moment."

"Fuck!"

"Dad!" His daughter scolds him. "But she didn't explain any more. Obviously there is a tale based on your reaction." She waits expectantly.

"If there was a story," and his daughter huffs in disbelief, "it would be one I am never sharing with you." He states with a degree of finality. "Besides I've never told Kate." He mutters.

"Never told Kate what Dad?"

Shit! He said that last bit out loud.

"Nothing."

"Oh come on you can't both leave me with teasers and then not tell the story!"

"Oh yes I can.

"I'll ask Grams."

Whew. Safe. For once his mother should be entirely clueless. He however, cannot keep that little victory to himself as apparently the relief was all too apparent.

"Grams doesn't know does she?"

He gives in and his smirk is all the answer he gives and the resultant sigh of exasperation is victory in itself.

"I just like her Dad." Ah back on subject. He can at least tease her. Perhaps he shouldn't.

At his facial movements, she pushes him. "Not like that!" She slaps his chest for good measure. "Plus she has a boyfriend. Long term."

"I know." Again with the eyebrow. "You really didn't think that I would have all the background on the person guarding my daughter? The most precious and important thing in my life?"

The slightly abashed nod concedes this. She would sometimes chide him about his over-protectiveness, notably when he overstepped the mark with the tracking app and a few other occasions but not so-secretly she loved that about him too.

"She's already graduated but she's still closer to my age. She's like a mentor to me. I know she started as my bodyguard, or close protection agent, or whatever you want to call it. But she quickly became a friend. It helps that she understands the world you and Kate work in. I can talk to her when I can't, well, um, talk to you."

"Thanks awfully Pumpkin."

"That's not what I meant and you know it Dad. And the same goes for Kate."

"Charming. Kind of glad Kate isn't here to hear this."

"She already has. Plus we talk about other things. We've been chatting on the phone. And she is perfectly all right with it. More so she encouraged me to get differing opinions."
"What? Like you couldn't get our combined viewpoints?"

"Oh please Dad, you complete each other's sentences, and that's before the mental telepathy and the eye-sex thing too, which as your daughter I can tell you is just a little disturbing, so no I won't ever expect you to differ too much on some things. Especially cases or otherwise where you are in danger. You are both too close to that, to each other."

He would concede that was a fair assessment. God knows he had tried to step back, often driven by consideration of his family. But Kate was part of that family now. There was nothing he wouldn't do, wouldn't risk for any or all of them. Even if it was somewhat contradictory.

"But we argue a lot of the time."

"But not about important things Dad. Anyway I think you do it because you both enjoy it. The word play, the banter. Oh come on and admit it." At least she didn't openly identify it as foreplay.

"Alexis, I'll admit that this is not the conversation I was expecting to be having."

"Well for the record I wasn't planning on this one either. And just to be clear, I don't object to how you and Kate interact. I really like it, well until it goes just a little gross but you're both getting pretty good, or at least better, at not crossing that line…..most of the time."

"Well that's important for both of us too. We want to be a family, so grossing you out, or Kate's dad and our friends out is something we want to avoid. Most of the time. And also professionally, that's really key for Kate too. She's worked very hard to get to her position, and I don't ever want to do anything to jeopardise that. I know I can act the joker but you both know – and our colleagues at the Twelfth, even the Captain I hope – that I'm not that guy in reality."

"And you Dad. I can see how much being able to continue to work with Kate and the NYPD means."

"It does. We'd still have each other outside of work, but work is a big part of who we are. Neither of us what that to change, or at least not yet."

"What does that mean Dad?"

"That's not a conversation for today. Not beyond what we've discussed as a family before. And certainly not without Kate present."

"Okay. But soon maybe?"

"Again not something I am discussing without Kate here and not without more conversations with her first. You know our position and that hasn't changed despite recent events.

"So what were we discussing?" He grins. "Ah yes, your mentor/friend."

"Okay Dad, I'll let you switch the subject but how about we re-table this when Kate is available." He doesn't say anything, so Alexis accedes to his request and switches back to the original track of their conversation.

"But what I am really trying to say is that Jane provides an alternate viewpoint for me. And I like her opinions. They are considered and seem genuine. I like that."

"Pumpkin," She frowns at that but it doesn't discourage him, "that's really good. I do like Jane. That's not my issue. I just want to ensure you have friends of your own outside of the police and
similar agencies. Believe me I thought it was really cool for a while that you get on with our colleagues and friends, but I don't want you boxed in. I want you to see and experience a wide range of what is on offer in life so you can make your own choices and not just follow in mine or Kate's.

"And I do. I have friends at college, actually I have made some new friends in recent weeks. I think we got the makings of some pretty good bonds growing."

"Well that's great Sweetie. I was worried after most of your high school friends choose other colleges and then you and Paige drifted apart.

"Paige is still my friend, maybe not as tight as we were at school, but she's off at Harvard and she has a serious boyfriend already. I told you that didn't I?"

"Yes you did. You were so pleased for her."

"Am, Dad. I still am pleased for her." She looks a little nervous, "Yeah well I didn't tell you she's moving in with Adam in the New Year. Moving out of the dorms and into the shared house he shares with his sister and her boyfriend.

"Oh" She scores.

"Relax Dad. I don't have boyfriend at the moment," she regards him and then adds, "or girlfriend." To his credit Rick doesn't react to the tease. "Plus I like being in the dorms and Manhattan is so expensive, and I don't think I could do it – move out I mean – just for a while."

They both know that money is not the issue. They had agreed and set a budget for Alexis whilst at college. Rick paid all her tuition and other fees directly, and Alexis got a monthly allowance that covered her dorm fees, and other essential expenses plus one hundred dollars a week for all other items including entertainment. Anything else she could buy from her own money – saved or earnt in part-time employment.

"I like being away from home."

"Well don't expect me to agree."

"You have Kate. And that should be enough."

"And it is. She is. Still it doesn't mean I have to like it. We've been under the same roof for eighteen years. I miss you. Miss the opportunity to just connect and interact no matter how inane, and let's face with me inane is better than insane."

"Dad, I miss those too, but I love what I'm doing at college, and even if I don't know what direction I am going academically, I like the independence and my life right now."

"But that's not what you wanted to talk about is it Pumpkin?"

Her head shake is tentative. She nervous, not a typical reaction for his daughter.

"It's Mom."

He is automatically on alert and Alexis feels bad for startling him.

"It's not bad. It's just that Mom has been messaging me. She tried calling a couple of times too. I haven't answered the voice calls but have listened to the messages she leaves."
"Alexis. You know I haven't tried to limit or guide your relationship with your mother except if I felt you really needed my protection but it is okay to be pissed at her. I still am. A bit. She crossed several lines that really should haven't been, even for her. But she does have a good heart on the whole even if she hasn't always been the best at showing that consistently."

"And I appreciate that Dad. When I look at how other friends parents have broken up yours seems, well strangely mature. Which knowing both of you is strange-in-of-itself, but…."

"I think I get that. Even when we separated there wasn't a massive amount of conflict. More that neither of us really wanted to make the effort to try to fix the marriage by that stage. "What do you want to do?"

"I don't know. But can I ask how come you are always so nice to her?"

"Well firstly, I am not always. Nice I mean. Especially when provoked. Notably in your defense."

"I think that is more since you met Kate. She's given you some backbone. Or at least made you want to stand up to Mom and her demands more often. But I don't understand how you can tolerate some of the stuff she does."

"Well she gave me you, and I do like to think that the best of her – the things that were part of what attracted me to her - has been passed down to you. And I did like her - a lot, loved her as I understood it at that time before I really understood - and we were married for almost 3 years Sweetie. But I guess in the end I had to concentrate on you and before I knew a couple of years had gone by and I didn't feel any anger for her. Only disappointment and I guess some, a little, sympathy.

"She missed out on seeing you grow up and sharing in that. And that is irreplaceable. You are my proudest creation Alexis. And that will never change. But I do need you to understand that I was not a push over for you mother."

"Even the ex-sex?"

"Oh."

"Yes we all know about that Dad."

"Not my proudest moments but you know that the whole Lothario playboy persona is an invention."

"Mostly."

"Well I like the company of women. Look who I live with. But I'll admit that the occasional hook ups with your Mom haven't perhaps been the wisest thing but not the dumbest thing I've done either."

"That gives you a lot of leeway Dad."

"Ouch. You wound me."

"Just a little. But you should be used to it with Kate. She's much sharper than I am. Or Grams."

"True." He really feels the need to get the conversation off him and back on topic. "So what do you want to do about your mom?"
"I feel I should give her a chance. But it has to be long distance for a while. No visits. Start off by actually talking to her again."

"That sounds fine. It is your call about how you want to handle it."

"Thanks. But I have a question?" Alexis carries on already knowing her father will answer if he is able. "Is she safe?"

"I believe so. Taylor Matthews are monitoring her and security at the house is good. Plus I think that whoever was organizing the blackmail and drug smuggling took the brunt of the displeasure. And terrible as it is to hope that is the case given that probably meant one or more people died, it should mean that your mom is safe."

"I used to think you got yourself into dangerous situations but at least you were trying to help the NYPD, or protect Kate or us. With Mom she did that for different reasons. More selfish reasons, and that I still find hard to forgive, all those selfish choices she made."

"And that is for you to decide about and reach your own conclusions. I know this isn't popular with you or your Grams but most of the time I know that I am going into a dangerous situation but the team have each other's backs and they have training and experience. None of that applied with Meredith and she is very lucky to have survived."

"If you want to give her a chance to reconnect that is down to you. Just let me know before you make any plans to fly out for the holidays for something."

"No chance of that. I want a family Christmas with you, Grams, Kate her dad."

"We'll see. Kate and I haven't really talked about Christmas yet, and her normal tradition is to work the day. But as she is on extend leave I really don't know."

"Just don't leave it to the last minute Dad."

She ended up having an extended gossip with Lanie. And another muffin (no lunch for her). She messages Rick to let him know she is running late. As ever the ME is a valuable source of information on how the Twelfth is going, despite being based in another building. Kate is pretty sure than Lanie has other sources of information than a certain Hispanic detective.

Finally parting ways Kate makes her way back to the Loft to collect Rick so they can head back to the Hamptons.

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**Front Page Washington Post**

**New York Senator to be named as key suspect in criminal investigation.**

*William H Bracken, junior Senator for New York has identified by multiple sources including law enforcement and Department of Justice as the central figure in what could well be the political scandal of the decade.*

*Rumors began circulating the Hill some week ago but without substantiation appeared to have died off. However, this paper has learnt that criminal charges are being reviewed, and are very close to being filed both nationally and locally.*

*The Department of Justice has been leading a task force of federal agencies and local law*
enforcement from New York.

As yet there has been no statement from the Senator who has not been seen since he left his office on Friday night.

New York.

As she exited her building the two men funneled her into the town car before she could even utter a word or protest or react in any meaningful way.

Before she is even seated, she lurches back into the plush leather seating.

Eyes adjusting to the gloom of the town car, she narrowly suppresses a scream as she recognizes the other occupant of the rear bench.

She had not expected it so soon, but Gloria Glaser knew there was price for failure.

But she had never expected it to be so high.

That she concedes was actually self-delusion. She knew better now. Right now.

Her own personal mark was beside her.

Having never previously met him, she only knew him by rumor.

Vulcan Simmons.

Reputed drug kingpin and more. Somehow untouchable. If he was here, and then it was indeed likely that he was Bracken's creature then that was understandable.

"Well look at you." There is a hint of leer but it is all for show. A man like this will take them young and tender. Not her.

"What do you want?" She takes a little satisfaction in being able to keep her tone almost level and not give away the utter terror embracing her.

"Oh honey I don't want that. I've got plenty on call 24x7. What I want doesn't come into it."

He's up close and breathing onto her. Well into her personal space but she can't, won't protest. Close enough she can really inhale his scent. He's very masculine and despite her fear she can acknowledge his powerful presence and intimidating confidence. This is a man used to getting everything he wants and fearing nothing, or at least nearly nothing. She suspects that even this man fears their ultimate employer.

"A mutual friend." Well she's never considered the Senator a friend. Not in any sense of the word. Patron on a good day, millstone on others. But she couldn't turn back the clock.

The pause is meant to make her nervous. It is not necessary. At all. She's actually grateful for her cycle, for wearing a pad that captures the slight involuntary release between her legs. A situation which is far more than uncomfortable even before Bracken's henchman speaks again.

"Well he is very disappointed in the outcome of certain plans. It has cost him time and money. Also he had business associates who were also disappointed. Very disappointed. A man trades on his reputation, and this diminished his."
"I did my bit. Was ready to do everything. It wasn't my area of responsibility that went wrong. The Bankers. That who you should be dealing with. Not me." She's not above begging or at the very least arguing for herself and her safety. She wasn't the one who fucked up. Why does she have to pay the price?

Simmons almost laughs but instead it is ribald smile and leer of perverse satisfaction out of keeping with his early statement.

"Oh Honey. You shouldn't worry quite so much. All of the above is why you are still alive. But the Bankers, well they're not in my remit. You are. So bad luck for you. Or maybe some good luck. Who knows?"

"What the fuck do you want?"

"Well strange you should ask that."

Soho, 1.40 pm.

They have just pulled out of the underground car park when her phone rings.

It's her dad.

"Hi Dad."

"Hello Katie. Have you and Rick left town yet?"

"Just on the road now, but we haven't left Manhattan. Why?"

"Is there any chance you could divert and meet with us? It shouldn't take too much of your time."

"Why?"

"I don't want to explain on the phone." Even without the words her father's tone is enough for both of them. She doesn't need to look at her partner beside her to know he is in agreement.

"Sure. Are you at your place?"

"Oh. What's the address?" She turns to her partner, her tone carefully neutral. "We're going to Val's. Just head for Fifth, it's one block back from the Park."

"Okay." He can be equally circumspect and careful with consideration for her feelings. This certainly isn't easing her slowly into the comfort zone for her father's relationship with someone other than her mother.

The building is not far from Central Park, just one block back. And taller than many surrounding buildings according to her Dad. If you were high enough up you'd have a great view Kate thinks. It doesn't take long to reach midtown from Soho as weekends in Manhattan are quiet in comparison to the working week, although there is still a far bustle of pedestrians and iconic yellow cabs moving purposefully. Saturday is not a day of rest for New Yorkers.

Her dad had greeted them by the door after they had been buzzed up. Jim Beckett was dressed in jeans and a light jumper. The sort of causal Kate associated with the cabin, not the city. Regardless he looked comfortable in here. In Val's home.
"Please come in. Good to see you Rick. Hello Katie" He brushes a kiss against Kate's cheek before reaching for Rick's right hand carefully.

Behind him, her father's girlfriend was wearing cream slacks and a green cashmere pullover, and echoes his greeting as she shakes their hands. They're not quite at the cheek kissing and hugging stage.

Even before Castle's low whistle of appreciation, Kate couldn't help but be impressed by Val's home. And now knowing that Castle is a bit of a real estate aficionado coupled with his whistle she guess this place is worth a bit. Probably more than the Loft.

The condo was indeed high enough up. It even had a balcony door that opened up onto a large terrace that wrapped round the two sides of the corner apartment. It was pretty good view even today, cold and a bit overcast as it was. It would be spectacular in summer with views directly onto Central Park.

It was warm too.

Both Kate and Rick were in jeans and 3 layers in expectation of going back to the Hamptons. It doesn't take long before their jumpers are off, joining their jackets in the nook by the entrance. If Val is phased by the sight of the SIG on Kate's hip, she says nothing.

Invited into the large living room that dominates the apartment they sit together on one sofa, unconsciously linking hands as Val and Jim settle into separate arm chairs opposite them.

Her dad leads off and in the space of three minutes Jim explains their discoveries and suspicions regarding Jeff Besley and the new direction for the firm into the murky world of campaign finances and SuperPACs. Val is largely quiet apart from the occasional interjection to clarify a particular point.

"Katie, we need some help. This is too just too big and to be frank more than a little scary."

"What do you want me to do Dad? I'm not NYPD. Well not at the moment. So I can't help investigate directly."

"I, we, don't want the police involved. Whatever this is feels bigger than New York. But you have other resources. It needs to be low key."

Kate looks at Rick, and he inclines his head in acceptance even though both are now harboring suspicions about where this might take them.

"So what else do you know? You are both experienced lawyers. Much of the previous was like the opening argument, lots of points but not a lot of substance."

"Wait a moment please." Val rises and heads off to what looks like an office, certainly the large stylish desk and high-end office chair appear matched.

She is both relieved and a little scared to see the legal pad presented to her.

Two and a bit pages of carefully written bullet points and summaries. She and Castle speed read.

"He has admitted that the work is primarily for a Super PAC." Val begins.

"Well logically it would be a New York or maybe North-Eastern politician," Jim adds, "I've done
some digging. The man Jeff Besley met some months ago is linked to a Super PAC called 'Future Forward'."

"Never heard of it." Beside her Rick settles for a confirming shake of his head, both are clearly curious and apprehensive where this discussion is going. The combination of New York and politics has a strong possibility of at least touching on Senator William Bracken.

"Very few have. But it apparently has tens, possibly hundreds of millions of dollars in it."

Beside her Rick lets out a low whistle which she ignores, "Where does that sort of money come from?"

"Donors who want to keep their contributions private, or anonymous. Personally I believe it was a major mistake allowing this sort of thing. But that's not the point."

Val chimes in now. "Jim – well I used my connections with some investigators I use for uncovering hidden assets for cases, they traced it back. I found a link. Well several connections actually. Some of the few staff connected with Future Forward all previously worked for on the campaign for a Senator and latterly in their office for some months before moving to the SuperPAC."

"And well the news today that Senator Bracken is suspected of criminal activity, and it is his campaign those staffers worked on."

Kate freezes.

"Kate?" by her side Rick instantly unable to keep a level of concern from his voice that well, quite frankly frightens the older man who instinctively rises and reaches out for his daughter who appears frozen in shock at the news.

"Katie?"

She cannot answer. Not yet. Nor is she able to even lift her eyes. The tremor in her arm that vibrates all the way to Rick's hand speaks for her.

"I know that look." Her father is gruff with parental concern, which he moderates, "Katie, what are you not telling me?"

The gaze turns to the man nestled in beside his daughter holding her hand and so obviously providing need much needed support and comfort but also strangely silent. "You too Rick."

Kate nods. She can't speak just yet. She lifts her eyes to her partner and sees the acknowledgement and acceptance there. Also the concerns. If they, because is most certainly not about her only, share this then the circle of risk is greatly expanded. Her eyes say everything Castle needs. She is giving him permission.

"When Kate was suspended early this year it was because of event directly related to her shooting the year before. We found some evidence, very limited and not legally admissible, regarding the identity and motive of the man we call the Dragon. The man behind not only Kate's shooting but Johanna's murder. Not to mention at least seven other deaths, including Captain Roy Montgomery, and two dirty cops, that we have knowledge of."

Jim gapes. This time it is Val's turn to support her partner.

"You know who it is? The man who killed my wife and tried to do the same to my daughter. Who so nearly destroyed everything I hold dear."
"Bracken." She gulps. "It was William Bracken. The fucking Senator for New York." Her father doesn't even chide her for her language.

"He's the Dragon. He's responsible for mom's murder, my shooting. So much more."

"We didn't have enough to arrest him. Only fragments of evidence, and no chain of custody."

"What did you do Katie?"

"The only thing I could do. I cut a deal. Our silence for our safety."

"And you trust him?" This man who has ripped their family apart. Who still threatens them?

"No!" Rick's absolute response is only natural. Not having had an option due to her lack of consultation in the first instance, Kate is not surprised. But she needs to assure her Dad and Val, and hell even herself and perhaps most of all Castle.

"Not so much but the deal has held." For now.

"How much is bluff?" Her father is not letting it go.

"A lot. But he doesn't know. Not for certain. Not enough to chance it."

"God."

At their request Rick leaves Kate talking with her father, this is obviously something she needs to work through with just them. He can accept that.

He finds Val in her kitchen making tea.

"Val, I…"

"Rick. It's okay. For the record I'm not going anywhere either. I love him too much to consider walking, hell, running away." Her head dips. He can see evidence of tears. "But damn it is a shock. Aside from knowing about Kate's shooting, Jim has always been very reticent about the details of her career. Or rather the danger she has faced.

"To be fair Val, he didn't know. About Bracken. Or her shooter. We kept it from him. From as many people as possible. To protect as many as possible, especially those we love."

"I can understand that."

"So do you have questions? You in this now. We're a tight group and not many know about this. Can be trusted to keep all of us safe. Because this Dragon will not hesitate to order the deaths of the innocent to protect himself."

"I never liked the bastard. Something inhuman about him. No empathy despite his words and gestures."

"Sounds pretty much like any politician."

"Worse than that. Surely you could tell the difference?"
"To be honest I've never really bothered too much until recently. We don't make a big thing about politics in the family. We have always voted Democratic. Our backgrounds in the arts and our friendships with many with different lifestyle choices.

"Well from the sound of things you have some form of détente with him. But what if he comes after Kate? After you?"

"We're ready for that. We may not have told many people but we do have some very capable allies looking out for us."

"This firm that Kate is working for. Taylor Matthews? Are they part of it?"

"Yes. You're very sharp. But please keep that to yourself."

"How do you do it Rick?"

"Do what?"

"This. Maintain such obvious good cheer and optimism but surrounded and threatened by violence and death."

"There is no short or easy answer to that Val. I could joke about the 'Master of the Macabre' or many other trite points but none would give a proper explanation as to how it has come to be. And perhaps the most honest answer I can give you is that I am afraid a lot of the time. Not so much for myself – that does happen – but for those I care about and others too."

"You're a good man Rick. Nothing like the press used to portray you as. I know Jim thinks highly of you. I do too."

"Thank you Val. And it is reciprocated. We've not known you long but you feel like a member of this family."

"Thank you. But just so you are aware I don't think we'll ever be legally related. Jim and I are both comfortable – for different reasons – with one marriage in our pasts and less legally formal, but in our minds no less binding, commitment going forward. Plus I think Jim, and well, I too, wants to see his daughter married first. So what's the hold up here?"

"Wow, nothing like pressure from the future in-laws." His eyes sparkle and not just with the comedy or stretching the facts just a little. Anyone could tell in that instant just how in love with Kate Beckett he was.

"A lot of what has driven us forward in our relationship both professionally and romantically has been dangerous and hurt one or both of us. We are both agreed that we are on the path to marriage but we want it to be our pace and choosing.

"You've married twice before Rick. The first because it was the 'right-thing-to-do', and second I would guess because it was the logically step. This your third time should be from and for the heart."

"My last time too. Don't get me wrong I can't wait. I want to be able to tease her and call her 'Mrs Castle' and she'll roll her eyes and pretend to be annoyed but secretly she'll love it. But it is important to us to have that moment to ourselves. Kate is intensely private and the things she has done for us including fronting the press still surprise me, and we want some of those things for us, just to be for us."
After the tea has brewed, they put together a tray with cups and saucers along with a sugar and small jug of milk and a plate of biscuits, and return to the living room.

There have been some tears and Kate sits beside her dad, turned in to face him and holding his hand.

"Do you think Jeff knows what he is involved in?"

"Not sure. Most likely not the full extent. But we have had some new people join the firm for the political work. And then there is the mysterious injuries he received."

"He's bought in two new lawyers. One is already angling for partner." Val’s tone leaves no doubt as to her view on that.

"Bob Armstrong. He's a condescending a-hole. Former chief of staff for some Congressman gunning for Senate that got dropped for campaign fraud."

"Bill Mitchell." Rick provides. "Ran for Senate but had illegal campaign funds. I remember his chief of staff was totally unapologetic. As much blamed the press for catching them out, not their criminal activity. That's your new hire?"

"Yeah well not that we got a choice. He came with the change in focus. He's new blood. And he has enough money to buy a partnership."

"Do you think he could be involved?"

"Could be. This is another line of investigation. But we'll have to tread carefully."

"I think it is time that we call in Taylor Matthews. They have a small team who work on this when required."

Kate reaches for her phone. Time to use her connections. And distract herself momentarily from the look of horror on her dad's face. Once his wife's murder was an intensely private grief that the two of them struggled to deal with alone when the police gave up. Now it is morphed into a monster with the very survival of dozens or more people at stake, and seemingly competing teams racing to defeat the other.

In the end they stay so long that the sensible thing is to postpone their return to the Hamptons until tomorrow. Val invites them to stay for dinner but they politely decline simultaneously, drawing the first smiles of the visit from everyone. All understand that both couples need some time alone with their partners to take in the new developments.

Arriving back at the loft, they find themselves alone. Alexis already back in the dorms at Columbia, the fridge considerably emptier apart from a postIt in her writing adorned with 'Thanks'. Martha, as planned, has headed out for the remainder of the weekend.

Just them.

Which is good.

Rick knows that Kate needs time. She'll come to him ready.

Anyway they don't have much more to discuss regarding the law firm or the revelations of today. Facing off against a pair of experienced lawyers had been conducive to ensuring pretty much every
fact and opinion was turned over during the course of the afternoon. The discourse and disclosure has left them mentally drained and they need a little time to regroup.

Kate picks up a book with absolutely no intention of reading it and settles into the sofa. Rick takes his cue to retreat to his office and Nikki.

In the end it doesn't take too long for Kate to seek him out.

"How was the book?"

"Hmmmm?" She hums into the back of his neck. "No idea. It sat on my lap."

His eyes fill with more concern. "How are you?"

"Surprisingly okay. Worried for my Dad and Val but so long as they stick to the plan we agreed and don't investigate at the firm anymore, I think they should be okay. Taylor Matthews will keep an eye on things too now that we know."

Rick's curve eyebrow elicits further clarification from her.

"Just for the moment I want to let it go. Get back to it just being us."

"We're still heading back tomorrow?" Rick's question shows just how uncertain he is of how his partner is handling this.

"Babe, of course we are. If I thought it was real, the risk, I would be on it. I know you would too. All this is another piece of the puzzle."

Looking over his shoulder she observes, "Looks like Nikki hasn't gone far either." He shakes his right arm indicating the continued trouble he has with fine motor skills including bringing Nikki to life. She takes his hand she gently pulls him up, "Now come snuggle."

"I know I have a tendency to internalise things and act independently. And I'll admit that I even seek space and to retreat behind my wall. I want to believe that I know better now, and can be better, act better too. But it would be easy for me to slide back to that."

He wants to disagree, to protest the truth of her words, but this honesty is them now, so he lets them go unchecked.

"God Rick, this could be worse than last time. I don't know how I would cope without you. I didn't know how to cope without you then."

"Walking away killed me." He ventures, and the hurt still resonates and she winces at that. She accepts the guilt for how long she ignored him, pushed him away, and even fled from him. It is part of her and she uses it now to drive her behaviour the opposite way, and fight for him, for them.

"I am could never blame you for that Rick. You had to do that to try and protect yourself and your family."

"Still one of the hardest things I have ever done."

"Well I'm still sorry that it took me almost dying to see the truth of us. And I don't want you or myself to ever doubt that again. I want that honesty between us for a lifetime." His head movement is all the acknowledgement that slips from him.
She tightens her grip on him, pulling their bodies closer together.

"Babe, you ground me. What was it you told me about the conclusion of Alexis' valedictorian speech? 'Solid ground'. Well in every way that matters you are my solid ground. My one and done. Just like I'm your 'third time'.

"Kate."

"Shush please Rick. I'm not proposing." *Might not be the worst idea ever.* "Remember we agreed that it should be a happy moment that drives that. Not reacting to some Goddamn new threat to our families. Today counts as one of those."

"Okay. I can understand that. But I believe I can live up to the physical stamina requirements for any engagement celebrations." His eyebrows twitch and Kate's own eyes mirror the man's darkened with desire.

"Perhaps you can provide a demonstration tonight?" Still she resists more. For the moment.

"I'm so grateful that Dad has Val to support him. God the temptation to fall off the wagon even with that support must be immense. I know when I was shot it was bad too. In part my staying at the cabin with him at the beginning of my recovery was about him and my concern for him. He is so strong Rick but something like this, so directly connected to my mom's death, I am really not sure about how good it was for us to have told him."

"He's strong enough Kate, and you're right with Val to help him he can resist the temptation. We can all be addicts in our own ways. Having people to support us and on occasion guard us against the temptation is invaluable. For the longest time I wanted to be that person for you Kate."

"And you were. Long before I could overcome my fears and admit what my heart felt for you Castle. You were the one who was there for me. And I can never apologise enough for the hurt I caused you and your family for making you wait for me."

"We're past that now Kate."

"But not my mom's case. I knew it would come up again and it has. And we know it will come up again. And most likely much quicker than any of us hoped. But for now I want to set that all aside."

Sometime later. It is comfortably warm in the Loft. Just like Val's apartment. Not like the Hamptons.

"Rick."

Hmmm.

"If we're going to spend much more time in the Hamptons in winter we need to do something about the temperature in the house. I'm freezing my butt off, and we can't spend all our time in the kitchen, in bed or snuggled under the throw blankets watching movies or TV."

She drapes her arms around his neck, kisses him across the stubble of his jawline and finds his mouth distracting them both momentarily.

"Why not?" He squeezes past their co-joined lips. It is entirely rhetorical of course. They both recognize the steps in this game. He plays the next card. "I'm not persuaded Beckett. I like how we
She pulls back so she can focus on his eyes. "Yeah well nice as it is," she has to swallow the involuntary guffaw that threatens to escape at his pouting, "okay really great then, but if we are going to spend the Christmas holidays and into the New Year there and especially if family and friends are invited, then we can't be heating the place with sex."

"And don't make a face. Your daughter and mother will be present so that should kill our ardor, at least a bit. Let alone if we invite the others."

"That's what you think. Has it worked here?"

"More than you think. Think about how much noise we used to make at my place."

His face is a delight before it falls just a little. "Oh. I am going to miss it. Your place I mean. We're still going to have sex? Loud sex? Aren't we?"

She decides to put his mind at rest – if that is ever possible. "Sure. Just stealthy, bedroom sex with not too much noise if others are present. I'm not sure I could face Martha again after last time."

"I know. I mean who knew she had learnt how to use the recording app on her phone." They both know it was Alexis who had taught her.

"Well at least we're were pretty sure we deleted it before she could send a copy to anyone else."

"Okay." His nod is counterpoised by his slight frown. "I know you moving in is the right thing, and it's great. I've wanted to ask for a while. Long, long time really. But I did like you place."

"I did too Rick. But if anything we've had more than enough hints from the universe to get on with our shared future."

"I know but that is not the point. Your place was great not just because we could have loud sex in whatever room we wanted. But because it reflected you. Your tastes, your life."

"Oh Rick, I don't want you to feel that way. Everything was so rushed, and well your family and the Boys did the moving not me. When the time is right I'll be more than happy to help redecorate and add my touches to our home."

"I do have a proposal for you."

At his face, "No not that one." She teased her tongue over her lips, "But I think you'll like it."

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**Washington DC**

She had enjoyed her unexpected half-day off. Her first proper one in a while. Even if they were only meant to be working six days it has seemed incessant. The 'six day' weeks prepping for the Bracken case were catching up to all of them. After observing most of the team crashed at their desks Villante had ordered them all home around midday today. She had barely made it home before taking a two hour nap. On waking she then had the laziest afternoon possible rounding it off with some premium food and a fine red wine. She's just thinking about another glass whilst she contemplates her full day of leisure tomorrow when her phone pulses with an incoming call.

"McCord." All business despite the day and the hour.
The voice at the end of the line catches her by surprise. The instructions equally so. The brevity not so much, as the familiar voice never spoke beyond what was strictly necessary.

"Absolutely. I understand. I'll be there."

She dials her new partner's number. He picks up promptly.

"Good Evening Sorenson."

"Stand down Will. It is not an emergency. What's left of your weekend off is safe. I'm just letting you know I've been assigned something else that just came up. So from Monday on you're to work with Kendricks on the deposition reviews. That should take the best part of the week. I'll be unavailable until mid-week at the earliest."

She shuts down his questions. "Just follow orders Will. And watch your back."

Hanging up she purses her lips. Her partner had been surprised and curious. After all what else trumps the biggest political scandal for decades? She is afraid she already knows the answer to that, or at least what sort of answer it would be. After all the voice on the end of the line had been sufficient confirmation of that.

See calls Villante next. He gets just the briefest bit more context but he knows just enough to accept why she is doing this. Why she has no choice. How a decision years ago to chase an off-the-books investigation has compromised her and left her unable to refuse the requests from this higher authority.

Despite knowing she is 'on deck' tomorrow, she refills the glass, draining the bottle. The only form of insubordination she can get away with.

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**The Loft**

The heat was on.

With good reason.

This was competitive. A matter of life and death, or at the very least a considerable amount of pride.

Rick crouched down, keeping in cover.

He was surprised to find he was sweating. In spite of his attire.

It was damn hot in the loft, the temperature notched up another couple of degrees.

He certainly felt hot. Well except for the bit where his unmentionables were feeling pretty drafty when he crouched down low. He had to admit that it was a different sensation to any previous game of laser tag he'd played. Eww he wouldn't go there. Not a good mental picture given his usual regular opponent over the years. However tonight's game was against a pro. Detective/Agent Katherine Beckett.

There was also more than usual riding on this. Should Beckett win then he has promised to have additional heating put in at the Hamptons. This coming week. To be honest, he is hardly adverse to the suggestion as it is damn cold there in winter but they normally barely ever go there outside of spring to late summer. Previously the family were always in New York for Christmas but who
knows this year. So many changes, so many for the better.

If he wins he gets to buy the entire Lego Star Wars collection and put them on display (after building of course) in the Loft.

"Zap!" A shot dispels his contemplation. He returns fire seeking cover. Hell he'd probably buy all the Lego anyway. Damn this was fun!

"Zap!" Another miss!

He returned fire. Mutual misses on each side.

He was running southpaw to look after his right shoulder which is a bit of a handicap. Still he is a reasonable shot with his left hand and has managed to make a good few hits, but Beckett had got her own in too. The scores are even, each only a single clean hit away from victory.

He catches a glimpse of a something. A flash of pale flesh - that would teach her not to tan all over. But she is fast and lithe. And sexy. Concentrate Rick! He pauses to get himself back under control. Regulates his breathing. Focus. Only one weapon should be used in this game.

It takes 3 more minutes, and more patience that he knows Beckett usually expects of him. Using his many more years of knowledge of the Loft and matches against Alexis, he gradually boxes her in. Trapping her in the kitchen area behind the breakfast bar.

After another fruitless exchange of fire, he is surprised when she suddenly rises up, hands raised.

She stands before him, "I surrender." Of course she's hardly submitting. Kate Beckett never submits. She's standing proud. Damn so is he now. She's smirking just more than a little in validation. Was that a glance too? Probably was based on her more than slight flush. But he was too. Fuck she looks great. Too. Long legs, flat stomach, perky bosoms with beguiling slight asymmetrical lift that favours her stronger, natural side, and well the shadow conceals what he knows awaits him between her legs. He should pat her down and check for weapons.

Still his instincts are screaming at him. Suspecting a trap, he advances cautiously. Beckett never surrenders willingly. Not in real life, nor in this game to the finish.

He can see her vest abandoned on the floor by her feet. He appreciates the area it is no longer covering, he barely notices the scar that sits between them now. And lower. She's a vision in the twilight of the Loft. Her tanned flesh running into the paler skin of her bikini line and more. They really must take that trip to Bora Bora he had suggested. A private villa and their own private beach would be just the ticket. And an all-over tan for good measure.

She of course observes his appreciating, and his own signs of appreciation too. She smirks, amping his suspicion but then undo's him with a nip of her pearly whites on a rouged lower lip. She's definitely cheating. When did she apply lipstick? Not fair!

He quirks an eyebrow in question at her.

"It was beginning to chafe Castle. I don't think they designed those with naked people in mind. Especially with female anatomy. I might need to wear pasties next time." She glances down at her peaked nipples. It takes pretty much all his self-disciple not to follow her gaze and lock on.

"Next time?" Oh crap he said that out loud. Worse not his best voice either. Too squeaky. Recovering as much as possible he continues his cautious advance.
"You do realize what surrender entails Beckett? The ignominy of forfeiture? The …." Shit the weapon. He looks back at the floor, at her vest. Where's her laser gun?

The tug at his ankle and the near instant electronic report of the laser weapon and the subsequent confirmation of his demise as his vest lights up and the vibrations reach all the way to his free hanging, well it is all pretty much one event to him.

Sinking to his knees with a cry of 'Nooooooooo' echoing through the Loft, he spots his downfall. There perfectly positioned in the wine rack is Kate's laser weapon linked to a surprisingly professional trip wire.

"Yes, I win!"

Event in the depths of his defeat he observes her. Indeed someday he'll remind Beckett of this, most likely on an occasion when she's chastising him for acting like a child. Because his Beckett, his very much unclothed Kate Beckett is currently doing a victory dance, a very naked victory dance around the kitchen.

Sometime later…

In the end they both won.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note

I'm back. This story has been on the back burner for too long and for that I am sorry for the delay. But my commitment to finish it remains undiminished. 9 chapters to go.

By way of excuses…..

We had a fantastic time in Africa celebrating 26 years of marriage. We saw gorillas, monkeys, lions, leopards, cheetahs, hippos, elephants, White & Black Rhinos, so many birds and so much other wildlife. We dined on seafood at the edge of the Indian Ocean in Zanzibar, slept in tents with Zebras, Water Buffalo and Hyenas outside our door at night in Tanzania, and flew over Serengeti in a hot air balloon at dawn. I took 12000 photos – some of them are actually quite good if I say so myself (one won me $2000 in a competition). But it has taken me 2 months of sorting and post processing to make the photo books my wife has demanded before Xmas.

Work has been murder (not literally) since we got back, and no let up until March next year.

Finally there was the small matter of the Rugby World Cup which has occupied was spare of my time for the last six weeks. It concluded successfully last Sunday morning with my beloved New Zealand All Blacks wining the RWC for the 3rd time. Becoming the first team to win the cup thrice, and the first team to defend their title. I am a very happy fan. My family can certainly attest to that when my victory celebrations woke them at 4am! But getting up to watch games in the night (the
competition was on the other side of the world in the UK) killed much of my spare energy.

If you are still with me, thank you for your perseverance and patience. As ever your thoughts and feedback are most welcome.

PS no ranting about Season 8 please. Save that for my story 'No Captain' if must and please keep it polite and rational. I have already learnt a hard lesson about waiting for the start of a new season of Castle to fuel my creativity for this story.
Bunkered

Chapter Summary

Previously: -
Gates finds out about Beckett and Castle's relationship. She is supportive of sorts. But Rick's position will be reviewed. Beckett is put forward for promotion which she must pass if they have any hope of keeping working together. While on a case Rick is shot saving Gates and the Boys. His near death experience brings our pair closer together and prompt more discoveries about the real Richard Rodgers. Beckett is given leave of absence to help him recover and they head to the Hamptons for the long rehabilitation.

Meanwhile, it turns out that the mundane realities of running a multi-year, global drug smuggling ring do eventually attract the attention of the Feds. And from a routine check for campaign contributions, suspicions begin to mount regarding the character and more of the Senator from New York.

As yet our dynamic duo are unaware of these developments.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Somewhere in Virginia

DC was close, but not too close. Far enough away that the noise, the cacophony of so-called civilization, does not intrude into this sanctuary. Close enough that he could sneak away here when the limited opportunities presented, and yet be back on the Capitol if the need arose without arousing suspicion on where he had been.

That is what this place is. A retreat, a haven. From DC, the Senate, the press, and increasingly now law enforcement. From all those who seek to assail him. New York was once his home but no more. Not really since his father trashed the family name, no matter what he, and yes even his weakling brother, did to reclaim it. Now he had no home, and certainly had no plans to take up residency in a federal penitentiary, so perhaps this place was the closest thing. For now.

Yet even here does not feel like home. For a start he can only come here infrequently or it would be discovered. And that we would not tolerate. In any shape or form.

The handful of staff are trusted and well paid for their silence. He had inherited most of them with the estate. Acquired through a shell corporation from a party who - how do they say in that line of work? - no longer had need of it. Despite the history of the place and the former owners, there is no ostentation. The well-maintained, late colonial mansion is small by local standards and there is little to give the identity of the owner away. No helipad, no covered pool, only the main two-story building, a smaller detached garage, plus an equally old servants cottage (still used as such), and the neat, even manicured lawns surrounded by a security fence and a single access road.

Of course the relatively humble exterior hides a far more opulent and lavish interior. One does not
make hundreds of millions from admittedly illicit activity without indulging in a few extravagances. His tastes are fairly modern but a weakness for Impressionists had taxed even the most skilled facilitators for a time. The walls of the windowless Library bear evidence of his wealth and how money can obtain almost anything. If one has patience, and access to resources with the right skill sets and inclination.

He often wondered where the appreciation for art comes from. He had neither the instinct nor education for it. Her parents certainly were not interested unless it was a display of power. His introduction came late while in college with a chance visit to a gallery that had so entranced him. Perhaps to the extent that it had been another trigger for the path that lead him to now. Even then what he desired was neither cheap nor available. Money he knew could fix both of those. It just depended on who you paid. But first he had needed the money. Lacking the patience and the prospects of a career sufficiently well-remunerated this desire had helped form the choices her made.

Here, surrounded by his masterpieces, he can take measure, and plan. He knows in his head and his heart that he will be done for. Eventually. But the family creed of never back down remained. His father, a failure at so many things, had at least taught him that, even in the midst of all his inadequacies. Hard lesson that it was. Another was that weakness was to be cultivated and exploited mercilessly. He learnt that well and had long surpassed his sire at that particular trait.

His available human resources were diminishing too rapidly. Soon, once more he would find himself with only those mercenaries bought with money (he had plenty of that), or the handful of individuals tied to him by their own sins of the past. And just how far he could trust them?

He does not drink but urge sometimes takes him. Perhaps it would take the edge from the frustration that burns at him, inside him. He is a patient man, slow to anger, but not so cool as to be without a desire for vengeance. The usual venalities held no interest for him. Alcohol, drugs, sex – all the vices of the weak. He was not weak.

It is no idle moment that he contemplates what havoc he should wreck on those that oppose him, and seek his downfall. But he is no fantasist. He has no need of it. He has power and reach a plenty. The act, or rather the multiple acts, will be all the satisfaction he receives or needs before the end. And the time to act is soon.

Of course it is entirely ironic that his downfall will be handful of others and not the vengeful daughter of that minor inconvenience, Johanna Beckett, and the slightly greater one that is the lawyer's detective daughter. He is fairly sure their 'truce' is holding despite neither party intended to honor it beyond the initial respite their encounter in the hotel kitchen had engendered. He fights the instinct to touch his cheek. Plastic surgery had fixed the scar but not the hunger for retaliation. He never let a slight go unanswered. Of course she'll pay, along with her lackey and paramour, Richard Castle. Their families too. A good portion of their colleagues as well. Why not?

He makes the call himself. Time to set the game in motion. The end game.

**Sunday, the Loft.**

It is a late start for them. Their post battle endeavors leaving both drained and sated, and enjoying a second night's undisturbed sleep. Well barely interrupted aside from the usual nocturnal migrations and noises that constitute the norm when sharing a bed together. Kate occasionally talks when deep asleep and never remembers anything, while Rick – more frequently - talks as he transitions from dreaming to waking, and remembers somethings. Both are equally cute to their partner. And the subject of some gentle teasing. In private.
They sleep late and it is gone ten-thirty by the time both emerged from separate showers and reconvened in the kitchen. Over coffee and toast, Rick starts to pack the large chiller bag with leftovers from their belated Thanksgiving celebrations. Alexis had made quite the dint with her own salvaging but none-the-less he pings her a quick message letting her know more was still available if she wanted it. He gets no reply but shrugs it off. He's getting better at managing the separation anxiety that his daughter's absence, even though it is barely a scant few miles, invokes. The woman by his side is responsible for much of that.

Kate has policed up their bags and grabbed a few more outfits to take back to the Hamptons, including a dress bag which Rick is banned from opening. For his part, Rick has two suits and some shirts in a pair of garment bags that join their overnight bags near the door. They're not sure if they will be back in New York before the holidays. A few extra clothes won't go amiss. Especially party clothes. It is the season for it, and for the first time since she was eighteen Kate wants to celebrate the season.

All this organisation and clearing the last of the post party trash brings them close to midday but before they depart Rick decides they should take a few more bottles of wine back to the Hamptons.

"Kate, how about you select a few bottles of wine to bring back. There were some news ones we still want to try from that delivery back in September." They had eight cases of mixed wines delivered just two months ago and secured in the wine cabinet. Not all of it was expensive, relatively speaking, although Kate had insisted on paying for her half-share which even with a good number of twenty dollar bottles was still a hit to her bank balance. Rick had not been particularly graceful about conceding to her insistence of being equals as far as possible.

Even with Martha's usual predilections there should be plenty left for them to take a few back to the Hamptons as it had only been weeks since they were in the Loft.

"Okay. You finish in the kitchen and I'll grab some of those new reds, and maybe a bottle or two of the fizzy stuff."

"Sounds good. Maybe we'll have something to celebrate." She can drop hints.

Kate can't help the slight buzz that the mere thought of the prospect of them celebrating brings. And the potential reasons too. She's increasingly on edge and expectant. If he doesn't do something soon, she might have to take steps of her own.

Kate makes her way into the storage area off the utility room. The wine cabinet is exactly that. The tall imposing structure with the solid wood exterior holds three compartments for unchilled wine, chilled wine and other chilled drinks (beer and soft drinks).

She opens the door. "Oh!" escapes her.

Reversing her course she arrives back in the kitchen where her partner takes one look at her face and wordlessly follows her back to what he suspects might be a crime scene.

Kate had left the outer door open and the ajar alarm for the chiller is beeping on their return.

"Umm Rick"

"Holy Hellspawn of Broadway! Mother!" He's right on all counts. It definitely is a crime scene.

"Don't mother at me Rick! It wasn't my fault."

"Sorry. Not you. Her!" Pushing his hands through his hair in exasperation, "Jesus how much is
missing?"

Kate does a quick re-count. Pretty much what she guess-timated before she got him. Maybe sixty vacant spaces in what had been a largely full storage capacity after their earlier online shopping spree. They had not needed to use any wine the other night at the Thanksgiving party and so had not previously checked the cabinet since their return to the Loft.

"Oh look she left a note."

'Richard' and then obviously added as an afterthought, 'and Katherine. Emergency soiree. Forgive me. M XX'. No mention of any plans to replace what his mother had liberated. So her regular MO then. But that was certainly some soiree.

He's reaching for his phone when Kate's hand stops him.

"Nope – no calling or texting your Mom. Martha can stay blissfully ignorant of the discovery of her crime." For now.

"I want to report a theft then."

"Sorry. Not a cop right now. Anyway I'm homicide."

"You could be preventing one. That count's doesn't it?"

And even though he's not looking at Kate, her eye roll says everything.

"Oh look here's a note from Alexis too." It may be the morning for discoveries. 'Dad and Kate. Sorry needed something for study group. Took the responsible option. I owe you. A xx.'

"She took the bottles of non-alcoholic cider we got for when my dad comes over. At least she intends to replace them."

"I'm thinking that it might be time to lock the thing down. The same biometrics as the weapons safe just with fewer access permissions."

"Really Rick? More locks and limitation on the booze than on your guns."

"No. Well. Okay. I was ranting." He has the grace to look mildly abashed. She doesn't mind his rants. They usually short and not at all directed at her. She has a mild interest in his more excitable use of language when they are on their own. She thinks he may have shadowed a sailor at one time based on his range of epithets.

"Save that thought for later. There are still enough bottles for us to take some back to the Hamptons. But perhaps having the alcohol more closely secured than your guns is not a great idea. Still I think you should speak to them about it. But later."

He raises his phone. "When you're much calmer about the whole thing." He lowers said implement.

She turns to return to finishing their departure routine. She can hear him muttering. "The same Beckett, secured the same as the guns."

She'll let him rant it out, shouldn't take too long and anyway he'll have forgiven both red heads long before he sees them next. Although perhaps next time they order Martha should pay her own share too. Yeah good luck with that.
And anyway she knows he wasn't really considering his threat. Especially as he takes everything to do with firearms seriously. Even when he pulled the swifty on her at the firing range in their first few months, she knew. She was a trained detective. She spotted the precise control, even when appearing to mishandle her Glock, the near text-book grip, the controlled breathing, the intimate familiarity with the weapon. She was satisfied enough to break regulations and let him fire her personal service weapon. Yet despite that his marksmanship had surprised her, and left her genuinely speechless when he smugly claimed the fruits of his victory. Maybe too she had wanted him to lay claim to something else instead.


It is not Langley, nor the NSA but close enough. There are no names offered. So no introductions, nor false pleasantries.

Even so she recognizes a couple of faces. Hardly surprising given what this select little group will likely be discussing. It is not the first time for some of them. Deputy Director (that's quite the promotion) Martin Danberg of the CIA. Some NSA lead analyst she's met twice before – Turznor she remembers his name as. And the man who summoned her here. General Gene Holland of the Defense Intelligence Agency. She's met them all before. Worked with them. Respects them too. Within the limits of their respective roles of course. She actually likes Danberg. He is almost human. The General is kind of the opposite but ironically it makes him bearable, the absence of the pretense of humanity. Turznor is just creepy - in that he spends too long out of natural light, spying on regular people, along with some disturbing mannerisms. Ugh.

The other three she does not know. Nor does she want to. They are all new, and all worry her. Their little group was usually self-contained. If it there are new people, then there are new issues, new potentials. All of it usually bad.

The late-middle aged red-haired woman, the obvious Special Ops Colonel (why are they always Colonels?), and finally the grey haired gent with the shark eyes were all new to this party. The Colonel's name badge says 'Silas' but she's naturally skeptical. The other two have no visible ID. And offer no names. She doesn't ask.

The briefing from Turznor is succinct. Which is diplomatic speak for they have suspicions but little in the way of hard evidence. Of a mole/traitor/killer/profiteer/drug smuggler/arms dealer somewhere in the Intelligence community. A ghost. Hell a phantom that appears and disappears for regularity. Perhaps more of a myth. Except for the name. The name apparently had got people killed. Just like Voldemort she supposes. She would roll her eyes but she's never that childish. Keeps her control almost all the time. Some in this room could likely test that. And her. And not in good ways.

"I don't need to guess why I am here," she challenges. "How is this connected to Bracken?" No replies, she pushes on, "More specifically to our investigation into him?"

"We don't have any evidence that it is directly linked to your current case." Semantics she counters in her head. "However, there are links to previous cross overs." At least General Holland has answered. He then nods to Turznor again.

"Two years ago Detective Kate Beckett of the NYPD shot dead a former Special Services soldier named Dick Coonan. It was adjudged a good shoot. Coonan had his hands in a lot of things including contract killing and drug smuggling. At the time of his death he was the lead suspect in his own brother's murder. He had worked for a limited number of employers after his military career was abruptly halted for suspected black market racketeering and excessive force."
Unfortunately, out of service, he turned to murder and other crimes as a means of making money. He was good at it. Turns out that as a 'cleaner' he had actually killed Detective Beckett's mother. What Detective Beckett, nor anyone else ever got was his ultimate employer. We think that employer has connections to the time Coonan was deployed in country. If the link is not via the employer, then a partner. They were moving all manner of gear - drugs, weapons, money, indentured labor. Of course the NYPD don't know this.

"What the NYPD also didn't know was that Coonan was also still actively on the books of a private military contractor at the time of his death. One with extensive government ties at the time, including to Senator Bracken. Caused a bit of a stink for a while. PMCs were already falling out of favour anyway. Suited some agendas. The particular PMC was cut loose. But not before the links were suppressed."

" Mostly," corrects the Spec-Ops Colonel, actually looking a little apologetic. Not that admitting any failure ever changes their behavior or focus. The problem with colonels McCord surmises is that their vision only extends as far as the mission. Regardless of cost.

"But the flow of drugs, weapons, money, indentured labor" - diplomatic speak for sex slaves - "didn't stop." McCord repeats Turznor's own words back at him. It is not a question.

"Never will." the silver haired gent opinions. His voice is deep. He's probably right. She marks him down as a realist. A cynic, well who knows. The grey eyes are flinty. Not much empathy there, and she has no trouble seeing this man as some sort of 'cleaner' too. Government employee or not, that sort of role unsettled her.

"We suspected that Coonan and his associates had contacts working inside SOCOM and the 'Web'. " The 'Web' was the moniker many gave to the eponymous CIA/DIA/NSA teams that flited around the conflict zones, declared or otherwise, seemingly immune to the rules, well pretty much most of them, legal and otherwise. Always mixed up in things but hard to pin down and identify. Deliberately so. She had encountered some here in her role. Despite the illegalities of their domestic operations there was never any objection or compliant. Everyone knew the score.

"Seems like you have this in hand. What do you need the 'D Oh J', and my team for? Do you think Bracken is involved in the crimes you are investigating? You have evidence?"

"Well this is a domestic matter." The General. Not answering the question.

"Really? All those black ops and now you're worried about the rules?"

Danberg smiles just a little as he speaks for the first time.

"The very nature of Bracken's criminal, sorry alleged criminal activities, means that the full and harsh glare of the press and public inquisitiveness will be shone into pretty much every corner. No matter what a number of parties want."

"So you want me to what? Cover-up? Misdirect? Suppress evidence? Not happening. " She pauses and then answers her own question. "Oh wait. You want to be seen doing the right thing."

General Holland's measured tone shows no sign of any stress "Calm down McCord. We're not asking you to do anything that you don't already do as part of your duties. Nor break the law. Just keep an open mind and watchful eye for anything that might be related. Especially with your current case. Then inform myself and I'll ensure it gets to the right people. And yes perform it in the public eye where necessary. We all know that is going to be for public consumption and not just on CSPAN."
Unsaid is that the Attorney General's Task Force could be relied upon to be a team player when it came to national security. *For the greater good.*

"So this is connected?" She certain it must be. But they don't have hard evidence, or none they are sharing. Worst case scenario is that they have information that is being supressed as it ties backs to someone or something that is deemed more important.

"Who can say." This from the red-head with no name. Does she mean who knows, or we're not telling? Or both? Sometimes McCord absolutely hates that she got dragged into this.

"I swear one day this is going to be the death of me."

"Careful what you wish for agent." The red headed woman cautions. McCord really doesn't like her at all. The woman is in her fifties, appears fit and the eyes are even less human that the 'Silver Fox'. The pair would make a scary couple.

"I'll need to brief in my immediate team and Vallante. But I take it you have more than that for me?"

"We certainly do McCord. You may even thank us for the information we are about to share."

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**New York State.**

Their return to the Hamptons was trouble-free.

Once again they were later leaving than originally planned but it is Sunday, the streets of Manhattan are quieter anyway and this continues for their journey up the I-495. Caught up in the ambience of a slow Sunday, Kate took her time driving and the journey took closer to three hours to make the trip back to their seaside home.

Rick kept her company for fifty minutes before dozing off. She listened to the radio with the volume down, as he slept on beside her undisturbed. She snuck the odd glance at her partner when the road and her cop training allows. She is so grateful for his recovery and optimism in doing so. She had not been quite so positive during her recovery. Shut people out to cope. He is the opposite. It is another building block in their relationship, making them stronger than before. But not without its own pain.

Their original timetable for return to the Hamptons had allowed for a planned detour past Ambrosia to restock. However, the deli is closed on Sundays but this was not an urgent issue as they had dinner for today and several more organised thanks to the leftovers from the Thanksgiving feast sitting in a cooler on the back seat. The Dodge wasn't the SUV and the cooler didn't fit in the sedan's trunk. Yet another consequence of a number of unplanned events and changes from their brief trip back to the city. Challenges they had faced together and adapted too. Each new event just further evidence that he really was the 'One.'

She woke him with half an hour to go. He was delightfully nonplussed for a minute or so before he re-orientated to his surroundings. He pretended a sulk but she caught the gleam in his eye even as she teased him, delighting in his childish plays.

Soon they are pulling up the drive way at the Hamptons. Their second home – she really still struggles to wrap her head around that one – is cold but welcoming. She has a plan to fix that. In the meantime they get the heating going in the kitchen and unpack.

Once they have all their bounty stowed away they watch a movie on the TV in the kitchen as they
have a very late lunch cum early supper. After cleaning up, they retreat upstairs where the bedroom fire place is already warming the room. Despite the hour, they’ll call it an early night too. They have Robert first thing in the morning. After three days without training, other than some stretching, Rick is not looking forward to the man's intensity and the workout. Something which even Kate can admit to. She likes a bit of downtime just as much as her man.

Brooklyn

The trattoria is small, barely large enough for the half-dozen candle lit tables. But it comes highly recommended by someone who would know a venue that is both romantic and possessed of a good kitchen. She is surprised that her source knew of, and recommended something off the Island. Still so far the recommendation holds good. Every table is occupied and the aromas assailing her senses tell her that the food at least has a hell of a lot of potential.

"Hello Lanie." Her date is here. Pretty much on time too. She half-turns and takes in the man before her, a smile gracing her lips. She rises and greets him with a genuine smile.

"Javi."

"You look lovely Lanie." His voice is just a little lower and slightly breathless. He's fit so she knows it is her dress that would be more than partially responsible for that. She likes his response but that is not, at least entirely, why they are here tonight. She likes the way he looks too. A nice jacket, black shirt with open collar, black slacks. He looks fine.

Within a minute of sitting their drink orders are taken and a menu's left for their perusal. It all sounds good and both choose something different than their usual fare. Their drinks arrive and their food selections communicated in short order.

They deliberately keep the conversation light, steering well away from the minefields that are his work, and their troubled relationship history. The food is great – just as recommended by Rick – and the ambiance quiet and soothing. Something they have both been seeking. She'll have to thank Rick - via text - for arranging the booking at such short notice.

Somehow, despite their nerves, it just works. Eventually they both settle, relax, and their familiarity and comfort return. Mostly. They skirt around some topics. More than survive the meal. She wants to do it again. He appears to as well.

Sometime later, after she had declined going dancing, he escorts her home. It was a very pleasant evening for both. It ends with a kiss with just a hint of more. But no sex. Something different for both of them. But this is what they are trying to do. Be together but change their dynamic. To see if they can properly connect outside of the bedroom or whatever surface was convenient.

She texts her mother and Kate – in that order – to inform them of events. And the optimism of progress, even if both had plenty of things left unsaid. She finishes with a final message to Rick to thank him for his recommendation for the venue and for arranging the booking. Her mother responds, obviously pleased by the results, but she like Javier almost as much as her daughter does, if not in quite the same way. No is no immediate response from Kate or Rick. Not that she expects it. Those two would be in bed, doing who knows what.

8.01 am Monday, Twelfth Precinct.

"Detectives please come in and shut the door"
They comply but they choose to remain standing. They both suspect, nearly know, what is coming.

Their Captain's sympathetic glance before she focuses on the report in front of her says the same.

Raising her head to look at the pair, "I'll get right to it. I know this is not going to be welcomed but it is time to shut down our investigation into the data theft and leaks related to NYPD personnel records."

"Sir!" He can protest on behalf of his partner and Beckett.

"Sorry Ryan." Gates actually looks sympathetic, "Above my pay grade. Way above. Out of our jurisdiction as well."

"Sir, my personal information - and Beckett's - was put out there for anyone to see and comment on."

"And I am equally unhappy about that Detective Esposito. However, this is non-negotiable. Non-reversible as well. The evidence has been seized over the weekend and removed from the NYPD. All other teams working on the case had stopped earlier, and well now there is nothing for them to investigate with."

Ryan actually looks shocked. Gates sometimes forgets how optimistic the man is. Not naive, but keen to see the best in everything, even the NYPD. She serves the same organisation but not with seeing and reluctantly tolerating many – but not all – of the realities of policing the one of the world's biggest cities. Not to mention politics.

Beside his partner, Esposito simmers, silently for the moment. She knows this officer – perhaps better than the man would credit - and also his type. He'll need to go let off some steam which normally would be enough given time, but her intuition tells her she needs more direct action this stage, so it is time for an intervention.

"Given us a minute please Ryan." It says a lot about the current state of the partnership that the younger man doesn't even check with his offsider before leaving the office, closing the door once again.

"I know you are unhappy Detective. But I want you to take some time and not do anything rash. It will take some time for your suspension to wash out but it will." She takes a moment to review his features. They are carefully schooled but he is not hiding anything from her. She has been around too long, seen too much and had some very fine teachers.

"You're a fine officer and detective, Esposito. Except where your innately instinctive loyalty has caused you to perhaps inadequately question yourself and your colleagues on a handful of occasions. But don't let go of that trait. It is highly prized for a reason. You just need to be a little more introspective and with less rush to action.

"Detective Beckett is also paying the price for her choices. As a Detective First class, Sergeant Supervisory is a sideways move. She should have been going up for her Lieutenant's bar, as a precursor to Captain. Her performance deserves it. Instead the career pathway will divert her for a little bit, if she still wants to pursue it. I took the same path but at an earlier age. Mine was for slightly different reasons as I need to prove my leadership skills having been advanced directly from a team member role. Beckett has her leadership credentials." She sees an iota of reaction from the man. Her words are getting through.

"But if you really want to leave, I won't block you. I think it would be a real shame for you to
decide to do so. From this precinct alone, and it would be a considerable mistake to leave the
NYPD."

"Captain," finally he speaks. Then he pauses, resets. "Thank you. I do appreciate your support and
advice. I know I have been out of sorts and have taken that frustration out on individuals that had
no part in the events that I'll admit have shaken my confidence in my role and the NYPD. I am not
going to rush any decision. Beckett got to rescind her resignation, I don't think many others would."

There is nothing the Captain can say to that last point, still she cautions temperance. "Please take
your time. You have a good partner there."

"I do. I do owe him and explanation. Plus an apology."

"I'm sure we can spare you for an hour so at the start of shift tomorrow. Perhaps a meeting over
breakfast might be suitable." She won't directly order him, but Esposito is ex-military. He can read
between the lines. No such thing as a suggestion from one's commander. Order it is, regardless of
how it is dressed up.

"Thank you Captain."

10.00 am Monday, Offices of Richard Castle Enterprises

The full management team was assembled in the meeting room at the offices of Richard Castle
Enterprises. The mood like the company was somewhat diminished.

It was not often that Henry (Business Manager), Steve (Commercial Law), Terrence (Accountant)
and Suzanne (Non-Commercial Law) were all physically present. However, the topics for
discussion today impacted their employer, his business and all of them directly too.

There was none of their usual banter, the somber attitudes reflecting the reality of their situation.

Any satisfaction, which have never approached any real level of euphoria, regarding their
seemingly outwitting the banks at the end of last week had dissipated. Replaced by the reality of
the massive contraction in the company's wealth, especially in terms of usable assets and capital. It
was all there in black and white in front of them courtesy of Terrence Dor's financial report. The
man had a genius for figures and for presenting them in clearly understandable terms. His one page
summary was equally eloquent and stark.

Terrence had finalized all the numbers over the weekend. The conclusions were bleak indeed,
echoing the reality of the situation for the company, Rick and for themselves. The bulk of assets
had been tied up in New York real estate – one of the great 'sure things' because if something
caused NY real estate to fall, then in all likelihood nothing on the wider market would be safe too.
As of the end of last week, RCE's previously extensive commercial property portfolio was some
two hundred and twenty million lighter in net value and now virtually non-existent to boot.

Their major remaining asset was the building that housed The Old Haunt. Originally bought on a
whim after acquiring the The Old Haunt, it actually had a lot of potential. Whilst the 'pub' was an
emotional purchase by Rick and hardly the star of the original portfolio, the parent building housed
three other businesses and six floors of residential tenants, all occupied. It has considerable long
potential but for the moment was relativity heavily leveraged. This had not been an issue when the
portfolio and their net assets were considerably larger. On the upside all the tenancies were cash-
flow positive. Even The Old Haunt did actually make a profit, helped by the patronage from the
Twelfth and surrounding precincts, but overall there was not too much excess cash flow from the
business.

Pretty much everything else was gone too, as the property assets provided the security not only for the loans for the Mayor's project but also the access to working capital for other RCE's business ventures outside of Richard Castle's writing.

Using their charitable donation to the Mayor's project had generated significant tax credits as well. But even with this, their best efforts they only just scraped enough to settle the outstanding bank loans. And this was only because they managed to persuade the banks that chasing the penalties for early termination and breach was at counterproductive if not financially disadvantageous. This smart talking had saved them and their boss more than fifty million. And avoided the prospect of bankruptcy for RCE.

Steve leads off, "We're going to have to raise the rent for the remaining properties we manage. We have a number of tenancies coming up for renewal. Twenty per cent in the next six months, and more than a fifty-five per cent within a year."

"We're under-priced for the current market by an average of sixteen per cent, as much as twenty-five points on some leases. Raising the rent by ten per cent for the eligible properties in the next lease renewal cycle will result in a six point seven per cent net cash flow. But should not adversely impact the occupancy rate."

"Good thing we signed The Old Haunt to a new ninety-nine year lease with virtually cast iron contractuals." Harry's attempt at humor falls flat but is a valid point. Although hands off, Rick – aka the Boss – is emotionally compromised with the pub and would take anything impacting operations and especially failure badly.

"Aside from The Old Haunt, we have the three other commercial leases, and seventeen residential tenancies in the same building. One commercial and two residences are up for renewal in next three months, more within six months."

"We have the Brooklyn venture for social housing. But that is at least a year to fifteen months from completion. Plus it is a low return, social investment. Do we have anything else?" The accountant adds.

"You forgot the pizza place on Seventh and Thirteenth," Steve corrects Terrence. No one calls it by the trading name. Terrence especially.

"Three then." The accountant looks sour. "But that last one is barely worth the interest payments. Even at the discount price we paid for the property. Of course having to rip out and replace an otherwise perfectly good pizza oven was an extra cost. But unless that stalled development nearby goes ahead business will stay flat at that place. At the moment there is virtually no local traffic."

Suzanne laughs. "Authentic Rick's, Terrence. The place is called Authentic Rick's. And eventually the development will go ahead, the residents will move in and business will pick up. We know it will, but that's the delight of investing in New York. Eventually it will be worth something. Just so long as you can afford to wait it out."

Terrence ignores her and goes for the bottom line. "For all our remaining properties the forecast net income is between three hundred to five hundred." That is thousands of dollars. Small change in the previous world of income for RCE. But no more.

"Not exactly great figures Terrence and Harry." Steve voices everyone's thoughts.
Aside from her last interjection Suzanne White has remained mostly quiet until now. This was not
normally her sphere of operations. She mainly watched out for Alexis and did a little for Martha
and was on standby in case Rick got into trouble but her services were not generally required since
he had gotten himself embedded on the right side of law enforcement, despite a number of close
calls in the past.

"The upside is that all his personal assets are untouched. And not at risk. Same with the trusts.
Unless we do something precipitous."

There are nods from the rest of the room. For that alone RCE and the team had served their
purpose. Rick Castle and his family were still wealthy.

"So we have options. We could use some of those assets to fund some small projects. Start
generating some extra cash-flow. I'm sure Rick would approve some allocation of funds so long as
it does not touch the trust funds and charities."

"So what about his 401K? Is that in play?"

"What do you mean Harry?" Steve suspect where this is going but won't show his hand or opinion.

"What I mean is that it has eight million in it."

"Sure we could use some of it to run some ventures. But how much and what kind of investment?
Plus we would need Rick's approval." Terrence. Always the stickler for the rules. Risk adverse too.

"How about we get him on the line? We need to update him and it might be time to float some
ideas. The previous wealth came from the slow acquisition of property since 2002 that coincided
with the boom in prices won't be easily repeated. Especially from a significantly reduced asset
base."

Steve raises a hand and the room quietens. "Before we do, I think we need to discuss the elephant
in the room." He sees shoulders and perhaps heads sag. They all know this is coming. Doesn't
make it any less un-palatable though.

"The reality is that with the diminishment of the portfolio there is no longer a business case for all
of us to retain our current full-time roles and perhaps more relevantly our salaries. Given that pretty
much all of his book and media business is conducted at arms-length from RCE so we are not part
of that income stream. Only the final residual balance comes through for Terrence to work his
magic. Harry does a little here and there but the reality is that without the large property portfolio
and the cash flow we cannot justify our time and costs."

They are all smart people. This isn't, or at least shouldn't come as a surprise to them. But it still
hurts.

"I've done the figures. There is enough to justify Harry's full time presence running operations, but
for the rest of us, this will be only part time going forward." There are nods of acceptance. "In short
we need to bunker down, but there's only room in a bunker for a lucky few."

"Suzanne and I have always maintained a small pool of other clients outside of RCE but not enough
to fill the income gaps that will arise. So that will be a challenge for us in the current climate.

"Terrence, this may impact you the most. You closed up your independent accountancy business to
come and work for RCE. I am sorry that it has likely come to this."

The big man barely nods. He had a quiet demeanor, and could appear gruff at first. But they had all
got to know him in the half-decade since he took over the accountancy functions and outperformed every benchmark. Although he did not often show it the pride he took in his professionalism masked a likely for his employer and his colleagues. Still he had a good reputation, more work would not be hard to find. Work he liked on the other hand…..

"Let me be clear, I want us to be united in this when we speak to Rick. I do not believe we should try and give Rick an opportunity to be soft-hearted. This is purely a business decision." More nods. They know their boss. No doubt he'll argue, possibly plead a little, but this is business. His business and they will do their best for the business and the owner as professionals.

"He'll feel guilty about it. He pushed to back the Mayor's project even though we warned of the risks to the business. He'll feel doubly guilty with the impact to our jobs and income. So we're all agreed on the party line. No dissent or uncertainty?" He looks at his colleagues, "Just to be certain we'll vote and have it minuted."

The chorus of 'ayes' signals their intent.

With that Harry hits the call button in Skype. Time to bring in Rick. And possibly his partner. Now things could get confusing as to which one of them would be the 'boss' going forward? He has no doubt Kate Beckett will want to take a back seat and not rock the boat. But would Rick let her?

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**Besley, Wax and Drummond.**

From the onset Jim had recognized that Valerie Wilson was a tough and savvy lawyer. Her reputation before she joined the firm said as much, as did her subsequent performance. Both when she was married to one partner and then again when divorced but still refusing to give up her job at the firm despite the breakdown of her marriage. Now that he knows her better – in the all the ways another person can – he also acknowledges her bravery and grace. Val has unwittingly been dragged into his family's seeming never-ending tragedy but the lady had not buckled nor fled. She had calmly stepped up and stood with his family. If anything this made him love her more. He had confessed as much to Jo the other night. If she hadn't been so adamant about not marrying he would have pulled the ring (his mother's) from its hiding place and asked her the question. Well that and the fact that Katie deserved to go first. He may have to put the word on Rick to man up and do the right thing.

Pushing those happier thoughts aside Jim frowns as he contemplates their current situation. Knowing what they now did, days in the office acquired a whole new outlook. Both were admittedly on edge and a tad twitchy. Fortunately internal politics at work had died down – for the moment. For once Jeff had not been a complete ass. He was still posturing and ineffectual but had somehow stepped back from his raging demography. Val had simply observed later to Jim that he still limped, and did so with an near-evil smile on her face. But it was no laughing matter. Whoever put the frighteners on Jeff would likely do the same to others.

Still he was concerned about their safety and that of their co-workers. There were a lot of innocent people here who had no part in any of their troubles. He had requested and Katie had arranged for a Taylor Matthews security review of the offices. Val was arranging it via a very competent but scary woman Katie had recommended. But that was some days away.

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**Monday night, the Hamptons**

Rick was dead beside her. What a day.
First up had been Robert who had descended upon them like a whirlwind, and the man had worked both of them hard, and this time had extended her exercise sets to push her superior fitness to similar levels of exhaustion as Rick's. In the end she had taped out, and joined a still panting Rick on the mat. The physiotherapist's look of satisfaction sufficient motivation for next time. She would not be beaten.

Once upright and hydrated they had actually braved the slight drizzle and near winter chill, to sit and soak, their bodies fully immersed to their necks, in the hot tub for maybe a quarter of an hour before pulling on robes, kept dry under a sunshade, and dashing back indoors to shower.

Then there had been his, no their, teleconference meeting with RCE. She was surprisingly okay with being pulled into business matters but had made it clear to all she was going to stay in the background. At least for now. It was another area where she should no longer be surprised at how mature he could be. Business like is probably a better term. And she wants to be part of it. Involved in everything she needs to be. To be his partner.

The news from the company was sobering. Not so much for the loss of millions, rather hundreds of millions of dollars, but for the resultant loss of employment for the people who worked for him. She had not been surprised that Rick had tried, pleaded even, to change their minds. He did however refuse to accept their resignations. Instead he ordered Harry to offer them redundancy with benefits paid. This had been reluctantly accepted by the group as a compromise. One they obviously had not thought of themselves. More confirmation that her partner, her 'one and done', is a good man.

They had leftovers for lunch, and then Kate had thrown herself back into study. Rick left to his own devices.

He was back in the kitchen inside an hour. The frustration obvious. The fine motor skills for his typing not yet returned. Robert had cautioned them about realistic expectations. The scans showed no nerve damage. It would simply take time and repetition with inevitable frustration as he rebuilt the muscles and control. She had some ideas on how to help him cope in the meantime. She would need some assistance of her own. Ryan or Tori would be best.

In the meantime she had distracted him with the summary of her own research into the options for heating solutions for the house. His eyes had lit up and he was off to his study post haste to do his own research leaving her to complete her own study.

10.11 pm Monday, China Town, Manhattan.

She didn't understand why Glaser needed an urgent meeting.

Carmel Davies might be a Lieutenant in IA but she was still a cop. This wasn't their usual meeting place. This was altogether too dark and isolated. She wasn't a street cop anymore but had once been. Her instincts might be atrophied by years behind a desk but they were still there and tonight they screamed at her.

But the Councillor had been insistent. Almost desperate even. And she owed the Councilwoman this much. Even if it shrieked setup to her cop instincts. But that made no sense. She had nothing to fear from Glaser. So she had come.

She entered the alley. It wasn't a dead end, nor was it completely dark. At least two doorway lights threw enough illumination.
Still something was off but she hadn't bought backup. Not like she could anyway. Not for the off-the-books assistance she was providing in return for a leg up with her career. Not illegal, but not without risk. Despite the fact that she was technically off-duty she still had her shield and pistol with her.

She caught a flash of something in the corner. With her mind already on edge she went for the security of her piece, even whilst announcing herself "NYP…" but before she even got her weapon clear of her holster and her identification complete she felt the bullet hit her. She'd never been shot before. God it hurt.

She's lying there for a minute or so, paralyzed not so much by the physical injury to her shoulder but by the shock. She's wondering why she hadn't heard anything. No voices, no gunshot.

"Oh honey why did you have to go and do that?" The voice is almost upset, "Look what you made me do to you." The deep baritone is not familiar but the face is. She catches sight of the end of the semi-automatic that is dwarfed in his right hand. No silencer. So who shot her? Did he remove the silencer? Or was there another gun with a silencer? Another shooter.

"Fuck!" escapes her lips. The man above her chuckles.

"Well I had plans. This wasn't it. Oh well not the worst thing that they have to change." He almost sounds regretful. But not entirely.

Shit she was dead. No one shoots a cop without being sure they can get away with it. Even this man.

"Why?"

There is no answer except the crack of a single shot.

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**Tuesday Morning, Twelfth Precinct.**

Espo and Ryan arrive together after their reconciliation breakfast before their shift. Ever mindful of the Captain, they are just over thirty minutes late for their shift start well within the allotted hour of grace the Captain had suggested.

Their breakfast had gone well. Turns out that the Captain's suggestion already had legs from another direction. Lanie had called Jenny and between the two strong women, two mule-headed men were given an ultimatum with incentive – the bacon and pancakes kind, and the threat of no physical intimacy.

Whilst the two partners have regained much of their sangfroid, there is a hushed tension on the floor. Most of the shift is already in but the noise levels and bustle is muted. This usually means one thing. Brass! And as there were none in sight, it clearly meant Gates has company.

Sullivan looks up and is pleased to observe that the partners are noticeably more relaxed in each other's company. It is a shame, or worse, that their calmness is not shared by the current occupants of the Captain's office. The same men whose voices could be clearly heard in the bullpen, through the closed door. He motions a warning to the two detectives who acknowledge with curt incline of their heads and aim for the relative safety of their desks.

Approaching their desks Ryan and Esposito can see into the Captain's office and Gates looks shaken. They finally catch sight of the faces on their Captain's visitors. That the Chief of Detectives and Deputy Commissioner are here, with raised voice, well that cannot bode well for
anything. Or anyone.

They never make it to their desks. Gates spots them through the partially drawn blinds, and her door opens.


"Sir." Espo acknowledges. Like all former soldiers, he clearly recognizes a moment where simply obeying the command is the best option, even if the order raises many questions.

Gates gives a terse dip of her head in acknowledgement, and retreats back inside her office, and her guests.

Esposito and Ryan have taken a little bit of satisfaction from marching a clearly bewildered Demming up to Gates’ office. However that is quickly diminished by the sudden look of understanding on the robbery detective's face. Hard to be smug when you have no idea what's going on but apparently the other guy – Demming – now does.

Of course this only lasts until he spots the Chief of Detectives and Deputy Commissioner.

"Sorry Demming. Did we forget to mention that Captain Gates has company?"

Score one for their team. Totally petty and junior school but hey this is the NYPD.

"Detective Demming I am going to need you to repeat everything you told me to the Chief of Detectives and the Deputy Commissioner regarding the meeting you witnessed where Lieutenant Davis met Councillor Davies. Please ensure you leave out no details."

"Sir, Sir." Demming is nearly ramrod straight at attention. Whatever this is, it is nothing good. The only saving grace is the absence of IA. That really would round off the group. Bad enough that Gates is former IA. If there is such a thing.

Gates nods to encourage him, and Demming repeats his previous report near verbatim.

There are no questions until the Chief of Detectives, after several moments, inclines his head to one side. "Your date. She can corroborate this?"

"Yes sir. She recognized Councillor Glaser on her own. However, she was facing away from them so didn't really observe much of the encounter. We felt it wise not to be too obvious."

"Still it may be useful. Thank you Detective. But not a word of this to anyone."

"Yes Sir."

Demming swivels and executes a rapid exit from the office, closing the door, any remaining energy focused on maintaining a controlled but rapid departure from the black hole that is the top brass. Only then does he let himself relax at all. Just a little as he maintains his pace to take him past the silent questions from the Homicide detectives.

As soon as the door shuts, the Chief of Detectives, releases his posture unknowingly mimicking his subordinate.

"Well Victoria, what the hell is going on?"
"If Lieutenant Davies was in with Glaser what does that mean?"

"We all know that Glaser is one of Bracken's known lackeys. Is this in any way linked to the rumors?"

"Of his criminal corruption and possibly worse? Possibly. You think maybe she is making a break or a struggle for control?"

"No. Glaser is time server, no ambition or drive. Knows her place. Firmly in Bracken's camp. None of the rumors have shown any sign of shifting her from there."

"So what the connection with Carmel Davies and how did she end up dead? Is this some form of retribution or punishment then?"

"God I hope not. All we need is a dirty cop. Especially one in IA. Could it be Bracken, or one of his agents, or possible someone who wants it to look like Bracken, extracting payback for something?"

"A possible theory. Bracken is known for bearing grudges. And that was before he appears to have been more acting more mafia than magistrate. But if so, payback for what?"

"Do you know how unbelievable this sounds? We're talking about a sitting US senator. New York Councillor. Dirty cops. Having people, including possibly a cop, killed."

"I've heard stranger. It is not that implausible. We have individuals do it all the time. Sure this is different because of the scale. But whatever is going on, it clearly involves multiple parties. Just who we don't have a clear picture of.

"I think we're missing something. What if it wasn't intentional? What if it was meant to be a meeting and for whatever reason she was spooked. Perhaps the party she was meeting wasn't who she expected. Not the person who called her. She was a cop, she had instincts, training. Went for her gun, and then she was shot and subsequently killed."

"That might align with the evidence. Crime scene reports indicates that the shoulder wound was most likely first and bled for at least several minutes before the fatal shot was made. Preliminary ballistics say the caliber of both rounds is 9mm but the rifling is different indicating two different weapons. One at least was probably silenced as the 911 call only referred to a single shot."

"IA are running lead on this but we're calling in extra resources. Need some from your team too Vicky."

"It is a shame Detective Beckett is not available to work this one. Her and her team, especially Richard Castle with his connections could be very good on this."

"You have changed your tune on that." The Chief of Detectives does not let Deputy Commissioner Lawrence's comment slide past. The man had not simply been a skeptic, he had previously openly opposed civilian consultants, especially celebrity ones.

"I may have underestimated his contribution. Frankly maybe I believed his press. Saw the playboy and not the professional. The figures don't lie but still I'm not the greatest fan of consultants. But in this case, the risks seem to have paid off. I'll deny I ever said that of course." Gates hides a small smirk of her own.

"Of course any decision regarding his future with the NYPD, well I would be inclined to leave that it the capable hands of his Division and Precinct commanders." Well that is news. Good news for once.
"Meanwhile, I have IA all over this. One of their own after all. But at the same time, her reputation wasn't entirely spotless. She had enemies and well her association with Glaser, that definitely riled a few people up. One thing to play the game, another thing entirely to play it too publicly. Put a few noses out of joint."

"But we can't let the murder of an officer go without response."

"Of course not. We're got a task force getting set up and it will be running by tonight."

"Victoria, with IA as primary on this, will some of yours be able to work with them?"

"The assistance from your team would be greatly appreciated," the CofD's amends.

"Of course."

"We need to get going. Kelly wants a report and to have the background before the press go feral on this. We'll schedule a phone conference for later."

And with that they are up and moving out of the office. No handshakes necessary. The Deputy Commissioner's body guard materializes from the edge of the bullpen where he had appropriated a coffee and Danish from somewhere. The Chief of Detectives rates, but doesn't want or have a personal guard but the harsh realities of what it is like at the top of the echelon help temper any ambition Victoria Gates has for rising too far. Body guards, politics. She's not sure which is worse.

She won't wait for IA to request resources. She'll keep what control she can, so she makes the call.

"Harriman."

"Hello Ros."

"Hey Vicky. Still miss us." A statement of fact, not a question.

"Of course. So much so I can send a couple of bodies your way if you want them. Two of my best."

"It would be appreciated. So long as they can work with."

"They're professionals." She chides.

"It's more than that." The voice challenges her back.

She knows this.

"They'll do their jobs and more."

"That's all I need to know. Seven sharp tomorrow please Vicky. They can report direct to me first day." And then the call is terminated. Some things never change. Ros Harriman is definitely one of them.

She sticks her head out of the office.

"Ryan and Esposito get in here."

The Captain's briefing has filled in many of the gaps and questions that have preoccupied the
experienced homicide detectives since they were ordered to fetch Demming from Robbery that morning. But not all.

"What about Sully and Blake?"

"Everyone else stays on regular duties."

"Suits and ties gentlemen. It is One PP," she focuses on Detective Esposito's dark chino's and polo shirt, he holds his ground, "report to Captain Harriman tomorrow morning at Oh Seven Hundred sharp."

"Sir?"

"Yes Ryan."

"Why?"

"This is a police officer who was killed. Lieutenant Carmel Davies. We do our best for all our colleagues. Regardless of, well, regardless." Then assessing the younger man, she adds for clarification, "You two are my best on deck. So you are up. Show them why the Twelfth has the best stats."

"Yes Sir."

"I know I don't need to ask, but this is definitely 'A Game' territory Detectives."

There is no verbal acknowledgement but Victoria Gates doesn't need it from her two detectives as they take their leave.

Wednesday, Conference Rooms Eleven and Twelve, One Police Plaza. New York.

The room was big. The folding partition between the two rooms pushed aside to house the thirty plus bodies, tables, white boards, laptops and other essentials for a task force.

It is two days in for most of the team. Progress on the case was slow. Which was to be expected. If nothing breaks in the first twenty-four it is usually the long haul. Nothing had. So far.

Esposito still felt uncomfortable in the suit. Ryan of course rocked a three piece but was still on edge. More than half the assigned resources were IA, and the boss. Well Captain Ros Harriman was not at all what they expected.

Okay female they knew of beforehand. But so very direct, even more so that Gates. And more by the book than any rookie, or their Captain. She was the living embodiment of the rules. The word was that Rosalind Harriman was going to be the first female Commissioner. And do it by being better than anyone else. No politics, no smoozing, no shortcuts.

And to top that she was probably better looking than Beckett. Which they would both deny of course. First that Beckett – a fellow officer – was more than attractive. Just not done, especially on the same team, even if she hadn't finally been dating the odd-sock in their foursome. Secondly, that someone else - especially another cop – could be better looking than Beckett. But the IA captain was extremely hot by any scale. Legs not quite as long as Beckett's but damn the rest of her. Wow!

But that impression was allowed to linger no time at all. The Captain had dispelled it in no uncertain terms on their first meeting. Espo of course had been rendered slightly tongue-tied and
the Captain had picked up on that and had given them a brief but firm talk. They were so going to have to work out how to pay Gates back for the lack of warning.

Captain Harriman never mentions it again. She is professionalism embodied and leaves Beckett for dead on that front too. But she's no fun either. Or at least not that they see. A quick attempt to elicit information from some of the IA detectives is shutdown so fast it may not have happened. No talking in class. And their non-IA colleagues know the same or less.

Esposito and Ryan find themselves part of the team of twenty-seven detectives – fifteen from IA, the remaining dozen like themselves seconded in pairs from other precincts or teams – hunting for Lieutenant Carmel Davies' killer. Ros Harriman was leading one line of enquiry – the external investigation - and her senior by three years, Captain Lou Vincent, was leading the other, the internal investigation.

Ryan and Esposito were grateful that they had the non-IA heavy external investigation. Still after a day or two the lines blur. Everyone has been doing anything and everything including grunt work. No one is shirking. The hours are long. Starts are at six. Knock off past ten. Meal breaks snatched. The two captains do make sure there are regular coffee deliveries and lunch is catered.

For all that effort they have nothing concrete. Informants, street cams, phone records, intelligence all turn up nothing.

But a consensus profile is emerging.

Their victim, Lieutenant Carmel Davies of the NYPD's Internal Affairs division had nine years on the force, six in IA. She was ambitious as her rank showed. But nothing they had said she was dirty. Or caught up in something. Except, that whilst she wasn't corrupt per se, she was politicking her way to the top. Nothing new or especially dishonorable about it for many. The difference was that she was clearly being sponsored by Councilwoman Glaser. And fast tracked just a little too quickly and that stuck out and stuck in the throats of a few. Especially in IA. That said no one had another pegged any credence to an officer being killed for ambition. Not for a future Captain's slot. Did they?

They had started with her sponsor. Councilwoman Glaser. Harriman had done the interview. The team watching behind the glass, crowded into the larger observation room at One PP. Glaser had been cooperative but not forthcoming about anything related the murder. Of course she was shocked by Lieutenant Davies' murder. Yes she was assisting a bright dedicated NYPD officer in furthering her career goals and the NYPD in service of the citizens of the city. She outright denied any knowledge or arranging a meeting. Nothing on either her or the victim's phones. No evidence of any proximity from the cellular network records. No traces of a burner phone. She could confirm her whereabouts at the time of death. Not that anyone thought the woman would actually get her own hands dirty.

Ryan had quickly been assigned much of the IT related stuff. A phone call to Gates got Tori Ellis slicing her time at the Twelfth to help out too. They quickly confirmed Glaser's presence at a late running meeting at City Hall. Everything was above board. They noted the Washington DC numbers but attempts to find them were inconclusive as they came up as Capitol Building but nothing else. They would need the DC Police, probably even the Capitol Police to confirm whose numbers they were.

Esposito found himself out on the streets running a lot of – entirely false - leads down. Knocking doors. Door-stepping with one of Harriman's deputies, Detective First Class Hal Green. He found he didn't mind it so much. They even did a couple of road trips with the Captain. Harriman did not
switch off. She is cop, all of the time. But she was extremely good at her job, as the two partners could now appreciate. She was very much evidence and fact driven. No theories or stories. Not much humor either. Espo missed Castle's distractions and Beckett's not-so-secret tolerance and occasional participation.

8.03 pm Wednesday, Murphy's Irish Pub, Brooklyn.

The two women were not typical clientele even with their jars of dark Irish stout. But one look at either was enough to discourage all but the most clueless of patrons to keep their distance. Only one had been brave or foolish enough to try and approach the striking woman.

Ros Harriman eyed her former boss across the circular table in their corner booth. They are talking shop but with low voices. No one close enough to hear.

"Your boys are good. Ryan has a surprising stubborn streak, persistent, won't give up, but smart with it. And Esposito is certainly pulling his weight. Keeping his head down too. Compared to a couple of the other co-opted team members they are just sailing along."

"Don't sound surprised Ros. What did you expect? They're both good detectives. Should be stepping to First Grade soon," Vicky Gates gives her former subordinate and inheritor of her IA captaincy a small frown. Best to change the subject. "Nothing yet?"

"I hear you Vicky. But no, not a thing. Whoever did this is either a ghost. Or protected. Really well protected. I don't know which one scares me most."

Vicky scoffs at Ros being scared of anything. Mind you she once believed that of Kate Beckett. "What does your gut say Ros?"

"I think this was unplanned, unintended. A meeting - possibly set up by Glaser, but we'll never prove it – that goes wrong. But whoever did it, well they don't care. Killing a cop doesn't phase them. So whoever they are, they're dangerous and probably connected."

"But not dirty cops."

No. Not what my gut is telling me. Nor Vincent's investigation. He's turned up nothing and you know how hard he looks. The evidence backs up the first impression. Glaser was simply cultivating and supporting an upcoming and ambitious cop. Happens all the time. Sure Davies wasn't afraid to show her connections, and put more than a few offside but nothing more. She was ambitious. Meet with Glaser about once every six to eight weeks. Their meetings were all out in the open and that includes the one witnessed by Detective Demming. Their last public meeting as far as we know."

"So this alleyway at night time? It is out of character? A dark alley for Christ's sake. Talk about clichéd."

"Yes. And as a cop Davies would have been suspicious. And much as it pains me, I've got a suspicion we're not going to find the evidence to solve this directly. But if it is connected?" She shakes her head. "Well things usually shake out."

At the nod opposite, she changes subject. "Anyway enough of that. Tell me Vicky? How does it feel to owe one to the annoying, irreverent, civilian your life?"

Vicky groans. "Not you too? DM hasn't stopped either."
"Well what's another man to annoy you?"

"This one is much better at it than DM, even without trying. Plus as the world now knows he's dating, or more, my best detective."

"Yeah, well that is something else we can talk about. Rumor has it that Kate Beckett is up for a potential promotion. All of that despite her serious disciplinary infraction less than twelve months ago."

"She did serve out her suspension. Although knowing what I now know about her relationship with Richard Castle, I wonder how much of a punishment that was. Regardless you almost sound jealous."

"You're joking right Vicky? I just don't like seeing people jump the queue."

"Maybe so, and you know I agree. But she isn't jumping the queue. She should have been promoted some time ago. The truth is, she is a better detective than either of us. Also as a team leader. But I'll admit I have my doubts about her long term potential if promoted to command, say as a precinct captain. She is too inclined to follow her instincts, or worse when it comes to cases close to her. So the additional responsibility as supervisor should be a good test of her commitment and control among other things."

"That's not all of it though is it Vicky?"

"No. I wonder if she would give it up for him? Well herself really. Oh Hell, the both of them. I don't think she is quite there yet but...who knows. It is not just her rescinded resignation that makes me question her commitment to a career. Before Richard Castle came along I would have imagined she was dedicated to the job but now perhaps not so much. Good for her, not so good for the NYPD."

"So in the press announcements they have only been together a bit over six months. Damn! There were a bunch of rumors in the early years, some press too. But nothing ever came of them. Back then they were dating others publicly I understand."

"Roz, have you been snooping?" She can barely keep the glee from her voice.

"Only on Page Six." Her counterpart's tone tries to convey humor in her response but even the subtlest of jibes from a friend about even a minor infraction of regulations is not allowed to pass.

"Oh behave Roz. I know you."

"Yes, you do. So you know I don't."

"Shut up and finish your drink. I think we need to go find a place that serves better food than here. I do not fancy some reheated non authentic Irish meat and potato pie."

"Right. So somewhere close to home so DM doesn't have far to travel to pick you."

"But nowhere near we might be recognized."

"I don't know. Maybe you could change things up with the 'Iron Gates' reputation."

"Not likely. And not without a fight." She glares at her former protégé. "Your reputation too, Captain-by-the-book."
"Touche," she raises her glass and almost chugs. "And there you go." She has finished her drink, and looks pointedly at the not empty glass in Vicky's hand and arches an eyebrow.

"Alright, let's go." Gates slams the rest of the now warm stout down. "I need to call DM and warn him."

"Yeah you do that. Won't change how you'll feel in the morning."

"Shut up! Are you trying to talk me out of getting drunk?"

"No just giving you fair warning of what to expect in case you forgot."

"I'm still blaming you in the morning."

"Fair enough. Best I state for the record that we should do this more often."

"True."

Chapter End Notes

Author's note.
This was been a overly long and unintended hiatus.
There are 8 remaining chapters to follow to complete this story.
Chapters 73, 79 and 80 are all complete bar final proofing. Chapters 74 - 78 are in various stages from outline to largely done.
If you are still with me, thank you.
If you went back to re-read what went before, thank you more.

Chapter 73 will be posted within a week.
Paranoia?

Chapter Notes

Previously: - With Rick's recovery progressing in the Hamptons, the outside world is intruding into their lives. Will they soon be back in the action?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

New York, Wednesday

Clare Dunne was not the impatient nor paranoid type. That got you dead or worse in her career. However it did not mean that she ignored her instincts. And her gut had been telling her to move up the schedule for security checks for Jim Beckett and Valerie Wilson. To that end Mike Dempsey and Adrian Hill had already been over the two apartments – it would be much simpler if the couple lived in one place - and were today visiting the offices Beesley, Drummond and Wax to complete the first round of assessments. At least the two of them worked together. If they needed a detail then a single residence and place of work were definite manpower savers but not without the downside of increased risk from being more easily tracked and targeted.

Something else was bugging her. She had spoken to Tim Matthews twice since Rick's shooting. Each time he had played down any risk but had urged her to maintain her guard. Whilst not exactly contradictory it was not the usual assessment. What wasn't he telling her?

As the company's CEO, Matthews was also the pipeline into the Government. His links, especially with clandestine and intelligence operations were a gold mine. Of course much of what he picked up was not relevant to Taylor Matthews or their clients, and was filtered accordingly. There is something is happening in DC, something involving multiple federal agencies. Something that could potentially impact Rick Castle, his family along with Kate Beckett and her family and friends. She would bet that it was connected to the rumours surrounding of an investigation into William Bracken. The news was hinted at campaign finance irregularities but how much had the Feds discover about the Dragon.

Yet all their intelligence and assessments show there were no current realistic threats. Nothing had come of their multiple lines of enquiry after Rick was shot. It appeared to be random, although the deaths in custody of some of the arrested suspects was not without its own concerns. There was no sign of any possible threat or change in posture from Bracken or any of his known associates. The godawful truce that Kate Beckett had brokered over her gun barrel seems to be holding.

The hacking strike against Beckett and Detective Esposito was the first sign that perhaps something deeper and darker was a foot. But that petered out especially once the Feds nailed and turned the hacker responsible. Opinion remained divided on what the purpose of the release of data was. She was leaning towards some form of distraction.

She would call Matthews again. Rick was her friend, and Kate Beckett might well be one too given a chance. She didn't like leaving friends in the firing line if she could help it. That was what she was paid for, and not so secretly enjoyed - so long as she had sufficient control, and for that she needed information.
The Hamptons, Thursday morning.

Kate's suggestion on Monday that Rick do research for a heating solution for their Hamptons house had paid off for both of them. Firstly it had distracted him and given him something meaningful to do so she could concentrate study for her promotion exam. Secondly, the house was going to get a heating solution.

She had been pleasantly surprised when Rick had returned after a couple of hours with his own research to share and integrate with her own. Naturally there was a differing of opinion on some matters and some vigorous and not always logical debate. But eventually a compromise had been reached. And on the Tuesday Rick has contacted several local suppliers and requested quotes along with lead times for installation.

The process was greatly simplified when only one company had been able to commit to an installation any time before Christmas. After speaking to the manager, Rick has been happy enough to place an order and request a pre-installation site visit. That had passed off on Wednesday without any issues being found. They would be back tomorrow to do the installation.

In the meantime between Robert's morning rehabilitation and training sessions and her study for her imminent exams, they were filling in the time. On Robert's advice Rick has held back from typing with more than one finger for a while longer. He has exercises to follow but also firm instructions not to overdo things and cause a complication that could set back his recovery.

Columbia Dorms, New York.

The end of term was coming up and her workload was right up there. Whoever said that high school was harder than college clearly had not tried. That she has committed to catch up on the two weeks she missed when her Dad was in hospital only exacerbated the time crunch she was facing. Assignments, plus tests, a couple of which were major enough to be worthy of the title examination.

She's managing but had been too busy even to dart back to the Loft for the remaining leftovers. Fortunately Grams had taken it upon herself to drop by with the most significant items earlier in the week. More than enough to feed her friends and shared kitchen's residents through to last night. Also the visit was a nice distraction from study plus she could check up on how Grams was really doing. She knows that Dad's injury and yet another near-death miss had stressed Grams so she wanted to make sure she was coping in a good manner. Her family's coping mechanisms often seemed to involve parties, over-consumption and – for her father at least – regrets later. Grams was seeing her therapist and keeping busy but Alexis promised herself to check in regularly.

Nursing another coffee – she's begun to recognise what a critical prop caffeine can be for the tired - and an alarmingly thick text book, she's not really concentrating this morning. She's been distracted by a stream of messages on her phone. Some with Jane had been fun and educational even, the others – from her Mom mainly – not so much. She'll have to do something about that later. Now her phone is on mute and face down in a vain effort to keep her attention on the page.

She needed something to relieve the tension and allow her mind to settle. Time for something from the chocolate stash. Then she promised herself she would settle and work until lunchtime.

Despite evidence to the contrary from high school, she still worried that she had inherited her Dad's wandering attention span. It wasn't that he couldn't concentrate, it was that he rarely focused on one thing for any extended time. Now she knows that when it matters he is absolutely zeroed in on whatever, or usually whoever, needs the attention, be it his writing, herself or Kate.
It has taken some time to get over her admittedly mostly irrational jealousy of Kate Beckett. It is not only her tall, lean body, beauty and gorgeous hair. There is the obvious confidence, and intelligence. Her success in a male dominated domain. Her captivation of her dad. But the final one was her sexual confidence. She radiated it on so many levels but never in a demeaning manner. She had finally plucked up the courage to ask Kate one night while Dad was on a sudden writing jag. Kate had invited her out to a coffee shop to ensure they were not disturbed and had been quietly supportive and encouraging of her own steps to discover her sexuality in a positive way while cautioning that some missteps and excruciating moments were inevitable.

She was honest enough to admit that sex was a good way of relieving tension. She hadn't had many partners and needed an emotional connection too before tumbling into bed. She had thought she had one with Max but it turned out his connections were all funnelled through one body part, and good as it was, she needed more. Once exams and the term papers were done, perhaps she could look for a new boyfriend with a brain as well as a…

Sighing she picked up the psychology text book again.

Seven PM. Attorney General's Office. Washington DC

Senior Agent Rachael McCord was finally done with the reviews for the Bracken investigation. She had just signed everything off for Vallante. And together they had submitted them to the senior counsel for the AG's office. His job would be summarising the two thousand plus pages into a far more concise brief for their political masters.

From there the decision to prosecute would be taken. Based on the evidence they had so far, she was hopeful that it would really be about what crimes to charge the man with. Not about political damage control. But she wasn't naïve enough to believe that would not be a factor.

There was no way that Bracken – she refused to address him as Senator in her head – would be changed with some violations. They had detailed evidence and multiple witness for campaign fund violations were a given. They had hard evidence of that.

For the other criminal acts listed they had varying amounts of evidence. Intimidation, witness tampering, failure to fulfil duties as a sworn prosecutor, bribery, tax avoidance, money laundering, and then the big three – arms dealing, drug smuggling, and murder by commission.

It was still staggering that an United States Senator could even been involved, most likely as a major conspirator, but that is what the evidence points to. But they lack the smoking gun that could tie it all together.

The links to the offshore banks were the key. Payments going every which way. And to regions and countries where virtually no legitimate business transactions would take place. Major red flags were Afghanistan, the Caymans, Bermuda, The Isle of Man, Peru, Serbia, and Libya. Some of those nations were flagged because of their secretive offshore banking, and others for the prevalence of narcotics and weapons smuggling.

Attempts to find witnesses or informants had largely been fruitless.

McCord was sure someone was protecting Bracken. A partner maybe. Perhaps even this ghost that the CIA was hunting in their ranks. Even thinking about it was enough to make her suspect her own paranoia.
The contractors had arrived just before eight that morning. It was a small team led by a recent emigre from the United Kingdom named Morris – no one even his co-workers seemed to know whether that was his first name or surname, much to Rick's obvious frustration with missing story – whose broad northern English accent almost required the use of subtitles. The other two workers seemed to understand him well enough and without prompting provided any additional clarification. Clearly not the first time the issue had arisen.

Right now they were completing installation of insulation batts into the ceiling. Apparently these would help reduce heat loss in winter and assist with cooling in summer. The final bit of that equation were two roof vents but they would not be fitted until spring.

Also delivered were the three new pellet heaters. They were currently still sitting in the driveway covered in plastic sheeting and shrink wrap against the elements. There was a persistent drizzle and the wind off the Atlantic was certainly enough to chill the bones.

Morris had gone over the plans with them just to be certain before installation and the making of holes in the wall began. There would be one heater for the upstairs space installed in the large rumpus room at the guest end of the floor.

The second would be installed in the entrance area lobby. This would heat that large area, smaller surrounding rooms, and some of upstairs too aided by convection.

A heavy drape was to be installed just short of the landing upstairs on the guest side. This would help isolate the pockets of air and ensure that the guest heater was only used when required. Rick had already select a nicely milled piece of mahogany that would hold the drag which could be pulled to one side and tied back, neatly out of the way.

The final pellet heating system would be for the library. The size of the room dictated that the largest unit would be installed in there.

All three have battery backups and remote controls. On the downside, their design required that they be fitted against an exterior wall and an air vent connected to the outside of the house.

After a short lunch break, the team get to work and the installations seem to take no time at all.

The flues are vented through the walls. One of the team is a licensed electrician and tests the sockets and connects up the heaters. The use of a standard socket rather than hard-wiring makes it easier for the heaters to be removed, say for the warmer months.

Morris the foreman had taken time to explain how the fitting was done and how the heaters could be removed and the small exhaust ports patched. Both Kate and Rick paid close attention, if only to ensure they actually understood the heavily accented former Brit especially as the other two workmen were not present to provide translation services.

There are remotes for each heater. And a master/slave configuration. But there is no fancy internet connectivity or Wi-Fi management. This can be retrofitted if required. Kate can sense her boyfriend's unarticulated desire but she heads him off with a gentle shake of her head, not so much as a stern gaze required.

A large plastic hopper had been placed at the rear of the exterior garage, out of sight of the house. This should hold enough pellets for the winter and beyond. A much smaller hopper is located in
the utility room off the kitchen. It holds sufficient pellets to refill all heaters several times without
the need to exit the house.

Kate was happy with the overall installation but actually wanted the proof and an extensive burn in
so to speak. The heaters had been fired up earlier, but only briefly in test mode to ascertain that
everything was working properly.

It seems to take a while at first but the wave of warmth gradually advances, seeps, then radiates
through the house with all three heaters running.

Kate is almost bouncing on her toes. Full of energy. Little peals of delight seeking to escape her
lips. She feels liberated. Free of the extra layers, the caution of constantly closing the doors on the
few warm rooms in the house, the near claustrophobia of enclosure when the very nature of this
home screams space and freedom. The constraints to contain the cold at odds with the design and
the appeal.

The new heating system? Best idea ever! Shit! She sounds like her partner. The one currently
sacked out on the massive sofa in the Library lulled in somnolence by the comfort of their new and
different heat wave. Maybe she can wear less clothes about the house, maybe way less clothes.
Maybe she'll share that idea with him later. No scratch that. She won't share that. She'll show him
instead. Surprise him. Make him appreciate just how much she likes this. And loves him.

But right now she is going to luxuriate in the warmth.

She cannot believe how good it is. Before this only Rick's small private study, the master bedroom
and the kitchen felt warm enough. Now pretty much the whole – huge - space felt warm and cosy
and inviting. A proper home.

Of course there are downsides to this new retrofitted heating system. Compromises had to be
made. The other upstairs bedrooms without reverse cycle air conditioning need the doors to be
open for the warm air to enter so that could be a little awkward for privacy of their guests – if they
have any.

She wanders the house and luxuriates in just her t-shirt and jeans, her socked feet taking her
exploring. Despite the season, now she is able to linger and explore more of the house and the
contents. Little knick-knacks, and mementos, and some bigger pieces, all with stories to tell. She'll
have to get Castle to give her the detailed tour. One that doesn't get distracted by unchristened
surfaces or their bedroom. Mind you she wouldn't object now that it was the proper temperature.

Eventually she decides it is time to have dinner and so she wakes her sleepy-head. Of course he's
adorably rumpled and just a little bit sexy with his hair mussed and the slight lag in his perception.
Somehow she resists the temptation to do something about it. For now. She does thoroughly kiss
him awake.

"So what's the plan this week and beyond Rick?"

"Now that we have the heating sorted." It is a kind of redundant statement given how they are both
only wearing jeans and t-shirts with light jumpers that almost feel superfluous. There a light sheen
of perspiration on his forehead where it has been mashed into the cushions.

"Hmm, thank you for that Babe." Her kisses conveying just how much she appreciated that.
Somehow she restrains herself from climbing up onto his lap. His eyes narrow in suspicion but
before he can add anything she kisses him again before pushing off and retreating.
"And aside from my therapy, and your studying, well I do have some commitments up here. And if you are willing you can come along."

She arches an eyebrow at him, "Really?"

He still can't read her at times. It is exasperating. She's standing there, head cocked to one side in question, hazel eyes unblinking. It is so not fair.

"I promised Louis Kinsmen that I would attend an upcoming event at the library which is Friday week. It is the Hamptons Literary Luncheon. There is an afternoon gathering a meal, and usually some form of special meet the author thing later. I'd love if you would come with me."

"Hmmm, I don't know Castle. Have I got anything I can wear?"

Is that a question?

"Or did you plan to get me another perfectly fitting dress? At least you have good cause to know my measurements now." She half-glares at him. "Which leads me to a question I somehow never got around to asking you. How did you know my measurements back then?"

"A good magician never reveals his secrets."

"Oh don't give me that. You can do some magic, but I don't think that magicking up that perfect dress was one."

"Actually it did involve magic of a sort."

"I'm waiting."

"Not very patiently." Both eyebrows arch dangerously. "Well if you must now, I checked your locker."

"You broke into my locker at the Precinct?!"

"Breaking in, is such a black and white statement, I prefer finessed in the name of research."

"Yeah, research. How's that going for you?"

"Really? You need to ask? I got the girl. At least I think I did."

"Ah har?" She relents, "Pretty sure you did. Still I wish I had known that."

"Why? You would have just twisted my ears or worse."

"Oh definitely worse. I accused Lanie."

His jaw actually dropped. "Oh wow! Bet that went well."

"About as well as you could predict. You owe me buster."

"It was years ago. Even Lanie must have forgotten by now." At Kate's incredulous look, he questions himself, "Surely?" Time to change the subject back to the original matter at hand.

"So Miss Beckett, would you do me the honour of accompanying me to the 2012 Hamptons Literature luncheon. It is an event to promote reading and appreciation of public library services. I think it would be a perfect venue for our first public engagement as a couple. What do you think?"
She's silent. Too silent.

"Kate? Too much? Too soon?"

She's lost for words. How can she tell him that she got stuck at 'engagement'?

Somehow she had recovered and accepted his invitation without explaining her blank out moment. Naturally he assumed it was some reluctance on her part to be seen in public as a couple and this caused a little bit of tension before Kate assured him in no uncertain terms that she would kiss him publicly if that was what it took for him to believe she was okay with their relationship.

Of course he is going to take that offer and run with it.

Now they are in the kitchen enjoying home-made chicken soup and fresh baked bread for supper.

They have their planners out. God they're such a couple!

"I have committed to doing an event for young readers as well but I don't have a date or venue for that. Paula always sorts that out and gives me the schedule with option dates. Admittedly I've struggled to fit some of that stuff in since starting at the Precinct."

The kernel of an idea forming in her mind, she made sure Rick's attention was elsewhere before letting her features bloom at the whole concept she was assembling. She really didn't want him seeing the look on her face before she had a chance to surprise him.

She turns her attention back to her soup, her smile curling round the edges of her spoon.

Rick turns back to catch her lips curved around the spoon. The soup is nice but it is not that good. Once he would have pushed, teased, maybe even begged a little. But now. He doesn't. Well not too much. He trusts her. And if she has a smile like that, then, well it usually only means something good for him. And he can be patient. Mostly. He's learnt that much with her.

The next couple of days fly by.

Robert is impressed by the new heating. However, it changes nothing in his approach to Rick's rehabilitation and he doesn't let up any on their training.

When sufficient oxygen reaches his brain so he can speak again, Rick articulates his feeling that they have long since moved past pure rehab and into some form of training cum torture. The veteran doesn't disagree.

The therapy on his arm is frustrating slow. Sometimes he doubts he will ever fully recover. Or close enough that it makes no difference. It is not the end of the world, he could have lost a lot more.

He does however notice changes to his body. His waistline that had been gradually increasing over the last few years has retreated. He's still not as lean as he was before he started shadowing Kate and the team, but it is a start. He does feel lighter and fitter. His energy levels are raised.

Kate has been extremely diplomatic about his weight, insistent that she loves him (regardless unsaid), but of late he notices her hands wandering and lingering further. This only encourages him too. He sticks at it. Every lung busting, heart pounding moment. Resists the temptation to snack
There's no whipped cream in the fridge, the popcorn is salted not caramel, the meals smaller. But he's not missing the indulgences at all. He has her and her wily ways distract him when he would otherwise eat.

If only he could put his mind at rest about his recovery.

**Tuesday, 12th Precinct.**

It was good to be out of the suits. Well for Esposito. Back into Chino's dark enough to be permissible and polo, plus a sports jacket in deference to the season. Ryan of course was still attired in a natty three piece. The tie was different but that was consistent. As was his actual taste in such attire. Castle reckoned Ryan was a borderline grabatoloist – which apparently meant collector of ties - Espo never checked, just took the writer at his word. He often wonder why he would not bother, but conceded to himself that when it came to literature and the words, the man would never cheat. Especially if meant displaying his prowess and vocabulary.

"Welcome back Guys."

"Thanks Sully." Ryan was always polite. And Sully wasn't bad. He just wasn't Beckett or Castle.

From his desk beside Sullivan, Blake - off course - merely grunted. Apparently it was rumoured the most he had ever said at once was 'NYPD! Stop or I'll shoot!' Despite that, or maybe because of, Espo liked him. It was effective in interviews as well. Totally threw the suspects off. Anyway Ryan and Sully could fill in the silent parts.

Even Espo couldn't bring himself to be surly. "Sully, Blake" he offers with nods to each, "What did we miss?"

"A bunch of cold cases, and we got one near-solve. Only two new cases for the Precinct. We caught one but Karpowski is now running with it as our almost solved cold case turned active just after we started the new case." Blake double grunts. That good huh? "And the other turned out to be accidental death," Sully concludes.

"Sounds good. Can you fill us in on the cold case? Anything left to do?"

"Sure." Then Sullivan looks a little tentative before lowering his voice. "No announcements, so I take it nothing firm on the Carmel Davies murder?"

"Fraid not. Hell of a lot of good cops did their best for more than a week. Couldn't turn up anything concrete. Can't justify maintaining the manpower, even for a dead officer, so it is being scaled back." The mutual look of resignation on all their faces tells the tale of the realities of policing to politicians' agendas and ever shrinking City budgets. "Looks like this one will stay unsolved for a while."

"Something will shake out." Sullivan has a cop's faith. Eventually some form of evidence emerges. Or most likely the perpetrator(s) screws up. The trick, or rather the luck, is identifying it as such and then tying it all together. Detective work, and that would be where they stepped in.

"Yeah. Expect so." Even Ryan 'Castle Junior' doesn't sound so sure.

They take their seats as Sullivan brings them up to speed on what they've missed.

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The Hamptons
She's in the kitchen taking a break from study and avoiding Castle, who is multi-tasking by binge watching some cancelled sci-fi show called 'Space Above and Beyond' and semi-pestering her, when her phone chimes with a new message. It is the middle of the day so outside the usual time for one of Lanie's regular missives, and frankly there are not too many other people she would expect to hear from. Swiping the phone and punching her access code, she finds that the message is from Clare Dunne.

