What's in a Name?

by Garrae

Summary

Forgiveness isn't something you are only granted by others. Forgiveness is something that you also have to grant to yourself. An AU starting about six months earlier than canon did, and in part a Christmas story. Please see warning in A/N.

Notes

This is a warning before reading. This story is based around the consequences of dealing with an alcoholic parent, both then and once they are dry. As usual, it is not soft and fluffy. If the subject may upset you, please back away now.
No warmth, no cheerfulness

“Kate. Hmmm. Kate.”

“Shut up, Castle.” It’s a bad day. It’s the middle of November and it’s pouring – well, sleet ing, which is worse, and it’s far too early to be this cold – and there’s nothing but paperwork on her desk and she has nothing interesting to do today at all. And it’s her birthday, and she has no plans.

“Kate,” he muses. What the hell this time? Surely Montgomery never meant her to have to put up with this jackass when there isn’t even a corpse? One case – one lousy case – that this smartass turned up on, and suddenly he claims inspiration – yeah, right – and talks Montgomery into letting him hang around and disrupt them. He’s been here ever since. She’d never had Montgomery down as a fan of murder mysteries. And she’d know. Oh yes. She’s read everything from Margery Allingham and Agatha Christie to Patterson and Baldacci. And Richard Castle. Though she doesn’t admit to that last. He might deduce it, but she doesn’t have to add to his smugness. Thinks he’s God’s gift to the reading public, as well as to women. Not to Gillette, though. Does he really think that stubbled look is sexy? Not in her house. Maybe Espo can teach him to handle a razor. (But it would feel so good against you, a little voice whispers.)

“Shut up. Some of us are working.” Her irritation boils over. “Why are you here anyway? There’s no body. Nothing for you to consult on.”

“You’re so cute when you’re irritated,” Castle oozes, smirking. Beckett emits a formlessly enraged growl and considers very seriously the advantages of re-arranging his teeth with the stapler. If nothing else, it would take him out the way while a dentist put his flashing, oh-so-practised, smile back together. And he wouldn’t be able to talk, which would be a very, very nice change.

“Why are you here?” she snaps.

“I need a name.”

“You’ve got a name. You splash your name around like beer at a frat party. But if you don’t like being known as Rick Castle we can find plenty names for you.” She smiles with no humour at all. “Starting with smartass.” Castle winces.

“Beckett, Beckett. If you’re going to find a nickname for me at least make it realistic.” His stubbly smirk widens. “Sex god will do.” He wiggles his eyebrows lasciviously. “I could show you, Beckett.”


“I told you. I need a name.” Just before she brains him with the stapler he carries on. “For my character.”

“And this has what to do with being here?”

“You’re my inspiration. My muse.” His eyes crinkle delightfully – no! She is not getting suckered into that discussion by a pair of big blue eyes. “So when I got bored I decided to come by and get some.” Her mouth opens. “Inspiration, of course. I couldn’t think of a name for my character. What else could I possibly mean?” His eyebrows wiggle some more. She glares even more fearsomely. It’s stopping her staring at his mouth.
“Kate,” he says for yet another time. Yes, that’s her name. But no-one in the precinct would want or dare to use it and she’s not breaking that rule for a sometime consultant who’s already offered to debrief her. “Short for Katherine, I presume?” She nods once, sharply. She doesn’t see where this is going yet, but she’s perfectly certain she won’t like it. Unfortunately she doesn’t see how to stop it, either. Well, apart from stopping his mouth. With a stapler. Emphatically not otherwise. Especially emphatically not with her own mouth.

“Katherine.” His voice lingers over it, as if he’s tasting it on his tongue, swirling it round his mouth like a fine wine. “Kath-er-ine. It means pure.”

“Don’t start” – Too late. Dammit!


“Especially at nearly forty,” Beckett snips. An instant later it’s clear that saying that was a mistake.

“You know my age? That’s so sweet. I knew you liked me better than you were letting on.” She splutters angrily. “Kath-er-ine.” This time it sounds as if he’s licking his lips on the th. Her eyes drop to his lips to make sure he isn’t. Said lips quirk up attractively – no. Not going there. And he can just stop saying her name like that, too. Stop his tongue slithering, slipping and sliding over it. She absolutely will not be seduced into liking him because of the way he says her name.

“That won’t do.” What? What’s wrong with her name? She bristles. “Too formal. She’s a cop. Feisty. Streetwise. Carries a gun. Katherine sounds like a saint, or a queen. It doesn’t fit the character.” She bristles further. “I need a short form.” Suddenly Beckett sees where this is going. Oh God. He’s going to start on nicknames and pretend it’s about the character. Because he cannot possibly call his character her name. Oh no. And if she stands up he’ll either follow her or shout. Oh God. She is dead. Deader than her last corpse, and if the boys hear him she’ll wish she were.

“There’s Kate, of course.” He catches her glare and leaves that one. “Or Katie. But that’s a bit… childish for a competent professional adult.” He looks carefully at her. There’s – something – there. A flash of embarrassment, but under it there’s something else. Hmm. Clearly her parents call her Katie, and no doubt still some hugely childish pet name too, just like he calls Alexis Pumpkin or baby bird. Let’s push a little, because she’s very nearly blushing and it’s cute. And unbearably sexy, and he’s wondered what she might feel like in his arms from the moment she arrested him. A plan to take her out for a drink (if he’s really lucky, dinner too) drops wholesale into his head.

She’s not blushing at all. Just because her dad still calls her Katie is no reason to blush. It could be worse. One of her friends was known as Tick all the way through high school because her mother was overheard referring to her as Tickety-boo. Really, what was that all about?

“Though I can see my main male character calling her Katie. Kate-eee, in fact.” He grins wickedly. “Depending, of course, on what he – or she – is doing at the time.” The expression on his face makes it perfectly clear what he’s thinking that his characters might be doing. At least, she hopes he’s thinking about the characters. The way he’s suddenly looking her over – eyeing you up, Kate – leaves her in some doubt about that. That look shouldn’t be causing warmth to pool in her stomach.

She focuses fixedly on her screen, pretending to concentrate on the paperwork. Her eyes drop to the time in its corner. It’s – oh thank God for that. It’s quitting time. She starts to pack up. She’ll go home and investigate a nice takeout. Seeing as it’s her birthday and all.
“You’re not leaving, are you? We’re having such a nice discussion.”

“This is not a discussion. It’s a monologue.” He pouts. Which she does not find at all attractive. He’s not five. And she is absolutely not looking at those full lips.

“If you would contribute, then it would be a dialogue. It’s only a monologue because you won’t talk to me. That’s very unkind, Beckett.” He widens his eyes and manages to look pathetically puppyish. It’s quite ridiculously adorably attractive. She won’t be attracted. Nor will she adore it. She will not. Just as well he’s stopped it. Now he’s smiling again. Unfortunately he’s smiling in a way that indicates that he’s had an idea. He clearly thinks it’s a good idea. On principle, that means it’s a bad idea. In fact, his smile is one she’s seen on innumerable suspects who have tried to soft-soap her into releasing them. He thinks he’s got a winning suggestion. Well, that’s not likely. She hasn’t been soft-soaped in years, and she’s not letting it start again now. And she will certainly not think about any of the more physical ways that he could use soft soap on her. Not out of her shower, or, preferably, bath, anyway.

“Come on.” What? “We need to finish this discussion.” What on earth – “Unless you’d prefer to continue it tomorrow.” Yes. Tomorrow. When with any luck a body will drop and this discussion can be permanently parked. In Nevada. Preferably with Castle also in Nevada. Deep in the desert. The extremely dry desert. This is not a discussion she wants to have. She’s just about to nod enthusiastically when he carries on.

“Ryan and Esposito could contribute too. I’m sure they’ll have lots of ideas.” She can’t keep the look of absolute horror off her face. She has the same sinking feeling of Titanic-proportion disaster approaching that she acquired the moment Montgomery told her that she’d got a fan. “Or.” Or? There’s an alternative? That’s got to be better than years of ragging from the boys. “Or you could let me buy you a drink and we can have a nice chat.”

This is not attractive either. Devil, meet deep blue sea. Rock, similarly, meet hard place. It occurs to her that Rick pestilent playboy Castle has a brain. In fact, he’s far too clever for his own good. He’s sandbagged her. No-one’s done that in years. She winces, rather too obviously.

“If you don’t want to be seen in public with me we can always go to your place.”

“No!” She doesn’t have to think about that answer. Absolutely not. She is not having him cluttering up her apartment and poking into her possessions. (or poking into you, says her unhelpful little voice. It takes some effort not to blush.)

“Okay then,” Castle says amiably. “There’s a quiet bar not too far away.” Quiet? Castle? Quiet? Well, at least it means she isn’t likely to figure on page six tomorrow.

The bar is very quiet. Deserted, in fact. This is almost as bad as going to her apartment. In fact it’s worse, because at least in her apartment she’s paid the electricity bill and can guarantee that there is light. This bar seems to have forgotten that. She did not sign up for low lighting and cramped booths. She moves as far away from Castle as she can manage without actually falling off the seat. He notices. Amazingly, he doesn’t comment. Still, the crinkling round his eyes is very informative. Infuriatingly so.

“What would you like to drink, Beckett?” She considers briefly. Sharing wine is far too friendly. Beer – that’s a cop thing, and to tell the truth she isn’t that fond of beer. She’s never liked gin. Scotch – nah. This dive won’t have the single malt that she very occasionally likes to drink. Tequila – no. Far too college party. Slammers are for co-eds.

“Vodka tonic, please.” Anaesthetic. Amnesia. Of both of which she thinks she will be in
considerable need, as if she isn’t already. Castle flicks a curious glance at her but declines to comment, possibly recognising her irritation at being finagled into something that she’s been avoiding since the day she met him. To wit, anything that might look in any way like a social meeting. She avoids thinking the word *date* too. It’s a very unhelpful word. All sorts of misplaced connotations.

A substantial volume of vodka disappears in one rapid movement. Castle notices that, too, and doesn’t comment. But he goes to the bar to replace it and brings another one back. And another one for him, though he’s only taken a couple of sips. Looks like he’s drinking Scotch. She supposes it’s his own liver he’ll ruin. But she’d better dial this back.

“So, Beckett. Kath-er-ine.” He’s licking over her name again. “Not Katie. That’s what your parents call you.” She says absolutely nothing. Not because she’s shocked by the accuracy of his guess. No. That’s an easy hit. No. It’s his casual, thoughtless assumption that she still has two parents. She buries her nose in her glass and sinks a third of what’s left in one go. This time Castle raises an eyebrow slightly.

“You okay, Beckett?” He puts an arm round her shoulder. That was a rather unexpected reaction. This isn’t embarrassment. This is pain. It’s very like her reaction when he told her his version of her own story. He wants to make it better, and he’s generally found that people in pain like comforting hugs. Unfortunately, in this as in so many things, Beckett doesn’t behave like most people. Back to banter and salaciousness. But he files this snippet of Beckett with the earlier one; for later assembly into a jigsaw puzzle, instead of a pile of disjointed pieces.

“Get off me.” She shrugs violently and the unhelpfully warm and comforting arm leaves. She doesn’t need comfort from Castle. He doesn’t need to know her story.

“That would have been a much more pleasant phrase if you’d rearranged the words just a little bit.” And thankfully the spoilt playboy is back. She can deal with that. It’s his occasional flashes of sincerity she can’t take.

“No.” That was rather blunter than she should have been. If she’d only found some smart, sarcastic remark it would have been more convincing.

“You sure you’re okay?” Back to sincerity. Damn.

“I’m fine.” He looks sceptical. She is not having this discussion. Not now. Not ever. Fortunately, he finally picks up the subtext and backs off that line of conversation. Unfortunately, he’s back to nicknames.

“Kathy. No. Too suburban. She’d be a teacher, with two kids and a white picket fence” –

“Cliché much?” Beckett snips. It would have been a snap but the vodka is softening her edges. Unfortunately, it’s also loosening her protection against inadvertent painful comments. It’s not – for once – entirely Castle’s fault. She hasn’t told him anything.

“– and a dog. A spaniel. Though secretly she wants a Malamute.” Beckett chokes on an entirely inadvertent giggle. “She’s married to another teacher.” He digresses. “You ever noticed that, Beckett? How teachers are always married to teachers? Lawyers to lawyers?” He’s still talking. She’s stopped listening. She’s not usually this raw, but twice in two minutes he’s hit the sore spot she normally shields. Another slug of her glassful disappears. Anaesthetic and amnesia are definitely needed. Armour would help, too.

“Sorry. Missed that.”

“Who do cops date? Other cops? Feds? Spies?” His eyes are dancing. “Mystery writers?” She doesn’t consciously register that last suggestion, caught for the third time on the first few words. She’s standing before she’s even worked out that her legs are moving.

“Excuse me. I have to go.” She’s far more than halfway to the door, the second drink untouched on the table, before he’s realised she’s not visiting the restroom, she’s leaving. She needs to get out, now. Three strikes and she’s out. She is not going to break down under the influence of too-fast vodka and sincerity in a dark quiet bar. The alcohol hit her brain almost instantly, and getting home before she does something stupid (like telling Castle the truth, or losing her temper with him because he doesn’t know the story and just hit all her sore spots, or simply kissing him) would be a good plan. Downing the drink that fast, on the other hand, was not a good plan. She’s a long way out of practice – she doesn’t practice, for good reason – and she should have known it before she knocked it back like that. Just as well she hadn’t had the second one. On this evidence, she’d have had to have been carried home.

Castle had watched Beckett knock back her first vodka like there would be no tomorrow and noted the timing very carefully. First when they got here – and yes, he’d inveigled her here against her wishes but he very badly wants to find out what’s behind that odd reaction and he’s not going to manage that in the bullpen –then when he’d said her parents called her Katie, and finally when he’d been talking about lawyers marrying lawyers. And then he’d asked her who cops date and she hadn’t even heard the last suggestion. Which hadn’t, actually, been a joke at all. And now she’s left, not, he thinks, coincidentally; hard upon that comment. It had taken him a minute to comprehend that she had gone straight for the exit. He leaves enough on the table to cover their drinks and a tip besides and goes after her at some speed.

When Beckett hits the street it’s starting to sleet again and no taxis are in view: an unsuspected disadvantage of dingy bars in dingy streets. She aims for the brighter lights of the nearest main road, knowing that as soon as she reaches it there will be as many taxis as there are cockroaches round a Dumpster. The biting wind sobers her up a great deal faster than she’d have liked. She could have used a lot longer under anaesthetic.

It’s her birthday. It’s her birthday, she’s twenty-nine years old, and she has as much life as the corpses she stands for. She didn’t mention the occasion in the precinct, because it’s not relevant. She’d have made arrangements with Lanie, if Lanie weren’t on the late shift tonight and she weren’t on shift tomorrow. Maybe they’ll go out Saturday. No boyfriend, no lover, no husband. Not up for a one-night stand, any more. Last serious relationship was with a Fed – total failure. Crush on her training officer before that – didn’t even make it to a point where success or failure might have been an option. She hasn’t met a likely prospect in months. Even when she had they’d not been… compatible. Compatible with her work schedule, that is. She hadn’t even got far enough to find out about other forms of compatible. (*Castle’s compatible with your work schedule*, says the annoying little voice. She considers lobotomy, to remove it, and her memories.)

The vodka’s made her maudlin, she realises. Self-pitying, and over-sensitive. She’s doing just fine without a boyfriend. Top Detective, here. Top team. Best in the NYPD. Best friend, in Lanie. Nothing to be maudlin about. She puts some swing into her steps and tries to rearrange her thoughts. Her mother may be dead but she’s still got a father. A lawyer who married a lawyer, and who calls her Katie. She hunches her shoulders against the sleet, and blinks, mouth twisted. It’s her twenty-ninth birthday, and instead of sharing cake and candles and wine and laughter she’s walking alone through the bleak November evening, looking for a cab to take her home to her solitary apartment.
She nearly makes it. With twenty yards to go, there’s a hand on her shoulder.
“What’s wrong?”

“My curfew,” Beckett says flippantly. The alternative is whimpering miserably. “I turn into a pumpkin at nine.”

“Thought that was midnight, Cinderella?” She winces.

“Only for Vice cops. The rest of us gotta to go to bed early.” She’s covering as best she can, but Castle hasn’t spent the last several weeks watching every move and flicker of expression that she makes without learning most of her tells. Right now, she’s lying through her teeth. Now he really wants some answers. No-one should react like that to normal conversational topics.

“Liar,” Castle says neutrally. It’s so unlike his normal irritatingly smooth, flirtatious tones that she stops walking and looks up. He leaves it hanging, and rapidly returns to annoyingly normal.

“We didn’t finish our conversation, Beckett. So I’ll just have to walk you home.” She splutters, forgetting her momentary misery.

“No way!”

“Yes way,” Castle pronounces smugly. “You’ve been drinking. It’s my duty to escort you home.” He pauses, portentously. “It’s your duty to help me think of my character’s name.”

“I don’t want to. You’re the writer, write. Use your over-active imagination.”

“I need inspiration.” He smiles sweetly, and falsely. “You’re my inspiration,” he sings, in a well-pitched baritone. A passer-by looks round, shakes his head in disgust, and puts his earphones in more firmly.

“At least get the lyrics right. After that, you can try to hit the notes.”

“I’m hurt, Beckett. Everyone says I’ve got a good voice.”

“Clearly they don’t have to listen to it,” Beckett mutters darkly.

“You could sing too. Then we’d be in perfect harmony. Wouldn’t that be nice?” He hums a few bars of *I’d Like to Teach the World to Sing*. In tune.

Beckett growls. It’s neither harmonious nor nice. Singing is strictly confined to her shower, and very rare karaoke nights with Lanie in out-of-the-way bars that no-one will find her in. Though when she does sing, she’s got a really great mezzo. Still, she is not going to be duetting with Castle. Totally inappropriate. She discovers with considerable irritation that she’s humming *Up Where We Belong*.

She discovers with rather less irritation – or at least a very different sort of irritation – that somehow Castle’s incessant, flirtatious triviality has dissipated some of her upset. Is it possible that this hyperactive man-toddler might actually have a good point? Just one, in the whole compass-round of ways he irritates her? She wriggles her shoulders in swift negation. Unfortunately, not only does that fail to dissipate the errant thought, but it’s clearly given Castle the wrong idea.

“You’re cold, Beckett.” She doesn’t need his faked concern. She really, really doesn’t need his
arm around her shoulders. “I’ll heat you up.” She growls. “I mean I’ll keep you warm. Lots of people have said I’m hot.” She’s sure they have. She will not be one of them. Even if it’s true. “Though if you want I could heat you up too.” The growl she emits this time would terrify tyrannosaurs. “Okay, too soon?” She doesn’t dignify that with an answer.

Not dignifying his suggestive comments with an answer does not, it appears, mean that he takes the hint and removes his arm. They’ve had this conversation already, in the bar. Time for more direct measures. “Castle, take your arm away.” This time she’s careful of her phrasing. He does. Well, that’s an improvement. He never usually does anything she asks him to. Like stay out the way.

“But you’ll get cold, Beckett. Then you’ll catch a cold and then you’ll give me it. My rugged good looks will be ruined if my nose is running and I sneeze all the time.”

“There’s a solution, Castle.”

“There is? You’ve found a cure for the common cold? You’ll be famous! Then I can date you for your high profile.”

“What?” Suddenly something she’d missed – or ignored – earlier knocks at her mind. He is definitely trying to wind her up. “I’m not dating you. That’s ridiculous.” He droops pathetically at her. She ignores him and signals a passing taxi. Castle slides in with her.

He knows he’s really pushing his luck now. There is every chance that he will be maimed or shot in the very near future. But his mind has started to work in a rather different direction from its normal concentration on getting Beckett out on a date, and if teasing her with nicknames and short forms of Katherine will extract some information – which it already has, if only he can put it together – then he’s going to carry on until he’s explicitly told to go home. First off, however, she’s upset and she’s thrown back a reasonable quantity of alcohol far too fast, although she’s looking surprisingly sober, so he is going to make sure she gets home in one piece. Even if she carries a gun. He’s not going to make it obvious that he’s indulging his mile-wide chivalrous streak, though. That wouldn’t do at all. He’ll stick to innuendo and annoying-ness. Even if it’s mutating faster than a flu virus in February into something very different from mere sexual attraction.

“Why are you in my taxi?” Beckett asks petulantly.

“I said I’d escort you home.” He sounds as if she should have known that.

“I don’t need an escort. I have my gun.”

“You don’t get off that easy.”

“Why, Mr Castle, are you making me an indecent proposition?” That is surely the last remnants of the vodka talking. It’s certainly not she.

“Would you like one?” His voice has dropped. Now it’s prowling round the cab. He’s remarkably close, despite the fact that she’s firmly tucked into her corner and he’s rammed up against the edge of his. It only proves that he’s disgracefully oversized. Which is not at all attractive. Really. (Your previous boyfriend was tall and broad, the voice reminds her. Lobotomy. Tomorrow. Lanie will arrange it.)

“No.”

“Too bad. If you change your mind, let me know.” She can hear the wicked smile without needing
to look. His voice hasn’t lost a jot of the predatory undertone. She ignores its effects on her hindbrain. She is a modern, civilised adult, six thousand years and more removed from the cavemen, and she is in control of her baser instincts. Remnants of vodka or not. She slides even further into the corner of the cab, and stares out at the now-driving sleet until they reach her building.

She pulls out a bill and is firmly forestalled. Castle is not only sneakily and unnecessarily paying for the cab but he’s also sneakily and irritationally on the sidewalk side. She can’t get out the cab on her side without the door being taken off by some other passing traffic, or being squashed. It’s perfectly clear that he’s intending to see her right to her door. Well, if he wants to prove that he’s polite he can. It’s entirely unnecessary, because she didn’t doubt his manners. Irritating and suggestive he may be, but not rude.

When she gets to her door her own manners take over her brain before her intelligence finds its way out of the final drops of no-longer anaesthetizing vodka. “Would you like to come in for a minute?” exits her mouth without her permission. Castle looks depressingly enthusiastic.

“I knew you liked me,” he oozes. He bounds in, somewhat in the manner of an over-indulged Labrador, and comes to a halt in the middle of the room. For a few seconds he’s blessedly silent. When he opens his mouth again Beckett wishes she hadn’t let good manners overcome good sense.

“That’s a birthday card.” No shit, Sherlock. He picks it up, and reads it. “To Katie, from Dad.” He’s clearly about to make a flip comment when he abruptly seems to perceive that she isn’t in the mood for any of his thoughts on the salutation.

“When was your birthday?” She doesn’t answer, pretending not to have heard. “It’s today, isn’t it?” More silence. Letting Castle know that she didn’t even have plans on her birthday wasn’t in the playbook.

“You should have said earlier. I’d have got you a cupcake with a candle.” He’s appalled. It’s her birthday, she’s got precisely one birthday card, and she hasn’t made a single change to her normal working day except that he finagled her out to a bar, somehow upset her and has now followed her back to her apartment where she’s pretending that it doesn’t matter that she’s not celebrating. Birthdays do matter, and celebrating with friends matters more. She’s been cheated of a proper birthday.

Well, he’s sure of one thing now, and that is that she is quite definitely single. He’d been pretty positive anyway, from her reactions to him, but now he is certain. No harm in trying to alter that. He’s been hoping for this sort of chance for some time.

“That’s precisely why I didn’t say.”

Castle looks humorously shocked.

“Birthdays are for celebrating. Surely you know that? How old are you?” Beckett raises her eyebrows. “Oh, okay.” She waits for the next shoe to splash down. “Why aren’t you out on the town?”

“Work tomorrow.” She concocts an almost-truthful statement. “Can’t be out late when you’re on early shift.” While he’s been asking questions, Castle’s slowly meandered across the room to where Beckett, now, as always in her apartment, barefoot, is desultorily looking for her takeout menus and considering the virtues of strong coffee to provide her with something that will improve the evening. The vodka has worn off. How can she go from almost effectively anaesthetized to stone cold sober in an hour? It’s not fair.
“So, Beckett. Names. Especially appropriate on a birthday.” He’s practically on top of her. She jumps at his voice that close. Castle puts out a hand to steady her and fails to remove it. In fact, he adds another one, so that he’s now placed two large, warm hands round her waist. “You know what else is traditional on a birthday?” His voice has dropped into a low, rumbling register that’s talking to her nerves, not her ears.

“What?”

“A kiss.” Which he provides, lightly on her lips. And then, when out of sheer shock she doesn’t kill him at once or even step back, he bends and kisses her again, much more forcefully, big hands and long fingers drawing her inward, tongue running along the seam of her mouth and demanding – receiving – entrance. His hands shift on her back to hold her against him, one at the curve of her spine, one sliding upwards to her neck and into her hair, twisting into the short locks at her nape. She isn’t sure at all how her own hands came to be round his neck. She can’t even blame the vodka, because it’s worn off. So she has absolutely no idea why she isn’t killing him already, (it’s not as if she couldn’t) and even less idea than that as to why she’s joining in. Except that no-one’s held her tightly and kissed her like this for a very long time and everywhere his hands go they leave a little trail of desire and heat and it’s just so nice to be wanted.

She opens fully under his lips and lets him explore her mouth. He tastes of Scotch and heat and indefinably of big, hard male, and the more she responds the tighter he’s caught her and shit he feels good against her and this is why she likes big, broad men, because she can feel protected. Which is really very odd because she can take care of herself perfectly well and she has a gun and an average target score of over ninety-five.

She gives up thought in favour of sensation; drops the last vestiges of daytime hard, controlled shell and curves softly into Castle. His reaction is immediate and certainly doesn’t disappoint: his kiss turns hard and possessive, tongue requiring her concession to his demands, hand angling her head for full access; his other hand runs down from the small of her back to over the curve of her ass and pulls her firmly against hard weight and hot body, holding her in just the right place so that she can feel how much he wants her. She knows that she’s already soft and wet and open: not her usual daily self at all, and the more she softens the more he takes and the more she gives back and oh it’s just so easy to let him lead her further and further down this path.

It’s just so easy to be exactly who she isn’t in the precinct: to be Kat not-Kate-not-Beckett who likes soft t-shirts and sweats and flowing skirts and even occasional dresses, not sharply tailored pants and jackets; who can cook and (whisper it softly) play acoustic guitar and (never say it aloud) likes occasional slushy romance novels and baths with softly aromatic bubbles and scented candles; and who, just for once in a way, would like not to be the alpha in the room but to be petted and protected and cherished. Which, for the next little while, seems to be a possible, if temporary, outcome. Because the Castle who currently has both arms tightly round her and his mouth hard on hers doesn’t seem much like the one who turns up at the precinct either. Exactly who he isn’t in the precinct, in fact. He’s a lot less irritating, for a start. Not irritating at all. His kisses are as smooth, seductive and sinful as good moonshine whiskey, and slide down every sensitive synapse to gather moistly within her.