This catches Kate by surprise. She had almost forgotten her part-time job. After the first assignment there had been very little from Taylor Matthews except a handful of seemingly routine communications via email to all staff. This is different. It is addressed to her directly. It is a reminder that her proficiency scores for her personal weapon are due by 8th December.

"Shit!"

"Kate? Something wrong?"

Where did Castle come from? Oh he's holding the empty popcorn bowl. She holds up the phone. A little too close so he squints. She pulls the phone back so he can focus. She bites back the urge to tease him about his age and failing eyesight.

"Oh."

"Yeah. I need to complete my regular shooting drills for Taylor Matthews. Kinda forgot about it." She cannot keep the disappointment from her voice.

"So what's the issue?"

"I didn't want to go back to New York," she confesses without explaining further.

"We don't have to. There are several gun clubs up here including the one I am a member of."

"Hmm. You did mention it." Clearly perking up at the possibility of a local solution.

"Yeah so you can shoot up here. The one I have membership at should be good enough. The instructor -Jacek- has all the necessary qualifications – he trains some of the local PD I think - so he can most likely certify your score for you."

"I expect I'll need that. Taylor Matthews are very organised. I'll check with Clare as to what is required and if that would qualify."

"I expect nothing less of the company I trust to help guard my family Kate."

She nods and then decided to change the subject a little.

"So do you think you'll be up for trying your hand at some target practice too?"

"Hmm not sure. It feels," flexing his right arm and shoulder with no visible reaction, "better but perhaps I should get an opinion. I'll ask Robert tomorrow."

"Good idea Babe."

"Babe?"

She doesn't answer him, her focus elsewhere for the moment, nibbling her lip in concentration as she quickly taps out a response to Clare. But he can see her smile.
Esposito is in the doorway drawn by the volume of noise emanating from the small room dedicated to the Precinct's computer crime team of two. Is it wrong that he does not even know the name of the young man who is one half of the team? Sounds like a party going on.

He is on the verge of barging in when he is frozen in place by the sight of his former girlfriend hugging his married best friend.

Then Ryan embraces Tori, hugging her back.

"What the Fuck Bro!"

"Javi!" Ryan ignores his partner's outburst. "The E-tag doesn't match the registration plate!" Tori scowls at him. Whether it is for his comment, or for breaking up with her is lose-lose situation.

It takes him a second to click. "So? That's like how common? People change cars and don't update. Lend tag to family a friend? City don't care so long as someone pays."

"Yes but no. Look at this. This Escalade was spotted two blocks from the crime scene. Full blacked out privacy glass everywhere. We got plates but we have nothing to tie him to the crime scene. Until now."

"What have you got? How can we be sure it's related to the shooting?"

"See the plates for the Escalade? The E-tag for the same plates passed through both the Jersey and Brooklyn tolls within 20 minutes on the night of the murder."

Okay that's a physical impossibility he concedes.

"We expanded the search. Got a hit. A burger place in Brooklyn. Drive through had a camera and we've got the images. We've got the driver clearly in sight. We're looking for him now." Ryan waves at Tori's workstation where the facial recognition application is running.

Okay so this is potentially big. Their first break in the case. Time for Gates. And her protégé in IA too.

He is still not a hundred per cent happy about the hugging, even though he called things off and well it was all innocent, especially Ryan. Man, he needs to get his head sorted out.

Fifteen hours later, Gates is alongside Esposito and Ryan as the partners re-join the hastily reassembled Task Force outside their suspect's current place of residence. It's a disused motor mechanics with a workshop and small office downstairs, living space upstairs.

In the lead is Captain Harriman - who despite being in IA - has unsurprisingly more than competently mapped out the assault plan with ESU. Now on the cusp of dawn she merely nods to the ESU team leader and sets things in motion while there is still cover from the twilight.

The ESU strike team force a near-silent entry through the smaller door on the main garage frontage with all other exits covered by uniforms and the Task Force's detectives in their vests and
windbreakers. They have little idea of what they are up against so the use of body armor and ESU was sound strategy. Better to be paranoid and prepared than dead or injured.

At first there is nothing until the radio crackles. 'Suspect vehicle located. Black Escalade. Plates match.'

'Tripwire' one of the ESU team warns the others. A pause. The suspense that had been easing after the initial entry once again builds in the teams. The radio echoes 'Clear' and then silence.

The first shots come less than ten seconds after that message.

The complement from the Twelfth along with two uniforms are covering the right hand side where the small office is seemingly inaccessible with a boarded up door and two barred windows. From their position they can do nothing but listen. And wait. Charging into a gunfight would more than foolhardy.

'Man down.' The same ESU voice. Almost unnaturally calm. 'Two subjects.' 'Wait. Possible third. Handguns.'

A burst of automatic gunfire interrupts the radio call and invalidates the last report. That is not a handgun firing. The snap of return fire is then audible, mostly single shots with the odd three round burst, the sound of MP5's signalling that ESU are defending themselves.

Then from in directly front of them, the upstairs windows blow out with a cloud of debris lit through with the flash the explosion and possible fire. Only then does the sound of the explosion reach them. There is only static on the radio for seconds and before the external teams can react, a second blast follows. This time the detonation is on the ground level and has sufficient force to force the boarded door mostly open barely hanging on its hinges. The shock wave blows a tsunami of dust out of the breached door and shattered windows. The concussive force has most teams off their feet or firmly behind whatever cover they can find. Then flames start to leap from the right side of the structure – both at ground level, and the upper floor.

First to react, Esposito is moving almost as soon as the shock wave recedes. His partner is on his heels whilst Gates is barking an instruction to the uniforms to call for Fire and the Paramedics.

The force of the explosion has buckled the door to the office. Holstering his pistol, Esposito takes off and hits the door at full pace and his momentum takes the weakened object with him as he flies into what really is a fire-fight. Incredibly despite the two explosions and the growing flames there is still gunfire being exchanged beyond the internal wall of the office.

Inside the building Espo and Ryan cover each other, years of partnership combined with the instincts of their training and experience. But before they can reach the under ESU team they need to get across the now wrecked office. This takes just over thirty seconds but by the time Esposito and Ryan negotiate the rubble and reach the open doorway to the main workshop, the gunfire has ceased. The lack of gunfire merely illuminates the remaining threat as the flames and heat are intensifying as the conflagration spreads rapidly. As they enter the main workshop, the Escalade and an older pickup are both alight. Evidence of multiple bullet and fragment hits pepper the body work and windows of both vehicles, shattered glass and fluids stain the concrete floor.

Espo spots the first prone ESU member, taps Ryan's shoulder and points his partner at the next ESU casualty before he scoops down to haul the seeming unconscious man onto his left shoulder. His grunt is inaudible amidst the chaos, but the man weighs near two hundred pounds with his gear on.
Ryan is slightly better off as he has his casualty on their feet with one arm around the homicide detective for support. Espo moves, more precisely staggers, and together the partners head for the original breech point in the main garage door, which is now the closest and only exit as the flames increasingly grip the right side of the structure, smoke almost completely submerging the space in an unnatural and deadly dusk.

They make it and with other officers waiting for them, they pass off their casualties before turning to consider another rescue attempt. Only to find Captain Harriman blocking their way and wordlessly turning them back with a firm shake of the head.

They turn back to the building and receive confirmation that there was no need for them to make a second and potentially fatal trip back into the inferno. Fortunately the other ESU members have managed to get themselves out. All six remaining members of the team are soon clustered in the light of the burning building. All appear to be carrying injuries of some sort or the other but are in better shape than the two Espo and Ryan bought out. They move to go to the most injured and assist but Captain Harriman leaves them in no doubt to that they need to simply wait for their own medical assessment from the Fire Department paramedics arriving on the scene.

Fortunately there are no fatalities on the NYPD side but there are plenty of injuries for the Fire Department paramedics to attend to.

All eight members of the ESU team are injured. Most injuries are to the largely unarmoured limbs. Four ESU members have gunshot wounds. Three with impacts to their legs caused by ricochets off the floor as the perps fired down at them from their vantage points on the upper floor. The fourth – rescued by Esposito - is the most seriously injured with the three leg shots and two rounds through his right hip when one of the gunmen had targeted him after he was knocked prone by the initial injuries to his legs. In addition all ESU officers have flash burns and cuts from flying debris but their protective gear prevented worse injuries.

Seven of the team surrounding the building are also injured. Minor for the most part but the two homicide detectives have some burns, cuts and bruises that will require outpatient treatment and assessment. On Captain's orders. Two Captains actually. Espo and Ryan learn that one thing scarier that their Captain Gates on the warpath is Captains Gates and Harriman in that state.

The Fire Department have doused the flames but declared the structure unsafe and at risk until a more detailed inspection can take place. They do allow a single CSU tech into the building to take photos and do a brief inspection from just inside the main workshop doors. Outside the rest of the CSU team is restricted to collecting the evidence from the ESU members who were inside.

The FDNY inspector cleared two CSU’s accompanied by a Rescue Squad into the building. Despite being permitted to stay barely longer than the first visit, their report is sobering.

Their suspect and two as yet unknown accomplices are deceased. The suspect and one other were seemingly killed in the first explosion. Neither had any apparent gunshot wounds. The final suspect has more than a dozen bullet wounds received as he broke cover in the aftermath of the two explosions, only to be shot-down by the surviving still active members of the ESU strike team. This man had been armed with a compact submachine gun that one CSU has bagged up. There are other four weapons recovered. All are 9mm handguns - two Glocks, a Ruger and CZ. The Ruger has a silencer.

Who the hell are these guys?
Three blocks away from the fifth floor rental, the man makes sure the drapes are fully closed before turning on the light. Placing the tactical glasses down. His memory harks back to a time when his fieldcraft was the difference between life and death. And back then he would have been positioned to do more than simply observe.

What had been a simple surveillance operation had certainly got considerably more involved. He had known it could be bad as soon as his team witnessed Vulcan Simmonds kill the cop.

Their task had been to track Simmonds and report if the drug kingpin was a risk to their unnamed client. Well more of a risk really. There had not been any further clarification to the instruction, not that it was needed.

He would have to find out how the NYPD had tracked and located the Escalade. That was not just simple curiosity. His survival, or freedom at least, which equated to the same thing, could depend on it.

Pulling on latex gloves, he takes a fresh burner phone from its wrapping and turns it on. It takes a little more than a minute to connect. He sends a message to a number he types in from memory. They need to meet.

He feels bad for the two freelancers that were in the building with Jerome. The charges were originally intended to ensure that any vehicles stored there were destroyed along with the three team members. But now they were very likely dead. No medical assistance had gone into the building, and only medical examiners’ vehicles remain. He had seen only NYPD ESU officers evacuated in the immediate aftermath.

Regardless Jerome knew nothing. The freelancers a little bit more. Evans and, well he can't even remember the other one's name right now, not that it matters. Or that he cares. He learnt that too, a while ago in a very different place.

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**Eight hours later.**

It is a tough old building, withstanding even the explosive blasts. They are cleared to go in for an extended examination.

The forensics gave them virtually nothing specifically useful for their original case in the murder of Lieutenant Carmel Davies. But in terms of evidence it was a gold mine.

The blasts were caused by military grade explosives. A combination of C4 and Thermite reports the Homeland Security bomb team. Designed to wreck and then incinerate. Destroy people and evidence. However, whoever set the charges and the remote triggers, had not counted on the resilience of the old structure. It was largely brick and stone with a steel framework. Whilst there was a lot of damage and destruction of evidence, a fair amount was not totally destroyed thanks to the integrity of the building’s structure. Certainly it had played a role in the preservation of the ESU teams by not collapsing. The other factor was that the charges had been concealed from view. Whoever planted them had most likely not wanted the regular occupants to be aware of the risk of being incinerated in explosive blasts.

What the hell is going on here?

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This fortunate turn of events does not give them direct leads on their primary case. With the death of their suspect, effectively this does close down what had been, or at least seemed, their best line
of investigation into Lieutenant Carmel Davies' murder.

The forensics are being fast tracked. The preliminary report from the firearms analysis states that none of the suspects' weapons match the two bullets from the murder scene. More concern is raised when the compact sub-machine that caused, along with the explosions, most of the ESU injuries, is examined.

The weapon is a Heckler and Koch MP5K. The K is the abbreviation of 'kurtz' which is German for short. Designed for easier concealment, it is much favoured by close protection teams including the Secret Service. This is an expensive and rare weapon, even an older model like this one, and not the sort of weapon typically encountered by the NYPD. This raises further questions about the identity and mission of their dead suspects. It may also give them some more lines of investigation. A unique weapon is often easier to track, regardless of whether the serial number was legible.

The Escalade was well and truly destroyed by fire before the NYFD could save it. The dual cab utility is less totally destroyed but there is no useful information from that vehicle. They were legally registered vehicles but bought for cash in false names. Whoever was using them was a professional. These are the motor vehicle equivalent of burner phones.

From a NYPD perspective at least they had one suspect for the crime. That at least made the PR side of it easier. Even if all those who knew better still faced the bitter reality of the low and diminishing chance of anyone actually responsible ever being bought to book for the crime for the foreseeable future.

One PP

That the Feds are involved is not a surprise. Homeland had already turned up at the crime scene. Explosions would do that. The fact that the conference call is with direct Washington is a surprise rather than the large New York field offices. Not the locals. There is a presence from the New York Field Office but the FBI are not the only agency involved. This is national. And everyone knows this is something big. Not everyone on the call has been announced.

Harriman is still leading from the front. "Whoever is doing this has access to military expertise and equipment. That alone is concerning. More so because from an investigative perspective we're no closer as to why or who did this. No motives. We know the destroyed vehicle was in proximity to the murder of NYPD Lieutenant Carmel Davies, but not if it was directly involved."

The Feds have some better news. They have the identities of two suspects. Both former soldiers. Veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan. The original suspect, the driver of Escalade, remains unidentified for the moment. All the identity documentation recovered is false.

The lead FBI investigator runs them through the background of the two dead veterans.

"Does it not alarm you that there is actually organised advertising and job boards for this sort of thing?" Gates pushes, speaking for the first time since the introductions.

"Actually Captain, it helps us keep track. Sort the fantasists, want-a-bees from the professionals and the real danger. The true believers," The investigator explains.

"So where does this leave us?" The Chief of Detectives gets to the point.

There is no answer for maybe twenty seconds before a male voice responds over the conference call. "Nothing we can share at this time but it has the potential to be linked to a major criminal
Wednesday, the Hamptons.

After years of seemingly being interrupted whenever they were on the verge of something, Kate had got used to the joy of isolation their Hamptons escape has brought them and their privacy. She knows it will not last and cherishes most moments with Rick on their own. Their bubble has been great not only for his recovery but for their relationship. Not since those first few weeks of her suspension and the redheads' European vacation had she been able to spend so much time with Rick. And admittedly back then a great deal of the focus had been on the physical side of their relationship.

Naturally sometimes she wishes there was something to distract him from his sole focus on her. Back in New York, this was a role Alexis or Martha would sometimes play with a subtle wink to her even before she had moved it.

Almost in response to her unarticulated thoughts Paula calls. Rick puts his agent on speaker.

The story of their hideaway in Hampton is going to break. Paula had worked wonders suppressing his former class-mate's story. But her attempts to sell the story had aroused interest in the pair which initially dormant had been fired by their trip back to New York and Rick's impromptu press conference at Bellevue.

"Sorry Rick, Kate. I managed to beat them back a couple of times. But it is a slow news week. They're definitively looking to run something."

"Thanks Paula. We lasted pretty well." He squeezes Kate's hand.

There would have been a time that Kate would keep the questions she has for Rick alone, but she was making herself adjust to this. "So what now?"

"Normally I go out, give them a sighting and an interview or two. It is not normally much as we only do publicity around book launch time."

"Speaking of which youse want me to sort that?" comes Paula's pronounced Jersey drawl.

"Ahead of you actually. Paula I've got just the perfect event coming up day after tomorrow. We were already planning on going. There would be local press in attendance regardless."

"So Friday? Rick its Wednesday! When were you planning to give the heads up on this?" There is a longish pause. "Did you say 'we'?"

"Umm. Yes."

"You were going to tell me Ricky?"

"Of course." He looks like a kid caught by his teacher. But Paula is not in a mood to be merciful. "Okay give me the details and let's sort this out. But don't think we won't be talking about this some more. I have distinct memories of someone's promise to keep their agent in the loop better."

"Sorry Paula."

"Yeah right. Look the both of youse, I can help. Make this a lot easier. But youse gotta be willing to share the information."
"Sorry Paula." They both say it this time.

"Do you practice that?"

1.10 pm, Thursday, The Hamptons Target Shooting Club

They are in the reception area of the Hamptons Target Shooting Club. They have deliberately chosen a time slot around lunch time. It is quieter then according to both Rick and the owner had confirm this was the case. They were the only booking.

There is a sign on the counter saying 'Gone to Lunch, back at 1:15'. So she is investigating the four large glass display cases full of trophies and photographs that occupy the foyer. It looks more like a school's display of trophies than a gun club. Especially for an establishment in a higher socio-economic locale.

She is rapidly scanning the cabinets. Looking through the generic trophies, some old enough not to be plastic, and photographs. Somehow she spots the one that takes her interest. There is no mistaking the eyes even if the hair was considerably more unruly. The as yet virgin scruff of youth on his chin, a few spots. The smile is serious. The eyes less so. It is him. A younger version but still the man she loves.

'1st Place Junior Air Pistol - R A Rodgers'

"It was my legal name then. Sometimes wish it was. But I digress."

She squeezes his hand. They are alone for the moment. His voice is low, just enough for her to hear without straining, but not loud enough to inadvertently share, even if there was anyone else here.

"Louis introduced me. Mother was travelling with a show. I was spending a couple of weeks with Louis and Frankie. They encouraged my writing, but I was a bit of a handful at other times. Louis suspected I needed something else to focus on. Shooting was the third thing we tired."

"Third? What were one and two?"

"Sailing. And Tennis. Louis loves both of those. I got terribly sea-sick and couldn't master the technique. Figured we'd be better off not drowning. And tennis, well let's just say I was easily distracted by short skirts. Anyway, after I had almost wrecked his dinghy and deformed a racket or two, Louis decided to see if target shooting might hold my attention.

"Like any boy I was fascinated by guns. But turns out that proper target shooting requires a lot of patience and listening before you can even hold a weapon let alone shoot.

More than that, it takes a lot of practice to get any good. But over the four weeks I was there that summer, I came three or four times a week, and did improve.

"The trophy is from the following year. I surprised Mother by asking if I could stay with them that summer. I practised even more than originally. Got that at my second attempt."

"R A Rodgers", even just her saying his birth names is captivating.

"Well it was my name at the time. Actually my membership at the club is still under than name. Helps keep me off the press radar."
"Do you ever?"

"Think about changing it back? From time to time. Sometimes more than others. Mother was devastated by my legal name change."

"I thought it was for the books?"

"That was my reasoning. She didn't agree. And she is probably right. I could have used the nom de plume without the full legal name change. But with no father and an uncertain future as recent graduate and first-time novelist, I wanted to be making my own destiny. But I never meant to hurt her or slight her. But a big part of the reason she calls me Richard is that it is the one name she gave me that I didn't change."

*Oh Rick. Poor Martha too.*

"It wasn't an act or rebellion or rejection. Unfortunately Mother took it that way. We were not at a good place at the time. Her latest relationship was on the rocks, her work was suffering and what she did have was often not a choice but the only option. I had survived college and my destructive tendencies which is hardly a ringing endorsement, especially as I was shortly to meet Meredith. My writing was my saving grace, so I threw myself into that. Committed, perhaps over committed, and that included the name change. Vanity and ego, especially my middle name. Edgar. Really, who would choose that?"

"I love you whatever your names are."

"Thank you. I know you do. But I sometimes think that he was the more serious one. The more mature, especially when you look at what 'REC' did during the *playboy* years."

There is not much she can say to that. She has a very good memory of many a Page Six headline featuring the man opposite her. Even if she knows that very public persona to be largely false, it was still him once upon a time, that there was some meat to those stories.

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On the dot of quarter past one and before Rick can ring the bell, a wiry, compact man in his late fifties or early sixties appears at the counter. His neutral demeanour changes instantly he spies Rick, an open smile with teeth emerges. There is obviously history and a friendship of sorts Kate notes.

Much as it is good to see Jacek again, no sooner he has introduced Kate to Jacek, than the man, who quite brazenly tries to steal her away. His doesn't take offense to that but when Jacek offers him an air pistol to practise with – 'pretty much no recoil' – while the detective does her serious shooting, he does huff in displeasure. He might be following Robert's recommendation not to tax his shoulder and arm, but it hurts his vanity just a bit.

He doesn't have too long to wait for the man's comeuppance. He tries not to laugh too hard as Kate completely schools Jacek from the go. Starting from when she produces her Sig P229 Elite and Jacek is speechless. He quickly recovers and asks if she had sufficient ammunition. After a few moments thought Kate decides she will keep her Taylor Matthews supplied rounds for another day. She buys five twenty round boxes of slightly inferior rounds, and gets a receipt.

Jacek is in fine voice as he witnesses the results of Kate's marksmanship. She shoots through all five magazines at the required distances. Jacek isn't done with her. So she reloads them and returns to the line for another series of targets this time at up to a hundred feet. Her results are even better than she hoped. Better than she has ever shot at that distance with her Glocks.
For his part Rick enjoys shooting the air pistol. It is a good weapon – there are no bad ones here – and his accuracy is good. He finishes up when Kate does, tracking her performance even if not directly witnessing every shot.

She is more than reasonably happy with her results. She scored comfortably more than enough to pass Taylor Matthews' certification requirements. She is not yet as familiar with the weapon as her Department issue Glocks, but the Sig P229 is a very good pistol.

The muzzle flash is still a minor distraction. However, when shooting at a hundred feet she got the feel for the first time of how different the .357 Sig shoots to the 9mm rounds the NYPD uses with the department issue handguns. The relatively high velocity for a handgun round means the .357 SIG has an unusually flat trajectory, extending the effective range in the hands of a trained shooter. Her results at this distance are the best she has ever achieved. She can now appreciate how Clare, with significantly more familiarity with the weapon can shoot effectively out to one hundred and fifty feet.

Perhaps she could challenge Espo. Her overall score is higher normally led by her faster reactions and better shot placement at the shorter ranges. However, Espo's sniper training means he wins every time at distance even with a handgun. She reckons this could be an equalizer or better. Definitely something to be filed away and dusted off once she is back on duty. Of course if she uses a non-Departmental issue weapon, so could he.

Once she is finished on the range, she polices up her spent casings and returns her gear to the bag. She gets the targets certified by Jacek. He has a stamp with the range details and current date. He signs below the imprinted ink. He even scans them and emails them to her before handing them back. She'll forward them to Clare later on.

**Thursday night, Capitol Hill, Washington DC**

He was used to fixing things. Controlling things. He made his name, this name, doing so.

But here and now things were pretty much unfixable.

Phone calls not answered, handshakes and meetings avoided. This morning, he even saw a Congressman who owed him at least a half dozen favours reverse direction and almost flee down a corridor rather than meet him or even be seen near him.

This was the other side of this job. And the name. One he had spent more than a decade crafting. One that was now effectively near defunct for all intent and purposes. He had many names but James Court was one he actually quite liked. He was seriously irked that the rash actions of the Senator and some of their underlings were destroying that. His retirement would not likely be here in the US unless he wanted it to be in a Federal prison.

The Senator was not in his office. Hiding out at his country manor that he foolishly believed no one knew about. No doubt gazing at his illicit art collection. Again something that he believed no one knew about.

The aide, Matthew Weston, was out too. No doubt visiting his dying brother at the hospice. He would need to arrange for Matthew to join his brother before long. The young man was far too observant. Better to deal with that soon before he became a serious threat rather than merely the risk he currently was. The same for several other members of staff who inadvertently witnessed
some things they should not have.

Then there was the issue of Vulcan Simmons. Hardly surprising that he would be a loose cannon, but killing a cop! He had almost lost it when the observation team reported in. He had not yet told Bracken about Symond's actions. He would save that for when he needed a distraction.

Now most members of that very observation team was likely dead. At least he hoped so. Their controller had reported in. Too many cops and no doubt Feds too for the man to confirm in person. But the lack of follow up tended to indicate that there was no further compromise. But the presence of federal agencies concerned him. Certainly Homeland the local FBI field office would be there. He didn't like it one bit. Especially if other agencies were tagging along in the background unannounced.

Still he had a plan. Several actually. Even when things were going well he always had contingency and planned for reversals. This was common sense not paranoia and events were playing out to confirm this.

Now what to do about the Senator?

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**Friday, The Hamptons.**

Their coming out together event is as low key as everyone can manage. Paula has agreed not to announce anything ahead of time. She has a statement ready to go but that it is it.

As Kate has discovered it turns out Richard Castle has a standing invitation to the Hamptons Literary Luncheon. Held six monthly at the local library and it is chaired by Martha's and Rick's friend Louis Kinsman. He is more than happy to assist with the variation from Rick's attendance to an event where both can attend. It fit nicely with their plan to subtly make a combined public appearance. Even Paula liked it.

Martha already had made plans and was coming up for the day and will be joining Rick and Kate. Alexis was asked but declined due to coursework deadlines and approaching exams.

It is not a big crowd. Maybe fifty all told. Enough to fill the venue. There is no pre-announcement of Rick's attendance at the event so the only news presence is the local paper who were invited. There is a photographer and a reporter present but no TV cameras. The reporter, Margaret May, from the Hamptons Gazette appears to be somewhere in her forties and clearly never moving beyond this gig. Rick knows her, which is not a surprise, but is Martha's mutter comment of 'hack' that surprises Kate.

"Bad review," supplies Rick sotto voce into her ear for good measure.

"ReviewS Darling. ReviewS. Never a good one. Especially from someone who cannot act at all." Damn Martha's bat ears at work again. She must remember that.

Before the actual dining, there is a presentation of sorts.

They are clustered around the newly named 'Richard Edgar Castle Mystery' section at the East Hamptons Library.

"I'm honored. Perhaps a little disappointed. I was hoping for Murder or at least Macabre. But this is the Hamptons so....." His arches his eyebrows and elicits a laugh from his audience. "Firstly, thank you to the Hampton's Literary Club."
"Now Louis will attempt to deflect and be his usual humble self. But as ever, and much like the many plays he helped produce, this is another successful production. Thank you Louis, and I just wish Frankie was here to share with you."

"To my mother, the unique Martha Rodgers." Martha's outfit is off course the most challenging in the room. "It may have been unconventional child-minding but your entrusting me to the public libraries of many towns, has paid dividends far beyond saving you money at the time."

Martha's protest of 'Richard' draws the intended laughs.

"My daughter is not here today. She's at college, working – I know – hard on her end of semester assignments. She is ample proof – along with myself – that hearing your parent talk, seemingly to themselves, in different and strange accents – is not detrimental to their development and future success. However, if she was here she may, well, have a differing opinion." More laughter.

Then his eyes find hers. "And to Kate." His eyes find hers, "Detective Kate Beckett. She's inspired my writing, given me a new hero, one I believe is more rounded and compelling than Derrick, and more recently she has given me new hope and faith in the journey of life. Something we plan to continue to discover together." This draws applause. Kate blushing, and a deeper shade of red when his eyes find hers.

As the applause ebbs, he breaks off his eye contact with Kate and focuses back on the main group of listeners, and he continues, his voice, his features suddenly serious. Kate has come to recognize this incarnation of Richard Castle, one he keeps tucked away but brings out when the occasion merits it.

"The sad truth is that even here in the Hamptons with it's higher than average income and education, the rate of reading is shrinking. And that impacts all of us. The State of New York has some of the greatest bibliographical facilities in the world. We have some of the biggest catalogs of books in the world. However, the true value of books is in the reading, and communicating of their ideas and stories. If they sit idle on bookshelves or in repositories then there is diminishing value in them."

Kate watches his audience. And they are his audience. He has them, well if not in the palm of his hand, at the very least their undivided attention. It is a little different than the first time she saw him in front of an audience when she had shown up to one of his readings for Storm Fall. For a start most of the audience were at least properly attired. Fully dressed even compared to some all those years ago. Not that she was either that night. He was distracting her at her work, so she endeavoured to do the same to him. It worked but not just in the way she intended. Sure there was annoyance, especially when Martha gave away Nikki's name, she couldn't help the flash of anger, and he would not back down, but there had been and remained more. The instant chemistry and attraction. If only they both hadn't been so committed to hiding behind their masks. Who knows what their story would be? How far would they have come by now?

"So I am pleased to be asked to help play my little part in trying to reverse the trend. Not only in the numbers of people reading my own works but other authors as well. Although you can skip James Patterson, he's got too much money already." At their gentle laughs, he continues. "However, very few of us, even James, can claim the sort of success of stories about young wizards, or perhaps even those about adult predilections behind closed doors. Tempting as the thought may be, my family and I hope my readership will be reassured that I have no plans for changing my subject matter." No one in the room can mistake his intent as he gazes at her again.

"There have been offers, very tempting ones. But I am right where I want and need to be. So no wizards or dungeons - of any kind - from me."
"Writing and the stories that result are multi-faceted. They can entertain, inform, educate, chide, encourage, entrance, repulse, and so much more. I wasn't an accidental writer, I worked damn hard at it from an early age. I was, and remain, immensely indebted and grateful to all those who encouraged me in those early days, but eventually it all comes down to the individual, my perseverance and what's in your head.

"Reading is much the same. It requires commitment. You need to focus, to switch off other parts of your life and let the story take control. Now more than ever there are multiple demands on the attention of readers, many not requiring the same level of commitment. Many take those lesser paths. But those that don't shirk can be rewarded in many levels. Firstly because they get to experience the story, and for the best an author can hope for, drawn into that imaginary world on a page. Secondly, their commitment to reading pays of in other aspects of their lives. They can learn to apply the same focus to other tasks. To their education, their careers, their relationships. Making a difference there, to the outcome of another person's life, well that has to be aspiration for most authors. Authors who can help people achieve that deserve credit, even if most of us don't get to live in Castles in Scotland.

"So with that in mind I happy to confirm my family's commitment to the Hamptons Young Reader programme for the next three years through to and including 2014. We are also signing up to help encourage the adoption of electronic books in the public library system. It should not just be the domain of massive e-commence companies. And it should not be restricted to those who can afford or want to purchase e-books. We need to ensure that the access to free borrowing is strengthen and preserved regardless of the format of the books."

"Thank you very much. And yes I will be signing a few copies of my books later. Although not the library copies." More laughs.

The seating plan separated them and despite her initial concern Kate found that she actually enjoyed the conversation and company of the other luncheon guests. After being copped up with Rick, it was quite liberating to just be Kate and meet new people. The food was very good, and the company and conversation from the other guests mostly pleasant, even amusing. There were minimal invasive questions. It was also interesting to observe Rick in action. She knew he could talk, but here was a different man. One who actually conversed in polite company without his ego taking over. Martha of course is shamelessly unconcerned about such convention but somehow never puts a foot wrong, although a few comments obviously sail close to the wind but somehow she always rights herself and continues on.

Once the tables are cleared they are in no rush to leave. At least now they're mingling together. Quite the couple. Head and shoulders, literally, above most of the guests. He in his dark blue tailored suit with pale blue dress shirt and deep burgundy tie, and she in a simple but flattering burgundy dress that stops above the knees and clings and ebbs against her body. She slips her hand into his and feels him settle. She does too. Almost everything learnt over their years of partnership condensed into simple body contact.

Martha finds them and makes her farewells. She is heading back to the city with some of the other guests who had made the journey from the great metropolis. Kate thinks she hears the word helicopter mentioned from the group. Leave it to Martha to find a way to escape the traffic. Perhaps she could tease Rick. Ask why he doesn't have one. Only jokingly of course. Anything against the Ferrari was non-contest. Although stuck in New York traffic was not where the car belonged.
They are collecting their coats when Louis joins them for one last time.

"Thank you both for coming. Katherine, I hope you don't mind me borrowing Rick for a few hours this evening? A few of the sponsors are keen to meet with Rick again."

Rick goes to answer but his partner is in before him. "Actually Louis that will be no problem whatever."

His mouth still partly open and listing towards gaping he can only stand mute in awe at her. Mysterious Kate. He likes that. She thinks she is so smart but he knows she is planning something. He's been on alert since their return. Still he'll play along. For now. It will likely be a very pleasant surprise. He hopes.

"Do I get a say in this?"

"No." Kate is not giving him an option and Louis' grin makes him suspect a setup. His mother most likely. It smacks of her dabbling. Now the real question was who the instigator was, and what is at stake? Something good he hopes.

Stepping out into the early evening chill, it is apparent that word has spread. There are now two TV news crews present, one sporting the logo of a city based affiliate. It could be Paula's work or not. No time to ask.

There was time, and even now, his ego would be stoked by the presence of cameras because of him, however, he can feel Kate tense – but not visibly so - beside him. That trumps any petty self-congratulation and there is no time to reassure her before the microphone is close and they are illuminated in the light of the TV camera.

"Good evening. Laura Divoc for Channel Twenty-Five."

Almost perfectly in sync they smile and respond, "Good Evening."

"Rick Castle, you've pretty been off the radar since leaving hospital aside from your appearance at the hospital less than two weeks ago. Can you tell us why are you hiding out here in the Hamptons? Do you have some love nest for yourself and Detective Beckett?"

He ignores the questions and the insinuation. "We're here to support the Hamptons Reading Programme promoted by the members of the Literary Luncheon Club. This event has been running for more than a decade and is ably organised by Louis Kinsman in memory of his wife, Frankie. This is a wonderful project for the betterment of the community. It does great work in encouraging readers of all ages, and in helping ensure that the local library service continues to offer services to as many as possible."

"Are you staying here Rick?"

His lack of response obliges the reporter to try another approach.

"Detective Beckett?!"

Kate hesitates only briefly, and taking her lead from Rick, she responds but without any of the obvious careful neutrality apparent in Rick's answer. Her voice and her features are alive as she communicates her feelings.

"As a police officer you get to experience some of the worst things in life. I have found that reading
provides an escape from that. Yes even crime thrillers." She smiles at Rick to make the association more obvious. "Reading is an opportunity to regain some of the humanity the job can try to steal from you. So like Rick, I am pleased to be able support the Hampton's reader programs and encourage my fellow citizens to make use of the great free public resource that is our library system."

However, that is as much as she is willing to share. The reporter's face is still determined but Rick doesn't give the woman a chance to form the next question.

"We are up here while I recover from my injuries. We had hoped to do so in privacy, and I ask that you please respect that. Once we are back in the city I will be resuming some public engagements before returning to the NYPD."

"When will that be Rick?"

"Sometime in the New Year I expect. I don't have a specific date. My recovery is progressing but is not especially predictable, and still has some way to go. I, we, are grateful for all the support we have received. Thank you very much." With that he takes Kate's hand and they move off looking for the town car service they were using this evening.

They're on the early evening news. Fifth item.

She's surprised how calm and composed they both look captured on video.

Moreover as she speaks to the journalist she sees Rick watching her. Nothing but total devotion and admiration in his eyes for the whole world to see.

Then as he speaks again she does it. Oh God, is there anyone on the planet who doesn't know how hopelessly in love they are.

The only small mercy is that the news slot is the last one before an ad break so there is no commentary from in the studio, only the verbatim report.

Oh well. It is not like she had not already stood up in front of the press to announce their relationship. However, they do not escape unscathed. Apparently their family and friends are also watching as their phones light up with messages. Paula seems pleased or at least that it is what they can ascertain from her exuberant and near breathless phone message.

Rick has changed into slightly less formal attire. Still smart but the dress slacks and tailored jacket are subtly different hues of dark blue. The shirt is a delicately stripped, light purple. She has not seen it before and it definitely fits him. Hugs all the right places and she can just imagine what it does around his guns hidden in the arms of the jacket.

Her appreciation of him is interrupted when Louis calls ahead to warn of his imminent arrival to pick Rick up. She manages to keep her cool, sweetly dismissive of his solicitations about her plans for this evening. She offers up catching up with Lanie and eating left-overs as her plans which he accepts without protest. And then after two extremely potent kisses he is off.

It gives her plenty of time.

He won't know what's hit him.
Rick had been anxious to get back home for most of the evening. Louis had detected his obvious nervous energy, and did not tease him too much during the course of the gathering. And he is grateful to the older man for that.

His nervous energy is in part because of her absence, but mostly because of the anticipation. He has known that she is up to something for days. Ever since he told her of the event and his evening duties. Her enthusiasm for his solo jaunt out was more evidence that something was afoot. Still he had let her have her little secret, so certain that it can only be something good for him. Even so it does not stop him wanting to find out. He had only barely restrained himself from pestering her for the last twenty-four hours.

He normally really enjoys the evening event that accompanies the more public gathering at the library. Since Frankie's death the attendees list had be solely male, and while this is not something he normally subscribes to, the event itself is refined, the topics cerebral and the food and drink sublime. It is also one of the rare occasions when he will smoke a fine Cuban cigar, savouring the taste whilst nursing a fine whisky or more rarely cognac. But not tonight. He may not know what her plans are but he has no intention of arriving back home in less than optimal condition. So it is 'early doors' for him and he only receives moderate teasing for rushing off as soon as it is politely possible. The shoulder offers an acceptable excuse for public consumption.

He waves off the town car as it reverses back down the drive. He already has his key in hand, and the door is opened in a matter of moments despite his attempts at calm and restraint. Somehow he manages to avoid throwing the door open like some schoolboy, or worse, a manic. Having her shoot him would not be how he hopes and envisages the rest of this night going.

The lights are on but the first thing he really notices when he opens the front door is the temperature. It is like a heat wave assailing him. He has his coat off and thrown over one of the chairs. His jacket follows almost immediately.

"Kate?"

There is no response.

"Kate?"

"You're back early Babe. Everything okay?" Her voice resonates in the lobby. Upstairs he thinks.

Without so much as another thought he is off up the stairs, almost bounding up in his haste.

He reaches the turn for the landing and comes to a dead stop at the vision that awaits him.

Oh! About his last coherent thought is that the heating is worth every single dollar. And then some!

Holy Fuck, he's going to die happy.

[For those of you reading the M rated 'Two of Us' - Chapter 4 'Tall' should follow]
Author's Note

My plans to publish this chapter earlier were derailed by the dreadful news regarding ABC's inexplicable decision to cut Stana Katic and Tamala Jones from the cast of Castle. It has taken me more than a few days to regain my equilibrium.

I remain a shipper at heart. This story will continue and conclude.

In the meantime thanks to the some of the great author's and their stories which I have reread (again) to reinforce myself. Particular kudos to Shutterbug5269 and 'Agent Rodgers' plus RGoodfellow64's 'Is Forever Possible?'

For those of you reviewing and following, thank you.
Welcome Back

Chapter Summary

Previously (a bloody long time ago – sorry about that – see Author's notes at the end of this chapter): - With their Thanksgiving celebrations in New York complete, Rick and Kate have returned to the Hamptons to continue his recovery in private.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The New York Ledger Online Edition

In and Out …. of Town - with Mary Saint-Michel.

In Town

The cast of reality TV show Jersey Shores assemble for a reunion tonight at one of their favorite hotspots, Shooters nightclub. Caution advised Boys and Girls! If nothing else there will be lots of press and lot of flesh. Like that will make youse all stay away! Regardless it could get ugly. Don't say I didn't warn you. Naturally we'll follow up with the pictures our lawyers let us print.

Senator William H Bracken took time out from politics in Washington DC to visit his home town overnight. He was here to meet civic leaders in an attempt to revive support for one of his long standing local initiatives that has been stalled for years. The project in Inwood proposes converting run down waterfront vacancies into a commercial and residential enclave. He also met with Mayor Bob Wheldon – whose own rival scheme for low cost social housing in the same area recently received a massive boost rumoured to be possibly more a hundred million dollars in charitable donations. Local representatives, business owners, and residents have been actively campaigning for the approval of at least one of the competing schemes so that the long derelict site can finally be redeveloped after years of deadlock between the rival proposals.

There was an official 'no comment' from the Senator or his team on the question of whether he may make a play for higher office. Despite his relative lack of national experience, talk continues to circulate of the senator exploring the potential, and building a possible war chest, for the 2016 presidential election campaign. That campaign is already shaping as a game changer for the Republicans who will be seeking to rebuild after the disappointment of preventing the Democrats going back-to-back with President Obama's re-election this year. The potential field of candidates is already looking like a record number including some wildcards. What's one more candidate in a full house?

As a dampener to the Senator's unannounced ambitions, there was no response to questions regarding the continuing rumours about possible campaign violations or criminal acts by a least one politician, possibly by a New Yorker, that apparently are the subject of an active federal investigation. Senator Bracken's office had no statement on that matter at all. Not a single word on or off the record.

Out of Town
The New York Rangers - are off to a short mid-season break/camp. Here's hoping they can come up with a plan to ensure they make the playoffs this season. Especially as their recent post regular season form and results have been disappointing.

Richard Castle – author cum police consultant and hero of the recent Stolen Art shootout - and his not-so-secret-anymore girlfriend, NYPD Homicide Detective-on-a-break Kate Beckett, are taking another absence from their home town. They were back briefly for Thanksgiving and were spotted at Bellevue hospital arriving for a check-up where it was Rick Castle’s turn to gush about his romance with his more-than-muse. Not long after, his (or is that their?) publicist announced that the recently revealed couple have 'once again, temporarily, left the City they love whilst Rick completes his rehabilitation.'

We look forward to welcoming two of New York's finest back. Maybe with more news to share?

See our other Castle & Beckett related news in the Metro Section, page 11.

Metro Section, Page 11 - New York Ledger.

NYPD to be cleared over Richard Castle shooting, future as a civilian consultant remains in doubt

NYPD leadership are reported to have received the consultation draft of the Ethical Standards report into the shooting and near death of author and part-time NYPD civilian consultant Richard Castle on 18 October this year.

According to our sources, not only has the report been given priority but it has also been expanded from the original brief to encompass not only the case and events leading up to the dramatic raid that nearly cost Richard Castle his life - while solving a murder and successfully recovering millions of dollars in long-missing stolen arts - to include an analysis of his overall impact and contribution as a civilian consultant, and the possible future of that role. The most obvious question is whether the NYPD regulations forbidding the active partnership of employees in a relationship apply. Questions from ourselves and others as to whether the unpaid consultant is subject to those rules remain unanswered. Perhaps this report may finally shed some light.

The same sources suggest that the report clears the NYPD of any culpability for the shooting. This mirrors the author's own feelings about the incident which his representatives have ascribed purely to ill-chance. However, the actual substance of the expanded brief is unknown and may hold the key to whether Richard Castle returns to the NYPD, assuming he wants to, and what shape that role may take. What was originally conceived as a short duration research assignment has developed into a near full time engagement for the author who was not previously known for his long term commitments outside of the Storm series and his daughter who he has assiduously shielded from publicity.

The near death experience not only brought the one-time Page 6 regular back into the limelight but thrust him directly into the public spotlight not only for his heroic actions but the surprise news of his until then under-wraps romance with muse and inspiration for Nikki Heat – knockout detective Kate Beckett of the Twelfth Precinct. The pair had been covertly dating for six months before the news of their relationship broke in the aftermath of his shooting. Sources confirm that they had kept their romance secret from NYPD management including Precinct Captain Victoria Gates. Just what the notoriously by-the-book disciplinarian, and veteran of IA, Captain Gates thinks of this could well influence the final result as she is the protégé of Chief of Detectives, Thomas Delaney, and is known to have his ear.

Since Rick Castle was discharged from Bellevue on 26 October the couple have kept a low profile aside from a few public sightings most notably during an outpatient visit to the hospital. They have
been hiding out in the Hamptons where it is rumoured the author has a beach-front property.

As yet no date has been given for the release of the report but it is expected within weeks.

**The Hamptons, Monday, early morning.**

Despite weeks of not having to, she still wakes early most mornings. The difference now is she can drift back off to sleep most times, with no precinct or Dispatch calling. Only him.

Without opening her eyes she knows Rick is still asleep beside her, just like on pretty-much every one of those days since leaving the hospital. The idle heat emanating from his body, the slight whistle as he inhales, and the odd snort/snore, all now familiar cadences to her new life.

His very presence alongside her is so natural she no longer fights it. Of course it still scares, and invigorates her, as it had from the beginning, only this time the fears that she secretly harbours are so much more developed. Perhaps evolved is more suitable. Grown so far, just like their partnership and now relationship, to a point that it is so crucial for her, and yet near debilitating because she feels so utterly dependent upon him. Her very independence, and the accompanying emotional detachment she had chosen as a wall to guard against future heartbreak, largely defeated by this man. His wit, his charm, his body but most of all his persistence and commitment to her. All evidence of his dedication and love. None of this surprises her. After all she had known most of this well before the fear had finally given way to her determination, and she had finally taken the chance, and turned up soaking at his door. Now she knows from delicious, direct first-hand experience just how much she could lose.

But she had resolved that night on the swings to leave the past and her ghosts behind. Because she knows how much better her life can be with him. No longer solely afraid, terrified even, she more than likes, loves what they have now. How much better it is than their work partnership before. She wants this, wants him every day. Permanently. If he didn't man up soon, she would. She almost laughs out loud imagining what Castle's reaction would be to her thoughts.

But a small frown creases her forehead. She knows that what they have at the moment here in the Hamptons is only temporary. This artificial isolation, a bubble if you will, had lasted longer than either expected. They had been so used but also wearied of the constant interactions and interruptions by others - even from family and friends - that the retreat to the Hamptons had been as much about their mental recovery as his physical recuperation. They have not only healed but grown stronger from it in part because the shared solitude has been coupled with their mutual promise to look forward, not back, and the leave their past mistakes behind.

But it was coming an end. They both knew it. And she more than looked forward to that in some ways, she definitely wanted her job back. But she was wise enough to fear it a little too. There were a number of things still unresolved. Not least was that Bracken still wanted her dead along with anyone else that could tie him to the murder of her mother, her shooting, and whatever other sins he had committed. Then there was the issue of being in the public eye. She would accept it for him. But within limits. If she had to do nothing more than she had done so far she would be almost ecstatic. She still couldn't believe her own actions and her decision to go public. How she had fronted that news conference at the hospital and told the assembled press and effectively much of the world that she was in love with him. She is still split on whether it was courage or madness that made her do it. Or both. Lanie certainly thought so.

Lying there snuggled close to the man she had loved for far longer than she had been honest with herself and him, she was no longer afraid. She promised herself she would not turn back the clock to the old Kate Beckett. She would not keep one-foot-out-the-door. She would not self-sabotage.
She would not fuck this up. A commitment to herself, to Rick, to them.

But as well as her now-defeated but long standing personal wall, there is the encroaching shadow of Christmas. More than anything else now the imminent arrival of the festive season has her faltering a little. She is not as sure of herself on this one. Can she let go of the phantom of her Mom's death, the tragedy so tightly intertwined with the season, to not Grinch out Castle's inevitable festive extravagances and his ebullience? Alexis has warned her about this very thing – his excesses even by Castle standards of seasonal joviality - and stressed that Christmas was most definitely celebrated in the Castle household. She is committed to him, to their family, but this is a big challenge. Something she has not handled for a dozen years. But this year she does not have her coping mechanism of working available. Hell be honest Kate. Less coping and more avoiding, running, hiding would be accurate. And what about her Dad? His usual Christmas was even bleaker than hers, nestled in the isolation of the family cabin, safe from temptation, but this year he had Val. What would change there? She had promised herself not to overthink things but that wasn't working. Yeah right Beckett, you do that!

But she is wise enough to know she wasn't going to resolve anything in the dark of pre-dawn, she settled back in to sleep, one hand snaking over to his body and under the cotton of his t-shirt to connect with heat of his body. He moves a little, unconsciously adjusting his position to allow her better access. She accepts and snuggles in closer. The alarm will wake them in time to prepare for their session with Robert. She can talk to Rick after that.

1 Police Plaza, Office of Chief of Detectives, 8:00 am on the dot.

She is punctual as ever. But he gives no acknowledgement of that. "Good Morning Captain Gates, pull up a chair."

Oh so formal. Captain? Not Victoria or Vicky even. Not a promising start, she muses internally of course – this is the Chief of Detectives – so she keeps her counsel for now. He might be her mentor but is most definitely her boss too.

As she takes her seat Tom Delaney slides a manila folder across his desk towards her. "What's this Chief?" If he's playing at formal, ranks-and-all, she can too. Petty as it is, it feels good. Just a little, especially as the tiny grimace it invokes.

"The draft of Ethical Standards investigation into the Castle shooting, and now expanded so that it includes the second component - the evaluation report on the effectiveness of a certain civilian consultant in the Homicide team at the Twelfth. Decided to make it a 'two-fer-one' offer." In twenty plus years his attempts at humor had never passed droll and she sees no reason to reward him now.

Taking up the document she begins to scan it. She is disciplined but efficient reader, and perhaps because she is a little peeved about today's hasty summons and perfunctory greeting, Gates takes her time to read through every one of the sixty-two pages in the report. She makes no notes but the Chief can see her lips purse at certain points and knows each will result in a question from the sharp minded Captain. For his part Thomas Delaney watches one of few remaining protégés still serving on the Force with a mixture of pride and exasperation.

"So what do you think?" Eventually his patience wears thin enough to give the pseudo order.

She places the document back on his desk and he retrieves it. Obviously it is not meant for wider distribution yet. A sign that despite his outward indifference he trusts her and values her opinion.
"It is not a snow job. Either way. I think I could accept the findings - of both parts of the report - and work with the recommendations. Of course I am not the one, or rather people, it really directly impacts."

"Don't sell yourself short Captain. But true enough. Even so, just for once Detective Beckett and her overly-connected partner don't get to have input. They'll have to accept and work with the outcomes regardless."

"Really? No input or 'guidance' from the Mayor's office. Or anywhere else?"

"Oh be real Vicky, of course there is consultation and quite a bit of it given the publicity on this one, but overall I think this is pretty fair. And a good outcome for most of us."

"It is very thorough and appears balanced. They left no stone unturned with Beckett. They even have trainers' notes from the Academy and the transcripts from her training officer as well. They are not the first to observe the possible interpersonal relationship infraction by both her and Mike Royce. I wonder if she knows that he took retirement so it never became an official investigation and left her record unblemished?"

Tom arches his fingers together and peers over the top, "Knowing Mike Royce, he would never have told her, and there is nothing to indicate she learnt it at any time including after his death. It wasn't his first brush with that particular problem and he knew the risks. He told me that it was impossible to say no to her."

"I didn't know you knew Mike Royce. He wasn't a detective under your command."

"No but he was one of the most instinctive cops in the city when he was in Blue. We gave quite a few Academy stars to him and a handful of other street cops to mould. He also acted as an unofficial spotter for talent we might have missed. Not that we needed it for Beckett. She was a standout from Academy onwards."

"I never knew that. Does Beckett know or suspect? Probably not. She is a damn fine detective, maybe even as Roy noted, one of the best, but her independent streak still runs hot and cold in her, more often cold but the risk is always there especially if the case has a trigger."

"Agreed Vicky. But that was the genius of Roy's suggestion to pair her with Richard Castle. She wouldn't take a regular cop as a partner but a civilian with ideas more off the reservation than her? It made her back off the freaky and tack closer to mainstream, at least in appearances, but still remain open to external input and work that to fit the evidence. And the CompStat reports certainly bear that out."

"I understand that Tom. But their high performance is not in question. Her suspension is obviously a major strike against her. But they also rip Beckett hard on several incidents during the course of Richard Castle's consultancy with her, notably security of her backup weapon."

"Hardly unsurprising, at least two officially documented cases of a NYPD detective admitting to deliberately handing her official backup piece to a civilian and it being discharged by said civilian with suspects injured."

"And in both cases, the suspects eventually being found guilty, and there were no fatalities, and in fact the civilian quite frankly displayed far better marksmanship and fire discipline than most officers. Not to mention in life-threatening circumstances where the civilian possibly, no probably, saving the NYPD officer's life in each instance. Acting more like a partner than many cops."
"Agreed. But hardly a selling point I’d dare use in public. Or even anywhere. We all know the rules. Beckett possibly more so given the first official sanction on her record from the stalker case where Castle shot the gun out of the suspect’s hand. Montgomery had no choice especially as the FBI were involved even if they were surprisingly cool about it. Jordan Shaw suggested a commendation but it did not fly in order to keep the firearm breach under wraps at the time."

"Unsurprising if they saved one of the Bureau's best in that case. But it was nice of Agent Shaw to make the recommendation even if she knew it would be futile."

"Actually given the situations these two have got themselves into over the years I am surprised these haven’t been more official notes that could be used against them. On the positive side of the ledger the review of his contribution to the Twelfth is generally very positive, and in favour of continuing his role with the potential of offering him a formal position. Of course it has been harder to judge empirically as we continued to keep him out of the official case files and evidence except where absolutely necessary. Roy Montgomery started that approach and I agree that it works in most circumstances."

"But there is no doubting the correlation in the performance of the 12th Homicide Department and Beckett's team in particular when Richard Castle is actually at the Precinct. And that is without considering the show-stopper cases they have successfully resolved. They have quite a fan club with not just the Mayor and Jordan Shaw, but Homeland and the CIA all providing official thanks. And then there is their actual valor awards for preventing the dirty bombing. Awards that cannot be made public. Most cops would be satisfied with one of any of those successes once in their careers, and yet these two rattle them off with an unbelievable success rate, not to mention luck."

"I don't think both of them almost dying from gunshot wounds qualifies as luck Tom."

"BS and you know it Vicky. Beckett should be dead, and Rick Castle well who knows. But he does deliver for us."

"I don't disagree. I have had the opportunity to witness his work first hand. Unorthodox and disruptive are suitable adjectives but they are more than offset by the breakthroughs and outstanding results his contributions make. Then there is the issue of his interpersonal interactions both within the wider Precinct and within Beckett's team. He is good for morale. And that is without any reference to his relationship with Beckett. And well to be fair convictions are not the final say for Homicide. That responsibility lies with the DA's office."

"Semantics and you know it. We both do. Doesn't mean we don't color around and over those lines when it suits us. DA's office do the same back. Then there is politics. We have been lucky so far that the respective District Attorneys and their ADA's have been keen to prosecute the crimes and not score political points. Rick Castle would be an easy target given some of his connections and his inability to stick strictly to his designated role were someone in the DA's office so inclined to make an issue of it. So far there has been nothing major. But it won't last."

"This will definitely be the case once Mayor Weldon is gone. This term is his last hurrah and when the Mayor is gone, Castle's current safety net goes too." Tom gives his subordinate an appraising look but she says nothing now. She had not been so calm when Richard Castle played his trump card a year and a half ago and go admitted back to the Twelfth despite being kicked out by the new Captain fresh in from IA with her hidden assignment and agenda to serve.

"So that means we need something more permanent, more formal and certainly more robust to ensure that Richard Castle can continue to consult with the NYPD."

"And more specifically the Twelfth. Don't go trying to short change me Tom. I'm not going to
share Richard Castle. I've had to put up with him at his most annoying, and now that he's almost house-trained, you can't take him away."

"I'm won't be doing that to you Vicky and you know that. But it is fun to watch you fight your corner for a precinct and a man you didn't much want not so long ago. Just so you know, you'll get as much of Richard Castle as he wants to give – of course that could well sting you just as much."

"I'll deny I ever said it, but at this point in time I just want the pair of them back at the Twelfth. Hopefully as soon as possible in the New Year."

"That should be good. You can let them know if you wish but make sure Beckett knows she needs to ace that exam to be certain."

"Yes Sir."

"Relax Vicky. Plus I can confirm that the deal made with the Deputy Commissioner and myself still stands. You clean up the mess Roy left and you'll get what you wanted. Might be a little later than originally planned but it is just a delay. The advantage of the wait – and it'll be maximum two or at worst three years - and you'll be ready for immediate promotion. Straight to Deputy Chief. And in line for my job if you want it. Maybe that is an even better result than your own career plan." He almost challenges her on the last point knowing full well how meticulous her planning had been for her career advancement.

"Tom, I know you're a man of your word. That is not in doubt. And you are right about the Twelfth. I do want the best for my people. That has never changed. Just because I didn't plan on being a precinct captain on my career path doesn't mean I don't look after my people. I am responsible for them. Even if they sometimes think they are not my responsibility. As for the promotion, I'll believe it when I have the official letter in front of me."

Chuckling Tom rises. "Good. Did you want some coffee now Vicky?"

"Why not." She rises too and follows her boss and friend out of the office, "and perhaps you can tell me what's bugging you."

XXX

After fetching their own coffee, they return to office, close the door, and settle back down at his desk. As soon as they had taken their seats, Tom slides the newspaper across. Today's New York Times.

"You asked what's bugging me. This." Flipping the front page over, he asks "So who you do you think it is?" His finger is tapping the top of a column that runs half-way down page 2. Despite the recent lack of new updates, there is always a space reserved on the front or inside page for the longish running saga of alleged political corruption encompassing Washington DC and the Big Apple. To date there is more rumor and supposition than facts.

"Sir?"

"Enough with the 'sirs' Tom will do now Vicky." She sometimes forgets how mercurial Tom Delaney - former patrol-man, Sergeant, Homicide Detective First Class before he became 'Brass' can be, and her boss for so much of her career - can be.

"Tom?" So she's playing him a little, a little payback if she can. But this will be a serious conversation. He expects her to speak up when she needs to, but for him to ask her opinion outright about this? Serious as a heart attack. Not something that would normally be discussed outside the
"Don't disassemble Vicky. You know I am talking about the possible subject of the D.O.J. investigation. Story has been running for weeks, just never quite got a full head of steam, yet. But it has too many legs to be a furphy. Pretty consistent that it is rumored to be a federal politician from the North East, possibly New York.

"So who do I think it is? What violations of statues are in play?"

Tom nods, leans back in his chair, and gives one of those expectant shark smiles. Waits for his protégé.

"Bracken?" Except it is not so much of a question, more akin to a statement. She has been pondering it on and off for a while. Plus she has never liked the man. Something unnatural, creepy even fractured about him. They had met several times when he was in the DA's office and since. But blissfully she had not had many direct dealings over the years.

"That's who my money is on." Tom's next question of 'tell me why?' is unspoken.

"Senator William H Bracken" Just like detailing a suspect up on a board, you start with the name.

"Former Assistant District Attorney, then DA before switching to politics. Blew through state politics and then quickly to Federal, well ahead of the pack. Despite his junior status he has accumulated a fair amount of authority in DC. And new enemies too. But that doesn't seem to phase him. He seems unnaturally confident of his position.

"He has prided himself on being independent and not beholden to any major sponsors. So where is his money coming from? His campaigns have always been smart but not-too-slick, with plenty of advertising and staff. Yet no major backers line up behind him. At least public ones. Some kingmakers have attempted to attach themselves but either rebuffed, sometimes firmly, and for the others there is a dance but nothing definite is ever agreed. You never see other politicians, even those with money, rebuff the Kingmakers or other potential sponsors."

She purses her lips and goes for it. "Campaign finance violations are given I suspect. But it can't be the only thing, not for the level of Federal interest. If it was only dirty money it would not have dragged out this long. They have other lines of investigation. More serious than the campaign funding."

Tom nods but waits for her to go.

"Bracken is a Republican but an East Coast moderate. So this makes him conservative on the fiscal stuff, law and order, but more progressive than many of his colleagues on social issues. Just enough religion to pass. Of course the lack of a spouse is an interesting one. Might cause issues later if he became a serious candidate.

"As a former DA he is big on law and order. He ran locally for DA and state Senate on anti-mob platform, and certainly was strong on organised crime when in office. But, and this could be a big part of the current investigation, he did target the major families and left minor players alone. One family especially if rumours are correct. But he got results. Everyone was happy. Well almost everyone."

"The ADA, DiNozo, has a thing for Bracken for that specific reason. They clashed back in the day – and not just because he supported David" - her husband – "when he ran off against Bracken in the election. DiNozo certainly wasn't a fan of the focus on the major families. He wanted to target all
organised crime – the Silva's, a small family, particularly - but Bracken blocked his attempts to launch investigations. Even with Bracken long gone from the DA's office it was only recently that Organised Crime kicked an active investigation off. DiNozo thinks there is some form of agreement between them. Not sure if it is kick-backs or a hold-over between the Silva's and Bracken. And without doubt there are clearly Bracken loyalists still within the DA's office."

Tom jumps in. He has known Charles DiNozo for decades, likes him, and can fill the gap for Vicky. "The beef is also personal for DiNozo. His father was crippled by enforcers from the Silva family. He's been after them for years, and relentless once he got to office. He has pursued it legally though. Hence the length of time it has taken. Even so – just considering the implications of a link between the mob and a possible Presidential candidate." They both shake their heads. Perish the thought.

"Also Bracken has fans within the NYPD as well. Not at very senior level, but at command certainly."

Gates nods in understanding and resumes.

"Wouldn't be the first time that authorities have reached understandings with a criminal organisation. Still it doesn't explain where his funding is coming from? Ignoring the issue of how difficult it would be to hide the source of funds, especially if it is dirty. But how is it even possible if it is the Silva's. They're small time, and federally politics is squarely in the millions, if not tens. Even if they had some hold over Bracken what is in it for them? What is in it for the Senator? The Silva's could probably buy a couple of city councilmen, even a district or two, but I doubt they could bankroll a state representative and no chance for a federal Senator."

"Agreed. I think we are missing the big stuff. The Feds clearly know more. The Department of Justice's Special Task Force has been running point on this. Something triggered their investigation Vicky. They only come out for big cases."

"And they'll never share with us Tom. We'll find out if and when they go public. But putting that aside for the moment I have another thing that sits uncomfortably with me. The whole thing with the attempted assassination attempts on Senator Bracken from this year. The ones which the FBI unravelled and foiled. The narrative doesn't work for me. If it was a professional hit, then he should be dead. No way would that be bungled. No way would the FBI learn about it before hand. Not if it was professional and a serious intent instead of perhaps a warning shot. You and I both know that. FBI knows too. That has got to have set off warning bells. Even they are not that dense."

"You are right Vicky. In fact the FBI agreed a while ago. They have already reopened the investigation and likely merged it into the DOJ led one. A friend tells me the original investigation was closed down quickly under pressure in DC. The Attorney General ordered it reopened quietly."


"I think you are more on the money than would be comfortable for many. I'll admit to being quite seriously concerned. Bracken has other connections, not least of which is with a private military contractor called Orantis Solutions. Initially an extra-territorial operation in the Middle East, they have been growing their domestic operations due to the ramp down of overseas opportunities. Those incidents targeting Raglan, Montgomery and Beckett were done using former military and
Special Forces operators. Some were claimed to be former employees of Orantis. It has been hard to prove. Those firms have very expensive and capable lawyers."

"So Bracken potentially has a small private army and an apparent willingness to use it. But where is the money for all this coming from? His political funding and the possible black ops. That's big money. Millions, tens of millions. We're missing something. Worse, than that I doubt that this is over. There is clearly more to come and not in a good way."

"I agree. Whatever is going on, I'm sure it is not over. Well then Vicky, give me an outline of what you think we should do here."

The Chief has sprung one of his traps. She can see the self-satisfied smirk – reminds her not a little of a certain author – and it is all she can do not to roll her eyes and snark back at him. Instead like a diligent pupil she will marshal her thoughts and come up with a proposal.

"Well first I am going to need a core of people I can trust. I'll start in my Precinct with Esposito and Ryan. They are already dialled in on Montgomery and who knows what else. Plus they have some extra skills that may reduce the risk of discovery while we investigate. Ryan is a dab hand with surveillance and has some IT skills. Esposito is former Special Forces and a trained sniper. I have a suspicion we may need all those skills given who we are up against."

"Roy certainly assembled a good team. Loyal too. But you are going to need more than those two and even if Beckett and Castle return to make up the numbers."

"We need to leave Beckett and Castle out of it. If this is linked to her mother's case then I cannot trust her, and by implication him to follow protocol. I have other candidates from within the Twelfth plus from IA if I am permitted.

At the Chief's not of permission, she continues, "Given we don't really know how many other cops Bracken has suborned like he did with Raglan and those other scum, I want to branch out from the NYPD, so I'm thinking….."

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**The Hamptons, Monday late morning.**

She sticks her head into their bedroom where her partner is back in bed for a recovery nap after their earlier session with Robert. As soon as she spies him, she knows he is awake. All this time with him has made his schoolboy antics charming but utterly futile in the face of her innate and detective-honed skills, plus years of observing Richard Castle observe her. She was just less obvious with the creepy staring. Or so she tells herself.

"Rick."

"Rick!"

"Ricky!"

"Oh. " His head turns, and she gets a glance, eyes blinking in apology. "Oh sorry Kate. My mind was elsewhere." He completes his previous half turn so her face comes fully into view.

"Yes well you can't keep reliving the other night." She really shouldn't tease like that with the tip of her tongue painting her lips with what he perceives as expectation. Or an invitation.

"Why not?" He wasn't actually, well not this time, but he cannot keep the slightly salacious expression from his face as he takes the opportunity she has presented him.
"You'll die, could die," she corrects as she is trying to keep a straight-face of her own, but failing miserably. Rick Castle can seriously degrade her game. Without trying. Oh it is so not fair!

"I'll take the chance," he husks. Oh he's still playing. He is incorrigible and like an Energizer Bunny in so many ways.

"Not the time." She manages to get enough determination behind it for him to understand she means it. For now at least. He actually looks disappointed. He's still recovering, admittedly almost there but has an almost insatiable appetite for her. However, he can take, um get, her.

"I've got something I want us to work on. The good news is that it does involve us getting hot and sweaty, and even laying hands on each other," she deadpans.

"You mean training don't you." It is not a question. At least he didn't eye-roll her. He knows better. Sort of.

"Yes. As Robert said you are ready to expand your range of exercises. And I could do with some practise before I go back." He starts a little at the last point and she makes a note to herself that they should definitely discuss that very topic, today if at all possible, in the mean time she still needs to get him out of bed. "So some self-defence and a little martial arts. Just basic stuff. Mainly self-defence essentially," she gives him with a clinical look over as if assessing him, "but if you are up to it, we can works some other stuff in towards the end. A bit of fun."

"Okay." He is showing a remarkable lack of motivation to get out of the bed, even now refreshed and awake from his nap, and his voice betrays him. She knows his frustrations sometimes get the better of him, especially with his ongoing issues around lack of comfort when trying to type. She has indulged him a bit, but that time is over. He is not a small child – he has proven that many times over – so can't be allowed to sulk like one.

"Now!" He groans at her command but she's ready for that. She expected some resistance so she has extra motivation for him to entice him out of bed.

"But we already trained with Robert this morning…." His protests die out as she starts removing the outer layers of her clothes. Her sweat shirt and track pants hit the floor revealing a pair of tight, shiny black three-quarter leggings he hadn't seen before, and one of her favourite midriff baring tank tops, this one purple with a bit of padding so her chest isn't totally flattened by the tight fitting cotton and Lycra construct that made her both martial and feminine all at once.

"Coming dear." He's showing remarkable powers of recovery as he rises like Lazarus and scoots out of bed, pyjama bottoms already shimming towards the carpet as he seeks to locate his sports shorts. It will most likely hurt, not to mention the high probability of minor humiliation, but the rewards could well be worth it. If nothing else the new leggings were shiny and sexy and made her detective derriere look positively delicious.

The training session has been interesting for both of them. Despite his initial reluctance, Rick had participated with increasing enthusiasm and may have even followed the majority of her instructions.

Kate is seemingly effortlessly graceful, belying the reality of her only taking up martial arts in her last year of college in preparation for the Academy. But she's a little out of practice after weeks off – she usually trains, often including sparring, at least once if not twice, or more, a week – and well since her own shooting she's not the same, maybe a little over 90% of her previous condition, and she despairs of ever finding that last 10% or so.
And then of course, there is her partner. Rick Castle totally puts her off her game. It takes intense concentration and willpower to stay focused. Worse of course is the intimate knowledge of what he, and her, are really like together. Plus Rick Castle had got game. A lot of it. He did at the beginning, and she still regrets a those things she did that contributed to him misplacing his game for so long but also grateful that ultimately he did so for her, for them. Of course since getting together his game has steadily come back until he can tease as well as her, just subtly different. It certain helps beyond all meaning that he has declared that he only wants to play with her. And she with him.

Rick is a quick study even if his body does not always get the moves correct. He's not the total klutz his precinct joking makes him appear like, but he doesn't have natural rhythm. Coordination is something he has to work at. A lot. She knows that dancing is one example where he has striven hard to be better than nature intended. No doubt Martha's theatrical influence is in there too. He is pretty focused on her instructions but still can't nail some moves, even with repeated practice. Of course she had teased and distracted him as well. She can't help it. It is entirely second nature and pretty much instinctual at this point in their relationship. It had been long before they had a relationship, or at least a romantic one. He is not going down without a fight and is happy to use the tools available him to fight back using fair means or foul.

But before things go so heated, after a warm up, Kate had started them off with some basics. A little bit of introduction to some simple forms. Then on to learning blocks and then how to punch. She only caught Rick rolling his eyes twice. She suspects more happen when her back is actually turned. Mind you he could just be staring at her behind. The tight Lycra was suitably flattering and distracting. She was honest enough with herself to acknowledge she bought it exactly for that reason and liked the impact it has on him. Since the Academy she had adapted to her fitter, more athletic form, and become more comfortable and confident about using men's reactions to her body to her advantage. But it had never been anything improper except for a handful of men she had relationships with, and one she wanted to, offered herself but he left. Of course she is not unaware that this got her a prolonged (for her) stint in Vice that she had feared she might never escape from before Roy Montgomery came knocking. For years she had been uncertain as to what really made her stand out enough to warrant the sudden promotion well ahead of her peers. For Roy to take the risk. She knows better now.

Even with the mental and subliminal games her new partner-in-all-things acquits himself reasonably well. He has some rudimentary knowledge from book research and even a bit of residual memory from his RTOC days at college. Plus some apparently first-hand experience of trying to spar with Clare Dunne when he shadowed her. The retired Special Forces Colonel had knocked any misconceptions he might of have harbored clean away as was her wont. And him on his arse many times. She really needed the full story on that one. Pictures too if they existed.

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They are just winding down, trying some very rudimentary point sparring for 'fun' when her phone rings.

She waves Rick off and he gracefully retreats in the direction of the kitchen breathing a little heavily and miming drinking, giving her space, and she nods both in thanks and in affirmation of his unspoken question regarding water. There is no specific caller ID but she recognizes the start of the number sequence. It is the one allocated to the Twelfth Precinct's main switchboard. It could be any phone dialing out.

"Beckett" She may not officially be a detective at the moment, but that doesn't change who she is. At least to the rest of the world outside of her family.
"Detective," Captain Gates' greeting gets her full attention.

"Good afternoon Sir."

"I apologize for interrupting your time away from the precinct so I'll get straight to the point. I met with the Chief this morning and he was able to give me some advance warning. I am sorry to inform you that the Civil Service examinations scheduled for December have been cancelled. The next round of examinations will now be in the New Year. No date has been scheduled."

"Sir?"

"No clear reason has been given but one would suspect that the ongoing budget crunch means they are loathe to create another wave of candidates pressuring for higher graded and renumerated jobs that simply are not available nor affordable."

That was pretty candid of her. "Thank you for informing me Captain. I'll continue to study but perhaps throttle back my workload a little until I have new date to aim for."

"You do that. Look Kate I wish I knew how this is going to pan out but the honest truth is that Precinct Captains have very little say in the greater scheme of things. Even the Chief's hands were tied."

"I know you are doing what you can Sir. Can I ask if the delay will adversely affect any plans for Rick and myself to return to duty?" She leaves the word 'together' out but the Captain hears it regardless.

"I don't know. I'll be blunt, at the moment Mister Castle's return is not the biggest issue. Wow. Does that mean her potential promotion might be? But before she can ask Gates is moving on, changing subject herself. "How is Mister Castle's recovery progressing?"

"Rick is doing quite well overall. He still has some mobility and fine motor skill issues which are preventing him from resuming writing properly as well as some other activities. All of which is a cause of some frustration. But we remain hopeful that it will not be too long before his is sufficiently recovered for that and also ready for a return to duty. I would expect and hope that would be sometime in the New Year. Will the examination delay hold things up Sir?" She goes back for a second bite.

"I don't know Kate," there is a longish pause before the Captain continues.

"Kate, when I met with the Chief of Detectives this morning he had some updates for me on the investigations into the shooting and the civilian consultancy. The report is not official yet but should be acceptable to all parties. However, as part of the investigations I have a few things I would like to share with you. I believe I mentioned some of the rationale behind these when we last spoke." Again another lull before her Captain continues obviously marshalling her thoughts.

"But I think I should explain more fully. I apologise if I repeat myself a little from before. Firstly please remember that perception is not always the truth but it is unfortunately a criteria especially in bureaucracies, and the NYPD if nothing else is definitely one. In short, some objections, a few with some validity, have been raised about your inclusion in the pool of candidates for promotion. A number of these objectors, including people I respect and trust, feel it is too soon for you to be up for promotion. It is less than a year since your suspension and especially when there is already a considerable number of already assessed candidates waiting to the fill slots if and when they open up. At to that the fact that the Department has already given you special leave that is not normally afforded officers, even though it is without pay. It may appear to smack of favouritism. Finally
there is the complicating factor of the publicity which can compound issues regardless of how favourable it may appear to be.

"Now having said all I disagree with that assessment. You are a more than extremely able and highly competent officer, verging on greatness if I dare say, certainly in the results your unorthodox team has achieved in the last four years. I am not so churlish that I would not acknowledge that a key difference has been Mister Castle. His presence has influenced how you approach cases and investigations, mostly for the better. But still - you lead the team and you deserve the opportunity to prove you are ready to advance further, and become more of a leader than you have been to date.

"In truth his shooting and other events only moved up the timetable for your promotion. We did not have a chance for your most recent performance review before you went on leave. If we had proceeded as per normal I would have told you that it would usually be more two years before you would be put forward for promotion but I was already pushing for it to be earlier. This is based on how the Chief of Detectives and I, recognise your abilities and want to support and encourage their development to make even better use of them."

"Thank you," emerges unbidden from her mouth, but the Captain ignores the interruption.

"And I know that a delay is not entirely fair based on your past performance. Even so, allowing for your suspension and that disciplinary black mark which to be honest may never go away, and will always be on your record, that was not your first brush with disciplinary action. Although somehow you managed to avoid any major formal measures prior to that, there are a number of concerning notes on your file. More recent and foremost are the two occasions when there was unauthorised surrender of your backup weapon to a civilian regardless of the eventual outcome. Despite these breaches your overall performance reviews rate you extremely highly."

There is a momentary pause before the Captain strikes hard. "But do not ever think you can pull the wool over my eyes Detective. This is not some game. The rules do apply to you and your side kick. The deception and subterfuge in concealing your relationship with a close colleague – regardless of his actual legal status – was a calculated and contrary to policy and expected behaviour. It speaks to some deep seated issues that you need to address. Otherwise you put yourself, your partner, your colleagues, your Captain and the NYPD at risk. I take it I have made myself clear?"

"Sir." She knows well enough not to respond further. Take the dressing down and learn from it. Some of the censure mixed with hard advice was the same from Montgomery. Gates would certainly have his notes on her record. They both leave his name unsaid. He had been her biggest supporter but also her fiercest critic, aside from herself. Tough on her to ensure she did not let her standards slip or path deviate but also give her some latitude to push boundaries and the rules, within limits of course. Her current Captain appears to have a similar approach. It just took them longer to reach that understanding, and the limits have yet to be fully defined.

Gates moves on bringing her thoughts back from her mentor/betrayer. "Once we have our City administration issues resolved, hopefully not too far into the New Year, I will be pushing for your promotion. I need you to do your part too Kate. First with the exams."

"Sir."

Her acknowledgement is once more cut short.

"I have no doubt your intelligence and dedication will get you across that line. But you will need more. And to achieve that Kate you will need to amend your approach and your decision making.
Like I said I have been reviewing your record. You have done extremely well but not without issues. Too many cases – and not just those involving your family – appear to take on a personal element for you. Managed appropriately and controlled, it is something that can make a great detective. Roy was certain of you, I am mostly persuaded that you can maintain the necessary self-discipline. But you are the only one who can do that. Not many can reach those levels of personal rigour and also assume the responsibility of leadership at higher levels. It is very different than leading a small team. You have to be able to maintain a measure of separation from the cases and to a certain extent your teams too. I don't doubt you are potentially capable of it. Roy said as much. But the execution is very much down to yourself. And finally you have to want to do so. Leadership is not for everyone, and many a good, great even, detective has declined the opportunity when offered, preferring the streets."

"Thank you sir. I appreciate your support and honesty." There is no acknowledgement from Gates and without being in her Captain's presence she can only speculate as to her bosses' mood so she continues. "I fully accept the results of my actions. Whilst I have always tried to do what is right, there are occasions where I do regret decisions and the results of those choices, especially where it has led to harm to others. I believe I am aware of what I need to do to advance. And ready. While I will admit to being concerned, even a little scared, of what it might mean I want to take the opportunity offered to me. To try. To see if I am capable of those things others have identified."

"Good. I am pleased Kate. I don't want to lose you. Nor does the NYPD. Both of you."

She manages to mask her surprise at the last admission. "And I want to stay. We both want to stay."

"Well much as I never thought this moment would arrive when I first arrived at the Twelfth, I find myself looking forward to your joint return in the New Year."

"Well we both look forward to that too. Sir, can I ask how things are going? What of my team? Can I ask how Esposito and Ryan are doing?"

At the other end of the phone, Victoria Gates is pondering how much contact the detective has had with her team. She had imagined them to be good friends, but perhaps they were or not. Or more likely her focus on her injured partner and paramour and their time away from the city had shifted her usual rapt attention on operations at the Precinct, even when off-duty.

"To be honest Sir, I have not really kept touch on the work side recently. I have been focused on Rick and we have been up here and perhaps a bit more isolated that I thought. We did get together to celebrate Thanksgiving a few weeks ago. But it was a deliberately work-free occasion."

She knows those. Her husband has a similar rule too for family events. And as for Beckett's team, well they are clearly more than just colleagues. She can indulge Detective Beckett's request.

"Their performance has been very good if you discount their antics if left unattended with no active cases."

"Oh." That is all Beckett can say to that.

"Perhaps it is another plus mark for you Kate. You keep them in line. Especially since it would also involve wrangling Mister Castle too. Although no doubt you can now offer extra incentive on that front."

The Captain's final arch observation leaves her momentarily gobsmacked. She needs to remember that Victoria Gates is a woman outside of the precinct with a family and obviously possessed of dry sense of humor not unlike her father's.
"They are not too bad sir. You just need some redirection of their excess enthusiasm."

"Yes well regardless they have being doing very well when suitably motivated. Both have recently been detached to assist with a task force investigation."

"The killing of the IA lieutenant?" Kate can't help herself with the interruption.

"Yes…," and again Beckett interrupts her Captain as her mind gets into gear, ignoring the usual risks that would accompany such a foolhardy mistake were she at the precinct.

"Sir, were they on scene at the shoot out and explosions that was reported in the news?" She had discounted, or more correctly not even made the association, as the incident had been in Brooklyn well outside the Twelfth's jurisdiction.

"Yes they were there. I was too."

"Oh. Sir, I apologize…"

"Beckett, nothing to apologize for."

She wants to protest but the Captain cuts her off before she can begin, perhaps extracting some small measure of payback for her earlier interruptions. "That is perfectly acceptable Kate. You are on extended leave. It would be unreasonable for you to monitor activities as if it was simply normal off-duty shift cycle.

"The team were responsible for the discovery that led to the operation. And then when it looked like going bad, led by Esposito, both rushed back into a building on fire to rescue some of the ESU team who had come under gunfire just as the explosions were set up. Undoubtedly brave, if a little impetuous, they rescued the two most badly injured ESU officers. Fortunately the rest of the ESU squad extracted themselves before the pair had a chance to try and repeat their heroics as the building was well alight when they attempted to enter a second time. They are both fine. They were a little sooty but otherwise unharmed.

"Well I am glad everyone is fine." She is. But she is also more than a touch guilty. Her team were in danger and here she was living it up with her millionaire boyfriend in the Hamptons. Stuck in their bubble.

"Yes, unsurprisingly we can actually get by without you or at least your boyfriend to rescue us on occasion. You I am not so certain about. I did some more reading of Roy's case reviews and other notes on you Kate. Extremely impressive performances in the field for the most part. I imagine there is some you cannot share with me, or at least anyone not cleared in with the appropriate security level. To be honest I am surprise that certain Federal agencies have not been interested."

Kate is still feeling guilty she didn't know it was them and it momentarily flummoxed and does not respond to her Captain's dig at the surprising number of cases they had handled with a national security implication. Or that it might have otherwise attracted recruitment interest.

"Look Kate, I learnt some time ago that this job is not just about trust and responsibility. It is also about boundaries and being able to separate your life and work. Letting go is hard, especially in homicide. You need to be able to step back and to have balance. This is something you have struggled with. I know that at times in the past you have been forced to take leave and downtime. It is not something we should have to force onto our officers. There is absolutely no need to feel any guilt or responsibility for your absence."

"You need to find that balance in your life. And I will of course deny saying this, but your man, he
Wow. This conversation is certainly not going as she imagined one with Victoria Gates would do. She can be honest back.

"He does. I tried so hard not to like him at first, or let him. But he didn't take no for answer, and before I knew it, he had been shadowing and consulting for a couple of years and he was one of us. But then building to something more too. He has more than proven himself." To her, to the Precinct, to the NYPD.

"Well both of you take care. I will let you know if I hear anything about the exams Detective."

"Thank you Sir but before you go, could I ask a favour." She is nervous but the tenor of this unexpected conversation with her captain, gives her the opportunity to ask. "Would it be possible for my team to be off rotation the weekend before Christmas? We wanted to invite them up to visit."

"A moment please." The pause is perhaps sixty or seventy seconds. "Once their shifts have finished on the Saturday morning I don't see why not. They are not rostered back on for three days. Will that be sufficient Kate?"

"Yes, more than enough thank you Sir." She has plans to make.

"Very well Kate. Did you want to be the one inform them?"

"Yes please. Thank you Sir."

"You are welcome Detective. We may speak again before the New Year and I do look forward to welcoming back both you and Mister Castle at the Twelfth sometime soon after then. I wish your families a joyous and safe festive season."

"And if I may, the same to you and yours. Thank you Sir."

She finds him in the kitchen with a half-drunk bottle of water in hand, slightly sweaty training top sticking to the curve of his spine, playing over his surprisingly taunt musculature. Another bottle awaits on the benchtop for her, condensation pooling where the base meets the stone. He's facing away from her, looking at something on his tablet propped up on the bench. She notes how he is using his right hand now, none of the clumsy attempts with the left. She is proud, pleased and relieved at the progress of his recovery, and the improvements. She certainly appreciates those. The fine motor skills, the increased stamina.

"Hey Babe." She almost laughs as he starts, whether in surprise at her presence, or at the endearment. Ridiculous man. She closes the distance and grabs her bottle but not before running her hand over his arse making him jump again. This was fun!

"So who was it?"

"Victoria."

"Gates?" His eyes narrow. She never calls her, no make that their - she self corrects – Captain by her given name. He's onto her. She doesn't care.

"Yes Rick, Captain VICTORIA Gates."
"Everything okay? Are they okay?" See he thinks to ask immediately after their teammates. Why didn't she? Is she losing her touch?

"Yes. And now they are."

"Kate, you'll have to explain that."

So she does. He shares her surprise at their Captain's admissions. He even looks a little embarrassed as well as proud at Kate's recollection of Gate's compliments and admissions of his contribution.

And then she unloads her guilt on him. As ever he is supportive but she observes his brow crease a couple of times but his self-discipline is good and he does not interrupt her as he lets her explain herself.

"This place, isolation, the bubble, we've created for ourselves Rick. I'm not saying our decision was wrong. I'm not. It was necessary for your recovery. And so good for us. But persisting, going on with it. We can't sustain it." More sure, she adds, "I can't."

"I'd never ask that of you Kate. You must know that?" Now she has him being uncertain. The last thing she ever wants.

"I do Rick." Her hands cradle his face, the simplicity of the action beyond measure as touch restores certainty to both of them. "The fact is I'm the one who has been happy in this bubble. For the first time since my mom, I've had extended time off to do things I would have previously never dreamt of doing or pursuing. With the person, and other people, I want to do them with."

He kisses her and she reciprocates briefly, but then she continues on. "But I've lost sight of some other important things in my life. Our lives. And I feel guilty. And I know I shouldn't. But I do. So I need to go change my focus a bit. Start to get back to the world, our lives out there. Ultimately back to my job." She drops her hands to his shoulders, and ever so carefully squeezes especially on the right acknowledging his recovery. "With my partner." He beams.

"And that's fine Kate. This was only ever intended to be temporary. For my recovery. For us too. You know I'd never ask you to do otherwise." She kisses him this time. And as it his turn, he kisses her back before speaking.

"And I've loved being in this bubble with you. Can't wait to do it again some time. Just for different reasons I hope."

Neither voice what those reasons could be. They've made progress but sometimes it doesn't seem to be so far. Or is it because sometimes they've just jumped right past those concerns, far beyond?

Regardless, she wraps herself into him in silent thanks and adoration. And remains that way for some time.

When she has done, she pulls back just enough to see his face and remembers the other question. Almost pleading with him, "Can we invite them all up for Christmas? Or rather the weekend before Christmas. Espo and Ryan are off shift by midday Saturday. I checked with Gates and she is fine with it as they are not on-call."

"Sure. We can do that. We had talked about having a Christmas gathering back at the Thanksgiving meal. So family and friends?"

"Can we Babe? Invite our families and friends. But Christmas will just be smaller. Just us, and your
mom and Alexis. My Dad has other plans. He used to go to the cabin but I honestly don't know what will happen this year. He hasn't said if his plans include Val."

"What about you Kate? Will you be okay with this Kate? I know that you've worked the holiday in previous years. Obviously that is not be on the cards this year, but if you need something more, or less, to help you cope then we can do that."

"Thanks Rick. But I think that I can manage. With your support," she quickly corrects before his face can even begin to show any doubt. "Sorry," she apologises too, her right hand caressing his left temple and down his cheek.

"Don't apologise. We can't be on edge for every little misspeak or omission. Look what that did, almost cost us."

"Thank you for being you. So patient and understanding. As far as Christmas goes, well it is time to make new memories and restart old ones perhaps. We can merge, adopt new, or old, traditions I think. And I can't, won't, do this without you Rick. I may mess up, may need a short break, I may even run and hide for a wee while, but I still want you, will always want you."

His face, carefully neutral at the start was transformed as the smile completed. "And you have me Kate. Remember, I'm equally likely to mess up. Remember I'm two and oh for marriages."

She rubs her right thumb on his left cheek, her eyes directly engaging his. "You remember what I said to you at the Ryan's wedding Rick?"

He nods, throat suddenly a little tight, mouth dry. So she supplies the words for him. If anything huskier and even fuller of hope than the first time, "Maybe third times the charm." She smiles at him, eyes full of love and her voice full of confidence, "For some time I've wanted to prove that you....now I would like to amend what I said slightly. I am certain that third time will be the charm." And they both know with whom.

With his words momentarily still absent he has no alternative but to close the narrow gap between them, sweep her into his arms and kiss her, deeply with nothing held back. He'll never understand how he got to be so lucky to be kissing Kate Beckett. And for her to be kissing him back with equal fervour. And all the other things they get to do now.

If they had intended to discuss matters further it is all lost in the rush to reach their bed before all their clothes were gone. What a day!

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes.

Happy New Year! Welcome to 2018.
My resolution - finish this!

Sorry.

As previously stated elsewhere the end of Castle hit me hard. Combined with major work and personal commitments my mojo vanished. I have got writing again but intermittently and slowly. Very slowly
After the train wreck of Season 8 I decided to rewrite my original ending. Extensively. Several times. With breaks and false starts, and lots of procrastination. And surgery, post-op physio and more work commitments. All-in-all it took almost a year to re-do the remaining chapters.

Finally, I have reworked my revised ending into the remaining chapters. There were 7 chapters of One of Us to go when I stopped previously.

I am now going to publish the chapters as chapters 74 - 76 are now complete and 77 onwards are in final edits/tweaks.

The chapters are:-
Chapter 74- Welcome Back
Chapter 75 - Imminent
Chapter 76 - Feints and Festivities
Chapter 77 - Breaking
Chapter 78 – Immolation
Chapter 79 – Wrapping Up
Chapter 80 - One of Us

The posting schedule should be one chapter every two to three days. Naturally I encourage your reviews and feedback. Excessive feedback may speed up the publication frequency (but I make no promises).
Previously – Back in the Hamptons, Rick and Kate are planning their first Christmas together and preparing for their return to New York.

The Hamptons

"I'm going to miss this." He doesn't expand on the short statement but they both know what he is referring to. Their still naked bodies are quite the clue.

"Me too." She can be equally honest. "Not sure how often we'll be able to do that once we go back."

Rick chuckles, nudging her in his bonhomie. For once she doesn't get the source of the amusement. "What?"

"Sorry. Just had visions of being busted after we nipped home for a quickie."

"Definitely not happening. We'll have to be on our best behaviour and be professional. I've finally got to an even keel with her and she has to like you now."

"I know. But I didn't save her life so she would like me. Although I have to point out, I didn't say it was Gates busting us? What about the boys? Or Lanie."

"They'll best be quiet if they know what's good for them," all flat intonation and menace. At her partner's raised eye brow she decides it time to get up and throws the covers off the bed.

They had rolled out of bed, showered and dressed. It was only after they had finished a late dinner and cleaned the kitchen that Kate messages Ryan and asks if he and Espo can call her. She knows they are on late shift today. It takes only minutes. Probably just long enough for the pair to find an empty interrogation or conference room. Not that the two of them were rushing for any reason.

"Beckett?" Ryan sounds on edge.

"Relax Ryan. Stand down. Nothing is wrong." She reassures them, keen to make sure they did not get off on the wrong foot, especially with Ryan who occasionally jumps to conclusions.

"Oh good. Nice to hear from you." Sass from Esposito. He has picked up a little too many mannerisms from his on/off girlfriend. Mind you there is a fair bit there that was all him. The former soldier has been a steadfast ally since they met but he still packs a sting. Plus her regular communications with Lanie have hinted at something being off with the sometimes taciturn team member.

"I appreciate we have been a bit out of touch during Rick's recovery but we did see you for
Thanksgiving so knock the crap off Espo." She deals with him the only way she knows how to when he is being mule-headed. The only thing he reacts to. Still more than a touch of the soldier in him. Too much for softer logic and appeal – from her or Lanie – to reach most of the time. She knows he is not a chauvinist but he is overly conditioned.

"Fine. So to do what do we own the pleasure?" A minor improvement. She'll let the sarcasm ride.

"As you know Rick's getting better, and he's continuing to improve, so we're starting to make plans for coming back. But it will be after Christmas, so the reason why I'm calling is indirectly connected." Her tone is all Detective First Class Beckett and they can all hear it.

"What I want to know is why did we have to find out from Gates that you two had been in a little bit of a situation since we saw you last?"

Rick can almost visualise the two swallowing nervously. Indeed Ryan's verbal response smacks of it, "Beckett, it wasn't like that.....wait.... when....?" Definitely flustered. Man how did they ever break criminals?

Beside her she can sense Rick stifle a laugh. It is still so gloriously amusing how the two of them get all tongue-tied and flustered at her comments. She really does feel like their mother sometimes. Even whilst on a break and miles away from Homicide.

"Yeah it was." Esposito again. At least he was honest.

"I'm just glad you two are okay. Heroics aside, Gates said you did a good job on the investigation too. I'm proud of you. But please do not go running into a burning building after ESU have walked into an ambush." They can almost hear her missing admonishment of 'without me'. They all know she would not hesitate to do the same and they would all follow her.

"Gates? You spoke to the Captain?" Ryan has found his voice again. He is so the weakest link. She can hear Rick's almost inaudible snigger beside her. She hopes the pair of them never get partnered up. Now that would be a disaster waiting to happen. And the resultant theories? Espo would probably kill them before she did. But it would be a close run thing.

"Relax Boys. The Captain rang to bring me up to date on the Civil Service exams. Unfortunately they have been postponed until New Year now. Which means I have some extra down time. So do you remember our conversation at Thanksgiving?"

"We do." Esposito answers after a pause during which the pair mutter between themselves like old wives.

Rick inclines his head towards her phone and she nods granting permission, and he addresses the Boys. "So what are your plans for the weekend before Christmas? The Captain told Kate you are off shift after Saturday morning. Want to come to celebrate Christmas a little early in the Hamptons?"

Silence, and then the sound of whispers, before Ryan inevitably asks "Can we bring a plus one?"

"Of course. No question that Jenny can come Ryan. Same rules as Thanksgiving but this time all the food and drink is provided. Plus you can stay the night. Either at the house or a local hotel."

More mutters at the end of the line. The pair had not muted, so it is mostly likely a hand over the microphone of Ryan's phone, hence the muffled incoherence.

Eventually Esposito answers, "Sounds good Bro. Look forward to it."
"Yeah, will get us out of an awkward family gathering with Jenny's family," Ryan adds referencing a long-standing marital breakup in the extended O'Malley clan that would no doubt make the traditional family pre-Christmas event fractious if events at the wedding supper from last year were anything to go by. No one made any comment on the blatantly relieved tone of Ryan's observation.

"Well prepare for a festive feast beyond your wildest experience." She slaps his arm and he rapidly changes subject dropping the hyperbole. "So Espo you bringing a plus one or will they already be invited?" She slaps his arm harder this time, the sigh audible.

"Not cool Bro!" comes the protest. Rick looks perplexed until he doesn't. Kate fights the urge to sigh again and instead barks a near command over-riding any potential disagreement between her boys. "Later. We'll finalise details including guests later. We'll circulate a message to everyone and go from there. You better get back to work before Gates calls me again to complain about distracting detectives who should be working. I'll touch base in a couple of days. Bye Boys."

"She's not here but you're right. We better get back to it. Later Beckett. You too Castle, glad to hear you still are on the mend." Espo again.

"Thanks Guys," Rick responds, his voice just a little taut. He really does think of them as brothers, and the emotion catches him by surprise at times.

"Just stay out of trouble," Beckett cautions just before disconnecting the call.

They would swear the two detectives were straight back into whatever bickering Beckett's message had interrupted.

As it was late they settled for messaging the others, and sending emails too. Responses came back almost immediately from Alexis and Lanie expressing their acceptance, although Lanie's did include a question as to whether there would be any announcement. Naturally nothing from Martha, nor from Jim and/or Val. Kate made a mental note to call her Dad tomorrow as it had been several days since their last chat, and she was a little anxious to hear how he and Val were coping with the additional burden since the disclosures about Bracken.

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**Tuesday, The Hamptons**

On days when Robert is absent they organise their own training sessions. Or more precisely Beckett cajoles Castle into his exercises and adds some of hers on for good measure. Still in their training attire, they start to make plans and preparations for the Christmas weekend over their breakfast.

Naturally Rick has a whole bunch of ideas and recommendations for catering but actually pulls himself up short to allow Kate to participate and provide her own input. He loves organising events and making people happy, but he gets a real kick out of sharing any form of activity with Kate.

Kate for her part is happy to let Rick take the lead whilst secretly pleased with his consultation with her. She makes a mental note to try to reciprocate and bring him into her activities when she can. Something that her innate self-reliance often quashed. A lot was simply down to more than a decade of mostly self-reliance and she knew better now than to make too big an issue of regression to behaviours she was actively trying to change.

Her Dad had responded to her message and promised to call that night after he got in from work. Martha still has not responded.
They have not long finished eating when Kate gets a work call from Taylor Matthews. It is Clare of course. Her boss of sorts. Not that it is much of a work relationship than a means to provide her with legal authority for a concealed weapon while she was not a cop. Another Castle connection made good.

"Hello Kate."

"Hi Clare. How are you?"

"Good. Did you think we had forgotten about you?" There is a slight tease in the question.

"No I was pretty sure you hadn't. But maybe I was beginning to feel a little neglected." She can play too.

"Oh please. You're stuck in a house with Richard Castle. You should be thankful for the lack of interruption. Or maybe you've been desperate for an excuse." The woman laughs, "Sorry Kate that sounded awful."

"Well it is true some of the time. And for the rest I did begin to wonder how much of a real job this is. Only one major piece of work and a couple of insignificant assignment reviews. Not that I am ungrateful for the legal permit and the pistol too."

"I'll admit this is not a typical resource engagement for Taylor Matthews. But Rick is involved so there you go." As if that explained everything. Which it pretty much does.

"I've got three things I need to discuss with you today."

"Okay, shoot."

"Nice segue and right on target too," Clare laughs. "Firstly, your range performance was good. But you knew that already. Well within the acceptable criteria for Taylor Matthews. And we're tough markers. How are you finding the gun?"

"Pretty good. Settling in nicely. The shorter barrel does not seem to adversely impact the range. The handling is a little different to the Glock's but I did start off with a 226 out of the Academy so the SIG basics are familiar. You did warn me about the ballistic profile compared to the 9mm. Now that I have shot some more, and at longer distances, I can appreciate the subtle differences. Still can't understand how you achieved those range scores."

"Lots of practise. Nothing else."

"Not sure I believe that."

"Your choice. Just remember, range qualification is every two months, but we expect team members to be more frequent if possible. Keep receipts for any extra ammo you purchase and submit them as expenses."

"Noted, but how do I do that?"

"Oh we never did run through some of those minor admin details did we? I'll send you the pack. Via email. Sorry Beckett that was my oversight."

"Not an issue. Can I call you if I have any questions?"

"Sure. On to the second matter. The full suite of security checks including a workplace audit for
"Your father and Valerie Wilson have been completed with no significant issues found."

There is a pause. Kate can't but help think that the former soldier is holding something back. But she doesn't call her, giving her a chance and before she can change her mind, Clare continues.

"Sorry let me expand on that. There were no serious red flags raised. The law firm, well it is not a particularly secure office – most work places are not – and neither your father nor Miss Wilson have any training so their awareness and routine poses a slightly increased risk in the event of an incident there. Their homes are good. Miss Wilson's especially in a really quite secure building. So the board is green with no overt threats at this time, so overall I would say you should not need to worry."

"Thank you. I do appreciate it. But if my family history was make an appearance?"

"Then the risk would increase considerably. But at this time there is nothing to indicate a change in the threat posture from any source, including Royal." Clare's voice sounds assured especially as she references Bracken's code name. But Kate is not satisfied. Years of not knowing have not been assuaged by now having the information of who is behind it, especially as they are in a stand-off that could turn hot and lethal at any time. Especially if the rumours were true and Bracken is close to being exposed or charged.

Plus Clare's words were precise. For a reason. The threat from Bracken was unchanged. But given the former DA, turned politician, murder and who knows what else, wanted her, and anyone else connected who may also share the knowledge dead, well that was hardly reassuring. Especially now that her dad and Val knew. Somehow she was more okay with Castle and Boys knowing and sharing the risk, but their non-serving family members. Definitely not. Especially given Bracken's proven propensity for violence.

"Is there anything else you can do Clare?"

"Actually there is, and this is the last reason for my call. You have seen the news, and the rumours aboard an East Coast politician under investigation?"

"Yes. But Rick and I are trying not to go there. And you have no idea how hard that can be." Well that saved her from raising it.

Clare laughs at the obvious frustration in Kate's voice, "Oh believe me, I know. Rick Castle would have tied himself in knots if not suitably distracted. Although I think you obviously have that covered don't you Kate."

Damn is she blushing? "I'm doing my best with that," she allows as a close to a confession to her temporary supervisor.

"No doubt. But look Kate, I am trying to find out more information if I can. Although we have lots of federal work, we're actually not too active in DC itself, but the boss has ties there. And well to be frank I think there is something going on. Something I am not being told. Deliberately. It could be nothing or could be something.

"But you have no idea?"

"None at all. Nothing except gut instinct. So can you and Rick do us, me – and yourselves - a favour, and stay at the Hamptons, out of the way? For a while longer at least."

"That is our plan. My exams have been postponed. So we're here, at least until New Year. We hope Rick will be recovered enough by then and we can return to the City and to duty."
"Good. Regardless it wouldn't hurt to be prepared."

She got the subtext.

"Thanks Clare. You'll let us know if there are any developments?"

"Of course."

Clare's call had prompted an intense discussion about their plans and in particular Kate's concerns about the threats to their families.

"And I know we've talked about it. Experienced it. Lived it. Damn near died from it. But the circle is bigger than us, than the two of us Rick. There are our families. Alexis, Martha, my Dad and Val. Lanie, the Boys. And our colleagues. Your employees and friends. Even Taylor Matthews. We are all at risk because of this."

"This is my fault. I struck a deal with the devil. The tunnel vision, my rabbit hole, and I went straight down again."

"I'll have to disagree there Kate. Did you once again display your alarming propensity for independent action and ignore those that could help you? Oh yeah." He holds a hand up to halt any response he sees forming as Kate's body stiffens instinctively at his honest criticism.

He carries on neutering any protest she was forming, "But you only really extended a deal I had already made. And that deal had been Roy's once, and brokered by Smith. And then you renegotiated. That's pretty much it. So the fault is shared. And difference the last time? You weren't just doing it for yourself. You didn't keep it a secret. You came back to me, and damn you showed just how much this all meant. We put it aside - the most important thing for more than a decade of your life - to be with me. You shouldn't feel bad. You should be proud."

"But I feel guilty Castle."

"Well we all do in some way but I'll ask you why?"

"For the first time since I was nineteen I've been almost unremittingly happy. I've temporarily left behind a job I normally love, I'm shackled up with my millionaire beau, in his beach house which is beautiful even in winter. And for almost two months I've thought nothing of it. But now things - the real world - are catching up and I feel that I've been so selfish."

"Again you shouldn't be. You deserve this. But I can understand that it takes time to adjust or that outside matters need addressing. But it was never meant to be permanent. I'm almost healed and like you I want to get back. Although I'll be sorry to lose much of the privacy we have here."

Black Pawn Offices, Executive Suite.

Despite lounging in his expensive chair, the three-piece suit was still immaculate and buttoned-up, and Miles Walton looked pissed. Which was never good. The man had no ability to mask his emotion, no desire to either. This was likely going to be bad.

"Hello Gina."

"Miles," she acknowledges and just goes for it. "You don't look happy. So which one of my charges is it?"
"Richard Castle."

Oh crap. Could they catch a break? Time to cover for her ex-husband, and most valuable property, again. If not the delay to the next chapters she wonders what it could be. At least his excuse was more genuine than many of his previous ones.

"He was shot. Almost died. He has injuries preventing him writing fully."

"You're still soft on him. And I don't care. At this rate there is a growing risk that there will be a gap in next year's premiere line-up. You will fill it."

"I'll have you know I've never been soft on him, probably more so when we were actually married," she admits with some insight. "I always deliver for you Miles so what is this really about?"

"I don't know what you are talking about Gina."

"Don't BS me. Rick's rarely on time for the chapters, unless inspired, and yet the book always comes out on time."

"And that is down to you. And you're very well compensated for it, especially given your own history with the man. But you are also right that there is something else going on."

Gina glares but Miles ignores the look.

"Have you heard of the American Book Company?"

"What or who is that?"

"A bit of both actually."

"They are a new broom media organisation established by a bunch of former TV execs that are branching into publishing. They are doing it the easy way by buying up publishers especially with rights to established series, and looking at renewing them."

"Does someone actually think that's a good idea?" Gina purses her lips, "and what do they mean by renewing?"

"First question - no clue. But as sure as ABC, they're knocking at our door, and one of the targets is the Nikki Heat series. Second question, well they want to reset the story."

"What do you mean reset?" Shit this is worse than she thought.

"Shake it up. Break up Nikki and Rook, add more characters, new plot lines, do the target demographics thing."

"They must be fucking crazy. What makes them think they can succeed with this? Rick's output may have slowed but it is a carefully crafted series with the story and plots built over years with careful nurturing of the characters. The readers love it. Changing any of those elements could seriously unbalance or wreck the story, and make the dedicated fans very unhappy."

She makes no mention of the adverse impact it could take on their profits. For now.

"Apparently that's not their concern. At least for now."

"So what are their objectives Miles?"
"As of last night they have a near forty per cent stake in us. And that is enough to make them the biggest and controlling shareholder."

"What!?"

"They may be fucking crazy but their money is still good, and that is all that really matters." He considers the woman opposite him. "You should be careful Gina. No one will be safe. Especially not feisty, opinionated editors with authors who can't deliver product on time."

"He always does. Eventually," she concedes. "But Rick will walk if we intervene with the story. His contract allows him too. His audience will hate it too. Do they really have no idea?"

"Not my problem. None of it. But it is yours. Don't try and make it mine."

"So your job is already under threat? And you're just going to roll over?"

"I'm doing whatever I need to survive the change of ownership. You should give some thought to that too."

She shakes her head but whether it is in denial or simply obvious exasperation is unclear. "Is this definite?"

"The buy up? Yes. The creative content control? Maybe not so much but that may all depend on how much output and income your Rick and your other pet authors can produce, and how quickly. Get to in Gina. I have to report on Friday. It will be the Quick and Dead. And you don't want to be a candidate for your ex's muse to investigate do you?"

Biting her tongue, she doesn't say anything more as she strides from the office, her face a stormy mask that has interns and long-term colleagues almost jumping from her path, platitudes dying on their tongues. The word will go out. Stay clear.

The Hamptons, Wednesday 2.03 am.

The alarm startles them both from sleep.

"What's that?" a discombobulated Kate mumbles into Rick's shoulder. Kate's eyes focus enough to read the alarm clock.

'2.03 AM' blinked back slowly coming into focus.

"Um, not fire, ah, shit, that's the intruder alarm for the grounds."

Boom like that. Kate is gone and Beckett is out from under the covers, pulling leggings on and then out the door and down the hall towards the weapon safe.

Brain still stuttering back to life Rick stumbles from the bed grabbing a sweat-top and pushing feet into his Batman slippers as he goes, shuffling round the bed to grab Kate's Catwoman pair, knowing full well she would have left hers on the floor. He remembers his phone and rips it from the charging cable, swiping to make sure it had a signal.

They meet at the stair case. Beckett has her SIG and tactical flashlight in hand. Two spare clips bulge in the waist band of her sleep leggings.

"Sorry, I didn't grab anything for you."
"I'll get something in a second." He hands over her slippers which she kicks on before shooting him a small smile of gratitude.

"So is there some super-duper spy camera monitoring with infrared sensors?"

"Actually no."

"Oh."

"There are proximity sensors at fence line and by the entrances." He purses his lips, clearly thinking. "I think that was the fence line alert we heard, the entrance alarm is louder. The cameras relay to a monitor panel off my study. But no proper infra-red, or night vision. Just cameras. But they do have a night mode too."

"Okay. How about we go check the house quickly before the cameras. But we stick together Castle. No separating."

"Sure. So are you coming with so I can grab a weapon?" He grins at her eye-roll.

"Careful I don't shoot you Castle."

"There's my Beckett."

Activating the biometric security he opens the weapons safe and opts for the fastest option. He removes a Walther P380 and a couple of pre-loaded magazines. After a perfunctory check of the weapon he inserts the magazine and drops the spare into the pocket of his sweat top beside his phone.

"Right lets go."

Beckett leads off, pistol in right hand, torch in the other. He follows, the Walther feeling rather small in his large hands but he doesn't trust his shoulder to handle the recoil from a more powerful weapon yet plus none of the larger calibre weapons had loaded magazines ready to go.

With Beckett leading they sweep the house in a rapid and efficient manner. And find nothing.

All entrances are secure and double locked. That is doors, windows, and yes Castle confirms there is no secret tunnel or escape hatch, but great idea Beckett. One for later.

They double back and check again. Same result.

He then takes her into the study and shows her how to call up the security camera files on his computer. They review the last hour and don't see anything. It is getting late so they return to bed, pistols at the ready on their respective bed side tables.

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**Wednesday 6.17 am.**

After what was left of a disturbed night, they dress and emerge in the light of day, both carrying their weapons. Another circuit of the house and there remains no obvious sign off tampering or attempted entrance. Rick returns his P380 and clips to the safe. Kate retains her SIG clipped to her belt. Neither comments on that.

Rick makes coffee, neither feel like eating but they force down some toast before abandoning any pretence of a relaxed breakfast.
They return to his study to review the surveillance footage again.

It takes two more viewings before Rick is the first one to spot the discrepancy.

"Oh crap." Rick wishes his suspicions weren't correct. But he thinks he knows what is looking at.

"What?"

"This isn't good." He needs to call Clare now. Do they need to get out or at least get more support?

"There's something there isn't there? What is that?" Kate has closed in on his shoulder so they can share the same line of sight. Only then can she see what Rick has finally spotted.

They both see it certainly see it, the shadow that when viewed at just the right narrow field of vision resolves into something more alarming. The near-mirage is approximately man sized and over the course of many minutes slowing advancing on the house before triggering the new alarms on the windows.

"At a guess, whoever that is, is wearing some kind of custom camouflage. Maybe something that dampens heat signature and other emissions to defeat the cameras at night. I reckon even proper infra-red or thermal might struggle too even if we had them."

"There is no sign of a weapon in their hands."

"That is the only upside so far."

"Got back and review the tape from earlier." Rick taps the mouse, switches to composite mode with output from all cameras displayed, and then moves the cursor to the horizontal scroll bar and drags it back.

They set the speed to times three fast forward and scan through the video. Nineteen minutes go by, when "There he is." Castle spots their intruder earlier in the tape. Just a shadow on the edge of the vision but now that they know what they are looking for they spot it much faster.

"Or her." Beckett observes, although she thinks it is a male based on size. They track the movement as the shadowy spectre slowly approaches the house until the alarm sounds. At this point the figure not quite so slowly retreats until they are out of shot of the cameras.

"Wait!" Kate grips his good shoulder. "Back up!"

"What?"

"Look. There in the far corner, furthest away from the first intruder. Is that a second person?"

"Shit! I don't know, could be," Rick admits.

"If so was the second person backup or another party?"

"Definitely not good. They knew how to avoid the sensors on the outer permitter. I reckon they must have got caught out by the extra sensors that were added later on the windows. They weren't done by the original security firm. They are wireless and slaved onto additional receivers."

"So the first security company never knew about them?" She voices the same conclusion he just reached, "Someone got your security layout Rick. Or at least an older version of your plans."

"Shit! Too late now. I'll extract the key segments of the video, and some stills and you can send
them to Taylor Matthews."

She squeezes his hand. "What concerns you?"

"You mean other than we have had at least one intruder on the grounds? The fact that they calmly retreated with the alarm sounding."

"That implies a professional."

"Yeah and that makes me nervous. So we should call Clare and let her know."

Kate sends an email with some of the key images and a link to the cloud storage Rick has placed a copy of the video highlights. And then she calls Clare who picks up on the second ring despite the early hour.

A rapid fire exchange lasts only a minute and then Kate is repeating back the other side of the conversation to her partner.

"They will check with local sheriff to see if any recent spate of thefts. But she doubts that is a valid line of enquiry."

"She has looked at the images we provided. She says it seems to be a slightly inferior version of what US military currently use. She is not surprised we missed it first time or that we did eventually see it. This sort of gear is intended for snipers and spotters in static positions. Not mobile scouts. Even so the equipment is not cheap.

Also she confirms that there was a second person present but we have no idea whether they with the first intruder."

Rick nods, fully digesting the meaning. It more than implies that whoever their night time visitor was, it was not a chance visit. Not that he ever believed it. Hoped, yes. Believed, no. And a second visitor. Well that didn't bode well.

"She recommends and I agree that we should take extra precautions and keep weapons to hand. But she doesn't want us to leave the Hamptons just yet."

"Okay. But if it was Bracken surely he would have sent a team straight in?"

"We don't know who it is. Even if it was him, his hired guns might be more professionally orientated and want to run a recon first."

"True enough. We have taken down a few of his men when he has tried."

"Don't get cocky about it Rick. We've been lucky as well. I almost died. We've had some close calls."

"I need to get security increased for Alexis and mother. And your dad and Val."

"They will all hate that."

"Tough. Just like you they don't get a say in it. Not for this."

"Agreed. Clare promised she would step up checks and see about bringing some more resources into New York."
Just to top the day off, Gina had called. Kate knew it was Gina as the ringtone was the Imperial March from Star Wars.

Just like he did with her call yesterday, it is her turn to give him privacy while he takes his work call. Kate can't help the jealousy that coils inside. The missed opportunity of that summer still rankles even if they have resolved to move past it, and Gina is nothing more than a work colleague. No different to Deeming or even Will Sorenson.