Castle, not being one to let an opportunity pass him by, had seized it and as swiftly found that, as he had hypothesised almost since moment one, Beckett is not nearly as unaffected by him as she’d pretended. He is somewhat surprised, however, that in more intimate circumstances she’s not at all like she is outside her door; but he is perfectly content to take control of the course of the evening and of this strangely yielding, soft Beckett. It’s clear that she doesn’t want to take charge; and from that he has rapidly deduced that – since she is not, as she could, maiming him – she wants him to. Which suits him just fine, because it’s only taken him a few weeks to be entirely enraptured by
Detective Kate Beckett, who is currently not Detective Kate Beckett but some completely different woman – equally enrapturing – who’spliant and responsive in his arms, where she fits just perfectly. Despite the height and the usual heels, currently and conveniently missing, there’s surprisingly little of her. Her wrists are delicate, her waist slim, her collarbones sharply defined. Must be her driving daytime public personality that makes her seem to occupy the whole of any space she’s in: the focal point, always in command of the room, wherever she is. Except, it seems, here.

He holds her closer, tastes more deeply: teasing and tantalising and taking and testing this new theory that the terse, tense Beckett might be someone quite different in her own home, her own private space; until finally he turns her round, rapidly surveys the room and lands his gaze on a large, full-cushioned couch. He walks them to it, where this carefully-judged exploration can be continued in comfort. Whilst he can, quite readily, hold her up, (and pick her up and carry her, but he’ll demonstrate that later if it seems appropriate) he’d rather it wasn’t necessary. It’s very odd, though. He’d expected, somehow, that the first time they kissed would grow out of rage and frustration and be hard and raw and angry. It’s not. It’s strangely soft and delicate and yes he’s taken her mouth hard and deep but there’s no rage about it. He wouldn’t have put them – this is a them – down for traditional roles in any capacity whatsoever, but right now it seems that Beckett’s being (this has just got to be wrong) feminine. His display of masculinity is less surprising. Metrosexuality only goes so far.

Beckett surrenders to being moved on to her couch and into Castle’s lap without the slightest semblance of a fight. Why fight what you want? No arguments, no problems, no complications. No commitments either, but who cares? It’s her birthday, and this is her present: a chance to be kittenish-Kat, not Kate, not Beckett. She’s so tired of being the strong one; the one in command. She can put it down for tonight, for the first time in years. She’ll pick it up again tomorrow, when she wakes. It’s just one evening.

But strangely, given the huge volume of suggestive, not to say heated, comments that Castle has produced since the day she stormed his book party to haul him in for questioning, he currently seems content with kissing. Hard, deep, and forceful kissing which she is very much appreciating – but nothing more, yet. Still, he’s very good at that, and hadn’t she thought earlier that she isn’t up for a one-night stand? She’s past that sort of casual behaviour, no matter what her body is telling her right now, which could be encapsulated in the three words jump his bones, pronounced in a very Lanie-esque twang. She is, after all, a mature adult, not an over-sexed, hormone-soaked adolescent. Really. Though if it came along she’s currently pretty certain she wouldn’t object, or stop it. It’s her birthday, and surely she can do what she wants on her birthday? God knows the rest of the day has been fairly crappy, and some pleasurable diversion would be good. This is currently a very pleasurable diversion.

Castle hasn’t moved off kissing largely because he has become instantly, hopelessly and incurably addicted to the taste of Beckett’s soft mouth under his and the way she feels simply held close against him. For now, it’s entirely unnecessary to push the point of this clearly mutual attraction. There’s no need to hurry. On the other hand, he could carefully explore a little further. Nothing too blatant. He’s not a sex-crazed teen. Even if it’s Beckett. He leaves kissing her mouth and feathers fingers over her jaw, tipping her face towards him and playing with the wisps of short hair round her ears. Interestingly, as her hair dries from the sleet that had accumulated on it, it’s acquired a soft wave. He wouldn’t have predicted that, he’d expected her hair to be as rigidly controlled as she normally is. Then again, he’s been wrong about the extent to which her personality is all about control, it seems.

Lips follow fingers as Castle investigates the fine-boned outline of Beckett’s face, glides round her jawline and delves delicately into the curve of her ear, the recess behind it, finds a spot where she
wriggles and breathes just a little harder, faster; so he kisses that again just to make sure he’ll be able to find it the next time. He has a very good memory for matters which interest him, and right now the contents of his arms interest him extremely. Not, of course, that this is new. Said contents have been the most interesting issue around him for weeks. Rather reluctantly, he stops kissing her.

“Isn’t this a better way to spend your birthday?” He tucks her into his arm a little more comfortably so that he can purr into her ear. “Traditions are always a good thing.” He doesn’t say, or do, anything further. It seems like he’s waiting for something: a word, or a signal:
Beckett is just a little discomposed that Castle has apparently left all the decisions up to her. She doesn’t want to make decisions, tonight, beyond the single vitally important one of consent. She thinks that her consent is relatively obvious, since she could have done him serious damage at any point and hasn’t.

“It’s okay, Castle. It’s good.” She thinks that’s enough, especially when she snuggles into his shoulder, relaxed against the firm muscle. Much to her disappointment, he doesn’t go back to kissing her, nor does he move on to anything else. Instead he holds her close-cuddled, and murmurs in her ear.

“Not Katherine, or Kate, or Kathy.” You what now? Surely he’s not back to names. She doesn’t want nicknames, or pet names. She just wants one evening when she can put everything down and not think. Just one evening to be soft Kat not hard-ass Beckett or kick-ass Kate, or Katie. To be Kat, but in her own mind, not in anyone else’s voice. “Mmmm. I don’t think any of those fit.” He’s nibbling gently at her earlobe. The voice and tone and action spread smooth sensuality down her skin, seeping in and soothing her slight disquiet at the direction of the conversation. A little less conversation, please, Castle.

“Fit what?” Beckett asks distractedly, far more focused on the wide frame surrounding her and the gentle, rhythmic movement of fingers at her shoulder and waist than on his words.

“Fit my character. Can’t call her Kate.” Beckett sighs in considerable and not at all concealed relief. “Katherine and Kathy just don’t work. Not badass at all.” He pauses, and considers. “Nor are they quiet, soft and relaxed, like you suddenly are now.” He leaves that hanging, too. Beckett’s not sure that she likes him picking up on her current state. But it’s just this evening. Back to Beckett-normal in the morning. She curls in and lets the slight scent of cologne and male settle around her. It’s... reassuring. Comforting. And rather too arousing for her own good. She wiggles into a thoroughly comforting alignment. Hard fingers flex against her, then release slightly and keep circling, stroking, far away from any intimate areas. It really doesn’t make the slightest difference to her reactions. She doesn’t realise that she’s emitting a contented little unformed noise.

“Kat.” What the hell? Contented noises cease instantly, as does soft relaxation. No. No. She’s only Kat inside her own head, inside her own apartment, and alone. No-one else gets to see Kat. No-one. “You’re purring. That makes you Kat.”

She didn’t want this. She’s returning to being Beckett faster by the minute and all she’d wanted was one freaking evening where she didn’t have to be Beckett, or Kate, or Katie. But she doesn’t want Castle to work out that she just wanted to be Kat. She certainly doesn’t want him to call her that. He might ask why.

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’m not purring.”

“It’s a perfectly acceptable short form. Or would you prefer Kitty? It’s a bit old-fashioned now but – ow! Let go of my ear, Beckett!” She lets go as he looks wounded. “That wasn’t nice. Just when we were getting on so well, too.”

He catches her wrist just before she takes another run at removing his ear. Clearly he’s hit another sore spot. He’s remarkably good at that. He’d rather be remarkably good at hitting – er – sensitive spots. So to speak. He’d better steer clear of this too. But in the near future he’s going to find out
why Kat is such a sore point. He suddenly foresees a reasonable amount of hard thinking – no, deducing – in his future. Shortly before an entirely unreasonably large amount of kissing Beckett. Back to lightening the atmosphere, before she realises that she’s still in his lap and stops being there.

“I know,” he says happily. “Split the difference. KitKat.”

“I’m not a candy bar!” She just has time to contemplate the magnitude of her mistake in engaging with this idiotic discussion before a grin splits his face in two.

“There are certain similarities,” he smirks. Then his expression changes subtly: the smirk becomes more of a lazy, sexy grin, his hand slips from her waist to her hipbone, the arm around her shoulder grips just a little more tightly. He carries on before she has a chance to stop him.

“It’s long and slim, with a smooth, attractive covering and substance within.” She opens and closes her mouth without producing words. “It tastes rich and sweet.” His eyes are intent. “I like to take the covering off. Sometimes” – his voice is lubricious – “I just can’t stop eating it.”

If he is actually talking about chocolate she will dine on her best Ferragamos, without sauce. But she can’t call him out on it because he is ostensibly referring to candy bars and if she admits by one single look or word that she knows perfectly well that he is referring to what they might do she’ll never be allowed to forget it.

“Better go find some, then. There’s a Seven-Eleven round the corner.” That sounds perilously close to a dismissal. Castle doesn’t want to be dismissed: it wouldn’t be any fun at all. Nor does he like the very standard sharp, sardonic tone in her voice. It’s far too similar to how she is normally, and he’d just been starting to enjoy the softer version. Hmmm. Maybe not talking would be a good plan, especially as she’s tensing up and any moment now she’s going to work out…

Dammit. She has.

Beckett stands up. And it is, clearly, Beckett who stands up. Whoever that softer woman was, she’s gone. But emphatically not forgotten. “Thank you for seeing me home,” she says, and moves significantly in the direction of the door and, more importantly, away from him. Castle receives the distinct impression that it’s not just a physical separation but an emotional and mental distancing as well. Hell. That was entirely not the plan.

“My pleasure, Detective.” His devious brain provides him with a new plan. All Beckett’s tells inform him that she’s not happy about something. All her previous tells and reactions inform him that she probably wasn’t unhappy about being kissed. All he needs is a few minutes to assemble his thoughts. “Could I just borrow your bathroom a moment?” He picks up his jacket and drapes it over his arm.

Beckett nods, once, sharply, and points him briskly in the right direction. Castle has no need of the bathroom, strictly, though he avails himself of the facilities in order to create the right impression. Then he swiftly removes some of the bills from his wallet: enough to buy himself coffee and a pastry, (he’s hungry) and meet a cab fare home if this doesn’t work; and puts it carefully on the floor (to avoid noise) where it’s not obvious to the casual viewer but could easily have fallen out of his pocket.

When he returns to the main room there is a noticeable atmosphere of hurry up and leave already which is more than slightly tinged – in fact soaked with – a colouring of because I’m upset and want time to myself. Nothing like living in a houseful of women to teach you about emotional
undercurrents. Well, if he’s got his timing right he should return, having done some thinking, just at the point her upset might actually be on display; and while he really doesn’t want Beckett upset he does think that some comforting support, coming from a shoulder currently located around three inches from his chin, might get him some answers and kissable, kitten-like, not-Beckett. Or alternatively, if he hasn’t arranged all these disparate thoughts into a coherent whole, he can go home and pretend he didn’t notice his missing wallet till tomorrow in the precinct. Everyone carries enough change in their pants pockets to get the subway, and he is no exception, so the explanation will still stack up.

Beckett politely shows Castle out and repairs to her bedroom, feeling stale, flat and very unprofitably miserable. Why can’t she have even one night where no-one wants anything complicated, or wants support, or answers, or justice, or seeing inside her head, or anything? She’s just so tired of carrying the weight of it all. It’s been so long, and she’s so exhausted by it. She’s not hungry any more, and she doesn’t want to start tomorrow tired. She washes, lost in thought and oblivious to her surroundings, and changes into her favourite heavy, silky robe, wondering why she hadn’t just followed her instincts and dragged Castle into her bedroom when she had the chance. Probably because you’re too controlled, Kate. Her mouth twists unhappily. She finds a book and curls up in among her pillows and comforter, just like always.

Castle enlists the aid of his phone to find the nearest open coffee bar or similar place where he can sit and think with the aid of some caffeine. It’s a little further away than he’d like, and it’s still sleet, which is rather unkind when it’s not even December, but the coffee is good and they have some very acceptable carrot cake. He finds a quiet chair well away from the whining draught biting from under the door and settles down to ponder.

On the basis of the pattern of vodka drinking, he hit a sore point when he suggested that her parents called her Katie. Start there. Why on earth would that be a sore… oh. Oh. He knows this. Or at least, she not only didn’t deny it when he told her his deductions of her story, she more or less confirmed it. Someone close to you. Oh fuck. And since her birthday card was signed by her dad it must have been her mother. Oh fuck. Because the second belt of vodka went down wholesale when he’d said that lawyers marry lawyers. Which would be her parents. Which implies a very happy home life, until it all went wrong.

So what flicked the third switch, then? Ah yes. He’d asked who cops date. Right now, she isn’t dating anyone – conclusion: bad break up, not too long ago. Which given Beckett’s work ethic and general level of seriousness could be anytime in the last couple of years, or even a bit more. Well, this cop ought to be dating him. He’d be a cure for bad break ups, he thinks smugly. She’d certainly appreciated him earlier. But then he goes back to pondering why she’d suddenly tensed up and realised what she was doing and called it off.