She had not hesitated giving Rick space to take the call on his own. She trusted him dammit. Plus she now trusted Gina. The publisher had been nothing but supportive during Rick's hospital stay, and they had reached an understanding.

Still she does get to stew for a while longer than she would like before Rick returned to give her the news from Gina. His face gives it away.

"How bad is it?"

"Looks like Black Pawn is getting new commercial partners with an aggressive agenda for increasing sales." He recites it like a sales pitch.

"How do they plan to do that? And what does it have to do with one of their most popular authors? Surely you don't need to sell more?"

He smiles at her statement but keeps his ego in check. "I've been lucky but many of their other authors are struggling. Sales are declining so to try and counter that they will be looking at renewing certain series." He uses the air quotes around the word renewing. The thing with the hanging hands is something he hates.

"According to Gina, there is minimal risk if I can have some regular output, and get something in front of her soon."

"And if you don't write?" She doesn't, won't say 'can't'.

"Well they will be able to exercise an option to take control of Nikki Heat from me.

"Doesn't your contract protect you from that?"

"Mostly, but there is some legal leeway in it. My own fault really. I haven't always been the most consistent and diligent so Black Pawn added some clauses. Standard stuff really. Penalties like repayment of advance with percentage based on deficient against deadline. But there is one clause. If I don't produce a Nikki Heat novel annually, full draft by May, then the series rights can be reassigned."

"God Rick why did you ever agree to that?"

"Never thought it would even be a chance. You inspired me so much. Even after than summer, I could draw everything from memory. Heat Rises almost wrote itself despite everything else, maybe partly because of it. And the money on offer for a three book extension was stupidly good, especially the advance. So I took it, warts 'n all. Even though Steve recommended against it."

"Okay. So what are we going to do?"

"I'll try writing. But I will warn you it may not be pretty. I'm the master of procrastination more than the macabre. But in a way this could be good, I've been making excuses for a while. Need to face it."
"Then I'll help in any way I can."

"Then I'll need some space. Just a couple of hours. Let me see how I go."

"Okay. But if you need anything partner….." She lets the offer hang.

"I'll know where to find you Kate."

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**Rick's Study**

She caves before him. There is only so long she could distract herself before checking on him.

"Fuck! I knew it!" There's some incoherent mumbling she can't pick out, followed by "Gor Dammit."

Sounds like he hates being right for once. Not that he actually is the egotistical poser she once thought he was long ago.

"Shit! I don't know why I ever thought this would work." The sound of something heavy slamming on his desk means it is time to intervene.

She slips into the office.

He doesn't notice her initially.

He's half-sat, perched more accurately, on the edge of his leather office chair. Facing his dual screens. One usually has his notes and the other the master document.

She approaches "Hey. What's this Rick?" questioning his attire and unfamiliar software on screen.

He starts. Just a little.

Turns.

The mottle quickly fading from his face even as he speaks, "Hi. Sorry. Frustration got to me."

Her raised eyebrow is question enough.

"Ryan sent this to me a few weeks ago. Voice dictation software. Supposed to be the best available according to one of Jenny's colleagues."

"But it is so damn picky. Keeps falling over on words it should know," he grousers.

"I have a rhythm. The way I write. The conversations are in my head but I never say them, not when writing it done. It just isn't right."

"I got a chapter and a few more paragraphs of the next done okay. But it is so slow to my typing." "I tried typing but my shoulder hurt after a bit. And then I just got more peeved off."

Secretly she's pleased. A whole chapter! That is the most since his shooting.

"Hmm, well why don't I reward you for progress made and also distract you to take your mind off your frustrations?" She leans in. "What da ya think Rick?" She rolls the 'r' and the click of the 'k' is almost simultaneous with the removal of her own top.
He's deer-in-headlights frozen for seconds. Which is just long enough for her to remove the rest of her clothes.

"Feeling exposed here Babe, someone is way overdressed." More instruction than observation.

"On it," and he is leaping to his feet to pull his sweatshirt and t-shirt over his head in one go.

He never makes it to his track pants and underwear as a certain detective beats him to the punch. She crouches to pull them all the way off as he lifts his feet in cooperation.

She is half-inclined to keep her head level with a certain prominent feature but goes with her first instinct. Rising she pushes his midriff and he somewhat gracelessly flops back on the floor, the pile of the carpet cushioning his fall. She notes that his despite his issues typing, his recovery has progressed to the point where he can support himself equally with both shoulders, no longer favouring the uninjured left side.

"What about my socks?" He manages to get out as she plants her knees either side of his legs and settle into him, her mouth covering his.

"Not planning to suck your toes" somehow escapes around their tongues causing him to let loose an involuntary laugh. She turns her head to aim for an earlobe (he loves her sucking and licking them, her tongue so dangerously hot, arousing and wet) and her nose encounters something alien. Her eyes focus and recognises the wireless headset with microphone.

"Get that off please." More instruction.

"Certainly. But for the record both of us will be getting off."

Using her closest part of her anatomy she bites him at the end of his earlobe even as he uses his left hand to snatch the band from his head and flings the headphones behind him, forgotten for now.

"It's been a while since I've seen this view." They are both on their backs, cushioned by the deep pile of the carpet looking up at the generally featureless ceiling of his office as their breathing returns to something approaching normal.

"If you are going to surprise me like that I may get the ceiling decorated. Give us something to appreciate post coital…"

She hmmmphs beside him. "Not one of your best ideas. Kind of making obvious that we need the view. And nice as the carpet is…there are much better surfaces to use." She swears he hears him mutter sotto voce something about ruining his idea with logic but she lets it slide.

Rising to one elbow to regard him the question pops out before her brain fully appreciates the potential. "Dare I ask about the previous occasion when you may have taken in this view?" Only belatedly does her brain signal a warning. Too late.

"Alexis." She relaxes as Rick's one name answer puts her fears at ease and he continues unaware of her momentary internal turmoil.

"Probably started when she was about five or six. We'd just lie back and hang out. Talk about nothing or everything. Usually outside by pool or on the beach so we could take in the sky, the clouds, the stars." He sounds so wistful as he reminisces. "But some days it would be indoors, especially in the rain. And I remember one particular time in here. There were summer storms outside and I had been writing, and Mother was minding her but must have nodded off, and Alexis
came to visit. Well you know me, any distraction, and Alexis is the best sort. So we got some snacks, a couple of pillows and hung out on the floor, lying on the carpet and just looking up at the ceiling, talking about life and things. Everything and nothing."

She kisses him. "You're a good dad Rick. A really good father."

"Surprised me too. How natural it was. I thought it would be my one chance so I didn't want to screw it up. Didn't want my daughter to bear the consequences of my failure."

"One chance? Now why this question did just blurt out of her mouth?"

Blue eyes darken. "Who would want kids with me? Couldn't even keep the mother of my first born.....so who would want kids with me? The sort of women I saw" he laughs bitterly at the euphemism, "was seen with, they didn't want kids. Most didn't know or even care about the one I did have a home. Didn't care much for me except Page Six, my wallet and maybe my dick."

*Oh Castle!* He sounds so bitter. She can't tell if he blames the bimbos or himself. "I do." She not just blurt it out. She means it. A clear statement of intent. She just needs to ensure he knows it. So she repeats herself, "I do want you. Just as you are."

She snatches his hand and pulls it to her mouth, caressing his skin with her lips before she speaks, "You're an amazing dad. And man. My partner. Never doubt yourself. Don't you ever..." She's not going to mention his flings and especially not his previous wives, especially the first. She'll be the last one and that's what matters. Her words sometimes fail them but she can show him.

She pushes him back down and he loses sight of the ceiling lost in her fierce demeanour and wave of brunette locks as her face closes with his.

"You mean it?" He sounds excited, and confused.

"I." She pauses for intent. "Do."

It is self-evident that the multi-layered meaning behind her commitment was understood as he surges into her, closing the remaining micro chasm to plunder her mouth.

She already knows he reciprocates, and she is pretty sure Rick was saying "God, me too. I do too" just as her tongue interrupted his speech and synapses.

Wow. Twice in the afternoon. Good recovery time Rick. Not bad for a man past forty. It helps that his recuperation program included improved fitness and a better diet. And she is so very grateful that they have been able to do this on their own with no one else to observe and interrupt their daily lives and their increasingly close bond. They had been closer than many married couples before they were even together but now. No wonder so many observers assumed they were a couple.

She rises slowly, tentatively trusting her legs to function. Her partner-in-all-things is still out. He needs his rest, and he earned it she concedes. She still blushes sometimes at the ridiculous ease at which they turn each other on. And satisfy each other.

She steps into her underwear and then her leggings. As she pulls her sweat top back over her head, she notices his headphones with microphone discarded on the floor where Castle had thrown them. The flashing blue light indicating they are still connected. Shit are they still active? One glance at his desk shows his laptop is still on too. It normally goes to sleep if left unattended. Obviously something is running to keep it awake.
A couple of steps, and she is swiping the mouse. The screen comes alive, and she sees the software he was complaining about still open and running in the foreground. Taking a moment to familiarise herself with the app, she hits the end recording button and then presses the button for the audio to written transcript. Within seconds Word opens.

Speed reading past his last frustrated efforts at story composition she quickly locates the point when she interrupted him. Oh my! She's never sharing this document with anyone except Rick. That is if she doesn't delete it without telling him.

There is a certain amount of gobbledigook but that aside it is all there in the document. Every moment vivid on screen. The voice dictation software had kept running throughout their afternoon's entertainment. All of it.

Oh, their two rounds of love making. Plus her declaration of being willing to have his children. And marry him. And his reply.

And it doesn't scare her. Not one bit.

She's not deleting this. Ever.

Management office, Easee Tricks LLC, Manhattan.

Well fuck he was going to have work on his security posture. The pistol pointed between his eyes was merely further evidence of how this day was seriously messed up. First some prick in blue had actually given his Escalade a ticket for three minutes double parking whilst he was getting coffee, and then his favourite girl had made herself unavailable – something he would fix up later – and now this.

Still he was not going to show any sign of giving a fuck and with that Vulcan Simmons strode into his swanky office suite, nodding in greeting as if it was normal day to his petrified secretary Clarice, and barely glanced at his useless, disarmed, and thoroughly cowed security team corralled under the watchful eyes of the three obviously ex-military types with evil looking compact submachine guns with suppressors, while one more of their colleagues had the silenced pistol aimed at his head.

The door to his private office door was open, and someone behind in his desk, in his chair, facing away from him. Somehow that pissed him off more than the gun. Or his useless team.

"What the fuck do you want?" he spits at the man now rising from his chair, gun to his head ignored for the moment, and turning to face him.

"Hello to you too Vulcan," James Court offers in an offhand manner as if this was some casual encounter. The silencer taps him behind the left ear as if to remind him of the threat behind him.

He won't be cowed, "Don't give me that shit Court. What do you…. no scrub that. Not you! Him! What does he want?" He will not mention Bracken's name. To do so would ensure the death of every one of his employees in this room, and possibly him too. He has probably already tempted fate in using the emissary's name. It suddenly occurs to him that maybe Court was not the man's real name. Likely, probably wasn't.

The man – Court or whoever he was - opposite him, smiles - if you consider the resemblance to a shark about to attack a positive emotion – and waves his right hand towards his own desk and chair.
"Have a seat."

"Fuck you. I'll stand on my own."

No longer hiding a scowl, Bracken's lackey gives him a hard look.

"Die on them if you're not careful." James Court cautions as he moves round the desk, eyes down for a second.

"Fuck you!"

The older man is blindingly quick and he doesn't even get a chance to move in defence before the steel toe-cap shoe takes him right between his legs. He goes down, tears already leaking from his eyes. Dammit that hurts. No one had dared do that to him since he was a very small kid.

"You definitely have a death wish, Punk," the taller man grins down at him.

"Nggghh"

"Well you know this was actually a social visit. Well of a sort. Until your help tried to deny me entrance. You're lucky that my men are professionals and didn't actually feel the need to properly dispose of any of your rank amateurs as an object lesson. One they deserve."

"Wwwha…What do you want?" he manages as he gets back as far as his knees, uncertain as to whether the pain between his legs or the man's mocking smile hurts more.

"I tell you what Vulcan? I'll take that question as sign that maybe I can have a logical conversation with you. Our mutual friend is not so sure. He thought that well you must have temporarily or perhaps permanently taken leave of your senses. Killing that cop. For absolutely no good reason." Court shrugs as if asking the question will elicit insight.

Still on his knees, he grits out, "It wasn't planned. She went for her piece," he attempts to justify.

Court bends, his no longer impassive face nearing, spittle striking the semi prone man below him, "Don't bother trying to rationalise it. You fucked up the moment you arranged the meet in a dark alley. Oh how fucking clichéd. Even if the alley was not under surveillance do you know how many fucking cameras there are out there?"

Court raises a hand perhaps to strike but pulls the blow and rises back to full height to continue his derision. "You had no business doing that. She wasn't yours to handle anyway your stupid Fucker. She was no threat. It was being dealt with."

Despite being on his knees he is fighting every instinct to lash out. He almost fails, "Says you.." but he manages to bite the rest of it down. This isn't the time or place. He vows not to make the same mistake. Won't let his guard down again.

"Sensible boy, do be quiet for once." Court lets the couple of words slide. For now.

From the vantage point of the floor it is nowhere as magnanimous. Oh the fucking patronising prick. He's dead. Not today. But sometime. He promises himself.

"So, so obvious." The man laughs almost to himself. "I'm surprised at the self-discipline but the survival instinct is well honed isn't. You didn't last all these years without that. Even with his support."
Simmons is almost off his knees, eyes locked on the older man's features, wary but compliant for now.

"So here's your orders. And I do mean orders." He waits for the slight nod of acknowledgment before continuing, "Distribute the current stock and ensure that you make the payments as scheduled. Then shutdown the pipeline. All the way back, not just this end. And purge everything."

At the lack of surprise or protest Court smiles. "You can even skim your usual extra cream off the top. Just like always. We don't care."

He can't keep the surprise of his face then. They knew?

Court chuckles, shakes his head in wry amusement. "Anyway Vulcan it was nice talking to you. Perhaps we can catch up again. Somewhere less prone to interruption perhaps," he promises with a certain degree of gleeful menace. "Of course, with the pipeline permanently out of business what possible reason would there be for a meeting?" he finishes with a note of finality as he reaches the door into the reception area.

A pair of Court's men move towards the outside door, the remaining two-some stay focused on Simmons' crew still prone in the corner of the outer office.

"On second thoughts, he's an object lesson for you," and Court steps over to the closest guard and snags the man's MP5K, balances the weapon against the nose heavy suppressor, flips the safety to three-round burst and turning and seemingly without aiming fires twice. Despite the suppressor, the sound of the weapon firing inside the walls rends the air almost as effectively as the flesh of two of his the prone men who jerk but barely make a sound as they die pretty much instantly. The remaining men are seemingly too terrified or cowed to protest or otherwise, although at least one may have soiled himself.

"Do clean that up won't you. After all you wouldn't want any incriminating blood and brains all over your business premises. Who knows who may find it? And explanations might be a tad difficult."

The guard without his gun bends to collect the six spent 9mm rounds ejected from the breech of the deadly compact SMG. He pockets the evidence before pulling a Glock 21 from under his sports jacket while Court retains the man's gun for the moment.

"Damn you Court. There was no need!" He protests as much to assure himself as well as this men that he is not completely beaten.

"That's where you are wrong. There is always a need and this is one of the occasions I agree with our mutual friend. Never over estimate your value to us. Everyone has a limit. And you are nearing yours. But you're smart enough to know that. Your time is almost up."

"This isn't over your motherf…" the still warm business end of the suppressor rams against his forehead, and he instinctively stops so forcefully his teeth draw blood from his tongue. He barely notices.

The remorseless eyes fix back on him, "Absolutely not, but it will be soon. And I do so look forward to the day, really soon, when we resolve all this finally. I may even do it myself. You know make it personal. Something special maybe. From back in the day, from other places." His expectant smile is absolutely terrifying.

The barrel pulls back and Court passes the compact submachine gun back to the contractor, and
leaves the office without so much as a further word or glance back at the human ruins.

Shit he has some cleaning up to do, and then he needs to get smart if he is to survive this.

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**Bel-Air, Los Angeles**

There was a time she would have been sufficiently *distracted* or otherwise incapable to have not noticed the security alarm flash in alert mode. But this time, she was up and looking into the yard when she spotted the two figures moving along the fence line towards the back of the house. She pressed the panic button on the nearest console. That lit up the house and surrounding grounds like some James Bond set. And the two shadowy figures ran for it.

Local police responded to the attempted break in promptly. The security alarm had triggered a response from the nearest precinct. Two cars. The pairs of officers swept the grounds and fence-line before going through the house. They watched the camera footage taken of the intruders and downloaded a copy to a USB key while cautioning that the distance and the suspects hoods would likely prevent identification.

Before the last patrol car had pulled out of sight, the phone rang. It was the security people. Taylor Matthews she remembers. They were confirming someone would be out the next day to check.

She didn't sleep much at all.

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The man from Taylor Matthews was fit and handsome in a manner. There was a time, not long ago, she would have flirted just for fun, or maybe with intent for a one-off. But now. But now she didn't know what she wanted.

He was professional, almost perfunctorily so as he ran through the security checks and procedures.

It took maybe twenty minutes to walk the property and during that time Meredith had relaxed. Without realising it she slipped into her default persona. It was only when she caught a slight catch in his voice that she even realised what she was doing. But worse, Oh God, far worse, was the way the man looked at her. Undisguised condescension etched briefly on his features before his professional cool resumed even if his delivery remained neutral throughout.

After the man had left, she sat down on the perfectly manicured lawn in tears until she had cried herself out.

Staggering to her feet she headed indoors for some water. What she needed was… What she needed was to be honest with herself.

She had been texting Alexis for the last two weeks. No response except for one terse and seeming final 'not forgiven Mom' response. Only the presence of 'mom' in the reply had been enough to save her from giving in to temptation and relapsing into some or all of her previous coping mechanisms. She had managed to keep that promise to herself since returning from New York. Perhaps she could do more.

So her next text she kept simple. 'Sorry. Can we communicate when you are ready? You choice'. And kept her expectations low. Meanwhile she needed to get some help.

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**New York.**
Conflicted about her mother's renewed attempts to establish contact, Alexis sought her Grams out. She needed a blunt opinion. Something she knew would not be forthcoming from her father.

Martha was either acting or was genuinely shocked by the question. "Well why me Darling? You know how I feel about her."

"Exactly why Grams. Dad would be too forgiving. Kate too diplomatic. She's really good at that."

"But I wouldn't be?" Martha hams it up just a little before conceding. "I suppose you are right Dear. But it is a dreadful position to be in. What do you want to do?"

"Forgive her a bit. She's not a bad person all the time. Just not very considerate at certain times. I mean she really messed up last time. But she was so desperate, and even though Dad won't explain everything I know it wasn't all down to her. I mean if it was really, really bad he would still be mad. I don't think I would want it unresolved over Christmas."

"True. Plus it is Katherine's first Christmas with us."

"And I want it to be all about us Grams. All of us. Plus how bad is it that I complain and exile my mom when Kate can never see hers again."

"You know Katherine would never hold that against you Alexis. But you are right."

"I'm not sure what the plans are beyond the weekend before that they have planned."

"I'm sure your father intends to go all out."

"I do too Grams. It's just that everything is changing. And I'm not sure how I feel about it sometimes."

"That is perfectly fine Alexis. You don't need to have the answers all the time. Heaven knows neither your father nor I do."

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**Washington DC, somewhere near the Mall.**

Everything about the bar epitomises this town. Buttoned up, expensive, monotone, ordered, but venal underneath the surface. Just like the man facing him.

"Sorry William but there are no further avenues open to us."

The man does not look particularly sorry. "I pay you a lot of money. You do NOT get to tell ME there are no more options."

The man opposite has represented the Senator in a legal capacity for some time, and after a lifetime in the profession, he is not easily cowed. "I would happily refund you the money Senator. If that is your prime concern."

"You know it is not." Small change does not even begin to cover how utterly insignificant the money was. His freedom on the other hand. Much more valuable.

"Honestly, the fact we managed to hold off the Department of Justice this long is nothing short of a miracle."

He did not bother to hide his disdain. "Seriously Albert, you thought that was all you?" He delights in the look of shock followed by understanding that dawns on the older man's features. "That was
primarily some of my contacts. Perhaps I should be asking for a refund. Or a commission."

"William." The use of his first name, as if that changes anything.

"Albert," his voice is lower, barely carrying but he might as well have screamed in the man face judging by the sudden shock and dawning horror, "just to be clear here. I pay you. You provide services that I require. Failure to render those services is not an option you wish to be responsible for."

Now that gets the man's attention. Satisfied that he has his full attention, he retrieves the folder from his attaché case.

"Now I do have something more for you. I need you to action the instructions contained on the second page of these documents. The first page is reporting and payment details. Pages three and on contain the supporting information. Do not miss a deadline and do not fail with any step."

Albert chooses only to nod. This sort of task is not un-familiar and the Senator is always careful to keep the matters to those that can be handled legally even if somewhat morally or ethically suspect. Hell this is Washington, most things fell into one or all of those baskets.

Lawyers. Unbelievable. Perhaps he should have Albert taken care of. Just on principle. Hell just for kicks. He could do that. Now that would kick up a storm.

Leaving the increasingly ineffectual and now really just for-show legal representation behind and moves towards the tall besuited man by the door leading to a private room. He makes no acknowledgement as the man opens the door for him, admits and then remains outside as he closes the door.

There are two leather couches and a small table inlaid with what looks like genuine ivory – from another time.

He places his attaché case on the table. From there he extracts the palm-sized device, anonymous grey plastic devoid of markings, and just like Court had demonstrated, activates it. He waits for the four LED lights to go solidly green and only then does he remove the burner phone and turn it on. It take some minutes to boot, an older model with less technology to make it vulnerable to eves-dropping. After entering the lock code, he presses redial button, and selects the number at the top of the list. After the agreed five rings the call is answered.

"Court" The man identifies himself, no doubt satisfied that the security precautions were working. He himself is similarly satisfied. One of the key reasons their sometimes fractious relationship has persisted over the years is the former military and CIA officer's field craft and expertise in counter surveillance. He keeps their secrets secret.

"Ah James. How is New York?"

"Not particularly hospitable William."

"Ah well that appears to be going around."

"Nothing really changes in the swamp. I take it your legal representation has concluded that they can do no more."

"Pretty much. But what do they know? However, they have been a useful deception for our other activities."
This spikes the former CIA's suspicions, "I'll be back tonight. Please try not to do anything precipitous before my return, Sir."

"I have no idea what you mean James."

"I wish you wouldn't do that William. I've been cleaning up a couple of your little reactions over the last week. There is not enough resources available to handle any more issues right now. A little patience will go a long way."

For once the Senator chooses not address the polite chiding from his subordinate, "Well the mess with Simmons is not of my doing. Is he still alive?"

"For the moment Senator. But there were a few object lessons among his staff."

"Good. Only delaying the inevitable but a little anticipation will be good for him."

"So long as we don't overplay our hand. He can be quite dangerous."

"Yes well I'm sure you have it taken care of. Just a shame that our original concept to frame Kate Beckett for his death can't be worked in there somehow."

"To be fair that idea was all yours William. I did not favor it because it is overly complicated and a tad too convenient, and therefore likely to be suspicious. In reality something will go wrong and probably end up with Beckett or her team turning the tables on those sent to take her down. She is extremely resilient, not to mention lucky."

"Fair enough, you made your objections known. It does not mean that I do not want her dealt with."

"Even though we are certain she is no part of this." The unseen wave of the hand in the direction of the Capitol confirms he is referring to the ongoing Department of Justice investigation, and the other man picks up on the subtle insinuation even without the visual clue.

"You know that I am no longer concerned about that, or whether the charming Detective has her claws in. That Bitch scarred me and I want her." His hand touches the cheek where Kate Beckett pistol whipped him. Plastic surgery had repaired – mostly – the visible, but the lasting stigma burned. Just like the other transgressions against him. Slights he had repaid with interest over the years. He could be infinitely patient when it suited him. That patience is wearing thin now. He is no fool. He is running out of time and he acknowledges that.

"Well as you know all good things come to those who wait." Of course Court will still try and counsel caution. He has a lifetime of practise at when to wait and when to strike. Now is not the time for the latter although it may be too late to influence some of his conspirator's games.

"Don't be presumptuous James. You know where she is regardless."

"Hardly a secret but yes. She is with the writer at his house in the Hamptons." Before the Senator can jump in he continues, "There is some extra security and I have had a reconnaissance sweep performed but of now there is no active team on them. Just occasional observation from local assets."

"And?" The Senator's voice drips impatience.

"It depends on how you want it done. Even with no visible security I would guess that any strike team will encounter resistance. Although she is on leave from the NYPD there is rumours she has some sort of Federal authority and so is likely armed. And him too no doubt."
"What?" Bracken is forward in his seat. "This is important. Federal? She could be using that to investigate." They had discussed the risk of Detective Beckett moving to a role with more sweeping investigative powers and more opportunity to hunt her mother's killers. Both had agreed that would be a very bad idea and steps would have to be taken if that transpired.

"William please." Court instinctively raises a hand in caution, seeking calmness from a man who cannot observe his efforts. "We do not believe that she is doing so. I have my suspicions that the writer arranged it to get her a carry permit to allow a concealed weapon whilst on leave of absence from the NYPD."

"The hack?" spits from the Senator. "How could he?"

"I think there is a quite a bit more substance to Richard Castle than Page Six shows. For a start he owns a formidable arsenal of weapons according to NYPD and New York state records. And according to his gun club records, knows how to shoot. He is friends with the mayor. Then there is his possible links to the CIA gained during his writing the Storm books. He does like to do hands-on research. He has had some involvement in his time with the NYPD on some cases that the FBI and Homeland Security have run. One in particular with Homeland I can't even touch it is redacted and firewalled off. So I think we should be far more cautious with our plans. Finally, the private security firm he uses is definitely not your run-of-the-mill one, especially for a celebrity. Taylor Matthews is …"

"Taylor Matthews? Shit why wasn't I told this earlier. They've taken business from Orantis and appear to have an inside track with Federal agencies."

"Nothing is too certain. But as I was about to add, Taylor Matthews are a premier private security firm with deep Federal ties and a long reach. Plus from what I can ascertain Richard Castle apparently has a long friendship with the founders. Which would explain how he is able to access their services. The man is well connected and not above to using them when it suits him."

"We were planning on killing him too?" For once Bracken doesn't mince words.

"It wasn't a priority," Court admits but he doesn't care either way. Strictly impersonal business for him, regardless of the Senator's more visceral connections.

"Make it one. And we need to look into the Taylor Matthews angle."

"Okay." Court reaches into his attaché case and removes a tablet. He unlocks the device and makes a couple of quick swipes to activate the necessary applications, and then places the tablet on its stand on the table in front of him.

"Senator, can you activate your tablet please." He phrases the request almost like a question.

"One moment." It takes the Senator just under a minutes before he has his tablet unlocked and facing him on its stand, the secure collaboration application running. From New York on his own nearly identical device, Court brings up a mixed collection of images of Detective Katherine Beckett on his screen and remotely sharing them with the Senator over an encrypted VPN between the paired devices.

There are more than two dozen images. Some shots contain the author. Most appear to be taken by a surveillance team from a safe, undetectable distance using a telephoto lens. They show the subjects in various locations around New York. Several appear to have been taken inside a police precinct, and more at the café or deli.
Back in DC the Senator purses his lips, a small frown as he regards the author. "I have wondered about him. And her. What's the attraction? For her? She doesn't seem the type. And he is not her type at all, based on her previous boyfriends. And she is not his type at least based on his history. Admittedly he appears to be less of a show pony now by most accounts. But he is almost a decade older. Plus a late teens daughter, and a washed up actress for a mother who is still living at his home. Hardly a catch unless you count the money. And Kate Beckett seems fully immune to that. No doubt in part because of her mother's little trust fund and life insurance." All reported without the irony that he was responsible for Kate Beckett's receipt of said trust fund and life insurance.

"Well she is very attractive. Stunning even." Court pushes more pictures across the link from his tablet to the Senator. On screen are a new set of images of the detective, including some taken very recently in the Hamptons. Kate Beckett in tight fitting gym gear, and some in evening wear - a striking red dress at a restaurant. Others out in the town or at a store shopping, her long legs encased in tight jeans, the writer in close attendance.

"Hmmm…very nice. Not my taste but really quite striking. Shame really. Too good for a cop. But we can deal with her. And don't forget to add the writer too."

He says nothing as he looks at the last photos. These are shots of the family and friends. The mother, a former soap actress he discards, but the daughter, all red-haired innocence? Well she had potential. That is how he could hurt the author. Something he can give to one of this team, not James to action. The man would refuse.

His subordinate interrupts those thoughts, "So what do you want me to do now William?"

"Get back to DC, James. I have a feeling I am going to need your expertise personally."

"I'll be back first thing tomorrow. But I will leave several teams in place here."

"Very well. Report in when you can. In the meantime I understand congratulations of your own are in order."

For once Court is lost for any words. So the Senator continues on seamlessly. "How is the new Mrs Court? Well, not Court. Whatever cover name you are using. No need to tell me."

"William…" Court finally manages to speak. It is not often he is caught out. Clearly the Senator has other resources – good ones, or at least competent – in play. He may have to follow up on that. Carefully.

"Relax James. Simply because I have no intention of fleeing, it doesn't mean I intend to force you to remain here and keep me company. You have a long and distinguished – well maybe not quite that last one – track record for getting out before the bitter end. You are to be commended for your foresight and planning."

"William." Court fixes the man with his most intense voice, once which even the senior figure in their protracted partnership, wilts slightly under. "Let me be clear about this, my offer still stands. If you so desired I would give you the same ability to escape and live out your life in comfort. God knows there is more than enough money to do that." Hell they could probably buy a small nation, something like a Pacific island, several even, and that would be after all the fees.

"James, you know I have no intention of doing that. I am not going to give them the satisfaction of becoming a fugitive. My mind is made up."

"Fair enough William but at least hold you peace for now. Please. The time is not quite right."
"Oh no one understands that better than I. I was already decided on this so it is not an issue for discussion. My patience is wearing thin but regardless it is they not me who will be the trigger."

"I think I understand William. But I think the Feds are just about ready to move on you. I think the issuing of an arrest warrant is imminent. But with the Department of Justice locked down I'm getting no useful information out of there."

"Imminently? I have a lot to do before then." The Senator does not sound perturbed.

"I'll be frank William. I'm still at a loss as to what you hope to achieve with whatever you have planned."

The vicious smirk that would not disgrace a comic book villain is actually less disturbing that what follows just before the Senator disconnects their session.

"Oh James, it is really quite simple. I'm going to ensure than no one forgets my name."

Chapter End Notes

2 down. 5 to go.

Thank you to all those you have reviewed or sent messages. I hope you are enjoying the story. Thank you again for sticking with me.
Feints and Festivities

Chapter Summary

Previously: - While Rick and Kate prepare for Christmas with their family and friends, elsewhere events are beginning to come to head. How long can our two-some hide out in the Hamptons?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Washington DC, Monday

Sticking together since being roomies in their freshmen year at college, Chelsea had temp-ed with her friend Gennifer at the same law firm after graduation. Of course it helped that Daddy's firm had put in a good word for the two of them. Then Gennie had moved on, looking to use her degree in Political Science, and she got a job on the Hill. In a senator's office no less. Of course Chelsea had moved on too. She joined her father's firm as a junior clerk. When an apartment near where they both worked opened up, it was fate. They had moved back into together and continued to share all the triumphs and trials of young people finding their way in life.

Naturally it didn't hurt that Chelsea's parents were rich, so much of the expense of living in the capital was negated. It was the same money that had Chelsea's parents whisking her off to their Virginia country club for the weekend. She had invited Gennie to come, but not untypically her flatmate was unwilling. Having just quit her job in that senator's office, she was looking for work, and didn't want to sponge, even though Chelsea's parents would not even blink at picking up the bill for the weekend.

Chelsea had enjoyed the two days and nights with her parents, but had missed her best friend. She had begged her to come, but Gennie's pride was strong, she wanted to make her own way, and be a friend not a 'pet' as Gennie called it. She respected her for that.

She was back with enough of Sunday left to do something with her bestie, and she almost skipped to the door, putting her hand on the handle even as she reached for her key. That was strange. The door to their apartment was unlocked. More than strange, concerning. They were both security conscious, especially after the break-in during their second year at college. They never left it unlocked, even when home inside the residential tower with 24-hour doormen.

Opening the door she steps forward with her small pull-along luggage behind her. Wow, the air was warm. Almost too hot. Did Gennie have the AC on high? They had agreed to keep the heating down and not load their power bill even with her parents helping out. Still pulling her bag, she calls out, "Gennie. You here?"

Oh. What was that smell? Ugg. Dropping the handle and leaving her bag by the door she went to investigate. Something was off. Did Gennie leave some food out?

She turned the corner into the kitchen.

Her scream bought two neighbours – the braver ones - running into the apartment, and a number
MPDC Investigative Services Bureau Detective Charley Munro wished she was anywhere else. A week ago the Caribbean had been on offer, some last minute thing a friend had found. She had the leave banked up and the Captain on her tail to take some. She could have gone with her girlfriends, been there sipping cocktails and eyeing up men. Nope instead here she was in DC. In winter. With a dead body, correction a very smelly and grossly dead body along with a shell-shocked witness.

More than shell-shocked. The poor girl was traumatized, her own vomit still staining the carpet and expensive shoes that would both likely need to be ditched. Not that it would matter too much based on the obvious wealth on display. Which was unfair of her as the poor girl appeared nothing but remorseful and shocked by her friend's death. Years in the front-line had a tendency to harden and make a cynic of most detectives.

The young woman's horror was unsurprising. Her flatmate had been butchered, and left for discovery. Only years of experience and a horrible habit of skipping breakfast had ensured she had probably not offered her own stomach contents up. She was certain at least one of the attending uniforms had been less fortunate.

She had no doubt that the girl, Chelsea Bellmont, was completely innocent. Well of this crime at the very least. There would be a cursory check of her alibi but the fact she left her country club breakfast all over the floor beside her dead friend, and her own shoes was a good sign. As was her near catatonic state that would no doubt back up her instincts and the initial alibi information.

The medical examiner and crime scene unit were finished. The body was bagged up and ready to go. The apartment would take a lot longer to fix up. The smell alone would be a major task, plus the blood stains. Pushing those thoughts aside she acknowledged the sign as Greg Duggan – her partner of five years – nodded his head off to the side. Leaving Chelsea with one of the attending uniforms and a paramedic, she strolled over to join Duggan in the victim's bedroom.

With just the two of them in the relative privacy of the crime scene, her partner leads off, "There were signs that a number of the injuries were post mortem. Maybe even most of them."

Who does that?

Duggan looked worse than her. But then new babies screwed with their already disrupted sleep patterns. He had no excuse as this was number three. Knew what he was getting himself into.

"Although as messy as shit Charley, I would put money down on the carotid artery as the first and only necessary blow." Well that might be scant relief to the victim's family and friends. Quick and relatively painless death. Still doesn't explain the gore. Or why in the first place.

She picks up from her partner. "So neighbours heard nothing. Not surprising as the vocal cords would have been severed with the blade strike to the neck. The splatter pattern indicated that the assailant was most likely behind the victim and had struck without warning. No defensive wounds. Her facial expression remarkably composed. She had no knowledge of her immediate death. That might be a little more grace for those who would mourn the girl."

But the rest of it was disturbing in of itself. If she was to take a punt then clearly the killer was sending a message.

"Yeah but what I don't get is the rest. The heating on high? The body left in the open? The injuries, especially all the ones that are likely post-mortem. The blood, the unlocked door, the complete lack of any evidence? The killer wanted the body to be found. This was clearly a statement of some
sort. Just wish we knew what it was. It was also the clear sign of a professional hit with elements of something more."

"Yeah but for who?"

"And from whom?"

With that they both moved back into the main area of the room and resumed the last of their tasks so they could get out of this abattoir and inhale something not reeking of death. Even if it was bitterly cold.

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**Washington DC, Federal Bureau of Investigation.**

"Hey Kendricks, you want something? 'Cause if you do loitering over there is not the way to get my attention." McCord didn't even look up, identifying and greeting the man with her focus still on the printed evidence logs in front of her. She has meticulously worked her way down the list ticking off every item with maybe ten per cent to go, but her pen pauses. Beside her Sorenson had barely breathed since he had unwisely asked if she wanted coffee when he arrived about forty per cent ago. Uncaffinated McCord is deeply sarcastic and sharp tongued. Reminded him of someone else but he leaves that thought alone.

A six-year veteran of the AG's team, Leyland Kendricks was a former Illinois State Trooper with a law degree and a laconic sense of humor. Sorenson liked him. Kendricks could always be relied upon to fill in those awkward silences effortlessly and with easy humor. But not this morning.

Unlike his partner beside him, Sorenson decides to cut the man a break and looks up and catches the serious face. "What's up Ley?" using his generic nickname.

"Sorry to interrupt McCord, Sorenson." Sorenson gets a nod of greeting even as the man continues to address McCord, the senior partner. "Got a call from Metro. They have a homicide."

"Hmm. Not uncommon. But why us?" McCord finally looks up, putting the pen down, her curiosity piqued enough to look away from the evidence logs that had so fascinated her. Kendricks wouldn't bother them unless it was something.

"Homicide. Young woman, killed with a blade. Quite the mess. Roomie came back from weekend to find her dead, butchered really. But despite the mess Homicide think it might be a professional job. Victim was currently unemployed, but before her quite recent change of status, her last job was working in the campaign office of Senator William H Bracken."

McCord tenses slightly but her voice gives nothing away. "Okay. Consider us all very interested. Sorenson you can run point on this one. Take Kendricks." The look she fixes the veteran team member with is plain enough. Let the 'rookie' run with it, and guide where necessary. Not that he should need it.

Sorenson would normally try to determine why his partner is personally passing up on the case. But in this case, he knows the reason. The review of the evidence needs a final evaluation and sign-off. The sheer volume of records had caused many days, even weeks of delays. Deadlines had been extended and were now very much final. The date loomed closer and Villante only trusts McCord for a case of this magnitude. And then last week McCord had vanished somewhere she wasn't telling about for three days, delaying things and yet Villante said and did nothing. He could fixate on that but she wants him at least to work the body. Trusts his instincts and she's giving him a chance to show what he's capable of. And if he had learned anything in the short time with the task
force, it is that if she's not sharing other stuff, it can wait to another day.

He rises, unlocks his drawer and removes his Glock 22 from the top drawer and inserts it into the belt holster at his waist, and then repeats the task for the spare magazines, clipping the holder onto his belt the opposite his sidearm. He grabs a fresh notepad from the second drawer, and pulls his coat from the stand, slipping the notepad into one of the outer pockets.

"Right McCord." His partner waves him off, dismissing him with a hand but still smiling as their newest recruit fails miserably to keep his excitement under complete control.

Sorenson is already striding for the lift, "Kendricks, what do we have on the victim?

"Gennifer Dunrack" or 'Gennie' with an 'ie' to her friends. Twenty-five. Graduated from Virginia Tech three years ago with a degree in Political Science. After a brief stint in a law firm, she worked for William Bracken's office and campaign since settling in DC post-graduation. Role seems to have been a step above an intern. It was paid but the investigators will follow that up for more detail. What we do know is that she was let go or quit, not sure which yet, about five weeks ago." His lack of further expansion indicates the extent of their early knowledge about the victim.

"Body was found by her flat mate, Chelsea Bellmont. Best friend, college roommate and same degree course as victim. She's working for daddy's law and consultancy firm, some mid-sized group mixing politics, lobbying, and finance." The look of distaste on the senior agent's face is amusing. Despite half a decade in DC, the former State Trooper doesn't really like the town or the inhabitants that much. Sorenson knows he lives a fair way out and commutes in every day.

"She's alibied out. Not least because Mommy and Daddy took her to their country club for the weekend, starting Friday at six and dropped her back at the lobby of the building just four minutes before the screams started at nine-oh-seven. MPDC have her on video and security system logs entering the building at three minutes past nine this morning."

"Just long enough to collect the post, make it up to her floor, enter, and find the body," Sorenson supplies.

"Door was unlocked which was unusual. Heating was on high. By all accounts it was bloody and bloated. The flat mate tossed her country club breakfast. All over her shoes apparently." Kendricks lets his prejudice show, and Sorenson's frown puts him back on topic.

"No estimate on time of death but based on everything else probably on Friday night. Nothing taken, no sign of sexual assault. Despite the mess the locals think this looks like the work of a professional. So it could be possible that someone was sending a message."

"Yeah but for whom?"

"No idea. MPDC's Investigative Services Bureau are running the case. They are finished at the crime scene and it was only when the preliminary report was logged that it caught our attention." No-one mentions their big brother apparatus with a system that automatically scans thousands of interconnected networks and can alert them on a wide range of parameters.

"They won't necessarily like us sticking our noses in, but if we don't take it off them completely, and run it parallel, it generally works out better."

"I know how it works Kendricks, I was FBI for long enough." He pauses. "Look sorry, I didn't mean to be prissy, but it's not my first murder, even if it has been a little while."

"Nah, 'm sorry too. Just that when you started they said you were working Homeland and State
liaison for a few years. Kinda assumed desk jockey."

"Yeah, and you would be right in that it mostly was paperwork and meetings but I was an active field agent for a number of years. Did my time. Including kidnap, and organised crime before getting behind a desk." He doesn't mention his injuries in the line, no one does unless they are material to the investigation. It is just the way it is.

"Sorry." He even sounds it.

"No problem. Must be a little weird here. When we all start, you go from being a senior back to the rookie. Even if only for a short time, not sure everyone would take it. Especially with all the experience."

"That's true enough Sorenson. Burn out rate is bad enough but a good number never get that chance. Simply don't gel and usually get sent back. Of course that depends on how many bridges they burnt getting here."

"McCord gave me the 'full'n'frank' heads up when recruiting me. I think I know what I'm getting myself into. At least I think so most days. Anyway, you driving?"

"In this town? Only if I have to."

"Alright I'll drive. Personally I think DC is alright. You should try New York or Paris. Now that's crazy and that's even with them driving on the right side of the road. London was different but at least they're polite. Now Ireland, that was….well I'll tell you when we're on the road."

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**Silva Residence, Brooklyn, Wednesday morning.**

Doctor Nirmal Jain had gotten used to the old man. Even come to like and in some ways respect the man he knew as his patient, even if he was a 'gangster' who rumours told could order terrible retribution without compunction. He had never witnessed it and was grateful for the small, or perhaps on reconsideration not so small, mercy.

But this still confused him. How his long term patient's initial calm acceptance of the fatal prognosis of stage four colon cancer has seemed to have morphed into near excited anticipation of his increasingly imminent demise. The man showed no signs of dementia. Indeed he was focused, lucid and really quite determined despite the pain.

The daughter is far less happy about the imminent loss but she too is resigned if less welcoming of her father's state. But she has never been less than a dutiful daughter over the years he has known the family, even now.

"And I will continue to stay lucid?" Another question.

"Si."

The old man smiles. At first it was because how utterly unexpected to have an Indian speaking Italian. Even a few basic words. But now, the smile is acknowledgement of the bond they share after twenty-two years as patient and doctor.

He hadn't realised at first. That his patient was a mobster. Of course he was new to the city, very new to the country too. Still it had been embarrassing to feel so naïve when he found out. But then the man himself was confusing. Never denied anything, not that the doctor asked, but also probably because he was untypical of what the doctor expected of a gangster. Never once in the
two decades has anyone ever asked him to do anything even the tiny bit unethical or illegal. His bill, itemized, is always settled on time by a family cheque, which always clears first time.

The FBI, the police, other alphabet-soup-agencies had all come around at times over the years, the most recent just earlier this year. But he had nothing to share, to say. After all he was just this man's doctor. In the end even the most persistent of law enforcement had accepted that. Grudgingly, sometimes with a hint of association and menace, but after his childhood experiences in a different continent they had nothing to scare him. He was familiar with such men from his homeland of course but after immigrating to America from India in his earlier twenties he was no longer afraid of men who would abuse their power.

Leaving by the main door, he nodded in respectful greeting to the group of men just approaching the entrance. He recognised one of the men. The one in front was The Lawyer. Another long-time servant of the family. One who probably had more secrets, but like himself no reason, nor ability to share. He did not recognise the other three trailing along behind the Lawyer. He did not like their demeanour, especially the older gentleman with the look of steel and more than a hint of menace about him. He made a mental note to ensure he stayed clear of that individual should they meet again. Subconsciously he hurried his footsteps a just a tad to carry himself away from any possible conflict.

Across the road from the Silva residence, Officer Raul Costa blinked to clear his tired eyes. This was his third rotation out of uniform with Organised Crime. He was determined to make it stick this time. He wasn't sure he would get too many more chances. So he had volunteered for every available opportunity, and as Organised Crime had the place under surveillance for near two weeks already he got to spend his duty time in the back of one of the NYPD's fine surveillance vehicles.

This was one was disguised as a member of the City's Sanitation Department fleet, and smelt like it but that could just be the stale takeaway wrappers and dead coffee cups.

Alongside him Sergeant Jervis Mitchell grunted, muttering to himself. He was used to the long serving officer's personal habits so made no comment. This was nothing to do except keep watching the Silva's place. ADA DiNozo was pushing hard on this, and their captain had somewhat reluctantly agreed to the operation, only being more accommodating once the overtime was approved. He made a note never to make Captain. The politics and the finances were not his thing. Regardless the money green-lighted this op and smoothed all the necessary feathers, ruffled or not. However as far as they could tell there was nothing (new) to learn. Was this yet another waste of money?

But he had been a street cop nine years, and he had good instincts, and his gut told him that maybe, just maybe, today something was about to change.

The family doctor – a regular – was just leaving. And now the family lawyer and some new players, three others were arriving. He recognized two – some of the family's small but effective muscle. Who was the new person? Whoever he was, the older guy looked seriously pissed off. Wonder what all that was about? Who was he? The suit didn't have the look of family business. The cloth and cut looked business, well maybe not business, politics maybe. Money. And that alone was interesting. The Silva's kept a low profile, and operated as far as they could off everybody's' radar – law enforcement, media and perhaps more importantly the other, much bigger, crime families and syndicates. Staying out of drugs certainly helped. The federal agencies usually were not interested without drugs as that perpetual war came with budget funding. A veritable trough to feast upon.

Mitchell had already logged it, but Costa added his own observations it into the log. Then snapped
off a couple of extra shots with the telezoom, suddenly glad of those weekends spent helping his cousin's photography business. He was the best shot on the team….with a camera at least.

Maybe it was something. Maybe nothing, but after weeks of nothing, it was the best result they had received so far.

Meanwhile he made a mental note to get some gym time in. Even some running. Sitting in a van for endless shifts eating crap and tanking extra sweet coffee was starting to be noticeable. And it wasn't even Christmas yet. He could rely on his mama to overfeed the entire family as per tradition. Best not to pre-load before the inevitable.

"I don't like coming here." James Court is every bit intimidating despite the two mob enforcers in close attendance. He pays them no regard, he attention focused on the semi-decrepit old man propped up on the recliner. "I only came because you asked so nicely." Which is true. It had been a respectful request even if it brooked no refusal. So he had made the incognito trip from a small airfield in Virginia to a small airfield in New Jersey and do his best ensure that neither the Senator or the multitude of federal agencies were aware of his jaunt. It was getting harder to maintain the secrecy especially as this was his second trip to New York inside a week.

"Yes, well I am no longer able to leave. So it is what it is," the old man states with a whisper closer to a confiding that confronting. So typical of the man who had plenty of authority but preferred courtesy and logic over outright intimidation. Not that he was not capable of such barbarism if necessary in years gone by.

"So why am I here? What is so important that it could not be done remotely? Securely."

"I am dying."

"Well that was hardly a revelation. Everyone dies. Even you Claudio." Court won't change for anyone, not Bracken, not even this now frail old man who has had a hold on him for almost two decades. "And to be frank you've been dying for a while."

"Oh James," he chides, "for someone so avowedly determined to avoid just that you should not sound so fatalistic. Regardless, I have made my peace but I have one remaining thing to do. And it you know who it involves." The man locks his gaze on James Court, and despite the frailty in the body, the eyes still carry every iota of authority from his prime. The same mana that had enticed and then entrapped a former CIA paramilitary team leader, severely down-on-his-luck and in a bit of spot of trouble after his unexpected exit from government employment.

"I know that you reluctantly bound yourself to me, and then to him. And that it was not your choice to do either. But bind yourself you did, and for a while it worked but then he took control, and in doing so you turned your back on us. Became his. When you were ours first."

"I never took direct action against your family's interests."

The old man laughs, more of a cackle that deteriorates into a hacking cough. It takes almost half a minute before he recovers but no one moves to assist him so this must be routine. "No you did not, but there were times when we would have appreciated more assistance from a man of your skills."

Court remains silent, wondering where this is going. So far this is hardly a reason to have him risk so much by visiting personally. To insist on it.

"But you have from time-to-time rendered aid when it did not go against him. That was appreciated. But then choosing to ally with that Neanderthal Simmons was a major blow against
"I make no excuses for it. Vulcan Simmons was, is, a necessity. Your choices dictated that. If your family had been willing to handle the merchandise then he would not have needed to seek an alternative distribution agent."

"Never. We do not touch the filthy poison!" The old man almost rises fully from the bed, arms animated in a sudden surge of emotion. He falls back as if struck down but speaks again almost immediately, gathering his strength from somewhere.

"Enough. I did not ask you here to rehash old disagreements. Because of your friendship and service, I am giving you an opportunity to escape the fate of your master. I have no doubt you have your own escape plans already, but you need to know that the time of reckoning approaches for him and there will be no escape from divine justice for him. Just as surely as mine own does."

"Si padron." Court decides it is time to be, or at least play, the obedient vassal.

The old man beckons Court forward and one of the lackeys places a dining chair close to the dying man's recliner.

As soon as Court sits, the old man begins, his voice low. Ill as he is, the outline what he plans to do, lacks nothing to the experienced former CIA planner, and unless something very untoward occurs, is very likely to be totally effective. He can definitely collaborate with the old man's scheme.

It takes only minutes, and in spite of the apparent earlier rift between them James Court kneels before reverently kissing the hand of the man who had first sought to entrap him and simultaneously offered him a way forward after he left the Agency. This fate had been unanticipated by all. A man who had now released him from the bond that linked them. But why did he not feel free?

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**Beesley, Drummond and Wax, Manhattan. Wednesday 5.51 pm.**

The regular mid-week senior staff meeting was almost over. The last before Christmas. And on a par for recent times, pretty much nothing had been resolved. Another seeming interminable waste two hours lost to near chaos of point and counter-point. What had begun as a change of strategic direction now ensured that everyone was mired in a stalemate driven by the confusion and conflict over the direction of the firm. Those present all recognized it but somehow never managed to rise above it. Of course every partner and pretty much every other person in the room knew their fates were directly or indirectly tied to whatever conclusion was eventually reached.

Fortunately little pockets of resistance, offering some scant sanity could been found. Today it had come even later in the meeting with just twenty minutes remaining. The department heads or their deputies took their turn to summarise activities and income for their fiefdoms. Despite the loss of at five major clients, they still had enough for a base income stream.

Concluding his brief and fact focused update on the performance of the commercial contracts team, Jim Beckett sat down and smiled, mainly for himself and the woman at the end of the conference table. But if anyone else was watching they would not have missed it. Well if he was honest it also had the satisfying sensation associated with seeing Jeff Beasley scowl at his contentment. So he smiled wider. Up at the partners' end of the conference table, Val smiled back too, mirroring him. She was not alone several others also joined in the smiles, abet with a fraction of the radiance. Their relationship was not a secret anymore, and many in the firm were actually
pleased for both of them. Obviously some were not, but they could go fish for all he cared.

Of course the man at the head of the conference table is definitely not one of their positive supporters. But for now Jim is barely paying attention as Jeff Beasley interrupts the standard agenda and once more tries to advance the case for the firm's move into politics and consultancy.

At what cost wonders Jim. Their established clients and income base were already severely diminished and further threatened. What made the man do this? He had never been like this before. Sure he was always keen to follow the money like his 'old man' but this was something else.

Much as he opposes the plans he won't question Jeff, or be confrontational. He'd never been one to rock the boat much anyway. That had always been Johanna's function. Then he been completely lost for so long, and only in recent year's ever-so tentatively stepping back into the business world in any deep capacity. That he now found himself being braver than before was a bit of surprise to him and others. He could thank one person for that. It was no surprise was that Val was largely responsible for that change in him. For making him not only happy but also content to take a risk.

However, despite all the positives about his relationship with Val, the uncertain threat related to Johanna's case and Katie's determined and decidedly dangerous pursuit of justice, was enough to temper any euphoria. The recent security check on these offices by Taylor Matthews had been described as routine and a precaution but the scars on his daughter along with his wife's headstone bore testament to how much more was at stake than the petulant posturing and pouting on display in this room.

The Hamptons, Wednesday night.

She was reading a novel when the S-O-S came in from Lanie. Before carefully putting the book aside, she placed bookmark precisely, the bottom of the leather indicating the last sentence read, a habit her mother had taught her.

She knew what the general issue would be before Lanie called. Same reason the dance between her best –female - friend and one of her 'brothers' would likely not go the distance. Esposito had too much testosterone for his own good sometimes. Ironically he normally managed to keep in controlled on duty, but off duty. Well that was a different thing. And with Lanie? Fireworks. And not the mutually good kind. Or at least not enough of the time.

Likewise Lanie had a bit too much fierce independence and sass for her own good. And well she didn't temper it. At work or elsewhere. She was confronting and while Kate could appreciate that in her friend, romantic partners might be less inclined to accept.

Put her and Javier together and wow they were explosive. Together the two could be combustible beyond safe levels despite their innate and instinctive attraction.

Fortunately she only has Lanie's word for how good the sex was. She really did not need Espo's input on that subject. Ever. But outside of the booty calls that was where the problems arose. How to fill in the other times if the relationship was anything more than carnal or casual. She knew both Lanie and Espo wanted more. To be like their friends, but she despaired that the two of them would ever last.

Despite her long-since dispelled fears, she and Rick never seemed to have that problem. Rick could talk at Olympic level but didn't most of the time. Moreover, they were equally and increasingly comfortable with the quiet moments. All the shared time before had built them to this. Lanie and Espo didn't have that despite their frequent professional contact.
That had taken a while but Lanie is pacified for the moment, so she goes in search of Rick.

Finding him surfing the web 'cack-handed' (as he called his use of his left hand) in his office. She knows he can use his right now but he has retained the new habit. Such a contrary thing is a little bit Rick she decides.

She interrupts him in the usual manner, and with his attention now on her, fills him in on the basics without breaking the girlfriend code. She finishes and she kisses him again.

Between kisses he reports that he has finished final edits on another chapter. He's back in the saddle, even if not fully healed, and making such good progress, her heart almost bursts with pride for him. He may act the fool but it complements his genuine intelligence, compassion and dedication to things he believes in. Like her.

"How is she?" She knows in inquiry and concern is genuine. Josh rarely, if never, asked about a friend or if he did, never actually listened once he felt his obligatory concern had been expressed. She's still disappointed in herself for letting important things like that slide, along with their half-hearted relationship. For settling, when there was more waiting for her. This man. Far more.

"Okay. For now. They managed to piss each other off. Again. They're cooling down. Separately."

"What was it this time?"

"They were out dancing," one of Lanie's favourite activities, "and some random guy bought Lanie a drink. Espo tipped it away without giving her a chance to do or say anything. Went from there."

"Oh."

"It's all right Rick. You can comment. I'm trying to stay neutral too."

"Really?" He can't quite temper the disbelief. She and Lanie had each other's backs against pretty much all comers. Himself included he imagined.

"Yes really." She suppresses the almost obligatory eye-roll, "I think at this stage it is obvious that it is very probably not going to work long term for them. But they need to make that decision."

From Rick's perspective Kate's comment implied that it was likely she had already shared that conclusion with Lanie, hence the neutral stance. Even so it was with a slight degree of trepidation that he spoke.

"I can emphasize a little with Espo. It is difficult being with someone and another party intrudes or steps across a boundary." His head drops, and then raises, blue irises on her. "Maybe a lot more than a little" he confesses, "especially if the parties are struggling with emotions and other issues."

"I know you did. Yet you were never less than respectful of the boundaries of my relationships. Sure you might have pushed up to the edge a couple of times but never anything else. I'll admit that at times I was confused about what you wanted, about what I wanted too."

"God I wanted to," he husks, an edge of desperation and want persists despite their current state, "push. Be the one to push. But I'll admit to being equally confused, you still do that to me sometimes, but I never stopped wanting to be more with you."

"You know I think there were definitely times I wanted you to." He gapes, wordless, and she ploughs on. "Yeah, and for his part Josh certainly didn't feel secure. But that's on me and his
issues, not you. And we're here now. And tomorrow."

"And Always Kate."

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**Washington DC, Capitol Building, Wednesday 9.08 pm.**

James Court ignored the pathetically concealed surveillance team and headed straight for the Senator's offices. Despite the profoundly serious situation he had a lighter step than for quite some time. The old man's release and the information that had accompanied it had given him much to ponder on the journey back to DC. He tried not smirk too obviously at the thought of once again evading all monitoring of his movements in his commuting. Not to mention getting an edge on the Senator.

He maintains a coldly dispassionate face as transits the corridors. It has two effects – one it reveals nothing about his state of mind, and two, it keeps anyone who might have been inclined to approach him, far away.

Entering the outer office he was surprised to find Matthew Weston was there. The young aide's brother was dying and the Matthew had been spending as much time as possible at the hospice with Peter. Even Bracken's usual iron disposition had softened but perhaps that was much due to the optics of denying a staffer requests to attend to a dying family member, especially if they were the orphaned sons of a former staff member. The man was a politician to the core. Of course the public were not aware that Bracken had Matthew Weston Senior and his wife killed when they became suspicious of his campaign finances, and had discussed going to the authorities.

"Good evening Mister Court," Matthew greeted him.

He nods, but then decides he can play the game too, "How is your brother Matthew?"

"No better. Peter is very unwell most of the time. Thank you for your concern Mister Court. I just dropped in because the Senator requested some changes to the text for the draft bill on border security. But the Senator is not in his office right now. He was meeting someone and said he would be about an hour. That was forty minutes ago."

He masks the astonishment. He knew the Senator could be deluded but this is madness. The man he knows is not so wilfully stubborn. Why bother with something that would have no value?

"That is fine. I will wait in his office if that is okay?"

The aide nods, and Court opens the door and heads into the office and closes the door behind himself. He does not bother with the main lights, content to wait in the twilight illumination from the already lit dual lamps on the Senator's desk.

Turning his thoughts back to the aide's statement we ponders the situation. Was Matthew lying? There was nothing in the younger man's voice or demeanour to indicate that but despite his youth the young man already had extensive experience with dealing with liars and deceivers.

He makes a snap decision. Silencing the young man had always been in scope. The aide could tie him too closely to some of the events that would likely become the subject of the eventual trials. He had no attention of allowing that. Perhaps it was time for Matthew to follow the fate of the rest of his family.

His original plan had been to have Matthew killed just prior to his escape so as to not attract additional attention but now he may not have the luxury of time. He hastily considers his options.
As he has a private moment before the Senator returns he extracts another new burner phone and messages a number long memorized.

Department of Justice. Thursday morning.

Whoever had killed Gennifer Dunrack had been a total professional. Not a single piece of useful forensics. Nothing from the apartment. Nothing from the cameras in the building or surrounding streets.

The meeting with the veteran detectives from MPDC had gained them nothing new. Neither did they expect it to be honest.

They had checked the employer, and the family, friends. The girl had been working for Senator Bracken's campaign team as a gopher. She had been assigned most recently to donor reconciliation but this largely consisted of telephone and email follow-ups. Her performance was good and there were no complaints before she was let go when the worked dried up. Two other interns were also terminated at the same time, and all had worked on the same projects. Both of the others were still alive. When interviewed, aside from their joint horror and shock at their former co-worker's murder, neither could provide a reason why she might have been killed.

Still the team had the smart money on Gennifer Dunrack inadvertently stumbling across something upon something she should not have. They just had no idea what.

They had driven hard at that line of inquiry. Interviews with the supervisor and Bracken's campaign manager had obtained nothing except rote shock and sympathy. The reason for her termination was simply lack of workload rather than a productivity or personality issue according to both. Access to her computer and the activity logs revealed nothing.

Aside from a cynical

Emmanuel's Emporium, New York. Thursday 9.03pm.

The event doubles as a Christmas and farewell party for the team from RCE. Of course their boss is absent this year but that was not going stop the team from Richard Castle Enterprises maintaining their Christmas tradition.

Despite the seasonal bookings the venue was not especially busy tonight. The restaurant was near Broadway but set back a couple of blocks. Far enough that you had to know about it or it was a fortuitous discovery. Despite the approaching proximity to Christmas, the main dining room is perhaps almost half full tonight. However all three of the function rooms were booked despite the hesitant economy.

In the smallest function room the team from RCE were enjoying a good meal and some even better libations. They have earnt them this year. The fact that this was most likely the last time the whole team would be here, the mood was a little more subdued and the atmosphere a tad toned down from previous years. It could have been recent events or merely the fact that their boss and usual host with the excess bonhomie was absent this year. His credit card was still picking up the tab but his near death had shaken them more than any would admit. At least there would be an absence of his serial pranks and bad jokes.

The food had been very good, the accompanying alcohol equally good too. Most of the party are feeling far less pain than they will in the morning.
Another RCE tradition was also intact this year. Beatrice crashing the party. A regular feature of the RCE Christmas party is that Harry's sister always turns up uninvited and crashes the party. Sometimes alone but more often in company, sometimes lots of company. Three years ago it had be the better part of chapter of bikers with some interesting results, and certain incident that will never to be shared outside of the group. This year, Beatrice is more restrained, and restricts herself to crashing the party with her recently acquired 'plus one'.

They had come from another function, and Josh Davidson was more than a little tipsy. But pleasantly so. This is day one of three days he has off work so there is plenty of time to recover from any alcohol consumption or lack of sleep. Beatrice had made it clear both were on the agenda, and he intends to match her commitment to having a good time.

The introductions had been made, and handshakes exchanged. First names only. Harry (he already knew - the brother and single), Steve (older lawyer) plus his wife Sylvie, Peter (accountant, big gruff guy, clearly most likely single) and Suzanne (another lawyer, husband was at home with the kids, looks a tough cookie), and Paula (obvious power dresser, although her attire tonight is power-party, with a strong New Jersey accent, she seems familiar too).

New drinks have arrived, and a few minutes of quiet, Josh attempts an opening, "So what is it you all do?"

"Did." The big guy, Peter, spoke up correcting him.

He frowns at the correction, and repeats the question. "So what is it you did?"

"Investment portfolio and business management." The big guy answers again with a faint edge of hostility. There are some sniggers from the assembled group, clearly a certain amount of alcohol already consumed at work here too.

"Unfortunately a major long term investment didn't pay off. So there have been some layoffs." This time the answer comes from Suzanne, the second lawyer.

"Oh sorry to hear that. Anything I might have heard of?" He tries for another opening to keep the conversation going and hopefully in a less hostile direction.

He fails.

Harry adopts a deer in headlights face, and Beatrice tries to rescue her brother and the rest of the group who have fallen uncomfortably silent. "Josh you want another drink? Water perhaps."

"Nah. Is good. I'm good. Thank you Beatrice." See he remembered her full name. Not allowed to use any abbreviation. He's not that drunk, or even too merry. He can remember the important things.

He's peering at raven haired woman again. What's her name? Paula. She's familiar. Very familiar. Then it comes to him. She was at the Richard Castle press conference. The one who introduced her - Kate Beckett - his ex-girlfriend, publicly declared her obvious love for the annoying author. And Harry worked for the author too. Her brother had told him as much the last time they met at Harry's Café. Do they all work for Richard Castle? Or used to? What was that all about?

Alongside Josh, Beatrice is already beginning to regret bring him along when she feels him start, the little jolt significant. Despite their relatively short time together, she instinctively knows what this means. He's tied the dots together despite the alcohol. Bringing him tonight was probably a mistake. Mind you she didn't realize Paula would be here to provide the visual prompt.
"Who are you all?" Josh demands.

Silence.

"I mean really who do you work for? Or did work for?"

Harry goes for as the truth, too tired to bother much with deflection especially Josh is already aware that he works for Richard Castle. "The company is called RCE, Josh. As Peter said we do 'investment portfolio and business management. I think you know who our principal and owner is."

He has more than enough familiarity with the initials adorning the books that taunted him from the bookshelf and crushingly from the bedside table in Kate's apartment. "You all work for him?" Even as he makes the demand he feels Beatrice's hand grip his thigh, unnaturally hard. He only winces a little. There is silence in the face of his question.

"Oh God! Youse really are sad. The lotta ya." Paula makes no effort to disguise her full Jersey accent. "Yes we all work, or will have worked, for Richard Castle. You got an issue with that you can take a hike. This party is on his tab, everything here is paid for by him, including that beer in your hand."

Wow she really is a little scary. Plus no one is smiling now. Josh can feel Beatrice tense by his side, and not just because she was squeezing his hand extremely hard.

"Um no. Not really. I apologise. Sorry I guess I've had a little too much to drink." He really is sorry. He thought he was past all this. He really liked Beatrice a lot.

"Sorry Guys. Josh and I will leave." Beatrice goes to stand but this time it is Josh who has hold of a limb locking her in place.

"No Beatrice. This is my fault. I apologise for being rude. She is right though. If you want, I'll go and leave you to the rest of your evening. I apologise for my actions if they have offended anyone."

"Nah it is all good." Paula insists backing down a little. Plus if we chucked out anyone who ever caused a ruckus, Rick would never finish one of his own parties. "There is a certain amount of laughter at that.

He still looks uncertain. "Oh relax Josh. I don't bite. Well I do but Beatrice scares me too so I'll behave." More laughter as Paula raises her glass the scowling auditor, who after a second or two's consideration pokes her tongue out.

"With good reason and don't you forget it Paula," Beatrice adds before finally relaxing her grip on her boyfriend.

The Loft

Alexis found it strange to be back home. Especially with her Dad away. His presence was missing everywhere she turned. He really was her home, or such a big part of it, so integral that even this most familiar place in the world felt empty without him. Also missing was the usual Christmas extravaganza of lights, decorations, train set, mistletoe and non-stop festive themed music and movies.

Staying at the dorms was an option but not a good one. Pretty much everyone had headed home for
the Christmas break. As a native New Yorker it was not exactly taxing to move back into home for a few weeks. Plus Grams was there, some of the time at least, but she could be excused as it was party season.

For her part she was able to keep herself busy with her new college friends either in person or online so that made the time pass quickly. In addition, she had reached out to many of her high school friends and some had agreed to meet up in the New Year if they survived Christmas.

She had finished her present shopping today. Even survived a joint shopping trip with Grams. So they were pretty much ready to head to the Hamptons on Saturday morning.

Between the two of them they had also been busy putting together a small – by Castle family standards – decoration kit to take to the Hamptons. On their last call to her Dad and Kate, she and Grams had told them that they will bring decorations from the Loft. Dad and Kate had confirmed that there would be a tree.

In turn they had jointly promised Kate that it would be a limited and tasteful range of decorations. But Kate had called them on that, telling them to bring what they wanted and needed to.

Her father's partner did want to know who was the more festive of the two senior Castles. No direct answer was forthcoming but Alexis pretty much confirmed her suspicious when as she promised to save Kate from the full Castle Christmas experience until next year at least.

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The Hamptons

Remembering their promise to Alexis and Martha, Rick and Kate had finally got out of the house earlier in the day and been to a local supplier to choose a Christmas tree.

They had not been out of the house much and it turns out that Rick doesn't know a guy in the Hamptons like he does back in the city, so they're like regular Joe's hunting for a tree.

Despite this the whole process is easy. She manages somehow to persuade Rick to stick something under seven foot and entirely manageable for the two of them on the roof of the Jeep. In the end the choice is easy when she almost pushes him into one of the firs while dodging one of his snowballs.

After hauling it home, they clean it up before bringing it inside. They set it up in the corner of the main lounge. Silver kitchen foil wraps the bucket, and simple strings of LEDs do most of the decoration. The rest of the Christmas decoration will have to wait for Alexis and Martha.

With the tree done they had looked for something entertaining and somehow Rick had coaxed Kate into trying one of his gaming consoles. They had even started off trying co-operative mode but computer games are not her thing. Still she perseveres for almost half-an-hour then she leaves him to it and goes in search on a book.

Another ninety minutes or so elapse and she checks on him. He now has a head set attached and she can hear him trash-talking his opponents. Shaking her head she leaves him with his online game and equally virtual buddies, Kate makes a decision to call Lanie who answers on the third ring.

She doesn't think too much about the reasons why but she's a little pissed at him. She's knows it is more than a tad irrational. It was unfair, after all he was so attentive to her. For years, even when she kept him at bay, even behind the bodies of other men. She doesn't even know why she is
thinking this, let alone discussing it with her best friend.

It only takes a few minutes and she is confessing it all.

"So what if all we have is the snark?"

"Oh and the great sex. Sorry best ever, world's greatest even, with your Mister Big."

"Oh, shut up Lanie!"

"Oh Girl, so what has got your panties all twisted?"

"Nothing. No well, not nothing, but not something. Not really."

The huff of exasperation sounds over the line.

"He's finally feeling a lot better, and making good progress with his hands. In fact so much so that he's using his hands to play an online game on his X-Box. He's been at it for two hours, and showing no signs of finishing."

"I'm not seeing the problem Honey."

"I don't know. I thought he'd want to play with me." The guffaw she receives is totally deserved. Somehow Lanie's self-discipline holds so that is all the comment she gets. More than enough of course.

"Maybe I'm over reacting," she admits.

"Living together is not all sexy-times, even if you two certainly come closer than anyone I know. You do know that, don't you Kate."

"I know that." She concedes.

"Do you? Really? Because I know you, Girl."

She wants to protest, but nothing comes out. Plus who can stop Lanie in full flight.

"You settled before. More than that, what did you call it? Oh, yeah. 'One foot out the door.' But you can't with him. He will call you on it. He is not perfect but is he is perfect for you. Plus everyone needs a little me time. The both of you."

Oh, that really was selfish of her. At any other time, she would probably be happy to have his attention elsewhere for a while.

She laughs. A little self-deprecating, a lot mortified at her own foolishness.

"Thanks for the pep-talk Lanie. I needed it for some reason."

"You are more than welcome. You have been a good friend and supporter with my own issues. So you get your head straight and go fix this. But do it now, not your usual procrastination and second guessing yourself."

"I will. Thanks Lanes. See you soon."

"Bye Girl. Go get him."
She is so bitterly disappointed in herself. Rick deserves more. She deserves more. She is capable of more. Just as she had conditioned herself.

She had never got anywhere near enough. At least she had been quite open with Will in six months, even if it finally broke down because they did not discuss things. But Josh was a year of her life, and really had little they knew of each other. That was not just her, Josh had his own issues but she could at least acknowledge that she had issues and bore a degree of responsibility.

But she is a little pissed at Rick, so he can come find her.

He looks at his watch. Damn! Shit! Almost four hours! No wonder his fingers were cramping. And he concedes his right shoulder is tired.

He didn't mean to. But it had been so long since he had an opportunity to play games. He'll admit he got carried away. Lost track of time until his right side reminded him.

Hitting the master off on the universal remote, he rises to go in search of his missing partner, apology at the ready.

He finds her in their bedroom, sitting on the chaise lounge that faced the ocean facing out towards the waves lost in the winter darkness.

"Kate?"

Her head moves a little, and he launches into his partially prepared apology.

"Hi, sorry that took so long. Kinda got a little carried away. It's been a while. I'm sorry."

He pauses, decides that short is sweeter and lets his confession end there. Perhaps hoping for absolution of some kind. Maybe just gentle admonishment. He gets neither.

"Kate?" Gentler, softer, more concerned.

She turns her head to him. He catches the evidence of her introspection still tracking down her cheeks.

"Hey you okay?"

"I'm so sorry Castle."

"What? You're sorry? I'm the one….What's the matter Kate?" Now he's the confused one.

It spills forth, her words intermixed with tears.

It is going to take a little bit of work but they will get over this.

Outside Emmanuel's Emporium, New York. Thursday, much later.

Josh had sobered up quite considerably since their arrival at the party. He had mainly stuck to soda water through the rest of the evening. He was actually enjoying himself and Beatrice seemed to have relaxed appreciably as well. So much so that she had been very vocal on her plans for him once they got back to her place.

Even so he was almost sorry that the party was over. The team from Richard Castle Enterprises
were actually very good company. Especially the big guy – Peter Dor – who was an interesting bunch of contradictions. Although now an accountant he had been an Army Ranger in his youth, and quite the raconteur once he had a few drinks. He was especially sharp with his retorts and it had been funny to see him so clearly beat Paula Hass, the worldly agent from New Jersey, at her own game.

With the bill settled by Steve, everyone was heading home. Cabs had been called but someone beside him was impatient. Beatrice knew of a better place to catch a cab and yanked him off down the lane way beside the restaurant to shortcut to the next main street. His attempted protest about safety lost in her haste to get him back to hers.

The pair of muggers lurking in the shadows near the end of the darkened cut-through must have thought it was their lucky night. One the drunk or foolish would take the cut through. Didn't matter much which they were, they would be parted from their valuables.

Stepping forward, the gleam of the knives was all that was needed to provoke Beatrice's scream.

"Shut up, Bitch!" demanded the first mugger as he flashed the large blade so it caught the reflection of the streetlights more than twenty yards away. A distance that seemingly beyond reach for the pair.

"Just give us your cash and phones," clarified the second, waving a slightly smaller but no less intimidating blade.

They had both moved to comply with the demands when the rumble of a familiar voice interrupts proceedings.

"You probably want to be gone. I've called the cops. Best you leave now."

The first mugger does not appreciate the interruption or the news. But he eyes up the intimidating bulk of the newcomer and decides it isn't worth the risk. "Well fuck the lotta yas. Let's get out of here," he instructs his partner.

The second is less inclined to depart. Advancing on the newcomer he holds his knife low and directly ahead of his body. "You want some big man?"

Peter Dor says nothing, and when the belligerent mugger lunges, making a sweeping slash at him, he waits until the last moment before slamming the man sideways into the wall with a roundhouse left hand.

Mugger and knife are separated but the first mugger suddenly appears and whips his longer blade at the former Ranger. Peter grunts then shoots a trunk of a leg out to hurl the mugger a good five yards backwards onto the hard surface of the road.

"Jesus. Thanks Pete." Beatrice almost shouts, adrenaline pumping, her eyes jumping from person to person.

They barely notice the two muggers picking themselves up, grabbing their knives and scurrying off. It is Josh who first spots that their rescuer did not escape unharmed. The big man sways a little. Could be the booze, or the adrenaline but he catches a glimpse of the formerly white shirt underneath the jacket and the dark stain spreading quickly. "Dammit, you're cut."

"Shit. I don't feel so good."

"Let's get you to the street. There is better light and someone's coming right? Can you make it that
"Yeah, I can do that. Don't think you two could carry me." He remembers the second question. "Yeah called the Police and asked for EMT's too. Called them when I saw the flash of the knife in the alley. You both stupid." He stops. "Shit. Hurts."

Josh decides they are close enough. "Okay, sit here Peter. Damn. I really shouldn't be doing this now. Not after the drinks. But let me look at you."

"'okay. Promise not to sue," the former Ranger hisses.

"Alright Peter. Can you keep the pressure on your wound through your jacket for the moment," instructs Josh who is now considerably sober. As he focuses on his patient, he is dimly aware in the background of more people arriving attracted by the commotion.

"Beatrice can you look out for the cops and ensure they called EMT if there isn't one coming," Josh does not even look up as he takes charge.

His girlfriend complies but does not make five steps before the clamor of sirens marks the arrival of first, the Police, and shortly after, the EMTs.

Within minutes Peter Dor is stabilized and in an ambulance with Suzanne riding shotgun to the hospital.

Given the season, the police relocate the victims and witnesses, and soon they are back inside the restaurant giving statements to the police with Steve Mathers hovering in attendance to ensure no legal complications arise.

The Hamptons, Friday 1.08 am

Rick's phone bleeps signalling an incoming message. As he has the alert filtered for 'VIPs' it must be important. Grabbing the phone, and still bleary eyed he gazes at the handset, taking a few seconds to get everything in focus. Four messages all from Steve, his lawyer.

"Oh."

He scrolls some more as he rapidly reads the string of messages.

"No fucking way."

Beside him, Kate is awake now. "What's up Babe?" She turns on her bedside light concerned.

"That was Steve, my lawyer. There was an incident at the end of the RCE staff party and Peter Dor – the big guy, accountant – got stabbed when he intervened to save some of the guests from a mugging."

"Shit! He okay? The guests?"

"Yeah, think so. You remember Suzanne? She's gone with him to hospital. She has reported back that wound is not too deep and mainly superficial but he has lost a fair bit of blood."

He still looks concerned. "You need to do anything Rick?"

"No. I think it is all in hand."
She takes in his pensive face. "So why do you look like that?"

"Ah, well…."

"Com'on Rick it can't be that bad."

"Um, well, the guests that Peter saved from the mugging. One was Beatrice, Harry's sister, and the other her boyfriend, Josh."

She is definitely fully awake now. "Josh?!!"

"Yep," he pops the 'p'. "Josh Davidson."

"Small world. Definitely small fucking world." She looks at him, "Don't you dare do that 'Six degrees of Richard Castle' thing. Or the Kate Beckett one." Despite the chiding she is impressed by his self-control. There was a time he could not disguise his dislike, or worse, for her former boyfriend.

"Yes Dear."

Oh he is pushing it. "Anything else?"

"Well after being saved by Peter, in turn Josh performed emergency first aid on Peter until the EMTs came."

"That's good. He is a good doctor."

"I don't doubt it. Just the whole thing is so surreal."

"Don't disagree but can we discuss this in the morning?"

"Sure Babe." He slips that one in, and Kate is so not alert she misses it. Or lets it past.

He types out a quick message and then lies back down alongside the woman he plans to spend the rest of his life with. They quickly fall back to sleep.

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**The Hamptons, Friday morning**

The morning brings more messages with confirmation that Peter Dor will be fine after a couple of days in hospital for observation and to let the stitches start to heal but should be out before Christmas Day. Naturally the police have no firm leads but Peter did get in some good shots so they hope something might turn up.

Over coffee, Kate decides that there is actually nothing to agonise over with regards to Josh. It was actually good that her ex-boyfriend was in a new relationship – even if it was one that was more closely connected to her life with Rick than any sane person could expect.

Rick agrees and both are pleased by the level of maturity and security in their relationship that this small test demonstrates.

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With Christmas just days away, Rick and Kate have finalized the plans for their first festive season together.

They are staying at the Hamptons and thus for the first time since joining the NYPD Kate will
forgo her usual 'tradition' of working a shift or several. They have not discussed it too deeply aside from Kate confessing of how it was a coping mechanism to enable her to deal with the too painful remainders of her family's loss. Rick knows her enough to leave it at that. Kate will share more when she is able.

For his part he knows what he wants, and knows too that she wants that equally. He just needs a ring and the right time. He had thought of trying to get someone to help him but this is his last time, and he needs it to be the right ring, maybe not perfect, but it does need to be personal.

In the meantime they stay busy organizing. Despite not being there in person they have arranged a delivery of food for the precinct on Christmas Eve and a follow up for Boxing Day. Of course this is only after having cleared it with Gates first. Kate had been surprised when Rick had insisted on making the call himself but seemingly it went well as they have the approval from the Captain. Maybe Iron Gates is changing her tune on her partner.

Following on from the belated Thanksgiving meal, pretty much everyone from their extended family will be coming to the Hamptons tomorrow and staying over the last weekend before Christmas. Most, including Alexis and Martha will be arriving late Saturday morning except for Espo and Ryan who will come up late on the afternoon, and go back on the Monday morning because of their shift patterns.

Val and Jim have informed that that are taking the Christmas week off work. They will be coming to the Hamptons first, then on to first to some of Val's relatives leading up to Christmas Eve and then on to the cabin for Christmas Day itself. Kate is proud that her Dad is also changing his Christmas routine to accommodate the changes in his life.

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**The Hamptons, Saturday**

When inviting their friends up Rick had offered the option of accommodation at the house or to arrange hotel lodging for guests. Kate's dad and Val accept the latter offer and decide to stay at a local hotel cum B&B only five minutes down the road. They had refused any attempt by Rick to pay.

Kate had wanted to insist that they stay at the house but her Dad had been equally stubborn so she had given way perhaps a little less gracefully than she should have. Maybe she and Rick would find out why when their guests arrived.

Alexis and Martha are the first to arrive. The town car service delivered the pair, their luggage, a large Santa bag full of wrapped presents, and two large plastic boxes that clearly contain Christmas decorations. Martha has also bought a selection from the Loft's wine cabinet. Rick was so pleased to see them both, he forgot to comment on that.

After greetings and a quick stowing of their personal baggage, the all move to the main room to decorate the tree. Before they can start, the pair of new arrivals notice Rick and Kate's lack of heavy clothing, and the unfamiliar warmth, which prompts a quick introduction and guide on the operation of the new pellet heating system.

Any reluctance of Kate's behalf regarding putting up more extensive Christmas Decorations is lost in the face of the dual determination of Alexis and Martha. The pair exile Rick to the kitchen to work on food preparation and creation of the virgin punch and eggnog for later. When Kate tries to offer to assist she is quickly press-ganged and dragged into the process.
They are just about done when Kate's father and Val are next to arrive. Although her father is driving Kate does not recognise the car which must be Val's. It is a very nice silver Lexus ES series.

Once again Kate takes issue with their choice to stay elsewhere but her father is having none of it. "Honestly Katie, it's no issue and well I'm the perpetual designated driver. Plus it is only minutes down the road and the weather is not too bad."

"I guess you are Jim. But you are welcome to stay here. You know that," Rick chimes in as he appears from the kitchen to greet their guests.

"We'll take you up on that offer when the weather is better and we can make better use of your position on the beach. In the meantime I think you'll have enough house guests, and we oldies can enjoy the peace and quiet."

"Watch who you'll calling Old!" chimes in Val with a fake elbow to Jim's side.

"Yes Dear." Jim actually rolls his eyes in a perfect execution of what clearly is a Beckett mannerism. Lucky for him Val does not notice. Or pretends not to.

As they wander off to the kitchen for virgin punch, Kate watches her Dad draw closer to Val and slip his hand into hers.

"I know they are a couple, and sleeping together but it feels weird." She can feel Rick beside her as she speaks.

"You mean like knowing your daughter is together with someone. But's it is one thing to know it and another to witness it firsthand in the same house?"

"Yeah that weird. I guess. Not that I have a daughter. Yet. Oh…"

Shit she's adorable when she's flustered.

"Well let me get a ring on finger, and you in a white dress and then we can work on that task as soon as you want. Or beforehand. I don't mind which. Happy to pick any order so long as you are there. Of course the package comes complete with one pre-made. A very good one in my more than biased view."

"I know Babe, and I love Alexis but she doesn't need any mothering from me." She pauses long enough for the smirk to show and he braces himself. "After all she got all the mothering she needed from you too."

He makes the obligatory outraged face. "I have you know I have official recognised status as a ruggedly handsome Dad."

She ignores that. "What about you Rick?" She knows he'll get her question even without the context that is entirely unnecessary between them.

"I'm ready when you are Kate." He leaves 'for anything’ off.

"Real soon then."

"Definitely."

They are both in the affirmative but she kisses him before he, or her, can say anything precipitous.
Although for the life of her, she can't understand why they don't simply leap in. All the way.

It is early afternoon before Lanie and Jenny Ryan arrive together in the Ryan's' personal vehicle, a 2008 Ford Focus which has clearly seen better days. Kate knows that Ryan wants a more practical and safer car for his family especially with their plans for children but money is perpetually tight for the couple.

Lanie and Jenny bring their bags in, and after the obligatory guided tour, are press-ganged by Martha into helping complete the decoration of the house from the Tardis-like boxes of decorations. Who knew two plastic containers could hold so much? Having Lanie and Jenny here certainly add to the general noise and festive atmosphere. Alexis is in perpetual motion and clearly enjoying herself.

It is almost supper time before a NYPD issue Crown sedan crunches up the driveway to mark the arrival of Esposito and Ryan. Their version of the guided tour includes a detour to the weapons safe to deposit their service weapons and backup pieces. Esposito is so impressed he is still pestering Rick for details about the contents an hour later.

Supper is homemade soup, sandwiches and hot and cold salads which is a popular choice especially in the face of the knowledge that Sunday will bring more food than they can comfortably consume.

The old downstairs sitting room is still in the process of being converted into a full time guest room. Despite the unfinished state, it is not too far from completion, and it has heating and a queen bed, just not the wall mounted TV and other features that Rick seems to consider essential. By consensus the Ryans take this downstairs room. At least it means the door can stay shut if they persist with their baby making efforts without disturbing the rest of the guests who will be upstairs. It is bad enough that Ryan occasionally impacts too much information but Jenny is even more brazenly open about the process. Most of the group try to ignore them but Martha of course merely encourages them and Alexis for her part seems strangely interested.

Espo man's up and takes the upstairs guest room with no heating. It has twin bed which can be joined together but Lanie will not be joining him at least on this first night. Despite the progress on the relationship front, apparently a few incautious words just a day or so ago, has them once again more at odds, than on song.

Beckett sighs. Is this is never going to end?

"Wait, where are you sleeping Lanie?"

"I'm bunking with my bestie."

Alexis does her best to emulate a sista-hood pose but only manages to be an imitation of what would be her father's similarly lame efforts were he foolish enough to try. Kate laughs as does Lanie who still embraces the younger woman, Alexis's face briefly exceeds her natural hair color. Rick doesn't laugh at all, and Kate loves him just a little more for it. He's never, well rarely, held back from teasing and engaging her in banter, but he is always considerate of his daughter's feelings and well-being. His mother's too despite their interplay and snarky observations.

For her part Lanie doesn't miss the look Kate gives Rick whilst his gaze is fixed on his daughter. She's going to make time to catch Kate alone and ask what the hold-up is? Martha winks at the ME. She hasn't missed the moment either. Kate catches both acts and the prospect of Martha and
Lanie allying to badger her about anything is slightly scary, but the likely topics from those two could be potentially discussing and then questioning her about are frankly terrifying, especially with her dad here.

Alexis has recovered but is persistent in trying to apologise. Lanie shakes her off. No apology required. She knows there was no ill-intent behind the action. Just like her father, occasionally her radar fails, although his often result in more dramatic outcomes.

Anyway, Lanie likes these moments with the young woman. Like any Castle/Rodgers she has an air of youthful energy and a certain degree of confidence about her, but the sweet and caring person remains, and any mistake is unintentional and worthy of being accepted as innocent of any intent. Plus now that Alexis is no longer her intern, she finds she wants a friendship with the smart, young woman. If nothing else they can bond over the mutual fascination around Kate and Rick. Of course some topics will definitely be out of bounds. Even Lanie wouldn't go that far with the author's own daughter. But they can gossip about the Ryans. Hell Jenny would probably provide full disclosure and a range of advice for the young woman. That could be fun so long as Rick is somewhere else to avoid his parental protection mode. Oh lots of potential abounds if they can make it happen. Perhaps back in New York she thinks. Of course it would be even better if she could get Kate there.

Jim and Val head off to check in to the nearby accommodation and this seems to prompt an early night for pretty much everyone.

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**The Hamptons, Sunday morning.**

The day starts with presents before breakfast once Jim and Val have arrived. Which is fine as despite the light fare most people ate more than their usual fill the previous night. By mutual agreement the gifts are all restrained and not expensive. Somehow everyone had got the message and there were no embarrassing exceptions of excess or diabolically bad choices. Rick had co-oped Alexis and Martha into shopping on their behalf with surprisingly impressive results. Kate can probably guess who they had to thank the most for that.

The buffet breakfast too is restrained by Rick's usual holiday standards but apparently that is traditional Martha informs them so as to save space for the evening meal. Plus it allows for an indulgence of sweets and nibbles to be eaten during the day, adds Alexis, for once appearing to be predominately teenager and not the serious young woman she often is in Kate's presence.

Kate had even managed to evade Lanie capturing her alone for 'girl talk', although when mentioning this to Rick he remarked 'what if she becomes desperate enough to not do it in private', leaving Kate agonizing over what to do. Fortunately she notes that Lanie and Espo have something going on which has them, and not a few of the witnesses preoccupied. Her father sensibly keeps out of it, but she is surprised when she overhears Val asking Martha about it.

During the afternoon there is a break in the festivities. Alexis and Martha have taken the other ladies with the exception of Kate out for a stroll down the beach. For the remainder, they all gather in the media room. Everyone here knows about Bracken and the deal that is meant to keep them safe for now. And the risk that the ambitious man will seek to silence them.

Most of the conversation is centered on the rumors coming out of Washington DC and New York and whether it is Bracken. Jim Beckett is surprisingly animated on the matter but even he admits that until the authorities lay charges no one can be certain. But the consensus is that Bracken is the most likely suspect. Which leads to a more detailed examination of the possible threat, and whether
it is increasing.

There is no final conclusion and Kate promises to follow up with Taylor Matthews to see if her employer can help.

For his part Rick does not let the mood darken for too long or too deep. He reminds them all of their responsibilities and how that they are stronger together.

By the time the ladies return from their brisk seaside stroll, the impromptu meeting has broken up.

The ladies have agreed to do the table settings, and some food preparation so Rick takes the men outside for a break – and Kate suspects cigars. All too soon they return with some super charged Nerf guns.

Naturally the host is closely involved in the events that follow, although this time he has able assistance of two NYPD police detectives. The Nerf guns had been in the pool shed – only partially bored man-children could be expected to be rummaging through the storage for an outdoor pool in the heart of winter.

In short order there were several near-misses including a couple of picture frames that were dislodged but not broken. It takes multiple near misses and a couple of Rick-ochets on Martha to get the childishness ceased, and the weapons confiscated.

Ultimately Kate, Lanie and Jenny get busy scolding not only their respective man but their partners in crime too. Once again Jim has sensibly not participated but Kate enjoys the sight of him opening laughing at the antics of the younger men.

Sunday night sees a Christmas feast of epic proportions that puts the Thanksgiving event in the shade. Rick had refused to have anyone bring a contribution and despite some outside catering for smaller dishes has cooked most of the food himself with a lot of aid of Kate and Alexis. All others are politely discouraged from trying to assist beyond a few chores, except for Martha who is entirely barred from the kitchen. She takes it in good humor and delights in the role of hostess which Kate does not mind foregoing.

The meal is a total success even if the dishes were not traditional Americana festive fare. The English style roast port with crackling being among the crowd-pleasers, topped for many only by the Australasian desert called Pavlova – meringue, topped with whipped cream and fresh fruit.

Espo actually looks a little green after his excessive consumption, and everyone else is not far off.

The evening almost passes off without incident, unless you count the near miss with the overly incendiary rum sauce for the Christmas pudding that was the second dessert.

The flammable rum sauce had been a little threatening but fortunately there is a full range of fire retardants including extinguishers readily to hand in the kitchen in case things got out of hand. Alexis mutters something about a previous incident involving a turkey and lessons learnt.

Despite the close call with the highly flammable sauce, the final dessert is lovely, and entirely defeats the entire crew who are stuffed beyond capacity. Even Alexis is near comatose.

It does ensure that there is close to zero activity, and what conversations take place are much more muted this evening as all appear weighted down by their festive over-consumption.
Kate had missed it but sometime before the Christmas feast Lanie and Esposito had made up, probably while she and Rick were busy in the kitchen, and had decided spend the second and final night together in Espo's room. Apparently they have a way to stay warm with the door closed, despite the lack of heating.

She really doesn't need to know more. Certain that Lanie will share anyway.

Kate still finds Alexis' near mortification about her and Rick's sex life amusing, especially when contrasted with her near fascination with Lanie's entanglements with Esposito. She is her father's daughter. Fortunately for Kate, her dad and Val keep the PDA to an acceptable level even if not the bare minimum. She appreciates that whilst simultaneously feeling guilty that she does and embarrassed that they pick up on it.

Alexis is quite taken with Jenny who is really quite open about many things. Rick bless his soul is doing his level best to pretend his daughter knows nothing beyond the birds and the bees. Martha is somewhat merciless with her teasing while never crossing the line and embarrassing Alexis. Jim and Val take mercy on him and distract him with some simple palour games and a couple of magic tricks. Val is surprisingly adept at the later especially with Jim. Much like Alexis, Kate could do without some of the insinuation that goes on between her dad and Val with certain sleights of hand. She catches Rick muttering something about double-standards, and is pleased when she dusts off her glare and narrows her eyes at him. Gotcha!

People start to peel away to bed. The Ryans apparently are still keen on expanding their family but fortunately far less publicly demonstrative tonight of their obvious procreation plans, although Jenny did remark that the lack of a TV in their room was not an issue as 'they could make their own entertainment'.

Jim takes Val back to the hotel after saying goodnight. Kate was somewhat surprised to be wrapped up in a full hug from her father's girlfriend. This was still taking some getting used to. She is naturally distracted by the alarming bonhomie between her father and boyfriend. They are clearly up to no good. Of course she's no fool and is wise to their distraction techniques.

Rick looks like he wants to party on but she decides to take that in hand by hauling him off to bed, leaving Martha to supervise the last of the champagne in solitude.

The Hamptons, Monday morning.

The following morning dawns all too soon and their slightly early Christmas gathering will soon be over.

Hardly anyone is present for what becomes a very minimalist breakfast. Just the two of them and eventually a tired looking Alexis, almost entirely lacking her usual bounce. For once Rick foregoes his usual breakfast indulgences (she's not enforcing their diet over the holidays) in favour of toast and jelly. Plus coffee of course.

Kate of course joins him for the java rush, although she is almost tempted by the hot chocolate than Alexis prepares resplendent with whipped cream, marshmallows and a flake. She sticks to some fruit and yoghurt instead. Alexis raids some of the left overs to accompany her sugar overload, preferring them cold. Apparently another trait she has inherited from her father. Rick challenges her to try a roast pork, apple sauce, gravy and cold roast potato sandwich. While this is not quite the level of culinary atrocity that the Smorlette achieved, she declines.

They are clearing away when Kate's phone rings. It is Jim and Val calling to apologize for missing
any more activity and stating their intention to join whoever is left for lunch. Kate doesn't want to think about potential reasons why they are late.

The Ryans are next to emerge. Both irrepressibly convivial and chatty. Jenny lets a few comments slip and it is all too much for even the previously interested teen, and Alexis flees back to her room for bit.

Eventually Espo and Lanie emerge just before eleven a.m. about the same time as Alexis reappears. Martha not at all, having been extremely diligent in her supervision of the remaining bubbly last night. They can expect her in the afternoon Alexis and Rick confirm.

Hardly anyone eats anything. Rick prepares 'care packages' consisting of leftovers for the others to take. There is a minor dispute over how to divide the remnants of the Pavlova which Ryan and Espo settle in their usual manner, and then have it taken off them by Jenny and Lanie.

So the city contingent head off much long past two p.m. aiming to be back in the city before the last of the light goes. Most of the traffic should be going the other way.

If Kate had thought it had been a Christmas miracle and she had escaped the talk with Lanie, she was put right before her best friend left. "Once you are back in the city Girlfriend. I'm breaking you two apart – if that is even possible – and getting the low down on all things. Understood?" Not that it was a question or an option. She accepts, hoping to wiggle out of it later.

During the planning for the weekend, Martha and Alexis had agreed to stay until a couple of days after Christmas and initially they were going leave before the New Year. Martha of course has plans for New Year's Eve, probably several. No one want to know the future victim's names.

Alexis had made plans to catch up with friends new and old and was going to head back at the same time as her Grams.

Alexis is not entirely sure how she would survive on her own with her Dad and Kate's obvious sexual energy. She is pretty sure they are not even fully aware of it. Clearly spending so much time together without any other company has conditioned them to behaviour in certain ways, probably without being conscious of it. And certainly not in an entirely innocent way for any observant guests of which there were plenty. Lanie, Jenny and even Val had remarked upon it on several occasions. She was certain her Dad and Kate simply had no idea how much they gravitated to each other, and all the little touches, kisses, caresses that went on and she really did not want to contemplate contact beyond those limits.

But once the other guests except her Dad and Val have left, Kate takes Martha and Alexis aside and persuades them to adopt her plan for New Years. They have had multiple invitations to events but have decided to accept one here in the Hamptons. Kate would like them all to attend together. Not least because it might take some of the focus off her, if only briefly. She is honest enough to explain that. Plus Rick has missed his red-heads.

Once the pair agree, and in a moment of introspection Kate apologises to them both for any awkwardness over her interactions with Rick. Given the potential pitfalls of the subject, Alexis is almost more relieved when Grams doesn't make a big production of it.

Having to rework their plans for New Years is totally worth the inconvenience when they see the huge smile on Rick's face when they jointly tell him he has three dates to the New Year Ball in the Hamptons.

Her Dad finds Kate before he and Val leave.
"So…." He begins.

"So…." She teases right back, tongue poking from the edge of her lips.

He gets straight to the point. "So we both won't be alone this Christmas."

"Yeah."

"First time in too long for both of us Katie. But I think it will be good. And it doesn't matter that we still won't be with each other on Christmas day. There will be other years, and I think this year we both have enough change and challenges for us to deal with.

"We'll still talk?"

"Of course. Somethings are changing for the better but we don't have to let everything in our lives go or forego them. I'll always want to talk to you on that day, and any other."

"Good. I like our talks. For so long it was all I could manage…" she trails off.

"But now you can do more. Share the day with others."

"Oh Dad, I didn't mean it like that." She apologizes.

"I know you didn't Katie. And I didn't either. But this is all so new. For both of us. Sometimes I feel guilty about being this happy. Like it shouldn't be allowed. I spent far too long denying myself, and others, especially you that chance. You too I think Katie."

"You didn't Dad. That was my choice too." She actually chuckles. "Kinda ironic how we both set out to deny only ourselves fearing it would hurt others but hurt them regardless. Also that we could protect ourselves from the risk more hurt."

"Grief is like that Katie. You zero in. Focus on the certain things. Not necessarily the wrong things but it takes away your perspective. Saps you, and no matter your strength, you lose your hope. I think that man and his family have helped you recover all that and more.

"They have. And Val has done the same for you too Dad. I'm sorry, so sorry, I wasn't supportive at the beginning."

"Hush Katie. It was a shock for you. Hell it was a shock for me. We had been colleagues for a while, friends of a sort for a while. There was an attraction but we both fought it. I guess we didn't want to ruin our professional and friendship if a more personal relationship did not work. Not much different to you perhaps?"

"Scarily close Dad." She bites her lip. "Probably closer than I would like. I don't know what I did to deserve him. He waited for me. He promised us always and we're getting there. So close actually, " she confesses.

"So that's on the cards? Not that I am surprised. I remember that meal when you told us all about your plans. But I knew before. It how he looks at you, stares really, just how any father want's his daughter's significant other to. But still he has two failed marriages. Perhaps he is gun-shy over a third?" Oh her dad's fishing.

"Absolutely not. As yes as we told you in September, we've talked about it. But no sign of a ring yet." She shakes her head to herself. "Do you hear how I sound Dad? When did I become that girl?"
"Always knew you had it in you. Your mother would be so proud."

"Proud? She would be gloating and you know it!"

They both say it at once. "Told you so!" The laughs feel good. Remembering her mother for the good times is still infrequent but not as rare as it was, and the hurt is more bittersweet than she would want, but being able to share it with him is a great sensation.

"I still miss her Dad. I think I always will. But now more than ever I believe in a possibility for joy."

"You remember that?"

"Yeah. Playing hooky from the wake." She won't go further. Tell how that last positive image of her father sustained her through those years when she lost him, and a lot of herself, to his battle with the bottle.

"I'll be sorry until the end that I wasn't stronger. That I couldn't be that person I was that day for so long."

"It's okay Dad. I've forgiven you and we've got better. Much better."

"So, do you have any plans to force the pace?" He asks switching the conversation back.

"Oh God no! Rick's a believer in fate, 'The Universe' as he calls it. I don't want to let those demons loose. But if he doesn't do, I might have to stage an intervention."

Her Dad laughs, "Now that I can believe. Of course some of your mother's and my 'interventions' with a certain teenager did not go so well."

"Dad!" She chides before admitting, "Guilty as charged."

"You have no idea how long I've waited to hear that?"

She mock pushes him, before wrapping him up in a hug. "I love you Daddy. Be safe and happy."

Washington DC, Christmas Eve

He had left the office late, especially for Christmas Eve. He had been pre-occupied with the case, and wondering if he should consider going home. He had looked up and even Rachel had gone. He vaguely remembered bidding them all good night and wishing them festive cheer.

It hasn't snowed too much during the day, and he lives close enough, so he walks.

He goes maybe a block before notices them. Two singular men. Pacing him, tracking him?

It is a few years since the counter-surveillance training he had before being assigned to Europe but some of it had stuck. Instinct first and then he spies them. Special Agent Sorenson casually turns himself around as if to peruse the contents of the store window. Shit! Unless he really was mistaken, he was being followed.

Does he try and lose the tail?

Head back to work? But there is no one there except the security details. Rent-a-guards essentially. He doesn't really have faith in their abilities in a fluid, uncertain situation.
He doesn't think this is a hit. He'd be dead already otherwise.

He has covered another block and a half from the office. On the spur of the moment he picks a bar that conveniently comes into view. It seems a little familiar but doesn't think on it as he hustles in, looking much like any person seeking an escape from the seasonal weather.

A quick scan shows two visible staff and maybe ten customers.

He strides for the bar, loosening his outer coat, grateful for the reassuring bulge of his service piece on his right hip.

"Good Evening Sir."

"Good Evening. I'll take a draft beer please."

"Coming right up." The barman looks at him. "Cash or run a tab?"

"Cash thanks." He slides a ten dollar bill out of his wallet.

He picks up his beer and heads further down the bar so he can keep an eye on the door, and most of the interior.

There is a solitary occupant, female, at this end, nursing something tall and orange with an umbrella.

As he finds a seat, she speaks, addressing him.

"Hello again. Happy holidays." The woman with the friendly greeting has a familiar smile.

He scans his memory. He has been in here before. With Rachel and some of the others celebrating a birthday just a week or two ago. A quick break from the investigation."

"Hello. Good evening, but I'm afraid I don't....."

"Tess," she offers, cutting across his awkwardness. First name only. Cautious. He likes that. "We didn't get introduced last time," she finishes.

He offers his hand and they shake.

"Will. Happy Holidays Tess. No one to celebrate with?"

"No. My family are back in Texas."

"You don't sound like you are from there."

"Is that your FBI training at work?" she teases, laughing gently, and then clarifies his unspoken question. "The last time you were in here you and your colleagues all had FBI jackets on. Plus the Department of Justice is three blocks away."

Smart. Observant. Is she an operator, or just a civilian?

"No Minnesota originally. But I did school in Houston at UH after we moved there when I was twelve. Graduated from the School of Education and stayed in Houston to work for a non-profit doing education outreach. Moved here four years ago with the new administration. I got promoted last year and just recently managed to score a place in town so no more commute."
He ignores the possibility of the comment about a Democrat from Texas and goes with the clichéd standard for DC. "So not a lawyer. That's almost a rarity for this town." She chuckles gently again, indulging his lack of game.

"What about yourself?"

"Virginia. But New York for school then FBI.

"Straight from school? Impressive. My brother is third year Houston PD. He did five in the army and then got out. He said he never even considered the FBI. Too hard to gain entry."

"Just the one brother?" She nods. "There is just myself. Only child. Parents live in New England now. Retired."

The conversation is easy, and after a few more minutes, she offers to refresh her glass and she accepts. While they are waiting, they move to a booth and he settles into the far seat, facing the entrance.

He feels the weight of the Glock at his hip. He has not forgotten why he came in here in the first place.

He sips at the beer. He'll have just the one. But he needs food. Something hot. Indulgent even.

Despite the time, the bar has a limited range of food, mainly snacks, still available. When Tess's drink is delivered he orders. Nachos are not exactly festive faire but they can be shared. When they come out less than ten minutes later they are hot and cheesy and more than fill the spot for both of them. Despite his initial plans, Will finds himself ordering another beer. A lite this time. He will nurse this one until he leaves.

The conversation progresses further. And despite the circumstances he finds himself enjoying it and being intrigued by the woman.

She is smart and funny with a restrained humour and manners. A lot like him he thinks. He is a strong believer in compatibility. He once thought Kate Beckett was enough like him to make it last.

Tess is more than attractive, but with an easy manner, and it has clearly worked on him.

But he still has his head in the game and when Tess goes to the toilet he takes his phone out and texts the alert team seeking an update. They confirm a car will be waiting in less than twenty minutes, apologizing for the delay caused by seasonal resource constraints. The observation team is outside and reports that there are no visible suspects in the vicinity. No one has entered the bar since he arrived. A few customers, maybe four, have left. He thinks it will be safe to leave himself, but he will leave alone. For a whole bunch of reasons.

On Tess's return he actually flirts a little and she reciprocates. Maybe it is the beer, but he thinks it is their connection plus they are both lonely and it is Christmas Eve.

But neither will go further tonight and he is fine with that. He hopes she is too.

No one had intrigued him quite so quickly since that certain junior NYPD detective did. Still Kate is no longer his, and here he was with Tess. So when he says he needs to go, she offers him her card and number he accepts and reciprocates with his.

She declines his offer of ride. She will have the barman call a cab when she is ready to go she informs him. She does however, lean across to kiss his cheek and whisper 'I hope to see you soon'
to him.

Will leaves, feeling happier that she is not in the possible line of fire with him. Regardless, he asks the observation team to hold position for at least thirty minutes after he leaves. His exit is undisturbed and he makes it home safely. The same occurs for his new friend and as Tess leaves the bar eleven minutes after he does, straight into the waiting taxi cab that takes to the short journey to her new apartment in town.

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**The Hamptons.**

Christmas proper is smaller, just them plus Alexis and Martha, a tad more restrained but not a quiet affair. No event with Martha and Rick could ever be.

What is surprising is how much Alexis adds. Clearly genes win through. Kate finds herself pulled along and joining in.

She still makes the time to mark the moment and remember her loss. She also needs to call her Dad. Rick has done an awesome job of distracting the red heads so she has some privacy to make the call.

Her father reports that he and Val are having a quiet day at his cabin. It is Val's first time there, and Kate knows her father had been nervous about the invitation but it all seems to be working out.

They talk around and about a few things and inevitably they get to her mom. Tears come but perhaps this year they are less than before, and it is different. She is not alone and nor does she want to be. Regardless she is grateful for the privacy. The call is not long but ends on a happier note than any she can remember.

She's not long cleaned herself up, before Rick finds her, a slightly desperate look on his face. Like all good partners she recognises when he needs a distraction so she drags him into their bathroom and up to her body. Kissing and hands only. No time for that. They both miss the freedom of their solitude. Eventually for both their breathing calms and she has to ask him what is going on.

"So what had you looking to hide out?"

"Umm, I may have pranked Mother."

"What did you do?"

"Swapped her red wine for some awful blackcurrent cordial that someone gave us a while back. Ribena or something. From England. Tastes like cold remedy."

"That wouldn't have you hiding. What happened?"

"Um she was so surprised she spilt most of the glass on herself. Apparently it is worse than red wine. Ruined her outfit."

Kate can't help herself, she curls in closer to him in an effort to muffle her laughs.

"Not helping Kate. She's going to kill me."

"She won't but you're gonna have to apologize and mean it."

"And buy her a new outfit."
"Yeah, and buy her a new outfit. But give me a minute to get it back under control and we can go down together."

He smiles and pulls her back in for another hug. "How is your Dad?"

"Good. Quiet day with Val. It's still sad, missing her, but we're coping much better. Moving on. Celebrating again. Both of us."

"Kate. I want you to know how much this means to me, to all of us. Changing your traditions. I appreciate it deeply. Mother and Alexis do too."

"You make me want to. No turning back now Rick. I told you I'm all in. That includes holidays with our families. Even if it does come with some difficult memories for us. But being with you makes it better. And I think for my dad being with Val makes it better too."

He kisses her. Several times. They can feel their bodies react to one another, but they pull apart, slightly flushed and a little regretful. They need to go back downstairs and resume the role of hosts even if it is just for the two red heads.

Of course Martha – having changed into a new luminous outfit that might actually blind the unwary and by sheer chutzpah hide any potential stain - merely arches an eyebrow at their prolonged mutual absence, and Alexis goes a little pink. She may be maturing but she's still her Daddy's little girl at heart.

In an act of festive restraint Martha waits a whole seven minutes before lambasting her son but is soon mollified by a genuine heartfelt apology, and the promise of a shopping expedition with suitable credit card in the near future.

The next few days are pretty lazy. The most significant events being the daily decision about what to do with the leftovers and then which seasonal favorite movies or shows to watch. The mix is of course eclectic so in addition to the classics it includes more recent Christmas fare such as Die Hard. She is reduced to hysterics when the entire Castle clan, Martha included, does pretty much the entire dialog. They actually have to pause the movie after 'Yippy Ki Ay' to allow them all to regain their composure.

Kate is once again surprised how easy it is to spend time with this new family of her. Even if they are not quite 100% official, yet, this is her family.

The only risk of discord occurs when Martha decides she will redeem his apology for the incident with the dress once she had returned to New York. Rick is clearly unhappy with that decision. Kate cannot decide which of the two is more melodramatic, and Alexis wisely exercises discretion.

Friday 28th December, Outside of Washington DC

The teams had assembled at the designated locations for their briefings, cash and to collect any required gear. It was almost like old times, except it wasn't. Not that any cared.

Veterans all, they carried the assorted hangovers of service in modern war zones. Asymmetric my ass was a frequent refrain. The Vietnam vets had it easy in comparison was an equally common refrain. Would they have to wait as long to be acknowledged and respected? For many that was simply not acceptable and for some it was in part justification they why they were here and taking action.
Of the course the main reason was simple.

Money.

Since returning most had struggled to find decent work, or any work in some cases. Typical. Happened before after and would for most generations serving during every war since the big one. Respect for returned servicemen lasted about as long as the welcome home parade, if they got one. For many, if they weren't already damaged by their experiences overseas, returning home to a too often bleak and bitter reality, usually took care of it.

Desensitized and disconnected from their own nation and fellow citizens, they represented the detritus of failed foreign policy and colossal military, diplomatic and strategic ineptitude. Not a new concept but this time they were more inured to shooting civilians and anything else to save their lives than any previous generation of servicemen.

Private work both overseas and here in the US was an opportunity. Of course they were still expendable. Foot soldiers always were. No different now. Except that the pay was much, much better. And no one pretended any more. Well maybe except for a few crazies. And no one paid them much heed.

At each location, the anticipation was soon held in check, replaced by disappointment when their paymasters arrived with their instructions but no gear. Equipment including weapons and ammo would be made available shortly before the green light. Any complaints were swallowed by the presence of heavily armed enforcers who made it clear that non-compliance was a one-time act with immediate consequences. The instructions were not to be divulged not even shared within the entire squad. Each fire team got their own set of instructions.

Contentment greatly increased when each man got ten thousand dollars in cash, half in hundreds and other half in fifties. And plenty of the notes were used so not as to attract attention. Before they left to return to their other lives, very clear warnings were given about their behavior. Any breech of Op-Sec or any misdemeanor at all would result in the forfeiture of the remaining forty thousand dollars plus unspecified but no doubt fucking scary consequences.

Their new employer played for keeps. So would they.

Department of Justice, 8.02 am 29 December

Despite it being a Saturday, McCord is in the office just on the dot of eight am. She dumps her coat and now almost cold coffee and sets a course for Vallante's office.

The door is slightly ajar when she approaches, so she does not knock, but does close it behind her. Vallante is on the phone with his boss. She can tell just from his tone that he is speaking to the Assistant AG, Joel Silverman.

She doesn't take a seat, and merely returns Vallante's non-verbal acknowledgement of her presence. She has more than a suspicion why he had called her in. Hence the closed door.

"Thank you Joel. You did your best." Her heart sinks and then something else takes over. Righteous indignation but she channels it internally. Best give her boss a chance she thinks and then just opens her mouth.

"Well?" McCord is pretty abrupt with her superior. She knows he has worked just as hard but dammit the long days and nights demand it. The sacrifices the team made. Hers too.
"Good Morning Rachael," her boss intones in mild rebuke before answering the question she is yet to ask directly, "Three of five signed."

"What?" She know he is referring to warrants. But that's disappointing. Two not signed. She already knows which two of course.