She didn’t like Katie. Okay, that’s not a surprise. She didn’t like Kathy. Also unsurprising, given how he’d described a Kathy. He suspects, based on his own parental experiences (of his parent and as a parent both) that she was only referred to as Katherine when she was in trouble. That is a bit of a shame, because he could really get used to the sound and feel of Katherine in his mouth. Not to mention the taste.

It was Kat that sent it plummeting into all sorts of wrong. Kitty and KitKat were simply amusement value and didn’t provoke the same reaction. Kat, on the other hand, stopped her purring and raised her tension level back to normal. So, something’s up with Kat. Okay, leave that for the moment. He takes another healthy draught of coffee and savours the cake.

What else? What else, he thinks, is the enormous difference between Beckett-normal and Beckett-at-home. Or, possibly, Beckett-in-his-arms. Beckett-normal is sharp, sardonic, wholly in
command and barriered higher than the Hoover Dam. Beckett-in-his-arms – well, wasn’t. That Beckett wasn’t a Beckett at all: she was soft and probably strokable and pettable; she cuddled into him like a contented cat would, boneless and utterly relaxed; and she clearly didn’t want to take the lead at all.

Oh. Two insights there that he could have used a lot earlier this evening. One, that she didn’t want to take the lead. Is it possible that the wholly-in-charge Beckett occasionally gets tired of being wholly in charge? It seems a tad unlikely, but then the events of the entire evening have been a tad unlikely. Even more unlikely, is it just faintly possible that curled-like-a-cat-and-purring-not-Beckett is in fact Kat, inside her own front door? That’s not something she’d want to have known outside said door. Including, naturally, known by him. She doesn’t trust him to keep that quiet, and to be fair he hasn’t exactly given her any reason to believe that he’s in any way discreet.

So if he hadn’t flicked the raw edge, where might he be? Well, if he hadn’t called her Kat, she’d still be tucked into his lap and in a very kissable position. More, she’d quite explicitly said it was all okay, all good; which is consent. So maybe they’d currently be exploring a little further round the baseball diamond than simply kissing. Kissing was good, though. Kissing Beckett is something of which he should do a lot more. An awful lot more.

And all this thinking has conveniently occupied a length of time sufficient for him to have waited for a cab, put his hand in his pocket to check, automatically as one does, that he had his wallet, found he didn’t, looked frantically around him, and then made his way back to Beckett’s building; on which mission, when he arrives, he does not forget to set the scene by asking the doorman if he’d picked it up.

The doorman is sympathetic but definite: no wallet dropped or handed in here. Castle fakes considerable annoyance at his own stupidity and a serious dose of worry; blesses the talent that he inherited from his mother and tells the doorman that he’d just like to check that he didn’t drop it at Detective Beckett’s, or in the elevator. The doorman sizes Castle up – a little protective, a little intimidating: Castle hopes that his own doorman would behave similarly if stray boys came round wanting to see Alexis on a feeble excuse like this – and, evidently satisfied of Castle’s sincerity, passes him on up. The wallet, though he looks to left and right as if searching, is naturally nowhere to be seen, since he left it in Beckett’s bathroom, and (he hopes) it’s still there.

He taps on the door. For a long moment, nothing happens: no movement is audible from within. Then the door opens, accompanied by an exasperated sigh emanating from an exasperated Beckett, wearing a garment that his fingers itch to stroke.

“What is it, Castle?”

“I can’t find my wallet,” he says apologetically, demonstrating its absence. He certainly doesn’t want her to know he’d staged this. “I definitely had it when we got here because I had it when I paid for the cab. It must have fallen out my jacket. Have you seen it?”

“No.” Beckett shakes her head, disarmed by the credible cause for him to have returned. “But I wasn’t looking.” She makes an expansive gesture around the room. “Feel free to look round here.” Swift thought flicks across her face, the Detective building the picture of what he had done. “You were in here – oh, and in the bathroom. I’ll look there. You can look in here. Don’t break anything.”

He skims a glance around the room, wanders to the window and checks under a side table, makes sure he doesn’t knock it and damage the small amethyst bird which is sitting on it. It looks rather fragile. Like Beckett. She’d had that certain glimmer in her eye that argues upset, but it had been a controlled upset, rather than emotional storms. As controlled as Beckett always is. He’s never
seen her otherwise. She needs something to cheer her up. A present, perhaps, for her birthday, dressed up as a reward for finding his wallet. When she finds the wallet, they can discuss rewards. Dinner, he thinks. A belated birthday dinner, somewhere classy and discreet: he can arrange that for tomorrow. But for tonight, reward might well equal kiss. On which thought there’s a triumphant squawk from the direction of the bathroom.

“It’s here, Castle.” Beckett reappears, on a cloud of you idiot how did you not notice you’d dropped it? He manufactures an expression of considerable relief.

“Thanks. Losing it would have been disastrous.”

“What, you’d have had to get the subway like us mere mortals?”

“No, I’d have had to notify fifteen different card companies. And I’d have lost all my coffee loyalty points.” Beckett looks slightly more impressed, and a lot more horrified, by the last sentence than by the first.

“I can see that the last might have been a problem,” she says sardonically.

“Are you telling me that wouldn’t have been a problem for you? You mainline coffee. Where do you keep your IV line?” She grins in a rather you-got-me-there way, and shrugs, just exactly the same way as she’d have done at the precinct. The remaining small hints of upset are covered almost perfectly – but, as she’s walked across the room, brandishing the wallet, to where he’s standing, still by the window, the signs are not quite wholly concealed. Three more steps… two more… one more – range.

“Here you are,” she says, and holds out the wallet, expecting him to take it. He does indeed reach out. It’s simply that he’s not reaching for the wallet.

“Here you are,” Castle says with considerable satisfaction, which in hindsight, Beckett feels, should have tipped her off, and instead of reaching for the wallet reaches for Beckett, puts both arms round her, and draws her in. He is, she finds, ridiculously snuggly. Far more so than her pillows. A little while ago she’d been wishing she’d just dragged him into her bedroom (assuming, of course, he wanted to, but it was pretty obvious earlier that he wanted to) and now here he is back again, and still indicating that he’s interested. Well, she’s clearly not going to be able to stop taking charge of events, but if she wants it, she can definitely have it. She stands still in his embrace, leaning against him, neither starting anything nor definitively stopping, considering whether she can bear to shoulder any further decisions other than yes.

And then the decision is taken out of her hands.

Castle had waited a moment or two to see what Beckett might do: top of the probability list being telling him to let go. However, he thinks that there is a faint chance that she might go back to being the soft not-Beckett of whom he’d quite like to see a little more, and a slightly higher chance that she might at least be receptive to some more kisses. So when she leans against him – though disappointingly it couldn’t be described as curving in – he thinks back to his deduction that she might not want to be in charge all the time, (he’s still not at all sure about this idea) waits to see; and, when she doesn’t take any decisive action, reasons that he can take some mildly decisive action without being on the wrong end of a harassment suit or, much more likely, a hard knee to the testicles.

He curls his hand round Beckett’s chin to raise her face to his, leans down slowly and inexorably
and takes her mouth, gently searching for entrance. Her hands come up to his shoulders: one sliding into his hair; he wraps one arm round her back to keep her body close and sets the other on her neck. And abruptly she lets him in and her stance alters from the previous marginal leaning in to curving close and all the hard, controlled lines have softened and flowed and he’s not sure how this transformation has occurred but it seems like he’s got something right.

So, much like earlier, he repatriates them to Beckett’s overstuffed couch and carries on exploring her addictive lips and mouth with Beckett suitably and comfortably – and addictively – arranged in his grasp. And, again just like earlier, Beckett seems to be perfectly happy not to make any further decisions at all. Which Castle still finds very odd, because if he’d been asked to bet on it he’d have placed a substantial amount on Beckett being very vocal about her wants and not-wants, and more than that on her driving the course of events. Except she isn’t. It’s not that she’s passive or unresponsive, but she doesn’t seem inclined to push for anything more. He pauses, trying to think of a way to ask the questions he wants to ask without spooking her.

Beckett is currently of the opinion that not having to take any decisions would be really good. Maybe she can simply wait and see how this plays out for a while, though she might need to be decisive at some stage. Oh. That would be now. He’s stopped everything: he isn’t even petting her. He’s not going to give her what she wants most: a chance to lean on someone else and let them take the strain for a little while, it seems, so she might as well have something she’ll like instead. Up to her, again. She drives her tongue into his mouth, and takes the lead before he’s realised it. She clearly isn’t going to get what she really wanted: a chance to put all her burdens down and be soft Kat who wants something different; but if she can’t have that then she’ll settle for a different form of relief. It’ll be good, she’s sure of that.

It’s just not what she really wanted.
She pulls Beckett back around her, shrugging into it like a comfortable coat. Back to Beckett, who can have slick, practised, perfectly enjoyable sex without ever revealing that sometimes she’d rather not be Beckett at all. Exactly as she could have predicted had she thought about it, taking the initiative ignites hot lust and very little in the way of soft cosseting. Gentle strokes, yes, but only in the context of winding each other higher and tighter and hotter and harder and wetter and yes he’s really, really good at this. So is she. As a physical connection it’s the best she’s had. She screams out her pleasure and comes hard around his own explosion and then rolls away to recover.

She’s surprised to be rolled back, and more surprised to be tucked in.

Castle is not wholly happy, despite the absolutely spectacular sex. Beckett has been exactly what he would have expected of Beckett, but he had wanted to be closer to her and all he feels is that he’s been – well, fobbed off with a treat. He doesn’t like the uncomfortable feeling that Beckett settled for this, rather than receiving what she really wanted, but not, unfortunately, being telepathic he currently has no idea what it was that she might really have wanted.

“Don’t do that,” he murmurs. “’C’mere.” He tugs gently, overcoming the slight resistance. “It’s not nice to roll over and go to sleep.”

“’M tired. Lemme sleep.” She really is bone-wrenchingly tired: her eyes are closing themselves and she can’t rouse her mind to anything more. Disappointment in the day and the unpleasant feeling that she settled for second-best because she didn’t want to expose herself and her history, even if that second-best was very, very good, has left her wrung out and strained. She wants to sleep, knit up her ravelled cares, emotions and feelings and face tomorrow as she faces every other day, a burden to be shouldered.

Castle kisses the only available spot: the top of her head. “’kay.” She’s apparently asleep before he can say more. He detaches himself carefully, cleans up, dresses and leaves. With his wallet, this time. Without, however, proper answers having been supplied. He’d previously thought, and then at least partly pretended, that shadowing Beckett is all about flirting to the top of his bent and hoping that the smart, sassy, whip crack Beckett will flirt back and then they could turn it into something a little more physical, in a mutually acceptable manner.

He’s not sure what happened tonight. He mulls it over all the way home, but when he gets in he’s no more informed than he’d been the moment he shut Beckett’s door behind him. It had, for sure, been excellent. But he still has the nagging feeling that in some way Beckett had settled for second best. He doesn’t like that feeling at all. He’s not used to being second best. Additionally, he’s pretty certain that being second best had nothing whatsoever to do with the physical connection. He might previously have had no idea, but now that he’s got plenty of idea he’s convinced that there’s something really pretty special there. He’s equally certain that Beckett felt the same. Physically.

He replays the second half of the evening. He’d had another chance, taken it, cuddled her in and kissed her and they’d spent some time in relatively gentle making out on her couch, during the whole of which period Beckett – no. Not Beckett, then. Possibly Kat, though he’s still trying to work out whether there really is a Kat – was perfectly happy, content, and not making any moves at all to be in charge or to lead or to be her normal driving alpha female self. And then almost without a warning she flipped back to exactly who she normally is and dragged him down with her. Not that he’d been protesting.
So. What happened to flip that switch? He hadn’t made the mistake of mentioning names, or nicknames, he hadn’t tried to push her. Oh. A-ha. He had stopped, because he’d wanted answers but hadn’t formulated the questions to which he wants the answers. And very shortly after that, Beckett-back-to-Beckett had made a swift decision and taken charge, just as he would have predicted. Maybe… maybe she’d just wanted not to take the lead? He finds that very strange, and not very Beckett-like at all.

It’s all far too difficult. Interpreting Beckett is complicated enough when she’s in the precinct and definitely Beckett. Interpreting Beckett when she isn’t Beckett is like interpreting Stalinist Russia: a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma. It’s certainly too complicated for tonight.

He’ll consider it all in the morning, when his brain might work. Right now, his brain is mostly occupied with the exceedingly pleasurable memories of Beckett in his arms, under his mouth and tucked against him.

When Castle has left Beckett sleeps for a time, then, exhausted as she still is, wakes with her mind churning. She tries futilely to let her mind relax back into sleep. Disappointment, though, fuels the memories, the reasons she’s so tired of it all.

She’s always been the strong one, a support for her friends. A strong-willed child, a rebellious and strong-willed teen, and then a fully focused college student. She wanted to be Chief Justice, and all her strong will had been turned on that. But then her mother had been stabbed in a dark, dank alley on a freezing January night, and everything changed.

Then, immediately, she had to be strong for her father. She couldn’t show weakness, or be weak, or even, after the funeral, cry anywhere near him. He careened down the slope far faster than she, and by the time she’d looked downward he was already at the bottom, sinking in the quicksand.

For two years she’d tried to save him from drowning, from diving over the edge hand in hand with his new best friend Jack Daniels. Then she’d gone to Al-Anon, as suggested by her then-therapist, and learned that – devastating blow – she couldn’t save him. For three more years she’d watched from a distance – never a safe distance; there was no safety; if she had reached out to try to pull him to some mythical safety he would have pulled her under with him – as he sank. Every day, every ring of her phone, every call from another precinct, floated on the surface of a toxic slurry of fear: fear of the news that call might bring; and under that a sludgy, poisonous underlay of knowledge that if it were the worst, then that at least might bring relief. At least then she wouldn’t continue to suffer the tyranny of hope: need not grieve each day for both the parent lost and the parent remaining. Instead, one parent gone, she watched and feared as the other tried to follow, and failed.

Every day, from the day she’d had to walk away, she’d shouldered her guilt that she’d deserted her father when he needed her most. Every minute since he’d checked himself into rehab she’s been sharply, painfully aware of the fragility of his sobriety, as delicate as a spider’s web and as dependent on a complex network of connections. Should any of those break, so might well he. And she, she knows, is the mainstay of that web. He’d told her so, short weeks after their shared tragedy: already deep-drowned in soft amber whisky to nullify the hard edge of pain, undiluted liquor to better dilute his agony; slurring and tearful and desperately clinging to her: you’re so like her, you’re so strong, Katie, I couldn’t bear to lose you too. You’re the only thing I’ve got left. Don’t ever leave me. But he had already abandoned her. Alcohol was a warmer companion than his devastated, grieving daughter.

Two years after that, she had forsaken him. She had to, or drown with him. And then she joined the Academy, to salt the wound she’d dealt him. Every day, she’d taken up her burden of
abandonment with the dawn and only put it down with sleep. Every day, she’d found that only pushing herself harder, faster, for longer kept her clawing, heart-ripping guilt at bay, for a while.

She’d graduated top. It hadn’t helped.

So she’d done the same, pushed herself past all limits, when she started in uniform; and consequently become the youngest female detective in NYPD history. That hadn’t helped, either; not with her father still drowning, still reaching for the next bottle, looking at her in uncomprehending and incomprehensible misery, pouring from bloodshot eyes and a slack face. She couldn’t stand to see it, and couldn’t save him. Survivor’s guilt, perhaps. A venomous resentment, that she resented herself more for being unable to put behind her, and still more for feeling at all. Didn’t she deserve some support from him? And under that, from whence neither therapy nor self-knowledge has excavated it: Didn’t you love me enough to stay away from the pit?

Finally, he saved himself: claimed it was the thought of her and gave her his old watch to prove it, to show her. But still she carries an Atlas-burden of guilt that she forsook him; and a further Sisyphean boulder that she has to be his mainstay. She sets her shoulder to that stone daily, too.

Her last – her only – serious relationship had foundered on the rocks of his never-articulated-in-sobriety, unasked but desperate, need for her to be her father’s safety-line; his belay. Sorenson had been a decent man, but he hadn’t understood – how could he, no-one who hasn’t been there could ever understand the depths of degradation of her alcoholic – say it, it’s the truth – father: the unconsciousness, the vile explosions, the tears, the vomit; and she had never talked about it – how fragile her father was, and is; how her departure would have destroyed him as casually and callously as a child destroying the spider’s webs for pleasure with one swipe of its stick. She couldn’t abandon him to the avaricious avidity of alcohol again, when he’d worked so hard to become, and stay, dry. His dryness, though, had become her arid Atacama, the desert of her life; her atonement for abandoning him. And still she pushes herself to do better every day, in order to forget for some few hours her personal burdens.

But then in the precinct there are other burdens. The burden of command: in charge of the team, standing for the dead. Always the raking claws, the scratched-bloody need to solve it better, faster; to chase down every lead and follow every trail. Always the decisions: this lead over that, this trail over that. Always knowing that failure, or error, falls on her shoulders; standing between her team and the brass, pinned by the spotlight. Tall poppies are the first to be scythed. But more than that, failure means another family with no answer, and only continuing, uncertain misery and the same tyranny of hope that she has borne; the same waiting, in dread, for the phone to ring – or not to ring. She’s still not sure which is worse.

At least she chose that burden for herself, not had it forced upon her. She supposes that she’d accepted the load willingly, hoping for it to displace that other weight; but today she would have given almost anything to lay it down for a night. If only putting it down didn’t mean explaining why. Why, just very occasionally, she wants to be Kat. If only it didn’t mean exposing her father.

It’s her birthday, and she is twenty-nine years old. Her only present has been spectacular, superficial sex with a smart-mouthed playboy, but at least that will not have repercussions. She can’t cut down her twin burdens without the hydra of her guilt growing back triple-headed. She’d never liked Kipling, the colonial attitudes and racism leaving her disgusted, but she understands the sentiment behind his poetry, however unpleasantly and appallingly expressed. Making the right choice, not the easy one, for the common good. Her father’s good; her victims’ families’ good. Her very own Birkenhead drill.

On this, as on so many nights before, she doesn’t cry herself to sleep. She has been done with
She’s the same Beckett as ever, the next day in the bullpen. And just in time, a body drops and she can lose herself in the necessary discipline of the investigation: prowling the precinct and the crime scene and the morgue for hours until it’s done, solved. And then again, and again, and again: no respite; a spate of murders that pushes all of them to their limits for the next month. Even had she wanted to repeat, or allowed herself to care about repeating, her encounter with Castle, there’s no time. She can continue like this indefinitely, as long as she doesn’t stop. When it does, she knows, she’ll crash over the adrenaline cliff-edge. When it does, Montgomery will force her – them all – to take a break and recharge. She’ll have nothing to stop the memories, and her burdens will be no lighter.

Their next case is a young man, Peter Berowitz, dead in an alley, an apparently random drive-by shooting. It’s not their normal run of murder – it seems relatively simple. CCTV records are obtained, while Beckett goes, Castle following her, to talk to the family: their address an expensive apartment in a good area.

She recognises the signs instantly, rams down her automatic, unthinking reaction before the grieving relatives spot anything other than her calm, cool, practised sincerity for their loss. Emotion does not, she has found, assist; either in solving the case or managing grief. The interview proceeds precisely as she intends it to: Castle interjecting at intervals in his usual fashion. She’s learning to allow for that, and to accept that it has some value.

“What happened there?” Castle asks, when they’re safely back in her cruiser and on the way to the precinct to regroup and consider.

“Huh? What?”

“You spotted something, or something occurred to you. Right at the very beginning before we even sat down. What was it?” She says nothing, for a cold moment. “C’mon, Beckett, you gotta share.” She bites the bullet.

“He’s an alcoholic. A functioning one, perhaps, but still an alcoholic.”

“How’d you know that?”

“Eyes, hand tremors, the marks on the table where a glass would be, the way his wife was watching him. Breath mints, at 10am.” She doesn’t mention the other signs: the lack of clear comprehension, the slight delay in understanding what had happened, the whiskey bottle in very easy reach. She doesn’t mention the way in which she recognises the look on the wife’s face: that same look which she had seen every morning in her own mirror for five years.

“That wasn’t what I meant.” She raises her eyebrows. It’s hiding a certain degree of panic. “How do you know what an alcoholic looks like.”

“I wasn’t always a Homicide detective, you know. You have to put in the time in uniform. You see a lot there, before you ever get to murder. All the problems of the underbelly of life. Some things you don’t forget, and drunken people and the carnage they cause is one of them.”

When Beckett isn’t looking, Castle peers at her sidelong. He’s not wholly convinced by her explanation, but he has no idea why he shouldn’t be. Anyway, he thinks, while parking that point, he has another goal in mind. He certainly has not forgotten his evening with Beckett, now almost a month ago, and while it may not have been wholly satisfactory emotionally he is quite definite that
its repetition would improve matters. In short, he wants to do it again. And again. And again, and each time learn a little more, move a little closer, find out and then provide whatever it is that she needs but won’t admit or ask for. Astoundingly, he doesn’t actually mean the sex, though he certainly wouldn’t be averse to more of that either. Mostly, he means his meeting with not-Beckett, who might turn out to be Kat. He concocts another plan.

“Have you done your Christmas shopping, Beckett?” He bounces happily at the thought of Christmas. Castle loves Christmas, in all its infinite varieties. He’s not put off by the commercial aspects, because little makes him happier than giving his family presents – proper, well thought through ones, and silly ones; stocking presents and under-the-tree presents. Any sort of presents, really. He just likes giving. He likes the food and drink, as many decorations as one can fit on a very large, and always real, tree, and all the Christmas films. Most of all, he likes the possibilities of magic and redemption inherent in the whole festival.

“No.”

“No? When will you do it? There’s only a week or so to go.”

“Christmas Eve,” says Beckett, casually. It’s not as if she has many people to buy for. Small gifts for Lanie, maybe Ryan and Esposito; something for her father. It’s more difficult when you can’t give liquor. That’s it. Then she’ll spend Christmas Day at work, and when her shift is over go to her father’s place for a dinner in which they won’t talk about Banquo’s ghost, there at the table with them; won’t mention anything about their shared family history or indeed anything about family at all, and will toast each other and the coming year in Coca-Cola. Afterwards, she’ll go home to her apartment and eventually go to bed and not cry herself to sleep.

“What! You can’t do that!”

“No. That’s not how you do it. You plan, and then you take one evening and do everything. It’s fun: you have wine and get all wrapped up against the cold and enjoy yourselves.”

“So you’ve done all yours?” She’s trying to head off the light she can see coming through the tunnel: to wit, Castle inviting her to join him for a happy evening of shopping.

“Of course. Well, apart from stocking presents, and maybe something silly for Alexis, and something to annoy my mother – wrinkle cream, maybe – or if I see something that would be just perfect for one of them that I haven’t already got…”

“Okay, I get it. You are – despite all appearances to the contrary – Mr Organised.” Castle evidently has a thought.

“Should I get presents for people in the precinct?”

“If you want. It’s not compulsory, but we can always use more doughnuts.” Castle looks a little dejected.

“Really? Doughnuts? That’s all?”

“Unless you want to be known as the rich boy trying to bribe us to be friends. Stick to doughnuts, Castle. It’s traditional.”

“What sort of doughnuts do you like, Beckett?”

“I don’t know what the rest of the bullpen likes, though.” He widens his eyes enormously and looks pleadingly at her. “You need to come and help me choose. I wouldn’t want to get something everyone hated.” He smiles, very like a small boy who’s thought of something that he’s sure his mother will like, such as a pet frog, or a snake. “And then I can help you with your Christmas shopping. It’ll be fun.”

“I don’t think I need any help, thank you,” Beckett raps out briskly. “In, buy, out. All done.” Castle looks at her pathetically.

“Beckett, that’s not how it works. It’s supposed to be fun. Sociable. C’mon. You should do it properly.” He keeps talking, but Beckett simply lets it wash over her and ignores it. She might, if pressed, help him select doughnuts, but that’s it. She pulls the cruiser into a parking slot and switches off the engine. “Okay, so that’s settled.” Hang on, what’s settled? “You come to mine tomorrow evening after work, we’ll have a drink and some snacks and then you and I will go and do your Christmas shopping.” He hops out the car while she’s still spluttering.

“I didn’t agree to that,” she says. But she knows she’s already lost the argument. And truthfully, it sounds like a pleasant, easy way of spending the early part of an evening. Down time. His daughter and mother are probably perfectly nice, even if his mother is supposed to be hopelessly theatrical, and anyway, they’re not coming shopping. She doesn’t have to spend much time with them. It’s okay. She can deal with the short time.

“Please, Beckett?” Oh, God. Big blue puppy dog eyes. Saying no would be like kicking a kitten. She just can’t do it.

“Okay. Just this once.” His grin lights up the dingy garage.

“It’ll be great. You’ll see.”

What has she done?
Red, red wine

Upstairs in the bullpen the floor is bustling with bag-laden detectives who have clearly spent their lunch hours shopping. The amount of tinsel around is giving Beckett a headache, as it reflects the precinct strip lights at strange, jittery angles. Fortunately for her temples, Ryan has delved into the CCTV records and found a whole lot of usefulness – such as the registration of the car that the shooting almost certainly came from. For once – and as a huge contrast to every case in the previous month – it’s looking like this one is easy.

The unaccustomed run of good luck continues the following day: the car is located early on, the owner is brought in, and under the twin intimidations also known as Beckett and Esposito (it’s too early in the morning for Castle, who normally rolls in around 10.30) he points them to the shooter. He’ll go down as well: two low lives for the price of one. Espo and Ryan go to pick up the guilty party and by mid-afternoon it’s all wrapped up.

The final act before they can complete the ridiculously high number of complicated forms (more than one form, requiring more than one box to be completed, qualifies as ridiculously high and complicated) that they need to supply to 1PP is to tell the Berowitz family they got the guy. Eventually, it might help them to work through their grief. Eventually.

Beckett raps on the door in her normal forceful manner and, when it’s opened by the mother, clocks instantly that she has spent most of the last two days weeping. This is not unusual. What is unusual is that she doesn’t want to let them in. (Castle is, naturally, right next to her.) Beckett insists, very gently but persistently, and reluctantly they are admitted.

It takes Beckett less than a tenth of a second – and one breath – to understand why. The father is nowhere to be seen. The smell of whiskey is everywhere, the knocked over glass and the remains of spillage on the table and dripping into the tasteful, woollen rug. It’ll need dry cleaned, by a specialist, Beckett thinks. She could recommend one, if asked. She listens very carefully and hears stertorous breathing from a room she is shortly sure is a bathroom. She recognises the following noise, too. At least this man is still capable of vomiting into a toilet. If he continues down this path, soon he won’t bother with that. She finishes her message of sorrow quickly, and sends Castle out ahead of her, tossing him the keys to the car and asking him to wait in it for her: she’ll only be a moment. When he’s gone she turns back to the mother.