"Insufficient evidence. You know the score Rachel."

"Dammit. We worked our butts off. I worked my mine," she let him know how angry she is, she rarely refers to herself on in first person in her reports, but she manages a pause, even while still shaking her head in disbelief at letting it get to her. "Let me guess…"

"Oh hush a moment Rachel."

"Sorry." He is her boss after all, and on the whole a fair one, so the apology is sincere. As is her temporary silence.

"The two campaign finance warrants, and the associated bank fraud one are all authorized. At least one of those has a RICO element so we can continue to build off that as well."

She nods. "They were all slam dunks. Plenty of evidence for those, and the RICO is not a surprise but welcome."

Her boss nods, "The murder and conspiracy to murder warrants were not signed."

"Not thrown out?" She takes heart at that. It is something at least.

"Insufficient direct evidence." He continues, "He's a sitting US Senator," as if that explains it. But it does actually. Encompasses everything. The law is not blind, nor is in impartial, or immune to influence and politics. And this case had every one of those in spades. She wishes it was not as common as it is with the team and the type of cases they handle, but this is a regular obstacle they face, and one they do all too often do not surmount.

And they both know Bracken has expended a considerable amount, maybe all, of his political capital and influence fighting the charges. "He's a criminal." She's so pissed she doesn't even add the usual preface of alleged. Why does this one feel so personal?

"That may be but he's a well-connected alleged criminal." Vallante concedes while correcting her deliberate oversight.

"And these first charges may appear weaker than desired but they should do the job. Especially the RICO provisions. We should be able to continue to investigate. It may be dull but the finances are key to this. We continue to follow the money trial."

"I'll be a lot happier when we have him detained, communications cut, and his organisation being effectively broken up. I'm worried that we've missed something. Actually more than one thing. He has partners, or if not partners, then at least smart subordinates who action a lot of this. Often independently I would guess to keep him insulated. He is a text-book case for clean hands as far as we can tell."

"You are right but in the meantime I think we all should acknowledge the constraints we have, and accept this for what it is. A start. And you should be proud of this Rachel. The whole team should be. This is political gelignite and somehow hasn't blown up in our faces. A lot of people inside and outside of this building are taking notice of that."
"But it should be more than a start. It is all so tentative. So frustrating. It should not be complicated."

"Do you need to step away Rachael?"

The offer surprises her. She knows it is meant for all the good reasons. "No. No Sir. I can keep my focus."

"Good, I have a sinking feeling we are going to need it. This isn't over. Not by a long shot."

The final assessment is definitely something she concurs with.

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**The Hamptons**

She had taken a moment to sneak away and check on the contents of the dress bag secured in Alexis' room. She was grateful for Alexis hiding the dress for her. She really wanted to surprise Rick.

Actually she was surprising herself. The dress was for New Year's Eve and they would be out at a gala in the Hamptons. God! What was she thinking?! Talk about pressure.

She has agreed to go out in public with him, in a fancy dress. Strike that. Beautiful, expensive designer dress. The dress was really was fantastic. She had found it in a local boutique here in the Hamptons in one of their rare moments apart. She didn't even mind the price too much because it looks so good. Especially on her. Plus Rick has not actually seen her in it yet. She is looking forward to the first viewing. She really hopes Martha and Alexis let them have some privacy first off. She knows the dress is enough for him to make filthy carnal promises against her skin and she almost shivers in anticipation.

It is not the only sensation she is feeling. Even now two days before the event her stomach was bouncing. Nerves, second guessing. You would think she is sixteen again.

She knows what she needs to settle her down. She needs her partner. So where is he? He would usually be hanging around, pestering her, trying to sneak a peek – especially as this is currently a dress he has paid for but has never actually seen.

Carefully zipping up the bag and returning it to the rack in Alexis' cupboard, she goes in search of her man before he came looking for her.

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He wasn't where she expected, but large as it is the house is very familiar to her now, and it did not take too long to find him locate him once she had returned back upstairs.

He was down the hall in what she has mentally labelled the play room.

He is at the weapon safe and he has his back to her, seemingly focused on something on the workbench.

She is not silent in her approach and he calls out, "Hey Beckett," while never actually lifting his head.

"Hey Lover-Boy," slips from her lips as she gently places her hands on his broad shoulders and looks over them. "What are you doing?"
He has the Sig P226 X5 out. It is broken down for cleaning. Entirely un-necessary as it and the other weapons always appear well, if not perfectly, maintained.

"Fancy a refresher?" He's going for light, almost blasé and an indirect answer.

"What's going on Rick?" She is concerned now. Well more concerned.

He completes reassembly and carefully places the complete weapon back on the table, and turns his body and full attention to her.

"All these goings on. The attempted reconnaissance of this house, the politician under investigation, Clare getting stonewalled by her bosses, men I usually trust to be honest dodging questions….I can't stop thinking about it."

"I know. I've been keeping myself busy to try avoiding thinking about it. You know that it doesn't work all the time. But what can we do? We have a deal. Imperfect, but the truce appears to be holding for now."

They both know how weak that sounds. Neither of them trusts Bracken, especially on a deal that was obtained at the end of Beckett's pistol.

"I don't trust Bracken. You don't either. And that goes double if he is the actual politician under investigation. And let's face it, the odds and what scant the evidence has been disclosed so far points to it being him. We may not have found anything but what if we were going about it the wrong way? They got Capone for tax evasion. What if they get Bracken for campaign finance violations?"

"But…."  

"And I know it is not Joanna's case, it is not any of the other murders, but dominoes tend to fall once something is dislodged. You know, 'shake something hard enough and something might fall out'. Maybe the feds already have more. There has to be evidence out there that hasn't been found. We're good but we don't have their resources or reach. And I think he is not going to wait much longer. If the authorities are closing in he'll want to clear house just as much, if not more than if he was just running for President. And you, and me, and probably others, are on his list. We gotta be. So I won't be unprepared. We may not get the opportunity to be fully recovered and ready, but I am not willing to get caught off guard."

"Well I'm not prepared to be a victim too. Not again. Remember we're in this together Rick."

"I know Kate."

She bumps shoulders with him. "So what is our plan Big Guy?"

"Well, my plan was to check my weapons, collect you and your guns, and then head to the range to reacquaint myself with my Sig P226 X5 and some of the other weapons. It is time to determine whether my recovery really is well enough advanced as Robert says." He is determined, and his voice takes on that gruffness, a lower tone that rumbles, and as she has known for years dangerously flirting with crossing the line to seriously seductive bedroom voice.

Maybe an hour or so at the range will settle her nerves too so she nods, not quite ready to trust herself to speak just at the moment.

Plus it will be good to see if he can really handle a bigger weapon. She almost chuckles at the double entendre. Thank God that last bit was only in her head. She turns her head to see him
standing there seemingly struck mute.

She didn't say it out loud did she? Did she? His face cracks open, all the confirmation she needs. Shit!

There is nothing for her to say in response. Her face heats despite her attempts to control her embarrassment. Damned by her own verbal slip up. She bites the inside of her lip, hard. Needless to say those poor range targets were now doomed.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes

Thank you for the continued reviews and feedback.

Hello to all the regulars and welcome to the new followers and those who favorited this story or me recently.

Thank you also to those who have noticed a few errors that crept in and have been kind enough to point them out. I have made the corrections.

4 chapters to go. Whilst the remaining episode are substantially complete, there are some final edits and extra QA checks to be performed on them. This might mean there may be a slightly longer gap between postings. However, please do not be concerned, the story will be fully published within the next 2 weeks – if only because my wife and I are off to a tropical paradise (hint Nathan Fillion is there now) for a well-earned vacation!
Chapter Summary

It is still the Festive Season, but what should a time of celebration, new hope and plans for the future is about to be torn apart, broken as secrets and crimes are revealed.

California, 29th December.

God she hates LAX! It is never quiet, especially around Christmas. It was two days before New Year's and it was still crowded to near beyond capacity with human cargo milling seemingly aimlessly. But it would be worth it. She was hoping to have an entire week's leave taking it well into the New Year. Her first break in almost a year of mainly six and often seven day weeks.

To make her transit simpler she had checked her all her gear, gun included. Even so it requires a detour to the secured cargo area to pick up her tactical bag containing the Sig (secured in a GPS tagged lock box her phone tracks constantly) and ammunition.

The TSA ape at the desk had major interpersonal skill deficiencies but Clare kept her cool and collected her kit without causing an incident. She didn't even need to flash her Federal id card. She waited until she was safely inside her rental before unlocking the case and retrieving her sidearm, loading the magazines, inserting one clip and strapping on.

Almost two hours later….

It had been a while but once traveled she never forgets a route. She turns her hire car up the more than dusty track, past sun blasted vegetation, and onto the property nestled in the California country-side on the border of Chino Hills State Park. Ahead, visible barely from the entrance gate is a low-set ranch house, and larger, much taller barn standing off to the right, both sitting near center of a couple of acres of black brown vegetation. The drought sure is biting more than bit. It had been so much greener if not quite lush the last time she was here. She was very much of a mind that climate changes and especially water security were national security concerns. Africa had only reinforced that. Religion just stirred the pot again, especially in the poorer regions of the world. But it was economics and existence that drove the majority of individuals. If only they had national policy that more attuned to that.

Pulling into the much newer lean-to car port beside the old barn, she exits the car and heads towards the single story ranch house, passing the converted Jeep with the wheelchair roof rack and the official disabled sticker countered balanced by the 'Disabled but Deadly' sign over a pair of crossed rifles sporting scopes superimposed on cross-hairs.

Despite the warmth of the winter sun she keep her lightweight jacket on. Prolonged service in the trouble spots of the world leaving her acclimatized despite coming from a New York winter, and she knows she will feel the difference once in the shade. Plus she never willingly displayed her armed status unless absolutely necessary.

The ramp leading up to porch is maybe the only other immediate visual clue that the resident may
not be fully mobile.

And there, at the top of the ramp, she is. Waiting for her. Her colleague, and friend, Stacey Steiber. A former US Treasury Special Agent, she now runs west coast operations for Taylor Matthews. To her friends she is Sass. Sass is also another of Derek's personal recruits to the firm. The former SEAL having picked her out and approached her, much as he had done for herself.

"Hey Stacey." She covers the distance between them easily and leans forward and brushes kisses to both cheeks, forms arms bridging her shoulders.

"It's good to see you Clare. It's been too long."

Formalities over that revert to their nicknames "You too Sass. Thanks for inviting me out here."

"You're welcome to come and stay any time Calamity, you know that." There is a touch of her namesake in that – the handle was extremely apt - and Clare deserves it. She had not been to visit for ages. Despite multiple invites. Their friendship had been natural once they met at the command conference, and they are both honest enough that in the beginning it had much to do with the loneliness of command for the females. Taylor Matthews is very much unique in any industry let alone security. Females running both major operations centers.

She watches as her host spins the wheelchair around on the spot, triceps tight against the pale green polo. "Wine?"

"Of course. White if you've got it."

"Silly question. Got any others?"

"Still got guns of steel?" If anything the arms are even tighter than before. She is obviously staying in shape. Clare knows that there is a gymnasium on the property, in the old barn. It was the first project after the wheelchair access for the house and other similar lifestyle essentials were done.

"You're joking aren't you? That sounded still awfully like a question Calamity?"

"Maybe it is. God I know I don't get as much work out time as I would like. It must be the same for you."

"Well that's nice, I hope you are not insulting your host within minutes of arriving."

"Admit it. You get nervous if people are nice to you. Worse if they pity you."

"Ain't that the truth? You and me both. We're a little fucked up, bear the scars. But still kick arse."

She turns one handed, a tall wine class full of cool liquid for her guest. Bubbles gently rise up. Something a little different to the Californian style French-in-name-only wines she drinks.

"Damn straight," Clare affirms. "Cheers."

"Cheers," Sass replies sinking half her contents. "I have some supper on in the kitchen."

"No barbecue?"

"Not today. That would likely bring the nosy neighbors over, and I want you to myself for today."

"No arguments there." She could do with a bit of quiet time. Just the two of them. "Do you need a hand with anything?"
"Nah. All under control. Be ready in twenty. How was the flight?"

"Okay. I guess flying business class is something I could get used to. LAX terrible as ever."

"You hate that place. But you didn't beat up any TSA goons this time I take it. How long you here for? You didn't say on the phone."

"Four to six days. Depends. Through 'til four days after New Year's if you'll have me, and work doesn't need me."

"Absolutely." Her host eyes her, clearly thinking. "You're trying to catch Tim and Derek when they visit."

"That definitely wasn't a question."

"Don't dodge. I know you Calamity."

"Fair enough." She takes a big swig of wine. "They're giving me the run around about the Castles and the Regal investigation. Not sure if the two are directly connected right now. But I think the two are. And I think it has to do with all the rumors of a big-time east coast politician under investigation. But I can't get a thing out of them over the phone."

"You know you're not supposed to mention that outside of a secure office." It wasn't a serious admonishment.

"Yeah, well you know me and information security. If it was operational security, that's something entirely different. Plus there is no one in range."

"Amen to that." They both drink.

"You going to gate-crash or try an' score an invite?"

"Well I could ask you. But I figure if I hang out at the office for a day or two, I'll get an opportunity. I know their schedule has them out here in the next week. They've been ignoring New York for some reason."

"Well if you are in the office you gotta know that you'll get some interest and competition too. More like none-too-friendly-if-intense opposition to be honest. A whole bunch of the west coast crew want another chance to take you down."

On Clare's last visit, over fourteen months ago, had scored a clean seven-nil on the sparring mats against men and women, and the last two a pair of experienced operators. In fact the last fight against those considered the best men in the east coast command. It had been close but she had won.

"I was counting on it. Need some practice to stay sharp."

Stacey's scoff told the story. "Really? I'm still not betting against you, and I can't bet against my own teams. But other than trying to surprise our bosses, you got anything else planned?"

"Nope. Well except your hot tub, please tell me it is working and not a victim of the drought, and maybe some sunbathing."

"I don't run domestic animals and most of the local wildlife has skedaddled so the well is okay. Both of them naked I assume."
"Damn right. One of the reasons I come here. No one questions or judges. Plus the all over tan looks great."

"But to put your mind at rest, the hot tub is heated and ready to go. And sunbathing will have to wait till tomorrow," she eyes the setting sun.

"That's fine. I'll just grab my gear from the car and chuck it in the guest room."

"Make yourself at home."

A quick journey to the car and she returns with her carry on bag and the gear bag she retrieved from security. The guest bedroom is off to the left and takes only minutes to stash her gear before heading back out. She travels light. Her pistol is still on her hip. Never that light.

She pauses by the door. There is a loaded HK417 rifle up against the inside of the door frame. Clare appraises the weapon with a professional eye. Sixteen inch barrel, Picatinny rails, tactical light, plastic magazine with transparent stripe for showing how many of the twenty rounds of 7.62 mm were remaining, fore stock grip, and what looks like an ACOG 6x48 with small reflex sight combination. A serious piece of weaponry. Considerable stopping power with good reach despite the shorter barrel but that at least would allow it to be used indoors as well.

There was a very good reason for it. Stacey had promised no one would ever take her again, surprise or not. Her Secret Service career had been ended after her capture and torture by currency counterfeiters when she had been in long-term undercover and been betrayed when operational security had been compromised. Now she is always prepared. Properly prepared. Never compromises. Never surrender.

"So how about you show me that new pistol of yours. I've been hearing good things about the P229 Elite." Rarely unarmed, even here, Clare reaches to her waist and produces her weapon from the holster, and after a quick safety check holds it out butt first for Stacey to take.

"What are you using?" she inquires of Sass.

"For business, mainly the older P226's and Glocks. The latter are mainly for the temps we take on as everyone knows how to use them. Our workload out here is different to the East Coast. A lot more basic grunt work. But rules still apply. Company weapons only. Personally I still love a good Forty-Five."

Handing back Clare's gun, she reaches into the wheelchair with her free hand, and rapidly produces a matt black handgun which she offers butt first to her guest. "Smith and Wesson M&P45. Ten plus one. Four inch barrel."

Clare hefts the gun, aims it downrange at an imaginary target, and assesses the feel. "Polymers make a huge difference. This is lighter than my P229 and yet carries eleven forty-five caliber rounds."

"Yeah it does. But you have to hold on tight and watch the recoil. Not a gun for amateurs."

Her scoff is scathing, "Like either of us qualify for that category."

"We'll hit the ranges one of the days if you want." Remind each other how professional they are. How competitive too.

"Sounds like a plan. I want to shoot that HK you have propping up the door."
"You like that? It is a beauty and I have the longer twenty inch barrel too. Only takes a few minutes to change. Improves accuracy a reasonable amount too. The sixteen inch barrel is a good compromise for handling."

"Yeah I do like it. Heard good things about it. We don't have much aside from pistols on the east coast due to regulations and the type of work we do. Sure most of us shoot long arms to stay qualified but we really don't carry more than pistols almost all the time."

"Well strange you should say that. I've got a second 417 if you want it." It was so not a question. "Call it a Christmas present."

"Wow. You never did things by half. Thanks Sass." She's already thinking about the logistics. Shipping the weapon back, how to register and store a military grade battle rifle in New York. She'll work something out. "I didn't get you anything."

"You don't need to. You know better than that. Just having someone hanging out here is good enough. We'll work out how to get that 417 over to New York. You can learn why I prefer it over the other gear we have on offer."

"Great! You're a real star you know that Sass. I take it most of the rest of the team prefer the smaller rounds?"

"Yeah they do. Most of the team go with weapons chambered for 5.56 and for what we do that works mostly. A lot still go with a M4 variant, but a few enlightened ones are using the HK416. It's the little brother to the one of mine."

"Enough about work. Tell me about these nosy neighbors because clearly they're not that annoying judging from your tone." She stares hard at the woman in the wheelchair who merely takes a swig of wine before answering.

"Guess they aren't that, well not too much. Neighbors yes, nosy just a smidgen. Mark and his stepbrother Tyler. Live next block over to east.

"So you and Mark?" It is an educated guess.

"A couple of dates. That's all so far. He's divorced."

"There is more to it than that." There always is.

"The step-brother, Tyler, has had some life issues so Mark is kept busy with him. Seems like a good enough kid. He's less than half Mark's age. Some late life fling by their mutual dad. Despite that they seem close, like family."

Clare bites back on what was close to an automatic comment on how family was not always close. Instead she digs a little deeper, "So how did you meet?"

"The local hardware store. I was getting some lumber and making sure that they didn't rip me off."

The eye roll says it all. A woman, disabled at that. Too many men would see that as an opportunity to be taken. She and Sass worked had to ensure those sort of men were always disappointed, if not humiliated if the situation allowed it.

"The two of them were nearby when I gave my address, and they heard. May have been trying to overhear. Figured that I was the new neighbor, introduced themselves, kinda went from there.

"They've been helping out with the fit out in the barn, and I've been letting them work out for free."
"So how is the gym going?" Sass had started construction of the gym in the barn as soon as the ramp to the house was complete.

"You can check it out tomorrow. See if you can keep up."

She shakes her head. "So back to Mark."

"Oh God!"

She laughs at the wheelchair bound woman. "Go on. Fill me in." She smirks. "So has he filled you in?"

"Oh crap. You spend too much time with immature boys."

"And men."

"Same-same really. But no to that terrible question. A couple of dates as I told you. There may have been some kissing," she concedes.

Clare will settle for that. Happy for her friend. "You like him?"

"I do. But it is slow burn. I'm always working. And this," she waves at her wheel chair. "He has Tyler. And the farm. But I'm hopeful."

"Then I'm pleased for you. But I still want to meet him at least."

"I'll see what I can do. But just to make a casual observation. You come out here, ostensibly to see me, and all you ask me to do is arrange for you to meet men. Is there something you want to tell me?" She asks archly and clearly finds that nearly hilarious.

For her part Clare makes a face and acknowledges the repartee. "Touché." They clink glasses. "Well do you have any charming women to introduce me to?"

"God no. I remember the last time I tried to match make for you. Not going there again."

"Oh crap. Yeah. Her. Miss-I'll-try-lesbian-sex-its-so-cool. So not doing that again. Even Rick Castle makes a better wing-man."

"Yeah well you can tell me that story properly some time."

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**New York. Warehouse in Washington Heights.**

He didn't think that Bracken and Court knew of this location but he was taking no chances not after the bastard Court's surprise visit to his offices.

He hadn't enjoyed Christmas. Then he never had. Fucking white man's holiday. Kwanza was no better except that it lasted seven days, and was good for business. Which was all that mattered. He didn't care who his customers were so long as they all paid for his product. He didn't give a damn what festivity it was, or what color they were, so long as their money was green and legal.

It had been a productive period from the drugs perspective. But when you have someone trying to kill or at best frame you, then that tends to detract a little from the whole season of goodwill thing.

Killing the cop had been a rash move. But let no one say that Vulcan Simmons did not have balls. He had expected extra heat but it appears that his seat-of-the-pants decision may pay off. The cops
had fingered someone else for the shooter or at least for fleeing the crime scene. His own foot soldiers were loyal. They would keep silent. Certainly if they knew what was good for them. Didn't actually hurt that one of the key witnesses had been iced by Court.

His major issue was not with the cops. It was his partners. Well employer/boss/blackmailer really. His problem was, and had been for more than a decade, William Bracken. Damn his stupidity for getting 'into bed' with the former DA. The man was bound to come unstuck. He was essentially just too clever for his own good, and too wrapped up in that self-belief. But Bracken had the goods on him. The hard evidence. The very thing the NYPD, and DEA had been searching for years. And Bracken had possessed it for most of those years. Courtesy of that crooked cop who busted him but give him an out. Turned him. Worst and first real mistake he ever made, until made a far worse one when he agreed to work for Bracken. Should have taken the jail time, it would have been short back then. Now it would be for life. Well at least Raglan had got his. Of a course slow death by cancer was far more deserved than the quick blow of a sniper's bullet but then how was Bracken's contract killer supposed to know that?

Just as bad, if not worse, was James Court. The fucking former-soldier/spy was on the surface the enforcer and loyal ally for Bracken, but he doubted that. The man's very actions in New York showed elements of independent action and goals. This was actually a sensible course. No honor among thieves, but if James Court was openly showing signs of that, then the end must be nigh. The former CIA agent was nothing if not calculating. Not to mention dangerous. He had him watched closely when his men could track him. Which was not always. That irked him, and he knew if should concern him more, on the rare occasions he contemplated such things.

Of course in turn the pair had good reason to mistrust him. He had been skimming at an extra five off the top of the money that was cleared for Future First. Not that his agreed commission was paltry but it was almost purely a demonstration of his control and ego. To show he could without repercussions. He was pretty sure Court and Bracken suspected but it gave him a rise to know they could effectively do nothing. At least for now.

He wanted to break something. Hurt something. Someone. Revenge for Court's physical and mental blows from the last surprise visit. He didn't give a shit about the men they had killed. Now replacing Clarice, his long term secretary, well that had been a problem. She had broken down so hard he had arranged for her to go stay far away with close supervision. If she became unreliable then well, she would be taken care of. Everyone who worked for him knew how it was. Brutal. But well rewarded.

He didn't often use his own product. But he felt the need for release. A couple of girls, no strike that, he'd have some ladies, with a bit of experience and something to hang on to. Ones who knew the ropes and wouldn't flake at the first signs of his physicality. He'd scratch a couple of itches tonight.

Look at his problems tomorrow. He was certain that they would still be there.

Outside the office that sits in one corner of the warehouse, were nineteen men. Nature or nurture had given them a bulk that didn't quite hide the body armour and the arsenal of weaponry. Their boss was taking no chances, and after the last deadly debacle these guards were at least alert and better prepared. There were a dozen more in the vicinity of the building should they be required. Including a couple who had trained as marksmen in the military. Woe unto anyone trying to take him out.

Court had done him a favour with his execution of some of his previous security. Now everyone took it seriously. And only two of his team had balked and then bailed. He was proud of that. But
he made it clear from this point on that no further departures would be tolerated.

Plus this was his home ground. Intruders were not welcome and often treated harshly, even fatally. Everyone from that stupid lawyer years ago, campaigners, cops, and worst of all, politicians. They learnt or they paid the price.

**Washington DC**

After the mandatory holidays – even for the AG's team - Sorenson was glad to be headed back to the office. He had got out of town to spend a couple of days with his parents.

He still could not shake the feeling he was been watched. Even though he had not seen any evidence of a tail since that one event on Christmas Eve. He had reported it but scans and checks had revealed nothing and there had been no other adverse incidents since the break in at McCord's.

First thing that morning, he had attended a meeting with the local homicide detectives that unsurprisingly had no delivered new information or leads. All were equally frustrated. The female lead detective, Munro, was especially despondent over the lack of evidence and the extremely slight chance of finding the killer.

They were certain that whoever had killed Gennifer Dunrack was a professional. Not piece of serious evidence, no security camera footage, even from odd angles, nothing. A damn ghost.

The follow up meeting with the victims parents was worse. He was respectful and composed. They were not. He could hardly blame them. The mother simply cried and the father little better with the bitter discovery that all their friends' connections and bluster gave them nothing.

Next on the list was Matthew Weston. The Senator's aide. Unfortunately he was not in town and was unable to be interviewed at that time. Background information had revealed the sad family history. He would be with his crippled and now terminally ill brother at the hospice.

Having finished all those tasks he is heading back to the Department of Justice. An 'all hands' meeting has been called for the team.

Reaching the modern annex that housed the team, he notices that the security was tighter now. All the guards are now in pairs. Also immediately noticeable were the tactical vests bulking up their frames. And beyond the first team, the other pairs carried MP-5 submachine guns or carbines. Not the usual security posture.

Still pensive and considering the implications of the extra firepower on public display he swipes in and enters the offices to find McCord was waiting.

There is a small smile on her face. Only a small one but probably the most expressive he had seen her in weeks. He momentarily takes heart from that before remembering the extra security.

"Morning Sorenson. Dump your coat and join us in Conference Room Three." McCord's tone of voice doesn't exactly convey positivity.

He is not quite the last one to arrive. Conference Room Three was the largest of the secured rooms. Tempered to prevent monitoring, privacy glass, and pass coded doors. The entire team occupied all the seats in the room, plus more than a couple standing or leaning against walls. Pretty much all of the Task Force's human resources had now been dragged into the investigation, putting other
projects on hold.

Vallante nods to him and he finds a seat reserved next to the one McCord has taken, so he sits, and
then the team is bought up to date on progress by their director.

The boss keeps what appears to be the gist of his briefing short and sharp. The good news, and
most probable reason for McCord's faint optimism, is that the Attorney General had signed off on
the evidence for the financial crimes including the RICO provisions. The kicker was that the
murder and conspiracy to murder charges were not yet over-the-line and work would need continue
on those. The charges were to be presented to key members of the Senate Disciplinary Committee
in coming days. Only then would an arrest warrant be sought. In the meantime, the suspect was
under increased observation but has shown no sign of any abnormal behaviour including evidence
of his preparing to flee. Somehow Sorensen knows it is not in the Senator's nature, something
about the man seemed primed for a confrontation.

The director pauses, says a few cursory words of thanks, and them seemingly stops speaking. For
most of the occupants of this room, their job was done for now. A few look to rise, but Vallante
seems to have second thoughts and steps back up to the microphone at the front of the room, and
his team stop, and sink back to their original positions.

"I know this had been a tough, well tougher, few weeks. Longer hours, away from family and
friends, especially tough given the festive season." This gets a few rye chuckles, half the team don't
have family, and most of the others seemingly hang out at work to escape theirs with a few
exceptions.

"All of you deserve credit and acknowledgement for how we have pulled the case together. This
started small and has snowballed. Most of you are unaware of the full gamut of what has been
uncovered in this investigations. Those that are, know this is atypical, even for us. A very big case
with profound implications at a national level. But also very personal for the victims and their
families. I know we are not always able to serve the best interests of justice but on this occasion I
think we may.

"Atypically for this town, there has been little outside interference and while there have been leaks
but they have not come from this team. I am so very proud of that."

"Of course, the spotlight will fall elsewhere and that is important. We do not seek credit. Nor the
limelight."

"For those of you directly involved in the case please remember that there is a long way to go."

"Senator William Bracken is a powerful man. And by all accounts is not going to willingly give up
that power.

"If the evidence we have gathered is correct, and the investigating team believe it to be, then he has
access to private military contractors and has made use of them both abroad and domestically. The
exact nature of their role has yet to be determined but we all know it not to sell Girl Scout cookies."
There is a faint murmur of chuckles from a few in the audience.

"So please take care. We do not yet understand what he may do if he feels he is provoked or has no
other options. Security has been tightened. All field operations are to be in pairs at a minimum and
tracked at all times."

The glances between the occupants are no longer quite so light-hearted as they realise the
implications of that statement. The security is there for a reason.
The Hamptons.

They are having New Year's in the Hamptons. Alexis and Martha have delayed their return to the city to join them for tonight.

Unsurprising they had received invitations to multiple New Year's Eve events. What was new was that this time the invitations were mainly to them as a couple. Some are personal and well intentioned. Other are simply courtesy and then others are self-serving, looking for publicity, association and possibly more.

They had an invite from the Mayor – she still won't call him Bob, despite everyone else including the man himself insisting – for the the 'Big Bash', the major social event back in the City but that would be way too public, at least too soon for Kate. She's not ready to share again that much again. Nor share him. Here in the Hamptons it would be more akin to dipping their, or rather her, toes in the water. Give her time to get comfortable. Share him a little. Despite the decision not to go to the Mayor's party, she treasures the invitation addressed to 'Ms. Katherine Beckett and Mr. Richard Castle', and with a handwritten note from Bob. It is actually their first piece of jointly addressed mail that was not a bill or NYPD administrative document. It is going in her keepsake box.

Having declined the Mayor's invitation, and all the others from events in New York, and two on the West Coast, they had decided that they will attend the one of the local balls here in the Hamptons. Martha had suggested several events – apparently she is a connoisseur of such things and manages to attend several each year too. They had dragged Alexis into the decision making and somehow despite three or four different perspectives had managed to find the nearly perfect event. Small numbers, only one hundred and twenty guests, a live band, a little pricier than Kate expected but it is for charity. And it is the Hamptons.

But Kate is grateful for the apparent low key nature of the event. They'll get their picture taken but that doesn't matter as they have already been outed. By themselves. First individually and then at the Literary Luncheon. She is slowly getting used to the idea of their public presence as couple. One where she may not always be able to shelter behind her gold shield on police business. She hopes any interest in them is short-lived.

For his part Rick was happy with anything Kate offered. It was ridiculous the lengths he sometimes went to try and keep her on-side and happy. Even at a cost to himself. He did so willingly and with an element of desperation he recognises now as being unnecessary. She is fully committed to them. Regardless at heart he can still be desperately insecure about her. All those years waiting. The other men. Only two. He shouldn't judge her for that. After all he was hardly a monk during the first couple of years. He should have been braver. Not waited so long. But they are moving past that.

At the Christmas gathering Kate, Mother, Alexis, even Lanie, had all told him that he was entitled to live his life without trying to pander to every one of Kate's phobias or his irrational or otherwise interpretation of them. It wasn't working all the time but he did feel more settled. Not so much because of what others had told, but what Kate did, and sometimes said. She still prefers actions over prose and he loves the actions they get up to. Most of the time.

Still he is enough of an open book that Kate takes charge of the discussion one afternoon when Alexis and Martha had headed out for post-Christmas shopping and beauty treatment.

"Rick."

"Hmmm." He looks up so she has his full attention.
"Remember our discussions?" He looks momentarily puzzled, like he is trying to determine the right answer. Instead he settles for a nod, maybe still hedging his bets about the topic.

"Nothing has changed." She sees recognition clearly dawn in his eyes which smile along with his mouth.

"I know I shouldn't. It's just that I worry. That one day you'll wake up and realise that you can do better than me."

"Stop right there. I don't want anything else. Anyone else. I just want you."

"But...." She smoothers his objection with her mouth. It is so good that they are alone again. She's going take advantage of their privacy, the heating and her own sudden desperate need for him. Oh and remove a little bit of that lingering uncertainty.

The Hamptons House, New Year's Eve.

They had eaten a home, choosing only to attend the party segment of the evening. There would be a light supper available if they desired but truth be told they were still feeling the indulgences of the last week. In addition there will be aperitifs and canapes available during the course of the evening.

Of course preparations had taken their usual course. He'd produced a red cummerbund from the wardrobe like a matador's cape and she had chased him round room until he agreed not to wear it. She knows he is merely teasing, but she will allow it. It makes for nice distraction from his usual investigations into her underwear. He'd find out later anyway. She is satisfied he does not know what will be underneath her dress – a gift delivered in secret by Lanie, or the dress itself, both surprises for soon and much later. Plus she did not want him to ruin the gorgeous vision that he is with that dreadful fashion faux-pas. Once he is done she shepherds him out of their room so she can get changed.

With her makeup and hair down, the lingerie, dress and shoes will not take long.

Kate catches them by surprise with the rest of the family assembled downstairs waiting for the limousine.

Rick is speechless but she can feel his eyes boring into her, fascinated by her dress but also curious about what lies beneath.

Naturally his mother gets the first words in. "Katherine, don't you look exquisite. The dress is beautiful. Doesn't she look great Richard." The last is delivered as an admonishment to her currently mute son. Both Alexis and Kate "You do look great Kate." Alexis adds with a wink. Kate suspects Alexis may have peeked when guarding the dress in her wardrobe.

"Kate." Just her name is laden with so much meaning as Rick finally speaks. "Mother is right, you do look beautiful. I'm the luckiest guy in the world," and with that he leans in and kisses her cheek and then her lips. She doesn't let him escape, and increases the intensity of the kiss, just briefly.

"Thank you."

A cough from stage left interrupts and Kate diverts here attention.
"Wow Martha. You look fantastic. And only two, or is that three or four colors," Kate teases.

Martha is actually not her usual assault on the senses. Her black and ivory gown is vintage and looks simply elegant. Of course there is only so much subtlety she can tolerate and her jewelry more than compensates but as ever she carries it off.

"Oh hush. Please don't you start Katherine. It is bad enough with those two."

Alexis gives her the thumbs up, Kate winks back in response even as the youngest among them prolongs the teasing but changing target. "Hey I object!" objects Alexis, "it's all him."

Alexis' pale blue gown is offset by her hair and a striking piece of jewelry that sits high on her throat. A complex tangle of white gold and red and green gems more like a choker which should overwhelm her pale features but doesn't. Matching red and green glitters from small drop ear rings, and a single ring on her right hand. One Kate recognizes. A family heirloom from Martha.

Kate in contrast has left her throat unadorned and the rest of her jewelry minimal. Just the pair of diamond ear-rings that Rick had gifted her on Christmas Day. And the handcuff bracelet that was an earlier gift. No rings. More than enough space for one more, should it appear?

The man in question remains silent, obviously familiar with how this goes. He does look extremely debonair in his fitted tuxedo which hugs all the right places. Kate is proud of the effort he has put into their fitness routine. She hopes he will keep it up.

"Oh yes, you do. Don't think I don't notice. Even if it is more careful than the oaf beside you."

"Thank you Mother. You know how to make a man feel special."

"Oh I certainly do." Her slightly faux seductive tone enough to silence the room full of smart people with sharp tongues.

And with that Martha wins the round.

Fortunately the crunch of the gravel on the driveway announces the arrival of the limousine and saves them all.

And with that they are off to the ball.

They certainly make an impression despite her innate desire not to draw attention. It's hardly surprising.

She's dressed in a full length ivory and red silk gown that flows and yet clings and caresses her lithe body. His bow tie is the same scarlet splash against the pressed white of his dress shirt and the charcoal black of his tuxedo and dress pants. Together the pair, well they're even more attractive than as singles. The weight he's lost since his shooting and his training have him even more striking and ruggedly handsome up close than Kate would ever admit too. This evening he is clean shaven, his hair within a faction of being more perfect than hers.

And she's not hiding the attraction and overwhelming feeling she has for him. They're so obviously a couple. Partners and more. There is no hiding how close they are. What was previously a secret except to a few at the Precinct now open for the world to see. But here in public she no longer cares. She claims him as hers and them as us.

So naturally others look, gaze even steer. Their audience would probably even do so without their
semi-celebrity status. They circulate slowly, carefully, maintaining their detachment as far as possible. Politely of course. The smile on her beautiful face captivates more than the man who loves her, and his wit and charm beguile almost as many.

Kate loves the fact that almost no one calls her Nikki or even Detective. Miss Beckett or Kate, or Katherine this evening. The Hamptons is just that bit more refined than her home town. She would not normally be too bothered but it feels nice.

These weeks in the Hamptons are the longest she has been away from the job since her shooting and even then with the fear of the sniper, the official follow-ups, and her incapacitation made it still feel like being on the job. This time it is clearly not the same. And for the first time she ponders what it would be like to be able to step away from the murder and crime for good. Rick offers her that option even if he

They get some pictures taken by the official event photographer. One or more from the set will go to Paula for a press release. Beckett would have protested once upon a time, but the flash of camera phones and the odd pocket camera indicate others are taking pictures of them too. The ones in the paper may as well be in focus and flattering. Castle hands over his phone so the photographer can snap a few for them to keep and send directly to Jim and Lanie.

A little later and they are separated for a brief while. Or at least Kate hopes so.

Rick is off with some of the library committee, dragged into some brief meeting.

Kate had kept circulating, and despite the optimistic beginnings she had encountered a few ugly trolls when flying solo. So unwilling to face more banal conversation or worse the occasional sly and thankfully rare outright digs at her social status (admittedly only coming from a tiny segment of the attendees), Kate had retreated back to their table to wait for her partner.

She finds their table almost empty. The other sole occupant is Martha who is nursing what looks like a brandy.

"How you doing Kiddo?"

"Okay. This isn't really my thing. I like a party but this," she leaves the sentence unfinished, her waving arms completing the task.

"I understand. But dear, you're doing more than okay. The people that matter are more than impressed. If that concerns you, which I suspect it does not."

"Thank you. How about yourself? I would have expected you to still be out there Martha."

"Oh, I am pacing myself. That and there are a few surprise attendees I would rather not speak to. I had seen the guest list but some late comers obviously managed to slip in. Anyway you're here we can chat," and with that Martha moves closer.

"How is he really Katherine? Richard can be very closed up if he wishes."

Kate ponders for a moment how honest she should be.

"He's is doing really well physically. But at some stage we probably should get him into see a
therapist. He is nowhere as bad as I was but it would help for him to see a professional." Kate does not have to elucidate further for Martha.

"Thank you Katherine. For not sugar coating it. Richard rushes right past it. I sometimes think he puts on this act for everyone. He has been like that for so long.

"Richard has always been able to be strong for others. Friends at school, at college, and don't get me started on the romances. Kyra even when she broke his heart. More so with Meredith when she had her doubts about the pregnancy. Again for those he loves now. Alexis, myself, and you Katherine Beckett especially.

"What he has not always been as good at is being strong for himself. He needs the support of others. People he can rely on the same way. But he's had it so rarely and never completely, never enough. Not until now. And he really doesn't like to ask."

She could give pat assurances but she won't. Not to his mother who matters to her almost as much as Rick and Alexis.

"Martha, please let me try to explain. Much of why I waited so long, was because I couldn't see myself, believe in myself, to be that person for Rick. That person he deserved. Some days I do still have some doubts."

"Oh my Dear. Please don't do that. Don't doubt yourself. Taking the leave from your job, your announcing your relationship and love to the world, the time in the Hamptons. That is more than enough evidence."

"But I'm selfish Martha. That is one of my faults."

"And Richard wasn't? Isn't? It is okay to be selfish so long as you are not self-centred. Neither of you are."

"Thank you Martha. I know you have been a great support for us."

"No, thank you Katherine. My son, all of us are much better with you in our lives."

"And that is exactly where I intend to stay."

However, anything else they were going to discuss is lost when Rick returns with two flutes of champagne and another plate of nibbles.

Despite her misgivings the Hamptons New Year Ball is very enjoyable.

Kate almost cannot believe how much fun they have. Rick is in his element, and she is pleased to see how relaxed he is. The miasma from recent days is gone.

Alexis has a whole gaggle of admirers of her own. This time it is not just Martha who teases her son, she teases Rick and God Alexis does too. There are times the poor man does not know what which way to turn or how to react.

He get his revenge of sorts. Snags her when she has nothing in her hands and leads her away from the crowds. Somehow he finds a secluded spot for them to be, well, them.

She's just a little buzzed when he draws her away from the crowd and the dancing. He has clearly
scouted out the deserted ante-room. Her heart soars involuntarily.

As soon as they reach the privacy they make out carefully and murmur sweet somethings. She can admit that he gets her quite worked up. Taking a short break to cool their ardour leads to nothing more and shortly he leads her back to the crowds.

She can't but help be more than a little disappointed when they return to the main auditorium without him dropping to his knee. Once again she asks herself when did she become that girl?

They see the New Year in. They somehow manage to keep the midnight kiss just the right side of respectable. And she hugs with Alexis and Martha.

Alexis appears to have an admirer. Rick would be more unimpressed but Kate mostly distracts him, largely by letting his hands explore and discover a little of the temptation that lies beneath. Ever observant Martha gives her a wink. The Senior Castle also nods her head at the youngest. She'll keep an eye out on the young woman and her potential paramour.

Rick's discoveries underneath the silk of the dress have him very keen to return home. Kate wonders if they will be on their own in the limo. And if so, how Alexis and Martha will make their way back to the house.

Turns out that it is not necessary. Alexis appearing with her cover in time to join their limo ride back to the house, Martha just a few paces behind bestowing farewells seemingly on everyone.

Once home, they had retreated to their room, and locked the door once Rick has retrieved a fresh bottle of champagne, ice bucket and glasses.

She had kept the dress on, and Rick had been suitably awestruck by her underwear as he helped her out of it. She is so thanking Lanie sometime much later tomorrow or is that today?

Of course she is no longer wearing any of her outfit, their naked bodies flush with endorphin's and sweat.

She is still disappointed that Rick had not proposed at the ball or here, back home, even as their celebration of the New Year winds down to its conclusion.

Somehow he knows. Lying in his arms, he speaks as she can feel his heart still pounding against her back.

"Kate. Too many people. Too many strangers." He only manages partial sentences and she is proud of that. She had reduced him to a near breathless puddle. To be fair he had done the same to her.

He half-sits and rotates so he can clearly face her, leaning on his side, no longer afraid to favour his right side. "Didn't want to share the moment, or you. We had that small moment of privacy but I when it happens I want us to be alone for the longest time. And even when it is over I want to be able to share it with our family first. Not a crowd of mostly strangers."

"How did you know?" She ducks her head in, blushing a little, a tear leaking from her left eye.

"That you were disappointed. I know you Kate. Not everything but most of the important ones." He can't help the small smirk she can hear if not see. "Plus your poker-face isn't as fool-proof as you might think." But despite the twilight his thumb finds the tear track and then his lips descend to
touch the trail of moisture.

She dusks her head, the emotion momentarily overwhelming. The she turns her head back to him, enough that he can see her arched eyebrow that clearly indicates a modicum of disbelief at his last statement but never his actions.

He ignores that intrinsic wordless interplay, "But I want you to know that I fully intend to ask you. And soon," he promises. "Well this year at least."

She punches him gently and makes no remark on how that gives him three-hundred and sixty five days to man-up. She punches him again for good measure.

"However you ask, it is not as important as my answer."

He kisses her and she swears she hears him mumble 'Duh' against her mouth.

Infuriating man.

And then his hands do that thing, and she is forgetting all about her recent disappointment and more about the anticipation of a repeat performance.

California, 2nd January.

Clare had seen in the New Year in with Stacey and her neighbors, which had been fun. While at least it was after the younger brother had got over his disappointment that she was not interested in being a cougar for him to pounce on. She was pretty positive it was the fact that she put two throwing knives into the side of the barn gym within inches of his face that persuaded him she was more dangerous than he was used to.

With the socializing behind her, Clare was anxious to catch up with her bosses, and had been pleased to finally get the news yesterday that both Tim Matthews and Derek Taylor would be in the West Coast office the following day.

Clare had ridden in with Stacey before sunrise.

The Taylor Matthews facility in Orange County is much bigger than any other the company has, and is not for show. No customer meet-n-greet here. It is an operational hub with a constant bustle of coming and goings even in the holiday season.

Derek Taylor and Tim Matthews were due into LAX at 09:45 and would be at the facility by 11:00 am. Clare wanted to be ready for them.

10:58 am.

She was kind to them. She let them actually exit the company SUV before she appeared.

Neither appeared surprised to see her.

"Hello Clare. Nice to see you again. Happy New Year!" This from former SEAL Derek Taylor as he extended a hand.

Tim Matthews merely shook his head in gentle exasperation, "Hello Clare."
Stacey directed them into the secure conference room, and then pointedly spun on the spot and headed back to her office by the Ops Centre. No one doubted that she would be listening in.

"So Clare, now you have us cornered." Matthews was still seemingly amused by this.

She shrugged her shoulders. If they wanted to play games she could wait them out.

Stacey's voice came over the intercom. "Grow up! Or do I have to come in there?"

No one was entirely sure who the former Treasury agent was threatening but all decided to cut their losses.

Clare went first. "Sorry. But you have been shutting me out."

"Yes and we're sorry for that. But orders are orders Clare." Tim Matthews opens.

"Orders? On what? And why? We're a private company."

The two heads are a double act after all these years and his partner takes over.

"I think you can guess. And before we go any further, the instructions came from the top. The Attorney General was instructed that the loop be kept as small as possible. He in turn ordered us to comply. We have no choice. We may be a private company but our biggest customer is the United States Government."

Derek attempts to mollify her, "Clare, if we had assessed any threat to Rick and his family we would have acted to protect them with all the assets the company has."

She wants to believe, and something in her appearance must give her away.

"We have eyes on Bracken and most of his key people. We're tracking them – when and where we can. There are multiple agencies in on this."

"No intelligence is infallible. There are gaps."

"Don't lecture us Calamity. We know that just as well as you do. But you have to know it is not just domestic agencies working this."

"Oh great. That's really supposed to inspire confidence."

Listening in from her office, Stacey has been quiet long enough, and steps in to take some of the heat off her friend but also perhaps help her. "So what do we do now?" she asks across the intercom.

"You two are like twins separated at birth for everyone's safety," chirps Derrick.

"Well then everything that happens is you fault as you recruited both of us," fires back Stacey in full Sass-mode.

Clare speaks up, "We tell them. Like we should have been able to do so much earlier. For the record, I am still pissed about that."

"Noted. But you did follow orders. So thank you for that Clare. As for telling Rick and his family, I agree. It is time."

"They won't be happy. If you think Rick will be upset, Beckett may be beyond that. But maybe
"I'll take full responsibility for that Clare. Do you think he can control her?"

"Uncertain. She is impressive, but her mother's case is her weak spot. Rick Castle is the only one who can make her stand down but even then I would say on past evidence it is not certain. Beckett will have to want to. That is quite an adjustment. She could just as easily break."

"You may as well come into this room Sass." Derek instructs.

"On my way."

Once Stacey is in the room, the men brief their Operations leads on what they know. In short order the two get the low down on the case against 'Regal' and charges that he will be indicted with first, and those that need more evidence.

"So how much can I tell Rick and Beckett?"

"That Regal/Bracken is the target and that they have enough to charge him with felonies but not enough for her mother's death or any other. Yet."

She commandeers the secured conference room to make the call.

"You kicking us out?" Tim asks.

"Yep. And don't listen in." She orders.

"Got ya back." Stacey confirms, and she man-oeuvres her wheel chair to push Tim and Derek out of the room.

Clare takes a moment to compose herself and then calls Rick's mobile phone.

It takes almost a minute before it is answered. "Hello?"

"Rick its Clare. Happy New Year."

"Happy New Year to you too Clare. What's going on?"

"Where are you?"

"The Hamptons of course, We're not planning to be back in New York for a week or two. Why?"

"Can you please have Kate activate secure mode on her phone? And will call her in two minutes."

"Clare?"

"Two minutes Rick."

She hangs up. Takes a good thirty seconds to center herself and then calls up Beckett's company phone details. She punches the number into the secure landline, and presses 'dial'.

Two rings, then "Beckett."

"Hello Kate. Rick is there with you?"

"Of course." All bite and snap. Beckett is not happy. Well it is only going to get worse.
"I've got an update for you."

Feeling drained she takes a quick shower, but one emerging from the changing rooms she finds Stacey waiting with an eager contingent of not-so-fresh-meat. There are seven team members in their training gear and she can almost sense the anticipation boiling off them.

She spies Tim and Derek lurking in the background, grinning openly. And probably everyone else available just happens to be hanging around right now too. Bastards the lot of them!

There is no escaping the challenge laid down. She is going to have to spar with the best the West Coast team has to field before being able to do anything else. She tries glaring at Stacey who merely shrugs her shoulders and smiles back.

All her life she's been fighting males. First her brother and cousins, then in gyms because the army wouldn't let her until they finally did. In Special Forces there were no favors, no short-cuts, no mercy. Especially for females. Deadlier than male was maybe a joke once a long time ago. Not any more. Clare and been there and bore the scars.

She turns and heads back into change into her lightweight tactical gear, and heads straight to the mats. There must be twenty plus in the room waiting to see the long anticipated face off.

The first three bouts are against single combatants and the last, a younger guy takes her close before one her dirty tricks leaves him down and a little bloodied. Then comes the double team. This pair are ex LAPD SWAT but she comes through. One on one, or two on one, she got them every time. Not without some marks, there are already going to be a few bruises tomorrow and some sore muscles.

It takes the final thee to best her. She recognises the tall Hispanic former Marine, Marty, and his half-Scottish sidekick Rob and Connie the former Military Policewoman. Stacey's best team. Even with three on one it was a close run thing. Clare was angry and she focused that into her work but the three she is up against have been practising and it is their teamwork that undoes her. They negate her focus and fire with good communication and a willingness to sacrifice for their team mates but it means getting in close to take the brunt of Clare's strikes. In the end it is the Connie, the former MP, who pins her with a neck choke, after the two males crash tackle her. Not elegant, but effective.

They embrace at the end of the contest. Marty is going to have a lovely shiner for a few days, she can't tell with the heavily tattooed Rob where his bruises will be but they will be there. Connie is favouring her left leg, Clare had done a fair bit of damage to the right at close quarters just before the end. For her part she has a couple of contusions that will swell up later, and she can taste blood in her mouth.

There is applause, whistles and few cat-calls from the audience but it is all positive. Shaking hands all round, Clare bows once before heading back to the showers and her holiday clothes.

She enters Stacey's office, to find her friend with the airline booking screen open.

"So are you heading back Clare?" It is not really a question.

"Yes. I would like to stay as long as agreed but I need to get back tomorrow. Things are coming to a head."

"Sure. Of course. I'll put you on a midday flight."
"Great. Thanks Sass. I'm going to need to active a few of my New York team and interrupt their holidays. Can I do it from in here?"

"Sure. Use the computer on the other desk."

As Clare moves purposefully to the second desk in the office, she feels her friend's hand on her arm.

"Anything you need from here? I'd send people if you need them. Meanwhile, when we get home tonight we'll bundle up that HK 417. I think you might need it. I'll get Tim or Derek to get an expedited docket for New York and we'll get some federal paperwork for it."

"Appreciate it Stacey. By the way, who won the bets?"

"On the fight? No one. Tim and Derek took all the money and said it will be donated to charity. No one dared say anything!"

"Figures."

**Department of Justice, Washington DC.**

The rest of the office, even Vallante, have gone home, leaving only the two of them.

McCord and Sorenson stare at the evidence summaries again, and again, each time, it is one more time. They have two days before the Bracken indictments will be locked ahead of the planned arrests on the Monday. Most of the team are satisfied with the results but these two want more. They want him to face court on the murders he has commissioned. They want him to experience the full weight of the Justice Department and with it the Third Estate and then public opinion. Serious as they are financial crimes including campaign violations are unfortunately not attract much attention after the initial story breaks. Regrettably plenty of politicians of both parties have been prosecuted and even jailed for crimes, but rately for something as profound as murder.

They are so close. Just short of the crucial evidence to link Bracken to murder. Try as they might the smoking gun(s) had eluded them. But all the circumstantial evidence and the gaps painted a compelling story. Bracken was a cold hearted campaigner, not afraid to use intimidation and if necessary murder to secure his position. In his campaign for District Attorney it would appear that intimidation was enough but within years there were clues pointing to more violent options to secure his goals. Just not enough hard evidence. He cannot have cleaned up so well that there is not any, it us just that they have not found it.

They have him dead to rights for the campaign finance and a number of other financial crimes but this is the real deal. They want to expose him not just as another dodgy politician but as a criminal. A serious Class A felon. Falling short is not something they aim for, or want to settle for.

McCord is very impressed with Sorenson. He has settled in well, and despite the very high stakes for this investigation has handled himself well under pressure. She had already recommend to Vallante that he get his own team. Once this case is over. She has discovered that she needs him. He balances out her often high-intensity, rapid fire approach with a more measured, and if possible for a former FBI agent, moderately more relaxed attitude even while remaining focused and professional.

She likes him too. The square jaw, trim physique. It will never happen of course and not just because they are colleagues but she can secretly appreciate man candy. She shakes off the thought
and focuses back on the case again.

They are almost out of time. The time table is locked in as it has been agreed between multiple parties including the Senate leadership, the White House, the multiple levels of the Department of Justice. It is quite the coup regardless. In less than five days Bracken is going to be arrested, and unless they have a breakthrough only the charges agreed with the AG will be filled. Maybe something will stick.

Beside her Will Sorenson ponders something a little more negatively. One thing neither has been willing to openly contemplate is that maybe Bracken is not acting independently. Or worse still, he is protected. That would be a real issue.

New York. Thursday 3.08 am, The Loft

It is the third day of the new year, and Rick and Kate are back in New York much earlier than expected, and not literally just because it is the wee hours of a cold winter's morning.

It was not how they planned to return to the city, but Clare's phone call from California had caught them completely by surprise, and even while they had still been coming to terms with that information, Captain Gates had called Beckett and her news was sufficient to prompt the pair to action.

The end result is that they hastily packed the Jeep with a couple of suitcases and a cargo bag full of clothes and other essentials, filled an esky with contents from the fridge, selected some weapons from the gun safe, and locked the house up. Then raced back to New York in the middle of the night without telling anyone.

They had largely driven in silence with Kate at the wheel, and only the frequent touches from her partner to help keep her grounded. Both deliberately not talking especially around the news of the Bracken.

Welcome home Kate thinks as she finishes putting the last of the food in the fridge. There is plenty of room as it appears neither Alexis nor Martha is eating here regularly. She mentally adds grocery shopping to the tasks. Perhaps they will use one of Rick's home shopper services.

Except that for Kate the Loft is not yet home proper. She had barely had a chance to it to become home before they had departed for the Hamptons. She had not properly moved in before Rick had been shot, and challenges they had both faced after he was discharged from hospital had left her little time to adapt and she could admit to remaining a little ambivalent about their New York abode. When she had confessed this to Rick this his advice was simple. Give it time.

But time was something that appeared illusive just now.

Captain Gate's call was to inform her that the Civil Service exams that had been delayed before Christmas have now been bought forward and in typical fashion sprung on the candidates with less than a week's notice. Attendance is not obligatory given that short notice, but any alternate exam block is not yet scheduled, and Kate – and Rick too - does not want to miss her chance. Their chance. Their best shot at what seems sometimes to be the last opportunity for ensuring they both get to continue working together.

Gates had been fairly abrupt but apologetic when she called last night. They had packed and then it had been a rushed trip from the Hamptons back to the city arriving in the early hours of the
morning. Rick would call the Hampton's housekeepers to tidy up after them tomorrow. Or is that today.

The Loft was empty. Martha and Alexis had returned to the city on New Years' Day but Alexis staying the night with friends and Martha, well Martha was somewhere else.

Parking any further thoughts she turned off the kitchen lights and padded through to their bedroom. They had not bothered to unpack the bags of cloths, and they had barely undressed before collapsing into bed. As Kate placed her loaded SIG on her bedside table, she observed her partner's own SIG already positioned by his sleeping position.

Rick returned from the bathroom and climbed into their bed and promptly wrapped her in bear hug, before softly kissing her, and murmuring good night. He is out like a light in a matter of moments. She'll do her best to follow him, hoping for a night's uninterrupted sleep, grateful for his zealous commitment to heal her broken heart.

he Loft, New York, Thursday. Early.

Naturally Kate awoke first and after kissing a comatose Rick had rolled out bed, and into the kitchen, snatching up her SIG as she shivered in the slightly too cool air of the loft.

It was now 8.06 am. She knew that because the last time she checked the clock on her phone it had been 8.04 am.

Coffee was not helping, a rare occurrence, especially for her. She couldn't quite place why.

Despite the familiarity of the Loft and quite a few of her own things decorating the space including their bedroom, Kate had not slept well. It didn't feel like home yet. The reality is that she had spent more time at his/their house in the Hamptons than in the Loft. It wasn't meant to be that way but it was.

Not so long ago she would have left. Headed to her apartment (no longer an option), Lanie's or her Dad, or even the cabin. Run/hide is probably more accurate. Now there is no possibly of anywhere but here, and she had no desire to flee despite all that was eating at her.

She will admit to be a little concerned about being ready for the Public Service exam. She has high standards and expectations of herself. Probably higher than the Captain's. Once Gates had told her about the pre-Christmas delay, she had slacked off, fully expecting to have plenty of time to pick it up in the New Year. She was no stranger to late nights and study. She would have that under control, if a little rushed. Nothing untoward with that situation. But she might not give as good an account of herself as she should.

What was naturally dominating her thoughts was the news about Bracken. Clare's information had been harder to hear, even if they had both already believed to near certainty that the politician under investigation had been Bracken. Rick had not just been surprised but also angry about the lack of disclosure on the issues from Tim Matthews and Derek Taylor. They were his friends, and he was feeling a little betrayed.

Once he had recovered from his tantrum Rick as ever had been good about the whole thing. Offering to give her some space before they had even left the Hamptons. She had declined, promising not to abandon him. He had simply nodded and had even refrained from passing comment in the following hours. Of course it is only hours since their arrival back in New York and they have been asleep for most it.
As she does have an imminent examination she decides to pull out her study materials and try and do some revision for the exam. Monday is just four days away.

Rick finally emerges from the bedroom and pecks her cheek before silently pouring himself and a coffee and refilling Kate's mug.

Rick had texted Alexis that they arrived home in the early hours, and shortly before 10am Alexis arrives at the Loft. She greets her father and Kate warmly but makes herself scarce to allow Kate to study in peace but not before offering to take Rick somewhere in case he becomes too much.

But they both decline that offer. They're staying in as agreed. No being seen in public just yet. Especially for reasons they are yet to explain to the rest of the family.

She just wants to get the exam over with and then perhaps slink back to the Hamptons with her boyfriend, not yet ready for the New York experience or facing everything that would come when Bracken was charged.

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**Washington DC, Thursday**

James Court really wanted to punch the woman in front of him. Actually shooting her would be more satisfying, stabbing her was a no (knives were not his thing unless it was the last resort), but he would settle for punching if nothing else was on offer. He didn't care about the so-called weaker sex. If she wanted to play in a man's world then she should wear the consequences. Especially if she continued to sit across from him doing so a damn poor job of not being insufferably smug.

For her part, Deputy US Attorney General Michelle Store, did not like the man opposite her either. But she was keeping her calm based on a recently shared security assessment for the AG's team. Despite his attire and usual manner, James Court was a dangerous foe. And it was not her job – today at least – to bait him – too much. That was to be someone else's pleasure.

"Mister Court," the phrased as a question, making all in the room aware that more was known than was being said, "the subpoena presented to you today requires that you provide all information in your possession regarding the Senator's financial matters.

"Ms Store, you are no doubt aware that I am not the Senator's financial advisor, or campaign manager nor his Chief of Staff."

"Yes I am."

"So why I am being presented with this and asked to provide information when the matters are not in my purview."

"Well for a lot of politicians that would be the case." She meshes her fingers together taking a few seconds to let the expectation build.

"But let's be blunt. Just for a moment. You are William Bracken's associate of longest standing having ties back to his days as an ADA campaigning for New York's District Attorney. You are his go-to resource for fixing things. By all accounts you are intelligent and experienced operator, and one would expect such a smart person to know when to make a deal."

She leans forward as if to share a secret but her voice levels at the same volume. "And so I think it would be very safe to assume that you do indeed know where the metaphorical bodies lie." She sits
back seemingly satisfied with that little barb.

Oh he does indeed. He would love nothing more than to add to them. But not today. Nor will he openly betray the Senator. Not today at least.

"I have no role in his finances. Nor do I have any awareness of what the Senator's finances are. I have no role in his campaign and office." All carefully phased to be true.

"I don't believe you."

"Well unless you have some additional information, I believe we are at an impasse."

"I am not done with you."

"Miss Store. Either arrest me or let me depart." At her frown, "You choice."

"Fine, you are free to go. For now."

He left the meeting and was heading to the Hill on autopilot, when his thoughts bring him up cold.

Despite his apparent calm, his mind was racing. If the Feds were willing to approach him directly, it means they were virtually ready to charge Bracken. Which meant at least one arrest was imminent.

But most likely only on the financial crimes. They still did not have enough evidence for other charges or they would not be talking, they would be arresting him too possibly. But once they did have the evidence for the crimes involving murder and violence, then the authorities would be coming for all of them.

The trigger will be when the old man made his death bed statement. On his visit to New York the dying man had told him of his plan to incriminate Bracken, but just not the exact timing. It would be soon as Francisco Silva's time on this earth was almost up. He would be ready.

New York. The Loft. Friday morning.

It is a late brunch of sorts. Their extended family is mostly all here. Martha and Alexis, Jim and Val had come back from the cabin at Kate's request. Lanie is working but Ryan and Esposito are both here before their shift starts.

When the door opens and Rick admits her, Clare's arrival at the Loft clearly communicates to the assembled grouped that Rick and Kate had news on Bracken, and that it was not likely to be good.

Clare does most of the briefing as she had the most direct source of knowledge. There is little by way of questions.

They will be increasing their security posture, and Clare has additional resources coming in from Chicago and L.A. Jim and Val have agreed not to return to the cabin, and Jim can arrange for a neighbour to close up the place properly until they return.

The first thing Clare promises Rick is to get close protection for Alexis. And as luck would have it Jane Stubbs was available. Despite the situation and uncertainty, Alexis for the moment is one hundred per cent teenager at the thought of reuniting with her friend.
Saturday

The first break through comes out of the blue.

The phone call from Francisco Silva's lawyer caught the District Attorney's office by surprise. It is a weekend, only a small duty team rostered on.

With the DA on holiday, they called one of his deputies. And so it was that it fell to New York Assistant District Attorney Charles DiNozo to call the Deputy Attorney General in DC with the quite frankly perplexing offer. Francisco Silva – a man who had spent decades avoiding the authorities, and him in particular - wants to make a death bed statement but needs it to be done with both NY District Attorney and federal authorities in attendance.

After thanking the New York ADA, the Deputy Attorney General wastes no time. Picking up the phone he calls Vallante on his mobile. The operation is passed this straight to the Task Force and Vallante has his best scramble to take the lead.

Within three hours, a DOJ jet had whisked Sorenson and McCord, along with a small team of lawyers from DC to New York with only a bullet point brief.

Francisco Silva - head of the small Silva crime family (financial and white collar crime, some loan sharking, no drugs).

Apparently dying - wishes to make a death-bed statement. Not an admission or confession.

So what can he offer? Only one thing makes sense. It involves William H Bracken. Former NY District Attorney, and now United States Senator for the State of New York.

New York, DA Offices. Secure Conference Room.

Despite it being a Saturday, ADA Charles DiNozo had come into the offices. How could he not? Francisco Silva, the man he had been pursuing long before he became a prosecutor was willing to talk to the authorities. But he was puzzled. His call to the Deputy Attorney General had not resulted in the FBI's New York Field Office contacting him. Nor anyone from the national organised crime in DC. He would have expected them to be all over this.

Instead a team from a group called the Task Force were on their way from Washington. What did these Feds want? He had never heard of the Attorney General's task force until today. He briefly thought about contacting his boss, and disturbing his vacation but decided against it.

Closing his office door, he pulls out his cell and calls the number that he had received from the Deputy Attorney General's office.

The call is answered within two rings.

"Good Morning, Vallante speaking."

"Good Morning Director Vallante, this is Charles DiNozo from the New York DA's office."

"Ah, hello. I was expecting you call.

"I must admit I am curious as to what the Attorney General's office wants from me?"
"Well ADA DiNozo. Can I call you Charles?"

"Of course."

"I think we have a mutual interest in a subject. Francisco Silva."

"I have been after him for a very long time but had almost expected to have no satisfaction. The old man is dying. He's going to escape earthly justice."

"Well that appears to be so. I believe he has Stage Four colon cancer. But he does want to make a dying statement."

"That what he has offered."

"You sound perplexed? And not exactly happy."

"Well for more than twenty years he had rebuffed any attempt to interview him. On any matter. Quite frankly it has frustrated the hell out of me."

"We all get that. But I understand that this goes deeper and may well be too personal for you Charles. So I need you to stand aside. You cannot be permitted to participate in this."

Charles DiNozo knows this. He does not want to accept it. Wants to fight it. But he will concede in the interests of the greater good.

"I know. I wish I could face him, but whatever deal he offers, he will not incriminate his daughter, or his organisation. Small as they are they should face justice someday."

"On focus is on another suspect at this time but I agree. But that will be your battle to continue after we have done our work."

"Whatever it is you are doing, I do hope it is worth it."

"Oh it is. I can guarantee that. I will have my lead agent, Rachel McCord contact you when they land. You will have your representative ready?"

"Of course. I understand that they want the meeting today. We have a very capable Assistant DA, Renee Lawrence, who will be attending. The DA's office has complete faith in her."

"Excellent. Thank you for your cooperation."

After the call terminates, Charles DiNozo, intones a brief prayer for his dead father, a man whose life was literally crippled by Francisco Silva. "I only hope it is worth it. I am sorry Papa. To break my promise. But he will be judged before God."

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**Silva Residence, Brooklyn.**

The man really does like death.

He daughter, Sophia, tends to him. The only other person present from their side is the family's long time lawyer, Emmanuel Castorini.

The team from law enforcement is not quite double their size but still small for a case of this potential important.
"Afternoon, my name is Rachel McCord, and I am the Supervisory Agent in Charge for the Attorney General of the United States. With me is Senior Agent William Sorenson. We have bought three legal representatives with us. They are Renee Lawrence, an Assistant District Attorney with the New York District Attorney's office, Henry Nkoto, a Federal Prosecutor with the Department of Justice in DC, and lastly this is Thomas Chastaine. He is both a junior attorney with the Department of Justice and a fully trained legal stenographer. He will be making a transcript as well as the audio recording."

"I see Mister DiNozo is not present." Wheezes the old man.

"It was felt it would not be suitable for the ADA to be here," Renee Lawrence replies, her clipped tone clearly indicating how she felt about it. Charles has been her mentor for the last three years, she knows how much this hurts him.

"I understand." The old man wheezes gently before it breaks into a small bout of coughing. The coughing fit lasts a minute. His daughter passes him a glass and some pills as it eases.

"These should give you thirty minutes or so. Please do not waste any more of the precious time I have left with him before God calls him home."

McCord restricts her response to, "Thank you."

"So what is it you wish to discuss?" she asks turning her attention back to the dying man.

"That will be clear, but first I need your legal certification that the terms as set out through my attorney are accepted and binding."

Both Lawrence and Nkoto verbally affirm that the deal is binding.

Sophia Silva rises and kisses her father. He leaves the room, and only the Silva's lawyer and the five law enforcement personnel remain.

"My name is Francisco Silva. I am seventy-nine years old. And I am dying. I have stage four cancer of the colon, the pancreas and now I am told many other organs." He pauses and regards the audience before him, the very people he had spent more than forty years denying this sort of access.

"I will be direct. I will not do anything to incriminate anyone other than one individual. Nothing related to my family or my business. Yes?"

"Understood, Mister Silva. So what exactly is it you do wish to tell us?" McCord is patient.

"Oh, it is quite simple. There is a man I wish I had never met or dealt with. I will provide a statement and additional evidence incriminating that individual in murder, conspiracy, drug trafficking and money laundering. I imagine you could get him for tax evasion too." He laughs softly at his own joke.

That person is William H Bracken, United States senator for the State of New York, and former District Attorney for the City of New York.

McCord cannot help the glance she throws at Sorenson. She is disciplined enough not to smile, or even dance a jig. But she is more relieved than anything. This is it! The break they need.

"Please continue." She barely trusts herself to ask any questions.
The old man smiles, clearly enjoying the anticipation and suspense he is creating.

"Mister Bracken first came to my attention when he switched from being a defense attorney in late 1992, joining the DA's office. But it was in 1994 that our paths crossed for the first time, and in the most unexpected way." He really is spinning the story, and Sorenson fidgets a little, drawing a wry smile and a continuation.

"It was then, May 1994, that William Bracken murdered Heather, previously Harriet, and originally Harry Weinstein, a former transvestite but by then transsexual prostitute in one of the boarding house my family ran. The aftermath was witnessed by an employee and I was called to the scene. I can, on my oath, affirm that I saw William Bracken, covered in blood in the same room as the victim.

"In return for my silence, William Bracken agreed to take no action against my business interests, and instead pursued, how shall I say, my larger competitors."

"Over the years, I have witnessed his action in many activities. In addition, I have evidence of his willful subordination and suppression of evidence in narcotics dealing in return for services rendered in the commission of the wholesale importation of narcotics, dealing, and in money laundering."

Sorenson glances at McCord. Sure, the head of a minor Mafioso family is not the best witness but it should be enough to bring the most serious charges at least. Especially for the murder of the prostitute.

McCord, nods to Henry Nkoto, and lets the experience federal take over.

"Mister Silva. Thank you but we are going to need much more including as much detail as you can remember plus any other evidence."

It takes them ninety-seven minutes to take his statement, not including two breaks for the old man to get more medication. But the time is worth it. They also know it is highly probable that this is their only shot with clearly terminal Mafioso.

They retreat to secure facilities in the FBI's New York offices to begin the process of formally transcribing the new evidence and commencing the addition investigation of the new evidence and determining what can be used in the expansion of the charges against Bracken.

There are a lot of people who are going to have to work this weekend.

While the lawyers work on the transcript and charges, McCord and Sorenson start to They also start to draw up additions to their list of suspects, and a new plan of attack for the arrests.

McCord had been keeping both Vallante and the Deputy AG in the loop back in DC. There is no surprise when their boss orders the team back to DC as soon as they can finish up with the District Attorney's staff. There is a further surprise when he instructs Sorenson to remain behind in New York for a few days and deal with any local liaison issues.

Sorenson and McCord part ways in the lobby of the FBI building.

"I'll see you in a couple of days Will."

"The Senator, and a few of his cohort are going to get a surprise as soon as the warrants are signed. You take care Rachel. This isn't over yet."
"Same to you. Remember no breakages."

"Do my best. Have a good flight."

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**The Loft**

With her exam on mere days away, Kate does her best to throw all her energy and focus into her studies. It even works some of the time. Rick is supportive and surprisingly restrained in his interactions, always watchful until an exasperated Beckett told him to take his hovering and 'creepy staring' off to try writing some Nikki.

Of course he has been significantly relieved by the appearance of Jane Stubbs to resume protective duties for Alexis. After consultation with Clare, Alexis has gone out to meet college friends.

Martha has even swanned off to an event with her transportation provided by Time and Motion who have been briefed on the issues.

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**The Loft, Monday 7 am.**

Kate had been awake for almost 70 minutes. She had simply lain there in their bed, listening to Rick sleep and mentally preparing herself for the exam.

She had done her best to force thoughts of Bracken out of her head. With virtually no success.

Giving up, she gets out of bed, grabs a robe and heads to the kitchen to make breakfast. She gets half-way there before she remembers and backtracks to collect her gun from the bedside table.

She has plenty of time, as her exam is not scheduled to start until midday.

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**12th Precinct - Homicide. Monday 10.01 am.**

"Jesus Sully! You're such a slob."

Sullivan is startled from his late breakfast burrito by the less than dulcet tones of one Kevin Ryan. Normally easy-going the younger detective looks plenty pissed this morning. And despite his seniority, Sullivan had got by in the NYPD by not making waves or causing a scene. He knows he's not Beckett. He doesn't have the endless legs, hot bod, sharp mind nor the killer rep. And he had tried to be more respectful of her temporarily loaned out space. But it's not in his essential nature, and he cannot help himself. But he can avoid unnecessary confrontation.

He sits forward a bit. Oh. He can see where the contents of the burrito have leaked from the other end.

He can fix this quite easily. A couple of weeks ago a (large) box of napkins and a container of wet wipes had appeared on his desk. No one had said anything nor was there a note. Regardless, he had taken in good stead. Far worse things had happened in the past.

Grabbing a napkin he goes to wipe the spilled contents of his burrito including the melted cheese gloop and sauce up. One hand is not going to work. In fact in makes it worse, as contents escape from the other end now.

Putting the burrito down on the wrapper, he grabs a second napkin and using the pair, one in each
hand, to scoop the fallen contents together and he drops them in the bin. Normally he would be satisfied with that but decides to go the extra mile and reaches for the container of wet wipes.

As he grips the container, his jacket sleeve collects the truck of the largest member of the family of elephants that had been remained on the desk he was temporarily occupying in place of Detective Beckett. As he pulls the container up and

"Oh damn!"

Of course, given his luck this is the exact time Ryan and Esposito return, to witness the family of elephants break into several pieces on the precinct floor.

"Can you give us a moment." Espo is barely polite.

"Guys…..I'm sorry." Blake shifts his grip from his partner's shoulder to upper arm and almost man handles him away even as Ryan tries the more conciliatory approach.

"Sully, we're not blaming you. But we need a minute."

Esposito has bent down and is carefully collecting the pieces into a convenient evidence bag so they can see if it can be fixed, when he spots the small rectangle object. "Bro, what is this?!"

Javi….I don't know. But it was inside Beckett's elephants. Didn't you say she told you once they were her Mom's?"

Yeah. He's quiet for a matter of a second or two. "Oh shit!"

"Don't touch it Javi. We need gloves and an evidence bag."

"On it Bro."

It takes some time to locate a suitable device. No-one has used this sort of gear for a long time. In the end asking around prompts someone who remembers there was a working machine down in Organised Crime's small offices on the first floor. Fortunately it appears to be in good working order and they return to Homicide.

They take one of the secure conference rooms and lock both doors, blinds not drawn.

Then they carefully ensure the write protection is enabled before inserting the micro cassette, and pressing play.

The first voices they hear are male. And not at all happy.

"Why are we here?"

"Don't be a chickenshit McAllister. You always were a pussy."

"Fuck you. Raglan." Well that was convenient, identifying both of the voices.

"I have no idea why I ever looked up to either of you scumbags. You both belong behind bars." A third voice. One they need no help in identifying. Roy Montgomery.

"Yeah well we wouldn't lack for company." Raglan.
"Who says we would keep it with you." McAllister.

The door opens and closes. Some else is in the room now.

"Detectives. Harmonious are usual. I see you have the Boy Scout along."

They know that voice. Bracken. That is Bracken's voice.

They continue to listen to the tape until Ryan has to stop it momentarily. Esposito looks just as shocked. They just heard Bracken confirm that he had Joanna Beckett and three others murdered to cover up the crimes committed by the rogue cops but also to protect his operations in the Heights.

There is nothing to debate. Despite their group promise to keep quiet about Montgomery, this trumps that earlier pact.

"How did the tape get here?"

"It must have been him. He was hiding it as insurance."

"But how did Montgomery know where to hide it?"

"He must have known Joanna Beckett better than anyone thought. Even Beckett didn't know about the compartment. Or she would have check and found this."

"Shit I don't like this, not one bit."

"You're right. I don't like it too. But you're right. Like last time." Esposito concedes.

"Yeah well you always were a mommy's boy." Ryan responds.

"And you're not?"

"Guilty too."

"But we need to let Beckett know Ryan."

"We can't right now. She's actually going into her exam any time now. Best to wait. The exam is meant to be three hours."

"Shit. Castle?"

"Maybe, but together would be better."

"Roger that. We're going to have to tell the Captain."

"Gates?" Ryan blurts.

"Of course Gates. Who else?"

With that they collect the tape player, its precious contents, and their notes and head towards Captain Gates' office.

It takes only the first plays of the tape before the Captain orders them to remain silent and dials a number of the Chief of Detectives.

"Tom, its Victoria. We have evidence. On that individual we discussed. A tape recording with
Bracken incriminating himself. Roy is on it too. He must have recorded it and hidden it as insurance."

"My God. Who else knows?"

"My two detectives, Esposito and Ryan. They are in the room with me."

"Detectives. None of this leaves the walls of your Captain's office until I say so. Even to warn Katherine Beckett. Is that understood?"

Reluctantly both answer in the affirmative.

"Right. Hold tight. I'm calling in the Feds."

Tom Delany calls Director Villante who in turn brings his best, McCord, into the conversation.

"Well our luck has really turned up trumps this time. The NYPD have audio evidence with Bracken implicating himself in the commission of multiple homicides. An old-school audio tape would you believe.

McCord looked at her phone, finger hovering over Sorenson's number.

Vallante see where her attention is. "Send Sorenson. I need you here."

"Yes Sir." Sorenson can cover this no issue.

"Tom, I've got an agent on the ground in Manhattan already. William Sorenson. He and a colleague will head straight to the Twelfth Precinct. I'll have their ID numbers and photo's sent to yourself and Captain Gates so you can verify their identities when they arrive.

**Homicide, Twelfth Precinct, 1.01 pm**

Unable stay in Gates' office any longer without arousing suspicion, the detectives have returned to their desks. A lunch break is out of the question. Nor is warning Castle, so he can tell Beckett.

They look up at the sound of arriving footsteps. The distinctive sound of shoe leather momentarily raising false hope of another individual, their demeanour does not effectively hide their disbelief and more than a touch of derision when it is Will Sorenson plus another unknown female agent arriving at their desks. Both are attired in G-Man, or is that G-person dark blue suits.

"Great. Can this get any better? The Febs are back." Esposito can bear a grudge probably longer than Beckett.

"Hello Detectives. If it is any consolation I'm not FBI anymore." That gets a surprise look from both, followed by a wordless question from the tilt of Ryan's head.

Instead of answering the former FBI agent motions towards the Captain's office. "We gotta go in there. If I can I'll try and clear things up after." His humble demeanour has the pair confused. Their previous antagonism momentarily forgotten.

Knocking, Sorenson waits at the boundary for the Captain to look up, lower her glasses, and beckon him with a motion to close the door behind him and the accompanying agent.

"Captain Gates. I am Agent Will Sorenson with the Attorney General's Task Force. This is my
colleague Sasha Timar." Both offer their ID cards which Gates scrutinises closely. They match the identities the DoJ has provided to Tom Delaney and herself.

"Good Afternoon," she shakes hands before turning back to Sorenson. "You name is familiar. Are you the same FBI agent that worked some cases with the Twelfth previously?"

"That would be me. I transferred from the FBI recently and I am now part of the Attorney General's Task Force. It is a special group out of the Department of Justice, tasked with matters of special interest. Furthermore, as a matter of disclosure I was in relationship with Detective Kate Beckett some years ago."

The Captain's right brow arches, "Thank you Agent." They are both aware that the missing detective is a vital connection in this ever-changing, challenging and escalating situation.

"I am not sure you do understand. I am here for the case. For the evidence. There is some history here so I wanted to make clear why I am here. Also because of that history, if I can help bring closure to Detective Kate Beckett for her mother's death, then that is a good thing too."

"I'm listening. Please go ahead."

"We've been investigating Senator William H Bracken for some time. Initially it was on campaign fund violations after a routine audit picked up irregularities that were not previously detected. But it has become apparent that those are just the tip of the iceberg."

"Captain, your lack of reaction tells me you have your own information, or suspicions."

"Mostly the later, until the reason for your presence here. This was an entirely new discovery and was only made accidentally today."

She reaches into her draw and her hand emerges with the small personal recorder. Sorenson catches a glimpse of the pistol butt in the same drawer.

"The evidence is on this cassette that was recovered from the inside of a personal effect of the late Joanne Beckett. To date only myself, the Chief of Detectives and the two detectives outside have heard it."

She passes it to Sorenson. "I trust you will take good care of it Agent."

"Absolutely. Thank you Captain. Is there somewhere we can set up?"

The two federal agents have emerged with the tape player, and presumably the contents. Gates has offered the federal agents one of the smaller rooms.

"The Attorney General's Task Force?" Ryan blurts.

"Still Feds Bro." Espo corrects.

"I can understand. Really I do. You're looking out for Kate, sorry Detective Beckett." He corrects at match frowns on the detectives. "And for your former Captain. I get that. But this is much bigger than all of that."

"Why you?"

"What?"
"They could have sent anyone?"

"I'm sure the AG has a whole team. Why you?"

"Truth be told, I was already in New York for another matter and was ordered here. But if they hadn't I would have asked to come." The two NYPD detectives look even more unimpressed at that.

"Look it is not like that at all. I'm not a former boyfriend trying to get back together or anything like that. Yes I still care for Kate, but as a friend. I just wanted to help."

They're not convinced.

"Look I know about Richard Castle. It was obvious before on the two cases I worked with him there that she was attracted to him, and everything recently has confirmed that what they have is special. I'm not going to try and ruin that." That is as much as he is willing to admit, either to them, or most probably himself.

The frank admission that he had accepted his inability to even try to win back their 'sister' settles the pair. With a tacit nod to his own partner, Ryan asks, "So how can we help you Agent Sorenson?"

"My partner and I will be here for as long as we need, probably just until late today. My supervisor is elsewhere unavoidably detained by other matters. We have come straight here to ensure the evidence is secure. And to lead off any new lines of inquiry."

"Well, I can tell you what you are about to hear will definitely give you some new lines of interest to follow up. If you are after the individual we are."

"Do you want to join us?"

The offer catches the pair of detectives by surprise. But they recover quickly with Esposito beating Ryan to the punch, "Sure thanks."

Not to be left out, Ryan addresses the female agent. "First up we need copies of this tape."

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**New York City Hall, 3.02 pm.**

Kate emerges from the exam to find Rick waiting for her in the hallway. She just knows he has something for her but she cannot get a read on him.

"Hey Babe."

"Hey Gorgeous. How did the exam go?"

"Okay. Some tough questions but plenty of easy ones too." She nips in to peck his lips. "You going to tell me what's up?"

"Not here. In the car."

Car? She had come by subway, and had intended to return home that way.

"We have a car. For good reason."

Kate follows his lead and falls quiet as her partner takes her hand and leads her out towards the
pickup point. And whatever news he could not tell her in public.

She waits until the town car is moving.

"Well?"

"Less than an hour ago I got the heads up from Tim Matthews and Clare, they are going to arrest Bracken within 24 hours. Apparently they have new evidence."

"My Mom?" She momentarily sounds like a young woman.

"Don't know. They couldn't share any more right now."

"I'm calling Clare as soon as I get back." There is Detective Beckett back again.

"Okay." It is all he can say. He's with her whatever happens. Always.

Department of Justice, Washington DC.

The audio tape from New York has transformed their extremely strong case, into a slum dunk. He wishes he could smile and relax like a number of his team, but he knows better.

With the breakthrough evidence from Francisco Silva and from the Twelfth Precinct, the Attorney General's team have more than sufficient evidence to charge Bracken for murder and commissioning murders, conspiracy for multiple felony, narcotics important, money laundering. The list goes on. The original charges related to campaign finance seem almost cursory in the wash-up.

There is a level of excitement and anticipation but the hustle and bustle has also blown all operational security. The story to not-so-much leak as explode and when it does, the consequences are what has him concerned.

The Loft, New York. 4 pm.

Calling Clare had proven fruitless. Kate did believe her that there was no further information. But she was still unhappy.

She couldn't eat a late lunch nor any form of snack. She just felt off.

At an hour lastly lying by his side on the sofa avoiding any news channel, she announced that she was off to bed for a nap.

"Hey Babe, I'm going to head to bed for a bit."

"You need anything?"

"Nope." She leans in and kisses him before heading off for the bedroom.

"Okay. I'll check on you in a bit. I love you Kate. We'll get through this."

She vanishes through the door way in silence. Rick suppresses every instinct to follow her.
Court had been here twenty minutes and been lost in futile attempts to persuade the man ever since. He wondered how far the authorities were from arresting the Senator. Him too for that matter. Very close.

"Senator, we can still flee. I have arrangements in place. We can escape them. There are plenty of funds."

Bracken chuckles.

"For someone so experienced, you still seem naive James. You really don't think they won't hunt me down, even from a non-extradition country."

"Well I'm not the same man I was then when we first met. I have evolved. I'm not that desperate fool with no idea about anything except service life. I won't get trapped again."

"Ha, you think you are the only one to change?"

"You think I want to stay here and do nothing. I have an option. They are closing in. I know how this ends."

"Take responsibility, spit in their faces."

"Oh that's not for me. I'm not going to jail. Nor am I doing some valiant but pathetic last stand."

"You can't just slink away this time James. You think they won't make the connection?"

"Watch me. I think after all these years, you owe me. But if you provoke me…"

The laugh is truly disconcerting. "I am not done with your services James. You are not dismissed just yet. And don't you dare think about threatening me again."

"It is not a threat. Just a clarification. I'm not helping you clear the decks with any more of your staff." He'll kill, maim and intimidate for a purpose, but not this gratuitous graffiti of death. It is not art, not rational, not human.

There is that laugh again. "Oh no. That will not be necessary. I fully intend to leave most of them alone. They know nothing. No threat. As for that silly girl. That was misdirection. Of sorts. If she hadn't been a lawyer's offspring I might have even let it go but she saw too much, and might have known how to connect it."

"Might have? Misdirection? The fucking feds are all over it. The trail pretty much leads to your office. I'm not going down over something as amateur hour as this. You should have let me take care of it. Like in the past."

There is no laughing. "Again you forget who you are talking to James. I have the best plan. And I do not need your assistance. I have resources of my own. Very good resources. They have absolutely no evidence on who butchered the girl."

Shit he must have more men from Orantis! At least Court hopes so. They would be easier to track, and maybe get under control. Freelancers on the other hand could be a real issue. He's going to need more resources than the Koreans and his own cadre from Orantis. This is going to hell really quickly. At least he got in first and secured the good ones. Mostly. Plus he has his wildcards to provide a backstop.
"Do you think it is wise to use those mercenaries? They are not exactly discreet nor particularly precise."

"Why ever not James? They are patriots. For the most part."

Court summons a laugh of his own. "Patriots? Psychopaths you mean? For a pay check."

"Is there something wrong with that? So long as they are guided, it doesn't matter. It is my place to lead. They merely follow."

"Well if you haven't noticed that since the Lockwood debacle, the quality of the resources available has diminished further. Not that Lockwood was particularly good as they go. He got taken down by a fucking writer for Christ's sake!"

"Well for once Detective Beckett and her minions are not even on my primary list although they remain on my radar. And I would remind you that your precious Agency's track record with direct action and paramilitary forces is not exactly glowing. Let's not forget that they saw fit to cast you off when you no longer fitted their purposes and they needed expedient scapegoats."

He will not respond to that. Because to do so would undo every fiber of what he built since leaving the Agency. He did not accept, ever, the reason for his enforced retirement. So it was never mentioned.

"William, how about we focus on what we can deal with." There was way too much truth in that.

"Now that's showing some sense James. What do you want to discuss next?"

"Vulcan. It is time."

"I agree but for the sake of clarity pray tell me why? Future First is efficient and we have never been making more money."

"Firstly, he really does know too much. Against both of us." The Senator nods.

"Second, he's skimming off the top and bottom again." Does the Senator shrug, he is not sure.

"Well that's no surprise. You have evidence of course." Court nods. "And the bulk of the funds are still reaching the accounts." Another nod. "And it is such a lot of money."

"He's a loose cannon and he's going to take us down with him. He has seen too much, and can work out too much about the internals. We should have taken care of him long ago. It might take more resources now."

"I'm sure we can manage. He's not the first and won't be the last we contain."

"It is worse than that. It is not just that he knows a little bit too much. It is that he's been digging and investigating. Then there is his unpredictable motivations and loyalty. Especially as he is acting out and it is becoming noticeable. He previously kept a low profile and benefitted from less law effort attention. Now he acting out and assuming he is untouchable. That is not acceptable."

These as close to the obvious. Death is the only option.

"And you know this how?"

"He killed a police officer. A Lieutenant. In IA no less."

""He is the one who killed the IA lieutenant last week? That was him?" Bracken does not seem to
doubt his word. Refreshing to know that at least some things remained untouched by the Senator's own disintegration.

"You have evidence?"

"I had him under surveillance but my team were compromised. Somehow the cops traced my observation team. Then inadvertently linked them to the shooting that Vulcan committed."

The Senator cannot contain the ironical laugh. Then there is barely a flicker. "I assume you have taken measures."

"Yes. It is contained. No blowback. I can clean up perfectly well Senator." Better than you he keeps to himself now armed with the extra knowledge from Claudio Silva.

"So what do we do about Vulcan?"

"I thought you were in favour of the incrimination option? But personally I would recommend a straight up strike."

"Well the incrimination would be more difficult with Detective Beckett on leave from the NYPD and therefore out of the equation for an unforeseeable timeframe. I had hoped to get two-for-one."

He purses his lips. "Let's leave the lovely detective alone just for the moment. But we will return to the matter."

"I can arrange a direct strike on Vulcan with pretty much guaranteed success and little chance of repercussions."

"Okay. Does it have to be now?"

"Sir. We may not get the opportunity again. He is already suspicious."

"Of course my answer is yes. I want you to deal with Vulcan Symonds but with care. He may be a loose cannon but he is still has a useful stockpile. And he didn't survive so long without being more than suspicious. He'll need to be eliminated quickly."

"As soon as we can. You are running out of time. The Feds will be back for you and you will struggle to get bail."

"Do you know something I don't James?"

"No Senator. Nothing certain. But there are new rumours, and lots of people working late in the Department of Justice and elsewhere."

"Then shut up and soldier. That's the phrase isn't it?"

"Understood Senator." Clearly conveying his backing off just for now. In his mind, he had made another decision. It was time to bail on this.

"Now tell me about the resources available in Washington and New York."

"We have two public teams from Orantis here in DC, and one in New York. These are all on-the-books. Officially security for your offices and staff."

Court pauses. The Senator regards him with an undisguised degree of insolence. That alone makes up his mind.
"In addition we have five black teams, two in each of DC and New York, and one more in Virginia.

"What about the other off-the-books teams Senator? The ones over and above my teams."

No answer, so he goes harder. "I know about that team here in DC. And there is at least another one in Virginia, and two more in New York. None of them official. Not traceable in the books at least. Unless you know what you are looking for. But if the Feds come looking they will find them eventually."

The Senator actually laughs. "Did you think I was going to trust you entirely? That is not how this works. How I work. I will take measures I deem necessary. I am not beholden to you Court."

"When have I ever let you down?"

"Not so far. But I trust nothing, trust no-one. You included Court." He holds up a hand, "And before you do yourself a disservice don't lie to me. Of course you have your exit plan. I expect nothing less. You are welcome to run but at a time of my choosing. Furthermore you will not be permitted to act contrary to my wishes or objectives. Do I make myself clear?"

"Sir." He can still follow orders. For now.

"Good. No more arguing James. I dislike having to be so short with such a loyal friend."

"Now I recommend you head back to DC."

"Goodbye William." Court extends his hand which the Senator accept with a measured grip.

"Farewell James."

Both men take their leave. Neither is happy with the other, and in their own minds both are now further committed to their own separate paths. But not outright betrayal of the other. Not yet.

After his unsatisfactory meeting with Court, the Senator has a more immediate issue to attend to. This one is personal, family.

Summoning his driver and security guards the trip should only take him to the other side of the Park.

**Park Avenue, New York, 8.03 pm**

Jennifer Bracken open the door to admit her brother-in-law. She makes no pretence of civility to the man she detests.

"David, your brother is here." And with that she turns and heads away from him, leaving him in the entrance hall.

Her husband emerges into the hallway and closes the gap, blocking any further progress into his home. "William."

Ever the politician, the elder Bracken smiles and stretches out his hand. "Hello Little Brother"

The hand is not acknowledged. "Don't call me that."

"I'll call you what I like. Especially as you are turning out to be a disappointment. Not that I should
Just like I told you before what would happen if you went against me."

"And I told you before that if you threaten my family or myself again Brother, I would take action.

"Oh hush. That is all bluster. What I want to know is why the critical loan that the votes for the redevelopment depended on went awry. That has a number of people disconcerted and disappointed. Myself included. Why did you not ...."

David interrupts his brother. "We did everything we could legally. I even had someone on the inside but it was events outside of our control. A white knight stepped in with a very major charitable donation, which was enough to swing just enough votes towards the Mayor's plan. We don't know who but they are but whoever it was they will have taken a bath to do it. But they did it anyway."

"I trusted you to deliver David. You have let me down. I don't care why, and I don't want excuses. I wanted results."

"Well you are not Father. Who as we remember passed on the family legacy to me. Not you. Not that the family reputation counted for much. Father was a bankrupt trading on the last desperate contacts of his former glory. Mother abandoned him. We barely sneaked admission into a school where building bore the family name."

"I don't appreciate the tone Little Brother."

"Well neither do I. You may currently be a US senator but if the rumours are true that is only a temporary state of affairs, and then you'll be in a far, far worse position."

"Don't you dare!"

Dare? Why the fuck are you even here? The redevelopment loans and the lost vote? That's bullshit. So fucking insignificant given that the Feds will be coming for you any time."

"That's my business, you little shit. And how do you know? Sound so certain?" This time the elder Bracken does not hide the emotion the mottles his visage.

"Have you betrayed me?" he accuses his younger brother.

"Ha. Well isn't that revealing? No I haven't betrayed you. Not yet anyway."

"Don't you dare! The consequences for you..."

David interrupts, "Fuck you. I regret the day I ever let you back into our lives. You've done nothing but belittle me continuously, have the temerity to demand massive support for suspect financial projects that need what are quite frankly borderline illegal actions. And then you have the gall to threaten my family and livelihood. Well no more. Enough!"

"Nice speech. The cub grows some balls. Did she lend you hers?"

"Get out! We're done. For good. I don't want to hear from you. Ever again."

"Is that your final word?"

"Get out!" The spittle actually lies, the elder Bracken brother ignores the phlegm that lands on his shoulder.
"Goodbye David."

David takes some satisfaction in slamming the door as hard as he can behind the back of his departing brother, who does not look back.

Fuck him!

The elevator car is empty and he pulls the burner phone from his pocket. Calling up the messaging app his starts retrieving and actioning the draft messages that are merely waiting to be sent. By the time the elevator reaches the lobby, William Bracken, has sent 11 prepared messages and set his plan in motion.

Despite the lingering anger, he pauses on the twelfth and final message. It is only momentary, and with no sign of emotion he sentences his brother and that bitch of a wife to death. Damn them all to hell.

The whiskey has not taken the taste of anger and he is honest enough to admit, fear, closer to terror away. Jennifer watches him with concern.

The way William had said 'goodbye' has his gut churning further. He feels more nauseous, not less. The glass crashes to the bar, and his head falls into his hands. He is going to hurl.

"David." Jennifer comes to him, and he is instinctively turning his body away from the bar and into her. She is taller than him, even without her heels, and she lifts his face, cupping his cheeks in her hands, she kisses his nose. Just her presence makes him feel better.

"We know what we need to do. Please do it David." This is delivered so differently to her normal confident tone, she is as close to begging as he has ever heard his wife.

Her words are the final trigger. He kisses her mouth, revelling in the sensation that still strike to his very core.

"Yes. Of course." He is certain that the decision is the right one. A quandary they, and he especially, has been chewing over for weeks since the Federal authorities first reached out. He is not certain that his brother has even left the building yet but he is pulling the business card out of his wallet, reaching for his phone, and dialling the number.

It rings three times before an operator answers. "Good evening Department of Justice."

"Hello I would like to be put through to Project Twenty-Nine please."

The operator does not hesitate at the name, "One moment please."

David Bracken knows what he needs to do to protect his family, himself, and his business. He feels no guilt about betraying someone who has so little in common with him except their surname and their now deceased parents.

"Connecting you now."

Plus he is almost certain this final breaking of their bonds could be terminal. Literally.

Multiple locations, the North East of the United States.
The call up arrives via the previously arranged relays on message boards, social media and cell networks. The reactions of the recipients are as diverse as their locations and lifestyles.

There are a fair number of loners, some by choice, and far too many by circumstance. For them the call is a blessing. A few pray before they head off, others take a final drink, or even stop at their favourite restaurant. Most simply check that the remaining forty thousand had been deposited and got in their vehicles, almost universally older pickups with rifle racks on display, and headed for the assembly areas.

For those with family, it is a more complicated tale. Loved ones are kissed goodbye, mostly. For some it is too hard. In some cases, they are shown a wad of cash or the bank details. And shown the confirmation of the payment. In almost every case, the money explains everything for their partners. Many a person has killed for far less than fifty grand, struggle street or not.

Probably the only common bond between them all is their commitment. They took the money, now it is time for them to earn it, and for some the probably that they will pay in full for it.

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**Washington Heights.**

The warehouse resembled the last redoubt in an apocalypse movie or zombie TV series in a cut-price, budget-direct-to-You Tube kinda-way.

Steel plates had been jammed into many of the doors and windows, and were possible welded to existing metalwork. They had collected a large number of those orange road side safety drums and filled them with sand and when the sand ran out, water. These were formed into obstacles inside the main entrance and the two smaller roller doors.

His men we not going to win any sartorial prizes as their outfits were more mismatched than the diverse weaponry they carried. There was a bit of everything on display. Sawn off-shotguns, a couple of Ingram MAC-10s, a Mini-Uzi, quite a few AR-15 clones – a few with selective fire and most semi-auto, a couple of AK-47 (or their lookalikes) and even a stolen NYPD grenade launcher but only three tear gas grenades, and no masks.

He had his own C4 Carbine, stolen from a NYPD precinct armoury at the same time as the grenade launcher, and then customised with a drum magazine and laser pointer. And as backup a pair of .44 Magnum Desert Eagle pistols. Nothing fancy about them, just the standard models. Each capable of stopping a man dead with a single shot, especially with the 'ripper' rounds loaded in the magazines. They were intended to defeat any known body armour at close range.

Five of his men had served in the military. Three were doing their best to organise the others into fire teams of three to five men, and then coordinate those new teams to cover particular areas. The final two ex-servicemen were military trained marksmen and they carried their long rifles with an easy familiarity. Both had staked out firing nests in the walkways that ran close to the roof.

Of course, it did not help, that veterans aside, there were few with experience of gun fights. With little exception his crew had merely had to act tough and use his name and reputation to get things done. Plus starting shootouts in the city was going to attract a lot of police attention.

The lack of experience worried him. He knew that it was not going to cut-it with what was coming at him. He fully expected that Bracken and Court would send some of their mercenaries after him. Exactly how good and how many he was uncertain. What he did know was that over recent years the quality and effectiveness of the veteran muscle employed by them had dropped off.
Not as many scary fuckers like Dick Coonan around anymore. He chuckled, wondering if Kate Beckett knew how much of a favour she did him, the man she wrongly thought might have been behind her mother's murder, when gunning down the mad dog. He had certainly enjoyed Bracken going ape-shit over the incident. Court had merely shrugged and waited out the tantrum, apparently used to the random nature of casualties in campaigns. For a while the quality of the resources had increased with some of the Orantis team or freelancers but then then usual corner cutting emerged.

But even with that, the serious threat to their lives, was more than enough to scare off five more from his posse. A total of seven now had jumped ship. Two the first time and now five more. Ran. Fled. If he survived he would take issue with those individuals who choose not to stand with him.

If he was being entirely honest, he probably should have done the same himself. He could have pocketed his take from almost a decade of Future First operations and his drug empire and disappeared to a non-extradition country, rich until his dying day.

But Vulcan Simmons runs from no one.

He does not know it but Vulcan's warehouse is already under observation. From an abandoned car shop nearly two blocks back the night sight gave a pretty good view of the warehouse.

Behind the night sight was Frenchy Dupont. As his name implied his origins were in Quebec. He had served first in the Canadian military and then moved to the US, become a citizen and then a National Guardsman in Vermont. Deployed twice to Iraq he had worked on and off for Orantis over the last half-decade. When he wasn't working for the paramilitary company he was a hunter and guide in the wilderness of his new home state. And part time assassin when it suited him, usually when money was tight.

The intelligence provided to him was accurate. He had a full layout of the warehouse and a fairly accurate count of the opposition. There might be a few veterans among them but that didn't bother him. He had fifteen better trained men – veterans all - ready to go when the order came. Together they would form four-man fire teams. Each team had a machine gunner, and a grenadier plus two riflemen. He would have preferred another couple of teams but he was confident he can get the job done with his allocation.

It was apparent that Vulcan Simmons' crew were reinforcing the building against attack. But Dupont has a secret weapon. Hidden below in the same car shop is a 3 tonne truck loaded with gas bottles and fertiliser and rigged with remote control. The remote system was basic but more than capable of taking the truck in a direct straight line into the main doors of the warehouse two blocks away. Those gangsters would not know what hit them when the primary breech was made by the truck bomb. The damn things had worked well enough against them in Iraq, it was somewhat ironic that he would be using on here.

What former Corporal Dupont did not know was that he was also under observation. But someone with even more experience and better intelligence.

Well-hidden and comfortable in the rented space of storage depot just a block further back from the abandoned car shop, Bae Dea-won, former sergeant of Korean Special Forces, watched the Orantis outpost where the team leader was observing Vulcan Simmons' warehouse. He is set up on a long platform raised up to look out the small narrow window. He has night vision, a sleeping mat, artic grade sleeping bag, hot green tea and near infinite patience.

His instructions from Mister Court was simple. Ensure no-one – from any side – survived.
The fact that there would be twenty plus gangsters and he estimated sixteen to twenty mercenaries did not concern him or his wife. He fully expected there would casualties on both sides from their confrontation. The plan was simple, wait until the first battle was almost over and then all he and his wife had to do was mop up.

He and his wife were well prepared to equalise however many opponents were left. They had a pair of Russian RG-6 grenade launchers. Each was loaded with 4 gas grenades and 2 incendiary rounds. The gas grenades were virtually the same as the ones used in the hostage rescue debacle in the Moscow theatre taken by the Chechen terrorists. However now, unlike then, this time they were fully intended to be fatal for those exposed. They had military grade respirators with new charcoal filters. In addition there were a pair of military issue M16A4 assault rifles, with plenty of ammunition should they be necessary. All were untraceable and would be destroyed at the end of the operation by the enhanced thermite grenades they kept for just such a purpose.

Confident in his mission he looked down to floor where his wife, Na Ry Song, lay sleeping on her own mat. Smiling to himself at how fortunate they both been over all the years to work and form a partner in every possible way.

She too was a former sergeant in the army of the Republic of Korea. They had been married for twenty-nine years after meeting when both were new recruits to the elite 707th Special Mission Battalion of the Republic of Korea's army. Both already experienced soldiers, and despite their best efforts, they could not fight the attraction. Of course they were discovered and faced the very real possibility of disgrace and even imprisonment for their romance but instead they were given permission to marry. The price for the special approval for them to wed only became apparent when after three years of extensive training both were transferred to a special force assigned to what would later become the 'Overseas Deployment Group' of the Korean Special Forces Command. They quickly became trusted members of the black operations group. They operated best as a husband and wife team and we frequently used by their government and especially their ally, the United States. It was then that they met James Court, CIA paramilitary commander and since their 'retirement' their sole employer.

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**Washington DC**

Try as they might to remain off-the-radar, the frantic activity in the Department of Justice, and the urgent consultations on the Capitol, and finally on to the White House do not go un-noticed. With the number of organisations and individuals involved the previously tight security around the Government's case is blown when in the space of an hour more than a half-dozen sources all confirm 'off the record' pretty much the same information to contacts in the media.

This forces the government's hand.

They know that Bracken is at his New York town house. A team of US Marshalls and FBI is scrambled.

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**The Loft, New York, Monday 11.04 pm.**

Kate had exiled him while she pretended to read a book or sleep. Unable to pretend to write anymore, he pushes the screen of his laptop down sending the device to sleep. He does one last swipe of the screen on his phone and just as he is about to plug it back into the charger, he spots something on his Twitter feed. A quick glance has him dashing into the main room to turn on the TV, not even giving consideration to the rest of the household who are in bed.
He jumps around. Every channel is running it. He settles on CNN where hopefully it will not be too tabloid. And then he calls her in.

"Kate. Kate. You need to come here please." He knows she is not sleeping, and most likely heard the TV turn on.

It takes maybe thirty seconds and she emerges from their bedroom pulling on a dressing gown, her pistol in her left hand. She arrives beside home just as the screen scrolls as CNN comes back from an ad break.

*** Breaking News ***
New York Senator William Bracken arrested by FBI for MURDER, conspiracy, and multiple other charges including campaign finance violations.

*** Breaking News ***

AUT HOR'S NOTE

For ease of reading on FF I split the chapter into 2 parts.

Here on AOO this chapter has not been split up.

The re-edits turned out to be quite extreme and this chapter grew, shrunk, grew and finally got a little trim (moved to next chapter) but it is still the largest of the story. The last three will be shorter (that's a relative term in this case).

Thank you to all who are following and especially to the reviewers. All your feedback is much appreciated.

Next chapter should be up by the end of the weekend.
Chapter Summary

Previously – At last Senator William H Bracken has been arrested and will be charged with multiple crimes including the murder of Kate's mother. Is this Kate's chance to see justice for her mother? But there are reasons the Senator had taken the name 'The Dragon', and our fearless duo, their family and allies, and the nation are about to find out.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Loft. Tuesday morning.

In spite of the number of times she has already watched it, each viewing of the arrest of the man - criminal she self-corrects - responsible for her mother's murder is still confronting almost to the level beyond coping. Confusingly it is almost more than conflicting too. A big part of her life's mission may be done. It is going to take time to work through everything.

But one thing is clear, she knows who she will have to help find her path forward with. She will not be doing this solo. He is beside her, with her, comforting her, shielding her, her ultimate partner.

She is so grateful for the absence of anyone but Rick for most of the time since the news broke. Never far from her side, he has been and is surprisingly reflective, near wordlessly supporting her even as she grips his hand too hard.

She dreamed of the moment over the years. Sometimes a little too much for her own wellbeing. For too large number of those dreams, she was the one to make the arrest and able to directly stare the murder down. Gradually these had lessened until she actually had a name and face, and then the frequency and vividness of those dreams increased again. She is not proud that this is a secret she still keeps from Rick.

Of course her making the arrest would never actually be an option in reality. Much as she wants to be the one to slap the cuffs on Bracken and witness his bravado collapse, it would not have been allowed to happen. She can wonder. How it feels being up close and able to see his eyes, his face ashen and fallen, the mask removed for all to see. The cuffs going on. The sag of the shoulders as the inevitability, the shame and defeat trumps the defiance as his fate settles and beat him.

This is real life. Or as close to it as possible in this semi-twilight zone she has been inhabiting with Castle and their families. Plus Gates would never allow it. Or the Federal Government. Or Castle. Or her Dad. Whatever, the reasons, they are right. Justice for her mom can be served by others. She just isn't sure whether she can wholly accept that just yet.

In many ways she is glad she is not there. It would be in all likelihood too much for her to cope with anyway. Media circus is perhaps an overly kind description. There are copious numbers of
law enforcement from every possible agency, naturally a milling herd of press, and finally a seaming vast throng of public, cell phones waving. It is a veritable circus – of the non-enjoyable kind. Not an environment she would be comfortable in. Certainly there would be no opportunity for any private moment of reflection and to be able to honour her mother without the risk of interruption or intrusion.

She images she spotted Will Sorenson somewhere in the crowd, but that can't be. She has no idea where he was now but the last she had heard he was a FBI diplomatic liaison officer overseas. What would he be doing in the middle of this case? Plus he knew how she was about her Mom's murder. They may have ended badly but surely he would respect her enough to reach out to her. Let her know. Her number – not that it would matter to a Fed - hadn't changed.

Even after almost ten hours it is still live on cable news, and then all the local channels are running constant for good measure. She hasn't even dared go on line, her phone untouched. She has seen Rick check his own phone and she knows Alexis has been online based on couple of snippets that have leaked through in murmured conversations around her. She hates that her almost-family are having to behave this way, but loves them for doing so.

This is one of those times coffee doesn't help. She won't try anything stronger.

There is no respite from it. Constant loop replays. And this time not just in her head. If she wants it is all up there in high definition on some many channels. Or the Internet – which her self-control is still keeping her from, barely. She knows Rick and others have checked, but she had never adopted social media and with her role as a homicide detective and the threats from Bracken and others it had made sense, so she doesn't feel it a loss to stay away.

Regardless of how she gets the news, this is a big thing. It's the biggest thing really. In quite some time. Years even. The talking heads have not stopped.

The more she thinks about it – and she really cannot help herself - and the further the coverage balloons out of control, the greater her relief she feels that she was not actually there. The media are relentless. She could only imagine how it would be with her. Especially with her mother as one of the victims. Herself too, her scars pulling in empathy or maybe sympathy.

She folds herself closer to Castle who has barely left her side since the news broke. And never for more than a few minutes. He had noticed her discomfort and fetched a heat pack for the long incision scar on her side. She marvels at him. She once could not tolerate him for periods longer than mere minutes. And now she can't function without him in a crisis. Well this crisis at least. She had prided herself on never crying – certainly in public - but today she cannot stop the tears. She squeezes his hand, and then just a little harder, just to let him know she is okay. She sees him manfully try to ignore it. Then sneak a slight glare at her, as if he knows she is doing it deliberately – their shared coping mechanism, and one of the first ways they connected.

For his part, Rick silently wonders in what other situations Kate would be like this. If Kate would do the same in childbirth. Certainly she had squeezed his left hand to the point of pain on occasion. He had caught himself just in time before actually spoke that particular thought out loud. Since then he had avoided even thinking about attempting to joke, or to deflect. This wasn't the time for his over-the-top exaggerated coping mechanisms. Instead he backs her up as she needs with his presence and comfort. But he has his suspicions, she may not be as stuck in her head as she makes out, and may indeed be taking liberties on occasion. He gets glimpses of a Beckett he is more at ease with. But then there are the tears. He really doesn't have much familiarity with this version of Beckett or Kate. So he does what he knows best for the situation when she is still the mystery he is
There was a time when she would retreat behind the wall, before breaking in solitude. But that is past, her past. The wall superseded, no, shattered, by her partner. So in his arms she shelters and then the tears come, her barriers overcome by the weight of pent up suppression.

She cries. Not weeping but with years of frustration and bottled up anger. So they are bitter tears mostly. For her mom. Her father. For Roy. For Castle. And for herself. For everything that was taken from them. They had all lost so much. She lost so much. She is not one for self-pity. But now she allows it. Indulges herself the emotions, the selfishness.

But she knows too that they all gave up so much, lost so much time that they would never get back. None of this seems worth the price paid. Not so far. Maybe one day the prospect of justice wouldn't feel so hollow. She also knows that the journey is by no means over. There will be arraignment, pre-trial, jury selection, the trial, conviction – she has to be certain he will be found guilty, and the possibility of appeals – Oh God, please let there be no appeals.

But for now she stays within his arms.

For his part Rick knows what he needs to do most of the time. Years of observing and tending – when she let him, which was rarely until recently – to Beckett make him the world authority on the matter. Not that he would claim it, or perhaps he should just to see that sarcastic eye-roll. The one she has (maybe) unknowingly passed on to Alexis.

The tears have run dry. For now.

He had held her until she had shaken him off and gone to the toilet to freshen up. He had checked on his mother and Alexis who had stayed out of the way mostly. They had only returned just as Kate did. Both offer long, lingering embraces with a few muttered words he cannot hear but does not need to. Both depart back upstairs. No one feels like going out right now. But that is now. It could be a long day or couple of days.

Kate comes back into his arms and they settle back on the sofa, there are still no words between them until he pushes gently, "Coffee?"

She nods, and he rises to go make some but not before kissing her gently with a soft squeeze of the shoulder.

Then a little while later when she had finally been able to finish the coffee, he had excused himself and then had returned with her phone. It was time to speak to her dad. They both knew it.

He rises to give her space but she snags his hand, and he is anchored there, a witness to what is a very one sided conversation with her father that concludes after maybe five minutes of largely monosyllabic responses.

Apparently she had not yet exhausted her tear ducts. She passes him the phone, and rises, walking off just a little bit in search of a tissue. He wants to follow but the call is still connected. On the other end was Val. She was obviously mirroring his role but with Jim and providing support of a similar kind. At that moment he is impossibly grateful that her dad has someone to lean on, to love and cherish. He thinks her mom would approve in a way. He knows Kate is trying hard but that final acceptance is especially challenging right now.