“If you need anything,” she says quietly, handing over a card, “this is where to find me.” She swallows. “I’ve… been through this.” Her flicked glance to the bathroom is sufficient. “Just call.” The drive back to the precinct is very quiet. Castle has no idea why Beckett took an extra moment – can’t have been a bathroom break, too short even for Beckett’s focused efficiency – but she’s wrapped in thought so for once he thinks he’d better not pry.

He’d noticed the mess and the smell too, but not being attuned to the sights and sounds of an alcoholic family member he completely misses their significance. Over indulgence belongs to his pre-Alexis days, and college parties. He’s never been exposed to the late middle-aged, upper-middle class alcoholic, functioning or otherwise; has only seen or thought of it in relation to street sleepers and pan handlers and hobos. For all his other research, his consequently vast knowledge and experience, this particular form of degradation has wholly passed him by.

Castle spends the remaining hour or so while the paperwork is completed staring (creepily, she insists) at Beckett in an expectantly hopeful manner and, when she finally switches off and tidies her desk, is out his chair with his coat on faster than a speeding bullet.
“Can we go now?” he enquires.

“Yes, okay, we can go,” Beckett replies, not expectantly at all. Castle pouts.

“Come on. I’ve got all sorts of lovely food and drink to ensure that you’re properly fuelled for shopping.”


“Could you tell my mother that? I don’t think she’s ever heard anyone say that. Ever. Even better, could you convert her? You have no idea how much she can spend in Saks.” He pauses. “You won’t hate shopping with me.”

“Why not?”

“Because it is with me.” Beckett humphs disgustedly, wholly and obviously unconvinced.

“Do you need a backpack to carry your ego, or a truck?”

“Ouch, Beckett. No fair. You’ve never been shopping with me so how do you know you won’t like it? You’re being biased. You’re not keeping an open mind.” He sounds ridiculously, petulantly, childishly offended – and all of it is wholly faked. She grins up at him, Beckett to the hilt.

“I have a theory,” she smirks, and watches as Castle’s faked poutiness dissolves into laughter.

“I never thought I’d ever hear you say that.” He assumes an expression of blinding realisation.

“You listen to me!”

“I can’t not listen to you. You talk all the time. It doesn’t mean I pay any attention.”

“Oh no, you don’t get away with that. You do so pay attention. If you didn’t you wouldn’t bother arguing. I think you like me, Beckett.” She throws her hands up in a gesture of disgust and turns to the elevator door that they’ve mysteriously reached. “We’ll get a cab,” he says as they exit the precinct. “There will be wine involved. Ordinary or mulled – do you like mulled wine, Beckett? Some has been mulling since much earlier. It’s always best if you give it as much time as possible for the flavours to meld.”

Oh fuck. She can’t bear the smell of mulled wine. She remembers coming home one dark, cold winter evening to find her father passed out in a puddle of spilt mulled wine and sour vomit. He’d made it for both of them, but couldn’t stop himself from drinking it all, no doubt on top of whatever he’d already had. It had barely been February: not four weeks afterward. It was then that she’d had to realise that he was sinking, drowning in the riptide and undertow of his devastating grief. She’d thought she could save him, then. She’d continued in that misconception for some time. She unknowingly winces at the memory; the stab of old, thin pain in her chest sufficient to cover her physical reaction from herself.

“It’s not my favourite,” she says, mechanically continuing to move forward, not seeing the street ahead, concentrating on not betraying herself.

“That’s okay. I’ve plenty normal wine.”

She can do this. For a short hour or even two, she can do this. She just needs to breathe shallowly, as she would at a crime scene, in through her mouth and out through her nose. Just like a crime scene. She’s survived much worse, for longer. By the time she saw her first corpse she was
already inured to the sights and smells and degradation: the effects on bladder and bowels of death or of drinking to the point of loss of all bodily control and then unconsciousness are not so very different in result. She’s never thrown up at a crime scene, no matter how gruesome. She’d done all of that in the two years before she entered the Academy, as well as all her weeping. Nothing she has seen in all her years of Homicide has ever been as bad as the scenes she’d dealt with at home, till she walked away. Nothing.

She’s faintly aware that a cab has pulled up and Castle’s holding the door for her. She slides in, turns her face to the window and, cold both without and within, huddles into her thick winter coat. She can be Beckett, till the evening’s over. She has to be, because Kat only exists behind her own door, in her own head, and anyway Castle won’t or can’t let her be Kat. Her burdens can’t be shared, her father mustn’t be exposed, and Castle wants slick, sarcastic Beckett, not cuddlesome Kat. He seems to want her to make all the decisions. Well, she can do that, but there won’t be very many of them. She supposes, rather bleakly, that he was quite good enough in bed for it to be a pleasant diversion, every so often, for a while. When neither of them have anything better to do. Just like this evening will be – once they’re out of his loft – a pleasant diversion.

She turns away from the window and smiles at Castle: her normal cool professional smile, sardonically amused at the foibles of the world around her; setting her at a slight distance from her surroundings, and wholly uninformative. She’ll cope with the short time at his apartment, she’ll cope with the shopping, and then she’ll go home. She might even take Castle with her, if he wants to come. It’s sure to be up to her to make the first move. He won’t. It seems that he’s sure that she’ll want to take the lead herself – and why should he not be? She’s hardly shown him any other personality. Can’t blame him for believing her.

And yet, deep inside where she doesn’t notice it, she does. She unconsciously blames him for apparently being able to read every last twitch of her face and posture in the precinct and then not being able to do so that evening a month ago in her apartment. She unconsciously blames him for starting down the road of providing comfort and cosseting and then stopping, leaving her to take the initiative. And she unconsciously feels guilty for blaming him, because after all every decent man knows that you have to receive consent and yes, she did tell him it was okay, but maybe that simply wasn’t clear enough. So because she can’t work out why she’s feeling slightly uncomfortable around him, why she’s a little more easily irritated: she hides in her cool professional demeanour and a bright, breezy, sociable shell, and reveals even less than usual, returning to staring out the cab window at nothing in particular.

Castle, after a night in which he didn’t actively think about it, but nevertheless mulled below the surface of his mind, the slightly odd feeling he’d had that there was more to Beckett’s reaction to the alcoholic father than he knew, had also not missed the slight hitch in her gait when he mentioned mulled wine. He’s also slightly discomforted by the way in which she’s been wholly, completely Beckett ever since that extremely confusing evening at hers, when at first he’d thought that she wanted cuddled and petted and then she’d suddenly done exactly what he would have expected from the outset and simply been wholly definitive about what he would have expected from the outset and simply been wholly definitive about what she did and didn’t want and like. (All of it. She’d liked all of it. Even when they’d… Do not go there, Castle. Not in a cab.) But there hasn’t been so much as the tiniest, most fragmentary hint at any instant since that softer not-Beckett exists at all, and had he not seen that person he’d never have believed that she’s there.

He scents a mystery. He likes mysteries. He likes solving them even better, and come to think of it he hasn’t found out Beckett’s story either. He’s guessed a big chunk of it – and she didn’t correct him, so he must have been right – but he doesn’t know. Furthermore, he doesn’t know whether his thinking in between the two encounters in her apartment was correct. It’s all the same mystery, all the same story. His insatiable curiosity is roused, and, like the Elephant’s Child, he has no intention of reining it in. In fact, he intends to let it rampage. He’d liked his glimpse of softer not-
Beckett. He’d appreciate a few more glimpses: not all the time, and certainly not in the precinct, but sometimes. As he’d thought previously, metrosexuality only takes him so far, and while he has no desire for submission from his partners, he equally has no desire to be submissive.

They’ve reached the loft, and neither of them has said a word to each other, letting the emery-rough, abrading discomfort of the silence surround them.

Beckett looks around as Castle waves her forward to precede him through the door. As she might have guessed, his loft is full of Christmas cheer and decorations: hugely festive and exuding comfortable warmth and the atmosphere of convivially chubby merry gentlemen. She almost expects that figgy pudding will figure in the snacks. For now, she readjusts her breathing to minimise the sickly, clinging smell of mulled wine and settles down on the couch to which Castle has directed her. It’s sufficiently far away from the kitchen that she needn’t look at the liquid and remember it puddling stickily on the floor. It had taken some time to clean the mess up.

Snacks are, in fact, well-judged, tasty and plentiful; and Beckett makes a fairly substantial meal from them, watched – approvingly, it seems – by Castle. She washes it down with a single slow-sipped glass of a very good Bordeaux, which has the happy effect of keeping the smell of mulled wine out her nostrils and the smell of good Bordeaux in them. His mother is missing – a Christmas party for distressed actors, Castle explains, indicating without words that he thinks that any distress will be inflicted by his mother upon other members of the theatre fraternity – but Alexis is there: happily chirping about Christmas plans and outings.

Beckett watches her with her father and preserves a very blandly friendly face; making all the right responses to Alexis’s genuine happiness and sincerity. She remembers when she was equally comfortable with her father: certain sure that she was loved and the apple of his eye. She had been a little younger, then. By fourteen, she’d been starting to rebel, push the boundaries; but she’d always been perfectly definite that her parents loved her without limitation. Maybe her father still does, but he’d loved Jack Daniels more. She could have coped with his devastating grief – he had loved her mother with everything he had – if he hadn’t made it clear that she wasn’t enough, wasn’t a consolation – was, in fact, a reminder. He’d said that too, deep in the bottle. You’re so like her. Why are you so like her? I can’t bear it. And he’d turned away from her and sunk another measure, until he couldn’t see her, or anything, at all. Even then, still she’d fought to save him. Even then, she’d taken him at his other, earlier, word: don’t leave me, Katie. I need you.

So many of the small things that go to make up the unbreakable love for a parent for his child are blindingly obvious to Beckett. The look in Castle’s eye, the slight protective curve of his body when he’s near Alexis, leaning in to listen and clearly paying total attention to what she’s saying: shared jokes and catchphrases; a brief reminder of sense and safety with her friends and Alexis’s slight huff and rolled eyes at the lack of necessity for that at the great age of fourteen; a note that her allowance is not, despite her grandmother’s suggestions, infinite – though the look behind that suggests that Castle gives Alexis a pretty sizeable amount. He’s proud of her achievements, too: they’re talking about her day and it sounds like Castle is pretty switched on to what she’s doing, and how.

That was Katie and her father, once upon a time long ago.

She drains her wine, excuses herself for a moment, locks herself in the bathroom and lets the memories wash through her and past her and away. She blots her eyes and rapidly reapplies her makeup to hide any trace; returns to the main room and continues her bright social answers and contribution to the conversation. Her history is no reason to depress Alexis, who is, it seems on further acquaintance, an unusually nice example of the variety of human race known as teen. Given her father’s general love of far-out theories, conspiracies and unlikely happenings, she’s also
unusually sensible. Beckett supposes that one of the family has to be. Though that’s a little unfair. Castle must have applied some common sense and childrearing discipline, otherwise Alexis would be just another spoilt rich brat.

That was Katie and her father – and mother – too, once upon a time long ago.

She makes a small noise, which attracts Castle’s attention. He flicks a look at her, grins widely.

“Ready to go shopping, Beckett?”

“Yes,” she says, social mask and the similitude of pleasure at the prospect in place. Castle reaches for her coat, stands to help her into it – and while she’s organising herself runs an assessing, curious gaze over her that she doesn’t appreciate at all. She raises an eyebrow in a way that makes it perfectly plain that she has both noticed and been unimpressed by the look. “Let’s go,” she says, with her practical precinct briskness. Let’s just get this over with.

“Where do you want to start, Beckett?” Castle asks, when they get downstairs, pursued by Alexis’s seasonal good wishes. She isn’t sure. Wine and chocolate for Lanie, which needs only a good store. Her father is… a little more difficult. What does she get her father? She’s not reduced to tie-and-handkerchief sets, or scarves, or, God forbid, socks. Not yet, anyway. Her father can’t think of anything to tell her; he doesn’t share her literary tastes. That had been her mother. Maybe a heavyweight political biography, or a historical tome. She sighs audibly.

“What’s the matter, Beckett?”

“I don’t know what to get my dad,” she admits.

Castle looks momentarily blank. Then he smiles. “You’ll have thought of all the obvious things, so no point in repeating those. Anyway, they’re boring.” He scrunches his face in thought. Clearly he wants to be helpful. Beckett had expected a series of outrageous suggestions, but he’s actually taking the problem seriously. “Does he like chess? Or board games?”

“Chess, but I got him a really beautiful set years ago” – she’d got it in Kiev – “and he uses it. He’s got a small travel set, too.”


“No way am I getting my dad Monopoly. Not ever. First rule, Castle, never, ever play Monopoly with a lawyer. Never. It’s an absolute disaster.”

“Your father’s a lawyer?”

“Yes. Anti-trust.” Her tone, though perfectly even and friendly, somehow manages to make it clear that that’s the end of that line of conversation. It’s decidedly discouraging.

Castle leaves it, but he thinks the more. He deduces that since her father is clearly very much alive, it must be her mother who is dead, just as he had thought at her apartment. Not least because she hasn’t mentioned a present for her. He has the good sense to keep his mouth firmly shut on that point. From Beckett, though she’s been bright, polite and sociable all evening so far, he’s strongly detecting a sense of underlying fragility that he’s not used to. It’s rather reminiscent of the way she’d been in the bar, now he comes to think of it. Hmm. Actually, there’s been an air of fragility since the very start of the latest case.