His conversation with Val is brief. She is brusque and all business, her focus obviously on Jim. He
finds himself inviting them both other for dinner, and after a pause for consultation it is accepted. Beside him Kate murmurs her approval, surprising him with her presence.

After hanging up, he folds Kate into him and she comes willingly. Even while comforting her, his mind is working overtime. They are aware that the threat from Bracken may not be over, and could in fact have increased. He makes a mental note to call Clare. Soon. He would not be surprised if the former soldier calls them first.

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**Department of Justice, Washington DC**

The US Marshall Service had taken Bracken to holding at the Federal Courthouse, so Sorenson is able to return directly to the office, and is shocked by the change.

They are approaching the limit, everyone is pretty much running on fumes. At least two of the mid-sized meeting rooms now resemble dormitories with a mixture of couches, portable cots and sometimes just the government regulation carpet hosting the exhausted team members for brief periods.

He spies Rachel McCord nursing what will likely be her umpteenth cup of coffee. He has given up, he never drank coffee that much in the past – simply not his thing - and just right now he cannot bear the bitter acrid taste. Soda has no appeal. He sticks to water most of the time.

He drops into his seat next to hers, and gets a brief smile, along with "Welcome back. That was good work. Nice and smooth."

He barely has time to respond before Director Vallante calls McCord in to his office. She starts for the sanctum but changes her mind and beckons Sorenson to follow her. Having just plopped into his seat, he rises slowly and follows her, curious as he is not normally invited.

Vallante looks in askance at McCord but her nod of the head is seemingly satisfied by Sorenson's presence.

McCord is a little bit shaken. Her boss looks worse than she does, if that is possible. She reminds herself never to take a Director level position. As if! Too much politics. She loves field work despite the risks.

"So Bracken is in holding at the courthouse under guard from the Federal Marshall's. They are choosing to not share any other security arrangements, even with us. He is scheduled to be arraigned within twenty-four hours. Again they are not choosing to share which Judge will preside. However, a little bird tells me they are freeing a number of slots late this afternoon for the arraignment. There appears to be an equal clamour of justices to preside or be unavailable. Draw your own conclusions to that little tit-bit.

"You look like shit McCord. Once this is done you and you team take forty-eight hours mandatory stand-down. No questions."

"I'll take a break when you do boss. Or when I'm dead."

"That's exactly what I am worried about. Did you miss the no questions bit? It is not a request Rachel. Consider it an order."

He looks at the newcomer. "Sorenson."

"Sir?"
"Welcome back from New York. That was nicely executed. Now I'm giving you a much tougher assignment."

"Sir?"

Vallante smiles, "I'm ordering you to ensure that the entire team, including SAIC McCord, stands down as soon as I order it. I am understood."

"Perfectly."

"Good now get out of here. We're not done yet."

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**Holding, Federal Court House, Washington DC.**

The State of New York had waved its rights and accordingly he had been whisked straight to Washington DC aboard a Department of Justice jet, and then to the main Federal Courthouse and straight into a holding cell with the entire block of cells emptied. Just him.

William Bracken regarded his lawyer with unrepresed distain. Well more than usual. But he could play the part. This was all for show. They were under observation. Cameras of course, and no doubt listening devices, despite client attorney privilege.

"William, I am at a loss to understand your instructions. Quite frankly they make little sense, especially now."

Of course that was entirely the point. All of the items he had asked Henry to do were mundane, inconsequential and maybe might lead their audience off in the wrong direction, if only briefly. He had set everything in motion before his arrest.

"Henry, I don't care if you cannot understand them, you simply have to follow them."

"Okay. So to be clear you are entering no plea at the hearing."

"Yes."

"Not a denial."

"I thought I was perfectly clear."

"Yes, I simply wanted to double check." The lawyer's tone was resigned. William Bracken had always been stubborn even when the advice offered would be to his benefit.

"Henry, in the years you have known me, have you ever had me change my mind?"

"No William."

"Well then, shut up, and do your damn job."

The veteran lawyer looks momentarily taken aback at the vehemence of the statement.

"Very well William, I will see you when you come up for the hearing."

Rising the man offers his hand, and is unsurprised when it is not taken. The Devil take William Bracken. "Guard!" He wants out. Of this holding cell, out of his retainer and far away from anything to do with this man. Before his toxicity snared him too.
The Loft.

She sleeps much of the morning and into the early afternoon, clearly exhausted.

He debates – and of course is highly tempted as always - whether to join her but instead decides he can do more for her by trying to handle – as best he and his team can – some of the more immediate ramifications of Bracken's arrest.

He starts with his agent and is comforted to find that Paula is already ahead of him. She is still drafting talking points and a media release will be sent over for them to for their review within hours. So far there has been only three inquiries from the press regarding Joanna Beckett and requesting comment from her daughter. But this won't last so they'll prepare to do their best to get in front of it.

His call to lawyers – Steve and Suzanne - is more of the same. On the conference call, the pair are all caution and for once he will take every bit of their advice. He can only hope Kate will accede too. In the meantime, they are to bunker down and not issue any statements without vetting between Paula, the lawyers, and then only after checking again.

He really needs one more specific person's advice, and sure enough before he can even call her, Clare is calling him.

Straight to the crux of the matter, she has no new additional security status updates. They should be alert but there was currently no signs of any threat, overt or otherwise. The surprise move by the authorities to arrest Bracken may have caught him off guard. Regardless she has secured Jane Stubbs to resume protective services for Alexis and the young woman would be at the Loft within the hour. Clare and two members of her team would be there around the same time. More Taylor Matthews resources were flying in to New York to provide reinforcements. Like the lawyers, she recommends hunkering down and waiting.

Rick bounces the idea of her, and quickly finds himself inviting Clare over for a council of war with dinner. He already has Jim and Val coming so he fires of messages to Ryan and Esposito to invite them to the Loft as well. The two detectives caution they are on duty but can take a break once they have cleared it with Gates.

When she wakes, Castle is there, waiting.

She beckons him in and climbs under the covers and she basks in his presence for a few minutes. She can feel him and tell he is antsy.

"What's going on Rick?"

"No change in the Bracken situation. I have Paula and the lawyers prepping in case, sorry for when, we need to make statements to the press. So far only a couple of inquiries but they will increase."

"God I hate that part of our lives."

"I know but even if it you weren't with me, they would still wait to interview you or at least a statement. This way we have Paula to run point and shield us from the worst.

"If I wasn't with you, well none of this would have probably happened and Bracken could potentially be president."
"You don't know that Kate. Mind you the bar for candidates seems to be getting lower each time. Who knows who could be president next?"

"Hmmm, is this were you give me the pep talk about fate and justice? Don't want it. Give me a kiss instead."

So he does. And then he fills her in on Clare's update, the increase in security for all, including the welcome return of Jane Stubbs to guard Alexis, and their council of war and dinner tonight.

This gives her much to mull over.

A light very late lunch, more of a snack is all she can stomach.

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**Langley, Deputy Director's Office.**

The call had gone out. Certain key resources were being mobilised. Less than 24 hours and the clean-up would be well under way. He only hoped it would be in time.

He was still flabbergasted by the extent of the problem, and the potential issues that would remain. Plus he still had to locate and terminate a rouge resource somewhere inside the Agency, DIA or NSA, and ensure there was no blowback.

Since his promotion, this was by far the most serious case that had come to him. It was fully compartmentalised with deniability to every level of government. If it ever came to light he would own it all. He predecessor has mentioned as much as he took his leave, looking very much like a condemned man given a reprieve.

He could only hope that the Nemesis and Valkyrie were as good as their reputations.

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**Office of the Adjunct Director, Direction générale de la sécurité intérieure, Paris.**

The American was on the 1:40 pm Air France flight to Washington DC from Charles de Gaulle. He would need to let his colleagues at the DGSE know and see if they could track him in the United States. At the very least warn them if the man decided to come back.

Not that he wasn't relieved to have the man in question off his patch. But he wondered why the sudden change. The man had pursued a single-mined campaign against Gregory Volkov, the former KGB/FSB hitman's operations in France with little pause for the last two years. Final resolution had only been avoided by Volkov fleeing back to Russia and into the arms of the very man he fled from - Vladimir Putin.

That fact alone made them give the American a wide berth. Any man who could scare one of the coldest killers from the old days in that manner was to be given the utmost respect. And the fact so far the American had limited casualties to foreigners from the East meant he could be left alone as a professional courtesy.

Plus after many years of being not able to act so directly against blatant provocation, there was a sense of satisfaction, even if it was an ami doing the work.

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**Aeroporto Internazionale Leonardo da Vinci, Fiumicino, First Class Check-In.**

The well-dressed woman waited patiently in the queue. The clothes were clearly boutique
purchased, if not tailor made, the matching D&G luggage, handbag and sunglasses covering her eyes. Her red hair perfectly coiffured and make-up classic simplicity. Despite the European chic, she clutched a United States of America passport in her hand.

An observer would place her in her late forties, early fifties with a lean physique and an earthy attraction, if not outright beauty. Italians' had long respected – and lusted – after such specimens of womanhood. And one of a pair Carabinieri officers, their Beretta M12 submachine guns cradled in their arms, remarked as much, somewhat crudely, to his colleague, in a voice low enough he was certain that the subject of his attention would not hear, nor as American likely to understand.

The line moved forward and bought the woman parallel to them. There is no-one else close.

"Scusami?" she asks the officers.

The observant officer, comes forward, all politeness and smiles, "Perdonami signora?"

The woman raises her sunglasses with her free hand revealing agate hard eyes with an intimidating stare. The officer swallows uncomfortably but unable to respond further as if suddenly transfixed by the Gorgon.

In perfect Italian with a slight Northern dialect she speaks quietly but directly to the man, "Mantieni la tua opinione per te. O ti schiaccerò i testicoli così anche la più bassa prostituta tranny non ti servirà. Buona giornata."

With that the woman smiles sweetly, drops the sunglasses down to once again cover her eyes, and calmly steps back as the first class queue moves forward again, leaving both Carabinieri too stunned to react the base threat to emasculate one of them so that even a transvestite prostitute would not service them.

Forty meters away, the senior field agent from AISI (Agenzia Informazioni e Sicurezza Interna) watched the exchange with a small smile. He did not need to know what was said nor did he doubt the man deserved whatever the American had told him. He was just grateful that the one woman storm was apparently leaving his country. He wished her a safe journey and hoped to never see her again. She had inflicted considerable damage in less than three weeks even while shopping at exclusive boutiques and dining – and more - with a succession of handsome men.

He wondered where she was headed. And briefly felt sorry for wherever she landed next. Just so long as it was not Italia, he was fine with that.

As soon as she was on-board and the plane departed the gate, he would call his superior to report. No doubt they would share the news with their friends. Word had it that the woman had been in several other European nations before arriving via a flight from Berlin. He wondered if the Germans too had experience similar disruption.

Federal Court House, Washington DC, 4.15 pm.

Ha. The look on their faces was worth it. Worth the fifty million dollars he had just splashed to secure his release on bail. The prosecutor had seemed so confident when demanding an extremely high bail bond given the seriousness of the charges, and the judge had agreed, equally as secure in their ignorance of his means.

After pulling his jaw off the floor, the Federal prosecutor had tried to argue that the mere possession of that amount of bail money by a politician surely must imply some form of
impropriety.

Unfortunately for the Government team, the court's only legal concern was whether the bail money was real. And it really was. He had been tempted to actually have it delivered as cash but that would have been a level of foolhardiness beyond even his own ego. He would settle for the extremely pronounced disbelief on the faces of all who witnessed the event.

He had willingly surrendered his passport to reassure the Judge. He would not need it. He had agreed to reside at his Washington town house, assuming that they would encamp outside to ensure he went nowhere and with the secondary effect of keeping him away from the media. But he had a plan and a contingency plan for that. Not that Plan B would be necessary James had assured him he would have him extracted without issue as soon as he was ready.

Plus if he wanted to flee the country he had ways and means that the absence of passport would not even delay for any length of time. James had even offered several options including some non-extradition countries but he was sure the former CIA Paramilitary was just going through the motions, both of them well aware he would be running away.

Indeed, he had no intention of fleeing, his planned evasion of the authorities was simply to prove he could and make the citizens doubt those who claimed to protect them and uphold the law. As he had promised Court his primary intention was a far higher objective than his own salvation. And soon the nation and those who thought they were in control would know the truth of it. What would follow was to ensure that no one forgot him or his message. He would not be ignored or consigned to history in ignominy as a failure.

By the time he and his attorneys had reached the main doors, they could almost feel the hum of the array of news media and worse waiting for them beyond the portal. And so steeling himself, he prepared to move back into the limelight.

Emerging into the twilight of a winter evening, the glare of media lights and flash strobes warns of the crush of the press and onlookers that was almost too much for the security to hold back.

'Mister Bracken' he hears, even his first name, 'William'. Ah there it was, a cry of 'Senator?' At last. But only a sole voice. It seems he was no longer Senator William H Bracken to most. Disappointing. As a senator, they had not yet had the full opportunity of time to respect him. Now they sought to strip him of that dignity.

Well if they wanted to play name games, he has another one he could assume. The impulsive moniker he assumed as much as a joke to hide his identity when this all began. Well if they were seeking the Dragon, they may as well find a dragon. And they will fear him.

And his fire would burn them, consume them.

Likely him too. But he was past caring.

Lifting his head, the smile beamed, a man certain of himself and his purpose. Let them see that. And as if from darkness he stepped forward, emerging into the battery of portable lights, and associate pack of microphone and cameras, confident and assured.

The show must go on.

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**Court Residence, Outer Washington DC**

Snapping the television off, he and walks the cupboard and does a quick visual check for his 'go'
bags. One in particular he opens to double check the contents, satisfied once-more with his inspection, he again affirms to himself that his conclusion that it is very much time for James Court to vanish.

Even with what he already knew – which was close to everything - he could barely believe the reports. This was like some disaster movie only with Bracken in the middle, and likely to drag everyone around him under too.

The whole thing had started to unfold and like a house of cards, once one part was dislodged, the whole edifice would soon follow, collapsing down and in on itself. And he had no intention of being trapped in the rubble.

He always knew Bracken's ego would likely be the root cause of everything going south. And sure enough Bracken now seems to have entirely taken leave of his senses. No longer was he the measured, and urbane senator, that persona nearly depleted and about to be discarded, soon to be replaced by the hyper clichéd identity that the man had chosen to masquerade behind. But one that was a far truer reflection of egotistical, vengeful, deluded and now probably deranged man he had once believed could – with the appropriate guidance and mentoring - be the leader of this nation.

The Dragon.

It had almost been an offhand joke so many years ago. But one which the Senator had never abandoned even when Court was almost convinced that they had cleared or at least supressed all the major skeletons in the closet. It was started when they were trying to warn off those snooping around things best left alone. The messages had been sent from the 'Dragon'. It had literally started as an impulsive joke. A mythical beast. Meant to scare. And some of their actions did more than that. But not always.

Surprisingly a number of those who they 'warned off' failed to heed the warning and suffered the consequences. Joanne Beckett had been just one who had not cooperated. He had cautioned Bracken about murdering the lawyer and the other three with knowledge of the case, but he had been ignored. A lesson he probably should have absorbed more fully before now.

Now the Dragon seemingly was preparing to make his final moves, and he no longer had any effective control over events. Fucking politicians and their egos. Regardless he would ensure that he fulfilled his duties to the man. The extraction team was ready in the vicinity of the Senator's townhouse and would extract him without the authorities even realising. He had a Plan B of course, but that would not be necessary. The team tasked with relocating Bracken had performed the similar missions in North Korea, Russia, the Middle East and no few Western Nations without ever being compromised.

He was actually relieved that Bracken did not want to flee the country. It would make his own escape less risky, but the man's plans to remain and taunt, even challenge the authorities concerned him.

He had been Bracken's fixer for long enough to know when a cause is lost, and his counsel unheeded. It did not matter that he was and is still vehemently opposed to it. If it had been small scale, and organised through him he would be able to block or cancel the strikes. But he is aware than Bracken has already set the wheels in motion on multiple strikes before he was arrested. Now even the man himself could not call off the hounds that had been set loose.

So with nothing to effect a change so he accedes to the inevitable, and prepares for his own escape. He has no intention of going out in some vain glorious action or worse a fusillade of bullets. In fact these largely fantastically suicidal strikes by Bracken's rabble, and admittedly a fewer number of
more professional operatives, would work very nicely in his favour. Just so as he stayed clear of any incidental or collateral impact.

Of course if he were inform on a few of the planned operations that he did have knowledge of, well that might work even more in his favour. It would tie up many of the primary response units and when the other strikes took place, then chaos would rule – at least temporarily. A string of messages to Homeland Security, FBI, NYPD and a few other agencies were already keyed up and on delayed timers.

Oh happy days.

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**The Loft**

Disbelief is the first reaction.

Anger the second.

Rick can see Kate's jaw locked solid, absolutely channelling full Detective Beckett to retain control around the large group. He is certain that is they were alone there would be a different reaction. But this is entirely her, how she copes in public, even if the audience is her family and friends.

Around the room, the shock of the decision elicits different response still shocked. Esposito's earthy Spanish, he wasn't even aware Ryan knew those epithets, Jim has his head in hands and Val's arms around him, Alexis is on the verge of tears, and even his mother is silent.

Of course, the even more stoic than Beckett, former Colonel takes charge. Clare is all business and he is grateful for it. So too is Beckett, he sees it in how she reacts to her temporary boss stepping up.

"That was clearly unexpected."

"Legal though," Jim opinions quietly, surprising everyone. The only person in the room with as much right as Kate, perhaps even a touch more than his daughter, to feel the most from this unfathomable event.

"Where did he get fifty million from?" Val asks the question they all have in their heads if not on their lips. And she answers it too, "Nowhere legal for sure." There are nods around the group.

"Future First most likely." Rick adds. Then when pretty much the entire room looks at him in askance. "I got the name from the investigations after Beckett's shooting. During all the digging around, I kept finding the occasional references to a couple of these new political action committees that fund all sorts of activity. Future First was the one Super PAC that popped up probably most frequently for a while but then nothing for a very long time. Not sure if it was no longer active or simply better shielded. We could never tie it to actual linked transactions, and it never appeared on any bank statements we were able to obtain.

Val chimes in. "Jim, wasn't that was one of the names we saw on the proposals from Jeff – the CEO at BWD - for taking on political accounts in place of existing clients."

Beckett speaks, "Clare, you need to call the Feds. They probably need to interview the banks and any one associated with Future First."

And with that the team starts to build a response.
Alexis approaches her father, "Dad, I'll order food. I know you were planning something but you're all busy."

Somewhat chasten Rick gives her an impromptu hug and apologies, "Sorry Pumpkin, we all got distracted. I'll give you my card. Just order a mix of things."

"Dad! Not my baby name please," she chides and he looks a little bit sorry, so she continues. "I'll use my own card. You will pay me back though," and she winks at Kate who snaffles Rick's arm and drags him back to the council of war in his office.

Since Bracken was arrested by FBI and charged with murder, the authorities have intensified their ongoing efforts to shutdown anyone and anything connected with his operations. The TV is running coverage of raids by Federal, state and local authorities on a number of locations for Orantis Solutions in Virginia and New York State. There have been multiple arrests. But there are reports of a large number of suspects on the run, along with missing weapons and vehicles.

None of this information does anything other than further unsettle the occupants of the Loft who have demolished a large selection of assorted takeaway while watching the continuous news cycle, changing channels to stay on actual reporting rather than talking head commentators.

Clare had offered Kate a research case for Taylor Matthews, in case she wanted a distraction. Kate had countered stating that she wanted to go to a gun range and to let off some frustration. Both Rick and Clare had nixed that idea.

Alexis had planned a shopping and dinner date with her new college friends. After discussing it Rick had reluctantly agreed as Jane Stubbs would accompany Alexis providing protection, plus Ryan and Esposito would drop them off on their way back to the Precinct.

There is no evidence or intelligence hinting at any threat, and Clare cannot provide any reason other than common sense why Alexis should stay in. Rick is clearly conflicted with his desire to hold his daughter close and safe clashing with his need to let her live her life.

For her part Kate entirely understands. The atmosphere in the loft is tense and the subject matter of the last few hours or so decidedly dire. She felt like wanting to escape too.

In the end a compromise is reached. Ryan and Esposito would drop Alexis and Jane off to meet here friends. They would stay in a small radius and there will be a town car from Time and Motion in proximity and Alexis would come straight home in that.

**Virginia, just outside Washington DC, Silent Oaks Funeral Home, 5.30 pm**

Matthew Weston stood before his brother's casket. Peter was finally at peace.

Looking down at Peter's calm features, no longer contorted in pain and frustration, he tries to focus and calm the emotions surging within him. He had something important to achieve before he can break down.

For now it was time to fully extract justice, and revenge, he admits honestly, for the loss of his family. And the prolonged torture of his brother.

And the target and focus of all this rage?

The man who had pretended to be his friend and supporter but in truth was the source of his
family's destruction and agony. Senator William H Bracken.

His father had been William Bracken's Operations Controller when he was District Attorney in New York, and had followed the ambitious man to work on his campaigns until the two parted ways amicably just as he had started college. Four months later his parents died in a motor vehicle accident while on their way to visit him at Princeton. He brother Peter survived the crash but with terrible physical and mental injuries that required constant care, and that finally – eight years later - claimed him too.

After his parents' death, William Bracken had stepped in to support him at college and helped pay for Peter's care. It had seemed only natural to go work for his benefactor upon graduation.

He had worked hard, and also been allowed time to visit and tend to Peter, and he had been promoted, and when the man became Senator Bracken, he was rewarded with the position of Senior Aide despite his youth.

However, this had been the very undoing of the new life he was trying to reconstruct after the apparent tragedies that had befallen his family. It had been entirely accidental when first encountered references to Future First and the 'Pipeline'. At first he ignored them, there were so many donors and organisations but something continued to feel off. For once he did not ask the Senator outright but instead checked covertly. He knows now that the gut instinct probably saved his life.

It took some time, many months. There was nothing at first but the longer he watched, the more things began to not add up. He also learned that James Court, the Senator's advisor, was directly involved in the supervision. The man unnerved him with his cold, dispassionate demeanour and he was even more cautious moving forward from that point.

It was a stroke of luck that he found the first crucial piece that eventually unlocked the trail of evidence. An oblique reference in a note with the name 'Lazarus', and the words 'Pipeline' and feeding 'FF'. Even then from there it took almost three more years of painstaking observation and patience to accumulate enough to be close. Certainty came when he connected a political fixer from New York called Jason Marks to the 'Pipeline' and Future First. Marks was over confident and careless - especially once he had a few drinks - and in a few weeks he had learned more than in the previous three years.

What he learned from Marks scared him but also made him more determined. Marks had also confirmed to him that James Court was a man to be feared. Whatever Court had done to Marks, the man would not say but it was obviously effective.

With Mark's information he was able to piece together the entire puzzle. Money from a mix of legal but mostly criminal enterprises – drugs mainly but also arms dealing and possibly illegal immigration with a side of modern day slavery - was being laundered by the 'Pipeline' and then funnelled through various organisations including businesses and Political Action Committees to Future First, a Super PAC. And it was vast sums of money. Conservatively more than a quarter-of-a-billion dollars in the last six years if his information was correct. Somehow Bracken managed to stay beyond arm's length as his fixer James Court ran the operation with the help of some unknown associates in New York.

But it was the discovery that his parents were murdered that made his decision final and easy. Somehow, his father had discovered an earlier criminal operation that the Senator had taken over, one that ended in the deaths of four people in the late nineties. Bracken had agreed to his father quitting and staying silence in return for his life (and presumably his family's safety). A deal Bracken did not keep. He had found the evidence of both the cover up and the deal in an older folio
of his father's that had appeared empty at first glance but removing the writing back revealed several pages of notes in his father's hand. Along with the evidence in the hand written notes from his father detailing not only the timeline but his suspicions about other illicit activities that Bracken was involved in, including the words 'Bracken = Dragon?'. His father's notes had ended with the prescient questions, 'Safe?' and nearby 'For now?'; 'Can I trust him?', and one final stark conclusion, 'No choice.'

To this day he cannot understand why the Senator kept him so close, and had supported him and Peter. Without the financial support he would have dropped out of college and the lack of premium care for Peter's would have seen him die much earlier, and his life collapse completely. Was it some perverse satisfaction from witnessing their suffering with the knowledge that he was the root cause? Or did he want to keep him close to ensure he was no threat.

In spite of all this he could not and did not act until Peter was dead. He would not allow that evil man to shorten another family member's life. So he had continued to collect information and document it keeping two sets of records.

Now he was ready to share and he had been able to reach out directly to the Department of Justice task force assigned to investigate thanks to inside information.

All he had to do was survive the assassins the Senator, or most like Court, had waiting for him. And he had a plan and a secret ally for that.

57 minutes later.
Matthew finished throwing up.

His newish friend and saviour passed him a bottle of water. Willard was one of the Orantis guards assigned to accompany him. But unlike the others who watched with barely disguised disinterest, distain or disgust, he had found a kinship with the guard who was a very similar age and other shared traits.

"You never seen a man killed before Matt?" Willard asked with his rural tones, clearly a country boy.

Matthew shock his head, a bit too vigorously and made himself feel sick again.

"Drink the water. Takes some breaths. It helps."

"No. So much blood. I thought it might be like a movie."

"Movies and TV almost never get it right. Either too little or too much. But rarely real. And no smell. Well don't feel any pity for those two. They've killed plenty at home and abroad, in uniforms and out."

"What do we do now?"

"You call that Federal Agent you have been speaking to and get them to collect us before Orantis or Court or Bracken send more people after us."

"Will you be in trouble for killing them?"

"With authorities, probably, but we'll cut a deal with your information. I'll claim self-defence. But if the others get to us first, I'll eat my gun before being captured."
"What about me?"

"Don't worry I'll shoot you first," he states entirely dispassionately.

"What?"

"Seriously Matt you do not want to be taken alive by these guys. Essentially I have betrayed them, they'll do their worst on me. You are like a freebie for them."

"Why?"

"Cause they can. Mostly. A few of them like that stuff. By mostly because they can and they don't feel anything. Just don't care."

"What about you?"

"I never deployed. Just West Virginia National Guard, so nowhere fucked as most who went overseas. Met some of these guys, they had some cash work going. I was desperate. Went from there."

"And they never?"

"What knew I was gay?" He laughs viciously. "Despite their disdain for faggots and queers, they wouldn't recognise one unless they were dressed like Liberace! So no they never cottoned on."

"But why did you?"

"Join with them?" Matthew nods.

"Like I said I was desperate. All about money. I barely graduated high school, no regular job, the National Guard barely covered staying alive. Out of options. Plus it was fun for a while. Nothing really harmful"

"Why stop? Why now? Why me?"

"Jezz Matt, you're full of questions." He laughs again, and kicks one of the dead assassins. "Cause I had enough. I didn't want to go where their journey was taking them. A final destination. Then you and I met a month and bit ago. Despite our class and education differences you showed me that there was something else. So I gave in to hope."

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet. We're not safe yet. Call that Federal agent and get them to collect us as a priority."

"I have already called and I've messaged twice. They have our location."

"Let's hope they beat Orantis here. In the meantime let's get away from the bodies, and wait." With that instruction, he turns back to the bodies and performs one more search just to confirm he has all the weapons and ammo, plus there were no more phones.

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**Washington DC, Department of Justice.**

McCord had been called in to speak to Vallante again.
Alone this time. Watching her go in solo, Sorenson knows the drill. He has not been cleared in for everything. Yet.

Arriving in his office, McCord notes her boss throwing another box of gum in the bin. He had given up smoking a couple of years ago, and gum had been his substitute.

"You still bulk buy that stuff?" She teases.

"Of course." He makes a resigned face and then it goes flat, serious.

"Rachel, Matthew Weston has called in. His brother is dead, and he is ready to deal. He mentioned something about evading two assassins. So we have to assume a hostile situation."

"We've got a response team on standby. I'll get the team together."

"Take extra but only one of you or Sorenson. I want the other back here."

He doesn't explain and she doesn't ask. The stakes have got immeasurably higher suddenly but not unexpectedly.

"I'll lead. Better we go fast and light Chief."

"Right but not too light. Take three ARVs and crews. I don't want us to lose this Rachael. What Weston is offering could pretty much seal things up for the prosecution. We are also very interested in what he knows about James Court. The Senator's fixer is mixed up in all this, has to be. But he has kept a very clean pair of hands."

McCord was the only one along with Vallante and the Deputy AG to be briefed in on the fact that the Senator's senior aide was willing to strike a deal, and with the death of his brother, Bracken's last hold on Matthew Weston was gone.

"In his latest contact Matthew Weston claims that he and a friend outwitted two men sent to silence him. He wouldn't expand but assume that there might be direct interference."

"I'll take care of it Chief. We'll bring him in."

"Thanks McCord. There is another reason Sorenson doesn't go. We're likely to need him to head back to New York. He seems to work well there."

"The brother?" McCord asks and Vallante nods.

In turn McCord simply nods too, turns and strides from the office. As soon as she is clear of the door she starts barking orders. Numerous agents spring into action.

Sorenson rises and looks to ask a question but she shoots him down. "Sorry Will, you're sitting this one out. Vallante wants you on standby to go back to New York."

It only takes minutes and the team of agents assembling in Meeting Room Four is impressive. Aside from McCord, Will knows about half by name. All seem very capable. They are loading up with tactical gear including a selection of weapons, ranging from the compact but deadly FN-90 submachine gun and at least three with M4 carbines plus a couple of shotguns. All have vests and windbreakers identifying them as FBI.

Sorenson moves to intercept his team leader. "You be careful out there. Bracken is far more dangerous than the responses we have seen to date. I know we're going after Orantis but there's no
way we're going to shut down and secure all of the assets. And that's just the ones we know about. Plus I've got a bad feeling about this. I know I don't usually subscribe to that sort of thing but my gut tells me something bad is coming."

She doesn't patronise him. "Mine too. I don't want to lose anyone Will. We'll be careful. This guy we're going to collect is a home run for the case. I'll explain more when I get back. We'll get you cleared in."

Sorenson drops his voice, "I'll probably be back in New York. I think the brother is going to fully flip too."

McCord nods, "We weren't sure on that one, maybe expecting family ties to hold but it seems Bracken either doesn't care or even goes out of the way to burn relationships, familial or otherwise."

"So see you when we're all back here and you help enforce Vallante's order for the team to take a break." She's teasing him.

"Yeah, I got some ideas for that." He does. There is a very good Tex/Mex BBQ restaurant that would suit the team as it has private dining. Give them a chance to unwind but out of the public eye.

"Bet you do. But in the meantime do your job G-Man." She sasses him, and then McCord gives him one last wink, turns and strides towards the main doors, calling out, "Saddle up," and eleven agents fall in behind her looking equally serious, their tactical gear simply reinforcing the impression, as McCord leads them off on the mission.

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**Washington Heights, 7.08 pm / T minus 7**

Frenchie DuPont checked his watch. Any time now the operations would kick off with the main wave of diversions. He did not have a lot of detail but the diversions would tie up first responders and give them a better window for escape and evasion at the end. Their vehicles were two blocks away, hidden in another disused building. He did not know about the other crews but he had planned everything including their escape route.

Alongside him the other three members of his fire team waited with an almost eerie stillness. All the strike team were veterans, but these three he has instinctively liked the most, and had formed his fire team with them. Although this would be their first battle together he trusted them already.

The assault plan was simple. A single breech by the bomb truck against the main doors and then all four fire team would assault through the entrance. No diverting resources, no messing, not giving the opposition a chance to recover. No mercy. Of course there was a risk of casualties. His intel – from unknown sources - had a dozen to twenty opposition with a mix of weapons from sniper rifles to handguns. But everyone knew the risks.

The firefight alone would be loud and be sufficient to attract significant law enforcement response. Factor in the truck bomb and you could probably triple the response normally. He confident from the briefing – that he alone out of this strike force had received - was that there would be a raft of false alarms and diversions to tie up New York's emergency services. In addition, this would be only one of multiple simultaneous strikes which would further confuse emergency service response.

He instinctively found himself reaching out to check the M16A3 leaning against the wall beside. It was pointless. The weapon was still in the same state of pristine readiness as when he had loaded it
and checked ten minutes ago. Beside him, the SAW gunner, Bill, adjusted his position, lowering the butt of the M249 Squad Automatic Weapon onto the weathered and stained concrete of the disused motor shop. This was no surprise; the fully loaded weapon was bulky and heavy with the one hundred rounds of ammunition and a modern tactical sight.

He felt the pulse first, then the tone in his left ear. That was his mobile signalling five minutes. No point in alerting the others. Too soon. He focused on his breathing, trying to calm the pre-battle nerves. No matter how many times, it almost felt the same every time.

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**City of New York Emergency Services Control Center, 7.12 pm**

Arlen Popkowski has been a senior shift supervisor for twelve of his eighteen years here. He loved the work and the buzz, and had declined the first two times they wanted to promote him to management and they got the message, he had not been asked since. It did not bother him at all. He liked it here on the floor. This was where he belonged. There were only a handful of occasions when doing his job had seemed like a chore, and only one where it was far more onerous.

"Pops," the call comes from Brucie, another long timer, hence the inherent permission to use his nickname. "Pops, we got a spike."

"Thanks Brucie, looking now." He punches up his screen and moves his mouse, even as his screen updates, the counters appear to move to move again, further towards red.

"Pops, better make that a surge. Big one too," Brucie updates the room. He can see that too. A real mix of responses required – police, fire and EMTs in singles, doubles and all-ups.

"I see it. What do we have team?"

A different voice. Kingston Jarvis, the duty threat analyst – a role added after 9/11 to collate incident information, identify potential threats and pass the intelligence on and upwards – is quick to respond, "Pops we got multiple incidents across Manhattan and the boroughs. No clusters, nor a pattern that we can see. The only thing suspicious is the timeframe. We have forty-three new incidents within five minutes. In Manhattan alone that's sixty-nine per cent of Ladder Company's committed, almost sixty for ambulances, and a really high majority of all police mobile response units. Three of the police response incidents have flagged for ESU, so that is all ESU ready teams for Manhattan deploying any time now."

Shit. That was going to leave the cupboard very bare. "False alarms, or pranks?" He really does not want to ask the other question, hoping that Kingston will answer anyway.

"None that have been reported. All appear genuine. Most incidents are low key. Only thing out of the ordinary is the short timeframe. First incident in this cluster was eleven minutes ago, and they keep coming but with no pattern. No incidents appear to involve high priority or critical infrastructure."

Arlen has to make the call, and if it is real, it literally is making a call. But first he focuses back on his team, "Alright people, let's crank it. Get our first responders out." There is no verbal response but he does not expect one. His team are focused on the incidents coming in and responding to the calls reaching their queues.

He goes with his instinct. This is off and he feels it. So he picks up the red phone, and it rings automatically. Process says it is to be answered within four rings. It takes seven. "Hello. Emergency Command." A woman's voice, a little bit rushed, uncertain.
"This is Arlen Popkowski at the ES Control, we have an Amber Alert with multiple incidents escalating will be code Red inside ten minutes. All services. No obvious threat detected. Board is clear."

"Wait please."

That does not happen in the drills. He can hear the same voice calling out to someone named Frank and asking for instructions. It is like they never learn, or forget. Effectively the same thing when it comes to a real emergency.

Meanwhile, New York's response to the rising crisis is delayed.

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**Washington Heights, 7.13pm**

At T minus two, his phone pulses again, and this time he makes the universal hand signal for ready to alert his team, and remotely starts the truck engine. This does the job of alerting the other three teams waiting out in the darkness. And possibly their targets.

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**Warehouse, T minus 2**

It had been a long couple of days. It was cold, miserable and boring. Really, really, mind-numbingly boring. Any initial alertness had been worn away by the frustration and cold, miserable weather.

The Boss has been good. Plenty of hot food and drinks. Regular breaks but this ain't their crib, just some previously disused warehouse that had periodically been used to stash drugs or other contraband. It did not pay to be too curious if it wasn't your particular gig.

Carl had been working for Vulcan long before he finished high school. He seemed to be a natural and prospects had been good since then. He never had a bad thing to say – always wise with Vulcan - but this shit was taxing that previously unquestioning loyalty. Not that he would say anything. Few did. Vulcan has a hair trigger temper and is one big mother. It never ended well for those who upset him, except maybe a handful of senior hands. Carl is not one of those, so he stays quiet.

Plus the boss has been on edge like none of them can remember. He is not one to keep it bottled in and all in the warehouse have heard his rants and threats to do unspeakable things to that 'Snake Court' or that 'fucking politician'. No one dares to ask for fear of provoking Vulcan - none of them forget what happened to 'Goodboy' whose only bad luck was to sell to an undercover cop.

So he will be stoic and not complain. Tonight he has duty one of the overhead walk-ways and his job right now is to keep watch by peering out the windows into the dark surroundings looking for any suspicious activity. Of which there had been nothing for days. It is cold and his breath frosts the filthy window panes as they go to considerable effort not to remove too much grime least they detract from the camouflage of a run-down disused warehouse. He glances at his watch. A genuine Breitling Aviator, any satisfaction at owning such item, lost in the realization that he has almost two hours before he is relieved.

He does another cursory check through a large hole, seeing nothing but receiving a cold blast of icy wind direct to his face. He is about to move on when he hears the sound of a diesel engine firing up nearby. Strange, there is usually nothing open this late round here. He looks out the nearest window and sees nothing. Probably just a truck parked down a nearby side street trying to dodge
metered parking.

The diesel noise gets louder. He glances out again, then stares, searching. He eventually sees a shadow move from the old garage across the way. That place was abandoned longer than the warehouse. What's a truck doing there at this time? Where are the truck lights? Damn fool need to turn on his lights. Not that there is a cop around here to ticket the misdemeanor.

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**T minus 1**

Frenchie watching through the simple display feeding from the single black and white camera mounted on the front grill of the truck, pushes the stick forward and the truck lurches a little as it accelerates, the noise of the diesel engine increasing. The gear changes are sluggish, and the truck lurches further each time, with the acceleration retarded as the engine is still cold but in truth the momentum does not really matter. Kinetic energy is not a factor in this.

Satisfied with the direction and his aim, he hits the button on the remote control for the headlights, knowing the sudden appearance of lights will likely confuse any observers including their targets.

He quickly glances down to check his M16 is ready. Beside him the men are set, ready to go the moment he commands. Almost like the good old days.

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**Warehouse**

If responding to his mental demand, the vehicle lights come on and Carl can now clearly see that the vehicle – a white mid-sized truck – is maybe thirty, hell twenty yards from the main door, and accelerating. And there appears to be no one driving.

Carl definitely ain't bored now.

"Shit!" He scrambles up from the window, remembering to grab his shotgun, and starts running down the overhead walkway, shouting out as loudly as possible. "We've got incoming. Fuck! Heads up. We've got…"

From Carl's first detection of the engine starting it takes has less than thirty seconds for the vehicle to travel the distance from the disused garage, and impact directly into the steel doors of the warehouse. The old doors mostly collapse under the force, and been driven in by the momentum of the truck, it had travelled only six yards before the traffic barriers had done their job and terminated the remaining kinetic energy bringing the truck to halt. The front of the cab was mess, one headlight was out, the other projecting at a weird angle, the windscreen popped. But as closest guards note there appeared to be no one inside the cab.

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**Warehouse, 7.15 pm / T Zero**

The noise of the truck crashing into the main doors had certainly got the attention of all the occupants of the building. Once the old building's steel doors had yielded, folded would be more apt, and been driven in by the momentum of the truck, it had travelled only six yards before the traffic barriers had done their job and terminated the remaining kinetic energy bringing the truck to halt. The front of the cab was mess, one headlight was out, the other projecting at a weird angle, the windscreen popped. But as closest guards note there appeared to be no one inside the cab.

Vulcan Simmons had reached the doorway of the office just in time to see the white truck come to a juddering stop against the traffic barriers, and shout out instructions to his men.
"Kill the fucking driver! Kill anyone. Kill 'em all!"

One of those closest to the truck, a long serving member, turns to explain. But he never gets a chance.

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**T Zero**

Zero Hour.

At these moments he can no longer hide or deny his base nature that delights not just in the hunt but in the kill.

Satisfied that the truck was going no further, Frenchie DuPont flips the safety cover and hits the trigger with a feral grin on his face.

Immolation.

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**Chapter End Notes**

**Author's Notes**

Well that took a lot longer than promised.

And not just because my wife and I enjoyed a well deserved escape to the tropical paradise of Tahiti including Bora Bora (Nathan Fillion left Moorea just days before we arrived).

The delay is due to this chapter being so pivotal to the completion of the story.

And the version I originally intended to publish did not work well enough. So I rewrote it, and rewrote it. It tripled in size and got unmanageable. Multiple reviews and rewrites later, for the first time on one of my stories I had a beta reviewer go through it. They made suggestions, some of which I used, some I didn't. But it was a useful if protracted process as their request for the previous chapters was somewhat counterproductive due to the sheer size. But they soldiered on. And I am grateful for their one-off (they were adamant about that) contribution.

Now chapter 78 will be posted in 3 parts. Each part will be published over the coming week. On here it will be one single chapter but will be 3 chapters on FF.net.

To everyone still with me, thank you for your patience.

Thank you to those who take the time to review and especially to those who have reached out with messages.
Chapter Summary

Previously – Has Senator William H Bracken managed to escape justice, or is it merely delayed. But what of his enforcers? There are reasons the Senator had taken the name 'The Dragon', and our fearless duo, their family and allies, and the nation are about to find out.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Zero Hour.

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Warehouse

The truck bomb had been designed to project the blast forward and to the sides of the truck to ensure that the teams of attackers would not be directly impacted by the blast and shrapnel as they prepared to assault the warehouse. To that end a thick steel plate had been welded to the tailgate and reinforced with sandbags behind it. The explosives were deployed as shaped charges with the cone facing in 160 degree arc forward from the rear. Packed around the explosives were plastic containers full of ball bearings, bolts, nuts and small gas canisters of the type used for camping, along with ten gallon cans filled with aviation fuel. Essentially this was a massive mobile Claymore mine with incendiary bonus.

It certainly worked. Probably beyond the most optimistic expectation. Everything exploded in a flash of light and fire, immolating any object and person within ten yards of the truck. The truck's cab shredded as did the entire cladding of the vehicle forming additional red hot shards of shrapnel to accompany the concussive shockwave and flaming shot afire from the mix of ammonium nitrate, C4 and aviation fuel.

The payload of ball bearings, nails and bolts is projected by the force of the explosion and flies through much of the warehouse, embedding themselves – for the most part - in any object in their path. The small gas canisters ignited and exploded randomly on impact or in flight. Beyond the ten yard radius of the fireball, these did even more damage to the building and occupants.

The old building, long neglected, shuddered, bent and in places broke.

For Simmon's crew, the results were simply devastating, and one hundred per cent fatal to anyone in direct line of fire within twenty yards of the truck. In seconds almost half of his assets – if he
thought of them as such - were eliminated.

The Storage Space, 7.35 pm

From their position with superior observation of both the derelict garage and the warehouse, the two former Korean Special Forces sergeants look away at the last second after the truck comes to a stop wedged in the entrance. They know what comes next and they do not want to be temporarily blinded by the flash over. Despite their preparation the blast of light and shockwave from the truck bomb is confronting. Whoever had built it had miscalculated the yield, considerably. Amateurs. Or out of practise. No matter. The sound rolls in now. That was certainly going to be very noticeable. They could only hope the distraction plan was working well enough.

"Get ready. They are right on time." Court's intelligence was good. It was rarely amiss, something that had prolonged their working relationship.

"I like professionals. So predictable." His wife smiles and despite her apparent femininity looks seriously warlike in her jet black coverall, balaclava and already carrying her Russian grenade launcher, the M16A4 slung crossover at her front.

Outside the Warehouse

"Shit Almighty!" the SAW gunner beside him expressed a common opinion. Well that was a bit bigger than expected. Fucking Oath it was. Good thing none of the teams were closer.

As a result Dupont did not need to make the arm pump or any other signal to go. The explosion had been all the indicator that the teams needed to begin their assault.

All four fire teams rose from their positions pretty much together and raced towards the breech, ignoring the residual fires and debris from the blast.

The first teams to reach the breech pause and on each side four flash bangs are hurtled into the space beyond. Probably a case of caution given the overkill of the explosion, but they had all lived through multiple engagements by never giving the other side a chance.

The Warehouse, T plus 1.

The blast from the truck has shattered pretty much every window inside the warehouse including those to Vulcan's interior office. Almost every man standing had been thrown to the floor. The fortunate ones before the worst of the shrapnel arrived.

Those within ten yards had been caught directly in the fireball, and beyond that thousands of pieces of shrapnel and exploding gas canisters had accounted for more and in mere seconds more than half the men were down.

The suspended walkway that ran round the interior of the outside wall had not weathered the blast well. Already weakened by years of neglect when the building lay derelict, the shockwave had fatally shorn a number of supports and more than half immediately collapsed to the floor with further crescendos of twisted metal and screams, some human. One of the two sniper perches along with its occupant went too, all too human agony lost in the cacophony as the metal screeched and warped in its own demise.

By fleeing as far as he could along the walk way when he saw the truck approach Carl the Lookout
had survived the blast from the explosion as by pure chance he had been largely shielded from the shockwave and shrapnel by a large vertical steel support beam. This same beam also prevent the walkway in his vicinity from collapsing immediately. Staggering down the adjacent staircase he tried to reorientate himself and remember if there was a round chambered in his pump action shotgun.

Reaching the ground he looked up in time to witness the near simultaneous detonation of the flashbangs. Far enough away and shielded so as to not be hit by the bomb or directly shocked by the new blasts, the blinding light leaves him helpless. Despite his lack of vision, he raises the shotgun in what he assumes is the vicinity of entrance and the threat. It is the last action of his life for just as he raises the shotgun, the second man through from the front fire team hammers him with a burst of three rounds to his torso. Any one of the rounds would have been fatal.

Vulcan Simmons' organisation is about to have a very bad night.

From this point onwards there was a constant barrage of gunfire as the four teams push into the warehouse, and start to wipe out the remaining shocked and disorientated defenders.

But they are not unopposed, despite their shock, a handful start to fight back.

Beasley, Wax and Drummond, Office of 'The Boss', 7.18 pm.

Jeff still liked to think of himself as 'The Boss'. It was both sufficiently laidback but empowered for how he originally envisaged his staff would treat and deal with him. Akin to the same relaxed but respectful his father had engendered over the years.

Events over the last year, and especially the most recent months had thoroughly disabused him of any those notions. He had come to realise that his father had earned that respect over time, and likewise had been measured in the exercise of his executive powers. Something he had not done. Quite the opposite in fact, and for now he barely holds control of this firm. And even that position is only temporary. Any one of a number of threats could or would deprive him of his control of the company, and in a one of case possibly his health or even his life. The last naturally scares him greatly.

He hears a commotion outside, frowns at the interruption to his troubled thoughts, but ignores it for the moment lost in the fog and hopeless mire of the crisis he is now conceded is entirely of his own making. Although it is past seven pm, this is New York and plenty of the staff are still here in the office. Just that they are not usually that disruptive.

He had just received a phone call from a Special Agent Sorenson at the Department of Justice. The offer had been extremely blunt and entirely lacking in form of dressing up.

He knows that has little option that to accept the offer from the government, and turn witness against them. His life as he knows it is over. But to wait any longer could bring dire consequences. He knows now who he was working for. He should have realised sooner but he will admit to being blinded by the greed and power the money would have bought the first. But that was a bust, and he has a limited window of opportunity to avoid paying an extreme penalty either to the government or the very dangerous people he did business with. And he needs to do it now before his information is no longer as valuable. But the mere prospect of denying them, let alone betraying them has him near frozen in fear too.

Them being the men behind Future First. James Court, a proxy and entirely intimidating one for William H Bracken, former US Senator, and now indicted on multiple felonies including murder
and conspiracy to murder. A man now free on bail and apparently inclined to take revenge on those who slight him. That really does not bode well. He wishes he could smoke in here but the rules were strict regarding health, even his Dad – who loved a good Cuban - complied. He really needs some nicotine. He pulls his top right drawer open searching for a pack of gum.

As he does, there is a loud scream, and then the barely-muted sound of something falling, or rather crashing down. Then more screams. This finally shakes him from his self-centred introspection. In no way is this normal business or acceptable. Channelling his problems into anger, he is still raising his head to look for the source of the interruption when his door bursts open with a crash. By the time he finishes fully looking up the first and last thing he sees is his own doom down the very big muzzle of a gun.

He was too late anyway.

"Oh shit!"

Somehow his focus is sharp and focus is not on regrets but just a mental prayer to please let it be quick.

It isn't particularly.

Unfortunately for Jeff, the masked gunman has specific instructions. The customer was paying extra, so the requests will be honoured, even if it was unprofessional.

The target has not even had a chance to fully rise – futilely - from his chair when the gunman rapidly adjusts his aim from the head and the first shot is fired.

It is a sensation like nothing he has ever experience before. The first shot targets his arm and the explosion of pain starting at his right elbow is indicative of the destruction. Were he to look down he would see his forearm suddenly dangling, hanging uselessly from the shards of his elbow, connected to his upper arm only by ruins of tendon, muscle and skin. The spray of hot blood on his face is just as shocking for the heat as the agony that lances him through almost his entire body.

His agonised scream unheeded by those already screaming outside, fleeing if they can. No one is coming to help him. The man before him is impassive behind aviator shades, and a serpentine smile. And he has already made examples of those who vainly attempted to thwart his approach to his target.

His legs begin to fail but the impact of the first shot forces Jeff up a little and further away from his desk, his chair rolling back, and the motion exposing more of him to the gunman. The next shot is clearly as deliberate as the first as it is fired low into his torso, and the pain from his arm is momentarily lost in the agony from his groin.

Thrown to the floor by the force and the overwhelming agony of his injuries, he is only dimly aware of the final mercy shots when they come, delayed mere seconds as the gunman has to step around his desk, to perform the professional double tap with the traditional two rounds being pumped into his skull from several yards away.

The gunman pauses to exchange magazines, pocketing the partially empty clip, but seemingly unconcerned about the empty shell casings, before turning and exiting the office without looking back, stepping over the lifeless body of the PA whose only mistake had been to freeze in terror blocking the doorway and access to her boss. A body and head appears in a door way some twenty yards away and he snaps a shot, satisfied when the target slumps and then falls forward, face ruined by the impact of forty-five calibre round on the bridge of their nose. No one else tries
anything on this floor.

He takes the stairs down one level and screams precede the gunman as he now heads for the fire escape, leaving three more casualties in his wake, one definitely fatal, all object lessons in failures of compliance and cowardice. Pushing through the alarmed door adds more chaos and confusion. He makes a rapid decent down the fire stairs and into the lane way. Sliding the pistol under his coat, he strides out into the street and straight towards the waiting car. Calmly crossing the sidewalk he opens the car door and drops into the passenger seat. He reaches across his body for the seat belt. With the click he nods to the driver and the car pulls slowly away slowly. Long before any sirens draw near.

Message delivered.
Job done.
Time to go.

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**Washington Heights, Warehouse, 7.18 pm / T plus 3**

Not for the first time, base survival instinct has saved Vulcan from the blast and the withering barrage of gun fire from the attackers. With his are two of his best men. All are one the floor of the small internal office, cowering as close to the cold dank concrete, all of them are covered in glass and debris from the blasts and bullet fire that has ripped the warehouse and as far as they know all or most of the other men apart.

Both of his companions are veterans of sorts, hardened either at home or abroad. They have fully automatic rifles – an AK47 and a M16A2. But it is suicidal to try and use them just now.

For now they wait.

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In cover behind a pair of toppled rusted steel lockers, Frenchie Dupont is satisfied with the assault so far. They have a dozen plus enemies down but he can see two of his men down - both from team three that entered on the same side as him. No time to check on them.

A ping of a near miss as a round sails off and away.


Damn that's a good forty-five seconds to swap out the hundred round mag on the SAW, and with it goes a large percentage of his firepower.

"On it. Fire in the hole," confirms his team's grenadier. The M209 pops and a 40mm HE grenade impacts just below the sniper's perch. The explosion is lost in the cacophony of the conflict but Dupont grins as he sees the man throw off the walkway to land nearly head first on the floor. He hammers the grenadier's shoulder to emphasis a job well done.

"Up," confirms his machine gunner having changed the magazine in less than thirty seconds, fear is the ultimate motivator. He glances left and right. All his team nod in readiness. Over the ways behind a wrecked pick up he sees the two survivors of fire team three give the ready signal.

The volume of fire slackens and then ceases - for want of targets and exhausted magazines.
Taking the opportunity, Dupont rises and leads his team on the final assault with a shouted command of "Go, Go! Let's clean them up."

A fresh wave of gun shots crashes out.

"Fuck we gotta move V," screams Hammer. He is a genuine veteran with a full tour served in Iraq where he obtained the very AK47 he clutches. Beside him the slightly less composed, and warrior of a very domestic nature, Tongs manages to agree all while looking like he all really wants to do is scream. Or be somewhere else. No fool.

"On two, let's give those mothers the full mags and then head for the rear fire door." These are their streets, if they can make it to the exit they have a chance.

There is another brief lull in the gunfire, and momentarily all they can hear is the crackle of fire, the screams and moans of the dying or injured and then they hear it, the command from the leader of the assault. "Go, Go! Let's clean them up."

Hearing the order, pushes them to action. Tongs is first up, whether driven by blind courage, desperation, fear or a combination of them all. His stolen M16A2 has three round bursts selected and he starts pumping the trigger as fast as he can. Rising beside him, Hammer is more measured, letting loose short controlled bursts from the AK47. Vulcan stands beside them, dwarfing both with his massive frame, and lets loose with the modified C4 carbine and the 75-round drum magazine on full auto. "Take that mothers!" he screams, and he grins as he sees at least four of the attackers fall to their gunfire.

Miraculously none of them are hit by the first wave of return fire and as their weapons run dry, they switch their focus to escape, and jump through the shattered window on the left side of the office and sprint for the fire exit in the corner, just yards away. Neither Vulcan who has dropped his C4 nor Tongs try to reload as they flee, but Hammer is slamming a fresh magazine in even as he runs.

Dupont barely felt the round that creased his arm. Beside him his SAW gunner and grenadier we down. No time to check on them, he screams at the remainder of his men, "Kill the fuckers."

The combined fire power of the nine surviving assaulters includes two SAW's and the results are predictable and fearsome. Tongs does not make three steps before his body is riddled by more than sixty rounds. Hammer is next to go taking two bursts to the head as he turns to exchange fire with his AK47. The weapon topples from his hand, discharging randomly as it careens to the ground narrowly beating its owner's body to hit the cold, hard concrete.

Managing to drop below the direct line of sight and gunfire, Vulcan grins. He has only a few steps to go to safety. He's a survivor. He'll make it.

But he is wrong. A round ricochets off a nearby metal surface and slams through his right hip. He is big man but the shock and pain of the impact is like nothing he has ever felt before. The force slams him to the concrete as he loses control of his body.

He misplaces seconds, probably longer, from the shock, and it precious moments more before he can do anything.

He is soaked by his own urine which feels strangely comfortingly warm in marked contrast to the searing sensations from his hip. Tears stream down his face at the pain. He won't give up. He
frantically tried to lever himself up. The door, and the chance of escape remains only a handful of yards away. Desperation on his face, he starts to drag himself, agony for every inch closer to possible escape.

With the full battlefield cacophony coming from the warehouse there is no need but with decades of training and instinct, the pair of Koreans approach quietly, reaching the outside of the Warehouse just as Dupont’s teams begin their final assault.

The wife spots two of the assaulters down near the shattered entrance. Efficiently swapping the grenade launcher entirely over to her left hand she slides the M16A4 on up and with barely a pause to target fires two single shots into the heads as precaution. The rifle has a shorter suppressor that mutes some of the noise. Not that it would be audible with the firefight immediately front of them. She briefly turns to smile at her husband and then re-slings the assault rifle and resumes her double handed posture with the grenade launcher.

**Washington DC, 7.20 pm**

Reports of multiple incidents in New York City and surrounds soon have every agency and force increasing their alert posture, especially in and around the nation's capital.

As the number of attacks in New York does not abate, this triggers an escalation in the readiness stated and a series of cascading responses that only serve to heighten anxiety for all concerned.

Visitors arriving at the White House are turned away down the barrel of automatic weapons as every gate and barrier is closed. Secret Service Agents with Stinger missiles and others with anti-material weapons take their positions and in doing so are spotted by a photo journalist with a long tele-prime lens and so begins the matching media escalation.

At Andrews Air Force Base a pair of F16C's, fully loaded for CAP, accelerate down the runway, passing a stationary Air Force One which is now too being prepped for in readiness for departure. Within seconds they 'rotate' and race away to their station height afterburners ablaze, pilots checking in with the NORAD ground station while they wait for an AWACS which was being scrambled from the 552nd Air Control Wing's base at Tinker in Oklahoma. At other Air Force bases the ready response flights stand to and just as importantly crews race to their Stratotankers ready to do their part to keep the air combat patrols aloft long beyond their internal fuel loads.

Inside and outside of the Pentagon, security begins to enact lockdown as the duty teams scramble to gear-up and deploy. Contingency plans drawn up after 9/11 are pulled from cabinets, many long forgotten and now hastily consulted. The Virginia National Guard Avenger crews are activated, and the startled crews race from their bunker towards their vehicles even as they wonder what was going on to disturb their usually routine boredom.

Outside the Department of Justice the everyday rent-a-cops are reinforced by uniformed FBI agents as the DC SWAT teams are scrambled.

Mostly confusion reigns.

No one feels safer.

**The Warehouse. 7.20 pm / T plus 5**

From his cover positon just inside the entrance, Sergeant Bae Dea-won – he still thinks of himself
as a serving soldier, especially in times like this when on an operation - checks the interior and he
spots eight, no nine he confirms, hostiles still on their feet. They may be veterans but they are
conveniently clustered together in what looks like two close groups. This would be too easy.

"Ah-hope" he confirms the number to his wife in their native language. They both pull down the
respirators that were resting on top of their balaclavas. No more communication is required. Years
of partnership given them an uncanny sixth sense and enable them to act together as one.

'Thunk, Thunk' is the report as each from a standing position fires the first of their four gas
grenades into the warehouse. Both of these are directly at the two remaining groups of assaulters.

Without waiting, they resume their entrance into the interior of the warehouse, navigating the
wreckage and bodies. All the while maintaining a deliberate and steady barrage of gas grenades
until each has discharged their remaining three gas grenades. There appears to be no need to use the
final two grenades which are High Explosive Anti-Personnel versions. Both lower the grenade
launchers and let them hang from the slings on their left hand sides, and raise their supressed
M16A4 rifles up and move forward as a pair to complete their mission.

Seeing the three remaining gangster fall, Frenchie Dupont allows himself a moment to re-compose
himself. No matter how many times, he always feels a little sick at the end. Fuck his left arm
stings. Could be a lot worse. Just a flesh wound. He laughs only those who have never been shot
say 'just' before any battle injury. He steels himself, trying to push the growing throb from the
wound to the back for now, they have a job to complete. Ignore his casualties too.

He is just in the process of swapping out magazines when there is a small detonation to his left and
a cloud of something starts to discharge. Immediately in the periphery of his vision two of his men
are down with barely any sound.

"Chem attack from rear." Did he call that out? Who said that?

"Fuc…." He drops overwhelmed by the noxious gas as do the rest of his team.

The Koreans work their way through the bodies ensuring that any not clearly dead receive a single
round to the head to confirm the kill.

It takes them less than sixty seconds. The clock is running. They move on from the bodies of the
now dead strike teams looking for their primary target. The man Mister Court demanded visual
confirmation of the kill for.

They were confident he had not escaped. They had barred all the emergency exits under the cover
of darkness the previous night. The chains and locks were simple but effective.

Despite the shock he had not simply collapsed immobile. Vulcan had managed to drag himself the
final few yards to the exit. There in an act of superhuman effort he had pulled himself off the floor
to get the necessary purchase to push the bar to open the fire door.

Except it did not open.

The bar depressed but the door moved only a fraction.

"Fuck! Shit FUCK!"
Holding himself up with nothing but sheer willpower, he made one more massive exertion, perspiring despite the bitter cold, but it was no good.

"MOTHER!"

And with that he had no more energy, even to curse, and depleted he dropped down to the floor, spiking another wave of agony from his hip.

The pain has one benefit triggering a surge and clarity of thought. He realises that this was deliberate. The whole thing a setup. That prick Court was coming for him. The resentment and anger generates enough energy that he somehow manages to summon to lever himself into a sitting position, with his back to the door, trying to focus and draw his one remaining Desert Eagle. The heavy pistol felt like a fifty pound dumbbell at the end of his arm, and it fell back to the floor.

He is eyes close, as the pain, blood loss and exertion drain what appears to be the last of his energy and will power.

He does notice there approach until one speaks.

"Ah Mister Simmons, are you still with us?"

An Asian accent. Female too. He loves Asian bitches. Usually but probably not this one.

What happened to the attackers in camo gear? This one attired in black.

His eyes fly fully open, "Who the fuck?" he squeezes out between the pain.

He sees now that there are two of them in tactical gear, and balaclavas obscuring their faces. Assault rifles hang from rapid straps at their fronts, a pair of bigger imposing weapons at their left sides. Neither weapon is in hand. They clearly believe he is no longer a threat.

There is a responding laugh.

"Our friend will be pleased that you are not yet deceased."

"Fuccck yo."

A derisive laugh is the first response, "Well you known him too," and the other individual, a man, speaks now. His tone flat and matter of fact, the accent harder to pick.

"Mister Court did say you were both uncouth and stubborn," the woman states, confirming what he already knew. She lifts up a hand which contains not a weapon but a cell phone and she takes a picture.

The flash startles him. 'What?' he thinks, and he struggles once more to raise the pistol in his right palm. But it is too much and his hand drops back after climbing only inches, barely retaining a grip on the pistol.

The woman clearly does not even consider it a threat as she takes another photograph ignoring the loaded large calibre handgun still in his grasp.

The man, in all certainty another Asian, steps forward past the woman but is careful not to obstruct her view and that of the phone camera.

"Well he can go fuck….."Simmons stops midstream, as a wicked looking knife gleams as it suddenly appeared in the right hand of the male.
He makes one final effort to raise the Desert Eagle but this time a foot darts out from the man, and casually kicks it from his hand, a precaution only as the threat was minor but the implacable assassin is taking no chances.

With no remaining resistance the end begins with no further fuss as the razor sharp blade slices across Vulcan Simmons' jugular with sufficient penetration to make the wound fatal but immediately so.

If Vulcan had wanted to make a last dying curse at them or the man who sent them, he is incapable of doing so as he begins to drown in his own blood, his lungs filling and the instinctive but hopeless struggle overwhelming all else.

They should be moving but the pair wait wordless for the final act to complete. They have their instructions.

It takes less than twenty seconds before the large body no longer displays any sign of life, the man moves in and checks, nods, and steps back. The woman takes one final image of the bloody body before turning to her husband.

"We must go now." Their watches showed eight minutes elapsed.

Remaining standing where they are both toggle the quick release straps and their webbing falls down then bodies, dropping the majority of their gear directly to the floor. This includes the assault rifles, grenade launchers and ammunition. They add their gloves and balaclavas and then both simply step back over their pooled gear, but not before reaching down to pull the toggles on a pair of thermite grenades.

In unison they turn and begin a rapid jog away, almost dancing over the debris and bodies.

Twenty seconds later, the delayed fuse termite charges explode, immolating their gear and triggering a round of secondary explosions from the unspent ammunition. The body of Vulcan Simmons does not escape and suffers further indignity as the flames spread. There will not be much for the police forensics to examine.

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**West Virginia, Safe house**

No-one knows about this place but he is not staying any longer than needed.

The images from the Koreans come through in quick succession.

Stills only. No video. Just as requested.

He is alone so it would not matter anyway, but the cackle that he emits on receiving the final images is pure evil, even if he admits it himself.

Fuck you Simmons. Just a shame he did not get to do it himself.

He will not deny that this one had been personal for him. A lapse from his usual measured professional standards but not one he feels will increase his risk so he had allowed it and indulged himself.

Vulcan Simmons had been a pain in the posterior from before they actually met. Since then it had only been worse. Only Bracken's command had stilled his hand. Well that and the fact that despite his many personal failings Vulcan Simmons was an extremely effective drug distributor and
money launderer. His only poor decisions has been after he had somehow been caught and blackmailed first by a corrupt cop and then by Bracken.

He knows that it was the dirty cop, Raglan, who had caught Simmons red-handed with a couple of pounds of cocaine, and had him turned him. For some unknown reason Simmons had not simply pled and done the time. A bad error of judgement that was magnified ten-fold when then D.A. Bracken had in turn caught Raglan and those other cops with their kidnap and ransoming of the mob members. Raglan had cut a deal and Bracken been handed the evidence for Simmons, and from there Simmons had been in thrall abet by threat first of blackmail, and then from more personal measures. And even then he had not always complied according to Bracken and his own surveillance.

They had indulged Simmons and his petty games.

Not that it mattered anymore.

He had been confident that Sergeant Bae Dea-won and his pretty Sergeant wife Na Ry Song would deliver. They always did.

Using the cell, he sends the code word to trigger one last task for them.

Contemplating the phone in his hand, he ponders briefly whether to share the final image of Simmons with Bracken, but with a shake of the head he decides not to. He is done for good with William H Bracken. Damn him to hell. With that choice final too, he drops this particular burner phone into the bucket of acid and covers it back with the lid.

No going back now.

It was regrettable that the Israeli had not come through fully. He had only got the static version of the device, and with no remote operation access this means that the he required that it be retrieved from the location it had been placed in. So he had one final need for the Koreans. They would ensure the intelligence would reach him via a secure drop box. And if they did not succeed, the device had a built-in failsafe. But he would rather have the intelligence.

Satisfied he is done here, he activates the permitter sensors and the timer. In eight hours this place will be incinerated by several large thermite devices. However, should the authorities come to call before then, well woe unto them. This and a number of other surprises were his fail safes against being incriminated and pursued.

The timer beeps. Thirty seconds before the sensors activate. Time for him to be on the move.

He was not foolish enough to believe that Bracken would not try something against him so staying ahead of both his former employer and the authorities was entirely wise.

His flight from Chicago leaves in just over nine hours. He will drive as far as Columbus and then catch a commuter flight to Chicago under his new identity. He will also pick up the final piece of his new identity in the Windy City before flying to sunnier climes.

He is out the door, and eighteen seconds after he left the sensors arm and the eight hour countdown begins.

Tarrytown, New York, 7.25 pm.

If there were any onlookers around they would have been startled to see the cluster of well-armed
individuals hunkered down by the old warehouse near the Hudson. This particular group are ensuring they stay out of sight of the warehouses that sit directly on the river. Separating the two lines of old buildings is an old service road that sees little traffic especially past dark even on a weekday. If the economy in New York was on the mend, Tarrytown is not the place to come prove it. Most building here are empty or half-occupied

The individuals – men and women - trying to stay covert are all from the FBI's SWAT Team Eight. This is one of three FBI SWAT teams for New York, but it is also the only Enhanced Team in the region. As an Enhanced Team they have regular training alongside the FBI's elite Hostage Rescue Team, making them the Bureau's A-team for New York.

This evening, the entire New York FBI SWAT command is spread out across five operations dangerously weakening their effectiveness. Two – like this one - are their own and the other three are in support of the NYPD's Emergency Services Unit, and New York State Police SWAT teams.

They have been on scene for only minutes and the airwaves are full of reports of incidents including explosions and gunfire in multiple parts of the city and outside the city boundaries. The team can only give them a cursory scan as their attention is very much focused on the situation they have been tasked with.

They are well north of Manhattan in Tarrytown in a mid-sized industrial and commercial estate where their intel has led to them deploying in active intervention mode. The reason – they are observing a group of suspects apparently armed with assault weapons and what could be a truck bomb. The potential IED is currently parked up in a storage shed opposite along with at least eight persons of interest.

Hidden from direct view of their objective and their suspects, Special Agent in Charge Carla Guinea squats down with her strike team leads. She can't keep the brief grin from her face. Their information from the tip-off was correct for once. Most tip-offs were nothing more than false alarms, spectres of overactive imaginations or outright paranoia. This one was different.

"They are all there. Our source reported at least eight men and there are eight distinct heat signatures. The 3D scans also appear to show long arms of some sort. We can't discern specific details as there are too many complimentary objects throwing off the scanners."

"Any idea what their objective is Chief?" Little Billy was obviously named by a comedian as he is the size of a small truck. The M4 looked a toy in his hands.

"No. In fact not too much to go on. A concerned citizen called it in." She can almost hear the eye rolls. Anonymous tip-offs were usually highly suspect and false. But this one had merit. And more detail than usual.

"The source reported eight men with gun cases, mainly wearing mixed fatigues, a U-Haul self-drive truck, and a couple of pickups from a farm supplies business near Jackson in country New York State that came into the city over the Tappan Zee bridge. Cameras picked them up and we tracked them here with a drone. They are currently holed up in that storage shed over there. No renter information for the U-Haul. Cash was paid, false name. No ID requested. All the plates come back clean but we haven't been able to identify any of the suspects."

"Sheeeet." Cowboy was actually from Michigan but had spent a decade in Texas at Fort Hood when not deployed with the First Armored Division. "Obviously our informant knows their stuff. We got all the ingredients for a revolution."

"Or possible fertilizer bomb anyway," chips in Annette Denning, the youngest team lead but
already a veteran of more than thirty operations with two confirmed kills. No one messed with her, especially if they caught sight of her game face.

"Oh joy." This from Ferris Woll, their extremely capable but overly fatalistic explosives specialist. Of course he had good reason for his attitude after surviving – just - two tours of Iraq and one of Afghanistan. He had survived more than eighty disposals including two where the device had detonated. That alone got him some slack.

"We will continue to evaluate but not for too much longer, we should probably try to take them here with far fewer civilians and risk of collateral damage. If we need a quick assault, let's use plan Delta Two. Ready you teams. And stay frosty. Weapons are free."

"Understood, weapons free," echoes back to her from each lead. Then the team leaders rise to move back to their individual teams. In less than a minute those teams move to their ready positions. But there are only three teams of four where SOP called for twice that number with at least three sniper teams as well their EOD support. Plus local cops.

From their vantage point on the roof their sole sniper team reports movement near the door.

"Stand-to," orders SAIC Guinea.

A series of single clicks acknowledge the order.

Showtime.

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**New York Emergency Control Centre, 7.29 pm**

"Well, are they declaring?"

"Not yet. They don't want to take the step unless they really have to. Declaring a state of emergency triggers a whole lot of other actions not to mention a ton of paperwork."

"You are kidding me."

"'Fraid not."

"We have new reports from Washington Heights of at least four large explosions and gunfire. First responders are holding pending availability of ESU or similar support for security."

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**Washington Heights, 7.31 pm / T plus 16 / Zulu minus 39**

They had made their way to the rental garage in a residential area. They are eight blocks from the warehouse and they had not heard sirens or any other response until they were more than half-way to their destination. A pair of police cruisers had gone past them but there is a mix of foot and road traffic and a pair of middle aged Asians fit no-one's profile so they are ignored. No doubt the ongoing incidents are keeping many locals off the streets to watch the local TV channels, but this is the 'city that never sleeps' so there is always movement and life.

The car was waiting in exactly the same position they had left it. A rapid but thorough precautionary scan revealed no obvious tampering. There is no time for anything more detailed. They are still on the clock, and need to keep pace.

"We have just enough time to make it. We are at Zulu minus thirty-eight."
"But do not attract the attention of the police, Husband."

The answering glare is a mixture of admonishment and attraction.

Saying nothing further, the Sergeant indicates, checks for traffic and then pulls out heading south towards their new destination.

**Virginia Countryside.**

He had to give these men credit. The pair had sneaked him right out of his DC townhouse with no one being the wiser.

He would offer them work – their skills were impressive – but of course, they already worked for Court.

But that did not matter just now. Right now he just wanted to reach his mansion, and settle in with a good drink, and bear personal witness his vengeance being wrought on those who had opposed him, and a select few who had more than wronged him, had actually hurt before he armored himself enough to ensure that never happened again.

**Soho, 8.02 pm / Zulu minus 8.**

It was a very clever – and simple - plan. The emergency services and more importantly their controllers would be looking for patterns and react or respond accordingly. This evening's events were purposefully designed to appear both haphazard and random as well as potentially threatening and possibly linked but not sufficiently to trigger the sort of escalated federal level response that would cause major operational issues. Also because both Court and Bracken had organised attacks independently these simply added to the overall impression of unconnected, non-coordinated attacks.

There was one more significant purpose behind the cluster of incidents.

It would not naturally occur to the authorities to look at the areas without incidents, and so with careful positioning and scheduling, their route to Soho had been opened up and they had made good time from the top end of the island within minimal risk from law enforcement.

He pulled the rental car into the parking garage and straight into the reserved bay next to the City maintenance van. Checking that they were alone in the garage, they exited the car and moving straight to the City Maintenance van his wife used her key to open the side door, and she jumps in. He takes a moment to lock the rental car, and clambers into the back of the van, pulling the door closed behind them.

Everything was ready. Placing their pistols down on the small workbench, they moved with efficient purpose. They stripped off the bright winter jackets that had concealed their black tactical gear and that too followed. They replaced them with jeans and t-shirts covered by lightweight fleeces, then over those civilian clothes they added City Maintenance dark grey coveralls and high visibility vests. Peaked caps and others accessories from the city's stocks have them looking like the real deal. Just two more city employees going about their business.

There is no inefficiency or idle chatter. Professionals always, they had survived precisely because of that. This was their final mission and then back to Korean and their planned retirement. Mister Court had been exceptionally generous with the fees for these final commissions. They would live
far nicer lives than most retired enlisted personal cover ever hope.

All their careful planning had worked so far. Still they would take no chances. Both collected a pair of flash bangs plus their pistols and a pair of spare magazines. For closer work, each took a pair of knives and an extendable baton finished off their personal arsenal. It should be precaution only, this was purely an extraction job.

All they had to do was access the building, locate and retrieve the device, activate it and download the contents, and the send Court the date and then leave.

This time the wife slips behind the wheel of the maintenance van to take them the final two blocks to their target. It was now Zulu minus five.

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The Loft, 8.14 pm.

It is a smaller group than earlier. The leftovers from their earlier council of war if you will. Just like the remnants of their earlier meal those that remain are gathered around the long breakfast bar in the kitchen. The food dwindles slowly as a few pick from them as the group work cooperatively on reviewing Rick's copious notes regarding the murder of Johanna Beckett and the conspiracy that has dragged on since.

There are a couple of laptop computers and Rick has dragged the Smartboard out from his study for use.

The legal skills of Val and Jim are coming to fore in assessing and prioritising many of the items. Everyone notices but no one remarks on how Val anchors Jim Beckett as they constantly cross over traumatic events in his life. And Kate Beckett's.

For her part Beckett remains close to Rick but is fully involved in the discussions.

Martha is largely silent with a mother's sense of pride and alarm at what her son and his girlfriend – really that was such a poor choice of description for Katherine – had been up for months possibly years.

Clare remains mostly quiet, listening for the most part, and making some notes.

They have a pair of Taylor Matthews agents for security. One is patrolling the hallway and the other is rotating through the Loft and frequently checking in with the team member in the Hall. As Clare had explained the company is small and does not have a lot of resources. Additional manpower is on the way from the West coast but will take time.

No-one is really paying attention to background noise from the TV where the ongoing coverage of the spike of incidents plays out. There had been concern earlier at the number of incidents but all the information pointed to a rash of unconnected events. Clare had made some calls and got no definitive word on the issues other than an assurance that the incidents appeared unconnected.

There had been a somewhat spirited discussion about bringing Alexis back to the Loft but none of the incidents were anywhere near the uptown shopping where Alexis and her friends were located. Alexis has Jane Stubbs with her and a Time and Motion town car was minutes away.

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8.15 pm /Zulu

The first impacts are already embedding themselves in the kitchen fittings before anyone
can respond to the delayed sound of the shots.

Naturally it is Clare who reacts first, just ahead of the other Taylor Matthews operatives, "Everybody down! Get down!"

The Taylor Matthews agent on internal duty was just in the hallway when the attack begins. He darts to a bag stashed in the hall and pulls a compact Heckler and Koch MP7 submachine gun out of his ready bag. Moving carefully he makes his way to the Kitchen and makes a quick glance round the partition.

He pulls back, readies the weapon and raises it, as he once more exposes himself but before he can acquire a target he is hit by at least one shot. The force is enough to throw him backwards and into the cover near the sink.

"Get down!" Clare

The Loft was under attack.

They were under attack.

"Mother!" Rick calls, frantic.

"She's with us Rick," confirms Jim his voice wavering under the strain of being under fire for the first time in his life.

Kate has her SIG out, but the pistol is clearly useless against the superior reach and punch of the sniper's weapon. Not to mention she has no vision of the shooter, only a general direction of fire.

Clare has to shout over the din. "There is more than one shooter. But no more than three, probably two. At least one of them is using an anti-material rifle. You really, really do not want to get hit by that thing." And then for completely unnecessary good measure, she adds, "understand?"

"Got it. Don't stick our heads up." Rick confirms with an edge of smart-arse-ism.

Clare is already distracted trying to assist her fallen colleague and lets it go.

Suddenly Rick is cursing up a storm as he huddles beside Kate. His expletives carrying over the gunfire.

"What?" she asks he just as goes incredibly pale. She makes the connection too. Everyone they love most is here. All except one. The one she'll never deny he loves more.

"Alexis!" Rick almost screams.

"On it." Clare confirms, even as she mentally curses and berates herself for not seeing the issue instantly. She prays that Jane Stubbs is on the ball. Already almost two minutes lost in organising a reaction.

Clare hits the speed dial for Jane. She needs Alexis in a safe house now. Or at the very least off the street as soon as possible. Hell she would settle for a NYPD precinct or anywhere else with enough bodies to make any of Bracken's hired thugs think again.

Another pair of rounds slam into the battered kitchen. Something else shattered.
The driver cursed again. Fucking New York traffic. They were late. It was Zulu plus almost two and he had needed to adjust position to account for the delay. But the New York traffic was not cooperating. He was also keen not to attract the attention of a traffic cop. Not just yet anyway.

Uptown Manhattan, 8.18 pm.

Jane had fallen back a couple of steps to answer her phone – it was Clare's ring tone - whilst still keeping an eye on Alexis and her two friends, Rose and Halley. She liked the girls. They seemed like typical college kids, still full of optimism and innocent hope. They were good for Alexis who needed as much of that type of support as she could get.

"Hey Cla….." her answer is cut off by Clare's own strident voice.

"Hotel. Echo. Actual. Say again Hotel Echo Actual." Clare's tone and the code words for immediate hostile threat and to invoke plans to get their charge to safety brings her to high alert.

"Acknowledged Hotel Echo Actual." Her training kicks in, she is already scanning her vicinity more intensely, shoulders tightening.

"Stubbs I have your position, Control could have team to collect but eta is almost thirty plus due to rush hour traffic. Use you discretion regarding the town car service and get them to cover." Clare is more abrupt than usual. Is that gunfire in the background? But before she can ask, Clare issues one final absolute command. "Take care of them Jane." Then Clare hangs up.

Now more or less fully hyperaware from Clare's alert and the sinking sensation that something bad is already happening, she rescans the vicinity, abandoning any pretence of looking at something on her phone as cover. She had to fight the instinct to palm the gun concealed on her hip. That was a rookie move her trainers had broken her out of with some difficulty.

First check was her charges. The girls are a bit more than a handful of paces ahead of her, but still in clear sight, even with the evening crowds. Their pace lulled by their conversation and distraction with the shops and sights of a new year in New York. Satisfied they are all in her coverage, she drops back a few more steps giving them more than a five yard lead, closer to ten, and she starts to systematically move her vision through a wider arc of the surroundings, looking for threats. Once she is certain there is no immediate threat she will inform Alexis and get her to safety. Probably best to send the girls home in a taxi so she can focus on Alexis.

She never gets the chance to let her charges know. Before she has even completed her second full sweep, she sees the ambush form before her eyes.

She spots the dark SUV first, hopes momentarily that she is wrong but then her heart is sinking. The vehicle is deliberately loitering when everything else is trying to move as quickly as possible. This is real. She has trained but rarely had to put what she knows into full use, and probably never like this. She trusts she is good enough. For the real thing.

No time for self-doubt she sets her shoulders and starts to plan. Better than just react, or worse panic.

There is no time to warn the girls properly, and it would ruin her possible single element of advantage - surprise. If she had one.

The vehicle pulls into the kerb virtually alongside the girls, and both are barely ten yards in front of
her. She speeds up just a little closing a couple of yards. Despite pulling into the sidewalk, the van continues to creep forward at a snail's pace, the engine is still running, exhaust fumes condensing in the cool air. She takes in the blacked out windows, and kerb side doors already partially open before it stops. The SUV is facing away from her so she can't see a driver or if there are more occupants in the front.

Danger!

Imminent!

She palmed the panic button on her phone. Judgement call or not, she'd love to be wrong about this.

But she knows she isn't.

Then there is no more time.

Only reaction.

The Loft, 8.18pm

Despite the chaos and literal gunfire pummelling their senses, not to mention his home, he has enough about him to analyse the situation. Based on the volume of fire he reckons that there are at least two shooters, across the road but possibly one or two floors higher. So that makes them a couple of buildings away, well beyond the nominal effective range of their handguns. He and Kate have nothing more effective and he was not certain that the high tech looking gun the wounded Taylor Matthews agent had dropped would be any more use.

A cry pierces his awareness and he spies his mother more than flinch as a shard of flying glass slashes across her left forearm drawing blood. It looks superficial but it is the tipping point.

Something snaps.

It's been building since he woke in hospital.

Having Kate has soothed much of the hurt, but it has only even temporarily assuaged the rage than had for too long lain semi-dormant in him. He's been the clown, a punching bag, the fall guy for too much of his life. Forced from two marriages not by choice, not a cop, not good enough. Years waiting for Beckett, earning his place. Still frustrating, maddening. And the fucking Dragon.

Needing to be put to bed before Kate thought she could commit. No matter that they didn't wait, the doubt was enough.

Well not this time.

Rage and frustration to the fore, he acts.

He has his Glock 22 in his hand he rises, springs really, from behind the kitchen bench, he is vaguely aware of a shot passing to his right, he scans and spots the muzzle flash two blocks away, and with no further thought opens fire. On every pull of the trigger he screams in rage and frustration, louder than the incoming and outgoing fire. He is aware of but doesn't hear Beckett's desperate 'Castle' but his brazen assault prompts – forces - her and Clare to emerge from their cover and open fire too.

It is barely a second or maybe two before his ten-round magazine – all that New York allows - runs
dry. And sensibility – if not sanity - returns, and he falls back under cover. Only fractionally fast enough as at least one shooter puts a round right through the last position of his head.

Beckett and Clare are back in cover too. All breathing heavily, unable to say anything as adrenaline surges through them.

All three weirdly synchronised as they slam fresh magazines home, chests still heaving as the sensation of living hits them hard.

Whatever they did, the inbound fire has slackened. Probably only a single shooter now. Another eight to ten or so rounds slam into his home and then nothing.

Is it over?

Five, ten, fifteen, twenty seconds pass.

No more inbound fire.

They can hear sirens in the distance. No idea is they are coming to their aid.

Castle appears to ready himself again and this provokes Kate, who is at her own breaking point, to renewed action.

Somehow not exposing herself Beckett lunges to close the gap between them, ignoring the debris including glass and other shattered objects littering the floor, punching his left arm pretty forcefully as she slides in, remarkably gracefully, halting right by his side.

"Oww! What was that for?!"

Really? She bites back her hard words, and settles for her deadly stare. Silent.


"You're not fucking John Wayne," she growls. Taking a steadying breathe, she continues, "plus you're not supposed to widow me before we've even got married. Idiot!"

"Or engaged" he mutters, correcting her out loud. Oh she might actually shoot him.

He hears someone laugh. Was that Jim Beckett? He would chance a glance but his attention is pretty much right on the other Beckett, who is right in his face.

His future fiancé – he hopes - takes a second and sends a rapid glare in the direction of the chuckle which actually increases as his mother joins in, one hand over the bloody gash that triggered his loss of control. Kate deliberately rolls her eyes and locks fully back on him, glare at maximum intensity.

"And whose fault is that?"

Shutting up now is a wise move. Unless.

Of course someone interrupts them. This time it is Clare with good reason, "Lovely as it is, can you check that conversation for now? I think our shooters have bailed. But we need assistance – paramedics - and more security."

Somewhat abashed they stop their bickering and look around the remnants of the loft.
The Taylor Matthew guard is looking pretty pale although the blood loss has abated. Clare is by his side, having somehow applied a field dressing.

Jim and Val are clutching each other. Sheltered from the fire storm inside the entrance to the utility room.

His mother is so silent he's really concerned. He glances at his partner, and Beckett nods and he crawls over - ignoring the shattered shards of kitchen - and hugs her, increasing his grip her protests which rapidly become sobs.

He takes a few deep breathes of his own. Only then does his thoughts turn back to his absent daughter.

"Alexis?"

"Waiting for confirmation," responds Clare.

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**Uptown Manhattan, 8.19 pm**

The first attack surprises everyone, coming from the side. Not the van. Classic distraction technique. The assault team must have already debussed prior to the van pulling up. Lucky they did not spot and identify her or she would probably have been targeted first.

It is misdirection with a double pronged strike as two shadows from the crowd converged on Alexis and her two friends. She was far enough back they hadn't made her, or at least not as the bodyguard. Not yet anyway. She sights the weapons in the hands of at least two of the assailants. Now she was absolutely certain she would be dead if they had identified her.

The first one in was a big unit and there was absolutely no need for the hammer of the butt of a pistol to the side of the poor girl's head that dropped Rose. Halley was simply shoulder slammed, screaming, to the ground by a second gorilla, out of the way as another attacker, the third and final who did exit from the van, came directly for Alexis. Despite the shock she was functioning calmly, mentally calculating the odds and her plan. She counted three hostiles – plus at least the driver her mind added. She could take them.

Locking her vision on the three assailants, she confirmed pistols in the hands of two who had attacked the other girls, the third – going for Alexis - was unarmed, or at least visibly so, and reaching for her charge who was reeling back from the shock of her two friends being slammed to the ground, the strike so sudden she had not even uttered a sound.

Around them people are automatically pulling back in shock. This is immediately beneficial as her field of vision and fire is clear.

She makes the assessment and in that instant all her training, experience and judgement coalesces into a split second decision to take action.

"Alexis DROP!" Her voice was louder in her own ears than she imagined. Even as her charge appeared to obey her command, she thumbed the panic button once again for good measure as she let her phone slide back into her left pocket, as her right completed its journey under her jacket and whipped her pistol clear of the low-profile belt holster and bringing it up in just over a second. Her left hand came up to brace her right, discipline and training ensuring a proper stance even for the light weight weapon.

The Beretta Nano held six plus one so she needed to make every shot count.
The teen had actually fully complied with her instruction and dropped prone onto the cold, damp sidewalk and out of the immediate grasp of the thug reaching for her, surprising him. He was starting to adjust and crouch lower but it was the other two with weapons that were her immediate concern.

Now the opposition and their pistols were turning towards her, weapons coming up in response to her shouted command to Alexis, but she had the jump on them and they were only now and not yet fully tracking on her as the likely immediate threat.

Jane had never actually fired her weapon in a real combat situation. She had only ever drawn it on the job once. Somehow none of that mattered now. In that remaining moment of opportunity she assessed that the risk was extremely real to her charge and herself.

Decision made.

In that split second everything changed.

She fired, comfortably handling the recoil from the compact Beretta. And again. A double tap to the man closest to her – goon was more accurate, he was the one who had pistol-whipped Rose - and watched blood explode from his chest as both shots placed centre mass and his body fell away, pistol too tumbling from his grasp before he could fire. No vest her mind added. Relief her oversight about possible body armour hadn't had a probably fatal penalty.

She made a reassessment because of the proximity of the snatcher to Alexis and the van. Rapidly changing targets she found the unarmed one - reaching down to grab the prone and not quite cowering Alexis - next in her sights. The noise of her gunshots had reached him because she catches his eyes flick in her direction but he didn't deviate from his intention to grab Alexis. With the angle and his body position the best option was a head shot. She didn't hesitate and fired a single round through his right ear. Even as he drops, poleaxed by the fatal wound, she instinctively completes the second shot and this passes through his left eye socket. His body falling partially across Alexis who has surrendered to the moment, and screamed as the dying or dead man enveloped her, body still twitching.

By now the final gunman has his weapon trained on her and is returning fire. She feels the passage of his first shot passing through the left side of her jacket between her arm and torso. Close, very close. She is acutely aware of no scream or sound behind her that would indicate an innocent bystander or passer-by had been hit. But no time for relief as the next shot hits her low in her left side and she is dismayed by the force of the impact, and the shock to her body.

But she is still moving and reacting herself. She forces her left hand back under the butt and in near classic Weaver stance she fires once and blinks in surprise as her fifth shot of the encounter missed the final man, just to the right of his shoulder. Shit! Another flash of flame form the end of his gun, firing before she can again, but fortunately the man's flinch from her near miss sends his own shot high and wide of her head, her right ear buzzing with the bullet's passage.

With no time to reset or second guess she fires her last two shots from the magazine. It's not text book, nor is pretty. The first 9mm round takes him under the chin and second through his right eye. His body spins away sparing her, and more importantly Alexis and the girls, more than a momentary glimpse of his ruined face.

Ejecting the magazine, she somehow stays collected enough to pocket the empty clip even as she fumbles a new magazine in place. For a moment she contemplates firing at the SUV which is now accelerating away from the curb side with open doors briefly flapping on their hinges, whipped by the sudden forces, before slamming shut with the momentum. Then the SUV is gone lost in the
startled traffic which is just reacting to the sudden and lethal violence on the pavement.

She has a more important job to do and get her charges to safety.

But then hyper awareness of her own personal situation intervenes. She had been shot. Fuck that hurts. She staggers. Somehow stays upright.

"Alexis!"

Halley has scrambled away from the two bodies on the ground near her. The final goon is still twitching a little, his body face down shielding the witnesses from most of the mess on the pavement.

Alexis has somehow got the dead man off her. Whilst being slammed by a dying person is never good the body had at least fallen so that the bloody gore of the ruined head impacted the ground not her. She had not so much pushed the body as scrambled out from underneath his torso and legs. She's not got much blood or other matter on her, but no doubt she'll be binning these clothes as soon as she can.

Despite being pale and shocked her, she is every itch Richard Castle's daughter and veteran of two internships with the NYPD. She starts dialling on her phone, and then grips Halley's shoulder before forcing her phone into the girl's hand. She orders her friend to speak to the emergency operator who is just responding to Alexis' 911 call. Leaving the shocked girl to stutter, near scream into the phone requesting the police, medics and fire brigade. In short send the cavalry. Send everyone!

Alexis next moves to beside Rose who is bleeding from a growing bump to the side of her head and some other contusions and minor cuts from the brutal takedown. She partially conscious but more than dazed and clearly out of it.

Having had the presence of mind to tend to her friends, at that point Alexis finally looks for her bodyguard. For Jane. The one person who had saved them all.

About five yards away, Jane Stubbs, is barely upright. It is only moments before she will likely be prone on the ground.

Alexis at first does not acknowledge the situation. Her eyes already wide, she blinks once and then again to clear the rapidly forming tears, and fights a shudder, and reminds herself to breathe. She cannot avoid it. She sees it so clearly now. The red. Blood red. It's very apt name as it spreads out across Jane's torso staining the pale cream coat her friend and guard was wearing. The stain, blood she corrects, is down the left leg of her jeans, still rich in iron and not yet darkened as she usually saw it during her internship with the OCME.

It also starts her into motion crossing the remaining yards to her prone protector. "Shit Jane you're bleeding."

Alexis takes a deep breath, fighting back bile, she is shaken to her core. "Badly."

"Understatement Al. Fucking hurts." Jane agrees. Then she sinks down, no longer able to support herself.

"I've been shot." The look of disbelief is rapidly giving way. "Oh fuck that wasn't 'posed to happen."

"Phone." Jane motions to Alexis to retrieve her phone from her left pocket of her jacket. Alexis is
tries to pass it to Jane who refuses it.

"Alexis, need you to get to safety. Already hit the panic button so assistance should be on the way. They will track the GPS."

"Not without you."

Jane is too tired to argue with her charge.

Soho, Maintenance Stairwell, Broome Street, 8.19 pm,

Satisfied that the door was barred he turned for the stairs and the short climb to his targets.

That was gun fire!

'What the Hell!?'

He couldn't believe it. Just as he was about to execute his plans. Of all the dumb fucking luck. Well maybe it could work.

Almost two years in the making, hiding out in Chicago, he had returned to New York a month ago to act out his revenge only to find his quarry still hiding out and licking their wounds in the Hamptons.

He paused at the base of the stairs. He momentarily considered aborting. But this was his best opportunity. Maybe even a better one if they are distracted.

After that close call – the house security had been enhanced beyond what his information said - he had been forced to wait for them to come back from the Hamptons. It would be better here anyway, more fitting. For it all to work, he needed them here in New York. He had planned it out in every detail. And he never deviated from his plans once made. Except to use his contingency. He always had contingency plans.

He had spent almost a week surveilling the place and was confident he had it all mapped out.

He had been the house at the Hamptons too but had only narrowly avoided detection. There was additional security that was not in his intelligence and it almost got him. Plus the location really did not fit his plans for his revenge on Richard Castle and Kate Beckett. He wanted to do this on their proper home turf. Plus there had been someone else in the grounds that night. That had also been a reason to abort. He is not a coward but he prefers to minimise the risk while working alone.

He starts up the stairs, the sports bag with all his gear in his left hand. Just as he arrives at the first floor landing he is surprised to meet two people - NY City maintenance employees - coming down the same stairs. He has not heard their approach, so their sudden appearance startles him.

He mentally chides himself for his slight lack of alertness, but at first glance they do not seem to be a threat. The couple are older, middle aged and Korean – he prides himself on his perception with his ability to recognise their ethnicity – and appear equally surprised by his presence.

Regardless, why the hell are these city maintenance people on the service stairs of a private building? Perhaps they are fleeing the gunfire but he now has instant doubts that not city workmen so what are they doing here? How did they gain access? These stairs were not accessible by the residents who had a separate set of fire stairs. It was exactly why it was perfect for his needs.
Going with his plan, he continues to ascend, and he decides to bull his way through and demands "Get out of my way," before adding, "please."

But even as he makes another few steps to reach the half-landing and narrow the distance to the pair the sounds of another round of shots reaches the stairs. It then that he notices that they do not flinch. And he is near enough so he observes that neither look afraid or surprised now. That is not a normal reaction. These people are trained.

His senses scream to him, and only his instinctive duck prevent the extensible baton that suddenly appeared in the woman's right hand from cracking his skull open. He dodged and danced back but there was limited space on the small landing and in the stair well in general. And he had no weapons to hand. They were still in his bag in his left hand.

Then he felt it, the sharp lancing pain that immediately radiated from his ribs. He instinctively stepped back, dropping down to steps, and caught sight of the short blade in the man's right hand, blood marking the sharp point. His blood. While he had been focused on reacting to the woman's first strike, her partner had attacked.

Controlling his stumbling, and body wobbling just a little, very mindful of the stairs behind him, he reaches for his bag in desperation. For the silenced pistol in the front pocket. His regret for stowing the Glock, made clumsy by the bulky suppressor, is momentary as he is out of time.

He doesn't make it as the two Koreans in perfect harmony launch matching kicks to his torso and he nearly flies backwards, breaking his contact with the concrete, he gets one foot down but the other is other the edge of the step, and he knows in that moment he has lost his footing for good.

He has no time to set and protect himself. He crashed to floor at the bottom of the flight of stairs, all breathe and fight temporarily knocked out of him, the only mercy that he had not hit his head and lost consciousness. His body is only just responding to the jarring landing, pain lancing through his upper left side and then along his back along but also echoing in his left arm.

The pair seem to descend the stairs in slow motion, seemingly unperturbed by this encounter. Or him.

Using his right side to push himself up, he struggled back to a semi-upright position, the stab wound and the impact points from his hard landing lancing through his body. His only hope is the gun. His frantic search spies his bag in the corner of the stair well and he lunges.

And comes up short.

They block his path to his pistol and salvation.

The male smiles and the pair close in on him. Their hands are now empty but that offers no reassurance.

No! This wasn't fair.

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**The Loft**

"Why isn't she answering?" Rick is beyond anxious. Kate has nothing to reassure him. Her own thoughts equally dark.

Alexis' mobile is active but no one is answering. On another call? Or too busy chatting with her friends? Or something far more sinister.
Clare sees the panic button alert flash up overriding everything else.

She answers. But at first there is nothing but silence. She calls out once, twice and then simply waits. They called, and if they can still talk they'll respond when they can, if they can. Nothing she can do from here.

Leaving the line open, Clare conferences in Taylor Matthews operations centre. She's not completely helpless despite the lack of response from Jane Stubb's phone. She orders a GPS fix on the phone. The reaction team – Taylor Matthews last available resources in New York - was still too far away, having originally been detailed to respond to the Loft shooting. They need assistance from the NYPD and any other law enforcement.

Kate grips Rick. Literally keeping him anchored in place, so Clare can work uninterrupted. And also just in case their shooters are still in the vicinity.

Martha is still sobbing in the distant corner of the kitchen near the stairs where Jim Beckett had dragged her and Val. The other woman is curled into Jim's side her eyes wide in shock but not crying. The man looks determined. This may be the first time he has been under fire but with loved ones to protect his focus is there. Kate also catches something else in his gaze – comprehension. He just got a lesson in understanding just what it is like.

There is glass everywhere and debris too, fragments of items, splinters of furniture, of a home torn apart.

They also begin assessing their injuries, and it appears no one – aside from the Taylor Matthew guard hit in the first fusillade - has taken a direct hit from the bullets but all of them have been nicked and in a few instances have deeper cuts caused by the flying glass and other debris. Hopefully they are only superficial but other wounds are deeper and will take longer to heal.

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Central Park, Underground parking garage, 8.20 pm / Zulu +5

They are running late – damn city traffic – but this is not allowed to disrupt their plans. The team debusses with minimal fuss and barely a murmur. Almost like being back in country. Except this is Manhattan, a place probably less familiar to many than the dusty heat of one or more America's many war zones where she sent her sons and now daughters to fight.

There is no one else around. The garage is about half empty. The majority of vehicles present are clustered near the elevators, including a bunch of service vehicles.

Nerves settle, this should be a piece of cake. They have the element of surprise.

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In fact multiple sets of eyes watch the paramilitaries and their assault weapons. The building's own cameras and the fiber optic feeds from the tactical cameras are repeated on monitors in the mobile command post parked in another garage a block away.

In the underground garage. Eight FBI agents, and an equal number of co-opted US Marshalls wait hidden as best as possible behind vehicles, hopefully far enough from the elevator entrance that they are not visible as they are all too aware of the ineffectiveness of the protection modern cars offered against military grade ammunition. The same too for their body armor.

Upstairs, another team of four FBI agents has taken up defensive positions inside the penthouse apartment. Staying clear of the windows despite the drapes having been closed, three have the entrance covered, their weapons out. Two are in possession of compact but deadly P90 submachine
guns, the third a Mossberg shotgun, a very effective weapon at the sort of ranges they could be engaged at. The fourth and final member is with the family in the children's bedroom, only her hand gun which still hidden under her jacket so as not to overly scare the children, or the parents.

The strike team approach the elevators but never make it.

"Federal agents. Drop your weapons! Failure to comply will be treated as a hostile act." This is a megaphone amplified command and not merely a shouted voice, and one that rings round the concrete surfaces of the car park with a slight echo.

Startled and off-balance one of the paramilitaries stumbles against a colleague. He recovers, and the pair instinctively raise their arms with their AR-15 clones, and this provokes an immediately response. One is hit by two three round bursts from one of the pairs of US Marshalls using MP-5s, and the second by a single shot from a C4 Carbine.

A general fire fight erupts.

And the body count goes up.

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**Upstairs, Home of David Bracken and Family**

The reports of gunfire from the garage have come across the radios. With her ear piece in the fourth agent gives no sign to her charges. They are too high up to directly hear the fire fight below.

However, any hope keeping David Bracken and his family unaware and isolated from the firefight downstairs are lost when sniper rounds start hammering through the penthouse apartment.

From across Central Park, the professional maintains his focus.

The heavy drapes provide an initial amount of protection from the thermal scope of the sniper rifle, but the trigger man is not concerned. He has ten more magazines which means one hundred more rounds available. After he has put an entire first ten round magazine of the heavy .380 Lapua rounds through the windows some of the cover is lost as curtains and fixture mostly disintegrate under the impact of the heavy rounds.

Snapping in another magazine he grins as he catches a vaguely human shape illuminated and he fires two rounds at the target.

The ineffectiveness of their protection behind the furniture is starkly illustrated when the agent with the shotgun is hit by the first round which takes him through the lower left leg, effectively cutting away his ankle and most of his foot in a spray of blood and a visceral scream. Thankfully he passes out. Although he does not appreciate it at the time, the injury and his immediate pole-axed collapse to the floor saves his life as a second round passes through the space where his torso would have been less than a second earlier.

The other two agents abandon their watch of the entrance hall and door, throwing themselves behind the most solid looking furniture, for the moment only concerned with their survival. If any of the strike team make it to the floor they will deal with that if they need to. But for now staying alive is their number one priority.
Suddenly a voice breaks on the phone.

"Clare?"

It is the Operations Centre that responds, following procedure.


Impatience wining through for once, Clare overrides the Ops Centre going with gut instinct.

"Alexis?"

"Clare!" The relief is palpable in the young woman's voice.

Decades of service and inevitable bad news stops Clare from asking about the owner of the phone. Dealing with the living. First rule.

Naturally, her use of the young woman's name has aroused immense attention, and her audience needs to know too, so she activates the speaker. "Alexis you are on speaker. I am here with your Dad, Grandma, Kate, her Dad and his girlfriend in the room. How are you?"

Kate feels Rick literally sag in her arms in relief, well until Alexis begin to recount the events of her brief but deadly encounter in halting half-sentences and tears.

Clare sadly shakes her head to Rick's outstretched hand demanding the phone. Kate places a calming hand on his, and notice for the first time the small nicks and contusions from their own battle.

With Rick seemingly temporarily mollified and as Clare continues to coordinate a response, Kate takes her own phone out and dials from her favourites.

"Hey Espo. Change of plan. Need you to divert from the Loft. I'll have a new address for you in a second."

Rick can't hear the other side of the conversation but his partner fires instructions down the line, mobilizing assistance for his daughter as she relays the address Clare calls from the GPS tracker on Jane's phone. Despite talking rapidly on her mobile all the while she is gripping his hand, and Rick is ever so grateful and in awe of the cool collective of his partner. And the other equally professional woman in the room.

She's all cop right now. Detective Beckett is back. He can't hear Espo but knows there is a question. Probably why. What is more important?

"Espo, Alexis is in trouble. Attempted kidnapping. Multiple perps, gunfire exchanged. At least two civilians with non-gunshots injuries. Her body guard is down. Alive but at least one GSW. At least one suspect fled in black SUV. No plate info."

At this point Kate is glad she is not on speakerphone as both Espo & Ryan swear in acknowledgement of the situation and the fact that Little Castle is essentially undefended.

"Taylor Matthews are sending a team. But they are at least twenty minutes out."

"Yeah Espo, we were taking fire too. But that's quiet now. Do this for us please."
Uptown.

They have attracted a bit of a crowd but no-one is showing any sign of helping. Too scared most likely thinks Alexis. She can understand that.

She can't focus on the bystanders, Jane is fighting her injuries but is barely holding on. She is still conscious, for now.

The bodyguards tugs her sleeve, and half-palms the compact semi-automatic into Alexis' hands. She doesn't have the strength to hold it any longer.

Alexis remembers her training. She quickly ejects the magazine and re-inserts it on confirmation that it contained rounds. Jane mumbles something she interprets as 'full'.

"Just six," the bodyguard reminds her, and Alexis nods lamely in response to the barely audible information.

"Watch for the cops. They'll be amped so don't wave it around. Don't get yourself shot by the good…guys.

"Jane?"

Briefly placing the pistol on the ground between her knees, she reaches to her injured friend and tries to assess the injury but there is so much blood. She knows she must try and prevent shock setting in so she urges "Jane, stay awake. Please."

Maintenance Stairs, Broome Street

The man was dead. He had put up little effective fight. He was quite fit – for an American – but not trained. At least not properly. They did not bother to check his bag or the corpse.

"Who was he?" his wife whispers in their native tongue, "Why was he here?"

"No idea – it is not important - but it is not safe here. Leave him as he is. We must go. There will be police soon. More police," he corrects.

"What about the mission?"

"Too difficult to complete now. We must get away before we are compromised."

"He will not be happy Husband." She does not often chide him, and rarely with their personal relationship. She was always the one to push forward and focus on the mission, regardless of the cost. He would usually follow along but for now he is in command.

"I am sorry Wife. But it is too risky now. Court will understand." She nods in acceptance.

He reaches the exit door and pushes the bar to open the door which does not move. He tries again.

"There is a chain." And there is. One of the heavy duty ones favoured by cyclists that could actually resist the usual tools employed by criminals stealing ten thousand dollar bikes. Heavy links, protected by layers of woven shielding.

"That was not here before. It has a six number combination. It appears to be very strong."

"It must have been the dead man." No point asking him the combination.
"This will take a few moments." Fortunately they are prepared for many eventualities. His wife reaches into her bag and removes the thermite cord. They move efficiently aware that every second is critical. Each moment that passes increases their risk.

**Uptown Manhattan, 8.22 pm**

Even with their attackers down, along with Jane, no one from the crowd, either the handful still close to them, or those who had fled further away, moves to help them. Alexis is hyper aware that she has a pistol in her hands and that probably is scaring potential helpers away, but she is not putting it down until they are safe.

Fortunately she doesn't have long to wait for the first responders, as the sound of sirens indicates the imminent arrival of help.

A patrol unit pulls up, lights flashing and a pair of officers emerge, drawing their guns, and scanning the confusion and chaos that greets them. After a matter of moments, they spy the three bodies of the attackers and then the small cluster of Alexis and her friends plus the injured Jane Stubbs.

With a nod to their respective partner, the pair work together. One of the first responders moves forward to approach the bodies, weapon up and covering the fallen men, eyes slightly wild as they take in the gory mess in front of them. The bloody head shot wounds on each of the three men confirm that they do not need to do checks for signs of life.

Turning towards the small cluster of the girls, their weapons still up, constantly scanning the crowd, it is the turn of the other officer to approach Alexis' group.

Alexis greets him from her position squatting beside her bleeding and barely conscious bodyguard. It is not really an effective posture if she needed to defend herself, even with the pistol held down by her side.

"Miss I need you to put down the pistol. Please," urges the officer, in his mid-forties, the bulk of vest barely discernible under his winter Blues. Despite the calm tone, his Glock remains pointed in her general direction, but not directly at her centre mass, but only a heartbeat away from doing so should it be required.

"What Precinct are you?" She doesn't know why she asked the question. The answer would not mean much to her, but she thinks that it is her father's stories about never assuming especially in unique situations.


The cop is not giving her any more time to make a decision.

"But I need you to put the weapon down now." The voice is much harder now, the instruction now an order, "Please Miss." He clearly does not want to shoot but lives could be at stake.

More sirens sound, this time discordant indicating more than one service, and looking up Alexis sees two more cop cars followed by an ambulance arrive. Satisfied that this is too elaborate for any setup she decides to surrender Jane's gun, certain now that the arriving responders really are law enforcement. Not that she could have taken on almost a half dozen armed people with a mere six rounds.
"Okay officer. I'm just placing it by my side and I'll push it towards you." Alexis places the small pistol on the ground and carefully pushes it a couple of feet from her body. Her focus immediately goes back to Jane.

The officer steps forward and uses his foot to move the pistol a bit further from the cluster of young women. Experienced enough to know it is very likely a critical piece of evidence he makes no move to pick up the weapon. "That's good Miss."

"Please we need paramedics for my guard. She's been shot. Hurry...please!"

"Your guard?" What the hell was this? This was certainly one crazy night. Radios were alive with reports of possible terrorist incidents, including at least two with 'officer down' flags. Everyone in blue was being called out and all of them are primed, extra vigilant.

He would be treating everything as hostile except this young woman does not appear to be a threat despite the handgun she was just holding. He had also noted that she was holding it correctly so had obviously had rudimentary training at least.

Even as the officer moves to secure the weapon and seek more information, a paramedic reaches them, looks to the officer who nods his permission, and the paramedic pushes past the officer to drop down beside Alexis. With an apologetic look, Alexis immediately switches focus away from the officer to the person who can help her friend.

"What can you tell me miss?" The EMT could see the blood but with the winter clothes and the use of what now appears to be some blood stained mass of wool as some form of tourniquet.

"Gunshot to abdomen. Not sure if it was straight through. She is bleeding heavily. We stopped some of it with padding with a pullover to apply some pressure, but she is very weak, and has briefly lost consciousness a few times. We've tried to keep her awake but it's getting harder."

"That's really good. I'm Kelly. We're going to look after your friend. You said she was shot?"

"Oh I'm Alexis Castle. She's my body guard and we were attacked, Jane exchanged fire with the men. She was hit only once I think. I am not sure of the caliber. It was a handgun of some short. It will be one of those over there with the attackers. Her name is Jane Stubbs. I'm afraid I don't know of any allergies."

"Thank you Alexis. Let me take a look. We've got it now."

Reluctantly Alexis moves back a yard or so to make room for the medic to work on Jane. She watches for a minute before remembering her friends.

From her new position it is only a few yards to her two friends, clustered together, looking scared but also strangely resolute.

Alexis lamely raises a hand, and only then does she become aware of the blood on her hands and clothes.

The paramedic's partner joins her and two start working calmly but somewhat urgently on Jane. Alexis takes a few seconds just to breathe, her heart rate seeming increasing, and her body shaking in time to the pounding. It had only been minutes since she and the girls were happily enjoying a brisk winter's walk and some shopping. So much can change so quickly.

After that self-reflection she moves to check on her friends crossing the few yards from Jane and the paramedics. They are now with another police officer. As she moves in closer and as she
approaches Halley gives a smile of sorts and hands Alexis her phone back. Rose looks terrible, tears cascading down her face, a huge swollen lump on the side of her head. She can't quite stand unaided and is being supported by the officer but refuses to move away from her friends. Alexis is so relieved that both of them, especially Rose, are mostly okay.

"I'm so sorry." Alexis doesn't know what to say.

They don't either. The silence is awkward, until the crackle of the officer's radios breaks the impasse with reports of other incidents. The officer mutters a couple of swear words under their breath. Alexis knows that this number of simultaneous events is not normal.

Rose's stirs, and is the first to speak, "What's going on?" and then far too rapidly, "I want to go home. I want my Mom and Dad."

Alexis knows just how she feels. Well her on the Dad side at least.

Shit! Her Dad. He must be going frantic.

She looks at her phone. Missed calls and unanswered messages scroll off the screen. But her attempt to call her Dad gets no response. She tries to assure herself that it could just be the result of this and other incidents, of phone services overwhelmed. But that thought that too often it is her Dad and Detective Beckett in life-threatening situations will not go away.

8.24 pm

A NYPD Rescue team and another paramedic crew make it to the scene in short order.

From this nearly arrived ambulance, a paramedic moves to attend to Rose who is still unable to rise unsupported. The contusion from the pistol whipping has enlarged even further, although there is no broken skin. In short order a rescue chair is produced so that she can sit.

One of the arriving rescue team is female. She settles in beside the girls to wait with them, displacing the other officer who departed rapidly, obviously wanting or needing to be elsewhere. The newly arrived officer has evidence bags and beckoning the first-on-screen officer – the older male officer that first confronted Alexis - hands one to him.

He returns back to where Jane's compact pistol has remained on the sidewalk, and pulls off his gloves to put on evidence gloves. Then carefully lifting the weapon up, and after checking the weapon is safe, he deposits the compact pistol in the clear plastic bag, holding on to it by his side until a CSU arrives to relieve him of the evidence.

Minutes go by. Alexis still nervous and on edge, tries to focus on the paramedics working on Jane. After what seems almost too long they appear to have her stable and the stretcher is prepared. She wonders if she can ride with Jane to the hospital.

The crowd has grown significantly and there is at least one large video camera in evidence but she cannot tell if it is a news crew.

She only settles when the familiar faces of Detectives Esposito and Ryan force their way to the front of the now large crowd surrounding them and she can finally relax a bit more. Both of the detectives are wearing NYPD wind breakers, bulging with body armour beneath, their gold shields prominently displayed.

Ryan is on the phone to someone. She hears his end of the conversation. "We're here. She's here."
She's okay." He is clearly listening to someone, "Just give me a minute and I will pass it to her."

Esposito peels off and approaches the officer with pistol in evidence. "Esposito, with the Twelfth.
What do we have?"

The cop hands the evidence bag with Jane's pistol to Esposito who looks back at her, and gives her
a smile that Alexis can't quite manage to muster back.

"Hello Detective. The pistol, Jane gave it to me. Just in case," Is all she offers by way of
explanation.

At times like this she can appreciate the mostly taciturn detective who wordlessly inspects the
pistol in the bag, and through the bag removes the magazine and then works the slide to eject the
chambered round.

"Chavez, log this please." Alexis vaguely recognises the CSI – when did they arrive she wonders?
– approaching them with an unnecessary evidence bag and clipboard.

"Berretta Nano, 9mm, one magazine with six rounds, five in the clip, and one round lose, ejected
from chamber. Weapon has been fired. I believe the empties should be near the GSW casualty the
paramedics are with. I can't see an empty clip. When we can someone will need to check her
pockets. I can see some shell casings just to the right. ID the weapon as the property of PSA Jane
Stubbs."

He hands it off to the CSI, and turns back to Alexis.

"Alexis. Did you fire the gun?"

She shakes her head. "No, it was just in case. Umm, Jane gave it to me because…"

Esposito is patient. Little Castle may have seen a few dead bodies during her internship but
something like this was a very different deal. A very different reality.

"It was so quick. I heard Jane's shouted warning. Then it got so chaotic. They came from behind us
I guess. Or our side. From our blind spot, spots. Right after Jane's shout there was someone
attacking Rose and her just…just falling to the ground. Then almost at the same time Halley was
slammed out of the way. Then there were hands…hands reaching for me. Jane shouted at me to get
down, so I ducked down as Jane had instructed me. I saw their guns even as I was going to ground.
At least one, no I think two, yes two of them had guns. The one reaching for me had gloved hands,
no gun."

"You did good Alexis." She shakes her head.

"You didn't freeze. You got out of the way and allowed your" he struggles to use a word other than
bodyguard. "You allowed Jane to take the action she needed to."

"Will she be charged?" Alexis already knows from the paramedics that Jane's condition is serious
but most likely not life threatening.

"I don't know Alexis." He is honest with her. "Too early. Not my call. But from the why you have
described things and what eye-witnesses have said, I think it could be ruled justified. But it really is
not my call."

"Okay. Thanks for being honest with me."
"Now we need to get you back to your family. Given the events of tonight you will all want to be together in one place." Oh shit. It all the chaos he forgot. How could Alexis know?

"Ummm, Detective Esposito?" She frowns, "What do you mean, 'the events of tonight'?"

He moves closer to the young woman whilst frantically trying to decide what to say.

Alexis is smart, even semi-traumatised she knows he is holding something back. "Javi!?" The unrelieved stress of the night is finally overwhelming her as her voice wavers. She looks nothing like a young woman, just a grown child. A very scared one.

"The Loft came under fire…." He starts with his explanation.

She actually hits him. Hard or at least quite hard for her. She can't speak right now. The tears that had been absent are now streaming down her face. That is articulate enough.

He feels ashamed. "Alexis. They're all safe. Your Dad, Beckett, they're on the phone to Ryan now."

"Then why didn't you say?"

"Umm, you didn't give me a chance. But I'm sorry I should have handled that better."

"I'm sorry too," she mumbles but keeps her distance, "sorry for hitting you Detective."

It is better but it is still almost beyond awkward. Espo wants desperately to do something to reassure her but he's lost. A gang-banger, mercenaries even he'll take them all on but females, even a single one out-fox him. Lanie, Torie, the other women he has seen, and even now, on a completely different level, Castle's own sweet daughter. All of them throw him, and not just off his game for dating and relationships, and now seemingly even as a friendly shoulder. He knows his life is a bit of a mess right now, professionally and personally. He's got a bit of work to do. But he can't deal, not right now.

Fortunately Ryan - looking slightly harried - arrives to rescue his partner. He smiles gently at Alexis, "Hello Alexis, there is someone who wants to speak to you", and hands his phone across to the young woman who takes it.

Momentarily speechless, she takes the offered cell. She hadn't even thought to use her own even after getting it back. Shock she wonders?

"Thank you Detective Ryan," she finally mutters before she steps back. "Daddy?"

"Hey Pumpkin."

Before Ryan knows it she is back again and wrapped around him in a big hug that the Detective can sense the tension leech out of the young women. Espo spins away mutter in frustration. Ryan tries to be a Zen as hell. There will be a few beers in their future. Of course it would help if his partner pulled his head out of his stubborn derriere.

Then Alexis almost bounds away – but not more than a few paces - phone to her face, "Daddy……"

Ryan re-joins his partner and the two step back a few more paces to give her some space but remain in close proximity. He can feel his partner's frustration but knows better than to try and talk about it here, certainly not while his partner is muttering very coarse curses in Spanish as quietly as he can.
Meanwhile, the radio squawks with reports of another incident in progress. Hard to keep track of whether it was a new one, or a status report on an existing incident.

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**The Loft, 8.27 pm**

Hearing Rick's almost shouted 'Pumpkin' and the way his previous rigid body sagged and relaxed brings just a little is a balm to the others. Knowing that Alexis is safe is of considerable relief to all the occupants of the battle-torn Loft.

And the home really did resemble a battlefield.

The heavy-weight rounds from the snipers had slammed through the reinforced glass of the windows, shattering some panes in places, and in other cases they had actually punched through the external cladding and the interior walls, leaving exit holes and in some cases craters to mark their passage before leaving pock marks or holes at their final point of impact.

The previously warm and welcoming Loft is no longer secure. The weather was one of the more obvious intrusions. It was not raining but it is January and the temperature is biting as the season leaks in through the numerous gaps in the glass.

The kitchen was one of their favorite places and it was in ruins. Fortunately the gas line had not ruptured, but there was at least one water pipe leaking somewhere, and the refrigerator had taken at least three, no make that five, six, right seven rounds, one door was hanging ajar on a single hinge, the interior lights blinking discordantly. From the ceiling one of the hanging lights was barely connected to the ceiling, glass smashed, others remained lit and the mismatched illumination somehow suited the wreck of his home. Several rounds had impacted surface of the breakfast bar and in at least two cases left long groves in the surface as they expended their kinetic energy. Innumerable kitchen tiles were smashed along with a number of small appliances including the coffee machine!

There were no jokes from Rick, or anyone else, about redecorating. Not at this time.

They would not be staying here long. Or for possibly for a very long time. There would be numerous repairs to be made but more significantly the very open plan layout of the loft had left the occupants exposed to the sort of attack that had come tonight. More attackers, or more potent weapons would have had a very different result.

They were no longer safe here. At least for now.

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**On the road, West Virginia.**

The rental car had a decent, and working, radio and he was able to follow the news from New York on the attacks as he drove. He also watched TV for a few minutes when he got free coffee at a gas station during a toilet break.

There had been a number of devastating attacks, a couple conducted in full view of security and in one case media cameras. These naturally had been on constant loop on the TV and Cable news networks as well as websites. Secondary sources, often members of the public, were flooding news sites and social media with images and video of the attacks.

In addition, there appeared to be quite a few unsuccessful attacks, and Court had expected that. Commanders should always expect casualties and also burnt missions. This time a number of those
failures he had directly facilitated but it was not like he was close to the men. Or even knew most of them.

Plus with that many operations from Bracken and himself, some were bound to go wrong. Especially given the quality of many of the resources they were using. This was even truer for many of the operations – if he could even call them that – initiated by Bracken without his involvement. The man was malice personified but without a military mind, a tantrum throwing wanna-be tyrant was all he would ever amount to. Even now he could fathom the purpose behind all of the mayhem, nor did he want to. Bracken was at least providing an excellent distraction for his own flight.

Even failed missions were useful in creating chaos, confusion and maybe enough would succeed. Not that he had any dependency on those. Meanwhile the actual critical missions – with his objectives - were being executed with far less show and far more success – so far.

His only real concern as he drove on towards Columbus was that the ever reliable Koreans had not checked in since the completion of their assignment to silence Simmons. Had the final task been a mission too far for them?

City of New York Emergency Services Control Centre, 9.04 pm

That been two of the longest and most intense hours in his life, but for Arlen Popkowski, the work is not over.

There were no new incidents reported in the last half-hour, and those in progress appeared to be tailing off, for the most part. Which is a blessed relief for all. The city's first responders are tapped out. Every resource committed and off-duty reserves called in. Likewise here in the control centre his team are drained, and still struggling to come to terms with the last two hours of frenetic action.

The Governor had invoked a State of Emergency, calling in additional resources from outside of the City and mobilizing a limited number of New York National Guard units to provide additional security and reassurance to the populace, and vital relief to the temporarily overwhelmed first responders. But they will take time to arrive and step into line.

Brucie appears at his desk with a fresh tea. "What now Pops?"

"Thanks," He takes a sip. Something stronger than honey in this one. He says nothing for a moment, cupping the warm beverage. "Now comes the clean-up," he eventually responds unable to hide the tiredness and despondency, "along with the butcher's bill, and investigations. Paperwork."

"It never ends," Brucie agrees.

"Seems like it, especially tonight. Makes you wonder what the point was. The why?"

"Guess it is not meant to make sense Pops."

Arlen stares into the mug unwilling or unable to find an answer. Their shift still has almost five hours to go.
Author's Notes

Life continues to intervene. Some good, some not-so good and some just sad (too many funerals).

We're almost there. Part 3 will come along when I am happy with it.

To everyone still with me, thank you for your patience. Thank you to those who take the time to review and especially to those who have reached out with messages.
Immolation PART III

Chapter Summary

Previously – all hell has broken out as the Dragon strikes out against his enemies. He is not done yet.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Manhattan. Two blocks from Broome Street.

The pair are coming down the stairs as fast as they can. They have three long and seemingly heavy bags between them and these are clearly slowing at least the second one of the men down. The one leading has a bag in each hand and the tail-ender just a single one in his right hand. Despite the seemingly lighter load of the pair, he is struggling and he stumbles almost dropping his single bag, his coordination and stamina apparently suspect.

Being shot does that. Blood stains through the left side of his thick insulated jacket, the sheen of perspiration coats his forehead, despite the chill of the winter night.

The tail-ender curses and picks up his pace to stay with his leader who is not making much – if any - of an allowance for his condition.

Both men are fairly non-descript with jeans, grey coats, short-cropped hair, and short beards. Being average – or at least appearing so - was a valuable trait, especially in their profession.

The bleeding man is not happy. Expending precious energy ranting even as he lurches downwards, "Fucking freak shot. Lucky prick!" He almost trips – again – foot catching the edge of a step resulting in the long case bouncing off the nearest wall, hitting him in the leg. "Fuck!"

His colleague finally pauses and turns to him, eyes ablaze. Taking a second to rest the long bags against the walls of the stair well he lays into the other. "Shut up. Yeah it was bloody freak shot, probably with a pistol, so especially so. But consider yourself lucky as the pissy little round had expended a hell of a lot of energy before it hit you. You wouldn't be here if it was a fucking proper gun. Now we've got to keep moving. Extraction window ends in less than two minutes." They both know that it would be very bad to miss their ride.

Grabbing their respective loads they move off at double time again.

Bleeding man is not done. "This whole thing is fucked. We were not even meant to be the primary team. Where were the heavy weapons team? They were meant to blow the whole top floor to shit. What the fuck happened to them?" It is a good question but not one his colleague cares to contemplate, at least openly, especially right now.

"I don't know. And if you don't fucking shut up, I'll leave you behind."

That finally quietens the complainer. In this profession left behind means a bullet between the eyes or the knife. Neither feature in his plans. Nor did getting shot by their targets.
The pair hurry on down the last few flights of stairs towards the exit to the parking lot and their extraction team. It is not natural nor especially elegant motion, their movements weighed down by their clumsy weapon cases. However, the contents were deemed too valuable and incriminating to leave behind.

The wounded man is really beginning to sweat heavily despite the January cold. He is increasingly focused on controlling his own movements to counter the effects of the wound, so when his healthy colleague comes to a sudden stop with no warning, the complainer slams straight into him, dropping his gun case to the floor with a thud confirming the mass of the contents.

His wound fires up, but before he can let loose another complaint he looks up, and the ready profanities die on his lips.

"Shit!"

Proximity means that the lethal weapon appears like a fucking big canon being pointed at the both of them. The burnished steel of the large suppressor only makes it appear even more menacing.

There is only one man behind the gun but they freeze in place. There is no thought of trying to take him. Despite the steel grey hair he looks entirely capable. The eyes confirm it. That and the unwavering gun barrel promising instant death. Plus only the injured man has any unoccupied hands, and any sign of movement to go for their own personal weapons would be completely telegraphed.

The newcomer finally speaks, a gravelly tone tinged with something that seems like humor, "Sorry I'm late. Your other colleagues were not very cooperative and delayed me somewhat. Not that it matters now." He seems to think for a moment, and then grins, like a shark. "Don't worry about missing your ride. They're not waiting for you either." There is no change in his expression to indicate whether the man considered his words humorous or not.

"What the fuck do you want?" the leader squeezes out.

The man chuckles, a slight shake of the head but eyes remain firmly locked on his targets.

"Nothing. Which is lucky for you. If you had been more capable or effective then this would be a much different and protracted conversation. Despite my reputation I would have to let it get personal and, well, the last person who pushed me that far did not like it."

"Just fucking get on with it, or are you going to talk us to death?" The hard man goes for bravado but it sounds like resignation.

"Hey!" the injured guy wants a say. Surely they could offer something?

The unblinking steel eyes give nothing away but their answer comes as the gun fires once, adjusts aim and a second shot, before either man can react, and the bodies drop.

"Nope. You had nothing I needed either."

He momentarily considers the corpses with a cold unemotional gaze. He does not like leaving evidence. He usually cleans up but there is not time, especially with the others still exposed. Plus there are the additional complications to consider. He is out of time.

He quickly ducks to collect the two ejected shell casings and drops them into the pocket of his jacket that already contains nine other shell casings. No point in making it too easy for the police – not that they would ever do so, but more than forty years of being careful it was more that habit.
Pocketing the pistol and suppressor he steps out into the night and around the three bodies of their extraction team. Each had a near entry wound in the rear of their skulls. It had been ridiculously easy, with all three trying to determine what was happening from the shooters upstairs and not paying attention to the immediate surrounds and their own personal security. He had literally strolled up and shot all three before they could react. He is never quite sure whether to bemoan the substandard quality of most of the current crop of mercenaries – definitely not crediting them as professionals - or celebrate it.

His phone beeps. He does not bother to read the message, knowing it will be his partner indicating that she was ready. Time to go before the authorities arrived. Or the temporary block on local cameras ended. God he was getting too old for this shit. Not that retiring appealed or ever seemed a likely option. In this profession a person was still retired, not the other way.

Offices of the New York Ledger

Having been in the print news game for decades Larry Hartz liked to believe he had good instincts for what made good news. Instincts that were still valid for this modern, near instant, online world. He backed those up with a predilection for old fashion facts and even more so the truth (to the best of their information at the time).

Right now every form of news media, and not-news, was lit up with the attacks in New York. The prevailing narrative was to blame the usual suspects. Online led the way but aside from some simple reporting and providing updates from the City and State governments and emergency services, the Ledger had so far shied away from any opinion or editorializing. For now. But it needed to do something soon. Or lose ground as readers looked elsewhere.

His gut told him something was not right. The information – limited as it was – left too many questions.

"Mark!" He calls over his City Desk Editor who almost sprints over at his boss's command.

"Larry," he pants, curiosity evident. In the years they have worked together he knows his boss is rarely wrong on a hunch.

"This doesn't look right. Mark, can you get an analysis on the targets."

"You're not going with terrorism?" It was more of a statement than a question.

"Could be a form of terrorism but I think we should be looking elsewhere for the causes. Domestic. Politics or crime possibly. What connects the attacks and or the victims? Maybe some, probably, not all. There could be outliers or deliberate ruses. Definitely think some may be misleading."

"Why?"

"All this effort and coordination, the military grade weapons, explosions, the surprise. They could have targeted a major event, gone for a spectacular not this diluted, multiple strikes pinpricks. Doesn't seem like the usual MO from our usual suspects."

"Okay, I'm on it Larry." Mark sounds like he is not yet convinced but that satisfies Larry as it meant he would give it the necessary rigor. He could rely on the man.

"As quick as you can Mark. We're going to have to put something up soon. The clock is running."

A frantic flurry on the keyboard and Mark announces, "I got this for now for the headline," and he
nods towards the large monitor where the title article now reads 'Attack on America – Inside Job?'

"We'll run with the first three W's and update with the fourth when we can.

Larry grins at the old school terminology. The first there 'W's' were Who, Where, When and last was Why.

"Great. Get it up, and get the content flowing. We'll update and correct as we go."

"You got it Larry."

Already speeding away Larry waved without looking, his mind on mobilizing all his best reporters and on showing Cable News that they still packed a punch and remained relevant for anything other who was screwing, or no longer screwing who.

It was going to be a long night.

The Loft

With no more gunfire, and for now, no more terror or tears, the occupants of the Loft found themselves in a surreally near-calm moment. Kate takes the opportunity to pull Rick into a tight embrace, her arms locked around his midriff, their chests rising and falling as one, heads and hearts together.

Clare is the first to stand, and after what seems to the other to be an all too brief scan of the area, gets busy attending to the injured Taylor Matthews agent.

Fortunately despite the visible blood loss and extremely washed-out complexion he is not as badly injured as appeared. His light-weight vest and judicious placement of his cell phone had retarded much of the potential energy from the snipers round.

Despite this relative good news for at Martha and Val this is the first time they have seen someone shot first hand. And for Jim Beckett second time is only better because it is not his Katie nearly dying. But human beings are resilient and slowly everyone else begins move, rising cautiously above the height of the scarred bench-tops.

Leading the way, their hands still holding their pistols, Beckett and Castle work together to stand up and perform another sweep before holstering their pistols. Now they have time to get a more thorough view of the damage wrought to their home. She may not have lived her much at all but her heart sinks especially for Rick, Martha and Alexis. This was their home for far longer. Would they want to stay? She knows from painful experience that violence can break a home and even erase the very essence of what makes it so. Would they ever want to inhabit a place where the kitchen – the heart of their home - had been ripped apart and the floors stained with blood.

As she turns to check on her partner she sees Val and her dad embrace and then both offer a hand to help Martha to her feet.

With Clare occupied with her wounded agent, Beckett takes charge. "Rick can you get the first aid kit. We'll need anti-septic and plasters. Better bring tweezers, scissors and a flashlight." He nods and moves off for the guest bedroom where a full first aid kit resides. Turning to address the others she asks, "I think we avoided any significant injuries but does anyone need glass or other fragments removed?"
Martha holds up her left arm where two long but seemingly shallow cuts have stained her silk top stained deep red and turning brown. "No darling. Just these two cuts. I'll be fine."

"You'll get your injuries checked by the EMTs, all of you please, and that goes double for you Martha," instructs Clare as she steps away from her agent and assumes full command again. The injured agent looks a little better with more color in his face, and has a field dressing compressed across his chest wound. Clare had worked quickly and efficiently, no doubt helped by previous experience.

Rick returns from the bathroom and places the first aid kit on a clear space on the breakfast bar benchtop. He frowns and turns back to the one of the cupboards and extracts a dustpan and brush plus new dishtowels. He carefully sweeps any debris into the dustpan and Beckett joins him in spreading the dishtowels over the freshly cleaned surface. Unfortunately this barely touches the mess and devastation surrounding them.

"Police and EMTs are two minutes out," Clare confirms before resuming her focus on her communications.

There is hardly any movement. The wind whistle through the new ventilation in the walls and windows and a tap drips, the buzz of flickering lights. Perhaps all are finally stunned but what they have experienced and survived.

But this moment is interrupted, unexpectedly by Jim Beckett who stands and approaches the pair, surprising both as he encompasses both in a hug. They both return the affection and then Jim steps back leaving the pair still connected.

But Beckett Senior is not done. "Katie, Rick," and despite the very recent display of affection there is something in his tone and they both tense in each other's arms, their eyes meeting and their mutual mind-meld communicating, asking what his is up to, and then 'he wouldn't, would he?'

Oh he certainly would.

"Katie, Rick," Jim restarts, "God knows I only have knowledge of a fraction of the tribulations you two have gone through but if today is any indication, the I think you really should take heed of the message the universe is trying to send you two."

"What message is that Dad?" Beckett challenges, too perplexed to be aghast at the question or her father's use of the term universe. Or the childhood name she only permits when they are alone.

Rick simply looks frozen like a deer in a spotlight, his thinking for once ahead of his partners but stuck how to respond.

"As a lawyer I can tell you, everything is much simpler when you are married." Beckett's jaw drops. She had maybe thought it would be about a prompt for a career change.

"For one your wife is always right." Val adds now standing beside her lover. Neither of apparently at all concerned by the potential hypocrisy of their own stated position of not marrying despite their obvious commitment.

"Not entirely sure I like the sound of that." Rick ventures instinctively trying to lighten the tone, before realizing what he said. "Not like that. Of course I want to marry again," he corrects, his gaze locked firmly on Beckett as if it needed confirming who his sole intended would be.

"Well you should be used to it already." Beckett intervenes hopefully trying to rescue him, them.

"Touché." He leans in and busses her lips reverently.
"No getting off point", the wily lawyer reminds them. They both chuckle-groan despite themselves.

"So Rick, would you do this old man a favor?" Jim Beckett leaves the rest unsaid.

"Dad!" Beckett protests for both of them.

Ignoring her outburst he carries on, "Her mother and I would appreciate if you finally got around to formalizing this long standing partnership." Before one or both of you die, are kidnapped or otherwise in some form of mortal peril is left unsaid but understood by all. Well at least it wasn't about being pregnant or some such mundane thing.

Martha comes to stand by Jim, her hand slipping onto the man's shoulder, looking sprightlier than she did mere minutes ago.

"Darlings. He's right. How many times? You love each other. Have done for so long. How long do you need to wait? How many of those sign's from the Universe?"

Even his mother is adopting the whole universe thing. Still struck dumb - the both of them. Momentarily of course.

"Kate…." Rick stutters. This was so not how he was planning this. For a start he really didn't want an audience. He would also have preferred a more romantic setting, certainly without recent imminent near-death – it would be nice if at least some significant moments in relationship were triggered by this sort of event - and a scene that includes pretty much everything and everyone too covered in bullet damage, blood, shards of glass and debris.

He holds up his hand. Everyone pauses, and rising babble dies.

"Okay thank you all for the group pressure. But this really is something for just Kate and I." Her eyes and the reassuring grip on his other hand confirming her position in support of him on this matter.

Certain of them, Beckett takes charge. "Right as Rick said. That is for us. And us alone. Now is really not the time. As the near-death experience professionals we know this better than all of you, well probably not you Clare," she corrects and continues. "Alexis is not here, we won't consider her safe until she is with us, nor for that matter should we consider the rest of us safe. So no, regardless of how much we want to" She will not say 'married', not right now. "And for the record I really want that, we are not doing this now." Every word stressed their position, determination and focus to the fore.

If he could love her anymore, his heart could burst, not that they needed another casualty.

Clare steps in. "Okay folks, Kate is right and now that we have cleared that up – for now – it is time for everyone to pack essentials. You'll be going on a road trip as soon as we can organize it. We're getting all of you to safety."

When her audience is slow to react, the former Colonel exercises her command voice, "Now hustle people or I'll take you out of here in what you are standing in."

That seems to work. For one Martha looks momentarily horrified, and promptly turns for the stairs. Jim and Val follow verbalizing an offer to help. Clare turns to Beckett and Castle, "Well what you waiting for? Get packing."

Kate nods, and grabs Rick's hand leading him to the bookshelves and on into their bedroom. They have some urgent packing to do, and a desperate need to escape whatever that was. A marriage
press-gang? Perhaps it was the shock from the shooting?

Central Park, Penthouse

The Not-William Brackens had loved their high-rise home overlooking the Park. Especially Jennifer who had devoted much of her time into making it an extension and symbol not just of their status but also their family. But now the penthouse apartment was ruined beyond salvage for her at least, plus the children. Physically it could be rebuilt and repaired but she would never live there again. How could they ever feel safe? Try to sleep and not fail to relive the terror of heavy caliber gunfire ripping their home and at least one visitor apart.

She kept a close eye on their children even as she shepherded them past the ruins of their living room her body shielding them – for now – from the reality of what it meant to have this family name. The injured FBI agent had lost quite a few pints of blood and seemingly most it remained, congealing on the floor or splattered across the former pristine coverings and furnishings. The debris of the paramedics' frantic stabilization efforts still littered the surrounds too.

As they approach the entrance her husband waits for them, along at least six agents and uniformed police, all in body armor and sporting a range of intimidating weaponry.

David is talking to an agent she does not recognize. "My own brother. The son of.." He bites back the epithet suddenly aware of the presence his young children still cowering with his wife, their faces white with fear but still listening and taking in as much as their minds would allow.

She nails him with a stare he knows well, "Fix this David," is her only words. More a command really.

He had little surprise that William could be vindictive and one to bear a grudge and see it settled regardless, but this was beyond any expectation. They were family. 'Were' was definitely the operative word here. If William wanted to be so cold-blooded, self-centered and focused on his own needs, then he could be too.

"Of course." He leans in to kiss her left cheek before dropping to the floor to their level to hug and kiss the heads of their two children. "Mummy is going to take you somewhere safe. Daddy will be there as soon as I can."

He half expected a protest but both children simply clung to their mother's legs tighter as their tears continued to fall. He can only hope that the trauma is not long term.

Rising he steels himself. This had been a long time coming but William had left him no choice. Barely moving his head, his eyes still on the shaken forms of his wife and children seemingly waiting for him, he speaks to the new agent, "Please tell Agent Sorenson, whatever he wants. Whatever he needs."

Central Park, Basement

Many floors below the Bracken's ruined penthouse, far bigger battle the in the garage was also over. It too had lasted mere minutes but that seemed shorter than the actually elapsed time for all those caught up in the violent exchange.

Now came the accounting.

One US Marshall was dead, two more injured and three FBI agents injured, one critically. Four
teams of paramedics worked, somewhat frantically, to stabilize their patients.

There would be no survivors from the strike team. Two had lived past the end of the gun battle but with the EMTs tasked to the law enforcement casualties as a priority, one expired before being seen, and the other would follow the others to the gates of Hades not long after.

Not just lives had been expended or ruined. At least a dozen vehicles have been riddled by gunfire, three still smoldering from fires, one just the skeleton after its gas tank had exploded, catching two other cars and two of the attackers whose charred corpses lie beside the middle vehicle. No more rounds were cooking off from the pair so the survivors and newcomers could move with relative safety through the battle scarred garage.

The crime scene analysts will be busy. This sort of event would normally have multiple teams but the sheer number of events means every team has been mobilized and then often split off to manage separate jobs. No one says it, but paperwork is going to be mountainous and the labs will be backed up like no other time since 9/11.

**Outside Crosby and Broome Street, Soho, a minute later.**

All three police vehicles arrived almost simultaneously. As the occupants cautiously emerged from their vehicles every officer was relieved to note that there appeared to be no gunfire at this location. However none of the responding cops were taking chances. Their vests were strapped on as tight as they could go, hands on weapons, they stayed close to the arbitrary but comforting cover of their vehicles and their colleagues.

This was an 'all hands' response, and that meant all available resources, scant as they were, are on the scene. In this case all that meant the three cars - two patrol units each with a pair of officers and unmarked car staffed by three detectives out of the Twelfth mobilized directly by Gates to help out.

His warm breath fogging in the cool of the winter's night, Patrolman Terry Knickman is doing his best to start calm and collected. This was his third call within an hour. The first had been for a 'B&E' but the second had been the leftovers of a drive bay shooting that left five dead and many more wounded. He would still be there if direct orders from their precinct Captain had not pulled them away to this location in Soho to respond to shots fired and officers in need of assistance.

He had joined the precinct from the 47th just two weeks before Christmas. He had felt it was time for a change and his former sergeant and captain had both reluctantly agreed. Of course being new, meant working Christmas but he had not minded too much. His wife was still a bit unsure of the change plus the daily commute was a fair bit further and longer but he loved his work. It was different here, a good different.

The faint echo of very distant gunfire and sirens brings him back. Focus Terry. Focus, he chides himself. The whole town had gone crazy with so many calls seemingly in a matter of minutes. Every car was out and all off-duty shifts were being called in. There were reports of officers down and multiple attacks often involving automatic weapons and in some cases explosives. They had been at a different incident uptown when dispatch changed their assignment and all available cars from the Twelfth were ordered to Crosby and Broome for an urgent officer needs assistance call.

He and his partner - Tony Koulouris, 'Tony K' to pretty much everyone, a long serving member of the precinct, and from his experience so far a good cop despite his love of a good feed and carrying a few extra pounds - are covering one the southern end of Crosby at the intersection with Broome Street. It is cold enough that his breath steams in the winter night, and Terry uses the cold to maintain his alertness, checking to look back and around, scanning to see where the other pairs of
cops have deployed. He can see the three detectives near the building to the north. He and Tony are in the shadow of the building that apparently was under fire. He can't quite see the other patrol unit as it is round the corner from them.

There is no gun fire in the immediate vicinity. He qualified that because in the distance and from at least two directions he can hear not-so-faint echoes of gunfire. Only discipline keeps his gun in his holster, but his hand hovers near even as he notices that Tony's hand is firmly gripping the butt of his Glock. None of them have anything more capable. He tries not to think too hard about being outgunned.

He sweeps the far side of the street and sees no one. Hardly surprising if there had been shooting just minutes ago. New Yorkers are not fools, they may spectate but if danger is near they flee like everyone else. If nothing else 9/11 had taught them that.

Adjusting his position slightly, his foot brushes against something with a crunch and he glances down. Glass. And other fragments that look like brick and cladding. He looks up and scans for the source of the debris but the night swallows everything. Nothing is visible from this position yet regardless he strains his neck trying, and momentarily losing track of the street he is meant to be watching.

"Hey you!" Just ahead of him Tony K calls out to someone. A suspect? A bystander? Someone. His head snaps back, eyes to the street. He feels the burn of disappointment in his gut. The guilt of knowing he should have been keeping his eyes on the street.

With his attention back on the job he spies a pair of what appear to be city workers, and he assumes that this is who his partner has challenged. They are about twenty yards away. They look Asian and have apparently come out of the laneway behind the building they are beside. It is hard to tell in the twilight as they are still just off the main street, shadowed from the scant illumination of the nearest street light. The pair appear to glance this way at the officers but then turn with their back to them and start walking at a brisk pace away, showing no signs of responding to the challenge.

Tony moves forward a couple more steps, his hand pulling his Glock clear of his holster. "Stop! You two stop! Police!" The two now suspects ignore his partner's much louder and very deliberate instructions, and keep moving. But the male looks back again and this time clearly not a glance, his face is more clearly illuminated by the street light the pair are approaching.

It takes him a moment but he recognizes the man. 'Wait. It can't be? Could it? But damn well looks like it. Was that was the same Korean man from the fatal traffic accident months ago when he was at the Forty-Seventh? And his silent – non English speaking - wife too? What their name? The Kims?'

He didn't believe in coincidences before he became a cop, and now, well years on the beat had worn any tendency towards trust out of him. Call him cynical, but his instincts were pretty good, and tonight has amplified all of that.

"Hey You!" He adds his own challenge. "Police. Stay right where you are Mister Kim."

The pair seem to obey or at least hesitate for a second, if not quite stopped, and this time it is the woman that turned. The wife! It was definitely her, the silent one or rather non-English speaking. Her facial expression was stony flat and did not change but even from twenty yards he could see the moment when she identified that his hand was now on his weapon. Then her head dropped momentarily, and her own hand went to the small bag at her side. That was enough for him, he was pulling his piece, when her hand started to emerge, he went on instinct, automatically shouting a warning, "Hey Lady, stop..."
Her hand came into full view, and even in the twilight of the street illumination, something dull and metallic glinted as her hand raised. Shit that was a weapon!

"Gun!" The shout is an automatic response. And loud enough to carry.

He is aware that Tony K is crouching down in his position, just ahead of Terry, his gun already out but the suddenness of the woman's hostile action beats both their reaction times and they are yet to fully raise their weapons, and the woman gets off two shots before Terry can sight and fires his first. Both of her shots hit her target, not him his mind near gleefully provides, and his first, a snap shot, goes wide, even as he sees his partner collapse to the ground with a heavy grunt but making no other sound as he falls.

Terry's line of fire had been partially blocked with Tony K being closer and unfortunately for his partner directly in the line of fire, but with his partner down he is now able to draw a full and uninterrupted bead on the woman.

There is a shout in a language he doesn't comprehend. Korean his mind supplies, even as something hurtles towards them and Terry flinches and looks away. Some instinct makes him raise his left arm to shield his eyes. It was a good call as he escapes from the full effect as the object lands yards in front of them and explodes blinding flash.

There are two more shots but amazingly he is still not hit.

But he is dazed, and his vision compromised. Blinking repeatedly to try and clear his vision, the sound of another shot convinces him he does not have the luxury of waiting any longer, and so he aims at what he believes is the blurry center mass of the female shooter and pulls the trigger of his service piece. The first two shots are so close together they could be one, then a third, finally a fourth time his gun barks at the woman, and the blur that is her body seems to drop. There is not time to assess further as more shots come his way. At least two close enough for him to feel their passage and he shifts his aim, identifies the target better as his vision clears, and fires, emptying the remainder his magazine at the male suspect.

From the roadside, Tony K has overcome the shock of the attack and the all-too direct strikes on his body armor, and managed to raise his own service pistol letting off four rounds at the male suspect before his target dropped from his vision.

With trembling hands Terry ejects his empty magazine, dropping it to the road to join his empty shell casings, and with a near fumble extracts one of his two spare magazines and slams it home.

Only then does his focus broaden. Despite the echo of all the gunshots still ringing, he is conscious of the shouts from behind him of 'Officer Down!' and calls for reinforcement, as the other officers abandon their caution and race to their aid. The need to support their fellow cops overcoming their all-too human instinct to take cover.

Blinking repeatedly to try and clear his vision properly, he can see both suspects down and not moving, seemingly at all, let alone in a threatening manner. Only then does he check his partner.

"Fuck!" At least Tony was still breathing and cussing. He completes his move forward to assist his partner.

"Tony?" he drops to one knee but his eyes flicker to the prone forms of the suspects, and back again.

"Vest took them but Goddam that hurt."
"We'll get you checked out by the EMTs. Can I get you anything?"

"One, no make that two, of my wife's cheese melts?" Tony sounds almost wistful. "They're the best. Lots of cheese, overflowing really, sliced tomato, cracked pepper, grain bread coated with honey mustard. Toasted until they are hot all the way through and the outer cheese is crunchy near burnt. Perfection."

Terry can only nod wordlessly as his own stomach grumbles loudly in appreciation of his partner's foody description. "Sounds like you want one too." Tony laughs and winces. "Ow. Must remember not to laugh. Fuckin' hurts."

Terry gives an unforced guffaw, relief permeating his being. They're going to be okay. Well once the paperwork is done.

In the distance more sirens sound.

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**The Loft**

Just moments before the new wave of gunshots all of the occupants had returned to the main living area for one reason or another.

While the civilians had unceremoniously dived for cover, the fresh echoes of gunshots nearby had evoked an almost weary response from the veterans. Clare is certainly experienced enough to judge that the rounds were small caliber and more importantly, although proximate, very likely not aimed at them. Beckett too, casting one of those looks that silently communicates everything needed with her partner. He nods and moves where he needs to go but remains low taking no chances.

The flurry of shots is short-lived and lacked the immediately - certainly in comparison to the direct attack on the Loft - but no one is willing to take chances with exposing themselves. They all hug the shadows and in some cases drop as far as they can down behind already battle-scared furniture and fittings.

From her position Beckett is reassured that Rick is already looking to their family, hyper aware of their civilian status. And with good cause. Unsurprisingly Martha has not reacted well. A fresh wave of tears and uncontrolled shaking. From her own position near the elder Rodgers, a pale Val resolutely moves in closer to offer her a comforting shoulder before Rick can complete his scramble across. Val has never said much about her childhood experiences but Beckett can imagine that it may not have been as blissful as hers was until her mother's murder.

She seeks out her Dad to check on him. He is crouched down, a picture of determination and controlled fear. Their eyes meet and she manages a soft smile of reassurance for him. From across the gap Jim Beckett looks at his daughter with new found appreciation of her profession. "How do you?" he voices.

"Cope?" Kate supplies the end of the question. "Training, experience - they both help, but it is down to individual. Some veteran cops don't. I was amazed I made it through the first ones as a rookie." She pauses, reflecting with some puzzlement that this is the first time she has actually shared anything so open about her experiences on the job with her father. They normally kept to the inane variations of 'it was tough but I'm fine'.

He appears to appreciate her honesty and restricts himself to a deliberate dip of the head in acknowledgement. She is grateful for how he could leave it at that. Her mom never would but her dad would most likely. She had learnt to trust him again, and if her shooting had not, then she had
to believe that this would not be a trigger for him. But the limitations of their past should not constrain them. She promises herself to do more, be better for him. Just as she has for Rick.

She eyes Martha still weeping softly into Val's shoulder even with Rick wrapped into his mother, and by association her father's girlfriend.

"Are you okay Dad?" letting her concern show in her voice.

"I think so Katie. That was terrifying but almost visceral. You are so aware. But I'm not sure it gets an easier."

She nods in affirmation. "Let's hope you don't have to. I never wanted this for you. Not everyone is so composed or reacts the same. Yours is not a normal reaction I think. Not for most people. A lot shutdown or panic. Maybe I get some of that sang-froid from you. If so thank you." She will not explain why but she expects that her smart father can work out that it has helped save her. More than once she reminds herself. Not as often as Castle has but then she did not always have her partner.

From her own sheltered position Clare is on the phone seeking more information but there is an entirely expected lag waiting for the local units to update the command center who in turn are providing updates that Taylor Matthews is using.

 Silva Family Estate, Long Island.

Sophia was tired. Really tired, worn down. Her father inched closer to death each hour. At first it had been so gradual, months, weeks, then days but now the cancer had an even firmer and final grip on him. It was only a matter of time and pain. She wished for an end and not for one, conflicted in her love, her religion, and the equally fierce desire for him to not suffer any longer.

She did not agree with her father's near-deathbed confession to the FBI and the deal that had been struck. A priest yes, the cops, especially the Feds never! But she would at least concede that getting Bracken and Simmons off their backs was potentially worth the sense of shame and the loss of honor even if the few that knew took it to their graves.

Her phone buzzed with an alert and on looking sees it is from the perimeter security systems. Another false alarm from a wandering pet or bird she hopes as she moves towards the nearby security room.

The room is empty of course. They only have a handful of guards – never needed more – and she instinctively checks the closed but unlocked door of weapons cupboard before turning her attention to the monitors.

The shape is too big, all too human. And there is more than one. Her heart sinks. Not a pet.

"Damn!"

The dim shadows moved in from two directions. At least a half-dozen, likely more perhaps, still hidden by the darkness.

She sagged, hands grasping the chair in front of her. She was weary.

On screen she sees an arm rise and go back before hurling something forward.

"Shit!"
The first explosion shook any trace of fatigue from her. The building is too solid to shake but the noise echoes throughout. Everyone, even her father, would be awake and hopefully alert enough to understand what the noise meant.

A second blast

She pulls the door to the weapons locker open and grabs the Benelli Tactical shotgun from the ready rack. Quickly adding a sling with another thirty rounds of solid slugs she throws over her left shoulder, she steps back and heads for the main hall.

"Lupo!" she screams for her right-hand assistant and guard and within seconds the compact but reassuringly bulky man is by her side, his pistol out and a Bluetooth earpiece in place.

"Senora Sophia we must go to the panic room," he half-orders. The situation making him stretch their well-established boundaries and roles.

"Si! But get my father!" Her tone brooks no refusal and he turns and sprints for the patriarch's room.

She thinks about following but decides to head for the security of the fortress like room near the center of the house. Despite the circumstances she chuckles to herself. The room was already constructed and fitted our by the previous owner – the movie director whose paranoia she now appreciates.

The first shots sound out. Whether from one of her three guards aside from Lupo or from the intruders she does not know. More gunshots ring out including now the concentrated chatter of automatic gunfire which she knows are their attackers, none of her men having such illegal weapon, only New York legal handguns and shotguns. They had never needed more.

Reaching the entrance to the room she pauses, scanning up and down the hallway, anxiously waiting for Lupo and her father and hopefully as many of her men as could survive this betrayal.

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**NYPD Surveillance Team outside the Silva Residence.**

Despite all the reports of attacks in Manhattan, they had been ordered to remain in place.

Recently promoted to the ranks of Organized Crime's plain clothes division, Officer Raul Costa is startled from monotony of their previously uneventful surveillance of the Silva's residence by a pair of explosions and the rapid exchange of gunfire

"Shit on a shovel!"

Alongside him, Sergeant Mitchell Jervis, is a long term veteran but he's never directly witnessed anything like this. Training kicks in. "Call it in!"

"Doing it now Sarge," Costa acknowledges.

"And we're staying put. We don't have the firepower," the sergeant orders.

Costa nods, perfectly happy to comply, especially when the gunfire increases including prolonged bursts of what must be at least two automatic weapons. With only their pistols they are totally outgunned.
Lupo had returned carrying her ailing father in his arms, and at the last second she shut the door before the attackers reached them. Only two more of her men joined them, neither seriously injured but both covered in dust and a few scratches and cuts from flying debris. The third, Tony, did not arrive. She mutters a pray for his soul.

The room is locked up tight. They cannot hear their attackers who must by now be outside the room. Both guards are reloading their magazines from the ammunition stored in the panic room. They are seriously outgunned.

Lupo looks at Sophia, "Senora, they come prepared. Explosives."

She immediately understands the significance. The attackers know about the panic room. And they have explosives. They are not safe here. But with her father's condition they cannot flee.

They must fight. She looks to each of her men and all dip their heads, loyal to the end.

Sophia returns their salute of allegiance and then she dips to caress her father's face and he becomes more alert and momentarily lucid, allowing them to exchange their familiar words of benediction and love, perhaps one last time. She nods to the two guards. They know what to do. Then wordlessly she and Lupo crawl to the emergency tunnel. This was a feature they added themselves with no contractors or planning records.

They crouch and move quickly down the low passageway, she pushes the one-way barrier aside, and together emerge from the recessed grille hidden behind a tall hedge on the edge of the garden. Now outside the house, hidden by the vegetation and darkness, they take a moment to check their surrounds and seeing no-one begin to move.

Wasting no more time they quickly double back towards to the main entrance. Lupo strides ahead, handgun held low in both hands, ready for the inevitable confrontation.

There is one man guarding the blown French doors, but he is naturally concentrating on the action inside the house. His last mistake. Lupo raises his silenced pistol and takes the man down with a single shot to the head. He tucks the pistol behind his back and pulls his own Benelli shotgun from his shoulder. Together the two stalk down the corridor and spot the first group clustered near the start of the hallway that leads to the entrance to the panic room.

There are three. All wearing dark bulky clothes holding variants of the ubiquitous M16 in their hands. All are looking down the hallway towards the panic room. The wrong way for them, the right way for the defenders.

Together they raise their shotguns and just two shots from each takes down all three men. The heavy duty buckshot ripping through the flimsy, non-military grade vests and exposed limbs and heads.

Charging forward they waste no time for beyond the three corpses they spot the main group. Until the shotgun blasts the attackers had been clustered by the panic room entrance presumably setting explosive charges. There are perhaps five or six but in their haste Sophia and Lupo do not have time to make an accurate count.

Since leaving the panic room Lupo has been speaking for the first time, counting quickly into his Bluetooth headset. "Primo, secondo," and where the count of three would have occurred the panic room door flies open on a quick release mechanism (another of their secret enhancements) and
gunfire sounds out from within, two pistols emptying their magazines as fast as the guards can pull the trigger, and giving them a vital distraction.

The group of attackers are disorientated and thrown off their game by the bidirectional threats from two axis and their responses are uncoordinated and more importantly delayed just long enough. She and Lupo empty the remaining rounds in their shotguns, grateful for the reciprocating automatic action that spat death and bloody vengeance at the intruders.

In the confined space the roar of the shotgun blasts is very loud and there is a brief cloud of gun smoke obscuring much of the hallway. When it begins to clear the awful effectiveness of the shotgun rounds in the confined spaces is confirmed. Four bodies are unmoving on the ground. Perhaps one or two attackers may have fled.

Lupo has his pistol out, his empty shotgun discarded against the wall. With no other weapon and her suddenly trembling hands Sophia begins the process of reloading the shotgun, her mouth and gut burning with the bitter taste of bile and the confronting combination of expended gunpowder and human debris. She had never shot anything more dangerous or animate than clay pigeons until now.

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**NYPD Observation**

They had not seen the attackers enter from the main road that observation position covered but from their surveillance van the two cops clearly see the two men exit the property from the front gate, moving at haste, neither looking in any direction except the one they are running in. These are not the familiar Silva guards and of the two strangers one is carrying an AR-15 type assault rifle.

Cop instincts kick in and both officers leap from the van, drawing their pistols, well aware of the disparity in firepower, their one advantage is surprise over the two seemingly panicked men.

"NYPD freeze!" Both shout out the obligatory warning even as they raise their pistols.

One suspect/attacker keeps running without looking back but the one with the AR-15 stops, twists in their direction, his assault rifle coming up. This is more than enough for their survival instincts and training and both cops fire until the man drops. Although unintended their fusillade also connects with the second fleeing attacker who falls and does not rise.

After hastily swapping magazines, the pair of cops cautiously approach the two fallen suspects. The rifleman is clearly fatally wounded judging by the copious flow of blood and brain matter. The remaining suspect is still twitching but the prognosis looks poor.

"Shit."

"Calling this in too, Sarge," Costa confirms even as his superior and partner looks pretty shaken, possibly the first time he has fired his weapon, and probably, no almost certainly, the first time he had killed someone. Despite fewer years in service, this was Costa's third occasion to discharge his official weapon, and the second time he had killed someone. Both previous events were eventually ruled 'good shots' but he does not look forward to the inevitable investigation and questions. Or the paperwork.

Cautiously continuing to move forward to secure the scene and the weapons, they can now confirm that both suspects are beyond any need for medical attention. They leave everything where it has fallen for the investigators.
They make no move towards the Silva residence.

Now the wait for backup, and EMTs followed by IA and brass. They had a long night ahead of them.

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**Crosby and Broome**

Hit five times including four in the upper torso, Sergeant Bae never regained consciousness and bled out before any medical assistance could be called.

Despite being hit six times, his partner and wife somehow survived until the EMT’s could arrive. After some frantic work she was stabilized and made it to hospital. But she too would never regain consciousness. Taking with her the possibility of exposing the operation and ultimately her client.

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**The Loft**

The second, and unharmed, Taylor Matthews agent who was stationed in the hallway announced the presence of an EMT team and a pair of uniformed officers on the floor.

Unwilling to accept the uniforms at face value and simply let them enter without precautions Clare asks them to wait until she can attend. Picking up her injured agent's MP7 she strides out to perform her own security validation check. Beckett follows behind her right hand on her holstered SIG, wondering briefly in disbelief how and why they had battled snipers with handguns when the more capable – but still not equal to a sniper rifle – sub-machine gun was mere feet away. Exiting the door she finds Clare and other agent in what appears at first sight to be a stand-off. Fortunately she is relieved that she able to positively identify Officer Michelle Dooser as one of the Twelfth’s own, and own her words Clare nods them on through.

The pair of paramedics go right on past them but the police officers stop to converse with the two veterans by the entrance hall. Dooser is fairly new to the Precinct but is no green rookie but it takes her a few moments to appreciate the reason for the somewhat wide-eyed response from her fellow more junior partner. Glancing down she notes than both Clare and herself are covered in debris from the kitchen, scrapes and more than a few blood stains. Both have their personal weapons holstered but the lingering smell of their gunfight and their empty magazines stuck incompletely back in their ready pouches gives them an air or maybe edge of competency and perhaps intimidation.

Michelle Dooser is definitely not a rookie with almost eight years in but it takes all of that experience to focus on her primary role and explains that the scene is being secured and briefly confirms that two suspects are down after exchanging shots with the arriving officers. She has no information on the earlier attackers. Given the lack of coordination and different weapons it is possible the two are not connected. Neither Beckett nor the female agent who appears to be in charge push for any more information accepting what was offered as the best that was available. Neither comment on the odds of being the target of two attacks in one night.

She knows Beckett – the very epitome of what she strives to be - is on family leave so the presence of the holstered weapon on her hip is a red flag. It looks to be a very expensive SIG from what she can spy and obviously is not Department issue. In addition based on the reports, the lingering smell of gunfire and visible empty magazine in stuck in a belt pouch, indicate that the pistol had been discharged multiple times within hours if not minutes, raises issues she should address. However, on this day, and in this situation she will save the questions for later and pass the observations to the investigating detectives. Beckett is one of them, leave or nor, and had earned and deserves the
With a nod Beckett heads back leaving the others to carry on and returns to the main living area. Her heart sinks just a little more with another view of the destruction all while appreciating that they were lucky.

One paramedic is with the injured Taylor Matthew's agent who apparently wants to leave under his own steam. Something the paramedic is vehemently opposing even while acknowledging that the injured man is not at immediate risk. Protestations that this was not their first gunshot wound are ignored.

For her part Beckett never wants to be so blasé about repeated gunshot injuries.

The second EMT has started with the less injured occupants and selected Martha and her very obvious cuts on her arm. She looks older and scared even with her son at her side. Despite their banter and play acting she truly appreciates how much Rick loves his mother.

Meanwhile Clare continues to organize while somehow managing to temper and tone-down the more obvious authoritarian traits of her former command status.

"Right while the EMTS is checking each of you out, the others can resume packing if they need to."

"Where are we going?" Martha inquires while looking sideways at the EMT tending to her arm.

"We don't have the details yet but it will be somewhere safer, at least for a little while. Be ready to travel light so keep it to essentials but enough for a week." Martha would probably have replied but the EMT is busy instructing her to hold her arm still.

"For the non-residents we'll see about arranging a home stop if it is possible. Otherwise we'll improvise."

"You make that sound like the A-Team," Rick observes somewhat slyly even while gentling gripping his mother's shoulder as she winces as the paramedic removes a small sliver of glass from her arm.

"Maybe but we damn well hit what we're aiming for." She grins as she says the words but the eyes confirm how serious she is about that with no tolerance for the fakery of TV shows. In days of old Rick Castle might well have bantered back with a claim that the very fictional TV characters did but they have all had their fill of very real bullets. And everyone was deliberately aiming at real people.

Rick still looks like he is going to that but lets it slide when a gasp comes from Val. She had taken the opportunity to retrieve her phone from her bag where it had been sitting muted during their earlier discussions.

"Oh my God!" anguish apparent in her tone.

"What Dear?" Jim unconsciously uses the endearment as he moves to her.

"There has been an attack on the firm. People are dead. Jeff and at least two others," her voice wavering and breaking with the tears.

As Jim instinctively wraps her tight in his arms, she continues, "I need to go. Be there."
"Absolutely not Val," that was absolutely an order from the former Colonel. "Too dangerous right now. We are definitely getting you to someplace else. This attack pretty much confirms a bunch of things we feared."

"Please." Val protests but it is half-hearted.

Rick crosses to Val and places a hand on her shoulder hoping to impart some small comfort, "It will be a crime scene. They will not let anyone in, and everyone else will have been relocated as soon as possible. We can get someone to relay any status to us," he adds looking at Clare who nods.

Val nods, tears drying. "I'll call the other partners," she glances at Clare, "Is it okay to use my phone?"

"Just for now" she assures her. "We'll discuss all the security measures in a bit. Now let's get packing."

Beckett had raided the Loft's weapons safe. Although not asked yet they would have to give up their primary weapons as part of the investigation into the shooting. She had seen how Dooser eyeballed her SIG even if she had not asked for it then, it would only be a matter of time. Dooser was a good cop and could be relied to add the information to her report when the detectives arrived.

So they would need replacements and a backup piece might well come in handy. She did not think Taylor Matthews could just magic up another P229 Elite so she had filled her gym/gun bag with Rick's two Glocks and the Walther P380 plus the related magazines and ammo boxes. The last weapon to add was the Smith and Wesson revolver that Montgomery had gifted her when her previous backup was destroyed by the bomb. Even when she had obtained a compact Glock 22 he had refused to take it back. So here it was a bitter-sweet reminder of the best and worst in her life.

Shaking it off she passes back through the main living area and heads directly for his office, keeping the laden gym bag in her hand. Despite this place now being 'theirs' she could never not consider the office 'his'. This was where he wrote much of his work, and was the very embodiment of the man-child she loves. So it remained his.

He is head down at his computer and does not look up as she enters. Instinctively she pushes the door shut and puts the bag down. Stepping towards him, as she approaches she sees his head cradled in his hands.

"Rick?" concern running through her voice, she stops and reaches for him.

Without looking up he responds, "Remember when we put aside the Case?"

She knows which case. Of course she does. The Case. Their arguments and failings especially over communication still sting more than she would like even all this time later. They may be so much more but their past is littered with mistakes and near catastrophes. She nods at first, almost not trusting herself to speak, but with his head still down she realizes he requires an audible response.

"Of course." She is more than curious where this is going.

"I haven't done any more. You trust me on that? Just like we agreed."

Oh. She nods again and manages to almost force herself speak, "Of course. We agreed together or not at all."
"Well you remember how I said I had a file that would be released by our lawyers if something happened to us? Especially if it was connected. Well I am certain this was HIM!"

"Bracken?"

"Of course. Who else would it be? Two attacks in one night. What are the chances?"

"Sorry. I know. Of course it him. There will be a pattern to all these attacks and I am sure many, most, maybe all lead back to him."

"This is him extracting his vengeance. Or trying to. It was bad enough when it was you and by implication me. But we signed up for this. My, your, our families and friends didn't. There is strength in the voice, a conviction and anger. "We take our chances. But they."

"Alexis. They tried to.." he cannot say the words, terrified that it would make them more.

Nuzzling in close Kate tries, "I know but she's safe," It is barely adequate as reassurance goes. They both know it.

"For now," he concedes. "I want to make sure he can't strike again. Hurt us or others more."

"So what are you saying Rick?"

"I, we can't hurt him physically, but I was on the verge of triggering the distribution of this when I called you in." He waves his hand at the laptop.

"But?" she prompts.

"I remembered that it is both of us. Well actually all of us, our families, our friends, our jobs. Not going to involve all them in this but it is for both us, not just one of us. We need to decide this together. Partners."

He sounds and looks genuinely upset. She knows this about him. He can be rash and impulsive but almost always with the best of intentions. And he can apologize. She remembers that first heart-felt apology. The one that meant enough for her to take a chance on him again.

"Sorry for almost going solo." She acknowledges this with a dip of her head and a non-sexy bite of her lower lip. Been there, done that. Got the scares.

She caress his cheek, "But you didn't." It is totally unnecessary now to state that they truly are partners. In all things.

The near-thing with his unilateral action is not the issue. But she is conflicted, torn between over the decision. All her training and instinct as a cop, and her upbringing, especially her mom's unshakable belief in truth and justice, calls for her to make them do this properly. But weighed against all that has assailed her and them since the night of her mother's murder, and she admits the all too human desire to strike out, fight back by any means possible, to defend themselves, make themselves safe. There is so much more at stake than just her solo crusade she started with.

But if they do this they could be acting to the detriment of the legal avenues for dealing with Bracken. Be honest she chides herself, for punishing Bracken. Much of what they release could be considered tainted, and non-admissible, and could realistically adversely impact the existing Federal case against him.

But Bracken got away with things because he was in the shadow. Even now exposed as he was, what were the chances he could somehow escape justice especially for her mom? Or worse take a
plea bargain, perhaps flip on potential partners. The very thought makes her shudder.

Rick waits as patiently as he can for her to reach her decision. She purses her lips, brow furrows, eyes hard as emerald. Fierce as ever, his heart quickens at the sight. He loves Kate but he loved Beckett first.

She trusts him absolutely. She has no idea "Yes, do it," her voice stark but not emotionless.

He pressed a single key. "Done."

"You were that ready?"

"Yeah. Like I said, had a moment of weakness when I nearly did it on my own. Sorry for almost going rogue."

"Kinda used to it by now."

They both reach for each other.

They emerge from the office out into the living room to find an expectant group waiting. Apparently their first talk may not have been enough and their prolonged absence behind closed doors may have aroused suspicions.

Getting straight to the point, Kate raises her left hand and wiggles her unadorned fingers. With no ring in sight, status apparently unchanged, there is no prizes for guessing who gets the first question.

"So you're not engaged?"

"No Mother." And "No Martha" issue simultaneously.

"Kate knows how much I want us to take that step. But not right now. We told you that. We need to have Alexis back with us. And we need new accommodation. At least for a while.

With that in mind Clare responds, "Well you will all be guests of the NYPD tonight. We have an accommodation plan so if you can all put aside you disappointment at the lack of need to go dress shopping I'll fill you in on what's going to happen."

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One Police Plaza

As his security detail peeled off in search of coffee and a break, he decided to leave his office door open. Partially because he did not want to hide and wallow in the misery of what has been the NYPD's and possibly the city's worst day since 911, but also in case someone needed him. Despite the very late hour there were far more people than normal here. But this was not a normal night.

He had made two bereavement visits this evening. Both for young officers with families - now widows and orphans. Sinking into his chair, Deputy Commissioner Rod Hawkins finished undoing his tie. He wanted to be home with his own family. Carole could make pretty much anything seem, if not okay, then better.

Instead the Commissioner had called him on his way back from the second visit with new orders. Orders that bought him back to his desk - instead of being at home - having come direct from a meeting with the Mayor, his boss, the Deputy Director of the FBI (now that had been a surprise to
find him in the Mayor's office) and a bunch more equally serious people. The meeting had been long and he was not done yet. On the trip back to his own office, he had made time to call Carole and assure her he was alright while apologizing for staying out.

Checking his notes he began to think about how to address his new responsibilities. He was to establish a NYPD task force to coordinate the investigations into multiple attacks across the city. This would be connected into an overarching task force looking at the attacks on a national level. Naturally this meant he and his team would be working with the usual alphabet-soup of agencies federal down to county level.

His federal liaison would be here tomorrow. A Senior Agent William Sorenson from the Department of Justice. The Deputy Director had spoken highly of him and he had worked in cooperation with the NYPD before, and even been injured in one joint operation. Hmm, interesting to see who the NYPD team was in both cases. What were the odds?

He thought about heading to the Operations Center but decided against it. Best to leave them to it. Brass were almost always an unwelcome distraction. He chuckled to himself at the irony of him – him, the ultimate beat cop – becoming one of the brass. Even more so as he was in what he considered a more political rather than operational role. His TO would have had something to say on the matter but Mickey was nearly fifteen years in the grave. How did he get so old?

Turning on his TV he hoped he could get a quick update on the situation. Plus it was always useful to see what information the public were getting. It was already on WPIX, one of the local channels with reasonable news coverage. Unfortunately it was not a news bulletin and appeared to be talkback. There was a call-in talking, no make that ranting, to the presenters about how foreigners were a threat and weak borders. It only took a moment to recognize the angry voice which was confirmed as a headshot with the bouffant hair appeared. Almost immediately he changed channel to WCBS where to his relief a news bulletin was running. He could not stand that braggart. Some people had no shame. Plus that particular person had form in this area with his accusations concerning the Central Park Five. He was wrong then and just as wrong this time. But the man would never admit it. He hoped the rumors of a political run were false. That was an issue for another day.

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**Manhattan Financial District, near Wall Street.**

Given the late hour it was hardly surprising that there was no one present at the RCE office or surrounding suites when the first of the four incendiary rockets from the M202 FLASH launcher fired from the building opposite struck the approximate vicinity. The results were mixed. The 66mm warheads were not particularly powerful and having been in storage at the National Guard - from where they were expropriated - for the better part of thirty years, only the first and the fourth and final warhead actually detonated properly. This was enough to shatter glass and start two fires which rapidly spread.

Unlike other attacks on this day, the human cost – at least for now – was limited to terrifying the four cleaners at work elsewhere in the building.

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**Crosby and Broome Street, Outside the Maintenance access and secondary fire escape.**

The police and emergency services presence is considerably larger than the initial first response. But with good reason.

The number of active incidents has declined to zero. While some incidents were still deemed
'active' none now involved any shooting. In fact general criminality was at a near-all-time low. Even criminals knew enough to stay away from a tired, suspicious partially paranoid (with some justification), and potentially trigger happy NYPD. All this means that resources are slowly becoming available to direct to the priority locations.

Broome Street happens to be one such priority site.

They have lots of bodies to contend with. The dead male suspect of Asian heritage just round the corner, and there is news of five men discovered dead two blocks away at the site of the suspected sniper attacks on the home of Richard Castle and his partner.

Right now there is a group of ten NYPD personnel clustered in the lane way at the back of the building, waiting for the command to enter. In front of them is the maintenance entrance.

A small team of four from ESU – whose parent units were scattered responding to incidents all over the city – and reinforced by four detectives, two from the Twelfth in NYPD windbreakers, and another form the Fifteenth Precinct, all with torsos bulging with body armor and despite the nerves, glad to be sheltered and hopefully soon out of the biting cold. The last contingent are two members of the NYPD’s CSI division.

More of their colleagues are dealing with the bodies on the street or two blocks away. They have been directed here because the door to the maintenance area is ajar.

The lead ESU operator unconsciously nods his head to a radio command, and announces, "We have a go. The top of stairs is secured."

A pair of ESU officers with shotgun and carbine nod and step up to the door which is ajar. Tactical lights on, they pause briefly before pulling the door open.

"Entering now."

The first pair in proceed only a matter of feet before reporting, "We have another body."

"Male – late thirties maybe forties. Located at bottom of the service stairwell. Wait one."

A silence of less than a minute is ended by a report, "Victim is deceased. Unable to determine cause of death. Area is clear."

The lead CSU is cautious but curious. "We good to go on in?" he inquires.

The older lead ESU operator, bulked up with full body armor and a fearsome looking shotgun, nods, "Follow me," and leads them through the open doors.

They only had to travel a few yards. There in the twilight of the service lights and tactical is the body the entry team found. The two ESU officers are scanning up the partially lit stairs.

The younger CSU raises his camera, and mutters a warning, "Flash", before snapping off a few shots.

They spend a couple of minutes evaluating the scene before them, well aware there are two pairs of detectives waiting with them.

"Plenty of injuries. Mostly blunt force with what looks like a puncture wound to his lower, left chest. Doesn't look deep enough to be fatal. Some of the injuries may have come from falling down the stairs which are concrete with steel edges. Blood trial leads down from the first landing." He
shines the torch directly on the stairs and sure enough the dark brown, almost black of congealed blood shines back. "Definitely looks like it."

The senior CSU looks closer at the dead man. "But I'll take a bet that none of those were what killed him."

Her colleague peers at the non-descript man. "Asphyxiation or strangulation possibly."

"Although his neck may be broken as well."

"Any id?" from the younger detective from the Fifteenth. Like all the others she has her weapon out and ready.

The CSU carefully reaches into a pants pocket and emerges with a wallet. "Illinois Driver's license. Chicago resident."

"Don't see a Bears cap," this from his older partner.

No one laughs. It is not the night for it. Too many people, law enforcement and otherwise have died. It is all hands tonight and tomorrow. Maybe longer.

By chance one of the outsider cops here is Detective Leigh Evans from Fraud Squad at the Fifteenth. Wordlessly she holds her hand out and when the id reaches her, holds in in her gloved hand, she looks and then then looks again. She doesn't pass it back for now. She remains staring very hard at the plastic ID.

Pursing her lips she opinions, "This is fake. A very good fake. But fake none-the-less."

"How do you tell?"

For a start, the id is too clean. For something that is meant to be four years old, it looks fresh as. That's a simple catch but then there is the DVLC hologram. It's the wrong version for the age of the card.

"I'm not gonna ask how you know all that. Especially for an Illinois ID," the older CSU responds.

"Let's see if Aphis has anything on him." They know it is a vain hope. A good fake ID implies professional.

"Did he have anything on his person?"

"No weapons. Just his wallet. Plus a cell phone which is locked."

"Hey wait up." A flashlight illuminates a dark object obscured by shadow in recessed alcove of the landing. A sports bag. Dark color hence the late discovery in the twilight of the stair well.

"Is this his? Looks fairly new. And full."

A couple more flashlights illuminated the corner and reveal more. The dark grey sports holdall is lying on its side, main compartment partially open but facing away from them.

There are three flashes whilst the tech takes photographs and then the senior CSU squats down and with gloved hands carefully moves the bag onto its base.

"Shit!"
"What?" his audience demand as one.

Despite the fact it is a crime scene, and attendant seriousness, the man cannot control the chortle that escapes his mouth.

"Well this might help confirm it is his." He holds the item up for them all to see.

It's a fucking Chicago Bears beanie. They laugh now. Tension easing. The flash of the camera as the tech takes a picture. Then a second as unsteady hands blurred the first.

Placing the headgear aside on the evidence sheet, he looks into the bag.

"Jezzus. What the hell have we got going on here?"

His had emerges with a cylindrical object, olive drab, with a safety pin. It looks military. It looks dangerous.

No one is laughing once again.

One of the ESU team members nudges forward, and requests of the tech "Hold it up." The CSU tech complies, carefully, and a detective shines a flashlight on it.

"Shit. It is a military equivalent of the flashbangs we ESU in use. Much more powerful. And if I am reading the designation right it includes a suppressing agent. Not even sure if this would be legal for our use. Military only. Maybe not even legal for them depending on what the agent is. I don't recognize the code."

"There are at least three more in here." The photographer steps forward. More flashes. The senior CSU is wrong, there are more than four. They end up with a not so small but tidy stack of six grenades. Three are the combined flash bang/chemical agents first discovered, and the remaining three seemingly are straight military issue smoke grenades. There is also a nearly-new military gas mask plus extra filters.

A bag of cable ties is next to emerge. Perhaps not so unexpected. ESU themselves use the same for securing suspects quickly.

"Fuck!" The CSU tech is certainly swearing it up tonight. No one is calling him on it.

His hands emerge with the cause of his additional consternation.

Blue rope. Nylon. They all remember. Especially those from the Twelfth.

One of the officers from the Twelfth comes forward, trying to get a closer look at the body, "Shit! Is it him?"

"Could well be. Fits the general description."

Meanwhile the CSU tech is continuing his search of the bag. There is nothing more in the main compartment. Moving to the end pocket the CSI cannot restrain another gasp as he finds more contents.

"Gun. I've got a gun in here." His hand emerges, more flashes as the evidence is photographed. There is a gun here. A Glock 19, serial number filed off, complete with an attached suppressor.

Two spare magazines emerge. The CSU tech looks closer. "The rounds appear to be sub-sonic hollow points." Illegal, at least in this state. As is the seventeen round capacity.
The other end of the bag reveals two hunting/skinning knives, one with what could be dried blood stains, and a taser, the contact type, fully charged according to the status bar.

12th Precinct.

Hell the new body armor was heavy even before the extra ceramic plates were inserted. But Victoria Gates was not going to widow her husband, or orphan her (fully grown) children, if she could at all help it. The SIG feels heavy at her hip too. Responsibility was bearing down hard on her today. It would for a lot of leaders in the NYPD.

It has not been a good day for the City, or for its police force. The Twelfth is lucky. So far, none of its officers have fallen in the line of duty but across the city it is a different tale. More than four dead and dozens injured confirmed so far. And she now has reports that one of the Twelfth's longest serving officers, Tony K, was in stable condition awaiting surgery after being shot twice. His body armor saved him from probably fatal injuries.

She has reinforced her earlier command to all her officers to ensure they have their protective gear on, and are looking out for each other. No-one is solo, pairs at a minimum, more if possible or practical.

But right now she needs to focus on two more immediate issues, first ensuring the Twelfth was as secure as possible, and second briefing the brass who would be arriving any minute.

For the first matter, there was what was available of an ESU team deployed at the entrances to the building. They were reinforced by four officers from the precinct and a similar number of Homeland Security agents. Additional security reinforcements had been requested but were not available due to the number of critical incidents. Everyone was stretched thin, near breaking.

Inside the building, there was another ring of officers, and two men wearing 'Federal Agent' jackets that she understands to be from Taylor Matthews. Apparently more were on their way. Normally she would more than frown upon such involvement but necessity and the calm demeanor of the obviously professional and experienced 'agents' had reassured her.

She noted some of her own here. The tall LT guiding the outsiders, and Torres organizing communications and refreshments without breaking sweat. The familiar faces comforting among the bustle of a precinct on high alert.

The ding of the elevator announces the arrival of the second matter on her agenda.

"Hello Vicky."

"Chief." She greets Tom Delaney and is relieved he is unaccompanied by any other brass. His personal protective detail peels off, going in search of coffee, no doubt fully aware of the excellence of the Richard Castle provided barista device.

"If you are looking for the rest we have decided to spread ourselves about. The Chief has had five condolence calls to make. So far. The Deputy Chief and two others have made the visits."

"Sir." There is nothing else she can add to that bleak observation. One more than the previous count of four.

"So what's the situation Captain?"

"No active incidents at this time. We have elements from the Twelfth at a total of seven crime
scenes including the one a Crosby and Broome and another two blocks away on Greene.

"Greene is the five men they suspect include the shooters from the attack on Detective Beckett and Richard Castle?"

"Yes Sir. We only have the initial information but all five were killed by single gunshots to the head. All have pistols, at least two were carrying bags with military grade sniper rifles. And none have any form of genuine ID."

"Five dead men are not our priority Captain."

"No Sir," she understands the message.

"The Castles and the rest of their group are still on site at his home. The perimeter and building on Crosby and Broome streets are secure. I believe they are packing essentials and getting ready to move. Once the situation is stabilized we will have an armored convoy bring them to the Twelfth. Miss Castle is coming directly from upper Manhattan where she was the target of an attempted kidnapping. Detectives Ryan and Esposito are bring her back here under escort."

"Good. They appear to have nine lives, or at least a few left. But I imagine you are curious as to why I'm here."

"The thought had crossed my mind. There are other precincts with more pressing issues."

"Quite. And the rest the brass are attending to those. I am here because the Attorney General of the United States requested it just ten minutes ago. They believe that Richard Castle is behind the release of a dossier of information on William Bracken and some associates. This was distributed to not only numerous law enforcement agencies but also news organisations and some organisation called Wiki-something-or-other. Ah Wiki-Leaks."

"And you are here to do what?"

"To be honest, I am not sure. The Goddam Federal Government pretty much told me to come, so here I am."

"Are they looking for an arrest?" concern coloring her question.

"No idea Vicky. I don't think so. Apparently they consider them, and include Detective Beckett in that scope, as 'persons of interest'."

Her raised eyebrow is more than enough response to that non-answer. At least they were not named 'suspects'. Both of them, Richard Castle included, are her people.

The Chief ignores his subordinate's obvious displeasure. "Out of our hands. The Feds and Taylor Matthews are apparently making longer term accommodation arrangements but the NYPD will host them tonight. The Twelfth is as good a place as any right now."

"We can do that. Use the gym and control access." Gates is thinking quickly, assessing the options.

"Good Vicky. I'll leave the details to you."

"Tom is there any intelligence on who or what is behind the attacks?"

"Nothing concrete. We have suspicions but we are haven't finished resolving all the incidents so it is too earlier to state categorically."
"But we think it is the same suspect we discussed the other day." Her non-question is met with unblinking eyes.

"Nothing on the thread board makes us believe it was from Islamic militants or other external parties."

Message received, she says nothing else.

"And Vicky. Warn your people to stay alert. This isn't over. Not by a long shot. I don't want anyone else not making it home."

Washington DC.

The three black – of course - Chevy Suburbans raced towards the heart of the capital down one of Washington DC's long boulevards, maybe ten minutes from their destination at the Department of Justice. These are DoJ specials replete with flashing red and blue lights recessed into their grills and roofs, and carrying more than an extra half tonne of armor sufficient to ward of small arms fire at the cost of a little speed and a lot of fuel economy.

Inside the middle vehicle Matthew Weston smiles, finally feeling that he could almost relax, despite the handcuffs. He had outsmarted James Court. Escaped the hired killers meant to silence him. He had evidence of Bracken and Court's crimes that he could offer the Government in return for relaxation of any charges against him and his friend/savior handcuffed beside him.

Across from him Agent Rachael McCord was neither smiling nor relaxed. Her carefully neutral expression suppressed a massive frown and headache. This was too easy. She would love it to be this simple but given what they now know about Bracken and especially his fixer, James Court, they could and should expect more. The young man opposite her seems almost buoyant but she won't give into any premature celebration. They are not home safe yet.

Her earpiece comes to life. Central are reporting multiple possible terrorist attacks in New York City. More to follow.

She frowns openly, a slight grimace also creasing the lower part of her face startling the young man opposite. Like all diligent law enforcement personal she monitored the threat assessments and nothing abnormal had been flagged. While never foolproof they would have expected some for chatter to be picked up ahead of this level of activity and number of incidents. Are they connected? Is there any connection to this case? She almost hopes that if genuine the attack are connected Islamic extremists.

She had barely finishing processing that concerning thought when something from her worst fears is realized.

She was facing backwards so she saw it all begin through the tinted armored glass of the rear window.

The near blinding flash of light and fire that rent the night sky as the tail vehicle just exploded. And with it four agents. People she knew. Dead.

No time for mourning now. "Go! Go! Go!" She screams into both the cabin and her comms. "Central we are under attack. Rear vehicle destroyed. No survivors." Her assessment is starkly honest. Nothing survived that hit and the near instantaneous explosion.

Their driver, only partially aware of the actual flash and incineration of the entire vehicle behind
him, but prompted by his superior's commands accelerates but is their efforts to escape is limited by the lag from their lead vehicle as it takes vital seconds longer to respond to the command over the comms, and her driver has to momentarily ease off the gas to avoid a collision.

Then the lead vehicle with four more agents on board starts to pull away and a gap opens briefly but before their driver can respond, everyone facing forward including McCord who was twisted round sees it. The glimpse and flash as an object lances out of the night and strikes the roof of the racing Suburban in front of them. Just for a fraction of a second the big SUV seems to stagger, recover but then it explodes in a mirror of their rearguard's demise, sending debris flying across the road ahead of them.

Instinct takes over and the driver brakes and tries to swerve around the wreck. He immediately accelerates again.

"Oh God!" Matthew Weston no longer looks comfortable, now positively pale and terrified. The reality of events clearly hitting home. Beside him, the other young man, merely looks resigned to his fate, muttering a barely audible 'fuck!'

Vital seconds pass and McCord appreciates now that speed and evasion is not enough against whatever is attacking them. They need to scatter and separate, hoping that their attackers are too far away to respond to individuals instead large SUVs. It is their only chance.

"Stop! And get out! Everybody out!" she orders, gripping the side handle on the cabin wall, bracing for the sudden deceleration.

The driver responds virtually instantly, and everyone is thrown against their restraints and buffeted as the heavy vehicle shudders, breaks biting and squealing as it judders to a stop, heavy tires stressed to the limits as more than two tons of vehicle leaves rubber tracks scorched into the tarmac.

Even before the SUV concludes its final stop, the cabin still rocking, doors are being thrown open and the occupants are scrambling to escape. Having the foresight to unbuckle the driver is already out, risking only a brief glance back. There is almost no thought of helping others, everyone for themselves. Except inside the still rocking SUV McCord had snapped forward to release the still hand-cuffed Matthew and his friend before tackling her own seatbelt. There was no time wasted with any expression of gratitude and despite the seeming encumbrance of their shackles both immediately slide and scramble to exit on the opposite side of the Suburban. Finally releasing her own buckle, McCord is still screaming at her cohorts and charges to get clear. She has her door open and is half-way out with one foot on the tarmac when the final missile strikes.

The Javelin missile was designed to take out tanks. The Chevy Suburban, despite being armored against small arms fire, stood no chance. Likewise for all occupants. Those closest died from the direct concussive shock and heat of the warhead. The few who had escaped immediate death were shredded by super-heated shrapnel as the entire SUV was ripped apart by a series of internal blasts, immolation complete.
Took a while to extract it with the bits of the story I wanted. Some has been carried over the Chapter 39.

We're almost there - I keep saying that. 2 chapters to go.

To everyone still with me, thank you for your patience. Thank you to those who take the time to review and especially to those who have reached out with messages.
Chapter 79 – Wrapping Up – Part 1

Chapter Summary

Previously

Finally releasing her own buckle, McCord is still screaming at her cohorts and charges to get clear. She has her door open and is half-way out with one foot on the tarmac when the final missile strikes.

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Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Washington DC

Even from their vantage point the fireball still illuminates the distant freeway and night sky but the small team are focused on their tasks, moving with quick, deliberate purpose. Years of service together gave them a silent efficiency drill instructors would die, or at least threaten to kill, for. Satisfied that there were no survivors from the three vehicles, they now had to bug out before law enforcement arrived. In spite of this there was no haste, their measured pace making this seem like nothing more than a routine drill.

A final police of the area would reveal nothing more than perhaps imprints in assorted boot sizes – obtained from military surplus suppliers and destined for incineration in an hour or so - if the authorities even identified this as the location of the attack. With their final checks done the team splits towards the two white vans waiting with engines running.

The perimeter team are last to board each of their respective vehicles, the brutal business end of their MK48 machine guns still pointing outwards as each clamber aboard a different van, and the doors slide shut, even as the vehicles move off, their headlights coming on.

If they were curious as to who they had just killed or who had wanted those vehicles and occupants destroyed, they were not going to gain anything by hanging around here.

The pair of vans pull out of the service road and immediately split up and vanishing into the night a good five minutes before the first emergency response had reached the smoldering wreckage more than half a mile away.

Operating Room 7 Bellevue Hospital, Manhattan

The floor resembled an abattoir and the operating table not much better. Everything was stretched to near breaking and beyond, inside this operating theatre, and all the adjacent theatres, throughout
the hospital and every other in the Tri-State, and the city itself.

The tall surgeon ignored all of that and focused on the bloodied body that somehow made it as far as his OR. Blood pumped from at least four wounds despite clamps and sutured but if he did not stop the bleed out from at least one bullets destructive path through the base of this police officers aorta it would all be for naught.

Minutes passed with little more than essential commands. There was no banter, no music, nothing except the struggle for a man's life.

"Shit!" The flow of blood suddenly eased as the patient's heart collapsed under the stress of the trauma and surgery. Seconds passed and his scalpel and clamp clattered to the already bloody tray. He blinks, bitter disappointment despite the reality of inevitability of the man's wounds.

"Easy Doctor. You did your best." The calm tone and detached manner were the result of many years of experience, good and bad as the head of grey hair and craggy visage attested. The observer was in scrubs too but the delicate procedure had only room for one surgeon in the patient's ruined chest and that was the man who clearly hated losing a patient. "Pronouncing 23:07". The tall man stepped back, took a quick look around the room taking in the resigned acceptance from his team. He frowned again, biting his tongue. He did not even know the dead officers name.

Raising his head he speaks again, this time with some positivity pulled from somewhere. "Thank you everyone, we did our best. I need some air and fresh scrubs. Please get what break you can."

"Take five minutes but we have more in triage, with at least two more patients coming up," confirms the older man. Thomas Berling, Bellevue's long-standing Head of Surgery, knew the team needed some time. This was their sixth back-to-back surgery and by some miracle their first loss.

The tall surgeon nods and strode past the clean-up team, tearing his mask and cap off and hurling them along with the gloves into the waste bin. He entered the prep room and clicked off the bloody clogs and headed straight for the sink. Using an elbow to flip the water on, he submerged his head under the luke warm water, one hand reaching out to snag a towel, instinct and familiarity guiding him.

He feels the presence but does not acknowledge the senior surgeon. It is no slight, simply frustration and tiredness. Neither man makes an issue of it.

"You've saved five already today Josh. That officer was dead before the EMTs bought him in. He was just too damn stubborn to give up."

"That's cops for you. I know at least one like that." But she defied the odds and pulled through he thought. He momentarily wondered where she is on this bloody day, before he turned his thoughts to his actual girlfriend. How long had he been in here?

"You've done great work here Josh. All those overseas trips have been great preparation for something like this."

"I wish they weren't."

He sounds distracted and the older man intuitively knows what his new Head of Thoracic Surgery needs. "Go grab your phone and see if you can check in with whoever it is that has you looking that concerned. I'll cover for you."

"Thanks. I'll be as fast as I can," and with that Josh Davidson near sprints from Prep Room for the
nearby doctor's lounge and his locker and his phone. He really did need to speak to Beatrice.

Chuckling, Thomas momentarily debates whether to follow and check again on his wife – safe at home when they spoke forty-odd minutes ago - but the sound of the main doors to the theatre being push open by a trolley means he has no time. He completes his cleaning routine efficiently on autopilot, mentally focused on preparing himself for this next patient. Stepping out he is surprised to see the patient – with at least two large compression bandages and wadding covering injuries to his upper torso and left leg - still on the trolley, not on the OR table and more disturbingly still awake and moving, their head turning and twisting, and making what sounded like a deep-set growl.

"Why is this patient not under?" His tone of command is enough to attract everyone's attention including what is obviously a difficult patient.

The injured man eyes fire up, "Now listen to me you hack."

"That's Doctor Hack to you. I'm sorry you have me a loss. Who are you?"

"Ethan Slaughter, Detective First Grade, NYPD. There is no way you are cutting me open."

He makes to response, stepping in to grab the charts, he quickly skims the notes.

"Detective Slaughter it says here you have major penetrating wound to your upper left leg and a smaller but nearly equally significant one to your chest. There is shrapnel and possibly bullets present. Unless you want to be known as hop-a-long or more likely another dead hero I suggest you lie back down and let my team send you to sleep.

"Sure. As you asked so nicely. But I'll be pissed if I wake up missing anything."

"Noted. Now please shut-up and let us do our jobs."

The detective says nothing else and the team get to work.

It takes several minutes for the anesthetist to work his magic. "All yours Tom. He needed almost twice the usual to get him under, even for his body weight. We'll keep an eye on him. He might be a juicer."

"Nah, looks like he's just big and surly." Turning to his team, "Let's get him on table please."

At this point a freshly scrubs Josh Davidson re-enters the OR. "What did I miss?"

"Nothing much. Our new guest is Detective Slaughter. We had a little trouble getting him situated on our table. Traumatic puncture wounds to the upper chest and left leg. Lots of shrapnel. I'll take the leg and you can have the chest."

He looks enquiringly at the younger man and is relieved to see a relaxation in the posture and around the eyes. Whoever Josh spoke to had helped he, and that was the best that they could hope for. They had more work to do.

"Where's that X-Ray?"

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Columbus, Ohio.

Traffic had been terrible, well below the speed limit and even the season. Then it had been stop-
start for the last three miles to the airport. Now instead the terminal, small as it was, it was jammed solid with people and extra security. The surprise suspension of airline flights had caught everyone by surprise, including the recently arrived James Court.

The playbook did not normally call for this type of response. Perhaps they had overplayed their hand in New York and DC?

Takes a few moments to analyse, rather than react and resume driving towards Chicago, he decided to wait it out just like most other passengers stranded by the sudden change in circumstances. In situations like this blending in was – in most circumstances – the better solution.

He managed to snag a solo standing table outside the airport's Starbucks, order a black coffee and catch up on matters. He looked like any other businessman in transit. Court allowed himself a small moment of satisfaction as he viewed the text message on the burner phone. It had arrived just as he was dropping off the rental. No photos for this one. More importantly another mission accomplished. This meant that Matthew Weston was no longer a threat.

Or alive at least. He had no doubt the assiduous young man had collected evidence but whether he had already passed it on or not, without his first-hand account that would not necessarily have the full weight it would otherwise had. And it will take the authorities longer to process any information they did have and act. Time he accounted for in his preparations and planning, time he was already making use of.

Of course, the threat from whatever information Weston had collected was all entirely academic. He had no intention of ending up in a court room, or anywhere else for that matter, where evidence of his actions could be held against him. Actually legal proceedings were not his primary concern. He had been in the business long enough to really understand good old extrajudicial justice – now there was an ironic phrase if ever there was one – American style. Since before the turn of the twentieth century, the hypocrisy of the United States knew no bounds, reaching out on whim beyond its borders in retribution, revenge and plain-old greed while parroting 'truth, justice, and liberty for all'. The only the methods differed now with drones replacing men, or more usually bombers and gunships, mostly. It was this that mostly that concerned him.

From his perspective, Matthew was merely an additional example to others, like that girl in DC, it always paid to ensure that those in the circle of knowledge knew the price of failure or betrayal.

Bracken had also requested that Weston be silenced – but never shared his reasons, if there were any, the man had poor emotional control and terrible instincts - but he had overridden the Senator and insisted that he use his own resources instead of the Senator's own men so as to be certain. For once the man had not objected, meddled or simply ignored him. Which was good as his resources were certain to succeed whereas the Dragon's men and methods could well fail or worse provoke a dangerous response. Doing this his way had cost him considerably, and the execution was very likely to be far showier that usual. He only hoped it did not draw the wrong sort of attention.

He had carefully avoided crossing the Agency's radar except in a casual manner so as to not arouse suspicion. Going completely off the radar was a sure fire method of attracting attention. His work for Bracken was carefully constructed to show just the right amount, or close enough, of activity for a retired officer. Of course that was then and this is now. Disappearing is definitely the order of the day in light of his and the Senator's actions.

The Dragon's shows of force today were certain to fix all the attention on the soon-to-be-ex-Senator and his guns-for-hire. Bracken was simply too emotional, too inclined to be heavy handed. It had taken him too long to bring the man's near insane desire for retribution to heel, mostly. By the time he had sufficient restraint it had been too late for some. Including those meddling lawyers
in the Heights. They were no real threat but Bracken was swayed by Simmons. It was simply a waste. Of course, it was also ironic that Bracken was directly responsible for the genesis of one of his biggest risks of exposure – Detective Kate Beckett and her crusade for justice for Joanna Beckett.

Not forgetting the writer of course. Richard Castle was a smart guy and he had something about him. He could almost swear the author had a lingering touch of Agency about his work and research. But he never come across the name during his time there, and reaching out after he had left had drawn a blank. He had thought about a deep cover, the author was too showy and inconsistent to be a genuine Agency asset. Unless it was the greatest act of all time.

There are multiple TVs on covering the attacks in New York and DC. Even the usual perpetual sports coverage is gone. Keeping in cover as a business traveller he watches the screens with the masses around him.

He sees the ticker tape report before the talking heads start, "Missile attack. At least ten federal agents killed in Washington DC ambush."

For eliminating Weston, he had used one of his long term last-resort contacts to organize this particular clean up. The man ran a very tight team of operatives who operated domestically and internationally and specialized in interventions. But charged accordingly, especially for domestic operations. And given that they had just killed a dozen or more federal agents plus witnesses they would be unavailable for some time; hence the eight figures sum they had demanded and received. Not that he believed he would ever need their services again.

It was worth it. Especially as he had dipped into Future First's funds for the transaction, not his own money. Bracken would have probably protested, Simmons would have taken it personally, though more probably because that meant less for him to steal. Another nail for the insufferable man's arrogance and interference.

Now to make good on his escape to his new life. First, he had to get to Chicago, and hook up with the next leg of his escape plan.

**Department of Justice, Washington DC.**

Security was tighter than before. But even he could guarantee that few of his colleagues actually felt safe, not that many would share such views openly. In the meantime they were locked down and surrounded by layers of security that included the National Guard, so entrapped was probably more appropriate.

The entire staff, or rather those that remained, were in the largest conference room. Even so they were crammed it, all seats taken and the rest standing at the edges.

At the front of the room stood two men. Director Vallante and the Deputy Attorney General both with grim expressions which could not mask the shock. They had been honest and had not sought to sugar coat the terrible loss. Or indeed the shock of the brazen assault on federal law enforcement.

"In light of tonight's events and the deaths of a dozen of our finest including Rachel McCord, Senior Agent Will Sorenson will assume responsibility for the Bracken investigation. Despite his short time with us, he is a very experienced investigator, and one of McCord's final actions had been to recommend him for a leadership position."
Sorenson allows himself a nod of acknowledgement. That is all he can stomach. He has already been physically sick and now only a blow or two away from being mentally wracked. Many of them are. Some are already effectively out of action.

Rachael McCord, his recruiter, mentor, boss and maybe-good-friend if time had permitted, was dead. Along with eleven other agents. All coldly executed by professionals employing military grade weapons. This was beyond murder. It was war.

The AG's team was not large, less than two hundred individuals, and less than sixty percent of those sworn law enforcement agents. Close to fifty percent now. Those deaths were a hammer blow to the team in so many ways. The murdered team members were among their most senior members, not just McCord.

"The Washington DC area local National Guard units have been mobilized and are securing key points. All leave for police and relevant federal agencies has been cancelled."

"How do we know it wasn't some of them?" The question comes from one of the senior analysts, Henshaw, Sorenson thinks their name is. A serious, measured individual not given to flights of fancy, which pretty much describes everyone in this office.

"What?" Vallante cannot quite hide his shock at the question.

"They were killed with military grade weaponry. And I'm not talking about assault rifles that proliferate like candy. These were rockets, possibly guided weapons. Something like at LAW or AT4. Maybe even an anti-tank weapon like a Javelin. Even with our rampant gun sales these are not under-the-counter or even black market items. These only come from the military. Here or overseas."

Vallante is momentarily knocked off his stride. "We don't know anything for sure yet. There have been no direct eye witnesses. We have a partial view from a traffic cam. We are hopeful that forensics will maybe tell us enough to confirm."

This is not answering the question and everyone knows that. Sorenson knows this is his moment. McCord would have stepped up. Now it is down to him. He stands, and he senses the room switch attention to him as Vallante, perhaps gratefully, gives him the floor.

"Painful as it is, we're going to have let others investigate this case for us. Rules require it plus we have our cases to see through. We don't know for certain if Bracken was behind these attacks but given the targets it certainly looks like the probability is high."

He pauses for just a few seconds, scans the room and does not shirk from direct eye contact, challenging his peers. "The original Bracken case remains our number one priority. We stick to our tasks. The evidence we already have is enough to bring serious charges. We're going to nail Bracken and as many of his criminal associates as we can. If we get distracted, then we run the risk of coming up short and potentially result in some of the criminals escaping justice. That's what they want, and probably one of the reasons behind the attacks. We definitely do not want that."

He pauses to let that sink in, relieved when he sees more than a few heads, if not a majority, nod in agreement or at least acceptance.

"Who knows we may get lucky and our work will assist in some way in the apprehension of some of those perpetrators responsible for this attack and the others." He wants to say massacre but he won't. "We do this the right way. McCord would. We honor her and our murdered colleagues by doing the same. I know I haven't been here long but in that short time I have come to understand and respect what Rachel McCord meant and did for this team. I'll do my best to not let her or you
down."

He sits again, and Vallante gives a nod of appreciation. He purposefully does not lift his eyes to
scan the rest of the audience.

It is a start but his gut still churns and his heads and his heart concur. But any tears will have to
wait for later. He has a job to do.

Vallante is not done yet, "Vikram what do we have from the digital surveillance team?"

Sorenson forces himself to focus back on the room and listen as the analyst stands and walks to the
front. The large display screens come to life forcing Vallante to take a seat. The youngish man is
clearly nervous, which is understandable given the situation, but once he starts to speak he appears
to know his stuff.

"It is still too soon to have anything related to the attackers. Local law enforcement and the federal
crimes scenes teams are still working on recovering cell phones and other devices. Based on the
lack of electronic chatter this was either down via encrypted channels or quite possibly organised in
small cells with no common communications. We think that the latter is more likely and believe it
may point to some form of coordination by an experienced 'old-school' type of operator.
Unfortunately, we have nothing more on that."

He pauses letting the new sink in but then looks a little brighter. Behind him the screen changes,
multiple documents and files appearing.

"Less than an hour ago a digital payload was received by multiple law enforcement agencies – not
us directly, and many news publications. Plus, several Internet organisations like Wiki-Leaks. The
contents are still being assessed but appear to cover wide range of information on Individual 1,
who we know as William H Bracken, and his operations including Future First and potential
involvement in major criminal acts including murder, drug running, money laundering,
intimidation to name just a few."

Six minutes later Sorenson is summoned to Vallante's office, and scant few minutes later is
heading with escort back to his apartment to pack before the lights and all escort will rush him and
several others to the airport where an FBI jet awaits to take him to New York. He has a whole
swath of new tasks including acting as liaison for the overarching multi-tier task force to
investigate the attacks. Other tasks include picking up from McCord with the coordination of the
witnesses for the investigation including David Bracken, the brother of their prime suspect. And
finally there is one new task. This one comes with very familiar names associated. And new and
old questions.

Taylor Matthews' New York office

She's angry. Far angrier than she has been for a while. A very long while. And here in private she is
not constrained any more. So she lets it out.

"God Damn It!" She pushes her boss across the room. Not gently. He's a fit dude, even if in his
early fifties, but he has to brace himself to stop the momentum from Clare's shove/punch. He could
probably take her if he needed to. But neither of them actually want that. He lets her blow off the
head of steam she has been nursing for hours.

He recovers after the short stumble, voice calm. "Easy Clare."
"Oh fucking leave the 'Mister Ice' persona out of this. Don't try to handle me." She is shaking. Adrenalin pumping almost as much as when under fire at the Loft.

"All those people dead, others I care about injured or terrorized. We were players, involved, in this and we're doing nothing but reaction. That not us. We're smarter, more focused. We should have, could have, done more. Prevented more of it. Saved lives." The words stream out, the fury slowly abates. Her boss knows her well enough, and rides it out.

"I don't deny that we are involved. But we are not guilty of those death and injuries. Or even failing to prevent them. We can only do so much. The information we had on Bracken was incomplete and no one believed he was capable of this level of irrationality and violence. Plus we were under instruction from the government not to become further involved. And to stand off if possible."

"People are dead. So many people. Because of that order."

"No. Even sharing what we knew wouldn't have been enough. We might have been better prepared but probably not. And you know that. And we all regret that. But the Castles are safe. That was our priority. And we had agreement that if they were in serious danger we could step it. And we did.

"Like it or not, we're not free agents Clare. We're constrained by the law, our clients' instructions and so many other factors."

"Just the same bullshit I left behind in the military. I thought we were different. You were different."

"Jesus Clare. Don't give me that. You know what you signed up for. You're not an innocent country kid anymore. We do our best. But there are limits and constraints, sometimes not of our own choosing. The work we do with the government comes with conditions. You alone should acknowledge that. Naivety looks poor on you Clare. You were a fucking Colonel not a cherry lieutenant on their first drop."

"Sorry. That was a little unfair." She will concede that.

"Just a little. And no one was expecting this. The corruption, the multi-layered, multi-headed conspiracy and criminal organisation. Drugs, money-laundering, murder. It is story book stuff. I'm not even sure Rick would come up with such a fantasy. Certainly wouldn't get past a good editor."

"And we all know that it would have had its root somewhere in an off-the-books government black ops program that somehow went bad. Happens often enough and just on rare occasions it really gets out of hand. So it would not be a total shock."

Clare can only nod. She has been there. Operating in Africa and Central Asia in support of undeclared missions often with little support and even less legitimacy under international law. It bought out the best and worst in those involved. Some see it as an opportunity, especially with black funds and little accountability. On the flip side there were those who stepped up. She had been lucky when her chopper went down. They were within range of a base with adequate facilities, and a general willing to risk his pension to send more resources to come rescue them.

"This one could be really bad. The Agency is being beyond tight-lipped about it. And Defense is almost worse for once. Ironically Bracken may not be the real, or at least the only bad guy, in all this. We know he did not start with a military or paramilitary background. So some else has been assisting and guiding those engagements and the resources used for some of his previous operations and certainly from today's attacks. He had help and assistance. Partners even."
"He's evil enough. Just remember that. Kate Beckett sure does. Rick Castle too."

"And Bracken will face justice for that. Not so sure about some of the others. It wouldn't surprise me if there was not some blood-letting going on in all this. Under the cover of the broad range of attacks."

"I thought so too. The attack on the aide that killed all those agents was extremely blunt. Whoever they are they are off balance, desperate."

"Talking about off balance, Rick's decision to dump that file on Bracken to the Internet is probably not helpful. Going to cause issues for the Government's case."

"I understand his reasoning though. Despite his work with the NYPD, even the fact that he is a reasonable shot," a pretty big complement from the tough marker, "words are his thing. Kate Beckett supports his decision." She maybe glossed over that last bit a little as Beckett had taken a little persuading to come around, concerned about any potential damage to the legal case against Bracken.

"Talking of Beckett, is it a shame she couldn't stay with us? The work she did is indicative of a capable thinker with first rate analysis skills, and she can shoot. Has the potential to handle herself with more unarmed and combat training than the NYPD or martial arts can provide."

Clare shakes her head in emphasis, "Don't think she would stay. Especially now. Plus she is not cut out for this. Not really. She's a city cop, wedded to New York, not to mention the man. Might be captain material but possibly not even that despite her smarts. She likes the solve too much. Who knows maybe one day she might move beyond it. Be a captain or even make a decent local politician. But from what I see she's wants to be nothing more. And she never needs to be nothing more too. Even before hooking up with Castle she must have been the only clean millionaire cop in the city."

"Give her credit, the clothes and apartment aside, she didn't come across as a trust-fund princess."

"I think that her trust fund coming directly from her mom's death might have a lot to do with that. She just spent it on essentials. It is not who she is. But for us her psych profile would probably be a fail. Much as I like her, she has issues that would be a risk for us, especially long term."

"So better we all go our own way at the end of this?"

"Yep. But she's with Rick Castle, permanently, so it's not like it will be the end of our dealings with her. But hopefully it will be for much more mundane matters than these."

"Actually that could be fun. Watching Kate Beckett take down over enthusiastic groupies. We may not even be needed."

"You wish." They both chortle a little at that. Somehow Rick Castle gets himself into trouble and that drags them back into.

"Right back to the matter at hand. We need to report back to DC. So let's get our facts straight."

It was going to be a long night. Time for coffee. Maybe Irish. No Maybe. Definitely Irish.

12th Precinct

They had arrived at the Twelfth Precinct in a convoy of three patrol units and two of the NYPD's
Bearcat armored vehicles. These was the best the NYPD and other law enforcement could offer especially at such short notice. The vehicles were scarce enough with every available unit assigned to priority and high risk tasks. They were fortunate that these two were not too far away to be available in time.

Visibility in the back had meant the journey, uneventful as it was, was conducted with very limited feedback on their situation. Plus, the size of their party meant they were crammed into the interior vehicles along with their limited possessions.

Arriving outside the Twelfth, the dimensions of their oversize transportation meant they had to alight on the street, and dash through a protective screen of officers geared up in their vests and a range of weapons, and through into the main entrance.

The first order on arrival was to reunite with Alexis.

Castle practically vibrated in anticipation on the short elevator ride to the fourth floor. Dropping his bag, he dashed towards the main conference room on the homicide floor where he could see Esposito and Ryan doggedly standing guard, knowing that Alexis would be where they were.

Both steps aside and let him brush past them, perfectly understanding his lack of acknowledgement. Beckett is a few steps behind, with her – and Rick's – bags in hand. She hears rather sees the initial reunion.

"Alexis!"
"Daddy!"

Kate hung back a moment as Martha squeezed past to make it a threesome for the extended Castle family hug but not without a questioning glance to her, but she nodded towards her two partners. She would join in the family reunion in a minute or two.

Dropping the bags for a moment, she greets them, "Hey Guys."

"Beckett." The pair respond in unison.

The symmetry bringing a gentle smile to them all, just as Beckett surprises them by hugging them both. "Thanks. From both of us," she adds unnecessarily as she watches Rick wrap his daughter tighter. For once Alexis does not make any form of protest.

"How is she?"

Ryan answers, "Shaken up. Glad she didn't have to defend herself."

"Still she is a surprisingly tough kid. Almost had to be dragged away from her injured bodyguard," Javi adds, soundly awfully like a proud uncle.

Beckett lets her head drop at that. Not everyone got away uninjured tonight. "Any news on Jane?"

"In surgery. EMT's think she will make it. But nothing else."

"Any idea who they were?" She references the assailants.

The pair share a look, and Ryan asks, "Can we say his name?"

"Who? Bracken?" They nod, and she responds wearily, "I think it is entirely past time."
"No direct evidence but we think so. No IDs or anything solid on the four bodies so far but everything is appears connected."

"The bodyguard did real well. Especially with that dinky little gun." Javi again.

"Still she took a bullet for Alexis. Shouldn't be in anyone's plans. We're just grateful you were able to get to them. We really appreciate you doing this. Thanks guys."

"Family. You know that Beckett. What about you guys?" For once Ryan lets Esposito handle the emotional stuff.

Beckett is too tired to hide the stress of the last few hours. "Intense. First, we knew was one of the Taylor Matthews agents took a sniper round in the upper body but body armor did just enough and it looks like he should pull through. Then all hell broke loose. As for the rest of us, the family are shook up naturally. We got a few minor cuts. The Loft is a mess. Taylor Matthews are talking relocation to a secure facility until things quiet down."

"Sounds like a good idea. You going?" Esposito asks.

"Yeah Javi I will be. Wherever Rick is." She knows what he is asking. But she can see the bigger picture now. Bracken will still face justice including for her mom's murder. She has other priorities, and she needs to attend to them. Glancing in the room, she sees Rick finally look away from his daughter and for her. Smiling at her partners she strides past the pair and goes to join the rest of her family but not before she beckons her Dad and Val to join. They can suffer Castle hugs too.

The reunion did not last long as Beckett and Castle had been ordered to report to Captain Gates, while Esposito and Ryan escorted Alexis and their extended family up to the gym. Alexis had been reluctant to leave her father, but Martha successfully coaxed her away with the suggestion of a hot shower and fresh clothes.

The Captain beckoned them in and closed the door to her office.

"I glad to see both of you alive and essentially unharmed." The pair opposite her have a number of small cuts and grazes, the worst covered by bandages. She chooses not to remark on the Star Wars themed plasters she spots on the arms of both her best detective and her civilian partner.

"Not how I imagined coming back to the Precinct," Castle admits.

"Well at least you weren't in cuffs." His mouth falls, and Beckett can barely suppress a guffaw. "This time," Gates adds to a small smile.

"It is very good to see that are both alive. As well as your families." The sentiment is very sincere.

"Thank you, Victoria," Castle clearly intends to take advantage of the previous permission to use her first name when in private.

Gates makes no mention of it, and another thing the Captain deliberately overlooks and does not raise is the obvious bulge of a pistol on the hip of her sometime civilian consultant. Or her knowledge that this was not even the gun that had been used for exchanging fire with their attackers. That weapon was already surrendered for testing.

"Sir. How bad is it?" Beckett cannot bring herself to address her superior by her first name, regardless of the circumstance.
"Very bad. There have been a number of attacks - more than fifteen at this time plus a number of others in other locations including Washington DC. Some were foiled or perhaps not fully effective. Regardless the damage has been considerable. Unfortunately there are dozens of fatalities, possibly in the hundreds and considerably more injured. This includes at least five NYPD officers and we have just received reports of an attack that killed more than ten federal agents in DC."

This is the first time they have learnt of the scale of the death toll and injuries. Both are shocked.

Gates is not done with them.

"Now is not the time but you two are going to have to give a very compelling account of why you kept information about Roy Montgomery and more importantly William Bracken from myself and the authorities."

They could dissemble and attempt to divert the questions or be truthful.

"You mean aside from near fatal injuries, multiple instances of attempted murder, conspiracy - with the cooperation of elements within the NYPD and other agencies." Castle fires back beating Beckett to the punch.

"Mister Castle, I'm not the enemy here."

"Sorry Captain we know you personally are not but must understand and consider our position. The authorities including the NYPD have failed this case, and us multiple times. Members of law enforcement have been directly involved in the corruption and crimes, others subverted. As a result good people are dead. Beckett almost died. My daughter was nearly kidnapped, and the rest of us came under fire. My first priority was and remains our safety."

"Our families' safety," Beckett adds for emphasis.

"And that is our first priority too. We are going to house all of your family upstairs in the gym. At least temporarily."

"I have to say that I am not certain that is the best option. It is not that we don't trust the NYPD, especially here at the Twelfth, but the last few hours have shown that Bracken's reach is very long and deadly. These attacks have been violent and effective. Almost all have involved assault weapons and others have had military grade hardware. There have been explosions and in at least one case a missile attack."

"Those are all valid points. But at this time the Twelfth is the best option available. I imagine Taylor Matthews will also provide some additional security. And discussion on the options for your medium term safety are now going on."

"Do we get a say in them?" Beckett asks.

"No." The Captain's answer is final.

Castle looks like he wants to debate further but a shake of Beckett's head quietens him.

"Can we please re-join our families Captain?"

"Of course Detective. Please return to the gym immediately."
But they don't.

Just like the naughty high school student Beckett knows he once was, hell naughty man he still is, no sooner have they moved out of sight of the Captain's office than Castle grabs Beckett's hand and drags her straight into Conference Room Three. There is something suddenly purposeful about him, and she more than half-suspects she knows but mentally she tries to deny or at least suppress her suspicions.

His determination and enthusiasm results in him almost throwing her into this, one of the smaller and compact conference rooms. He lets go of her hand and in a burst of rapid motion he shuts and locks the door and drops all the blinds for good measure.

Having checked they cannot be observed he turns to her slightly wild-eyed, his chest if-not heaving, then rising and falling with what she is almost certain is anticipation.

She should be a little annoyed at the abruptness of it all but her heart is nearly beating out of her chest. She knows what this is. She craves it so much, possibly as much as she knows this man wants the same thing.

And if the lead-up is nowhere near romantic there is probably no more suitable location than here at the Precinct. The place where they have built this unbreakable bond and partnership over the years, where she killed a man to save him, where they have flirted and occasionally fought, and broken each other's hearts and rebuilt them.

"Kate." His voice almost breaks and she cannot help the slightly raised sardonic eyebrow at the quiver in her name. Almost challenging him to 'Man up Castle'.

He frowns as he received her subliminal message, gives her that little squint of frustration she secretly loves, and starts again.

"Kate." Much better. She smiles in reassurance, even if she can barely stand. She would flop into a seat but thinks that might detract from what comes next.

"This has been burning a hole in my pocket since I got it." His right hand emerges from his jacket pocket even as he sinks to one knee.

Oh there it is. The small black box.

Her right hand rises to cover her mouth, eyes moistening even as her throat constricts and dries up.

"Katherine Houghton Beckett..."

"Yes." It just pops out right over the start of his question, clear and definite.

They are both pretty sure what her affirmative was intended for, but he forges on with a look that asks if she knows how this works, and starts once more and asks the full question for good measure and the record,

"Katherine Houghton Beckett will you marry me?"

"Yes." This time her sangfroid deserts her, voice going up an octave and tremulous, but she gets the answer out – again - just as the first tear escapes.

His face splits open and those blue irises pop with obvious delight. And relief.
She never would have said no. She has been ready longer than she would ever admit to. She just
hates that he still harboured any shred of doubt about them, about her commitment, her willingness
to be his wife, and to have him as her husband. Her one and forever more.

First stage of the formality done, now comes the presentation and Castle opens the small black
velvet covered box as he remains kneeling.

Oh again. Really Oh. The ring is gorgeous. And it is her. So her. Another thing he got right. White
gold or maybe platinum, a large but not too large solitaire diamond gleaming at the centre and
surrounded by small clusters of sapphires and emeralds adding color and impact.

He is rising from his knee and as soon as their heads are level he leans in and kisses her. "I love
you" they both whisper - in sync as ever – around the kiss. It feels like a first kiss too. A new,
better, different kiss that they need to test further so she hooks her arms around his neck and goes
again.

When they finally part for air, Rick steps back so her arms drop away from his broad shoulders.
She is puzzled for a moment until she spies the box cradled in his large palm. He plucks the ring
from the velvet cushion, and she extends her hand expectantly, and with only a barely discernible
tremor he slides the ring onto her ring finger on her left hand.

It fits. Of course it does. And she is instantly enamoured of both the visual and metaphorical
significance of this ultimate commitment and with tears still shedding she wiggles her fingers
replete with an entirely un-Beckett like giggle.

Then she pounces on him. The kiss is intense and lasts until oxygen is essential for both of them
and they break, both chests heaving as their hearts race together.

"You did great Rick." She answers the question he was so not asking. He beams.

"How long have you had it?"

"The day you took the sergeant's exam. Second shop I tried, third ring in that store. Once I saw it, I
knew it was the one."

She lifts her hand admiring it. It suits her. He really knows her, and this choice is the ultimate
proof. But even if the ring had not been perfect she still would have said yes.

"But we keep this to ourselves for a little while so in the meantime I'll keep this safe here," she says
reaching for her necklace.

"Let me." He gently slides the ring off her finger as she unclasps the necklace and threads her
engagement ring onto the gold chain to sit alongside her mother's ring.

Her finger instantly aches at the loss, and once again he knows her so well, lifting her hand and
kissing her unadorned ring finger.

"Kate. I've wanted this for so long. You have no idea how happy this makes me. I often thought
and feared we would never get there. Our timing sucked, our seeming inability to converse except
in subtext, something or rather someone always intervening. I think I've almost punched out Javi a
couple of times, even Ryan. I didn't want to wait any longer. I've waited too long. Will you marry
me?"

"I already said yes."
"So you did." He is all high wattage, full beam.

"Alright get the happiness and ego under control so we can leave."

"Me. You should see yourself. You are totally glowing. People who know us are going to know."

"Shit. Game face time. Imagine it's Gates."

He frowns, "Okay that might work."

"Well it better 'cause we need to go in case Gates comes looking and finds we didn't actually head straight to the gym."

"Definitely working." His face splits in another impossibly delighted grin. "Maybe not."

Dolt! "I love you Rick. More than I ever thought possible. Let's go."

She turns but she changes her mind and places a hand on his chest to stay his movement. Their eyes meet, both still more than a little misty with the emotion of it.

"Rick, I just need to say this." He looks like he wants to say something but her finger brushes his lips hushing him. "Thank you for being the one to stay, to fight, to break down those stupid walls, to prove yourself over and over, above and beyond. I'm so sorry that I made you ever doubt that this is what I wanted. You are such a good man, a great father, the best partner ever. I am so honoured to be marrying you, to spend the rest of our lives together."

Oh he is crying properly now. She might be too. So much for their chances of making it to the gym unremarked.

"Kate, thank you. This is all that I dreamed of, beyond what I expected or deserved, and I'll spend our lifetimes proving it. I love you Kate."

She smears another kiss to his lips, "I love you too Rick."

They hug for what seems like minutes before drifting back into another one of those toe-curling kisses that still amaze both of them, and steals all thought and breathe from them.

From outside their conference room cocoon a loud noise sounds and breaks the moment, precinct life intruding. This time both are able to smile wryly at the interruption.

"Time to go. Game face time." She briefly kisses him again as she unwinds her lean, strong limbs from around him, stepping back.

"And so not working." He confirms still beaming.

She is pretty sure she still is too. She swipes a thumb over both cheeks to erase any errant tears of happiness that might be lingering.

They really need to go but she is certain he is not wiping that face and truth-be-told she probably is not either. So long as they can tell their family first, she doesn't care who knows. Now there is a turn-up for the books. She gives up laughing at herself and the pair of them.

She shakes her head, "You coming Castle?" she asks as she slaps his fine posterior, unlocks the door and strides out of the still shuttered conference room, her secret-for-now fiancé quickly falling in step. Maybe he is doing his own, far less subtle, observing of her delicious derriere. His fiancé's. Man it is rarely hard not to crack the biggest smile ever.
It is a nation frozen in horror at the seemingly random but surprisingly deadly attacks. Almost all of the incidents are clustered around the nation's largest metropolis and the rest in and around the capital itself. The butcher's bill is high even before more updates come in.

Naturally suspicion begins with the obvious candidates for such acts. The talking heads and social media leap to judgement. Some news organisations follow suit. Much of it is 'fake' and almost all of it is wrong. This never stops the conspiracy mongers, opportunists and

But within the halls of the Department of Justice and other law enforcement authorities, professional, largely dispassionate – despite their own casualties – analysis rapidly identifies a pattern to the targets and manner of execution of the attacks. Analysis that leads their investigations and conclusions in a quite different direction. Admittedly they have far more pertinent and relevant information to hand than the public and media. Information they are not sharing outside of their own circles at time.