Now, if her father is a lawyer, then, going back to the conversation in the bar a month ago, not one word of which has he forgotten, that means that likely her mother was too, again, as he had
previously thought. Ah. One mystery solved, on the basis of a lot of circumstantial, but corroborating, evidence.

That only leaves the other concatenation of small things. The instant recognition of an alcoholic. The dislike of mulled wine – how can anyone dislike something so redolent of Christmas and evenings round an open fire; of chestnuts roasting and sleigh bells ringing? Still, that’s a reach too far. Some people just don’t like it. It’s just the way she’d paused for an infinitesimal period, just the way her step had faltered, just that once. He’d wanted to take her hand, or arm, then; or put his arm around her shoulders and tell her it would all be okay. Smart, slick Beckett, always ready with a dismissive quip or flip retort, wouldn’t have put up with that for a moment. So he hadn’t tried. But he’d wanted to. He really had. He still does.

“So, not Monopoly. Clue?”

“No thanks. I solve crimes all day. I don’t need to do it when I’m seeing my dad.” They walk another few paces, both thinking, suddenly companionable in the shared issue.

“I know!” Castle ejaculates.
“What?” Beckett’s got no further, so any insane idea is better than the nothing that she’s got.

“It’s really old-fashioned. I mean really old-fashioned. But I know a guy who runs a shop” – he’s flagging a taxi as his words spill out, falling over themselves to escape from his throat – “that specialises in really old board games, and he reminded me about this one which was really good fun and I always meant to get that one for Alexis but I never did though I’d played it a lot and it might be just perfect and even if not there might be something else you liked and”-

“Castle, stop just for a second. Slow down. What are you talking about?”

A taxi draws up and he hustles her into it with a hand on her back. When they’re underway he starts again, looking slightly sheepish. “It’s a board game. It’s called Sorry.”

“Sorry?”

“Yes, that’s its name. It’s a bit like a complicated version of Parcheesi. Instead of dice you draw cards, and different numbers let you do different things. It’s quite strategic. You can get it new but this guy has a shop with really old versions rather than Phineas & Ferb…” Somehow it’s not a surprise that Castle has watched Phineas & Ferb. She imagines that the psychedelically insane (or chemically-induced: whatever the writers are on, every so often she would love some) inventions, humour and music would be right up his alley.

“So why didn’t you get it?” Castle goes a little red.

“Well, by that time Alexis was already beating me at enough games that I didn’t want to add another one to my extensive list of defeats. The owner taught me to play, though.”

Beckett is stabbed by a memory of her father teaching her to play first Uno, then gin rummy, then poker, over summer vacations in the cabin on the days it rained too hard for them to go fishing together.

“I never let her win – well, not once she would notice,” Castle continues, “but it didn’t seem to matter. And she was disgustingly triumphant when she won, egged on by my mother. I’m sure my mother helped her.”

“Oh, of course, she’s simply a whole lot brighter than you,” Beckett says without most of her usual snark. Castle only grins.

“That’s possible, too. She’s certainly more mature.” He doesn’t comment on Beckett’s sudden lack of focus. He files it for later. “Almost there,” he says happily.

The cab draws up at a very small, dark looking store front with a variety of old boxes and decks of cards in old-fashioned designs. Castle bounces out the taxi as enthusiastically as he’d bounced into it and offers his hand as Beckett steps out. The sidewalks in this mess of small streets are not nearly as clear as in more populous shopping areas. In fact, it looks like no-one’s walked down here all day. When Beckett feels the slide of slush under her boot she decides that she prefers Castle’s proffered hand to falling on her ass, and takes it. His grip is surprisingly firm. She remembers vividly how he’d felt, not in bed, but sitting on her couch, holding her close in. He doesn’t let go when she’s straightened up and caught her balance. She doesn’t ask him to, nor does she pull away, until they enter the gloomy store.
There's a wheezy cough from somewhere in the back, and a shuffling of feet. Despite these foreboding portents, when the person arrives it proves to be a rather elderly man, white-haired and gently balding in a tonsure pattern, and wearing – carpet slippers? – and a velvet smoking jacket in a distressingly bright violet with a paisley pattern in red and gold. He falls on Castle's neck with trilling enthusiasm.

"Richard! Dear boy, where have you been? You haven't come by for months." he flutes. He notices Beckett. "And who is this lovely young lady?" He regards her with an artist's appreciation.

"This is Detective Kate Beckett, NYPD, Julian." Julian takes her hand and kisses it. "She needs a Christmas present for her father," Castle says emphatically, regarding Julian with a very strange expression. Beckett thinks that it looks rather like confusion at the kiss. "So I thought of you. And here we are." Castle gestures widely, only just missing an ivory chess set and a delicate model of a WWII fighter plane. Julian looks flustered and not a little nervous, much as if a large, bouncy dog had bounded into the store.

Beckett looks around. She can't see a single electronic toy or game. She smiles vaguely at Julian and starts to wander around the shelves. Most of the boxes look older than Beckett – though they all seem to be in perfect condition. She peers at them, picking one or another off a shelf to examine. She's never seen a lot of these games: she's far better than competent at many forms of card game, (she turns hard away from the pang of memory) but there had really only been chess and checkers; Monopoly and Clue at home. She turns back to the two men.

"I don’t know what to get my dad," she directs toward Julian. "He likes chess, and checkers, so Castle suggested a game called Sorry." She sounds rather uncertain of its acceptability.

"Sorry," hums Julian. "Hmmm. Now where did I put that?"

"The one you tried to get me to buy," Castle points out, attempting to be helpful.

"Ah yes, that." Julian turns without any further hesitation to a small shelf towards the back of the shop and picks up a box. "Now, Miss Beckett" – Castle winces slightly, but Beckett is intrigued by this elderly, old-fashioned courteous man and doesn’t correct him as she normally would – “let me show you.” He sets the box on a small octagonal table with a marquetry inlay of a chessboard in birch and mahogany, a rim of mother-of-pearl around the edge, and opens it carefully; first taking out a board and laying it precisely on the table. There are four different colours, each having a place to start, a little tower of squares with a top – Home, it says – and some interesting looking arrows in a slide configuration. Julian takes out three of the four small boxes and extracts some pawn-shaped, coloured wooden pieces, setting them in the relevant Start points. Beckett looks at him sharply.

"It’s pretty," she says, still intrigued, “but what are you doing?"

"Oh, my dear" – Castle winces even more obviously, but Beckett simply lets that wash over her – “the best way to discover whether you think the game will suit your father is to play it. Sit down here” – he presents her with a chair, and there seems no option but to consent. Besides which, the game looks interesting – “and let us all play the game. Richard, my boy, please will you shuffle the cards while I explain the rules to Miss Beckett?"

"Please, call me Kate."

"Kate? Short for Katherine, I presume?" Julian’s bright, birdlike eyes meet hers. She nods.
“I do not like abbreviations. May I call you Katherine, instead? Such a beautiful name.” She has no idea why she assents to that. No-one calls her Katherine, now. However, the old-fashioned atmosphere in the slightly dusty shop, giving her the feeling that she’s stepped into Miss Haversham’s parlour, and Julian’s decorous courtesy in asking no doubt had much to do with it.

“Of course. May I call you Julian?” Her courtesy in return is entirely unforced. The manners of a slower, more formal age seep over her, and here in this peculiar little shop, with this peculiar little gentleman, extraordinarily, she feels less tense and more at peace than in years.

“It would be my pleasure if you would do so.”

While they have been exchanging formalities, Castle has quietly brought two chairs for Julian and himself, and considered with some surprise Beckett’s alteration from her earlier stressed unhappiness to this unaffectedly courteous, poised – well, lady. This trip, he thinks with considerable satisfaction, had inadvertently been an excellent idea.

Julian finishes setting up the game. “Now, Katherine, you will already have discerned that the aim is to bring all your men safely home. We will cut to establish who shall begin, but we will defer that for a moment whilst I explain the cards. You may only start a man if you draw a one or two. A two will provide you with the opportunity to draw a second card. A four requires you to move backwards four places. A seven may be split into two moves, by two of your men, adding up to seven. Both must move forward. An eleven allows you to exchange places with any other man on the board.” He taps a finger on the coloured squares making up the tower. “This is a place of safety. Here, you are not at risk. Anywhere else on the board, should another player draw a card which would allow him to land upon the same square which you occupy, your man may be sent back to its start.”

He smiles beautifully. “It is customary and mannerly to apologise when you send another player’s man back to start, hence the title.” Beckett smiles in return. This sounds interesting. She’s already beginning to think that even if, once they have played, she doesn’t believe that her father would like it – she certainly might. “There are two final points to note. Should you draw a Sorry card, you may start one of your men by removing any other man upon the board, except those in Safety; and apart from those cards which I have already mentioned, all moves must go forward in the direction of the arrows. Should you land here, on a slide of a colour which is not your own, you may slide to the end. Any other men on the slide will be sent back to their start, accompanied by your apology for the necessity.” He pauses for a few instants. “Shall we begin, Katherine? If Richard believes that the cards are sufficiently shuffled, that is?”

Castle smiles affectionately at Julian. “Of course they are, Julian. Didn’t you teach me how?” Beckett blinks. How long has Castle known this man? But it’s time to begin. It takes her a little while to become familiar with the pattern of play, and, much to her relief, neither man is patronising enough to make any concession to her lack of knowledge. She loses the first game, naturally. Julian, who appears to be hiding a razor-sharp tactical mind behind his fluttering personality, wins, and offers another game. Beckett accepts instantly. She likes this game. It’s far more strategic than Parcheesi, but less complex than chess.

This time, although she still loses, she has a far better grasp of the potential strategies, and the game is far closer. When they’re done, with Julian winning again, she’s decided. She smiles contentedly.

“My father will very much like this game,” she says formally, her words chosen for her by the atmosphere of a bygone age. “Would it be possible to take two, though?”

“Naturally. May I ask why two?”
“One set for my father,” Beckett replies, “and one for me. I’ve really enjoyed this game. Thank you.” Julian clears away the pieces and the board, and then reaches for another box.

“Would you like one gift-wrapped?” he asks.

“Yes, thank you. This one.” She indicates the one which they hadn’t used. Julian turns to the important business of precise wrapping in a heavy, brocade-print paper redolent of Victorian Christmases long past. Beckett feels as if the time she has spent in here – she drops a glance to her watch and realises that it’s been two hours and more – has been spent in a Dickensian setting: a slower, gentler age. She turns to Castle.

“Thank you,” she says with sincerity. “This was the perfect place to get a present for my dad.” Castle smiles down at her in return, a little ruefully.

“I suppose now you’re going to insist that I play Sorry with you until you’ve learned to beat me soundly every game, aren’t you?” Beckett grins a little wickedly.

“I hadn’t quite thought of that, but now that you mention it… Or we could take it to the precinct and annoy Esposito and Ryan with it.” She looks down at the box. “Or not. They might spoil it.” For some reason, which she can’t quite put her finger on, she doesn’t want this box damaged, or any of the delicate little wooden men lost. Maybe she simply wants it to be perfect, to be a perfect aide-memoire of an evening where her burdens have not intruded on her once; where she hasn’t been Beckett and hasn’t been Kate or Katie. She’s been Katherine: a woman of old-fashioned courtesy and grace in a small, dusty, old-fashioned shop with a proprietor straight out of Dickens. It’s not being Kat, but it’s had almost the same soothing effect. And it’s been Castle who’s allowed her to achieve this benefice.

She won’t be taking this game to the precinct, or anywhere else. She can’t take the risk of it being damaged.

Castle has observed Beckett with interest as she played. The fragile air surrounding her had dispersed as she turned her intelligence and a considerable strategic mind on the game, and while naturally she had lost (he and Julian have played relatively frequently before) she’d caught up pretty quickly. Julian likes her, Castle can tell. That’s interesting, too. Julian normally takes a little while to decide about people, with Castle having been a rare exception. Then again, Castle had been a young teenager when he’d first stumbled upon this shop, and even then he’d understood that this was a place of tranquillity and an earlier age.

Julian had taught him to shuffle well, and to deal; to play backgammon and other strategic games, and then to play chess, though Castle had never once beaten him. When he’d complained, a little petulantly, about that, Julian had admitted to International Master status, and Castle had resigned himself to the fact that he would never win. He doesn’t have the patience to learn and analyse the strategies, and occasional instinctive brilliantly brave and creative moves are not sufficient. He still enjoys playing, though. At times this shop had been his refuge, and entering its portal still soothes his soul.

However, it’s well after nine, and they ought to be letting Julian close up. Fare-thee-wells are exchanged – it always seems the appropriate phrase for Julian: so much more apposite than a mere goodbye – and Castle ushers Beckett out into the street where he discovers with delight that it’s snowing hard. He discovers with marginally less delight that it’s clearly been snowing hard for some time, as they continue to fail to find a free cab. He becomes aware that Beckett is speaking.

“How did I not know about that shop? It’s only a few streets away from my block. I never knew it existed.” She peers up at Castle, snow sparkling her dark hair. “If we just take a right here we’ll
be practically at mine.” She peers a little more uncertainly. “D’you want a coffee? Maybe there’ll be more taxis after that.”

“Coffee would be great, and I could call my car service from yours.” He grins. “We could have another game, Beckett. I like winning over you.”