These acts of violence are indeed almost entirely connected. As the names of the victims and targets are collated, that strong suspicion firms into hard knowledge for the vast majority of attacks.

Indeed for all the connected events the trail is very hot, entirely and unsurprisingly undisguised once you consider the evidence. Facts point not to an outside force but to one of their own. The suspect who was indeed part of the very government of the nation. All paths lead back to one man, whose downfall is now marked by an abrupt status change from suspect to criminal mastermind, suspended US Senator William H Bracken.

What has them scratching their head is the why?

What purpose does it serve?

And the timing? Why now?

However, these questions can wait. The first order is to overturn the shock release on bail that had so unexpectedly been granted barely twenty-four hours ago.

With the ink on the new court order barely dry, the authorities move to re-arrest Senator William H Bracken. The US Marshall Service takes the lead assembling a large team with additional backup from other agencies and law enforcement bodies to take him back into custody.

By now the news media have caught on – no doubt assisted by an off-the-record source or two - and begin to associate the renewed legal action with the attacks. Unsurprisingly the tempest continues to grow. Contradictory and confusing reports are issued.

In the scheme of things it takes next to no time to assemble the arrest teams but by the time authorities make their move multiple media teams are on site and waiting to witness his re-arrest.

Except William Bracken's Washington DC townhouse was empty.

The teams from the US Marshalls and four other agencies monitoring his town house have no idea how he had escaped their surveillance net for his house-arrest. There had been all manner of observation, human and electronic.

Yet all seemingly incapable of confining the man to his Washington home with only two entrances and exits and an electronic tracker attached to his leg.
Effecting entry they find the town house empty of life but the ankle bracelet is sitting on top of the untouched King bed.

The initial on-scene surprise, rapidly escalates and near-panic transforms into recriminations and mutual finger pointing. And it is caught on camera. The humiliation cannot be suppressed and naturally this brings the panic to the attention of public and once more the Internet spins it out of control.

Nothing less than a national shitstorm erupts as authorities, media and the public thrash about.

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**Columbus, Ohio.**

The authorities had just announced that flights would resume within hours but warned of delays. This seems to settle many of the mass surrounding him down. A good few of the TV screens had resumed showing sports but at least half remained on the news channels.

Pushing the cold coffee and remnants of day-old Danish aside, he tried both numbers again. No response.

They had never let him down before. They would not fail to respond unless they could not.

The options were not exactly good. The best case scenario would be if they were in silent mode probably avoiding capture. From there all the remaining options were versions of combat ineffective, incapacitated through injury or death. The worst case was captured.

This really was not like them at all. They were his most trusted assets.

He desperately wanted to make use of the interceptor and scrambler but needed it to be online and the access code confirmed. The later he did not have as it was only generated on the device when activated as a security measure, and the Koreans had not sent him the code.

It had cost him a small fortune to obtain the device from an old contact in the Israeli security services. But fear was a great motivator. Even for him. He was near desperate to know what or hopefully not Richard Castle had in the way of information on him. The author might have though his investigations were subtle and untraceable but was wrong. The only thing that had saved the pair was that he had not informed the Senator and thus the deal had been preserved.

Even if the author had nothing the disruption from scrambling all their electronics and local data copies would cause delays and further confusion.

Turning his thoughts back to the Koreans, he wonders if it worth chancing a call to one of his few as yet unused resources. But he abandoned that idea. They could already be under investigation and monitored. It wasn't worth the risk.

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**Virginia Countryside.**

CNN is running on the flat screen television in his office.

The man chuckles with what could potentially be called maniacal glee.

Well he had to give Court the credit. The former CIA soldier/spook had spirited him out of the DC townhouse without a single one of the multiple agencies surrounding the place being even the slightest bit suspicious. The man clearly had the skills, not that he had failed to prove so many
times over the years. For that reason, and the former paramilitary's mostly-steadfast loyalty, he had decided to spare him, and let the man have his escape.

But his escaping from the capital was merely a postponement of the inevitable for him. Enjoyable as it was to stick one on the government and his foes, the end game approaches.

Not that he wanted to escape. Merely that there had been tasks unfinished before he could allow himself to be properly detained and denied access to the resources he required.

Those were all in motion so there was no need to hide any longer.

Court had already confirmed the demise of his aide Matthew plus the Orantis turncoat. That had been a nasty shock, a junior team member who had surprised and killed the other members of the assassination team sent to deal with his aide. The collateral damage included a dozen federal agents in the security detail but he cared not a whit for them. He had no illusions that the efficient and effective operation to silence the young man was primarily motivated by the threat the young man posed with his ability to effectively incriminate James Court and not just himself. Still it was a job well done. It is a shame that many of his own resources were not as successful in their missions, despite the noise and bloodshed they created.

Regardless, it was time.

A single phone call to his lawyer was enough to give his pursuers the lead they required. Regardless of legalities they would be tapping all his contacts, or at least the ones they knew about.

They would be coming for him, and he was waiting.

It was simply a matter of how long.

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**Somewhere in rural Virginia**

They came mainly by road, convoys of flashing red and blue converging down the two access roads that led to their destination. Blue & Whites mixed in with the ubiquitous dark SUVs.

They came across country too, although disappointingly there were no horsemen, only more big ugly SUVs bouncing across the uneven ground, crashing through the odd hedge or fence in a government sanctioned act of vandalism.

Finally, they came by air with seven helicopters in a pale imitation of Apocalypse Now – minus the Wagner soundtrack. Of course the US Government was far too politically correct – on the surface - these days to play that particular artist.

As the airborne contingent neared the mansion, a pair of dark grey, twin-engined UH-1N helicopters sporting 'FBI' tags split off and directly approached the main building, the doors sliding open, as the FBI's Hostage Rescue Team prepared to rappel down while sharpshooters watched from the doors.

Far above two Virginia Air National Guard F16Cs circled unseen, their hasty on-load of stand-off missiles threatening but realistically impotent in the event of any incident. Their pilots' own confused and contradictory orders notwithstanding, especially given their normal mission profile for air defense of the capital.

It was an abundance of caution and firepower. But one the authorities felt was merited given the death and destruction of the preceding hours.
It was all unnecessary.

His staff had abandoned him. Or he had driven them off. At this point it was immaterial as to which actually happened first.

His hired guns where elsewhere. They had their remaining tasks to complete. Well those of them who had not already deserted him or fallen in the course of their missions. The reality with a lot of these wannabes and militia types was their capability was actually significantly lower than their visual impact and egos.

For their target despite this being his choice, even a plan of sorts, he was disappointed, largely in himself.

He had fleetingly considered greeting them with a wave of fire. A last stand, pistols blazing. Except he was never – well that one time excepted – the one to dirty his hands.

However, he made his decision and this choice was far more appealing. He wanted them to see his secret wealth, a manifestation of his glory and power. All those things he had accumulated without detection. To show how he had outsmarted them. More than anything he wanted them to understand that not only was he not afraid of them but he did not respect them. The rule of law was for the weak. The strong took what they needed, the rules and the laws to be challenged.

He had contemplated other options. Committing suicide was definitely not one, primarily as he wasn't willing to do it himself. In passing he had even thought of ordering someone to do it but as he was bitterly discovering, the loyalty of most of his staff was severely lacking, especially in light of the growing show of force from the authorities and his sudden lack of liquid funds. Those few that remained largely did so out of a lack of options or awareness that the well was dry.

It would appear even in death Vulcan Symonds was getting payback. He still didn't know how the man had done it but almost every single bank account, on-shore and offshore was now frozen. Other finance sources had disappeared or already been seized. He had more enough for the matters in hand, but little else. His huge war chest had shrunk considerably. His remaining mercenaries knew nothing of this, they would likely assume the funds were effectively limitless as always.

And his immediate cash reserves? Almost 80% depleted. He knew who to blame for that one. Court. James had absconded and taken the lion's share without so much as a by-your-leave. However, give the man credit, he knew just how much to take to ensure there was enough left to not inhibit his master's final plans.

He is pretty sure that Court is also relying on his being killed to further close the loop on the potential incrimination. Or at least long enough to escape to whatever non-extradition bolt-hole he had arranged.

Well good luck to him, but he had a feeling the former CIA paramilitary would need more than that.

He knew something that his fixer did not. He did not know the identity of his secret partner and benefactor but he did know their power and reach. There was literally nowhere on the planet that James Court could run to.

New York

From the comfort and security of the New York operations center, newly promoted team leader William Sorenson stood with the crowd and watched the live video feed from the HRT chopper. It
is only one of twenty plus feeds appearing on the wall of monitors in the operations room which is linked to the bigger operations center in DC. For the uninitiated it can be confusing, but once you learn to focus on just a quadrant of the wall of images it becomes considerably easier to extract information and follow the action.

It was like something out of Apocalypse Now. All they needed was Colonel Kilgore and Ride of the Valkyries. The tactical gear and military grade weaponry of the assaulters added to the illusion. Of course he only had to look around this room or beyond to see plentiful examples of paramilitary style attire and equipment. The domestic arms race was a growing concern for many. The dumping of surplus military gear from the overseas wars against terror were inadvertently contributing to their own at home.

The crinkle of static brings his focus back to the matter at hand. There is no elation, no gung-ho machismo. A dozen of their own, including Rachael McCord were killed tonight, and despite the innate and taught professionalism of the FBI he did not doubt that many - including himself - were of half-a-mind to see this as potential for extracting some form of retribution for that crime.

But no one says it. This is the FBI and by extension the Department of Justice. Revenge is not their method of accounting. That's the other guy. So they hold fast – tenuously in some cases – but they stay true to their ethos. It might be cold and dispassionate but this is how they work.

The tactical lights of the FBI's Hostage Rescue Team illuminate the ground level of the drop zone as the helicopters pull back. From a camera in of the choppers watchers see clusters of light beams dance seemingly haphazardly as they sweep through the property. In reality the men of the ground are grouped in tightly clustered teams assigned to designated objectives, and all in search of their target.

After the dramatic manner of their arrival it was strangely anti-climactic. No gun battle breaks out, indeed no form of hostile reception whatsoever. In fact almost no one is there. Only three unresisting and unarmed persons taken into custody, confused by the sudden convergence of law enforcement into their lives. Even as all three are zip-tied, all claim to be staff for the estate – one groundsman, and two domestics – one male and one female. None are armed nor look like they have training.

Now some of those coming overland and they reinforce the airborne force. The sweep of the two smaller buildings is done and with smaller fire teams taking up positions to surround the main building, larger groups assemble by each of the two entrances. At an unheard command each stack peels off to enter the building in column ahead, weapons up.

For some reason the main lights in the house are off, although there is scant illumination from a number of lamps scattered through the building. The absence of discernible human presence and the twilight lends an eerie ambiance that is reinforced by the narrow vision of the digital feeds from helmet and body cameras.

None of this distracts or slows the two entry teams who move efficiently and precisely through the mostly darkened building, finding their way with the illumination projected from the tactical spotlights under the barrels of their weapons.

The first floor is swept quickly without any discoveries and both groups begin their ascent up the twin staircases to the second floor. Once again they arrive nearly simultaneously at two sets of closed doors to a large room on the where external scanners have identified a single human sized heat source. Explosive sniffers detect no presence of threats and with practised and methodical ease they effect a near silent entry from the two entrances.
There is no opposition and it takes perhaps two or three seconds before the sweeping lights complete a fast scan of the room and at least four beams of light suddenly coalesce to illuminate the solitary occupant.

There in a high backed chair is their fugitive, William H Bracken, sitting calmly, nursing what appears to be a fresh cup of tea.

As almost a dozen tactical lights and gun barrels converge on him, the man slowly lowers the cup to the saucer and places his hands on his knees, saying nothing. A pair of HRT operatives sling their weapons and approach with the ubiquitous zip-ties in hand. The man neither cooperates, not raising his arms with wrists together, nor resists.

It is close to fifty seconds before someone finds the main light switch and the monitors flare briefly as the night vision cut-off on the cameras which take seconds to adjust. Even the latest tactical gear has limitations.

The initial focus is all on their target. Bracken does not resist even when handcuffs are snapped on his wrists. In fact he does not appear to say anything as he is taken into custody and is led away down the hallway to his transfer to a waiting helicopter. A couple of the tactical cameras continue to follow the prisoner out of the house and out into the main entrance of the complex which is crowded with vehicles and personnel.

Will keeps his attention on some of the cameras that stay in the main room, and these are being swept to display what the capture team have found. It takes more than forty seconds to pan the room even in the greatly improved illumination of the main lights. Maybe the same time passes again before those viewing it can comprehend what they are seeing.

All of the room is covered in paintings stretching up to the ceiling on every vertical surface. There are a few small sculptures on pedestals but primarily it is framed art-works that not some much dominate as overwhelm the room and the viewers’ senses. Thematically the artwork appears concentrated on the Baroque period with a substantial minority of Neoclassical pieces.

None of them were prepared for this.

It is impossible to determine even from a high resolution feed whether they are the real thing. Sorenson has some small appreciation from dealing with a few art crimes during his European posting and they look genuine. The potential scale of the wealth in the mansion was simply staggering. Especially for a man who apparently was a 'humble' public servant for much of his life, especially after his father had blown the families wealth. The brother was Wall Street-rich but seemingly there was no love lost between.

A not subdued "Holy Fuck!" echoes round the ops room. Hell that came from the Deputy Attorney General in DC.

"Back up! Right fucking now!" Wow even more direct and coarse from the usually urbane and composed legal professional. Not how the man usually acts at all. Naturally it gets immediate compliance.

"That's a Rembrandt! It's literally priceless."

"What?" This from one of the entry team who is apparently in the comms loop with the operations center, and his camera swings back to the painting in question.

"I actually recognize it. I remember the case."
"You mean not only is that unique antique painting by a famous artist but it is stolen too?"

"Yup. That's the Storm on the Sea of Galilee by Rembrandt. It was stolen from Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum of Boston in 1990. Sometime around March or April, definitely before Easter that year. I remember it pretty well. It is one of thirteen pieces of art taken in the largest property crime in U.S. history. I worked on the case for a number of months about three years later when a lead was found but didn't pan out."

The room is almost universally slack-jawed.

"There is a five million dollar reward but there has never been any concrete leads. The pieces were split up and last tracked to Pennsylvania and Connecticut a few years after the theft."

"How the hell did he get hold of that?" Someone asks. No one can answer.

"Someone contact the Boston Field Office, they will want in on this."

"And if it is not already done, lock the site down now. No one in or out, and ensure all feeds are secured. This is way fucking bigger than we thought!"

There are numerous other art works including it turns the actual furniture. As experts are bought in it rapidly becomes clear that the majority are stolen. In fact possibly all of it is actually stolen art.

How had Bracken managed to obtain so much art work? So many questions.

Unfortunately for the FBI's Art team they will need to take a number behind the primary investigators when interviewing the suspect.

Rick's research files had been sent to five different law enforcement agencies including the FBI and the NYPD plus eleven different news organisations and just three independent websites including Wikileaks. None of the recipients received their message from the same source as another. In fact, for may the payload seemed to originate from a half-dozen or more seemingly randomized and fully anonymous sources. All effectively untraceable.

Whilst the sources for the payload was different in every case – just as the NSA and other agencies would be discovering during their investigations – the content was identical in every instance.

It was a substantial dossier of information and would take some time to process before it can join the deluge of content that will come to dominate national and international news cycles for days and beyond. Not least because the scale and scope of the information it contains will take days to even begin to comprehend.

Even after weeks it will still be an active news item.

Not only does it show the true nature of the Senator from New York and his criminal enterprise. It goes far beyond local, and even national politics, reaching firmly into international relations.

Also highlighted is the complicity of a number of lesser public figures and their raft of co-conspirators, enablers and lackeys in New York and Washington DC.

The ugly reach and influence of organised crime within the city is also covered including the Silva family. So long in the shadows, happily thriving in their role as a 'junior' and unimportant piece, they are now thrown into the harsh light of publicity and the media pack.
The drugs and arms trade in and out of Afghanistan in an echo of the Iran Contra affair. Even if this time it is not officially or unofficially sanctioned from the White House, there is enough evidence to more than insinuate some form of connivance and cooperation given the utterly brazen manner in which the operation has been conducted.

The use of private military contractors to action policy, a portion of which appears to be driven by agendas seemingly at odds with stated national security goals and diplomatic treaties.

Coming immediately on top of the devastating attacks that once again shake a nation's confidence, the allegations have politicians, diplomats, bureaucrats, and generals scrambling and the press and public ravenous for answers and retribution, that above all else.

Reaction was inevitable, but the results of the accounting, well that remained to be seen. No-one seemed interested in the legalities or justice.

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note

All the final 2 chapters are finished except for web formatting and will be posted in the next 24 hours. There are 2 parts to Chapter 79 and a single part to Chapter 80.

To everyone still with me, thank you for your patience.
Thank you to those who take the time to review and especially to those who have reached out with messages.

Happy New Year!
Chapter 79 – Wrapping Up – Part 2

Chapter Summary

Previously....
Bracken has been rearrested but the devastating attacks that once again shaken the nation’s confidence, and allegations have politicians, diplomats, bureaucrats, and generals scrambling and the press and public ravenous for answers and retribution, that above all else.
Reaction was inevitable, but the results of the accounting, well that remained to be seen. No-one seemed interested in the legalities or justice.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A Times

Veteran Private Eye & Author Murdered

Mason Wood, one of Hollywood's most long-standing and influential private investigators was found dead in a private residence in the early hours of this morning.

Although 'officially retired' from PI work, Mason Wood was President of the Detective Authors club and remained a highly influential and respected figure in the crime writing community. Some were less kind imply that some of that 'respect' was owned more to fear of the Wood's influence and grudge-bearing.

The LAPD are not commenting on the cause of death, the crime scene, or any other details relating to the case. Lieutenant Kyle Seeger steadfastly refused to comment on any aspect other than to confirm that the victim had been positively identified as Mason Wood.

However, one witness who briefly saw the scene described it as 'bloody' and 'gross'. The victim was only partially dressed and appeared that they may have been engaged in some for sexual act at the time of death.

More to follow.

Twelfth Precinct

Even if they were observed, Beckett and Castle were too lost in each other to notice. More money may have changed hands among a few of the more observant – and still optimistic - occupants of the Twelfth and the long running betting pool.

Unconcerned/unaware the pair make their way to the precinct's gym. Located up on the top floor, it is windowless with just two ingress points so making it almost the most secure location in the building. Or the least escapable runs through their minds.

This is their temporary refuge. Probably only for tonight if Clare had anything to do with the
decisions. Which she will.

There are a half-dozen of their own Precinct’s finest on shift on the floor, all with vests and half with tactical gear including shotguns and a solitary C4 rifle. An additional two team members from Taylor Matthews posing as federal agents – or so their jackets state providing the cover for them to be present among the law enforcement – with the deadly looking compact P90 sub-machine guns and equally intimidating expressions.

Entering through the swing doors they find that it has been transformed from the spartan. Sure the beaten and tired paint and flooring remains, but the space is now filled with a selection of camping gear including folding camp beds, air mattresses, along with four assorted folding tables and a dozen chairs.

Their family are clustered around the biggest table, some sitting and some standing. There appears to coffee or similar along with bottles of water on the table.

With those tall strides Beckett reaches the group ahead of her for-now secret fiancé. Both know it is not the right time to make their announcement. Sure they could do with something uplifting but their family is more than shaken and frayed. Especially Alexis who bursts into tears as soon as Rick reaches her. Despite the focus on the young woman, Kate feels Martha's eyes on her, appraising. Before she can say anything the woman smiles mysteriously and turns her attention back to their group.

One of the uniforms has the battered TV in the corner of the gym going. Only possessed of a worn set of ‘rabbit ear’ antenna there is no cable, only the local broadcast channels. This is more than enough as even with these limited options the news cycle is relentless.

Twelfth Precinct.

They had ordered food although with considerable apathy from their group. No one felt much like eating but Rick makes a strong case for enjoying the option for takeaway while they can. Despite this attempted encouragement they end up settling for a multitude of pizza in variety of flavors, safe in the knowledge that their protectors will happily consume anything left over.

The TV continues to cover the terrible events of the night. The death toll is approaching more than one hundred people including at least twenty law enforcement officers. This number excludes the perpetrators.

With all this going on neither Rick nor Kate had felt it was opportune to reveal their change of status to their family. Alexis in particular is desperate for news of Jane Stubbs. But they have heard nothing new since she was taken to surgery. Gates has promised to keep them updated.

Ryan and Esposito came by to give an update as best they could. There was no further news on Jane Stubbs, much to Alexis’ obvious disappointment. Better news was that there had been no further attacks and the only incidents occurring now were when law enforcement were apprehending suspects, and most of those were reportedly being resolved without further conflict. The pair had been ordered to stand down and resume on the morning shift. Both were going to head home as soon as they had checked in. Ryan was happily able to confirm that Jenny and all their families were safe with no concerns. Esposito had no updates to share on his own situation but did wait until the pair were leaving to inform Beckett that Lanie had reported in, safe and secure in the main OCME building. And that she quote 'expected an apology from her girl once things had settled down'.

No sooner than Ryan and Esposito taken their leave, if on cue, the appearance of Officer Hastings marks a summons for the pair to see Captain Gates.

They take the stairs down to Four. Gates is standing in her office and makes for a somewhat imposing sight, despite her relatively small stature.

"Mister Castle, Detective Beckett." There is optimism in her tone. "The hospital has just informed us that Jane Stubbs is out of surgery and in recovery. She has a serious gunshot wound but is officially out of danger."

"Thank you Sir," Rick is truly relieved. Something good to carry back to Alexis. He knows that it will not make everything better, not by a long shot, but hopes that it will be enough. For now.

"That is good news Sir. What about the investigation into the attempted abduction?"

Gates nods in appreciation of Beckett's insight. "It will be at least twenty-four hours before Miss Stubbs can be interviewed. The lead detectives will need to speak to your daughter Mister Castle. Probably as earlier as tomorrow morning."

"I think she will be up to that." Castle is already wondering if he needs to have one or more of his lawyers present.

"Please be assured it is purely as a witness. Furthermore, initial investigations and other witnesses accounts have Miss Stubbs apparently acting within the law to protect her charges. There will need to be a formal investigation and a review but I do believe that she can focus on her recovery from her injuries."

Both Beckett and Castle exchange a look, relieved. Their Captain did not need to give them that.

Gates sits and waves her hand at the guest seats. "I have some other news. This will take a bit longer to cover."

Both sink into the chairs, worry back on their faces, too fatigued to hide it.

"You will be aware that in the aftermath of the attack on you and your families, in your home at Broome Street, the first responders encountered further hostile subjects, and there was further exchange of gunfire, resulting in further casualties."

The pair nod to acknowledge the event.

"Two patrol officers challenged a couple acting suspiciously who were near the rear of your building. The female suspect opened fire without warning injuring one officer and in the resulting firefight both suspects were shot. One – a male – died at the scene, and the other was transported to hospital in critical condition and was not expected to survive. I haven't heard the latest but the report from the scene indicated that her injuries were probably terminal.

"The two deceased appeared to a first sight be City workers. But their behavior and location was enough to rouse suspicions and they were challenged. Both ignored commands, and the gunfire was initiated by them.

"The ID recovered has been confirmed as fake but very good forgeries." Gates pushes across two headshots of the deceased along with images of the false identities.

After studying both Castle and Beckett both shake their heads.
"You mean like Government level forgeries Captain?"

"Exactly Mister Castle. Inquiries to South Korea have hit a blank. Actually more like a wall. The attempt to ID them triggered some sort of security flag and now nothing is forthcoming. We have passed the details onto federal authorities and something similar has happened here too. I am told that the Defense and a number of Intelligence Agencies are now not cooperating on this line of inquiry."

Castle and Beckett share a look but let their Captain continue uninterrupted.

"As I said they were seen leaving the laneway near the rear service entrance of your building. One of the officers - Terry Knickman - who confronted them remembers the male suspect from what was classified as a fatal pedestrian accident some months ago. That made him suspicious and when he and his partner, Officer Kourolis, challenged them, the female suspect immediately drew a gun and opened fire injuring Kourlios. Officer Knickman was temporarily blinded by a flash grenade but managed to down both suspects."

"How are they?" Beckett inquires on behalf of both of them.

"Kourolis is bruised up but his vest saved him from anything worse. Knickman has some slight vision issues but I told they will pass in the next twenty-four to forty-eight hours. But that is not why I wanted to speak to you."

"Sir?"

"It was sometime later – after you had departed for the Twelfth – that with the aid of reinforcements a team entered the service stairwell to conduct checks and complete a full sweep of the building. There was another body discovered. This was one was at the base of the maintenance stairs. There were signs of violence and the likely cause of death is asphyxiation from a broken neck. We initially suspected he may have been a maintenance man inadvertently caught up in the attack. But a check of his identity and possessions nixed that."

She pushes across a new photograph.

"Fuck!" Beckett with the potty mouth, unable to maintain her discipline. Even as she swears she is turning towards and reaching for her partner.

The Captain lets it pass. There is good reason.

"That's him. 3XK." Castle, his voice flat and lethal and both hands fistimg hard, leaving no doubt about his emotions when confronted with his nemesis. Even if apparently deceased.

Kate rises and instinctively closes in and wraps herself around her finance from behind. This is his bete noir. His rabbit hole, his nemesis, be damned. He is shaking solidly, whether in rage, fear or just releasing pent up energy she does not care. She won't let go.

"He is definitely dead?" he squeezes out, barely suppressed fury lighting his tone.

The Captain ignores the excusable emotion, "Absolutely. We have the body is under guard at the OCME morgue."

"What else do we know Captain?" Beckett asks for both of them.

"False identity found on him appears to indicate he has been Chicago for some time, possibly since the last occasion he crossed paths with us. The name he was using was Alex Castillo."
"Fuck!" that was Rick. She can hardly blame him. Stealing his name, or at least a facsimile of it.

"So what was he doing here Captain?"

The question much like Gate's answer is superfluous. "As much as we can figure from the evidence recovered he was coming to pay the pair of you a visit."

The insinuation in the last word strikes home. Castle's face falls. She worries if it too much for him. On top of everything else.

"We retrieved a number of military grade stun grenades, including several with a chemical element which would have rendered anyone unconscious within seconds. Possibly fatally if the individuals were not resuscitated in a time manner."

Their untypical mute shock enables the Captain to carry on.

"He had a silenced pistol, knives, cable ties and of course blue nylon rope."

"Shit!" That was both Beckett and Castle.

"However, he did not appear to anticipate meeting whoever disabled and killed him in the stairwell. The silenced Glock was zipped up in the end pocket of the sports bag he was carrying. There is no sign of any blood except his own."

Beckett finally chimes in.

"There was no security in the service stairwell. When we were attacked there were two Taylor Maxwell agents plus their New York lead Clare Dunne in the loft itself. One agent was stationed by the hall door, and the other two were with us in the Kitchen area. The agent in the kitchen was injured by the first shots. There was no additional security presence. We hadn't had time to make any other arrangements."

"We are checking with Miss Dunne but I believe that you are correct Detective."

They all take a moment to reflect on the enormity of the events.

"I think it is entirely fortuitous for you that all these events happened nearly simultaneously. Whatever the circumstances and however you want to view events, it appears that at least one or more of the malicious parties attacking you cancelled each other out.

"So were the Koreans backup for the first attack? Or a flank attack? And why? Who was responsible for commissioning them? Bracken?" Castle is finally able to enunciate a full sentence.

"And we can assume 3XK was not working in conjunction with them." Rick again. "It is not his style. He may have a partner or more likely a patsy in some of his past schemes but nothing like these two Koreans. It just doesn't make sense."

"We agree. We have teams tracking his fake ID and money trails backwards. And just before I came to see you a team following one lead found the body of a plastic surgeon at her Manhattan office. A Doctor Kelly Neiman. She was a well-respected cosmetic surgeon. She was stabbed through both eyes by her own scalpels. Gates passed them a pre-mortum publicity headshot showing an attractive mid-to-late-thirties woman with blonde hair.

They shake their heads. "Never meet or heard of her," Beckett answers for both.
"She did fit the base 3XK profile, but she doesn't seem the type for him to target. If she was the target why not kill her with the rope? No I think she was assisting him in some way." Castle opinions.

"The scalpels to the eyes would indicate some degree of antagonism. A falling out or maybe that was his plan? Or maybe events forced his hand and he did not want any witnesses left behind when he abandoned one plan?" Beckett bounces back at him.

"Do you mind Mister Castle, Detective Beckett?"

"Sorry Sir" issues simultaneously from the pair.

Gates can only shake her head ruefully. These two are going to be even more insufferable when they return. And effective she reminds herself. Please let the last be true. If only to compensate for how disruptive the pair can be. Especially if they take their relationship to the logical conclusion as she suspects they are soon to do.

"The team obtained a warrant – there are judges awake across the entire North East including DC, and issuing warrants including Federal ones as needed round the clock – and in the search of Doctor Neiman's business the CSI's found a hidden folder with headshots of Doctor Parish and Detective Esposito along with those of two persons who approximately match their physical characteristics. It appears that for some purpose Doctor Neiman was going to alter those individuals to resemble Doctor Parish and Esposito. We are not exactly sure why. At least yet."

"Records?!" Rick exclaims.

"The records," Beckett affirms, nodding.

"Pardon?" Their Captain is not on the same wavelength. No one is.

"Captain, if you looked like Doctor Parish and Detective Esposito you could most likely gain access to all the records related to the previous 3XK cases. Possibly with only cursory checks of their official ID, if any. With that level of access they could take or destroy all physical evidence for many cases. I know the NYPD back up the electronic stuff but courts still place a higher emphasis on physical evidence. Plus recent events have shown even the backups can be compromised."

"That is not a bad theory Mister Castle."

"Rick please Captain," he corrects her. "He said he wanted me to feel the pain of causing others, being responsible for deaths. Because I had ruined his plans. I think with the planned use of impersonators and the attack on the loft he was going to cleaning up his record in New York. Once done this would clear the decks for him to resume his campaign of serial killings. But the events surrounding Bracken disrupted his planning, so he abandoned his first plan, taking care to ensure any witnesses were eliminated."

Beckett picks up, "I think if you ever find them, the candidates for becoming doppelgangers for Lanie and Esposito, are already dead too."

"We believe so too Detective," Gate's use of her title could be many things but this time it was respectful. "And then Tyson came to your home looking to at the very least subdue those in attendance, and take some other action, had he not encountered these mysterious Koreans who we can assume killed him."

"But why did they not then attack the Loft? With us fully distracted by the snipers, we would have
been fairly easy targets."

"I don't think their mission was to attack the Loft. I think they had an entirely different objective. They were not equipped for an assault, at least not in comparison to most of the other events that occurred in the last few hours. No one has found anything other than the pistols, knives and a two remaining stun grenades. They used another stun grenade in the attack on the two officers. But I must admit at this time we are at a loss to understand what their purpose was."

Castle looks directly at Beckett, "You realize that we probably owe our lives to a pair of Bracken's killers."

"Now that is an alarming thought," but something does not gel and she says so. "But if they were Bracken's killers they would have attacked us. Surely?"

"Beckett, if they weren't Bracken's whose where they?"

"Not sure. But they don't fit the pattern. Bracken has used professionals, but from our dealings it has always been a direct application of lethal violence. This is different. Not just the method but the objectives."

"Do you think he had an intelligence operative? Someone who was monitoring us?"

"Yeah, could be that. But if Bracken was going full dragon, why not attack us when they had the chance? Position, opportunity and element of surprise."

"But not motive. Because that was not their mission. These two were not Bracken's but they worked for his intelligence operative?"

"The same person who wants to know what we have on his boss and by implication them. But not for Bracken's sake, as he has gone beyond the point of needing it. But his own?"

"Captain, perhaps you should let the authorities know they should be looking for Bracken's aides or senior advisers. Someone with a police, military, or more likely intelligence background."

"Thank you Castle, I shall do that."

"Sir?"

"Yes Castle?"

"Does Ryan know? About 3XK I mean?"

"No. Other than those making the discovery, you are the first people that have been informed outside of the Brass. So unless someone has passed it on, then I do not believe so."

"Could someone….? I don't know. Me, you? Can someone please let Kevin, Ryan, know. It's important. Very important."

"Of course. I should have remembered. It was his weapon that was taken and used. I will call Detective Esposito and have him take the news."

"Thank you Sir."

Their meeting with their Captain was over and they were back in the gym with their family. Virtually the entire contingent barely touched their food. Hardly surprising after they have briefed
everyone else with Gate's news.

Their news on Jane Stubbs had lifted spirits considerably and prompted another round of tears from Alexis. Kate communicates silently with Rick even as he comforts his daughter. This is all too much for the young woman.

Jim Beckett and Val had retreated into a corner and were talking in a quiet but animated manner. Kate assumed it was related to the law firm after they had been informed of the attack on the offices and the deaths of five people. Jim had firmly and physically restrained Val from charging off to demand her 'release' to attend to her firm.

Even Martha was reduced to muted shadow. In part this was because of the near monotone outfit she was wearing in contrast to her usual blaze of colors, almost as if she wanted to be overlooked. For her part Alexis was equally subdued, her hair the only concession to her pale silence. Rick had been a constant presence but even her father's embrace could not draw more than a wan smile from the young woman.

For her part Beckett knows Castle is going to need time to deal with the news about 3XK. Just like she will with Bracken once he has faced justice. There is an outside chance that the Dragon could escape but she needs to have faith for her Mom.

**USP Lee, Virginia.**

This was pretty much an archetypal federal penitentiary if one was to visualize it. Stark concrete and spartan blocks. The wing on the upper floor of one block was now empty except for a single prisoner and multiple guards.

The Assistant AG looked tired and harried despite the impeccable suit. Still he maintained a calm voice as he addressed the recalcitrant remand prisoner. He had only been in here three minutes and he wanted to leave. He was even wondering if the soon-to-be former senator was angling for the insanity plea.

Of course it was the middle of the night, and no one really wanted to do this now. Regardless the prisoner had waved his right to an attorney. Unsurprisingly he was currently between legal representatives, and seemed in no rush to retain a new one. The AG's office was stepping very carefully to ensure that everything was done by-the-book.

"So you had no part in the additional attacks that took place in the last twenty-four hours."

Bracken laughs even as he denies it all. "Whatever it was, it wasn't me. You had me in custody most of the time. Monitoring my every moment and with no communication except to my lawyer and I'm sure that is monitored too."

Despite being right on the last point – a secret court hearing had ruled that his communications with his lawyer could be monitored on national security grounds, the Assistant AG knows the man is lying. He does it as readily as drawing breath.

Regardless his false bravado fools no one in the room. Or listening elsewhere.

"Mister Bracken."

When the former Senator seems to remain focused elsewhere he raises his voice.

"Senator Bracken!" He can make that concession to the man's vanity if it gets them somewhere.
"Late yesterday, shortly before you were re-arrested, Matthew Westin, you aide and another individual taken into protective custody. However they were murdered along with a dozen federal agents when their vehicles were attacked and destroyed with military grade weaponry."

Even the Dragon can be shocked. Although momentary, the surprise shows before he schools his face. James had not told him about the large collateral casualties. He had assumed it was another of his self-contained, minimal fuss actions. Obviously he was wrong. Was it necessary or what there more behind the method. Knowing James, that was certainly the case.

"Well that is a terrible shame. The young man was disloyal. Do you want crocodile tears? I have none left. How sad." He enjoys taunting these minions.

"So you deny being involved?"

"Did I not say that? But for the record, and once again, how could it have been me?"

"It was you, or someone acting on your behalf."

"My behalf! What makes you so sure it was on MY behalf?" The indignation is not entirely play acting. He can channel his concerns and questions about James' motivations and use them against the lackeys. The very men that should be working for him.

The Assistant AG is caught by that, and falls silent.

Thinking on it brings enlightenment and Bracken's crocodile smile resembles a deadly smirk. He knows exactly why James had commissioned such brazen handy work. The elimination of young Matthew was of benefit to both but far more likely to be more beneficial to his former-CIA fixer, James Court. He had not protested too hard when the man insisted on taking care of the traitor with his own resources.

Well played James. Well played indeed.

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New York, 12 th Precinct Gym, 2.57 am

Despite the time neither Beckett nor Castle were really sleeping. They were not sure about the rest of their family. They suspect that any sleep was fitful.

There was brief flurry of activity at the gym entrance, attracting their attention.

It was Gates back and it was likely that she significant news or why else would she be here? She had the same clothes on so it appeared that she had not had an opportunity to head home and had likely worked on through the night. Until now.

Flashlight in hand, Gates navigates her way over them.

"Captain?" Beckett acknowledges in quiet tones.

"Can I speak to Mister Castle and yourself again please Detective?"

Rising they walked to the far corner of the gym where a single bulb barely illuminates a foldable table and four camp chairs were set out. The table holds a large water dispenser and plastic cups. The empty pizza boxes having been cleaned up before they went to bed.

They do not sit, but do keep their voices down.
"Sorry to disturb you," Gates offers and accepts the shrugs from both. The hour is late and courtesy feels unnecessary.

"It took three CSI teams including one from the FBI but we believe we found out what the Koreans were doing at your building."

Both Beckett and Castle share a concerned look and wait for their Captain to continue. She holds her phone up and turns it to face the pair. The image on the screen is of some sort of dark grey plastic box attached to a wall.

Castle hisses in recognition. "That's the service stairwell. Or at least based on the wall color it appears to be. What's the device?"

"Correct Rick." The late hour, her tiredness perhaps but Gates does not correct her use of his first name. "The device in the picture was installed in the back of the maintenance area at the top of the rear stairs. It is completely sealed. It is approximately thirty inches long about twenty wide and ten deep. The casing is toughened plastic but there is absolutely no markings or controls on the exterior. It took us some time to identify it and ensure it was no longer active."

"A bomb?" Castle is all concern, and beats Beckett by mere fractions of a second.

"No. Or rather not quite. According to the information only just provided by Homeland Security it is a military grade electronic signals interceptor and scrambler. Designed to monitor and collect communications and then when ordered it can send some sort of electronic pulse intended kill all electronic devices within range. Permanently.

"Homeland were not too forthcoming but we were told that one this model the scanner/scrambler has a limited range of approximately thirty to forty yards but is almost totally effective including against hardened devices except those to the absolute latest military specifications. In terms of the data interception and relay, the transmitter has a limited range and would need a receiver unit within a thousand yards possibly a lot less, depending upon the interference from solid objects and electromagnetic sources."

"Wow. And this was listening to us, or rather our technology. Do we know any more as to who or why?"

"The device is extremely rare, mostly likely from Israel, and not generally available outside of government circles. Our sources inform us that this is an older model, the newer ones are more compact and capable and even rarer. Even so this is a very specific tool, for a very specific purpose. Someone with strong ties to the intelligence sector had to be involved and whoever, the ultimate party is, they were seriously trying to target information you have Mister Castle. Now what could possibly have that would make it worth this kind of effort? I don't think they were after the next Nikki Heat manuscript."

Rick takes a moment to check with his partner. She nods. Full disclosure and honesty.

"Well Captain, disappointed as I am that my work is not considered valuable enough to purloin, I believe they would have been after the intelligence and information we were collecting on the Dragon – who we now know is Senator Bracken – his associates and their operations. Since I learnt about Beckett's mother's murder I have accumulated what is now a considerable volume of information. Unfortunately far too little of it is of the standard to be directly incriminating evidence capable of standing up in court, especially in respect of legal discovery. Regardless I collated it all and built a framework round it. Almost like a story outline if you wish. Once Kate and I became romantically engaged we continued to work carefully and over time we filled it out as best could.
After the attacks on our family, I triggered a protocol to release that information to multiple parties over the Internet. The same would have occurred if one or both of us had been killed."

"And you couldn't have bought the evidence to the NYPD? To me?" Gates tries to sound disappointed, verging on incredulous but all know that this is for plausible deniability. Following procedure, by-the-book, Iron Gates.

"Sir, we did not know who we could trust. Roy Montgomery being involved, however indirectly, made us even more wary of the potential risks of Bracken moles or accomplices inside the NYPD. After all that is what McAllister, Raglan and even Montgomery to a more limited extent were."

As Beckett speaks she spies how Gates looks pissed momentarily at her mention of Roy before the Captain can hide the emotion. Has she made a mistake? Why was Roy a trigger for their current Captain?

"Okay, I see I need to set the pair of you straight on Roy Montgomery. Neither of you have spoken to Ryan nor Esposito regarding this I take it?"

"Sir?"

"Beckett, don't try and play dumb with me. But on second thoughts rather than take that path, please give me a few minutes to explain. You may think you knew about Roy but there are things about Roy's past that you won't know and will explain and perhaps excuse much of his behavior."

Gates takes a couple of minutes to explain his background, and the secret anti-corruption work that both he and Gates had been a part of, and which had been hidden under an affirmative action program. And how when that program wound down, Roy Montgomery and others including Victoria Gates had been given promotions and returned to normal policing duties but otherwise abandoned as their sponsors temporarily fell out of favor. Somehow Roy Montgomery had been compromised, at least partially, by Bracken or one of his associates.

"Damn. Roy. Why didn't he tell anyone? Tell us." Castle corrects, sounding devastated, as both he and Kate feeling the rawness of his loss, and the conflicting emotion, once again.

"Bracken's assassins most likely. We believe now that they had directly threatened his family. There may have been a temporary abduction and then surveillance photos had appeared. Roy obviously felt trapped. By then the anti-corruption program had been wound down and those in authority who knew were mostly gone, or at least not in a position to assist at the time. He probably thought he couldn't rely or trust anyone. Not with his family at stake."

They can understand that. "Does Evelyn know the truth?" Kate inquires, her teeth nipping at her lower lip hard enough to draw a tiny smear of crimson.

"Yes, she always has as far as I know.

"Oh God, what must she think of us? We owe her the most profuse apology."

"Not necessary. She knew and understood your position. She would never have judged you. Plus I understand Mister Castle was most helpful with trust funds for their children's education."

"But we left him to die." Beckett is clearly horrified.

"His choice. And we all have to respect and honor that as best we can. He didn't want his fate for you Kate. I believe he was trying to give you options."
"Well I made a hash of that."

"Not fatally though. Which leads us back to your intelligence operations and that information which I assume is what you so generously shared with the world."

They're both pretty sure that was more than slight sarcasm from the Captain.

"Perhaps we could discuss that somewhere else, Captain?"

"No Mister Castle. Here is just fine. I am not changing the security around just to suit your desire for privacy."

"Perhaps we should sit then Captain. This might take some time."

"You don't need your notes or computer?"

"No sir. All up here, or enough of it anyway." Castle remarks tapping his head.

As their Captain resumes her seat, the two partners sit and share a brief equally concerned glance. Perhaps coming back will be harder than they thought.

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12th Precinct Gym, A lot latter

Gates had accepted their version – for now - and had left them while she reported to the higher echelons of whoever is running and monitoring this particular circus. No doubt that went a lot higher than the NYPD brass and the city of New York.

Unsurprisingly their extended chat in the corner had disturbed everyone. The pair gave a very potted summary and set everyone back to bed to attempt to sleep once more. Beckett assumed they would be on the move today, and told them so.

Everyone had resisted, complaining of not being able to sleep. But there is almost nothing else to do. All personal electronics had been temporarily confiscated and placed in a Homeland Security dampener device. The TV is off, and no desire among them to see endless replays of the trauma and grief that has beset their city and to a lesser extent Washington DC. With the lights dimmed there no is option to read a book. After a prolonged round of hugging and soft murmurs of comfort everyone had retreated back to their respective sleeping areas.

They have all settled down as best they can on the mix of camp beds and sleeping mats, and the assorted mix of sleeping bags, duvets and blankets that has been rustled up at short notice. One of the most common complaints about the gym was a lack of cooling but was actually a positive with the temperature in the room feeling relatively comfortable for winter. No doubt the number of bodies also contributed.

Rick and Kate have chosen mats and blankets rather than the awkward camp beds. Their sleeping position is closest the main doors and both are still dressed underneath their blankets including footwear. Their backup pieces – their primary guns are currently being processed as priority by the NYPD CSI technicians following the shoot out - are close to hand.

They know their personal weapons should be superfluous as there are more than thirty heavily armed and alert members of law enforcement and Taylor Matthews protecting them and their families, but they keep them close regardless.

Despite retiring to bed, neither are sleeping. They are not sure how many others in the gym are
either. Momentous does not begin to describe the day. Nor does horrific. Maybe traumatic.

Not a single person had been hungry and the majority of pizza that had been delivered earlier had been redistributed to the cops and other security who showed no signs of such hunger reticence.

Martha and Alexis are sharing a large inflatable mattress but judging by the squeaks and nervous silhouettes, both are struggling to sleep. Val and Jim Beckett are likewise paired off but on separate camp beds and despite the darkness Kate spies a pair of arms are intertwined across the gap.

Desperate to achieve some calm, and quieten her mind, she is trying to fall asleep, and finally mostly succeeding, when he moves, rolling over to be close, bringing her back to wakefulness. Without waiting to confirm that she is awake, he whispers, "You know Kate, this is not exactly how I dreamed it, or how you promised the night of our engagement would be."

Keeping the huff of exasperation to herself, she rolls over to face him, and then leans closer to him, trying to keep her motion and voice undetected by the other residents of the gym.

"Shut up Castle!" Beckett hisses. "Family secret – for now - remember."

"That's just us right now." He observes, adding "that's a very small family," for good measure.

"We'll tell them when we get out of here. Either at or on our way to the safe house that Clare said is being organised."

"Deal."

Then a hand covers the small space between them unerringly locates his left ear and tugs, a little more gently than most yanks he had experienced over the years, he still winces, and she still smiles that infuriating smirk that somehow is far more arousing that it should ever be. "Sorry. Can't help it. Love you so much. Just didn't want you to be disappointed."

"I'm not really disappointed. How can I? You finally asked." Her smile – visible even in the near darkness - says everything else he needs to know. "And I said yes. And I'm sure we will make it up to each other. So rain check okay? Now go to sleep. I love you."

"Love you too future Missus Castle." He's still not sleeping. He wishes they were not sleeping together. But they'll have a lifetime together to make up for that.

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**Virginia, I-66 somewhere near Middelton, 04.03 am**

The government issued sedan impacted the main pillar at speeds in excess of eighty-four mile per hour. The impact zone encompassed the whole width of the car and the front-end crumpled well past the front row of seats and the vehicle concertinaed into approximately high its former length.

"Good-bye you prick!"

Under her blonde wig, the natural red head didn't bother to check that the target was dead. Impact of a large sedan into a bridge support at more than eighty miles an hour defeated all known car safety systems.

"Nice move slick," she compliments the driver.

"I've not lost my touch."
"Good idea to scare him into accelerating."

"Amazing what untrained amateurs do under pressure, and a small bump and didn't even have to
ride him into the concrete."

Behind him he can see the handful of other vehicles on the Interstate come to a halt in a vain effort
to assist at the accident. None had been close enough to make any meaningful identification and
they would be swapping vehicles is less than five minutes. Cameras and tracking were increasing
but had not yet made their fieldcraft obsolete.

"What's next?"

"A trip south of the border."

"Will I need a bikini?"

"Not that sort of wet," he replies, fully intending the double meaning.

"Oh goody!"

"But first I got to report in."

"Really?"

"Yes. In person too. See the new DDO. Bit of a boy scout. I recommend you stay away. There are
a lot of people there who really don't like you."

"I can't begin to imagine why. Is there anything I can do before our trip to Mexico?"

"Nada. You've done California already. I wont ask if you had fun."

"You know I did. He squealed like a trapped pig too."

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New York

Clare had reappeared at the Twelfth shortly after nine in the morning with a large contingent of
Federal Marshalls. Not even giving them time for farewells – it appeared that Gates had finally
gone home sometime earlier and the Boys were not in yet.

Jim barely got time to say goodbye to Val who was staying in New York to deal with the aftermath
of the killings at the firm. Clare briefly introduced them all to the four Taylor Matthews operatives
from LA who would be providing round-the-clock close protection to Val until further notice.

Without further ado the rest had been gathered up with their scant belongings but minus their
electronics and whisked off in a convoy of armoured mini-vans to Newark airport and onto a
business jet.

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Somewhere in North America, about 4 hours later.

The descent is fast, much quicker than any commercial airliner. Almost at military pace.

Rick looks around the cabin of the private jet at his now-extended family.

As discussed scant hours, and sleep, ago he and Kate had announced their engagement once the
plane was airborne. First Kate had slipped the ring on her finger and they had waited. It had been Jim who spotted it first. Everyone had been pleased for them, and it even seemed to bring Alexis a little more alive. Mother of course was over-the-top delighted and more tears were shed. Except by Clare you had simply arched an eyebrow at him and given Beckett a sphinx-like smile.

Across the aisle there is Martha and Jim sitting together, and opposite them Alexis her legs extended across both seats.

He had offered a place to Val, who had declined after a long conversation with Jim. She was staying back in New York to try and clean up the mess and rescue what was now appeared to be her law firm from the legal and finance mire from Jeff Beasley's greed and consequent bloody death. Too many good people had already paid the price for his entanglement in something much more significant than mere money laundering. Three dead at the law offices, and a dozen more injured. And that was just the visible injuries.

Of course Val now had shadows from Taylor Matthews as well as the US Marshall Service and NYPD guarding her. Jim had only come at the insistence of both Kate and Val. Rick had sympathised with the man, there was no escape from that double teaming, harassed to the point of compliance by a pair women who loved him. He was familiar enough with that, and resigned to a future of far worse, even more numerically disadvantaged.

He is extremely aware of the presence of his fiancé sitting beside him on his left side. Her right arm is looped into his left, fingers caressing his ring from underneath. Her left hand rests on top of his left forearm and his right hand rests on her left, his fingers touching her ring. She had her replacement Sig P229 in belt holster on her right hip, and occasional it bumps against him, or he against it. But he won't say anything. He has two pistols in the holdall, and Beckett – well his fiancé he reminds himself with some internal glee - has another for good measure in her bag. Across the table from them, Clare is visibly armed to the teeth and no doubt there may be more in the luggage bay. The crew up front were probably armed too.

Despite it being less than a day this is a new normal for them. One he likes a lot. Assurance so comfortable for them. He had half-expected her to find it awkward or uncomfortable but as ever she continued to surprise him. This time with her flexibility and adaptability. Of course it doesn't hurt that the gentle caress and succour of the rings with intent behind them so potent. Taking strength from each other and the symbolism those circles offer for completing their lives together.

Aside from his family, the presence of Clare in the cabin does not feel too much of an intrusion. Despite the former Special Forces officer being very much in professional mode, he still considers her a friend first, guardian second.

Even with everything else going on he had observed how she hadn't relaxed much until the jet had reached cruising altitude. She's not entirely switched off now as they come into land at this supposed secure and secret location. The menacing Heckler and Koch HK417 battle rifle wedged in beside her is a good indication of that, along with the familiar SIG in a tactical holster on her right thigh. In deference to aviation safety and her fellow passengers, she had unloaded the big weapon once on board, but he was certain the twenty-round magazine would shortly be back in place now that they had landed. This was not a weapon to be trifled with as it 7.62 millimetre rounds were considerably more powerful and lethal than the standard 5.56 millimetre rounds in most assault rifles. Couple that with Clare's highly trained skills and woe unto any bad guys within about four to five hundred yards.

There is a ballistic vest on the seat beside Clare. In fact they all have them. They would all be wearing them before they left the plane.
The approach to the airfield would have been conventional if it were military aircraft but as a civilian executive jet the lower faster run-in had been steep with only a sudden last minute pull-out for a shallower and much lower first pass over but not landing. Again not conventional but according to Clare the pilot wanted to check the runway before landing. The plane executes a swift and steep turn and comes back in for the final approach, and the plane lurches a little as the extra air resistance from the landing gear adds to the deceleration.

The wheels of the executive jet make contact with the runway surface, and the engines are slammed into reverse thrust and the jet brakes sharply, noise dropping, to accommodate the merely long enough runway, fresh snow and a little ice ploughing up and in general contributing to the deceleration. This was not the sort of landing strip that usually saw jet aircraft operations, especially in winter.

No sooner had the wheels touched down and with the plane still moving even with 100% reverse thrust and brake applied, two SUVs were moving from the small terminal building making an intersecting path to the plane.

They pull up either side of the aircraft door offering some shelter from the elements and from anyone observing the arrival.

Sure enough even as the plane made its final braking and the engines cut to idle, Clare had her vest on and then slapped the twenty round magazine back in the rifle. In deference to the still seated passengers she didn't ready the weapon, but it was cradled in her arms as she rose to talk to the flight crew.

For Clare's part she knew Beckett and Castle had eyes on her. She noticed that Rick had his own Glock Nineteen belted on now. He wasn't going to be defenceless.

With the plane stopped, all the passengers had risen, and almost as one set about putting their ballistic vests on. For Castle and Beckett it was a familiar routine. For the other family members it was a new experience, and Rick and Kate assisted them.

Clare already prepared and the cockpit door opens briefly for the co-pilot to put his head out and to nod in her direction. She nods back. All the communication non-verbal.

The co-pilot had emerged from the cockpit, the holstered pistol at his left hip incongruous with the otherwise seemingly normal aviation uniform of dark slakes and a white shirt emblazoned with pilots' wings. He reaches into a locker and pulls out a large parka, and turns to his passengers, "You better rug up warm if you can. Winter is still going strong out here."

**Somewhere Not-New-York**

For her part Kate Beckett-soon-to-be-Castle was quite relaxed. Despite being in the middle of who knows where. Their little family have decided to call it 'Not-New-York' in the absence of any other information. They know they are close the Rockies after approximately four hours flight time from Newark. At the heart of this relaxation is that she entirely trusts Clare with their safety. It is a rare thing, but this former Colonel is extremely competent and exudes honor. If she says they are safe, they are.

She had eyed the powerful battle rifle Clare cradled with a brief moment of envy. She had her own SIG on her person. Castle had a Glock belted on. In her holdall they had backup pieces along with every spare magazine she could find. But they had not come to fight but it did she doubted pistols
would be much use. This was long arm territory.

She needed to stop those thoughts. Clare has assured them all that this was a refuge for them. At least temporarily a haven from any threat posed by Bracken and anyone else. A chance to reset and regroup.

Clare was and remained suitably tight lipped about their actual location. They had been in the air long enough to travel more than half the width of the country and there were mountains that had to be the Rockies to the West.

The SUVs have taken them the short distance from the landing strip to the main compound. Even as they approach the buildings they hear the jet power up and begin taxing for take off. By the time they exit the vehicles the jet is nose up and climbing away.

Entering the largest of the building they find heat, light and surprisingly modern facilities. There they had been introduced to their guardians. There were eleven personnel already at the location, nine men and two women. All appeared to be armed all the time. All had pistols and most with high-powered hunting rifles. The introductions had been first names or nick-names only.

The main compound consisted of four buildings, three of which were currently in use and fourth that there were informed was unused. It was not be entered as there was no power and no heat.

They had been taken down corridors and shown to their living quarters in the second building which was connected by a partially subterranean corridor. There were four rooms off a shared lounge with mini-kitchen and two shared bathrooms.

She thought back to the preparations to leave the Loft.

The repair crews could wait. Same for insurance assessor but even Castle was not confident his insurance covered assault by military weaponry.

Once the seriously injured Taylor Matthews team member had been taken off on a gurney, their injuries, all minor, were treated by another team of EMTs. The slash to Martha's arm was shallow, bloody but shallow. Still the Diva did not wave it off, the shock of events all too real for her.

Her Dad and Val had come into the Rick's office.

She and Rick had been prepping their gear.

Rick's pair of Glocks were ready, having been stripped, checked and re-assembled. She would be taking the smaller Twenty-two and Rick the Nineteen. Rick was reassembling the Walther P380 just as she was finishing with her Taylor Matthews provided backup Sig P229.

Both lawyers blanched. Handling her weapon was not something she ever much did around her Dad. To see her and Castle competently checking and prepping their guns would be a shock.

There was no time to return to the Hamptons to retrieve the other weapons but they had enough for now. Especially considering the additional firepower Taylor Matthews bought to the party. Hopefully none of it would be necessary.

Once the weapons were done, they would pack bags with clothes, toiletries and other essentials ready to depart for the Precinct before being taken to a safe location.

The FBI and Attorney General's office had offered security, the US Marshall Service as well, the
complete works. Instead Taylor Matthews had stepped up, and calmly taken over, ignoring protests from all parties except the one that actually mattered – Rick and his family.

Handing themselves into Clare's safe keeping had been that easy. First they had all been stripped of their communications devices so there was no way for them to be tracked. No laptops, no eBooks (damn Wi-Fi everywhere). Nothing digital. All seized devices were scanned, shutdown and then placed in a tempered secure case which was locked.

They were given just enough time to make a handful of essential calls. Rick had called Steve his lawyer and

Of course wanting to get them to a safehouse and implementing it were two different things. For one, there multiple objections of family members to overcome. For once Martha had conceded gracefully. Rick and Kate knew this was the best course of action.

Alexis had refused to leave until she was satisfied that Jane was being properly taken care of. She had been steadfast in her initial refusal to depart without first visiting her injured bodyguard in hospital. This had been the cause of some tense moments before Clare had offered a compromise. A video session so Alexis could see that her friend was alive. Any attempt to beg from an actual visit was meet with iron refusal.

Val had refused to go. The firm needed her. Jim had not argued to stay but likewise, he had been equally adamant that Val be looked after. He had almost gone toe-to-toe with Clare before being satisfied that his girlfriend, a term that would have once triggered Kate, was being properly protected.

He knows them, so he shouldn't continue to be amazed by the selflessness of his family. Of how they think of others ahead of themselves.

Kate is watching him. As ever that freakish mind meld thing seems to be happening.

"You. You do this." At his puzzled look, his fiancé had continued. "You set the lead, the example, and they all follow. For years you have done it for them, and me. You can't but help be a good influence on the people around you Rick."

"Right back at you Detective."

Not New York, the Next Day.

No one would admit it but they had slept better here. The beds were superior for one. Still there was not much appetite to be found even if the food produced by two of their guardians had been actually far above expectations.

Now they needed to fill in the time while they waited until they were told it was safe for them to return. Without there electronics there were only the scant resources available at this location. Maybe forty novels and a couple of hundred old periodicals. Almost all military or law enforcement related.

In the immediate aftermath of the simultaneous attacks on the Loft, Rick had unleashed his own unrestricted warfare on Bracken. The first round Internet dump to Wikileaks and other sites was just one step.

The idea had first struck him years ago. When Kate had been in trouble and he had been unable or worse excluded from helping her. As so frequently observed, he's not a cop, he has no badge, no
gun, nor legal authority. But he was not without his own arsenal of tools, both offensive and
defensive, that he can wield.

His intellect and his words. His most potent weapons.

Now hidden away in secret base somewhere in the north west of the nation, they had more time at
their disposal to work and refine their stash of information. Clare had reluctantly allowed the them
to take an USB memory stick with all the information secured on it. Castle had managed to get
Gates to agree to using the precinct's copiers to print four copies. Three to take with them, and one
for Gates, along with an electronic copy.

Kate looks up from the document that had her attention for the last few minutes to find her father
watching her.

"When?"

"For the last two years as we learnt more."

Jim Beckett had been reading a copy too. He turns to his future son-in-law.

"Well Rick, there's a lot that wouldn't be admissible in court, but I guess that wasn't your intended
audience."

"No Sir," At the man's frown, he corrects, "No Jim, it was not." This gets a warmer smile, a nod
and then the frown. The lawyer clearly has issues with the approach. But this is war – of sorts – and
legal niceties are not what is required. So neither say any more on the matter. It was too late to
change it now.

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Jim seems more relaxed now he is out of the immediate
line of fire, and more so that he feels assured of Val's security with a Taylor Matthews team
backing up the NYPD, US Marshalls and who knows what else. Clare gets him a status update at
least twice a day but refuses to let them communicate directly.

Leave it to his Mother – who has been reading his stories longest – to fire into reviewer mode first.
Putting down the latest version of the summary she almost exclaims, "Darling, this is the most
serious thing you've ever written. I always knew you had it in you."

Rick is watching warily so Alexis also joins in. "But it is. It's actually good Dad. Just as
compelling as one of your novels," there is hint of tongue on her lips, "plus no sex scenes. You
really have no idea how mortifying it is to have your friends read them out loud."

Beside him Kate mumbles to herself. Oh she has an idea. He sensibly has no response, and a scowl
at his mother prevents any further unhelpful commentary. There may be a giggle from Alexis but it
difficult to discern above the audible sigh from his fiancé. Jim too remains silent. He is grateful for
that too. Kate probably is also.

"I didn't write it to be a bestseller. There's too much blood on the pages, on my hands."

"No!" His right hand is yanked and it is a sign of her irritation that Kate makes no allowance for
his shoulder in the very firm pull. He winces even as she continues, "You do not get to make that
call Rick. None of it is your fault. If is not mine, or my Mom's, it is not yours. Do you understand
me? The blame is elsewhere with the criminals. With Bracken, Coonan, Court or whatever his
name is."

"Exactly so, Bug," chimes in Jim, unconsciously using his pet name for Kate. Alexis and Martha
look equally forceful.

He wants to argue, he does, but in the face of such adamant determination he backs down but does not recent his self-blame. The burn in his heart and his head is not going away anytime soon.

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**Washington DC**

Will Sorenson was tired. The eighteen hour days had definitely caught up with him. He was glad to be back in DC. He couldn't quite call it home yet, certainly not based on the lack of time actually spend in his rented apartment.

He thought about grabbing something from his fridge but then he remembered the open carton of milk before he left for New York. Rather than chance it, he settled for a glass of water. He would face the peril of his expired diary product and anything else tomorrow. Villante had given him the day but he was restless.

New York had been pretty successful, so much so that he was back in DC inside two days. Bracken's brother had not provided too much new information but had been useful in confirming a number of things that had not been previously verified satisfactorily. Likewise the liaison with the NYPD and other authorities into the attacks was going as well as could be expected and the last thing they needed was another Fed underfoot.

The only 'miss' had been the disappearance into an undisclosed secure location of his two special witnesses.

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**Not New York.**

The accommodation was relatively basic and aside from the limited range of TV channels and their books there was little else to do. Even Martha had remarked on the absence of connectivity. Alexis positively chaffed without the conveniences of the digital age.

They were allowed outside in daylight hours and all of them took the opportunity.

There was a very Spartan training room but only Beckett and Castle used it.

Desperate for some alone time they had sneaked off and in typical Beckett/Castle fashion had ignored the prohibition to enter the fourth building in the complex.

"Castle?"

"Hmm, no power or heat. This is not going to work."

She huffed at him, eyebrow cocked in question and approbation.

"While we're here did you want to look around?"

His flashlight illuminated the scratched text on the wall.

"What is that? Arabic?"

"Yes. It is the opening line to an Islamic prayer."

"How do you know that Rick? Actually never mind. Research."
"What is this place?"

"I think I can guess. I think "

Clare had held her peace during the most recent discussions. She inclined her head towards the door, and Rick and Kate rise to follow her out.

"I'm leaving in the morning. Heading to Washington DC first to meet with our leadership team. We have some work to do and they need me. Then I'll be back in New York."

Neither the author nor his fiancée say anything.

"You'll be safe here. They're a good team. It should only be a few more days, certainly less than a week before you can leave. Events are moving fast. They may have made the opening moves but we're running them down fast. Bracken's re-capture also helped. Very few of them are driven by idealism, and there is no more money. From what we can tell something went wrong with their financing and they were either ripped off "

"Won't stop us missing you Clare."

"That's very sweet Rick but some of us work for a living. We can't all have a family camp-out in the wilderness."

Now where had Rick heard that opening line before?

"Talking of the camp-out, are you going to share what this place actually is?"

"Prefer not to Beckett."

"Tough. This was at least temporarily a rendition site. Correct?"

Clare blinks once before answering, "Yes. CIA black, black operation but only briefly back in the early days after 9/11. How did you find out?"

"The Arabic writing on the wall in the south bunkhouse."

"The bunkhouse you were told not to enter or use?"

"Yeah that one. Red rag to a bull, you should know that by now."

"Look it was way-before Taylor Matthews existed. It has never been used for anything in the time we have used these facilities."

"The doors that locked from the outside. The lockable hatches on some of the doors."

"This is not our facility. We just borrow it on occasion. And it has not been used for that since that one time, at least that is what we were assured of."

"But you don't just keep a place like this, with the guards and the expenses running for no purpose."

"No. You are correct. But you will have to take my word that it is not used for illegal activities."

She regards Beckett with that penetrating gaze, "Best I can do."

"Damn Clare, I'll take your word. But I don't like what this place represents."
"Yeah, well aware from the black and white with the NYPD, there is a lot of grey."

"Who are you trying to convince Clare? Me or yourself?"

They didn't really need the back-channel updates via the Taylor Matthews personnel on site. They could watch it 24 hours a day on cable news, national via satellite but there was no local news.

Their butcher's bill from the first wave of attacks was eighty seven dead, more than two hundred and sixty serious injuries, and more than a thousand with less immediately life-threatening injuries and traumas. The death toll included innocent civilians, more than a dozen local and state police officers, fourteen federal agents, and in one case a Taylor Matthews operative.

But with their leaders arrested and Bracken's lieutenants vanished, and no longer on the offensive with the surprise momentum of the initial ambushes and assassinations, the survivors of the various paramilitary arms of Bracken and Court's organisation rapidly turned to flight over fight.

What has followed was a manhunt for the ages.

Those few that could vanished or went to ground but for many there was no escape. As a furious nation's law enforcement closed in, the majority of the fugitives surrendered but too many refused and did not cooperate, and in the process left multiple new victims in their path.

Some of those suspects went out in a blaze of false glory, and fortunately no more innocents died in those exchanges, and although there were further law enforcement casualties there were a handful more fatalities.

Some figured if they stopped running, and were the first to cooperate, they would be able to cut better deals. But it was a vengeful nation pursuing them and they would be, and ultimately remain disappointed.

With Bracken arrested and arraigned without bail, attention had switched to his number two. James Court had vanished off the face of the radar. The consensus was that the man had an escape plan and had executed it.

**Beesley, Wax & Drummond Lawyers**

The crime scene tape still divided much of the executive area but Val did her best to not let it affect her, and just as importantly ensure that the few brave staff that had answered her call could see that. Still no one even approached the CEO's office and the secretary's desk. Nothing had been removed yet and it was possible to see the blood stained carpet that was no longer fully covered by the crime scene cloths.

She was surprised at how quickly she had got used to the security detail. There were always two with her at all times. Plus there were at least two pairs of US Marshalls as well as at least one pair of NYPD uniforms on site.

She had been working the phones non-stop. Calling the partners, senior staff, their clients. It was too early to tell if it was working. The city seemed to be having a hang over from the attacks and she wasn't sure if the numbers staying away reflected solely on the traumatic events at the firm, or the city at large.
She missed Jim but letting him go with his daughter and Rick Castle's family had been the right thing to do. Her shadows had passed on a couple of status updates to confirm that they had arrived safely and all was well. She was tempted to give the guard a hug and a kiss and ask for it to be conveyed back but the guard had given her a wry smile as if knowing what she was contemplating and she had given up. For now.

She did miss Jim. He would have jumped right in beside her and she could really do with a hand right now.

Not New York

Aside from following the news, Rick and Kate kept themselves busy with paperwork.

This sequestered hideaway was only temporary and they knew what awaited them back in the real world. Between the Feds, the NYPD, press and probably others they had not considered they needed to have all their information ready and presentable. So Rick and Kate began to update all their case notes along with the more formal reports, and prepare them just like they would for a trial. It was not something Rick had a lot of experience with as Gates had never sanctioned or tolerated it. Prior to his death Roy had wanted to keep that line too, and to avoid any potential legal complications. As a result Rick's status as a legal observer and consultant had rarely been raised by either the prosecution or the defence. A large chunk of that was down to the solid police work by Beckett's team. And keeping the author out of the paperwork as much as possible.

This time more than half the evidence came directly from Rick. They were meticulous and precise. Working carefully to ensure they clearly documented the facts and the primary information sources from any supposition, or conclusions. Disappointingly there was a large volume of information that was not present or verifiable. They could only hope that other investigations had as many of the gaps covered as possible.

Jim Beckett knew his daughter was a great cop but in those days hiding out in the woods somewhere in the heart of the nation, he witnessed just how exceptional she truly was in cooperation with her partner. He was comfortable with the romantic side of the pair (within the usual parental limits which seemingly did not apply to Martha), but the depth to the professional side of their partnership was a revelation to witness first hand.

It still felt somewhat unnatural how easily they slipped from Katie and Rick into Beckett and Castle.

Alexis sat beside him watching the couple work. Another point in question. He was still adjusting to the knowledge that this very smart and beautiful young woman would be his grand-daughter at some point in the near future.

Depositing a mug of very mediocre package hot chocolate on the place mat in front of the man, she ventures, "I'd never seen Dad like this." Until Kate is unsaid but acknowledged by both of them.

"Nor I. Sorry Alexis, that's not quite right. I've seen Katie like this on her own on a handful of occasions but never the two of them.

"They really are partners in every sense of the word."

"Yes they are. Her mother would be so happy for her." He looks at the pair of lovebirds wistfully.

"Does it still hurt?" Alexis' question is not unexpected but he is surprised by how much we wanted
to answer her, "I'm sorry if that is too intrusive, I guess we're not really good at boundaries sometimes in our family."

"It is alright Alexis. I guess I should get used to it as we are going to be an extended family. I won't lie, losing Johanna was the worst possible thing I could have faced. I coped at the beginning - barely - but when Katie went back to college then I didn't. I'm still ashamed of my weakness. How easily I slipped. It was a long path back. I didn't see it at the time but I needed help, and the solution is not at the bottom of a whisky bottle.

"As well as my relationship with Katie, my career took a hit but I am grateful for the chances to resume and to make it as far as I have.

"And now, I can't believe how blessed I have been. Being with Val has made a big difference. Before I would say I was content. Now, I would say, a few key issues aside, that I am happy. Much happier than I ever expected, or hoped to be."

"I think Kate is happy for you too. I know I am. Dad and Grams too. I like her. Val I mean. I was a bit worried she'd be all business but she's sassy and funny."

"That she is. It took me far to long to see that."

"I think we all worry about family, it is part of what family is. I know I worry about my Dad. I have done for years. He gave up so much for me, and lost bits of himself. Then he met Kate and well that was that. At the very beginning I told him it was different but none of us – especially the two of them - realized how much.

"It took time to reconcile myself with the risks he's taken. I do understand why. Especially now. It still scares me.

"I don't think it ever goes away. Katie starting as rookie officer was terrible for me. I had several relapses. Ironically it was the first time she got injured badly enough to be admitted to hospital that actually started me on the path to long-term recovery.

"Do you mind if I ask how you are Alexis?"

"I guess I am recovered from the shock of it all. I didn't really have time to be scared when it happened. Just react. Everything was so fast. I felt so sick afterwards.

"You know, I used to think I would like to do some of what Kate and Dad does. Not the whole cop thing, but maybe private investigations. Or something involved in criminal matters."

"And now?"

"But the world is a lot scarier and darker than I ever want to discover. I would like to go back to a time before that. But I know I can't. Regardless I don't want to follow in my Dad's footsteps. I want to do something that helps the community but I'll do it from another direction. Do you think my Dad and Kate would be upset?"

"I don't think so Alexis. Katie is very much a supporter of independent action. And I think for your dad, he will be happy whatever you choose so long as you are truly comfortable with your decision."

Observing the her Dad and Alexis talking together, Kate takes the moment to draw Rick away.
"How are you?"

His lips purse, considering. "Angry. Fucking pissed actually."

"Never have guessed," she deadpans and draws a laugh from her partner.

"I would do anything for my daughter, my family and close friends really. But for Alexis there are no limits to the extent I will go, the darkness I would delve, embrace even, to keep her safe.

"Well let’s hope that we never have to find that out Rick. I don't doubt that commitment, but I would be happy if you never found out what it is like to take someone's life or inflict pain so mercilessly. Even for family."

"I know it is something you live with, and it is one of your strengths. How much reflection, thought, compassion even for the wicked.

"You know me Beckett. I'm a writer. Imagining worst case scenarios is stock-in-trade. And after the event in her childhood it is something that never quite goes away. And recently it has been near the forefront."

"I wish you had told me. Shared. Rick." It is a gentle chastisement, one partner to another.

"You know one of the reasons Alexis attended Marlow Prep?"

She shakes her head. He has shared much but this is new information.

"They have so many children of wealthy parents – and by wealthy I mean way more money than I'll ever possess. So they have policies and procedures in place for kidnapping awareness and prevention. And if something did happen I thought it would be someone else not Alexis that was targeted. I know that is a terrible thought but that is how I rationalized it. But in the real world it doesn't work that way, and now my girl has been exposed to the darker nature of life.

"And now. I just want to keep her and mother as far away as possible from what we do. And sometimes I don't know how to do that. It scares and shames me that I didn't consider those risks for a long time. Not seriously enough. That I didn't listen to you. You tried so many times to make me see."

"And then I didn't. I was selfish too Castle. My shooting me woke up to that. One of the reasons I didn't call you. Trying to protect you. Your family."

"Our family," he corrects, caressing the ring.

"The annual security drills with Taylor Matthews, the personal security. I treated it like a game, something fun and lightweight, like Zombie survival camp."

"That's a thing?"

"Oh yes Beckett." He takes in her look of total bemusement, "It is definitely a thing!"

"Right, of course it is."

"You know what this means?"

She shakes her head before she can stop herself.

"We have to go!"
She groans. There was zero chance he would forget about this? Or let her get out of it. Oh well it could be fun.

**Langley, Virginia**

The man is well built, a smart grey beard, close cut gunmetal hair. Spectacles that he now actually needs sometimes. The suit is tailored, but not obviously expensive. The body still lean and possibly, no probably lethal.

What caught most observers out was the eyes. They were cold. Analytical. Calculating but if one was to look at the right moment the same steel with a trace of blue eyes would stare back with a hint of mischief.

The elevator is certainly taking its time. Fortunately he is the only one in it. His glare had scared off the pair of children that had tried to ride with him. Despite the lack of human observation, he is well aware he is being monitored, so he remains remarkably unanimated.

He doesn't come in often. It is not his kind of place. Too many suits and not enough spooks. Certainly not of his kind. The genuine ones. People with purpose. Backed up with the skills and the intent to use them.

Well the meeting was interesting enough. And the reasons for the in person briefing rightly justified. The Director of Operations just told him to take care of the loose end that was James Court. Nothing more was said but that was more than enough. He knew what was required despite the lack of any other provided parameters. Full sanction. It had been a while since he had one of those that actually included direct permission for the usual outcome of his operations.

Danberg was there too. He quite likes the man. There is a bit of steel in him but he remains a neophyte in comparison to old hands like himself. But Danberg had proven himself with the operation in New York and the successful close out of the double agent, even waiting until the last possible moment in the hope of getting every potential scrap of information. Sophia had been good. In more ways than one. That at least was something he shared with his son. He briefly chuckled, mainly to himself but enough to crack his lips into a small vertical movement. He had no doubt that Richard Castle would be horrified at the thought, but he had left those human conventions behind long ago.

"Who is James Court?" the Boy Scout had ventured. The DO had ignored the question effectively shutting it down. He agreed with that approach. Sharing of information was a fucking disease and in this digital age one with so little real security. Yet unlike Danberg he did actually know who James Court really was. And he is pretty sure no one in the room who also knew was going to give up his name. Not when it ties a lot of them back into a number of beyond black operations that need to remain well in the past. Things that had provided James Court with limited protection when his criminal activities were noted and reported.

The ping of the doors opening in the lobby brings him back. He still scans for threats and targets as he exits the elevator car and strides for the exit, unclipping the visitor badge to hand back to the bored security contractor riding out another low pay shift. Another sign of the times. Another mistake by those who only care about the bottom line.

From his office, Martin Danberg watches the man named Hunt exit the building through the security monitors.
For his part Danberg is pretty damn sure that the target's name was not his real one. Who was James Court or whoever he is? The whole thing screamed alias and worse black-ops cover-up.

Mind you he is equally sure that the man the Direct of Operations just ordered to clean up is also hiding behind more than an alias as well.

He also knows better than to go looking. At least right now. He'll admit to some curiosity about their target but he knows that it likely ties back to some mutual black operations that the old guard want to have swept up permanently. And the sweeper, well the scary arsehole can keep his anonymity for a while longer.

Meanwhile he had another problem. One that was about to become far more pressing.

Funding. And as Deputy Director of Operations, budgets were his direct responsibility.

Although not directly party to the criminal activities, the Agency was piggy backing off similar methodologies to pipeline funds for off-the-books projects. They were going to need new income streams. And soon.

"Hello Tim."

"Deputy Director Operations no less. Congrats Man!" Danberg frowned. He hated the title. His counterpart at the NSA knows this.

"How's life in Kindergarten?" He can at least have a little poke back.

"Not so bad. Some of the recent recruits are really good."

"Sounds promising. Talking of promising, you said you have an idea for us. Something to help with base acquisitions."

"Yeah Martin. I think we do. But I'll go on record that was not my idea. Comes from the new kid – Nathan. I'd like him to pitch it to you. He's here with me."

Danberg already has the records of the NSA team in front of him. Charles Nathan Walker. Former black and white hacker. Caught working for the mob but turned and then to WITSEC and then onwards, ultimately handed over the NSA.

"Go ahead."

"Umm, hello sir."

The new kid is nervous. Danberg almost laughs out loud. He never makes people nervous. Not like the field ops agents. Like Mister Steel Grey. Something about the man bugged him. He seemed familiar but he would swear he had never met him before.

"Relax kid. What is it you want to pitch?"

"Well, I am not sure how much you know about computer operations but we have all these super computers, and they are not always busy so there is spare capacity. No we can't lease it out, but there is a way we could make use of it to generate funds. Literally."

Danberg is intrigued. "I'm listening."

"Have you heard the term crypto-currency?"
"Um, no. Give me the laymen's guide."

USP Lee, Virginia.

He was getting impatient. He had wondered when they would reach out. He had been half-expecting it sooner. They had promised.

He had upheld his end of the bargain. Simple really. All he had to do was appear to all intents and purposes as the prime mover in the grand conspiracy. And this he had done, and done well.

But nothing. No contact. No anything.

Something must have happened.

He had no intention of serving out any part of his sentence.

What to do?

Turks and Cacaos

Two hours ago James Court, or rather Jim Bucknor as his suitably weathered and entirely genuine passport stated, had stepped off the small Island hopper from the Dutch Antilles with his wife of sixteen days.

Outside of arrivals they had been met and the blacked out Mercedes limo took the American couple to the pre-rented luxury two story villa in the gated estate. Outside the walls armed guards stood watch, and inside liveried staff waited at their beck and call.

Whilst his wife distracted herself with ordering champagne and snacks to be delivered to their villa he had retrieved the secure tablet from his carry-on bag. Logging in via VPN and several dark-web proxy relays later, he checks up on the status of the operations on a message board.

He had sent two decoys off on long distance runs on international flights. At least one had been still moving less than 48 hours ago. The other had been detained at O'Hare before they even started the second leg. Damn '9/11' – it had actually given rise to some improvements in aviation security.

Plus there are a lot of pissed off people looking for him. Or more specifically James Court. Back in the United States and abroad. He was not about to give them any satisfaction. He knew how to run and hide. He had been doing it much of his adult life.

A knock at the door marks the arrival of their luggage. Chuckling to himself he tips the bellhop generously. He has plenty of money. Jim and James both. He had left most of James Court's wealth behind. Give more than a hint of a panic-driven flight. But in truth most of it was well enough hidden that it could take the authorities years to locate it. If ever. And that was before Vulcan Simmons had wrought his final act of defiance from beyond the carnal pit somehow wrecking financial sabotage on Future First. Simmons had taken especial care to ensure that the financial ruin befall Bracken's super-sized slice of the pie.

He didn't need that money anyway. He had not skimped when creating the now-decade old false identity he now inhabits. Jim Bucknor was a retired day trader with more than a few million in a variety of off-shore banks beyond the purview of the IRS and anyone else. He just looked like another typical tax exile hiding out in the Caribbean with his trophy wife. More importantly with ten years of transaction history including with the IRS, Homeland Security and other agencies he would comfortably sail under the radar of virtually every search parameter.
Talking of his wife, the pop of a champagne cork announced she was ready to celebrate. He turns to find her with two crystal glasses waiting for him. She was watching him with those Doe-Brown eyes, her lips slightly moist.

"Want to go start christening the rooms Jim?"

"Sure Babe. Why not." He'd show her how he didn't need a damn blue pill.

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**Not New York.**

One of her favorite things is to walk outside in the snow. So clean and unsullied nothing like winter in New York. There are several trails that skirt the clearing and pass through the tall trees that surround the compound. She goes several times a day but always in daylight or what passes for daylight here.

After checking with the guards they are told they are permitted to take walks so long as they stick to the paths, stay out of the deep woods, check in and out, take a radio and at there are at least two people going out together.

She would not have minded a few solo walks but accepts the constraint without protest. After all it mostly is she and Castle - of course. But she changes it up, her dad, Alexis, Martha even. Usually just a pair of them together.

On this occasion it her Dad tucked in alongside her as they crunch through some new snow they fell in the middle of an afternoon. This is the last walk of the day. The weather is not great, the wind is up, bracing and bitting through the multiple layers, and there is light fall of sleet that cannot make it to snow but is at least not reduced to rain.

Unlike some of her other companions she and her dad navigate the path with long periods of comfortable silence. She missed this with him. Walks with her mother were often very talky.

"I like this," her dad declares, stopping for a moment to rescue a fallen pine cone from the ground beside the path. Holding it up they both admire the natural object, burnished silver by a long winter's rest, before he carefully plants it back where it lay.

"Me too."

"You used to love walking with your mother. Always so secretive, both walking ahead or behind so I could not hear or join in." Such a melodramatic sigh. Has he been spending too much time with Martha?

Is he teasing her? "Girls' business!" she protests, "You should know that." Then for good measure she pokes him back, "I think it was more to avoid your interruptions."

He wears an offended look but cannot maintain it in the face of what is nowhere near one of her interrogation stares. Oh she's got him, a sly smile now on his face. Amusement she thinks and he confirms it.

"Oh your mother explained that quite well enough." She loves how they can do this now. Talk about her without the constant grief. "Plus me interrupt? I think that you have a case of mistaken identity"

"I'll give you that," the smile creeping around her concession. He was always economical with his words even before, and after it almost qualified as singular, so sparse were they. They have healed
and they are both better for it, but he'll never be verbose despite being a lawyer.

"Anyway, if you need your head talked off, you have Rick. Or Martha." The last has a little bite compared to the tease of the first name. He and Martha were so incompatible it was laughable. She couldn't believe Lanie had once tried to suggest the two could date. Or that she and Castle could go on double dates with them! Talk about off-the-planet! Regardless the two of them put their best foot forward for family occasions and it was no longer excruciating, merely exciting with the odd faux-pas, the latter usually from the Grand Dame.

"Don't sound so happy about it."

"I think I should. They love you. Alexis too. You make a happy family."

"We are," she does not deny it, "but you are part of it too," she cannot control the lip nibble even as she adds, "Val too. Sorry I was a bit of a brat about it. Her."

"Not too much. I had feared worse you know."

"Really?" she is somewhat stunned by that admission. "I wasn't really that much of a brat was I?"

"Oh no. Nothing like those teenage years."

"Thanks I think."

"I think I deserve some." She gapes at him. He grins back and offers his gloved hand. She takes it without hesitation. They fall silent, content in the mutual connection.

Somehow their walking and talking has taken them as far as this track goes before it disappears into the woods. The end of the line. If on cue the wind and sleet increases.

"Time to head back Dad."

"Good idea. Plus if we hurry we can beat Martha to the kitchen."

It should be funnier but she really was an average cook and even she and her dad could comfortably outdo her best effort. "Oh God you're right it is her turn. Let's hurry." She turns, hands still connected and tug him with her as her stride lengthens.

"Hey, just take it easy."

"Keep up old man."

**Turks and Cacaos, two days after arrival.**

He'd been out to the bank to handle some face-to-face transactions. The institution was discreet enough. He had been sensible enough to choose one that mainly focused on legit transactions – well as legit as they come on the island – and also one that the CIA or any other agency did not use. It would be tempting chance too much. The bank customers would be mortified if they knew just how much parts of the US government know thanks to their leverage over the island. Despite his paranoia he had been pleased to discover no alerts had been set off and his funds were all present and fully available. If he wasn't already, he would be home free soon.

Feeling the mood lighten, he made a snap decision. They would go out tonight – for the first time since arriving - and in the meantime he would get Fran to help him celebrate again. She was
surprisingly willing. Which he liked. She had also procured some little blue pills. He had been a
cynic but had to admit they worked wonders after he could not quite stay the pace after the first
day.

The bank provided limo dropped him at the front of the villa complex. Tipping the driver he was
stopped for a quick but reasonable check of his credentials. The uniformed guards already know
him as 'Mister Jim' but still checked his ID. Admitted through the pedestrian gate he whistled
cheerfully as he strolled the hundred and fifty yards to the front entrance of their villa.

They hadn't bothered to lock the doors during the day. The estate was secured and armed guards
patrolled the fence line and common buildings and connecting roads.

"Darling I'm home." For once there was no pretense in his address. He really did like her. He kicks
off his slip on shoes.

No answer.

"Fran?"

No answer again. Not unusual. She sometimes had her iPod headphones in. Probably just sunning
herself by their private plunge pool. That could be interesting. She did like to work on the all-over
tan. He could appreciate that.

It took only a minute to check the downstairs rooms, and look out into the private courtyard
containing the pool. Nothing. He was more than half-disappointed to not see her there in one of her
skimpy swimsuits. Or less.

Where was Francesca? Despite the rushed marriage of convenience he had discovered that he
actually really quite likes her. He does not love her of course. That weakness is for fools. But is
equally convinced that she does not love him as well. But she really likes his money, and the
freedom it brings. Well enough not to ask awkward questions. And it doesn't feel like a mercenary
transaction. If nothing else it is nice to have a bed companion who doesn't run on a clock nor
charge based on how he gets off.

He moves rapidly up the wide stair case that dominates the open-plan lobby, pleased that even now
his breathing does not alter. Sixty-three and he still has it.

She is not in the master bedroom but her black swimsuit lies the cover. He darts through the large
walk-through and master en-suite. Nothing.

Slightly alarmed now he continues his search. What had the fool woman got up to?

He finds her in the second bedroom. Flat out on the bed. He scans the room and hallway on
instinct. Nothing. A second looks tells him more. This is not natural. One more look tells him that
his wife was out of the game. Alive? Probably?

Now at maximum alertness he searches for a weapon, anything.

Then he surprises himself, and he actually takes a moment to turn back and properly check on Fran.
As suspected she is still alive but likely drugged based upon her posture, and shallow but
discernible movement of her not inconsiderable chest.

Chiding himself on his moment of weakness. She was of no use to him. She was not an asset or a
player. Simply part of his cover and a biological need that had conveniently become more. The
hook up had originally just been for fun but then he had considered his position. He had needed a cover and the attractive widow, childless with only distant cousins, Francesca Moore, was near perfect. He had cultivated her over a period of months last year. Got her hooked on him. It wasn't exactly a chore. She was very fit if somewhat surgically enhanced, but despite her blonde locks and bust she was smart and fun. Very keen on money and he had more than enough of that. But she was also discreet. Asking no personal or more important business questions.

As he stepped back from her, she shifted slightly, head lolling, no sound coming from her mouth, but he can see the spittle and huff of air that bubbles in the drool. He is surprised at the relief he feels. Getting old. Soft.

Reaching for her neck, he double checked. A firm pulse. Good. Not dead or dying.

But unconscious at the very least. Very unconscious. Unnaturally so. She did not take drugs, or smoke, or even drink a lot.

Someone had been here. Likely still here. That was concerning.

He didn't have a gun. It wasn't something encouraged here. Perhaps he should have considered but stealth had been his major asset. And it would have caused local complications if discovered. Or used.

Of course there is nothing usable in the otherwise empty and unused second bedroom or adjacent en-suite to improvise as a weapon. He is not sure one would be useful. Depends who had found him. If it is who he suspects, then no weapon would help.

Emerging from the bedroom he senses the presence on the landing before he spots the figure in the shadows of the other end of the long marble expanse. They had been reclining against the wall. Waiting for him.

He is not sure whether to be impressed by their san froid, or angered by their overt confidence.

Damn! Out of time already. He has an escape package nearby at another bank. Passports, money, all the essentials. All he needed to make an escape. He just needs an opportunity to get there.

The figure emerges from the shadows and moved, glided was more appropriate, to block his escape path down the stairs, stepping into the center of the floor and into the light.

Now he knows for certain it is an escape he is never getting. This is a professional. They at least gave him that much credit and respect.

No longer in the shadows, his opponent sharpens in his vision.

Not Him!

Looking closer he observes that it is not even another male.

A woman.

There is momentary relief was that it hadn't been Him. The old man. He would have died of course, and it could have been brutal. But in a perverse way it would have been a bit of an honor for them to send Hunt after him. Or even that psychotic bitch.

Could it be Her? The old man's partner. He dismisses the thought, the rabid bitch preferred guns.
There was no sign of firearms. This one was coming in for the kill up-close.

But any relief vanishes as the woman moves, advancing menacingly, all efficiency and grace. Fuck! This was an insult. In the old days they would never had sent a woman. Not for an operator like him.

But maybe one he'd survive. Perhaps. He is no self-deceiving fool, but maybe there is a slight chance.

He wastes no time. He strikes out, lunging for her with no warning. His speed belied his years. It had been a while since he had taken a life with his bare hands. He wouldn't hesitate to do so again. Not with the maximum stakes.

The assassin slipped away from his attempted blows, his shots going high and wide. Shit! Not a single hit made.

In no time, she came at him. Left hand, left hand, right foot, left knee, right elbow, left hand again. And she made contact with every strike.

He attempted to counter, failed and launched his own wave of attacks.

It took him less than ten more seconds to face absolute reality.

He was in shape, especially for his age, but the woman was younger, but equally if not more experienced, and possibly better trained. Fitter too if hints of the physique beneath the black, fairly close fitting tactical gear were to be believed. There was no visible weapon, no gun, no knives. A couple of deep pockets could conceal something of course.

Having yet another set of blows swatted away with ease, and one grab not only broken but reversed, he rapidly concludes for certain that not only is she also fitter but stronger too. The last rankled a bit. She's a fucking woman.

Regardless he lashed out for a third time, on this occasion with a waist high pivot kick, trying to catch her hip or upper leg. The woman took the shot, seemingly effortlessly riding the blow, and bounced out of reach of any follow-up strike, a silent simile upon her lips. Her left hand beckons him.

He scowled in return and stepped up his efforts, determined to survive even as his reserves of energy deplete. He had not trained as he used to for many years. The knowledge remains but the body betrays him. He is breathing heavily now. Her chest moves with the calm cadence of someone totally at ease. This fires his anger more.

Another rapid fire exchange and he grunts from a deflected half kick to the sternum, even if he did land a blow on her torso which got no reaction at all.

As they come together a further time, he misses it in the blur of her limbs. He doesn't see the end but he feels it intensely.

The short black rod extended suddenly from under the sleeve of her left arm and in one liquid motion she lunged forward, under his guard and surprisingly gently bought the end of the weapon upwards into his right armpit and in contact.

'Crack!'
There is no external sound but the noise reverberates through his body as the electric shock overcomes all coordination.

He was on fire. From the inside.

Muscles losing all control, he collapse as his central nervous system short-circuits, and falls convulsing hitting the solid marble floor with such force his right shoulder dislocates along with nose and jaw, several teeth coming loose, his body bloodied and broken.

The woman fades from his blurred vision even as the agony overwhelms his body.

Somehow he still felt the pin-pick on his bare foot.

All the time the female assassin said nothing.

His last thought was that she wasn't even breathing heavily. How lame. He fades, and dies, his last moments of comprehensions clouded in own disappointed in himself.

The assassin was long gone from the Caribbean island before his body was found at base of the marble staircase. The so very recently widowed Francesca had recovered consciousness and found him. She made a panicked call to the estate security team. They and the private doctor responded and then reluctantly called the local police. Within hours Francesca was whisked to a secure private room inside one of the island's elite private hospitals under guard from a team from the local CIA station and the FBI representative from the nearest US consulate on the way.

News breaks that America's Number One Fugitive - James Court - had been found dead in a Caribbean villa of an apparent heart attack.

His real – but by-all-accounts including hers - unknowing and deceived wife found him in the morning after she came to after what was at first reported to be a heavy drinking session. She collapsed in shock moments after calling authorities, and had been hospitalized for stress ever since.

Initial investigations concluded that Jim Buckenor (James Court) had apparently fallen down the impressive and very solid marble stairs, and in doing receiving a small number of painful but not on-their own fatal injuries before expiring of a heart attack, perhaps bought on by the stress of his escape.

Reports said that the FBI had sent a team but reached the same conclusion in the absence of any evidence to the contrary. Not that anyone seemed to be trying too hard. Not in comparison to their efforts to locate the considerable funds he had reportedly secreted away from many and assorted criminal enterprises. All were futile.

As no one – wife included - claimed his body it was cremated by the local authorities after three days and scattered at sea.

Aside from a joint checking account with his new wife, and a business account, nothing of the tens of millions he was reputed to have fled with was ever recovered. As there was no evidence to determine that the remaining money in the marital bank accounts was the result of criminal endeavors, his new widow was allowed to keep the three million, eight hundred and twenty-two thousand, eight hundred-and-three dollars and fifteen cents in their joint accounts. At which point she seemed to pull herself together and departed the island as soon as permitted. On arrival back in the US she was collected by her sister and monitored – discreetly – by several agencies hoping for
information or a break on the missing money.

Not New York.

With James Court joining Vulcan Simmons in the now facing ultimate justice section, any know Orantis or associated militiamen either dead, imprisoned or fleeing, and with William Bracken indicted and secured behind bars without possibility of bail, it is finally judged safe.

Clare made the call. It was time for them to return home.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note

This is the penultimate chapter.

To everyone still with me, thank you for your patience.
Thank you to those who take the time to review and especially to those who have reached out with messages.

Happy New Year!
Chapter 80 - One of Us

Chapter Summary

Previously.

With James Court joining Vulcan Simmons in the now facing ultimate justice section, any know Orantis or associated militiamen either dead, imprisoned or fleeing, and with William Bracken indicted and secured behind bars without possibility of bail, it is finally judged safe for them to return home.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Closer to New York, but not quite there…yet.

The mood aboard the business jet carrying them eastwards is much, if not-happier, then at least lighter. Despite the glorious winter scenery and accompanying tranquility, no one had been reluctant to leave their isolated hideaway and head home.

Just before the plane arrived at their snowbound retreat, Clare had contacted the base and in the resulting conference call had caught them up on events. Almost all of the news was positive. Bracken remanded without no possibility of bail in a Federal 'Super-Max' jail, was being held in solitary confinement. Federal prosecutors were reported to be clamoring for the right to lead the case. Almost every outstanding suspect had been detained, and there had been no further attacks since that night. Authorities attributed this to the overwhelming force of the law enforcement and public response, the overall high casualties among the terrorists in the initial attacks, and finally a realization among many of the survivors that they had been 'played' and that their patriotic crusade was nothing of the sort. Of course, not all surrendered, but those that had not were too busy running to be a threat.

On a more personal level, Clare was able to confirm to Alexis that Jane Stubbs was continuing to make excellent progress and had been released from hospital just the day before. Alexis was visibly buoyed by this even if it resulted in more tears. Before Jim could ask, Clare confirmed that Val was secure and well but was extremely busy trying to save the law firm. She had a message for Jim, something about Val looking forward to getting his 'fine skinny butt back to the office and other places.' Beckett was pretty sure that was the readest she had seen her dad since her unexpected-early-return home from a sleep-over, surprising her parents who had not expected her home until the following. She had been just fifteen and equally mortified.

However, there is one major negative. They don't get to go home just yet. Their presence was required, well actually ordered to be more accurate, in Washington DC. The Federal authorities have questions for the dynamic duo, and they want answers now. No more delays. The only bright spot on this is that they have a written guarantee from the Attorney General of the United States that they will not face any charges or sanctions.

Mexe-Solar, umm…Mexico (Well Duh!)
The Vaughn Industries private jet had landed at the nearby military airfield where no one thought such an activity was out of place. Naturally there was no immigration formalities, instead the passengers had meet by a group of heavily armed paramilitary types, and had been whisked directly off an armored SUV, itself anonymous in a convoy of seven such near identical vehicles. The only real significant difference between the SUVs was the intimidating 40mm Grenade Machine Guns mounted on four – the front and rear pairs - of the SUVs. These are manned by seriously scary looking mercenaries with skull masks. Such was the price of doing business in such a dangerous place – where of course everything was for sale. The convoy had driven straight out through the open gates, past the armed air force guards, without stopping.

Less than twenty minute later the convoy had arrived at the modern factory and warehouse. Surrounded by two razor wire fences and cameras, it looks imposing. The only discordant note, the complete absence of security guards or anyone else for that matter.

Despite the lack of greeting party for the convoy, this does not deter the pair of men emerging from the first of the unarmed SUV’s. The two be-suited men stride directly to the doors of the reception which glided open to admit them. Their security detail remained outside.

The entrance foyer was sleek glass with polished concrete floors and a long reception desk. Not even a single receptionist awaited them, but again this did not phase the two men – more than likely it was expected – and they continued onwards into the building. Once past the gleaming glass entrance lobby and the neat façade of the factory building, entering the main floor revealed an absence of high-tech manufacturing machinery. There was no state-of-the-art assembly line producing solar panels. Instead occupying perhaps a fifth of the space is cluster of long workbenches, surrounded by stacks of partially empty shipping palettes, and a little further back a couple of shipping containers. At one end of the benches there are a pair of modern industrial printers, along with two large packaging machines. But otherwise the huge space was empty. Despite all this, the space was refreshingly cool, air conditioning blunting the heat from outside.

The taller man in the expensive tailored suit moves purposefully, the natural aura of ownership settled on him. This is after-all his factory, one of many in Vaughn Industries possession. Although there is not another one like this. The sneeze and muttered apology, "Sorry Mister Vaughn," from beside him reminded him that he was originally meant to be alone. But at the last minute his guests had made a request. So accompanying him today was David Andersen, the business manager tasked with making Mexe-Solar appear like a genuine business concern. Of course, David never really got out of the office so the in-your-face security, the starkness of the location, all were rather confronting for the man. He knew at least not to verbalize that in the presence of his employer.

Now where were their guests for this meeting?

The outside the gleaming modern facility everything looked entirely above board - like so much of the Eric Vaughan empire - and successful to boot. Manicured lawns, a busy car park on weekdays, the staff appearing to be working in two shifts, and transports coming and going laden with materials and product.

In fact the factory was a front. The material deliveries were imported solar panels from China that were wiped of any evidence of their origin and rebranded and rebadged as Mexe-Solar product. The operation was multi-faceted. Hell, they even had domestic sales reps and online support (in the Philippines) for the product they sold.

The sale of the solar panels was mere incidental income for a scheme that moved contraband of all categories across national borders and laundered large amounts of cash from multiple enterprises. Most he assumed to be entirely criminal.
All-in-all it was a very clever front and one that he was well rewarded for. Many would scoff. After all, how to do your make industrial fraud it worth it for a billionaire?

Easy – offer him access, authority and power beyond the realms achievable with his money alone. Having billions did actually have limits on what you could buy. Providing this service had given him an in with those infinitely more connected and powerful. And all in secret. In return for what to him seemed like trivial matters. This foremost among them. Even so this was an operation that he knew nothing significant about. Nor did he care to. He had others to handle the details.

Footsteps sound. In the empty space of the factory the echo is confusing but eventually he realizes it must be coming from the vicinity of the shipping containers. The only place anyone could be concealed.

His guests. The ones who requested this meeting. Demanded really. Despite his wealth he could not refuse the meeting request. A mutual acquaintance had refused a summons and was now a scarred cripple confined to a wheelchair. He wonders sometimes what he got himself into. So far, despite the promises, the rewards had been scant and disappointing.

He turns.

There are two of them, a man and woman. Oh, that is not who he expected. This was not the pasty, pudgy America and his scary sidekick who had come before.

He frowns and then recognition dawns.

He had met these two before. Berlin. Two years ago. It had been an interesting, eye-opening experience which had initiated him further into the scheme. It did not mean he liked these people. The very opposite emotions in fact, especially the woman.

"Eric Vaughn how nice to see you." The man sounds pleasant enough. Just like the last time.

"Yes, well I can't say the same. So why don't you tell me why I am here." He blinks and corrects himself, "Why we are here? I am very busy."

"Oh Eric, that will all become clear. I do understand you are busy but should I care?" The red headed woman was as rude as ever, verging on truly obnoxious. He didn't like her the first time they met, despite what went on, and this new encounter just reinforced that initial impression.

"Oh be nice." The silver Fox chides the woman. Who ignores her partner with another irritating smirk. The man seemingly is used to this, and simply shakes his head in amusement.

"So why are we here?" he demands.

"Op Sec," the red head replies cryptically.

Beside him David looked confused. Or rather continued to look confused as the entire conversation since he arrived with his boss. "Op Sec?" he parrots back in askance.

"Op Sec. You know? Operational Security," the red head explains with condescension dripping from her tongue.

"Why? What are you talking about?" David blurts out, his eyes a little wild. A man clearly out of his comfort zone.
The red head eyes him dispassionately, sighs, "Look the cover story for the factory is blown."

"Well that had nothing to do with me. Us," he corrects. "And even if it did the last thing, we should be doing is standing around here." For once David actually makes sense, and somehow doesn't sound like the usually whining prig he knows him to be.

"Well there is some truth in that Honey. It was a mistake for you to come here."

David looks like he is about to speak again when a 'Phwuppp' barely registers in the cavernous space and Eric shifts entirely in instinctive reaction as his finance manager drops dead on the floor. Despite the shocking nature, he is irrationally proud of his reactions as he managed to dodge any blood or other splatter on his bespoke tailored suit, a single button undone in deference to the heat.

He looks up to see the older man holding a long, silenced pistol, a small wisp of smoke rising from the barrel.

"Hey Jackson. No fair! It wasn't your turn!" protests the red head.

What?! He said his name was James.

"No! Well whose turn is it Rita?"

Shit she said she was Ann! Who are these people?

"Mine! I pretty sure."

"What!? No! Really?"

The man grins evilly and winks at him. He must be some form of psychopath, clearly enjoying this.

"It is you know. Getting a little senile, old man." The red head obviously respects no-one, even her partner.

'Who the fuck are these people?' Vaughn wonders.

"Well if you are sure. But we have deadlines."

"I know." A roll of the eyes.

"Well I just want you to know you don't have time to fuck him to death."

"What the bloody hell are you talking about?" he interjects, his anger getting the better of his instinct to stay quiet. It is not the only mistake, his posh accent slipping to expose his roots in the industrial wasteland of Wales.

That's it. This has got way out of hand. He wants answers. His anger, especially at being ignored, overcomes the surprise of David's cold-bloodied execution.

"Aw. Spoil sport." She smirks at her husband and makes doe-eyes in counter-offer. "Are you sure? He's quite delectable despite the supercilious attitude of superiority and the fake Limley accent. You could join in. We could relive Berlin." She is actually making doe-eyes at the older man.

"Another time maybe." He is still grinning.

"Oh well. Sorry darling." She sounds regretful as she turns to Eric. "You going to miss going out with a bang."
"Sorry? What the fuck are you..." Realization dawns too late, "Wait! You can't! I'm one of…"

The red-head right arm whips round her back, and in single continuous and elegantly graceful movement extracted the compact form of a Beretta 71 pistol made more-than-slightly awkward by the bulk of the silencer and without pause fired into the tall English man's right eye socket, interrupting his futile protest, and seamlessly shifted to fire once into the left socket before her victim's brain had even had a chance to acknowledge the first fatal shot.

Eric Vaughn's body toppled and fell to the ground onto the unnoticed tarpaulin pre-positioned on the floor awaiting his body. Much like the one his finance manager now occupied.

"One of us? I don't think so" Rita spits out.

"Who is?" the man muses, mostly to himself. "Nice choice of weapon Dear." Jackson Hunt adds to his wife, his own High Standard HDMS a classic of even older vintage.

"I thought so too. A classic of course. Works for me." The implication lingering as she grins at the almost seventy year old man with the much younger body across from her. The two are entirely ignoring the dead men at their feet, their banter and near foreplay the product of many such experiences.

"Oh behave. If you were to be caught it would be a bit of a giveaway."

"Only if I got caught." Her disdain drips 'as if' in challenge to her partner her glance going his silenced pistol, a dead giveaway in its own rights as the CIA's preferred assassin pistol since World War Two. "Anyway, you know how important it is to use the right equipment, comes a close second to training and working with the best."

"Well Mossad certainly were back then. Maybe less so now, damned democracies and their oversight committees." All the bitterness of his all too frequent run-ins with a perennial series of bureaucrats leaks out.

"Well times change. But it was the best wet work field craft education around back then."

"And you certainly cut a dash through the training course." And in the dorms. After all it was where they had met.

"I really did enjoy myself. I am curious though." She nods at the man she just killed. His status as a billionaire and supposed ally a mere inconsequentiality, now and before.

"About what?"

"Well, why now? He was no more of an issue, not really any real threat, than he was previously. It wasn't like he was going to blab to someone. Not after Berlin."

"Our mutual acquaintance." He would never call him 'friend' referencing the man in the NSA who had taken over running the *LokSat* programme after the CIA supposedly shut it down.

"What about him?"

"He had a mission for Eric. Wanted him to target my son. Try and come between Richard Castle and Kate Beckett. Dangle his billionaire pecker and charm in front of the detective and cause issues. Even had the whole thing plotted out like a bad spy story. Spurious business visit to New York, fake an assassination attempt, request police protection and somehow get a homicide detective assigned as his personal body guard, then seduce her using a Limey accent and a bit of
charm. You know the really implausible type of thing."

She is nothing if not quick witted with a mental agility and a mouth to match. Something that had drawn the stoic assassin to her. Well that and her passion for uninhibited sex. He had been a much younger man then.

"Oh. You were the real target. He's really pushing it." Neither of them took the thing personally. Most of the time it was just business.

"Yeah. I also now know he had a hand in passing information to Volkov. It wasn't just Sophia Turner. In fact, the more I look into it the more it looks like she was working for them all along. The ex-GRU thing was a cover. Same for Volkov.

"You know I tried to track Volkov, actually got as far as inside his fortified bolthole in Paris but he was ahead of me, just. Already bailed and made a run for the Motherland. Shame as I had a neat little exploding radio I planned to use. Anyway he bolted back into the protective arms of Vladimir." His normal dispassionate delivery drips venom and sarcasm. Gregory Volkov is kill on sight, regardless of the rules and the consequences.

"That's a shame. Still Vlad would have made sure he got another cut from Gregory too. I always enjoy how much Gregory suffers when he must give up money. But the biggest concern is that our mutual DC acquaintance is clearing playing for too many sides. Or more for his own at least."

"And not just money anymore. I think he is considerably more involved than we knew. And he's playing the game for keeps now. Or trying at least. And for the moment he's maybe a little up on us."

"Well that's embarrassing. We're gonna fix it?" She doesn't ask more than that, having long become accustomed to Hunt's lack of sharing.

"Certainly are. Got full approval at Langley so we're starting the proper clean-up."

"Well we can do his human assets with no issues but how are we going to neutralize his information bombs?"

"Already in hand. Turns out we got some new recruits recently and at least a couple are very good. The Data Team have the best in the saddle already. Certainly seem competent as most of his info drops are already neutralized. Just a handful to go. And then we can move on him. You can even do the honors."

"They want an object lesson?"

"Not sure. Possibly. Possibly not, just so long as there are no loose ends."

With all the talk about loose ends, Ann/Rita nods towards the entrance and the seven SUV's with their compliment of security sitting outside. Another inconvenient set of witnesses. "Eventually they are going to wonder where their client is." She sounds bored, and not at all concerned about being seriously outnumbered by a group of highly armed paid killers.

He doesn't speak. Just reaches to the nearby table and the small generic remote sender device. His thumb lifts the safety cover, pushes a small black lever up to arm the device, and then he presses the red button.

The roar of the buried anti-tank mines and the accompanying Claymores hidden in the flower beds is initially muted by the industrial building surrounds until the shock waves shatters the showy
glass in the lobby. There may be whispers of screams and agony but neither pay any immediate attention.

"I'm just going to check. Be back in a minute." Rita rises on her toes and kisses her husband on the cheek. Jackson Hunt watches as his wife walks to a nearby table and from under a tarpaulin extracts a silenced UMP-45 with an extended magazine, and stalks off towards the now shattered entrance, and towards the sounds of secondary explosions as the vehicles, fuel and their armaments cook-off.

He remains as he is. She doesn't need backup. He has no pressing need to see more bodies torn apart by high explosive and shrapnel. Nor Rita's delight in finishing off anyone unlucky enough not to have been killed instantly in the blasts. He occasionally wonders if this relationship of theirs would be the death of him.

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**Washington DC**

Derek Taylor – the Chief Operating Officer of Taylor Matthews - had met them as soon as the plane taxied into the cover of a private hangar well away from the main terminal at Dulles. He's not as tall and imposing as his business partner, Tim Matthews, the former Ranger, but there is a comforting solidarity about the Navy SEAL veteran. For a start there is a touch of the rogue about him, the very essence of rebellion that Rick has sought to portray with the character of Derrick Storm. But also a sense of duty and justice.

He exchanges a hand shake and bro-hug with Castle before shaking hands with the rest of their group, except for Martha who doesn't let him escape with less than a prolonged hug and two kisses to his cheeks. This is obviously not the first time this has occurred as the man accepts her exuberance in good humor and makes no comment.

"Good to see you all. We're hoping to turn this around today and have you back in New York tonight." These words alone lift their spirits, just the prospect of being home is enough.

"Right everyone jump in, we're set up just up the road at a nearby hotel, no need for all of you to come into DC to see the Feds," and with that he beckons them towards a pair of grey SUVs with blacked out windows. Each has a driver and extra guard riding up front in their familiar dress down of chinos and a sports jacket over a polo.

Minutes later they are pulling into the entrance of the Marriot Suites, and quickly whisked through a side entrance, bypassing the lobby. They take an elevator up three flights and a brisk walk brings them to their room.

"We have a pair of rooms here, one-bedroom suites, you can nap if you want. We've opened the connecting doors. We'll order some food shortly. There will always be at least two agents with you. In the meantime, I have some things of yours."

This is even better as he comes bearing gifts. Their electronic devices. Well not all of them but the essential ones – their mobile phones, Rick and Kate's Kindles, Alexis's laptop. Plus, the associated chargers, accessories and a couple of these new power banks for charging USB devices. He seems to have thought of everything. "The rest are in New York, but Clare and I figure this is what you would prioritize."

"So, can we?" Alexis asks for all of them, her hand already hovering over her iPhone.

Derek smiles, "Yes Alexis, it really is safe you to have them back and use them. We wouldn't have
bought you back unless we were certain it was safe."

"Great, thank you." And with that she pretty much snatches up her phone and hits the power button and skips to the nearest sofa.

"Um Rick and Kate, apologies but we are on a tight schedule so perhaps we can leave turning on your phones until after we have seen the Attorney General's agents?"

"Sure. Let's get this over with," Beckett is all business.

Jim clears his throat, and both know he will offer to accompany them, and provide legal representation, but a shake of Kate's head, and the gentle squeeze of her hand as she leans in to kiss his cheek communicates their decision. They are going to take Government at their word.

"Going to need to you to leave your weapons behind too," Derek orders. Beckett's eyebrow arches at that, but the man – her boss, or rather bosses' boss – has that look that this is non-negotiable.

"Okay," Beckett accedes with a nod to Castle.

"Great, leave them with Constance," he indicates to a female Taylor Matthews agent who holds out her hands, receiving Beckett's SIG and Castle's Glock in their belt clips, along with the spare magazines.

They take their leave of their family, the sooner they do so, the sooner they can go home. Alexis' phone is pinging repeatedly signalling the constant stream of messages, but she takes time out to hug both her Dad and Kate. Even Jim Beckett seems slightly distracted by waiting for his phone to finishing starting up. Despite the updates via Clare he obviously was keen to speak to Val in person. Martha waves them off, indicating that she will make use of one of the beds for a nap.

Wordlessly Kate Beckett snags her fiance's hand and they follow Derek out of the suite and back to the SUVs.

**Department of Justice.**

The place feels alien. Maybe because of where they've come from. But likely not. Their life is in New York, but their home town is brash, in your face, real. This place is different, like an anti-precinct. Everything was so buttoned-up and constrained, all-business, no fun.

Neither speaks. Derek does any talking and soon they are ushered into the large executive office and the middle-aged man in a rumpled suit that greets them looks tired and not a little haggard.

Derek does the introductions "Director Villante, this is Richard Castle and Katherine Beckett."

They exchange handshakes, and Derek excuses himself.

"Thank you for coming in. Please call me Carl. I know you would have much preferred to be heading directly back to New York."

Both nod and Beckett responds, "We would but we do understand why you want to speak to us. Before we begin Rick and I would like to state that on behalf of our families were extend our condolences and are sorry about the death of your agents."

"Thank you. It has been a blow. We're quite a small team."
"The loss of a single officer is hard, we cannot begin to appreciate how your team are feeling," Castle add.

"Thank you. We do appreciate it. It is a struggle but continuing the case and prosecuting the criminal is the most immediate way we can honor them right now." Villante responds.

"You appreciate that we did not bring our lawyers. We're hoping this meeting would not require it," Castle adds.

"Absolutely. Not necessary at all. As previously communicated to Taylor Matthews and your legal representatives in New York, we have no intention of charging you or anyone else in your party.

"To be blunt, whatever your potential or alleged breaches of law, be they criminal or civil, the US government can hardly prosecute you for protecting yourself against criminals including elements of said government."

"To be fair, it wouldn't be the first time."

"This comes from the top, Mister Castle. The very top. We are under the strictest instructions to put our house in order."

"What exactly does that mean? Putting your house in order?" Beckett is straight in. "Sounds a lot like a potential cover up."

"I can state that it is absolutely and unequivocally not the case. At least from a Department of Justice perspective. There will be a Senate inquiry, well at least one, if not more."

Suppressing the urge to roll her eyes, she goes straight back on the front foot, "How can we trust you? We don't even know who you are."

"We are part of the Justice Department, and report directly to the Attorney General. Our official title is the Attorney General's Judicial Support and Investigation Task Force," he has the grace to frown as he names his own organisation, "but generally we're referred to as 'The Task Force', or 'The AG's team'."

Beckett goes back again. "Until a short time ago we'd never heard of your task force."

"That is entirely intentional. We try to operate off the radar."

"Not exactly transparent. I imagine not every investigation results in prosecution or conviction, and that is easy to do from the shadows." Castle this time. Backing his partner up.

"No law enforcement agency ever does," Villante concedes, in mitigation.

"How can we be sure Bracken will go to trial?" Beckett gets to the crux of the issue.

"I know you have trouble accepting this. Perhaps a familiar face might help. He can provide you all the information you need. He is cleared to share absolutely all the evidence we have for the case against William Bracken."

He presses the intercom on his desk. "Have him come in please."

Beckett and Castle exchange one of their shared looks. Are they being handed off? Are they being handled?
The door to the office opens and neither Beckett or Castle initially turn until Director Villante addresses the newcomer.

"Agent Sorenson will be briefing you."

Both spin in shock. "Will?!" Beckett manages to say something. Castle is mute, whether by choice or design remains to be seen.

"Hello Kate, Rick."

He looks little changed from the last case they worked together. Still in a dark suit, slim but grey touches his hair in in more places, and there are dark shadows beneath his eyes that attest to too many nights without enough sleep. He proffers his right hand and they both rise and shake it in a professional manner.

Director Villante intervenes before it gets awkward, "I'll leave you in the capable hands of Special Agent in Charge Sorenson. Agent Beckett and Mister Castle, thank you for coming in cooperating. It is appreciated."

They both shake hands with the Director, and silently follow Will Sorenson out of the office and across the aisle to a small conference with drawn blackout blinds.

"Special Agent in Charge?" Beckett sounds, well not disbelieving but curious.

"Congratulations." Rick offers. Sorenson shakes it off with a frown. But somehow it is not a slight on Castle's politeness. Something else. Both notice it, say nothing but are curious as to why the title appears distasteful to him.

"Hello Kate. You look surprisingly well."

"Beckett." She corrects, directing him to be professional.

Fair enough, he nods and follows with "Castle?" just for confirmation getting another acceptance.

Not awkward at all.

"Look, this is obviously a surprise for you." They can only accept that with half-shakes of disbelief.

"How?" Beckett inquires.

"I was recruited from the FBI not too long ago. I'll admit I'd never heard of the Attorney General's Task Force before they approached me. They keep a low profile normally. They handle delicate investigations and lot of background checks. I was part of an FBI team investigating campaign finance violations in New York, the AG's Task Force often coordinates such multi-jurisdiction investigations. Imagine my surprise when I found out the first case I was bought in on was connected to you."

"What are the chances?" Although Castle response could be interpreted as somewhat sarcastic, no-one remarks on it.

"Actually Beckett, Kate, I just wanted to say how sorry I was when you were shot and grateful that you pulled through."

She permits the brief change to personal from professional. They dated for six months, the end
might have been terrible, but he was a decent man at heart.

"Thank you Will. Dad told me you sent a card. I'm sorry I never responded. Didn't do much communicating that summer." She is not looking at Castle but reaches across to squeeze his hand. They are past apologizing and revisiting that but somehow the echoes remain, but she is confidence that they can overcome those together.

"Look this could be all sorts of awkward but let me explain what the purpose of this meeting is. As you have been told this is not an interrogation or even a formal interview about the information that was released on the Internet related to William Bracken, Future First, and any criminal enterprise. There will be no charges laid. That has been made very clear." It is also clear that Will Sorenson is not happy about this. "This is the Department of Justice briefing for you on our investigations, and what we know in respect to the multiple charges pending against William H Bracken."

"But you wanted to?" Castle probes unwilling to let it go.

Just for a moment Sorenson professional comportment fails him. The look he gives Richard Castle is loaded with emotion – anger, frustration, maybe some envy. "I don't know how you do it, or even why, but you have some extremely powerful and influential friends Castle. We have received instruction directly from the Attorney General. I am told that this came directly from CIA where apparently they have and I quote, 'a profound appreciation for Richard Castle's considerable contribution to the security of the United States'. Short of shooting someone of Fifth Avenue, you appear to have a free pass."

Beckett arches an eyebrow at Castle. She knows about Sophia but is there more behind that. A question for later perhaps. To his credit, Castle does not preen or say anything.

"I think we should get back to the purpose of the meeting." Beckett has sudden flashbacks to the first time these two met. She really does not want this to get competitive, especially now that she truly does know.

They resume their places and posture, and Sorenson places a binder on the desk, opens it and sets about explaining the information and the case against Bracken. He has a lot more information that they do on certain parts of William Bracken's life.

"When he was a senior at his very expensive prep-school Bracken was sexually assaulted, possibly raped, by a transvestite prostitute during what was meant to be an initiation. Some form of established ritual, it was usually taken to mean the loss of virginity with a prostitute. This was apparently organised and paid for by some of his classmates as pay back. For what we are not sure, but word is that the young William Bracken had not dealt well with the family's fall from grace when the father lost their fortune. But we believe the actual assault went way beyond was they had envisaged."

They can appreciate the impact such an event could have, even if it is hard to have any sympathy or empathy for the monster that came from it.

"Naturally the scandal was hushed up by the participants, the school, and even Bracken's father was party to that. From interviewing David Bracken, the brother, this caused a breakdown in the relationship with his father and by the time William Bracken graduates from college, the wash up from this is that his father effectively disowns him and anoints younger brother, David, as the family heir. Despite there not being much of an actual fortune to inherit. But the Bracken name still carries some weight."
"Bracken does well at NYU, and then staying in the city, he eventually graduates from law school with distinction. And then the bar. His first career steps are at a mid-sized law firm where he specializes in criminal law. Initially as defense counsel. He wins a lot of his cases. He is a talented lawyer and an able speaker. People speak of his very convincing presentations and a growing confidence and charisma.

"In a not untypical move the DA seeks to negate his success by recruiting him and Bracken moves to DA office as a prosecutor. This is where it departs from the usual. He goes from fairly junior prosecutor to Assistant DA in no time. He appears to be very ambitious but also a very effective prosecutor, winning almost every case.

"Despite all this positive performance, what we now know is that for unknown reasons he chooses this time to start enacting revenge for the sexual assault at school. For the most part he was using the law, enforcing prosecutions against many of his former peers. This was mainly financial penalties or exposure that shamed them. There was no mention of the incident at the school and there was no violence in this revenge against his former classmates.

"As an ADA he has access to plentiful resources and not all officially sanctioned. Unfortunately, the practice of private eyes, off-duty or former cops, working extra-judicially was quite widespread. It was via one of these unconventional tools that he tracks down the transvestite who raped him. That person was by then a transsexual prostitute, and from what we can gather that despite his resources he is the one that personally confronts her. During the confrontation the prostitute is killed. We don't know if it was deliberate or not. We have no evidence.

"But what we know now is that he is discovered with the body by an agent of the Silva family. We believe that family agent was either James Court or someone who told Court directly. You notice that we do not have a name of the victim. None of our information sources provide any name, not even a partial name. It is likely the body was 'disappeared', or the death was treated as non-suspicious.” None of them need an explanation of how prevalent something like that would be with a typically vulnerable and troubled class of victim.

"This is where it gets a little more complicated. The information we have now only came into our possession very recently because Francisco Silva, the head of the Silva family made a deathbed deal with us, sparing his daughter from prosecution for past crimes in return for everything they had on Bracken.

"As I said there was no direct witness to the murder, but Bracken was found alone in the room with the body. As we don't know the cause of death, we have no idea whether it could have been disguised as a drug overdose, and simply filed as 'another junkie bites the dust'. So, the body was never officially discovered and the victim vanishes, just another missing person. By Francisco Silva confirmed that they had evidence to connect Bracken with the death. With this compromising information the Silva's have a powerful hold over Bracken."

"Dammit." Beckett exclaims, pounding her boot into the leg of the desk, rocking it. Will looks somewhat startled but Castle knows exactly what she is thinking. A key moment. All it needed was one person to do the right-thing and the chain of events that resulted in Johanna Beckett's death might never have taken place.

"Do you need a moment?" Will asks, concern tinging his voice.

"No. I'm not fine but please carry on. I just want this to be over." Sorenson looks puzzled, but Castle knows from their discussions that while Will Sorenson knew of Johanna Beckett's murder, he was never sufficiently aware, or concerned enough to ask or learn about the depth of devastation it wrought on Kate's life. Naturally Kate would have made it difficult to learn but from his
perspective it does not give Sorenson a leave pass. Of course, he has made his own mistakes with Beckett and this case.

"If you're sure?" Beckett nods, determined.

"Bracken is an ADA on the rise, and already being talked of as potential DA and more in some circles. He is a valuable tool for the Silvas. But rather than use him directly to influence things in their favor, they take an indirect, long game, approach by providing him with information to successfully prosecute other criminal enterprises. We now believe this type of play to be the Silva trademark – staying in the shadows, dealing in low visibility offenses mainly white-collar crime and intimidation, and cautiously playing their rivals off against each other.

Beckett interrupts him, "Have you communicated with New York ADA Charles Denoza? He has been investigating the Silva family for a long time. He may be able to collaborate information you have been given."

"I know the name, perhaps one of the other team interviewed him. I'll follow it up. Thanks." Will makes a note on the legal pad in front of him, and resumes.

"It was about this time; the Silva family had recruited a small number of new operatives for legitimate and semi-legal operations. Among them is a former military man, apparently with some paramilitary experience. This is the man who we know as James Court, but whose real name is not known. Whatever his previous career in the military, Court already has impressed the Silvas and being the one who bought them Bracken he is assigned as Bracken's minder to guide and protect the family and their newest resource, the murderous ADA.

"They feed Bracken intelligence and evidence which he uses. It pays off. Ambitious and effective Bracken is rapidly promoted to Senior ADA. He builds a strong reputation as anti-mob, targeting major organised crime operations. This we now understand has been helped by a careful flow of information from Silva family enabling Bracken to score some big public victories against major crime families."

"And no one was suspicious of his successes?"

"No Castle, I think in those times pretty much everyone was happy for prosecutions against the mob that actually stuck. The public hear RICO and assume it just works," Sorenson's bitter tone illustrates his cynicism about that view.

"It is while Senior ADA, and preparing to run for DA, that Bracken discovers the mobster kidnapping run by three NYPD officers. We don't know exactly how. But he sees the opportunity to do something without the Silvas knowing. But we don't know if James Court is party to this information but if he is, he doesn't inform the Silvas. We don't know if Court was directly involved with Bracken's subversion of the three cops after the killing of the FBI undercover Bob Armen, or if it came later. From what we understand Montgomery was an unwilling party to this but not Raglan and McAllister who are already corrupt and despite the loss of their mobster ransoms to Bracken somehow increase their wealth over the years.

"We have forensically examined Bracken's financials and it is about this time that he suddenly clears all his debts in a short period, and gradually starts to accumulate wealth. Admittedly the outward signs give nothing away, he appears to be a successful professional, nothing more. I'll admit we are still uncovering at lot more information that we were not aware of, including an estate in the Virginia with a collection of priceless art, all of it stolen.

"Now it we know that Captain Montgomery was formerly part of a secret NYPD operation into
police corruption. At the end of the operation he had been promoted and returned to normal duties. We believe that he tried to seek help from the leaders of that undercover operation but before he could do so, we understand now that there was a direct threat to his family. Enough so that Montgomery could not continue his approach to former his commanders and handlers and choose to remain silent."

"Damn. Roy." This from Beckett. He struck a deal with the devil for the safety of his family. Just like Rick did for her, and she for him. Castle looks almost heartbroken. He really looked up to Roy, and the fact he had been caught up and involved in the cover up – involuntary or otherwise – had only increased the tragic nature of events.

"In the meantime, Raglan has a bonus for Bracken. He has hard evidence on an upcoming drug dealer - Vulcan Simmons. It is for mid-level dealing and would normally be good for a couple of years at most. Most dealers would just take the sentence, knowing that they will be out early if well behaved. But Vulcan is ambitious and impatient. He doesn't want to waste a few years in jail. So, he does a deal with Bracken.

"Using information from Raglan, Bracken turns that deal into a strangle hold over Vulcan Simmons. Whatever he does, however he does it, they form a partnership of sorts. As Bracken's political career takes off so does Simmons criminal empire. No one connects the two, but they appear to have a symbiotic relationship with James Court as the middle-man.

"None of this is shared with the Silvas. Indeed, the Silvas and Simmons could almost appear to be enemies. But with Bracken and Court running as intermediaries a truce of sorts exists, so long as they avoid each other. It may have been brokered by Court. It probably helps that Simmons deals in narcotics and dabbles a little in prostitution, areas the Silva family are vehemently opposed to any involvement in those moral crimes. So, they are not direct rivals.

"After some years, Detective Beckett's mother investigates Joseph Pulgatti's imprisonment for murder of undercover FBI agent Bob Armen. When Johanna Beckett does not back down or respond as demanded to Bracken or one of his henchmen's threats, they kill her – and three others - using former Special Forces soldier named Dick Coonan."

There is just a slight pause. Even after all these years it still hurts. But both men in the room know her story and how it impacted her, even if only one of them had ever truly made it not just bearable but able to push it away and move forward.

"We have not managed to work out the connection between Dick Coonan and Bracken. But we now suspect that Coonan at least made contact or formerly worked with James Court in the Far East, possibly Korea when he was serving in the Special Forces.

"We do not know for sure when Coonan started as a contract killer but after he left the Army under a cloud, narrowly avoiding a dishonorable discharge, probably because the Army wanted to avoid the negative publicity. He does nothing of note until almost two years after mustering out he sets up a charity for children's education in Afghanistan. Almost right from the beginning this is used for cover for multiple illegal activities which we understand included weapons and contraband smuggling into Afghanistan. In addition, Coonan builds his own side line in importing drugs back on the return leg."

"Now when initially investigated by the DEA following the case you worked it appeared at first to be an independent operation. We have since learnt that it had very different beginning as a semi-official black operation from somewhere in the Intelligence community. This is where we believe Court and Coonan may have re-connected. Apparently, there was a regrettable decision made to permit the cultivation and trading of narcotics, specifically poppies for opiates, by the local Afghan
warlords. In return those warlords would be more active in opposing the Taliban. This was further bolstered by the provision of material assistance, mainly weapons. Somewhat ironically many of the weapons had been seized in Iraq before being sent to Afghanistan.

"As the project was off-the-books it was lacked proper oversight and so was effectively compromised from the outset and eventually almost totally corrupted. At some point the program was probably wound up at an administrative level in the States but whoever did that did not follow-up and it was never properly shut down."

"Fuck!" This is Beckett. She looks murderous. "So, is Bracken gonna walk? His spook friends get him off?"

"Hell no, Beckett. It doesn't work that way. At least I don't know so. This is my first major case, but national security does not trump everything. No one is pushing for this to be dropped."

"It's too public anyway," Castle observes.

"You're right too Castle. Can't put that genie back in the bottle. Can I continue?" This last is directed at Beckett who inclines her head in a swift movement, eyes like agate.

"Opportunists, criminals, like Coonan continued to use it for own benefit. But Coonan is wily enough to know that using the cover of his so-called non-profit charity for schools in Afghanistan can only be effective for so long without extra assistance. Aware of the risks Coonan establishes a patsy using an ambitious idiot named Johnny Vong to act as the apparent distributor. But soon this is not enough and rather than be cautious he keeps on doing what he was doing, his operation growing very quickly. He needs desperately needs help and this is where we believe James Court comes fully into the picture. He connects Coonan to Vulcan Simmons.

"Vulcan Simmons is already an established, and - thanks to Bracken – protected, drugs distributor in the City, and he agrees to handle the New York operations and distribution for Coonan. Coonan initially stays as a partner. But it's a misjudgment on his part. Soon Coonan is essentially muscled off his own program when Vulcan Simmons decides he does not need him and takes over. Despite this Coonan does not fight back and appears to concede gracefully. We believe this is because he had a backup ready. He turns his fake cover scheme with Johnny Vong into a real drug smuggling operation. It also appears that he has decided he is almost rich enough. The final reason is the very real threat of James Court coming after him. We believe this keeps him in line because he knows something about Court's paramilitary background."

"Jeezz, what sort of person scares a contract killer?" Castle postulates.

"A very bad one." Beckett confirms. She knows this from first hand experience with Cole Maddox.

"Agreed. Unfortunately, we have been unable to learn much at all about James Court. Aside from his time in the United States Army, not one agency is even admitting he was one of theirs. Castle, I don't suppose you could?"

"Sorenson, whatever anyone has told you or implied, my connection to the CIA is not current, nor is it that good. On a couple of occasions in my past I have had some brief contact. Think of it as some fortuitous alignments of fate, I certainly do."

Sorenson frowns, but has no option but to accept the rebuff to his request.

"One of the by-products of this is that either via Coonan or Court, likely the latter, Bracken is introduced to founders of Orantis. As an avowed civilian with no military experience he somehow
cultivates links with the firm and the relationship is beneficial for both. Orantis got big and profitable from Iraq but with that market winding down, Orantis needed more work and ideally legitimate work. Their urgency increases after the Iraqi government starts to eject paramilitary firms following the Blackwater massacres.

"Court somehow gets them some limited operations in Afghanistan. While these are smaller and less profitable but also easier to integrate with illegal activities. The big trick was than Bracken helped Orantis secure jobs in the US. Enough to stave off bankruptcy and eventually grow a bit.

"A lot of veterans passed through the company doors but they – and by this, I mean Court, and Bracken - were always careful to ensure that the resources they used for their criminal activities were not directly Orantis employees. But on checking more than half of our suspects in the attacks had done temporary work for the firm or an associated company. Some had no confirmed links, and this includes the sniper that shot you Kate."

She feels Castle move in closer, his grip on her hand closing but saying nothing more. She appreciates it. They have lived this enough.

Sorenson has the decency to look somewhat shamefaced about that last statement. "I'm sorry for bring it up. Do you need a moment?"

"No. Thank you. That will not be necessary."

"We are still not sure how much culpability rests with the Orantis management. About half have been cooperative but have nothing substantial to offer, and the other half are lawyered up to the gills and saying nothing."

"From what we have found so far. The sniper – Cole Maddox - that shot you had some second-hand association but was never a direct employee of Orantis. From what we understand he was a free-lancer bought in specifically to target you Beckett."

"Why didn't he finish the job?" Kate voices one of her deepest fears. Something that held her back from many things, including crucially from starting her relationship with Rick.

"We don't know. When he died in the booby trap blast it caused all sorts of ructions when his identity came out. We think this prompted Bracken to back off. Perhaps concerned that it might lead to him."

"Apparently as far as the authorities knew he was a model former soldier. His really name was Cedric Marks. He originally joined Infantry branch and served in Second Infantry Division in Korea We do know he was sniper trained, attending U.S. Army Sniper Course at Fort Benning, and there made connections with Special Forces operatives. However, we do not believe was a member of one of the official Special Forces units. After this he had - according to what limited information we can get - participated in some unconventional warfare operations. He had commendations and awards for boxing, several martial arts and unarmed combat. He served nine years, took an honorable discharge, worked some security gigs for overseas companies, mainly in oil exploration. Absolutely nothing on their radar."

"What do you mean their radar?" Beckett jumps in.

"Unsurprisingly the military are actually aware of the potential risks posed by a small number of their former special forces soldiers. All SOCOM veterans are tracked after leaving service but certain ones are watched and monitored a bit more carefully. Studies indicate that rates of criminal offending are no higher among SOCOM veterans than other classes. However, in the category of
professional mercenary there is a marked increase in the percentage ex-SOCOM members. Also graduates of sniper training are also tracked. These are men who are selected for their capacity to coldly kill individuals.

"Cole Maddox/Cedric Marks fitted that later profile. But we have been told he did not throw up any flags. As best we can understand he was contracted in independently of Orantis. We do not know if it was Bracken or Court. But the military authorities co-opted the FBI and we – sorry force of habit – they conducted an investigation."

"But found nothing?" Castle asks in confirmation.

"Correct," Sorenson concedes.

"We found nothing on him either," Beckett admits.

Maddox was dead. He could no longer hurt them. Nor could he influence the case against Bracken.

"What about those involved in the attack on the loft?" Castle changes the subject.

"I believe Captain Gates briefed you on that before you left New York. As you are aware all those attackers appear to have been killed by parties unknown. The bodies we found were all identified as active or former members of Orantis. They had all been killed by single gunshots to the head. Fragments recovered are 9mm but as far the forensics can determine the rounds were hand-loaded with custom cast bullets.

"So almost untraceable then?"

"Not totally but effectively yes. We have no idea who killed them or why. We could hazard a guess that it was to stop them talking or punish failure but that does not appear to have happened in any other incident."

Wisely neither Beckett nor Castle say anything. What can they say? Are they expected to have empathy for men who were trying to kill them only minutes earlier?

Sorenson obviously agrees and is moving on. "The dead Koreans outside your home don't align with what we know about Orantis operatives or anything else that Bracken or Simmons had commissioned."

He pauses and turns a couple of pages. "Before you left were you informed that Vulcan Simmons was dead?"

Beckett nods, "Yes, Captain Gates briefed us just before we left. There was a little information at the time. An old warehouse, an armed confrontation with more than ten dead including Simmons."

"We were a little preoccupied, but you can't expect us to care about the death of a thug like Simmons?" Castle adds.

Sorenson fixes Castle with a hard stare verging on a glare, "The final number was thirty one bodies recovered at the scene including Vulcan Simmons. Among the others, two of his lieutenants and eleven of his known foot soldiers. Twelve of the dead were in military surplus camo gear but armed with a full range of current weaponry including M249 Squat Automatic Weapons and 40mm grenade launchers. Identification for all those twelve deceased came from the Department of Defense. All were former veterans with combat experience in Iraq or Afghanistan, often both.

"Any ties to Orantis, or Bracken?"
"No. None that we could find for these twelve. This is not uncommon. While a percentage of the total number of attackers on the day were employed by or linked to Orantis, the majority were not. Interviewing with the captured and investigations into the deceased show most were recruited off websites or by word-of-mouth among other veterans.

"But that's not what I wanted to talk to you about." Sorenson pulls a couple of photos out of the folder and pushes them across the table.

"Simmons." Castle and Beckett whisper together.

"Yes, and very dead. Simmons had been shot in the hip – a very painful wound but not fatal. His cause of death of exsanguination. His throat was sliced, and he bled out, drowning in his own blood.

"Good!" Beckett's venom surprises all.

"His body was found near an exit that had been chained and padlocked from the outside. The reason I bring it up is that further investigations have tied the dead Koreans to the crime scene for Vulcan's murder. We recovered some fragmentary DNA evidence that we were able to match to two Koreans killed outside Mister Castle residence."

"Our residence," Beckett corrects.

"Our home," Castle adds a little redundantly, with just an edge of one-up-manship.

Sorenson's jaw sets, squarer than ever, but he continues, "We suspect they may have been direct agents for James Court, perhaps something from his days in the CIA. Court sent them to make sure the strike against Vulcan Simmons was successful but also eliminate the actual attackers."

"Wait," Castle interrupts. Sorenson pauses, and Rick asks, "There were two of them and they took down up to a dozen heavily armed veterans plus any survivors of Simmons crew? Who are these people? Ninjas?"

"Former South Korean special forces. So as good as. But South Korean has gone silent and we are getting no help from State or Defense in addition to any intelligence agency. We believe the CIA knows a lot more but we have had virtually nothing from them. We do not believe that Court is his real name, but we cannot get anyone to formally acknowledge that Court was once even an active CIA officer. All we have is an anonymous source that stated that Court led paramilitary project teams, occasionally in the Middle East, but more frequently in Asia and especially Korea before he was let go in the peace dividend draw downs in the mid-nineties."

"Like you wouldn't believe." Will confesses, and then for good measure adds, "Plus politics." He leaves it to his small audience to decide what that actually means.

"So, you think Court was behind the monitoring of the Loft?" Beckett asks seeking confirmation.

"Yes. But other than being told it is device of Israeli origin, we have nothing else. James Court or whoever he really was, is dead. I'm afraid that in some ways it is a cover-up. We have not been able to get any further, even with the Attorney General directly calling the CIA, NSA, DIA and Pentagon."

"So, your new job has limits on your resources and access?" Beckett phrases the question carefully. Both men know her well enough to see beyond the obvious. But only one really knows what drives that question.
"Which is how we got started. The AG's office coordinates background checks on politicians especially as they start to reach national prominence. Such as in the case of William Bracken when he started to come on the radar as a potential presidential candidate. It was a routine audit of his campaign funds, we followed up some discrepancies and that was the start of the Federal investigation. And it snowballed from there."

"So where does that leave the case against Bracken?" Beckett demands, getting to heart of the matter.

"Actually, most of what I have discussed today is entirely incidental to the main charges the Government will be pursuing against William Bracken. We have more than enough to charge him with multiple murders by commission, RICO statutes, and campaign finance violations. With the concealed audio tape of your mother's we have a considerable degree of evidence to support the charges against William Bracken for the murder of Johanna Beckett and three others in the same month. And your attempted murder, Kate."

"How strong is the case?" Beckett asks.

"Good enough."

"What? Good enough?" Castle almost snarls, cutting off anything Sorenson might have been about to add, and he starts to rise, pushing the chair back. Beckett's hand on his arm stops his movement and he sinks back down, still tense and taunt. Still angry.

Beckett glares at Sorenson, who manages to look apologetic, and takes advantage of Beckett's intervention. "Sorry, a poor choice of words. What I meant is that the evidence we have is good enough to have a high confidence of the charges being proven in court. It also means that we now have the best prosecutors fighting behind the scenes to lead the prosecution. And to be frank they do not commit unless they are as certain as possible of having a winner. It can make careers and fortunes, but it can do the reverse too. So yes, we are confident."

"So much for a commitment to justice," Castle observes with a very unsubtle jab at the institutions and maybe even individuals. Beckett must give Sorenson his dues, he does not respond to the barb. Once again, she acts as the mediator.

"Rick, that's good enough for me," Beckett assures him. As a detective it was all you could ask of the prosecutors, and usually had to settle for less. "I believe that it is enough reassurance that everyone is committed to this and invested in seeing it through."

"I just want an end to it. The man is a serial murder, not to mention his other offenses. How many lies, the hurt he is responsible for, the countless crimes he has committed or enabled. I don't want him to escape from that. There has to be consequences. Please tell me there won't be a plea deal?"

Sorenson answers, "Look Castle, I can't do that. It is out of our hands. But it is very unlikely. The Government is not inclined to offer it and so far, Bracken has been uncooperative and rejecting everything we approach him with. Like Beckett says, based on my experience this is going to trial, and we've got quality - and legal - evidence to have a high probability of conviction."

Beckett knows it is time to go before either man loses it. She didn't miss Sorenson's dig at Castle's Internet dump. She knows Rick didn't either. She sometimes loses sight that Rick feels equally strongly about bring Bracken to justice. He's a good man, and its high time they went home so she can remind him of that in private.

"Is there anything else Agent Sorenson?" Beckett says standing.
"No. Not unless you had anything you wanted to disclose?"

Beckett watches Castle's jaw tighten but he holds his peace. "No thank you, we're good to go," she adds, hopefully in conclusion.

Sorenson rises, "It was good to see you again Agent Beckett," and he extends his hand. Beckett takes it and unexpectedly Sorenson asks one final question, "So 'Agent' Beckett,'" he addresses her by her interim title," How exactly does that work? Federal authority from one of the AG's special favourites, Taylor Matthews? I thought you'd never leave the NYPD."

Ouch that was a personal dig, but Kate lets a feline smile grace her features, "Oh that's connections again. Turns out I'm dating the original backer of Derek Taylor and Tim Matthews, and their number one client." She can almost physically sense Sorenson's offense and is pretty sure Castle just grew an inch or so, chest out. Men! But she'll have her man's back every time. "Anyway, Taylor Matthews is just temporary, I'll be back at the NYPD as soon as I can. Along with my partner of course," she adds looking at Castle with unashamed devotion. "He's one of us, and I wouldn't have it any other way. Goodbye Will."

She lets go of Will Sorenson's hand, and Castle reaches in to shake it, the extra firm grip and visible wince on Sorenson's face all apparent, and Castle politely bids 'Agent Sorenson' farewell.

Sorenson heads for the rest room. It is fortuitously empty. With a moderate degree of restraint, he kicks the waste bin across the floor, less-than-half-caring if the spinning cylinder stays upright or spills its content across the floor. It comes to rest against the far wall with a satisfying crash. Momentarily mollified he bends and hits the tap, his hands scope and lift, dumping their cold contents on his face. He towels off, checks his tie and collar in the mirror. A pale face, a touch of stubble with dark shadows glares back at him. Shit he really needs a break.

He knows he shouldn't let Richard Castle get to him. It is clear that Kate Beckett loves the author, and despite the stupid petty jealousy it is mainly regret he still feels for not trying harder. The man is most probably good for her, certainly spent more time with her than he did. He knows he never committed enough to earn Kate's trust and a chance for more. Six months and he left for the job, which means he waived the right to remain of her life. He still doesn't like the guy. Even with previous knowledge from his earlier investigations, Castle's seemingly endless connections brown him off no end, he detests those that take shortcuts, or have means to do so. Though he will admit he is intensely curious about the links to CIA. The DDO does not just ring up and give a free pass for anyone. That could be one hell of a story.

**Murphy's Irish Pub, Brooklyn.**

Ryan had been trying to speak to his partner for weeks. Cop-to-cop. Friend-to-friend. Javi had blown him off until now. He's grateful the knucklehead had come finally round, especially as Beckett and Castle were due back, maybe even tonight.

"Hey Javi, thanks for coming," he waves his partner over the small beers – they're on shift in a few hours - lined up and waiting.

"What's up Ryan?"

Giving his partner that same look of disbelief, they use on suspects, "Why don't you tell me?"

"Shit. I'm don't wanna do this, Kev" Esposito protests.
"Well tough. You got to. Call it tough love." And he does love his brother.

"What do you know?" Espo concedes, slapping both hands down on the table in concession.

"I heard you got offered a slot on an ESU team."

"I did. Of the back of our rescuing the ESU team under fire. Pienaar in Squad Three retires next year, figure I go in now I got a chance at Sergeant when he goes."

"Why? We got over last year, Gates has been reasonable, so what's up with you Javi?"

"It's not you Bro." His partner sounds honest enough, "I got in a rut, and now I'm stuck. The suspension with Beckett showed me that bullshit still rules.

"You don't believe that." Ryan sounds certain.

Esposito shakes his head, "Maybe I do, maybe I don't. Look I got black marks on my record that are never going away. No matter what Gates says. So, does Beckett, but Beckett just sails on. Fast track to Captain I bet."

"Be real Javi, she's going to Sergeant, maybe Lieutenant. But the rumors say Sergeant and that's at best the smallest step forward she could make. So that's not it, or at least not all of it. Please Javi. Be honest. If not with me, with yourself."

Espósito swigs a deep draft of the dark beer, not answering.

So, Ryan probes further, "Don't tell me your jealous of Beckett. She's had to do everything better than everyone since the Academy. She got here on merit, Montgomery's support be damned. And you know that."

Espósito holds his hand up in acknowledgement of that point. "Even so, she's promoted or as good as and I'm not. But I'm not jealous of her. Really I'm not." His head drops a little and he takes another swig of the dark stuff as cover in case his emotions are to readily apparent to his partner.

Too late. "Javi do you still have a thing for her? Beckett?"

"What!? Who told you that? That I still got a thing for her?"

Ryan grins in victory, his partner has never admitted before that he ever had a torch for Beckett. "I've heard the stories, rumors really. Beckett's certainly good looking, I mean really good looking, model body and face, and that's before you get to know her, smart and sassy too.

"I don't know, maybe I do."

"But I bet that's not the issue Javi, and you know it. Beckett's more than hot sure, but she's our boss and partner. Plus, the rules. I've never seen you in all my time at the Twelfth. So, don't go tryin' to bullshit me."

"We went out once, way back when I first came to the Twelfth. After a case. Celebratory drinks. We had a lot to drink, rough case. She kissed me, I kissed her back, she stopped it, said it was a mistake. That we couldn't too it."

"I wouldn't have minded if Beckett kissed me." Back then of course.

Espósito closes his eyes, opens them and blinks. "You know Beckett's a rule breaker?"
"When necessary. Sure, we all push the line." He'd more than done that undercover. Never that level again. He's got secrets that are nightmares that haunt him sometimes.

"Nah, not that. She dated her TO. Royce. You must have heard the stories?"

Ryan has heard whispers, but no one has ever said anything. Could be false, especially with Beckett's abilities and looks. "So, she could date you? Bullshit! I've seen you together, you're tight, more than. But like family. He brother. I saw how you helped with the sniper case. You think I don't either of you feel that way. Castle obviously doesn't think so given he's useless at hiding any form of jealousy as far as Beckett's concerned. So, what is this about?"

Espo nurses his stout, gaze locked on the glass.

"Is this about her and Castle?" Ryan looks at him perplexed, "I thought you supported them? What about at the beginning? Better than Shark Week?"

"I thought it wouldn't last. Even if she did give in, she'd chew up and throw him out," Espo finally responds.

"And Demming, and the DMB? What about them?"

"Knew that they'd never last. They never do."

Except one. "So, it is Castle? What exactly, Espo?"

"Look Castle pisses me off. He kept secrets from her, and then there was the shit with the stewardess. He just swans in and doesn't leave. He reopens her Mom's case, puts her in danger, she's almost died at least twice, if not more times, because of that case. His fault."

Ryan looks at his partner. Something's not right. Not just because Javi has head up his ass. Something about that accusation is off.

"Bullshit Javi. He's one of us. He's put in the hard yards, faced risks and danger, hell he saved our lives a couple of times. His got us tickets, lent us his Ferrari, been nothing but good to us. Don't give me this shit Man. And with regard to Beckett, she's a big girl she sure as hell can choose who she loves. They're almost out of this, why can't you be happy for her, for them?"

"You don't understand Kev. I started it." Espo finally confesses.

"You started it?" Ryan looks agog. How had Javi started it? He thinks. When Castle started shadowing Beckett, she tried to foist him off on Espo but he refused. Then slowly Castle proved himself and Beckett opened up to him. They all noticed it. Then suddenly he was off the team, something to do with her Mom's case. How did Castle get the information to investigate? Suddenly it occurs to him.

"You gave Castle Beckett's Mom's file. Is that what this is all about? Your guilt over that?"

Javi looks like the choirboy caught in the stalls. Shit he is right!

"Was it your idea?" He probes quietly.

"Nah., He asked. I shoulda never given it to him. Should have told Beckett, she woulda kicked him to the curb. This would whole thing have never kicked off."

"Does Beckett know?"
Javi shakes his head. "No. Castle told me he never said."

"Beckett's not smart enough to work it out herself?" Ryan laughs. "You're a fucking idiot Javi. If you think Beckett hasn't worked it out. If she was angry," he stops momentarily to correct himself, "Sorry if she was still angry about it, she would've said something or tried to kick your ass. A long time ago. Even if Castle has never spilled. Speaking as a good Catholic kid, that's some fucked up, long-term guilt-trip you're running."

"So, what I am going to do?" Esposito does not deny anything Ryan had stated.

"Nothing." Ryan finishes his beer. They can't have another as they'll be on duty in less than three hours. Well actually that's wrong." Ryan sees an opportunity to correct a few elements of Javi's behaviour. As his partner's head rises, and the eyes engage, Ryan speaks. "First, you're gonna get your head outta your ass and stop trying to transfer out, even to ESU. You're my partner, and that's final. Second you are never going to mention it to Beckett or Castle ever, and finally you going to treat Castle right, like a brother. I shouldn't have to remind you he's more than proven that he's one of us."

Espo groans, more in admonishment of himself, "You're a good man Kevin Ryan."

"Shut up and finish that beer you idiot."

Derek had whisked them out of the Department of Justice and they return to the hotel suite just over three hours after they departed.

On the way back, the pair finally remember that they had still not turned on their phones. They had a brief moment of fun seeing who had the most missed calls, messages and emails. Rick won the overall total, but Kate had the most from a single individual with more than forty messages of all types from Lanie. "Wow, have you got your own stalker?" Rick jokes only to be shot down by a withering glare and the observation that he probably fell into that category. He doesn't deny it.

Once back in the room they find a somewhat refreshed group playing cards while they waited. They give a very potted summary of the detailed report that Will Sorenson had provided. They leave out pretty much most of the detail including who presented it. They really didn't feel the need to further add to the circus.

"So, Daddy are done here? Can we go now?" Alexis near begs. She is improved after their enforced wildness hideaway, but she is not herself. They will need to give her, space and support. Beckett is still surprised at how much self-control Castle has managed to exert. She has momentary pangs of sympathy for her dad, but not too much.

"I think so Pumpkin. It is all wrapped with the government." He sounds tired but relieved.

"At least for now." Beckett concedes.

"They wouldn't dare!" challenges Martha.

"I think what Katie means is that it's enough for now, "corrects Jim Beckett as he hugs his daughter, and stares Martha down. The matriarch has seemingly recovered her zing and zest, but she looks suitably mollified by Jim's glare. "How are you Katie? You don't seem as upbeat as Rick."

"Not really okay. Mom was killed because she didn't cooperate and roll-over for criminals who should never been in the position to do that in the first place. She, and others, are victims of
endemic greed and corruption. Multiple agencies and individuals failed her, them."

"That's human nature Katie, always going to be there. But people like you and Rick make a difference. A profound difference. I'm so proud of you, and you mother is too. Doesn't mean that you haven't given us some scares over the years."

She leans in and kisses his cheek. "Thanks Dad. We're hoping that with Bracken in jail and his criminal organisation shattered that the overt threats are gone, and our new roles will probably see us behind desks a lot more than before."

A groan from close proximity announces the arrival of her Fiancé. Having extracted himself from his daughter, Castle wraps his arms around her "But for now we can go home."

"Yeah, let's go home Castle. That's more than enough for now."

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**Langley, Secure Wing, Operations Directorate, DDO's Office.**

He permitted himself an ironic chuckle. He had become that 'guy'. The one, staffers would try to avoid. Too early to be thinking of himself as the 'Old Man', even so today as Deputy Director Operations he had been putting the fear of God into a few unfortunates. He never thought he would be the one to do that, it just wasn't his thing before now. But perhaps he was wrong. The promotion had come out of the blue, surprising everyone not least him, especially moving across into Operations. But he was wrong. Perhaps it was good that people in this organisation were learning not to underestimate Martin Danberg. They didn't always need to know why, they just had to do their jobs and stay out of his way. And if they wanted to play games, he could play right back. And it didn't hurt that the 'Old Man' had been in the field and had at least one personal sanction against his name. Not many here or elsewhere could say that in these days of drone and satellite-guided bombs.

Turning back to the matters at hand, the onset of his anger today was discovering, or rather confirming, the disheartening level of complacency and stupidity that was still to be found even in an 'intelligence' agency. You would think after all the mistakes that contributed to 9/11 and the rise of Islamic militancy, that this would be a thing of the past. Unfortunately, it really wasn't. Today's trigger? He had finally received the LokSat report. Well as much of it that was permitted. Even as DDO some pieces were redacted. Kind of made you wonder who had the security clearance to do the redaction for something someone with the third highest clearance in the land was not allowed to know?

Coming over to Operations from the Intelligence branch, for him the biggest sin was lazy thinking and the associated piss-poor analytics. He had tried his best to stamp it out but it never went away. A prime example was the amateurish decision-making that had allowed a program like LokSat to be conceived in the first place, let alone authorized, left to run with lots of funds, minimal supervision and even less accounting, and finally supposedly shutdown but never confirmed. No validation. It had a really high risk of blow-back, just like had occurred. Well he intended to put a stop to as many as he could, while being realistic enough to know he wouldn't get them all.

Then to top off his morning, before he had even finished the LokSat report, he had step outside the rope and put the hard word on the Department of Justice regarding Rick Castle and Kate Beckett. Word had reached him that the AG's office raised the possibility of laying charges for obstruction of justice against Richard Castle and possibly Kate Beckett. He had stepped in making it clear that they were not be charged – with anything at all. And not just because they had saved New York and possibly more.
Sure more than just the CIA owned them for that, but also because the CIA and other agencies did not want the negative coverage that any arrest might trigger. The Agency was very self-centered when it came to keeping the lid on scandals. Up to and including assassination – the very thing Hunt and his partner – was she really code-named 'Red'? – were currently commissioned to do. Of course, the CIA was totally aware of the irony of cleaning up a black op with another black op.

His intercom buzzed.

"Yes?"

"Agent Shipton to see you Sir."

"Send her in."

The door opens and the attractive agent enters and approaches his desk, extending her hand.

He takes it with a smile, "Good job in the Turks and Cacaos, Agent Shipton."

"Thank you, Sir. The accent helps. Everyone was on the lookout for Yanks so-to-speak. I breezed on through."

"Regardless, it was a good op. You can have some down time. I'll have you on standby in case I need you in New York, but the way things are going I think this one is pretty much put to bed."

"That would be nice. I put pop back to England and see my Mum. I can be back inside twelve hours if needed. Any prep I can do?"

"Yes – I have temporarily cleared you to access the files on a former asset code-named 'Python'. I'm hoping it won't come to it, but we may need you to do close surveillance on that individual and his police partner."

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**City of New York**

For their final leg back to New York is on a DOJ Learjet that sprints them back from Dulles into Newark. Given the proximity of the capital to the great metropolis the flight time is minimal which is a good thing as this really is a much smaller aircraft. Barely enough room for them, and a pair of uniformed US Marshalls riding with them. Of course, there is no service on board, just a bottle of water each offered by the co-pilot before they took off.

Immediately after touching down, the plane taxis off the main jetway towards a hanger in the corner of the airport. There must be at least a dozen vehicles with lights waiting for them. A real cop-spotter's bonanza - New Jersey State Police, FBI, US Marshalls, and sitting off in the twilight are a pair of NYPD choppers, a Jet Ranger, and one of the larger Bell 214 Search and Rescue birds.

They are almost unceremoniously bundled off the jet and into the waiting Bell. Two NYPD ESU members with M4 rifles flanking them and strapping in alongside them before the doors are closed. All the reports state that the threat level was diminished but it is clear than the City and NYPD are taking no chances, especially with some that they consider their own.

Before departure there are respectful handshakes all round from the flight crew, and Kate noticeably sits taller when addressed as 'Detective' by the crew chief. Soon Kate is tucked in beside her Dad opposite Rick, Alexis and Martha as the crew runs through their pre-flight checks.

The helicopter ride into Manhattan is something else. They stay pretty low and move at a fair
speed, comfortably higher than the usual cruising speed of the helicopters when on patrol.

There is a brief pause waiting for the red and white striped New York Helicopter JetRanger with its team of ESU operators to depart ahead of them. The journey in is unremarkable and they so slow for landing. As their chopper does, they can see the ESU operator with a sniper rifle point in the direction of their NYPD rescue bird and then down towards what must be the landing pad. Sure enough Frank the pilot nudges the nose down and guides the bigger chopper into land on the designed helipad on the pier that is usually home to the Downtown Manhattan Heliport.

This time the chopper does not power down so with the rotors still moving above their heads, first their ESU guards exit and then the crew off-load them. As soon as they are safely clear the rotors down draft, the blades spin back up to take-off power and the chopper lifts clear of the pad and off into the night sky.

There is a reception committee waiting for them. But for once there are some familiar faces among the not inconsiderable crowd.

They spy the Boys there in their NYPD windcheaters. Esposito is naturally acting cool but they all catch Ryan's automatic raise of his arm and wave. He doesn't even blush too much. It is good to see friendly faces. Both detectives manage all-too-brief greetings, even as they are hustled to the waiting SUV's. It is clear that they are not going to be sneaking around town for a while. With a pair of patrol cars and four motorbikes to make a quite impressive motorcade.

They bustle through traffic and each familiar landmark is a blessing as they get closer to their destination.

The Loft

Home.

She had barely lived there since officially moving in but it changed nothing about the sensations it induced in her. Those emotions and thoughts unbidden continued to surprise her. She could only imagine what it did for Rick, Alexis and Martha.

The state of their home had been the subject of some discussion during their absence but had largely been forgotten in the excitement of their journey home. Almost until it came time to open their front door. Which was the first thing they noticed. The color was the same but this is an even sturdier looking door with a thicker reinforced frame. The key still works and the door swings open, if a little more stiffly, none of the group saying anything beyond the perplexation on their faces as they step into their home uncertain of what to expect.

As the lights come and they move beyond the entrance it becomes apparent that in their ten days away that near miracles have been worked. Their home is not fully restored but it is well under way. It is secure at least. The exterior damage – at least from the inside – is fully repaired. The shattered windows have new panes installed. They look different, perhaps all of them are new. There appears be coating with some reflective element akin to the one-way-mirrors at the Precinct, preventing external observation.

The blood stained and torn up kitchen floor, cupboards and bench-top have been replaced by appear to identical items. The same too for the bullet ridden and shattered refrigerator. Replaced by what looks like the same model. Alexis and Martha are the most surprised, Rick appears almost amused by the state.
On the kitchen bench-top propped up against an empty vase is a folded sheet of paper with his name on it. Dropping his bag, Rick lifts the paper and opens it, speed reading the contents.

"It's a note from Steve and Harry outlining the current status of the rectification works and a few other things," he announced.

"The tradespeople have been stood down for at least a couple of days to allow us time to settle in without the distractions of too many strangers," and he proceed to reel off the information on the progress of the repairs. As suspected, there are new windows everywhere, armored against rifle rounds, and a new reinforced door with improved

Alexis has wandered into the kitchen, opening the refrigerator in search of water and finds it fully stocked, "Dad! Look!"

Having attracted his attention, he looks and remarks, "Ah, that's what Harry's comment about 'no need for takeout' is about."

"Home cooking sounds good to me," Martha agrees prompting an exchange of looks between Alexis, Kate and Rick. Jim wisely says nothing.

Martha and Alexis have gone upstairs to unpack and revel in the delights of being home. Some mention of baths had been made. Kate thinks that sounds heavenly. Their wilderness retreat had only showers. She had never had a chance to actually use the one in his en-suite. Now might be the time. Or perhaps after dinner.

But first she needs to farewell her Dad. She can tell he has itchy-feet. She can understand that. He has someone to see.

"So are you are staying for food Dad?" She knows she is teasing him, and is rewarded by him being briefly tongue-tied as he tried to come up with the correct diplomatic response.

"Go. She'll be waiting for you. Plus it's late, probably too late. I'm not sure if anyone will be eating tonight." She is right, it is late, and probably unlikely Alexis and Martha will return downstairs.

Her Dad wraps her in a hug, "see you soon Katie." He extends his hand and get man-hugged instead by Rick. "You too Jim."

Espo and Ryan will take him, and with promises to see them soon, Jim leaves to see Val. Before they leave, Esposito snarks, "Nice place you have here Beckett," and receives a clip round the ear from Ryan.

"What was that about?" ponders Rick aloud as the three leave.

"No idea but I'm sure Ryan's got it in-hand," Beckett remarks offhandedly.

Normally he would call her on that, but not tonight. They have an agenda all of their own now that they are home.

"Holy crap Castle!"

The bath was fantastic. As was her bathing partner. She really did hope that Alexis and Martha were soundly in bed, especially the soundly bit. Even with the doors closed, they had made some noise, and she noted, displaced a certain volume of the bath water.
"Like it Beckett?"

"Surely you don't need an answer to that superfluous question, Ricky?"

"Well no. Not when you put it like that." He is pretty sure she could go permanent mermaid on him if she wanted.

"Good. Any more champagne left?"

"Nope. All gone. We even drank most of it. You need some more?"

"Nah. All good Lover Boy. Let's go to bed."

"No arguments from me Kate. Let's get into OUR bed."

It is ridiculous. Juvenile level comments and her heart melts. She's doomed.

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**Valerie Wilson's Apartment**

Katie's partners had dropped him at the main entrance of the secure condo. The doorman had greeted him, and he was pretty sure called ahead as soon as he left the lobby.

Val was waiting for him with the front door open, a vision in a silk blouse, jeans and bare feet.

"I missed you."

"You have no idea how much."

"I think I do, but do you want to show me? I want you to show me Jim."

---

**Sometime later**

"I didn't think I had that in me."

Val coughs, suppressing a laugh at his unintentional joke. "More like it was in me," she adds.

Jim actually goes a little pink. She loves him for it. His decency, his honorable nature, his dedication to his first wife, and he still finds space in his heart for her.

"Oh I have news. Rick proposed," and Jim delivers a potted summary of the precinct proposal which they only learnt about on the plane with Val staying in New York.

Oh, she'll take a little of those compliments back as she slaps his chest with a sting, "And you couldn't have told me sooner?"

"Felt it was better delivered in person."

She let's the charade drop. "You're right. About time. I assume that she said yes?"

"Of course, she did."

"And how do you feel about it 'Dad'?"

"Good. On the whole, really good. Of course they could have been more discreet and less enthusiastic about all their *celebrations.*"
"You said that without air quotes but I assume you meant so?"

"Oh yes. Martha named them 'snow bunnies' cause they were at it like...." Val's hand covers his mouth.

"Jim, much as I love you, you are not about to talk about your daughter and future son-in-law while we are narked in bed."

"Oh, you're quite right. Sorry dear."

She smiles and snuggles in. Maybe one day they might change their minds about no matrimony but for now they had plenty to occupy them saving the firm and dealing with an eventual wedding – just not their own.

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**The Loft, the following day.**

They both wonder how long the splendid isolation can last. Well it is not total isolation. She had finally returned Lanie's phone call and was pretty sure the squeals were audible across New York without the aid of a cell phone. She may have had to concede a girlfriend's only catch up on the weekend.

Martha is already reconnecting with her students and her social circle. Although the security threats are believed to be gone, Martha has acceded to Rick's insistence that she go everywhere in a Time and Motion town car.

Alexis has not left the Loft yet and has no immediate plans to do so. Her college friends have all been in touch and they will be catching up in the week at the Loft once they have aligned their schedules. Alexis had so wanted to see her bodyguard Jane, but the young woman had gone to her parents in Pennsylvania for the start of her recovery. Regardless they had spoken by phone several times, and at Rick's insistence both Kate and he had been allowed to join the second call to express their appreciation directly to the bodyguard. Jane was suitably embarrassed even more so when Rick promised a character based on her in his next novel.

Both Rick and Kate are concerned about Alexis, but she appears to be coping, and has reluctantly responded when they have inquired into how she was doing. It was going to take time, but all the signs were positive. Perhaps the most surprising thing Alexis shared was that she had called Meredith and they had spoken briefly. Her Mom was okay and apparently had two small roles in upcoming TV shows but had even more unexpectedly spent most of the call asking after Alexis and how she and her extended family were. Both Kate and Alexis noticed that for once Rick made no jokes, perhaps a sign about how serious everyone including the usually self-centered Meredith Harper was taking all of the events.

Inevitably Rick's actual job catches up to him. He finally responds to Paula's messages and fields a call from her. It isn't too bad then Gina calls. Rick holds up the phone so she can see the caller ID and then answers, putting the phone on speaker.

"Richard Castle where are you?" his publisher and ex-wife demands.

"Why?" Beckett cannot work out whether she wants to smack or kiss the sly smile off her partner's face as he torments his former wife.

"You know why," the caller demands, insistence woven through their tone.

"I wanted to have a meeting?" He's seriously yanking her chain right now. Even Gina does not
deserve that. Well not today any way.

"Damn you Rick! You left town. Actually that doesn't cover it. You dropped off the face of the planet and didn't tell me. I had to find out from a police officer and a bloody press release."

"There was a very good reason. You know I have those, occasionally." Just briefly Beckett has a tiny bit of sympathy for Gina. Imagine being his boss and being married to him. Oh wait. This was definitely going to get complicated and frustrating, maddening even. They'll cope.

"Even so, I have been trying to get hold of you." There is a long pause as Gina finally catches up.

"I know." He deadpans.

"God! You know you're infuriating."

"I know." That was Kate.

"Kate?"

"Yes, hello Gina."

"You're there with him?"

"Well that's what the press release said isn't it?"

"Yes, well, you never know what to believe with those. Really Rick?"

"Let it go Gina. For once. Please."

"Oh no. You're not doing this to me again."

"He's done this before?"

"Yes he has prior form for this." Ouch. "Lots."

"Gina!" Turning to woman in the room with him he mouths 'Please Kate' but she shakes him off, curiosity peaked.

"He once hid from me for four days." Somehow Gina still sounds as if it was a personal affront.

"Five actually. You just never even noticed for the first twenty-eight hours." Rick still somehow manages to put his foot in it.

"Five days then." Gina accepts his correction with a glare.

"So? Is that so bad?" Kate asks a little perplexed.

"We were still married then."

Oh. Oh really?! She turns on Rick.

"It was complicated." Shit he is going with one of her excuses.

"Not helping."

How is she getting on so well with one of his previous wives? SHIT! Doing it again. Thinking of herself as Missus Castle already. Well she does have a ring indicating that future status.
Blackpawn Offices, The following day.

Somewhat against her will Kate found herself in the offices of her fiancé's publisher. Her as yet mostly-still-a-secret-except-to-their-family-and-closest-friends fiancé's publisher. And of course workplace of ex-wife number two.

Despite only being back in New York less than a day somehow it has transpired or possibly even conspired, that the first place they been required to leave the relative sanctuary of the freshly repaired (mostly) and newly fortified Loft for, was here at Blackpawn.

The offices are modern, plush even. Smartly attired staff and an air of perpetual business. Kate is sure she doesn't like it. Even the SIG at her hip doesn't settle the unbalanced sensation that swirls around her consciousness. This is not something she would enjoy. Much like Washington DC or some other places.

The personal assistant had greeted them upon arrival and hauled them straight off to a conference room where two women waited.

There had been handshakes all round. Both women begin by being solicitous of their health, and their family.

Paula of course has been quite a bit more direct than Gina. And more emotional.

Eventually after offers of coffee and other refreshments - they settle for water – they sit at the conference table. Paula and Gina each take a side with Gina at the head, so Rick and Kate slide into adjacent chairs opposite Paula.

Despite this being Gina's turf, the New Jersey publicist leads off, wasting no time.

"We've been approached by a national network, plus one local and two more independents. In short they all made a pitch for the same thing. They want to make a TV series about you. Well the pair of you to be more accurate. Based on the real life events. They believe that there is more than sufficient drama to commission a minimum run of two seasons."

"Oh No!" Having someone play the two of them! Their lives. Her at work. Showing them romantically! Hell no! This was way worse than the books.

She catches the two women shy away from her exclamation. Oh did she verbalize something?

Beside her Rick is suppressing a grin at her outburst but looks somewhat, if not equally, concerned. Obviously, she did speak out loud.

"Too meta?" He asks in that voice. Rick is calm. How can he be so completely un-phased? Did he have some advance warning of this? Oh he was in so much trouble if he did. But in the meantime she can play along. Support her partner.

"Absolutely." Well she can do the same. Or at least try. She can spy the barely hidden twitch of his lips. He knew or at the very least suspected beforehand. And he didn't tell her!? He's so dead. Put a ring on her finger and he's already going behind her back? Big trouble buster!

He turns to look fully at her. She momentarily leaves her features unguarded. At least he had the decency to pale and then blush. Naturally the whole exchange is silent. But then he turns it around.
The facial features set and the grin is beyond cheeky. It is positively cherubic.

Paula and Gina shared a look of incomprehension. The pair opposite them seemed to exist on a different plane. The editor scowls. Gina has her own experience and knows where that look comes from.

"How about comic books?" Paula ventures, never one to give up.

"I could be cool with that." Kate allows, surprising all in the room including her partner before adding the condition, "Only using alter egos. No real names."

"We could work with that," concedes Paula.

Gina momentarily looks like she was going to intervene before Rick interrupts her as he address Kate.

"I always did see you as Elektra."

Paula and Gina stare in wonder as the hard-boiled detective blushes to roots of her hair.

Gina gives in to the urge to ask. "Oh God please tell me you don't have the costume?" Is this her own personal experience with Rick Castle at work?

A shamefaced Kate can barely breathe and yet somehow cannot prevent the minute and involuntary nod that escapes. Rick looks confused, then ecstatic, and then seriously turned on. Unfortunately for him that is a look at least two of the woman in the room were overly familiar with.

Even though she has not had the opportunity to wear it for Halloween as she had planned. Before today only Lanie knew she had it. She has no idea why she doesn't deny it. It must be the 'I'm engaged to Richard 'Freaking' Castle' hormones. Yeah she'll go with that.

Rick is of course openly jubilant and before she can form any sort of response, her partner chimes in. Maybe it is his first instinct to defend her, which is sweet, but it does also have other repercussions.

"Well Gina you had a costume too" Rick adds tying to changing tack and take the focus off his fiancé, but without much forethought. At all. Oh talk about self-incrimination.

Kate and Gina pretty much freeze, but not someone else. Paula begins cackling manically. "Oh God let me guess. Blonde, good endowment?"

It is Gina's turn to blush to her roots, and nods shamefaced. "His idea."

After his initial interjection, Rick has sensibly kept quiet, perhaps belatedly aware of what he has unleashed. But in all likelihood it may not help him. He can feel the stern gaze of all three women fall on him. He may well have been the architect of his own doom. Damn his own mouth.
He goes for the charming rogue smile. Fail. Oh he definitely will not escape from this without consequences. Maybe not at all.

"Ricky?" That was his Kate. Ricky? Wtf?

"Ladies, when we get back home I am going to be having a very long chat with Ricky." The two suddenly gleeful faces opposite appear to think this is suitable punishment.

Why is this his fault?

He decides it's time to try and get the meeting back on track.

"As I will be returning to the NYPD, most likely as an official Police Consultant. Still unpaid. We need to ensure that anything we produce complies with ….."

"Unpaid?" interrupts Gina. There is very little that does not get assessed for material value with her.

"Unpaid. That way our relationship is deemed to not conflict with NYPD regulations. Of course we are still subject to the rules regarding publicity and disclosure." Both faces fall at that. They love publicity.

"Kate's new role will see her in the field less. Same for me."

"Well that's good Rick. Less chance of injury for either of you," Paula at least sees the upside.

But don't worry Paula and Gina there will be no further mention.

Gina notices Kate's glance down at the finger.

I'm sorry. It was rude of me. Congratulations to both of you.

"Thank you Gina."

"Some insufferable traits aside, he is really not a bad specimen."

"Thanks," he sneaks out, trying not to whine.

"I know," accepts Kate with a small smirk.

Paula snickers, "It was time for a new line anyway. I mean Master of the Macabre, what were you thinking Rick?"

"Wait. You mean that was his idea?"

He would protest but realizes it is pointless. At least it can't get any worse could it?

"Of course. The ego didn't give it away?"

Oh maybe it could. He's never attending one of these meetings again. He'll send his lawyers or Harry maybe.

"Well once we have our engagement sorted with the NYPD that will at least give you something to publicize.

________________________________________

The Loft
Beckett had taken pity on him and not made any mention on the way back home.

But apparently she cannot let sleeping dogs lie. He can hardly complain after all his years of his research and digging.

She ambushes him before coffee, the Minx, "Are they always like this?"

"Well actually that was one of the better ones. Gina hardly shouted at me at all. Perhaps I should bring you to all my future meetings."

"No! Just no."

He turns towards his study.

"I haven't forgotten Ricky. We will be discussing certain matters later when we are alone."

He turns back, "Oh. Can I at least see the Electra costume?"

"No. Absolutely not." Especially as she could not currently remember where it was stored in the chaos of her moving in. Not that she was sharing that point of information. That implied certain compromises might be an option.

"That's not fair."

"Don't pout. I'll tell your Mother."

"Oh God, No!"

"Then be a good fiancé and make us some coffee."

"Great minds Beckett, I was just thinking that." The thrown cushion is accurate but futile.

The Loft, That evening.

Victoria Gates had never inside Richard Castle's home. No scrub that. Richard Castle and Kate Beckett's home.

On the day of the attack the closest she had got was the outside of the building being briefed on the bodies.

From the location and the building, it is obviously worth a lot, but then what in Manhattan isn't expensive?

It was suitably impressive. Not just the space.

Not at all gaudy or vainglorious. Given the lack of time spent here since their relationship, most of the decorations and furnishing are likely his. Yet she can spy things that are clearly Kate Beckett.

There was a clear absence of large posters of the author, or a shelf of awards that she knew the man had accumulated over his twenty-year career. The public ego of the former Page-6 lothario was clearly not present at his home just as at the Precinct.

"Kate, how are you?"

"Not entirely sure to be honest Victoria."
"That is completely understandable?" she asks as Beckett guides her into the large living area and into the presence of the author consultant.

"Hello Captain."

"Richard. How are you?"

"Rick please," he corrects. Only his mother calls him Richard. Gates nods acceptance. "Much improved and quite frankly relieved that this is over."

"The shooting bit at least."

"Yes we both certainly hope so." He stays standing. "Can I get you a drink Victoria?"

"A tea if you have some would be most welcome."

"Coming right up. Beckett?" The Detective nods in the affirmative, and he leans in to kiss her cheek before wandering over towards the open plan kitchen, leaving her alone with Gates. She is pretty sure it is intentional.

"Kate, I believe we were trying to ascertain how you feel."

She pauses, giving herself a few seconds to find her thoughts.

"My mixed up feelings." The Captain nods, waiting for her to continue. "Trying to identify and bring those responsible for my Mom's murder to justice has dominated much of my adult life, and only recently have I been able to see and move beyond that." She does not need to look to the kitchen of her home with him to explain.

"Even then it didn't leave us alone. The case had a habit of coming back whether we wanted it or were ready for it. I know it is not over, but we are closer. Closest that we've ever been. And I don't want that to be my, our, future. I know my previous actions have not always made that clear but I would like to think that I finally have a handle on what I really want."

"And aside from Richard Castle, that is?" Gates is as direct as ever, and this still catches her partner by surprise, Beckett notices from her peripheral vision, as Rick almost walks into the new bench-top. Clearly he had been eavesdropping. Of course.

"What I do know is that I want to be a cop. Right now that is a homicide detective, but who knows what the future might hold. But I want to come back to the Twelfth. Back to my team. Back to the NYPD. I'll admit it hasn't been easy after Montgomery, but I think I could learn from you."

Victoria nods sagely at her subordinate's disclosure. Kate Beckett has a high achiever but not without her faults, and it was good to see that she recognized that. Plus, from a personal point of view it felt nice to be appreciated. Her reputation had often been a barrier to that, still is.

"Thank you, Kate, I think that we can work on that following your return."

"I'd like that Sir," Beckett responds, slipping back into cop-mode briefly, "but if I could just have the opportunity to settle back in first, and find my feet, I'd appreciate that."

As she finishes, her fiancé returns and slides into place beside her, he places a tray with a tea pot, three cups, milk jug and sugar bowl down, and his right hand slipping into her left. He subconsciously toys with her engagement ring.
"Well that is good. I look forward to seeing you back at the Twelfth. Both of you." At Ricks' look, she smiles, "Don't look so surprised Mister Castle, I can read statistics as well as anyone else. So can the Brass. The closure stats certainly helped overcome any remaining opposition."

"It will be good to be back Sir. I have, and well we have, missed the job."

"Beckett, Mister Castle, we'll see you next week?"

"At the Precinct Captain? Absolutely no place I'd rather be."

"Good. You have been missed, and not just because your partners have had to buy their own lunches. You're one of us, Rick. Next week we'll make it official," she promises. Beckett squeezes his hand hard in excitement.

Gates reaches into her bag and she carefully extracts a folder leather holder and belt-holster with unloaded pistol, placing them on the table.

"Now these are yours Kate."

Kate retrieves the Glock 22 and more importantly her gold detective's shield from the desk case. A perfunctory check of the weapon confirms the chamber is empty and the last digits of the serial number match with her memory.

She places the pistol and holster back on the desk for the moment but Kate continues to cradle the second item reverently. Her gold shield. Once she had believed it was everything she wanted and needed. It some ways it is still true, a symbol of who she was and the journey since her mom's murder. But it was not everything, is was not her true essence. She had given it up twice now. Both times for the man beside. Always beside her. She does not need to look for confirmation that is even more absolute in this moment of truth.

As she gazes down taking the moment to fight for control of a tear, Gates extracts a clear plastic bag which contains a twin magazine pouch and a third loose magazine. She deposits these on the surface in front of them.

Firmly back in control Beckett raises her head to find her Captain's calm, appraising gaze, and an offered hand.

"Welcome back Detective." Gates smiles, "Don't get too used to that title. I have one more piece of news."

"Sir?" The surprise delaying Beckett offering her own hand.

"The Civil Service exam results came through. Congratulations you top scored this year for your segment."

"I did?"

"The Chief of Detectives has signed your promotion to 'Sergeant—Supervisor Detective Squad' and it will be effective when you return next week".

She finally takes the hand and their firm; mutually respectful grip says more than the words can.

"Thank you Sir. I will do my utmost. However, I came back, it will be good to be back in the Precinct and with our team."
Moment past, bureaucracy intervenes, "I'll need you to sign for the weapon," her Captain advises as she presents the regulation form for receipt of a firearm.

"What no re-certification?" Kate feels comfortable enough to tease her boss gently.

"Sometime next week to make it official. But I am satisfied that in the intervening months, well we all know you haven't lost your edge." And with that the notoriously by-the-book Captain signals her acceptance of the non-NYPD activities during her leave of absence.

Rick watches with pride and perhaps a little jealousy. He knows that because of regulations, his age, well quite frankly his lifestyle he'll never have one, but a man can dream. Meanwhile he can continue to live vicariously through his fiancé – does he love even just thinking that title! Plus it still freaks Kate Beckett out, just a little.

"That just about concludes things but before I leave, I trust I do not have to remind Mister Castle that civilians are not authorized to carry firearms at any time while engaged with the NYPD. Even official consultants."

"No Captain. I'll make sure to leave them at home."

"See that you do. I'll see both next week."

"Yes sir." Beckett answers for them both.

Just as their Captain is about to exit the doorway she turns,

"Welcome back Beckett and Castle."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note

Okay. Apologies. I was not happy with how this chapter was flowing, So it is now in 2 parts. This and the Epilogue that will follow very soon.
So in an act of déjà vu- This is the penultimate chapter. :-)

I know it took weeks to reedit but I have too many other commitments that cannot be ignored.

To everyone still with me, thank you for your patience.

Thank you to those who take the time to review and especially to those who have reached out with messages.
New York Ledger Website

Rick Castle, Kate Beckett return to New York.

Richard Castle's representative has confirmed that he and his family have recently returned to New York. They were one of many in the community attacked on that night of infamy, their Soho home coming under direct fire and as previously reported, there was an attempted kidnapping of Alexis Castle, his daughter. During that event four assailants were shot dead by a bodyguard who was injured in the exchange of gunfire. Two college friends of Alexis Castle received injuries requiring treatment.

Rick Castle and family were advised to seek a safe location at the request of local and federal authorities. They returned to the city four days ago once it was confirmed it was safe to do so.

There has been no statement from the Rick Castle, Kate Beckett or any representative on the multiple charges against former Senator for New York William Bracken including the murder of Detective Beckett's mother in 1999.

There was no comment on whether the author and NYPD consultant was behind the release to the Internet of multiple files implicating William Bracken and accomplices in the murders of Johanna Beckett and at least seven other individuals, as well as drugs and weapon smuggling and money laundering.

Paula Haas would only add that "Richard Castle and Kate Beckett will make a statement in due course, once it is appropriate to do so. With so many hurting and William Bracken yet to appear in front of a grand jury, this is clearly not the time."

Public Defender dies in mugging

Up and coming lawyer Caleb Brown was killed in an apparent mugging gone wrong in the early hours of this morning. The popular public defender was attacked leaving his mid-town office just before 2am, and pronounced dead at the scene.

Witnesses reported see a slim person confront Mister Brown as he left his office, and about a minute later flee with his messenger bag and possibly other possessions. Passers-by called emergency services, but they were unable to save him.

Police would not comment on the injuries received by Mister Brown other than to say they were consistent with self-defense wounds. One witness who saw the body stated that that at least three fingers were missing from his left hand and his right hand almost severed, as well what appeared to be at least two or three stab wounds to the upper torso and neck.

This is the first death in New York since the terrorist attacks almost two weeks ago. Detective Kyle Lamington of the Fifteen Precinct has appealed for witnesses and would not confirm that the attack took place in a security camera blind spot. There are no suspects at this time.
News of the disappearance of billionaire Eric Vaughn was initially submerged in the continuing avalanche of news around the attacks and the Bracken scandal. In London, more astute heads noticed and soon stocks in his firms were looking decidedly shaky. Within twenty-four hours there were as-yet-unconfirmed reports that a number of divisions were substantially under performing compared to earlier statements to the markets and authorities. Investigations by the relevant regulators were being opened in the United States and the United Kingdom.

Others also noticed and we less concerned by the stock market and more by other implications. A series of hasty meetings occurred in the corridors of power. None of them were on record.

Remand Prisoner 87634B had been waiting. Not always patiently if you were to check the logs or ask the otherwise uncaring but wary guards. The same guards who tried so hard at maintaining their absolute professionalism at almost all times, not doubt encouraged by the presence of Federal Marshalls, and cameras with direct real-time feed to the Department of Justice.

Having sacked his lawyers and rejected the Government appointed counsel, he had been left on remand with no contact from the outside world. No television, no newspapers, no Internet. A handful of books, a bible. He had received word that a Grand Jury would be impaneled in approximately two weeks, and a further reminder of his legal rights.

He was allowed one phone call a day. He had been expecting contact and action to secure his release from this confinement. Days had passed with nothing. He had called the number every day. Frustratingly it had rung unanswered the first two days, when he rang it on the third day, the number came up disconnected. Disconcerted he had retreated to his cell and contemplated the meaning and found no answer he liked. Instead he hoped that his release would be done in person.

He does receive a visitor but not who he expected.

Or hoped for. But he recognizes him from way-back, the face familiar, despite the guard's uniform.

"You!"

"Hello Bill," the man at his cell door offers amiably as if they were ever friends. The steel grey eye convey his true feelings.

"Guard! Guards! Help!"

"Not going to help you. No one is going to come."

The prisoner pales, "What are you doing here? Where's?" then he stops, clearly rethinking what he was about to say. "Didn't think you would deign to get your hands dirty."

"Well for a start if you think that you don't know me at all. But in this case, you are actually correct. I am not here to get my hands dirty. Nothing as simple as that for you."

"Do your worst. I'm ready."

"Exactly why I'll be doing nothing more than delivering a message." The man smirks, it is infuriating as intended. It also makes him appear much younger.
Bracken rises and approaches the cell door, "What do you mean?"

The answer with another smirk, all insolence and mirth, reminds the prisoner of someone else. He just can't place who that is. Disconcertingly the eyes do not change, steel grey and deathly intense.

"Your friend won't be reaching out to you," the silver haired man offers, "Ever."

To his credit, Bracken gets it right away. He blanches, shocked by the revelation. He stags, grabbing at the bars for support.

"You wouldn't dare! You don't have the power." The assertion is all bluster. They both know it. Especially now.

"Really? That's what you thought?" Hunt laughs, "You really don't know who I am do you?"

"I demand…." But the man's scornful laughter halts the protest.

"Really for someone involved so intimately I would have thought you got it. But you clearly never did. Him. You. Me. The whole scheme. Everyone. It is all expedient. So long as the parts served a purpose and offered total deniability it was permitted to continue. Your murderous thievery was barely tolerated and to be frank we should have done something sooner."

"But…" the curt shake shuts him down again.

"The whole scheme and the participants, nothing meets that criteria anymore. So protection was removed. So was he" - the visitor refers to the 'friend' – "and there you have it!" He doesn't expand on what the removal of protection implied for the nameless person in charge of the LokSat program.

"What are you going to do with me? What happens to me?" He blurts the questions out, all self-control lost.

"Nothing. You can rot here." The answer is delivered in an emotionless, flat tone.

"You can't! Not that. I'm ready." Hunt turns to leave, and Bracken makes his final desperate play, "I'll tell them everything."

The visitor laughs, his only other response is a shrug of the shoulders and another equally annoying smirk and with that Hunt turns and leaves a broken man to his fate.

He exits via the staff gate where Rita is waiting for him in the rental car with the false plates. They'll have it crushed before the end of the day and a doppelganger in its place. The guard's uniform incinerated along with the not-fake ID card. All traces of the guard in the system would be wiped inside a carefully timed window so as to not arouse suspicion, and the same for all video and audio recordings. The mysteriously vanished guards will return to their posts, sworn to say nothing.

"Was that really necessary Jackson?"

He almost gapes at her. Oh, the irony. This woman had left bodies littering pretty much every continent and one of her favorite activities was to mess with them mentally, sometimes physically, before dispatching them. Sometimes her wonders just why he married her. Aside from the freaky sex of course.

"Of course, maybe perhaps not but indulge me Dear." He gets that little dig in, a little matrimonial
banter and snark.

"He's pissed me off for years. A big part of that was because he was incapable of the self-awareness to realize what an arsehole he is. It was nice to actually get him to maybe recognize that and bring him down a little. Show the little prick how truly powerless he is."

"Not what I would have done."

"Of course not. But to be fair, I don't think you're to his tastes."

"True enough. Well the slimy deviant is fucked anyway."

"You really don't like him, do you? But yeah – someone will probably be sent along to clean him up just in case he actually knows something of real importance."

"He makes my skin crawl and I've been in some sewers. So why didn't you do it Jay?" She teases him with the abbreviation she knows he detests. He had hospitalized some agency unfortunate when the Men in Black movies came out. She knows he'll let it pass for now but make her pay later. She's counting on it. Anticipation almost makes her giddy. A sensation not unlike that she gets from the rush of killing. She's so fucked up and doesn't care. No other way to cope or she would have eaten a bullet – one of her own most likely - years ago. Or maybe one of his. It should be wrong, but it was the ultimate sign of caring in a profession not given to the usual human weaknesses.

"You know I don't do freebies. Plus, this is really not my mess. I wanted nothing to do with it from the beginning. Tried to stay away as much as possible." He leaves it that, not willing to explain himself further.

"Well does that mean we have some time to kill?" Rita asks with a slow deliberate tone.

For his part he is intimately aware of how his wife is feeling. He is already looking forward it. Yes, somewhere buried down deep is a little piece of a rational mind that points out the inherent risks of being with someone who's two biggest thrills are killing and no-holds-barred sex. And isn't afraid of enjoying both in short succession.

She gives him a sly and serious salacious look and then flips straight back to cold professional, "You know they'll try again."

He knows he well enough to understand the question and the change of topic. "Of course they will. But not this next election cycle, 2012 is too soon. They'll have to revert to different means, and reset for 2016, probably 2020. Takes time to get all the pieces in play. Bracken was more than a decade in the making. And they're getting desperate. Bracken was absolutely the wrong choice. He was a flake. Too many character flaws, too unpredictable. But yeah in the meantime they'll look to put their proxies in charge while they look for another."

"Doesn't it concern you?"

"What, that a group of ultra-rich conservative, religious fundamentalist, elitist nutbags have been trying to suborn the constitution and take over the nation for decades?"

"Yeah, that. Not even a little?"

"If they can actually do it, then the maybe nation is beyond saving. Plus, they've been trying for it since well before Nixon screwed up. Since the New Deal. And failing."
"Always the fatalist Jackson."

"Yeah, my son can be the hopeful one. I'm no fool."

"You did it again," she points out, grinning at his acknowledgement of his son. She knows that despite his outward protests and cool demeanor her husband does feel something for the son he sired but abandoned the same night. Never claimed or properly acknowledged is more accurate but neither will voice that.

Damn it, he did. Again. Acknowledge Richard Castle as his progeny. "Well I'm still not going to see him or have contact. Between Sophia and Volkov plus Bracken's fuck ups he's had enough near-misses. It is too late anyway." His tone makes it clear this matter is done.

She takes the hint switches back to the previous, safer topic. "You know they could always go about it a different way."

"What?"

"Just break the whole system." The prospect of anarchy and the opportunities appeals to her chaotic nature and instincts.

"How would they do that? To even begin to do that you would need someone so patently unfit for office. How would they get the un-electable elected in the first place?"

"No idea. I'm all about direct action."

"I know you are Rita. But you might be onto something."

"Yeah well let's hope none of those multi-billionaire types who been funding the project think of it."

"Now that's something that scares me."

"Let's swap cars and then go get a room. I'll take your mind off things. But keep the uniform for now, a little role-play might be fun," she adds as she trails a sharp nail along his bicep. He actually has to concentrate not to push the accelerator down.

_________________________

Homicide, 12th Precinct.

Detectives Sully and Blake are packing. There is not much to box up, having traveled light when coming across from their home precinct at the Twenty-Eighth.

Even Espo is a little sorry to see them go. It's not like Sully is a bad cop. Sure his personal cleanliness and a few other habits are a little suspect, well annoying, but he is a diligent investigator and overall a solid detective. Espo is not so blind to his own faults so he can cut the other detective a deserved break for a few personal foibles.

"Sorry you never got to meet Beckett and Castle. Even more that you didn't get to work with them. It is the damn-est thing I've ever witnessed. They finish each other's sentences, never seen anyone else like that. And don't get me started on their actual freaky investigative deduction process."

"So kinda like a shared brain Espo?"

"Yeah. Although sharing a brain with Castle," he shudders, "well that would be a headache for
anyone even Beckett. But it is more than that. They complete each other. Been obvious for a while. Even before they got together."

"I look forward to witnessing it first-hand someday. After all it's a small department so who knows what could happen down the track. But in truth even if they were not actually here, their mark echoes all over this place. They must be special people."

"They are." Ryan confirms, with much more clearly left unsaid.

"Anyway, aside from what everyone around here seems to feel and say, having looked over some of their old cases, they deserve the promotions, regardless of what the wider scuttle-butt says. For the record so do you two do as well. Especially for going in to rescue that ESU team. There should be commendations for that."

"Do it for anyone. Even you guys." And with that they're back to cop-mode. Deflection and playing down things.

"It's been an honour and a pleasure Detectives." Sully rises for the last time and considers the box holding his possessions but leaves it there for the moment.

"It has." It seems that Blake is to be as economical as ever but then he carries on speaking to the surprise of his audience. "I'll continue to work on Sully's table manners. Who knows maybe one day he'll even get a girlfriend to last more than a month, although there was that girl from Staten Island a year or so ago. You know Sully, the one you almost asked to marry you. Before she came to her senses." He finishes teasing his partner, "Anyways, it's been better than average gents." He extends his hand and both Ryan and Esposito shake on autopilot as they continue to gape at the man who has just strung together the longest speech they had ever heard him utter since his arrival.

"Hey you coming Sully?" Blake cajoles his partner. That shakes them all out of their mutual stupor.

Sully shakes his head, "Well I never." He too extends his hand, grinning. Espo still checks it for food remnants before slapping his palm with the older detective.


"Will do. We said our goodbyes to the Captain earlier. If you are ever over near the Twenty-Eighth drop in and say hello. If we're not at our desks on in the field, you could do worse than look for us at Harry's Table if on duty, or if off duty try 'The Squire' over the road from the Precinct, they do some craft beers that are actually worth it."

"We'll consider it. Thanks Sully." Ryan has his easy smile and an open palm extended.

"Ryan." Sully seems a bit emotional, but in the long tradition of cops – especially NYPD – he blows it off and extends his hand to meet Ryan's.

The exchange of handshakes compete Sully grabs his box and heads off after his partner who is now waiting by the elevator, once foot holding the door open over the barely audible protest of the open door alarm.

And with that one more impediment to Beckett and Castle's return is gone.

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**Conference Room, Department of Justice, Washington DC.**

The team had assembled. Villante was elsewhere testifying in closed committee on their findings.
In his place, relative newcomer Will Sorenson has the floor. He keeps it brief.

The absence of McCord and the others dominates the room. Despite having got their man, the sense of incompleteness lies heavy on them all. There is a void, it almost feels like defeat.

Sorensen was tired. And aggrieved. The price they paid? Too much. Especially for Bracken. He lets it show in his attitude.

"So, what now?" One agent, Heidelberg, inquires.

"We pack our bags and head back to our families. Have the vacations were never had time for." That at least generates a little enthusiasm.

"The Chief has authorized a week off for everyone except that rostered on. This is effective as soon as we have debriefed and secured all evidence and gear. No exceptions." He hadn't expected any objections, there were none.

Of course, he had no family here in DC. He didn't feel like heading back to New England to his family. They wouldn't understand. Perhaps he could head back to that bar. What was the name again? Taps. Yeah, he would clean up and head to Taps. Maybe see if he could find that very attractive woman or one like her. Some human company and no talk of paperwork, court cases or death seems mighty appealing right now.

Main conference room, Beesley Wax and Drummond, New York

The Taylor Matthews and law enforcement guards have departed, in their place are smartly-attired representatives of the private security firm recommended by Clare Dunn of Taylor Matthews. A pair discreetly man the reception lobby and another pair circulate the building. Right now they are outside the doors of the main conference room.

This is the first time this room has been used since the incident. Hardly surprising as the office of former - in every meaningful manner – head of the firm lies two doors door on direct the path to this room. The crime scene tape had only been removed the day before. She had seen more than a few glances and flinches at the doorway, and equally many more just shied away, avoiding looking at all. Which is entirely understandable. This is not a law firm that routinely deals with criminal cases, certainly not ones involving violence, and regardless on the rare occasions they had there had never been any actual intrusion of brutality and death into these walls.

The staff are here and they have all taken a seat. There was a time, not long ago, that an 'all-hands' meeting would have every seat occupied and the walls lined with those standing. Now all the remaining staff can sit with more than a few spare chairs. Some of the absences were voluntary and others less so.

"Good morning everyone." She waited until she was certain all the chatter had ceased.

"Thank you for coming in today. Events of the last few weeks have been traumatic and well quite frankly devastating."

She makes sure she makes as much eye contact as she can as she begins her next sentence, "Before we begin I would like to take a moment to reflect on those who lost their lives. Stacey Guillame, Roger Miles, Hia Lee and yes even Jeff Beesley." Now Val lowers her head, and assumes most of her audience does. She hears a few whispered prayers.

"Thank you," pausing for a moment to ensure she had their full attention, she continued. "With
effect from 7.36 am today I am now the Managing Partner of this firm." There is little surprise and even a polite smattering of applause from most occupants. She smiles in appreciation and lets it settle.

"It was not unanimous, and it is with true regret that I report that Samuel Goldwyn and Marie Walker have given their notice and intended resign from their positions as partners in the firm." She has to respect their loyalty to the Jeff even if it is entirely undeserved. Although in Marie's case the FBI has made it clear she was not to leave town. The firm was well rid of her.

"That said all the remaining partners have committed to stepping up to fill the gaps and bring in work. Everyone will work. Even me." The last gets more genuine laughs. No one could doubt Valerie Wilson's work ethic. Those in the know would appreciate that

"We are going to attempt to recover our lost clients and rebuild our business in our core strengths. This means that with immediate effect we will abandon any effort on political consultancy and policy lobbying. Our core strengths were and are commercial and civil law, and we will aim to rebuild there. The remaining partners have discussed widening our previously limited criminal arm. But if we do it will be cautious and with the consensus behind us.

"There are going to be changes here. I won't lie. Times will be tough. But we will not let one man's vainglorious ambition and greed bring us down. This firm, and more importantly the people, matter more. My door, and door of the other partners, are open if you have anything you want to discuss in private."

"Thank you for all for coming back and turning up. I appreciate it. We all do." There is a wave of polite applause.

"Finally. I will confirm for those of you not already aware, Jim Beckett and I are together as a couple. There is no workplace policy against it, but I assure you that this will not affect our professional lives and our contribution to the firm. I trust you will see that."

This does comment does not go unmarked, and there is a small round of applause and a few mostly appropriate comments along the lines of 'about time' and 'well that wasn't a secret' muttered as the staff file out.

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**Taps Bar and Restaurant, Washington DC.**

Will had been disappointed to find the attractive lady from so many weeks ago not in attendance at the bar. He had internally mocked himself at his unrealistic expectations and started with a beer. Deciding that food might be a sensible option he had enjoyed a bowl of seafood ravioli and a glass of rustic red wine sat at a table, before retreating back to the bar and a whisky.

Sitting at the bar he ponders how he found himself here. Alone, in his mid-thirties, nursing a drink at bar before returning to his spartan furnished apartment, alone. A second whisky followed and somehow, he finds himself replaying the events of the day and his meeting with Kate and Richard Castle.

Frustrating as the author could sometimes be, the real issue was his own guilt. He had not explained, perhaps confessed would be more apt, to Kate that he was the one to actually save William Bracken from a rival's car bomb last year. He had saved the life of the man responsible for the death of his ex-girlfriend's mother and he had saved him. Accepted the man's praise and an official commendation, only for that politician to be revealed as the Dragon and wreak havoc across the North East before being finally shutdown. He wasn't ashamed of his actions in isolation,
but it was not something he would ever willingly share with Kate Beckett. She did not need any more pain, no matter how well intentioned.

He finished the second whisky, threw a couple of notes to cover the bill, and headed out into the chill of the night and his lonely apartment.

Federal Penitentiary USP Lee, Virginia

The end – of sorts - for William H Bracken had been a while in company, and in all likelihood swifter than he deserved but not as he expected.

Somehow, he has been moved from the isolated secured wing and he is now in administrative segregation. The extra US Marshalls, the cameras, the sense of being special – all gone.

Administrative Segregation was for his own protection. Or so one of the guards told him with an evil smile.

He knows it will do no good.

They will reach him here.

Their reach is global.

This isn't even a challenge for them.

Just a matter of when.

The lights go out.

He wonders if it is time, barely sleeping until the lights come out and his endless day begins again.

Sometime later the lights really go out – everywhere. Not just his cell but throughout the entire cell block. The blinking red of the cameras ceases too.

He is not sleeping. It feels like he never sleeps but this body betrays him.

He is weak and alone.

Afraid.

It is time.

He briefly wonders who it will be.

The cell door barely squeaks as it opens, and an involuntary gasp escapes as the shadow approaches. Maybe he wasn't ready.

The lights come back on

For William H Bracken, former District Attorney of New York City, former US Senator for New York, there are no more lights.

No shank, or blade, nor bullet finds his body.
Just an injection of air into his blood stream causing a massive stroke.

By the time medical assistance arrives he is permanently paralyzed without the ability to communicate in any manner, his vision gone, and suffering uncertain levels of brain impairment.

This is a far worse fate that he would have been prepared for.

A living death with his secrets sealed within him.

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**The Loft**

Martha and Alexis had wordless hugged her and left the two alone.

She had messaged her Dad and Val has responded assuring her he was being looked after.

Now it was her turn.

He holds her.

Comforts her.

Supports her.

She is not crying for the criminal.

She is crying for the justice denied.

For her mom.

For her mom's colleagues.

For Roy.

For all the innocents. All the victims - cops, and civilians.

All the lives cut short or ruined for his dreaded ambition. His lies. His vanity and greed.

"What do we do?" He asks her.

"We go on. We persevere." That inner strength, the never-back-down commitment, both key reasons why he named her extraordinary. Even more so now.

"Montgomery was right. The war goes on. All we can do is fight the battles. Choose who you stand with. What we stand for. I know where I stand." He caresses her face.

"Kate, and it may not feel like it right now but we won this one."

"Do you really believe that Rick?"

"Yes. Mostly. Maybe not entirely, I don't know," he confesses. "What I do know is that it will be fruitless to pursue it further. If there is something, someone, else beyond this, beyond the Dragon then it/they is/are far more dangerous than anything we've faced Kate."

He raises his eyes directly onto hers, "Call me a coward but I can accept not knowing if we get to live our lives without any more threats. I know enough, now, that good fortune, lucky breaks and millimeters got us this far. All those will run out sooner. You know me Beckett, I'm the man who
argues that we can move the rubber tree. But not this time. Not ever again. Let someone else tilt at windmills. We've done our bit. More than done it."

"So we give up?" She's never been a quitter.

"No. Never! Just we stick to regular police work, well as regular as Beckett specials can get."

"I thought you might want to give it up," they both know enough that she is talking about her, and by implication and extension him too.

"Never, you know that Kate. I could never ask you to walk away from your calling. Justice for your mom, and the others is important, but it is not what keeps you doing what you do."

She presses a kiss against his throat, tasting the salt of her own tears.

"But all you need to do Kate is tell me what you want Love."

"Rick," she pushes back a little so she can see his face in focus, also streaked by tear tracks, "Rick, you remember that night when I came to you?"

"Of course." He could never forget, never would.

"You asked me 'What do your want Beckett?' and I told you Rick. All I want is You." She leans forward to kiss him reverently, on the lips this time. "It may have taken me longer it than it should, but my answer hasn't changed, will never change Rick." Kiss. Another Kiss.

One and Done. A ring to confirm it.

"I know Kate. Partners whatever you want to do." His turn to Kiss her.

"Whatever we want to do, partnership remember."

His expression darkens, the mood turns serious. There is one think I think we need to NOT do. And we have to agree NOT do it together."

"Rick?" this is not what she expected but she trusts him and waits for him.

He pushes back a little and regards her, basking briefly in the moment, appreciating all that they have a chance of. "You know if there is someone or something else behind or above Bracken, then whoever is it out there, well they are far more capable and scarier than anything we've faced. And so if they exist, we have no idea who they are, who they represent, and what action they would take if they are threatened."

Her eyes never leave his. Even now emotionally beset her intellect and innate logic is apparent, "You're right."

"I am?" He's playing for humor, just a little, "Can I get that in writing?"

"Ass."

"You like my ass," Pops out before he can stop it.

She shakes her head as she closes in menacingly, a swift nip to his left ear lobe is accompanied by a hushed admission, "I love that ass, and the rest of you too, but focus Rick."

"You understand what I am asking Kate." She nods. "So we're agreed?"
"Yes, I can make peace with that. The Dragon is exposed and arrested even if never tried in court, my mom's killer is dead and that's enough, and not just for now." Her turn, she pushes back to regard his face, eyes bright with emotion, love, and some little mischief, "Of course I might take some persuading." Time to do some reassuring and supporting of her own.

"I'm up for that."

"I'm a cop. I need evidence."

"Oh future Mrs Castle, I'll give you all the evidence you need Detective."

"I need the hard stuff."

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**Langley, Secure Wing, DDO's Office.**

Cutting the audio feed just before it got too weird, Jackson Hunt smiled as much for himself as the man opposite. Keeping his facial expressions mute was instinctive, honed by decades of deception and danger. He rarely let his guard down, certainly not even here in his 'home base', sitting across from the new Deputy Director of Operations, Martin Danberg, a man he categorized as 'Boy Scout' despite his field experience and personally killing Sophia.

Smart boy, his son was no fool. Even hopelessly in love with Kate Beckett he had enough sense to know when to quit. Too many misunderstood, in this game alive was ahead. Dead was not.

Now did Kate Beckett truly understand that? He could only hope the Detective did. For a smart person she often failed to grasp simple concepts. The ramifications if she did not and could not stay away were damn serious. And he would not be able to protect his son or her from them if they tried to investigate in future.

There was no way the US government would permit the already public scandal to become broader. Rumors and conspiracy theories were par-for-the-course, accelerated by the toxic tangles of the Internet. But two trained investigators with excellent analytical skills could pose too much of a threat. The damage done by a single corrupt senator and some rogue paramilitary types were bad enough. The would be no chance that multiple intelligence and security agencies would let themselves be put in a position of having to deny or admit to running black ops, some over decades, using arms and drug smuggling in the pursuit of national security policy. No chance whatsoever. Iran-Contra had been enough of a stain but that had been explained-away by a president with failing faculties and a 'rogue' National Security Advisor. This time, it could be markedly worse. Even if those involved had not trusted any elected officials from the President down, it was the sort of activity that could cripple a democracy and weaken it dangerously. He was not respecter of politicians on the whole, but they were better than most other options. The current President had no military experience but at least sought seasoned advice even if he had a tendency to overthink things. Still better that than anyone that trusted their gut over rational expert analysis.

"Satisfied?" he inquires of the DDO.

"Mostly. Short of getting a signed agreement, I don't see any other option."

He does not suppress the scoff, "A legal agreement is the worst option. It pretty much confirms that malfeasance was occurring. We don't want anything like that."

"We. For a man who vanishes for long periods of time, and comes to Langley a total five times in a decade, that's quite the statement."
Oh. It was high time he got out of here. This place was as dangerous as any back-alley in a third world country. He says nothing more.

Danberg shrugs his silence off. "I'll admit I'm not really sure what to say to you Hunt. You and your partner did good work on your assigned tasks. I get the impression you'd do a lot of what we ask for free. If not you, then your wife certainly would. But not carte blanche. What drives you?"

He blanks the DDO, "You know how to reach us, if you need us."

"When we need you Hunt," Danberg shakes his head, "We'll always have a need for you."

"I guess so," he concedes, and then offers an olive branch, "You know I was ready to retire in the nineties? The Cold War was over, we'd 'won' and I'd had enough of living on my nerves. I miss those days," he confesses, "The certainty of who we were dealing with, the boundaries and lines no one crossed. And enemies that could be reasoned with."

"Russia never goes away Hunt. They'll be back. Make no mistake. And China is on the rise. Probably will exceed all our forecasts and analysis too. Starting with Nixon we've made too mistakes, compromised too deeply and gave them too much, too soon. They've started to turn that against us, and it will get a lot worse. They don't even need to go to war. They could just buy us up."

Hunt shrugs. What is he expected to do? He's not for sale, but he concedes many are. Too many. And he and Rita are not going to turn back the tide, defy history.

Danberg obviously shares the same unvoiced concerns, "There are too many in the West that only count wealth as the ultimate measure. Not the Chinese government, money is just a tool to them."

Hunts barely nods. This is hardly news.

"You know we tried to start a list of national leaders in politics and business that were susceptible to corruption or influence. We gave up. Easier to start a list of those who are not," Danberg confesses.

"Like you said, somethings never change. When shit happens, call me."

He rises and shakes Danberg's hand. Time to collect Rita and find a quiet spot for a few months. Somewhere in Europe with decent food, wine and some distractions for Rita. Some where they can get lost in.

12 th Precinct, Monday.

Today was the day, it has been more than four months since the Twelfth Precinct's resident civilian consultant had been a regular here in Homicide.

Word has spread that today will mark his return to 'duty' alongside his partner Detective Kate Beckett. As a result, the bullpen is crowded, almost to bursting. There are far more cops than the Twelfth's own homicide team occupying almost every space in the room and beyond onto adjoining areas of the floor. The only clear space leads from the elevator to a certain desk in the homicide pen. This detective's desk has two chairs, only one of which rotates and tilts, and the other – of the non-tilting, non-rotating antiquated type on four legs –has clearly seen better days but somehow remains resolutely anchored to the short side of the desk, not going anywhere. On the desk there's a quaint collection of elephants arranged down the back to the left of the computer monitor and where there previously was one there are now two name plates to adorn the desk.
Despite the mass of bodies, it is almost unnaturally quiet with a low murmur of conversation from the assembled detectives, uniforms and support staff. A sense of anticipation is palpable across the room as the crowd is clearly waiting for an arrival of some importance.

If it is a celebration there are no banners or signs, cards or gifts – this is the NYPD and such tokens are not required – frowned upon even - among the extended family of those who serve. There is a ping from the direction of the elevators and every head in the room turns in time to watch the burnished doors slide apart.

The coffee shop delivery boy balks when faced with a veritable posse of cops, but somehow stutters out "Delivery for 12th Homicide" as he steps out pulling a three shelf trolley cart loaded with a bounty that will no doubt be more than welcome. The boxes hide a collection of pastries, donuts, muffins and accompanying several large trays of hot coffee in to-go cups with lids. The order had been phoned in, paid for by credit card.

Seaming stuck, several homicide detectives move as one to rescue the delivery boy, and direct him to the break room and in a matter of minutes the delivery boy retreats back into the elevator with his eyes firmly locked on the floor. He is grateful to have delivered his cargo without a room full of more cops than his has ever seen in one place pick up on the fact he was smoking dope with his cousin Vinny and friends last night. Desperately trying to remember what jacket he wore last night, he is almost certain his misdemeanor is open secret on his face to the cops, after all his mom had busted him when he returned home. And she was no detective.

A couple of minutes later there's another ping, and the elevator doors slide apart to reveal two tall figures facing towards each other. They are well dressed in relaxed but smart business attire, their coats folded across a forearm in each case. Closer examination reveals they are conversing with each other and apparently preoccupied with the other person, and potentially unconcerned with what may await them outside the confines of the metal box. They're in very close proximity to each other. In fact, they're leaning into each other, so much so that they appear merged together. Both faces have wide relaxed smiles, and whilst the words cannot be heard they are evidently having a very personal conversation. Even if you didn't know them, you'd suspect that these are partners and probably more on so many levels. For a room full of cops and detectives it would be a slam dunk even if they didn't already know.

As if they can feel a hundred plus eyes on them, the pair turn in tandem to face the doors and freeze at the sea of faces awaiting them. Both instantly adopt poker faces, only the slight downcast of both pairs of eyes hinting at any nerves, although the male's deep blue eyes have a remarkable gleam that could only be labelled a twinkle of mischief in them. Perhaps he finds something humorous in the situation but he's wisely saying nothing for now. Still with no apparent embarrassment showing on their faces, they link hands without looking, and step forward onto the floor.

The applause begins the moment they step across the elevator threshold. In the beginning it is respectful and measured but also conveys so much more. All in the room can feel the warmth and comradeship. It's the time-honored tradition of welcoming back one of their own who has survived - somehow avoiding paying the ultimate price of service to the City and its citizens. Soon there are some whoops and louder cheers lead by a couple of very familiar voices. Maybe the odd cat-call in there too, again the accent suspiciously familiar.

Making their way down the clear path to a desk, they pause before the familiar desk and seats before noticing a pair of new name plates. Taking in the lettering both stare at them for a few seconds. 'Sergeant Katherine H Beckett' and 'Consultant Richard Castle'.
From somewhere nearby Captain Victoria Gates, clears her throat, and the whole floor stills, even the two figures.

The Captain steps forward into their little space. There is a smile adorning her face. She is still learning how to balance her reputation as Iron Gates with a more human approach, but she figures this occasion is perfect for the lighter touch.

"Good morning Beckett and Mister Castle. Welcome back." She pauses for effect, sure than many in her audience would have picked up on the absence of a title for Beckett. "Both of you." This elicits laughs and a delightful look of surprise on both, with her detective managing to mask most of the obvious surprise, the writer/consultant making no such effort.

To the surprise of all, not only does the more diminutive Captain shake the right hand of each of the pair opposite her, but she steps in for a quick hug of both. She returns to her previous position just as promptly as total silence still rules the floor. Perhaps in shock.

Surprisingly the author stays quiet but his partner's tight grip on his left hand may have something to do with that, along with their own mutual surprise at the Captain's open affection.

For her part, Captain Gates does not even acknowledge her actions, and switching her gaze to scan across the assembled audience, takes advantage of the absence of any distractions to address the floor.

"When I was asked to assume command of the Twelfth and in particular the Precinct's Homicide team, I was aware that there was a civilian consultant - dare I say a famous crime novelist? - shadowing the team for three years. His presence was originally only intended for character research but somehow morphed into something significantly more prolonged and meaningful. Despite the value seen and reported by Captain Montgomery and his own team, which are reflected in the CompStats, I have to be honest that it took me quite some time to understand and share the sentiment. Some may call me a skeptic. Others might have gone further maybe."

More laughter at that.

"I am not normally slow on the uptake, but someone didn't especially see fit to ingratiate themselves here. We got off to a rocky start." Her pointed look raises some chuckles but not especially among the principals. Those first few weeks after Montgomery's death with Beckett in hospital, and everyone else desperately trying to find answers, had not been the best circumstances to introduce the pair to each other especially without Beckett's buffer.

"But no more." She actually smiles. Really smiles. It transforms her and judging by the virtual absence of sound in the crowded space, is somewhat of a revelation to her officers.

Gates carries on, "Mr Castle, your courageous actions four months ago, not only saved the lives of two of my officers and my own - for which my family & I are forever grateful - but reflect highly both on the New York Police Department and your commitment and service especially given the volunteer nature of your role to-date. It is not the first time you have risked yourself to aid the city or its officers."

Gates possibly looks slightly misty eyed. "You almost paid the ultimate price for that dedication and bravery. As you were not an official member of the NYPD, regrettably it has been ruled that you are not entitled to a New York Police Department medal, much as all of us would wish to see you recognized so. However, I am delighted to inform you that in consultation with the Commissioner, the Mayor has decided to award you the Bronze Medallion, New York's highest award for civilians in recognition of your long-standing commitment to assisting the NYPD at
great personal risk and injury having consistently demonstrated exceptional citizenship. The ceremony will be at a date to be confirmed."

There is a moment of stunned silence. A stunned Beckett actually checks to see if Castle's jaw has dropped. Oh, it is more than that. He is shocked, and a tear is trickling down his left cheek. She knows how much this means to him. He never expected any reward or recognition, in fact quite the opposite, striving to ensure that publicity around his ongoing consultancy was as minimal as possible except for the books. This clearly may not be the case going forward.

All Rick can do to acknowledge the cheers and acclaim that now fill the room with noise, is nod and fight back his tears, swallowing hard, maintaining a firm grip on the hand of his partner-in-allthings by his side. There is no classic Castle ego on show here.

Gates lets the applause run its course and once the noise has abated sufficiently, she continues, "I know I speak for your family at the Twelfth, and for all of the NYPD, in welcoming you back to the precinct and to the team. Your colleagues and partners have missed you, and it is time for you resume your place as ONE OF US!"

There is a further extended round of applause, mixed with some low key but heartfelt cheering and the odd wolf-whistle (one source sounds suspiciously like a certain Hispanic detective).

As the noise finally diminishes, Gates continues, "We also welcome back and congratulate the newly promoted Sergeant Kate Beckett. She has successfully passed the civil service exam with this year's top score and one of the highest scores on record. On behalf of the NYPD I am pleased to officially confirm her promotion to Sergeant Supervisor Detective Squad."

More applause meets this announcement and "Way to go Beckett/Sarge" can be heard above the applause. The newly minted Sergeant frowns, having clearly not contemplated being tagged with the nomenclature of 'Sarge' for the foreseeable future. She will definitely have to nip that one in the bud with Castle. She has ways and means. Then more echoes come from the crowd, reminding her that others may need appropriate discouragement too.

The noise continues longer than the Captain desires, and this time Gates exercises her authority, holding up her hands to signal silence which falls almost immediately.

"Sergeant Beckett will be responsible for the Twelfth's homicide squad as well as retaining her own investigative team of Detectives Esposito and Ryan along with Richard Castle. Sergeant Katherine Beckett will you please come up."

Beckett lets go of Castle's hand and goes forward to collect her new badge and ID card. She shakes hands with her captain and leans forward to say a few words. Whatever she says to the Captain lost in another round of applause that continues as she steps back to her expectant partner.

"Which leads me to Beckett's partner. I'm still not entirely sure what to make of the pair on any given day. The change in the nature of their relationship has been cause for some deep introspection at One PP, and please do not think that theirs is an example that employees of the city and especially serving members of the NYPD can follow. The regulations still apply and will be enforced." The Captain's stern words leave the floor in silence. She appears satisfied with that response and continues.

"Following a review by the NYPD, quite a thorough one I may add, and one that involved external parties to validate the results and recommendation, Richard Castle has been offered appointment as an official civilian consultant for the NYPD. This he accepted with considerable enthusiasm and haste."
The Captain comes to a halt, her pause forced upon her by the tumultuous wave of applause and whistles that blast over the momentarily awestruck consultant. Even knowing this was coming, the approval from the mass of officers is overwhelming. He looks almost embarrassed by the open applause and affection shown.

Gates once again raises her hands, and her eyebrows, and as the noise subsides just enough, she is able to continue.

"But perhaps he might regret that just a little," Gates hints with a smile. "This is not the only change taking place. Mister Castle, your former role as volunteer placed constraints upon a wide range activity, some of which you abided by and others not so much." There is a less than subtle warning in there. Gates leaves it as that, continuing, "With your change in status this is no longer the case, as some – but not all, and no you cannot have a firearm - of those restrictions will be lifted. And while I am sure Sergeant Beckett won't welcome the additional paperwork and bureaucracy that comes with the responsibility, she won't be alone. Mr Castle will shortly be enrolling at the NYPD Academy and taking the required classes to cover large parts of the NYPD syllabus and completing all necessary legal certification to enable him to do his share of paperwork and further his contributions to the team."

Ryan and Esposito's "About time Bro" echo through the room, as a clearly stunned Beckett looks on. This is nothing compared to the shock on the newly minted official Policy Consultant's face. There is a general round of chuckles and some outright laughter at the new consultant's expense. He takes it well, probably too shocked to respond.

Once more Gates holds up her hand and once satisfied that her audience were listening. "Of course, our newest consultant will need to ensure he sticks to the actual facts and doesn't try to dress up his reports, and keeps the language to a more prosaic standard than his novels." More laughs.

"Mister Castle. If you would be so kind as to step forward."

Still apparently slightly stunned, Rick does so with none of usual confidence.

Her Captains badge is on display from the pocket of her blazer. Looking down at it she raises her head to address him, "It is no secret that you've envied those who possess one." The confirmation nod from the still mute writer is sufficient testimony.

"Unfortunately, we cannot award you a Shield, much as you have done so much to earn one over the years. However, as the NYPD is introducing a new formal position of Civilian Investigative Consultant that have produced this new official identify card." She reaches into the hip pocket of her jacket and retrieves a folding leather wallet akin to the ones some detectives use and flips it open so that Rick can see the contents. He takes a long moment to study the words embellished on the official document.

Gates holds it out in her left and he takes in his own right hand.

"Congratulations Mister Castle."

Gates extends her right hand and he quickly swaps hands and shakes her hand formally and utters only a short acceptance, "Thank you Captain Gates. I'll do my utmost to not let the City, you or my partner, or my colleagues down. This work I have been permitted to assist with has been some of most profound and rewarding moments of my life. I should be thanking you all."

"You are also the first ever recipient, so much as it might pain me a little to say so, you are breaking new ground here. Naturally it also comes with the responsibility to fulfil those duties to
the best of your abilities and in full compliance with the law."

He opens the black leather case himself and looks down reverently. Taking the ID he flips it fully open and inserts the back plate into his jacket pocket. He can't but help look down. "Cool!" He sticks two thumbs out to indicate just how pleased he is, finally regaining some of his usual cockiness, and eliciting some laughs.

He steps back to Kate who slips her hand into his and squeezes. There is a tear at the edge of her eye, but he won't acknowledge it. She'll wear it with pride, but she doesn't need him to be strong for her here among their extended precinct family.

"When I am called away or otherwise not available, in my absence, Sergeant Beckett will assume responsibility for the Precinct's detective teams and will act as incident commander for first response teams. I have no doubt that this is a step on the pathway to greater things if she so wishes. I also have no doubt that their team will quickly resume their place as the best performing homicide team in the NYPD."

There is a short round of applause Gates is not quite done.

"Recent events have marked this nation, city, this department, and left a terrible legacy. A far too high number of citizens and law enforcement members have paid the ultimate price, and many more will have to live with the consequences of the crimes and evil ambitions of a few.

"Those that carried out their terrible deeds seek to excuse themselves by saying they are patriots, or that the crimes they commit are necessary to protect us. This is false, those are lies and they are liars. They are simply criminals. They believe they are above our laws and our society's rules. The opposite is true. They are beneath them. But they are still subject to them. And it is our job to protect our fellow citizens, our city and our nation from all enemies foreign and domestic. And finally, it is our duty to protect each one of us. Never forgot that. Thank you all for your service and dedication. Dismissed."

Always….almost

There is another round of applause and after handshakes, measured back-slaps for Castle only as no one dares give one to Sergeant Beckett – and the ones Castle received are given with care in light of his recent injuries, the crowd is about to disperse, many with an eye to the muffins and coffee calling from the break room.

Unable to miss having the last word, the famous author and newly minted official civilian investigative consultant clears his throat dramatically just as his mother had taught him, retakes the hand of his partner and stuns the room.

"Thank you very much. My Fiancé & I…."

The looks of shock and surprise are quickly replaced by a cacophony of noise as a new round of raucous applause and cheers. There are some fortunately mostly undecipherable catcalls. There is also a portion of the audience who are throwing questions. Ones that likely has to do with a date and possibly a second question about location. Sergeant Beckett looks suitably embarrassed only for a moment before her left hand emerges with a sparkling ring adorning her finger.

From her vantage point the Captain spies a number of hands go into pockets and there will likely be money being exchanged. After all the bets on the pair of them are legendary. She does not normally condone any such action, especially quite so openly and blatantly. But she will let this one ride. Just on this one occasion.
Kate is not really aghast at her fiancé's announcement. She was resigned to having it go public, after all it was what she wanted, but she had hoped for something tasteful and decorous. But just like the proposal there is a profound balance in it happening here.

Then of course he has to kiss her.

Very profusely but just on the right side of decency. She's not sure if the flush on her face is from embarrassment or something more. Probably a combination. It also puts paid to the ability to answer some of the attempted questions that will be a little too close to home for them.

After a minute or so, the noise finally starts to abate, but Rick doesn't get a chance to continue his speech or rebuff any unanswerable questions, their Captain awaits.

"Sergeant Beckett, and Mister Castle…..my office NOW!"

Some things never change.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes

Okay.
It is over!
Done!
Complete!

To those of you who have re-read it, thank you for your dedication and commitment. Especially to all of those you who reviewed, thank you for your time and thoughts.
To those who have messaged and communicated with me thank you.

This was originally conceived more than six years ago as 4-6 chapters. Less than 10000 words. The first thing I wrote was pretty much the last quarter of this, the last chapter.

To my readers, thank you one and all for sticking with this. Six years, 85 chapters and almost 650,000 words in the making. Suffice to say it took on a life of its own, and evolved in directions I never expected.
But mostly I have had a lot of fun writing this.
Especially with some of the characters. I have some original characters who I cherish, and I have tried to use the rest as closely as I can from my experience of the TV show.
I make no secret that I love Seasons 1 - 5 and bits of 6 and less of 7 and virtually nothing of 8. It is why I've had so much fun with characters from those last seasons.
They are my equivalent of Red Shirts in Star Trek. There for plot purposes and to die horribly. ;-P

I have been asked by a few community members what is next?
Well I have some more stories outlined but don't worry these will be much shorter and I won't post until I have them ready. I think I have learnt my lessons here.
I have also posted this over at Archive of Our Own where you can download it as a single file in the format of your choice.
I also plan to - at some point - revise and reedit this story just a little to improve some
sections, fix up some spelling and grammar errors that have persisted over the years. This may only be published at AoOO due to the logistics but I will provide an update if I do so. Please don't expect this any time soon. It will be something I will need a lot of time to work on.

This story is dedicated to all in the Castle Fan Fiction Community - my fellow authors, and most importantly the readers. Thank you all for making this so enjoyable.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!