“Don’t get used to it, Castle. It’s not gonna happen that often.” She returns her attention to her footing. It’s rather slippery on the sidewalk and she really does not want to be planting her backside on the snow. Goodness only knows what nastiness is hidden under it.

They reach her door without mishap but with a thick frosting of snow on coats and scarves and hair.

Castle, entering politely behind Beckett, whips one comprehensive and unseen glance around her apartment and realises that not only does she not have a Christmas tree up, even the abomination of a plastic one, there isn’t so much as one solitary Christmas card or twinkling piece of tinsel. The contrast with his own festively decorated loft is chilling. Beckett appears to be fully subscribed to *In the Bleak Midwinter*, as opposed to his philosophy of *God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen*. It’s as bad as her appalling attitude to her own birthday. She doesn’t seem to notice anything wrong or think anything of it. With considerable self-control, he doesn’t comment. On the lack of decoration, anyway.

“What will you do for Christmas, Beckett?”

Beckett hadn’t particularly wanted that question raised, though she had been expecting it, but she has in any event a ready, conversation-stopping answer. That answer will *not*, however, include the significant matter of her voluntary assumption of the Christmas Day shift.

“I’ll go to my dad’s and we’ll spend Christmas together,” she answers. “Christmas with family.” She smiles, apparently perfectly happily. She has no intention of describing what that means. Castle smiles back, apparently perfectly – what? Reassured? That’s not an appropriate reaction. He hardly knows her (even if they have been to bed. That doesn’t count.) What’s it to *him* what she does for Christmas? Anyway, it doesn’t matter. If he’s reassured then he won’t be asking further.

And he doesn’t. But unbeknownst to Beckett, he’s picked up the hint of brittleness in her words. There’s more to this, he is sure. But now is very much not the time. He wants to *find* softer Beckett-Kat, not spook her. And asking Beckett questions about her personal life is a very fast way indeed to spook her.

Castle, domestically, offers to shake the snow off the clothes over the bath if Beckett will put the kettle on because, he says plaintively, he is freezing and may never be warm again.

“Oh, of course, you could warm me up,” he smirks, and realises that that was a mistake just as soon as he does.

“Really? And how might I do that?” It’s not that she’s irritated, or angry, or even glaring at him; but suddenly, with the quizzical lift of her eyebrow, Detective Beckett’s coolly amused, sardonic air of slight distance is right back. He disappears to shake the snow off their coats before he can add his right foot to the left foot sticking out his mouth.

She rapidly concocts a pot of coffee, sets it and two mugs on a tray, and adds two jugs: one containing plain and one containing vanilla flavoured creamer. She regards the tray for an instant, and then picks up and sets on it one jar of powdered cinnamon and one of ground nutmeg. The
complete ensemble arrives on the coffee table and Beckett sits down at one end of the couch.

When Castle emerges from his sartorial ministrations, Beckett is quite obviously expecting him to sit at the other end of the couch, at a socially acceptable distance from her. He doesn’t like that expectation. *His* expectation is that he will sit next to Beckett-who-is-being-Beckett and see if he can’t move just a tiny bit closer to Kat-who-he-thinks-Beckett-wants-to-be. So he does.
He sits, in fact, almost as close as he can get without actually picking Beckett up and putting her on his knee, and the only reason he doesn’t do that is that Beckett, despite the immense improvement in her levels of stress-induced reserve since they left the store, is not precisely radiating receptivity. He compromises by laying his arm along the back of the couch without quite touching her, but managing to make it clear that, should she lean in only the smallest fraction, his arm will be very content to curl around her. He has, in fact, developed yet another plan. *This* plan is intended to deal with his ever-stronger suspicion (though he still finds it very strange) that behind her own closed door – or possibly confined to the even more limited and inaccessible area behind her eyelids – the only decision that she wants to make is whether to say *yes* or *no* to any suggestion he might make.

He continues to find that very odd indeed. A rum go, as Julian might say. His extensive experience and exploration of the highways and byways of sexual practice does not incline him to think that any usual form of Beckett has any bent at all towards submission. His very short meeting with the aspect of Beckett to which he is very privately referring as *Kat* does not give him that impression either. *But* she isn’t pushing for anything. *But* she is – was – soft and yielding against him. *But* she seemed to be perfectly content to allow him to choose what happened: almost passive, though thankfully not passive but perfectly, gloriously responsive to him. And then he’d – *big* mistake – stopped to think and a switch had flipped and soft, yielding *Kat* had instantly become hard-edged, alpha, driving Beckett and everything had ignited into one searing firestorm of – ah. Of sex without closeness or emotion or, really, affection.

Light dawns. *Kat* wants *affection*. How had he not seen that earlier? He *knows* that Beckett doesn’t do casual (or even not-casual) touching: never bumps fists or high-fives or claps anyone on the shoulder, no matter how merited. Up till a month ago, and with the exception of that evening and this, she had never touched him, even accidentally. It’s as if she’d had a force field around her that prevented her touching anyone, or anyone touching her. Under the social shell, the Snow Queen.

But that is all very odd too. Normally, from all the variegated research that he has done – largely into child-rearing, so he could do the best possible job with and for Alexis – that sort of lack of desire for contact and lack of contact implies a cold, unaffectionate (and sometimes abusive) household. Yet when he’d told her his conclusions about her history, he’d got the very clear impression that, up till what he is now absolutely bone-deep certain was her mother’s murder, she had grown up in a happy, loving household. Maybe he’d been misled about that, but he simply cannot see how she could be as empathetic with the families of the victims as she is, had she not had that loving background. Maybe the trauma of the untimely death had done it. Maybe there was something else, though right now he has no idea what that might be. (It never occurs to him to remember, still less connect, Beckett’s instant recognition of alcoholism or that, at the time, he had been less than wholly convinced by her explanation of that recognition with his current train of thought.)

Anyway, enough thinking. There is coffee, to warm his chilly blood, and Beckett, to warm him generally. And if he, much bulkier, is chilled right through, how much more must she be? *And,* he thinks, she wants affection. Possibly. Right then. Time to test the theory – very carefully. He likes living, and he wants to continue to do so with all appendages attached. He’d look most peculiar with only one ear, or no nose.

He drops his hand very slightly to rest around, not on, Beckett’s shoulder, where the implicit
suggestion that it carries is that it would be nicest to curl in against him; which suggestion is backed up, after a second or two in which he does not become maimed, dying or actually dead, by the lightest possible pressure of his fingers to encourage her in.

He’s less surprised than he would have been a month ago when she does lean in. It lasts for all of five seconds, until she leans forward, adds what appears to be half-a-pound of cinnamon, at least a half-pint of creamer, (vanilla, by the smell) and then a sizeable dash of nutmeg to her coffee. Her mug must be a Tardis, he thinks, and wonders where he can buy, beg, borrow or steal one. He then repatriates his arm and himself adds creamer and a small dose of cinnamon to his own coffee. (He’d used to like nutmeg in it, till his first marriage collapsed.)

“How much spice did you put in there, Beckett?”

“I like spice.” She only realises what she’s said on Castle’s indrawn breath and suddenly sparkling eyes. He never can – and he clearly isn’t even trying to – resist temptation, and she’s left him a gateway the size of the Brooklyn Bridge – lengthways – to be tempted. It wasn’t even deliberate. A delicate line of pink draws itself over her pale cheeks.

“You like it spicy?”

“Coffee,” she says discouragingly.

“Nothing else?” His arm has sneaked back around her. His fingers are insinuating tiny patterns on her shoulder, which are encouraging her to lean in against his chest again. The gesture doesn’t match his words, which are Castle-normal flirtation and innuendo, whereas the fingers are soft and gently persuasive. She succumbs to the possibility of affection inherent in his fingers, and leans back against his arm and slightly inward to his chest.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” she ripostes: normal shut-it-down technique in action. It usually works.

“Yes,” states Castle extremely baldly. Beckett’s mouth drops open in shock. That is not how the game is played between them. He is not supposed to be transparently and blatantly clear about what he wants. She becomes aware that he hasn’t finished talking. “but I’m sure I’ll find out eventually anyway. So it’s fine that you don’t want to tell me now.” The very strong implication is You will. Possibly suffixed by soon. And he’s still talking. “I’ve got a much better idea for right now.”

Really, Castle? That line is so lame it requires a wheelchair. It’s perfectly clear what he’s about to try. She leans away from him again.

“Sure you do,” she drawls disbelievingly, edged by annoyance.

“You’ll like it,” Castle grins.

“Sure I won’t.” The border of annoyance on her words widens.

“You liked it plenty last time.” Oh, for heaven’s sake. Could he be any more obvious without starting to take his clothes off? She’s amazed that he isn’t already undoing the buttons on his shirt. Or on hers, for that matter. Or dragging her back to his cave. Some of these lines need carbon dating to establish their age.

“So will you set it up or shall I?”

“You might as well,” Beckett says crossly. “Seeing as you’re the one who’s making such a big fuss
about it. Let me know when you’re ready.” The next thing she’s expecting is an attempt to kiss her, which will result in his ears being amputated without benefit of scalpel or anaesthetic.

She is therefore completely blindsided when he looks about him, spots his prey, extricates her lovely new game and efficiently sets it up on the coffee table in front of them.

“There we are,” he says happily and innocently. His uncontrollable, wicked smirk makes it absolutely and infuriatingly obvious that he had quite deliberately misled her. She glares, and when that has no effect, growls. The smirk grows wider.

“One colour each, or two?” Castle grins, the underlay of evil mirth still wholly apparent.

“One. I’m still getting used to this game.”

Okay, so he thoroughly mischievously led her down a false trail, but actually, here, now, tonight, she likes this idea better. It’s another matter that doesn’t match his words but is very congruent with his fingers; which, she notes, are still around her shoulder and still encouraging her inward. It occurs to her that if she ignores the over-heated nature of his conversation and simply believes the message contained in his actions, then she can continue the calming serenity of the earlier part of the evening. She leans back in, and this time Castle repositions his arm so that she is, gently, a little more wrapped in. Hmmm.

Castle still wins. However, Beckett gives him a considerable run for his money, and although she doesn’t forget to say Sorry! every time she succeeds in squishing one of his men and sending it back to the start, the tone of satisfied triumphalism tells a very different story. Each time she does, Castle pouts; each time it’s her piece returned, she grumbles and he grins.

By the end of the game, they’re on the third pot of coffee and Beckett is firmly snuggled up to Castle. It makes moving the men a touch awkward, but that slight disadvantage is firmly counterbalanced and indeed substantially outweighed by the major advantages that the position brings: chief amongst which is that she feels warm, comfortable and cosseted: of all of which this winter season has left her much in need. She emits a tiny, contented noise and curls closer, which act is swiftly followed by Castle clasping her more tightly. It feels good, even if she did lose the game.

She looks up and smiles. Castle smiles back.

“That was fun,” she says. “I’ll beat you next time, though.” Castle shrugs, unbothered.

“Bring it on. At your disposal, any time you want to try again.” He acquires an expression of realisation. Beckett is instantly suspicious. “I won. Don’t I get a prize for winning?” he asks hopefully. She rolls her eyes in resignation.

“What are you, five? Do you really want a prize for winning when I’ve only played three times and you’ve played – what? – three hundred?” Castle looks plaintively at her and produces a sad little-boy face that goes straight to some previously undiscovered area of Beckett’s brain, which promptly makes a land-grab for the well-travelled areas of her brain previously responsible for common sense.

“But I won,” he points out, as if that’s a clinching argument all on its own. It’s not. She’ll shut this down, too.

“Okay, I’ll buy you a packet of M&Ms tomorrow. There. Happy now you’ll have your prize?” Her tone is rather substantially less snarky than her words. She’s too comfortable to be wholly
snarky. Beckett is snarky. Right now she feels warmly not-quite-Beckett.

“Well,” Castle murmurs in a low, growly voice that does very strange things to her stomach, “it wasn’t quite the prize I was thinking of, but it sounds good.” This time, having been comprehensively fooled earlier, Beckett refuses to rise to the bait he is casting in front of her. Instead, she drinks her coffee, makes a horrible face as she discovers it to be nastily tepid, and puts the mug down with a noise of disgust, enhanced when she notices Castle’s empty mug already there. She entirely fails to realise that putting the mug on the tray next to Castle’s means not only that Castle currently has both arms free but that she has just laid down her defences: being the risk that her coffee might spill.

When she looks back up at Castle, he’s already leaning down slowly, intent written in every line of his face and his darkened eyes. His arm has tightened around her, though she’s sure that if she makes the slightest movement of discontent he will stop. All she needs to do is not stop him. No further decisions needed. Maybe this evening she’ll receive what she really wanted, the comfort and soft consolation of being able to lay her load down and be cared for by someone else. Who’d have thought that it would be irritating, sexy, smart-mouthed, jackass Castle who might be able to give her what she wants most? Even if it’s only once, that’s a whole lot better than the last couple of years. The whole evening since they left Castle’s loft has made her more relaxed and soothed than at any time since she broke up with Will.

She nibbles automatically on her lower lip. She might as well, she thinks stupidly, have stripped naked. Castle swoops down on her mouth and sets about claiming what he clearly perceives to be the correct variety of prize. And since this time he’s not only made a decision but, clearly and thankfully, doesn’t seem to expect her to do anything more complicated than consent and respond, she lets the hard gloss shell of Beckett fall away and becomes, at least in her own head, not-quite-Kat but certainly someone who’s a lot closer to Kat than to Beckett. She rearranges herself into a more comfortable and, not incidentally, accessible alignment and ensures that she is a full participant in proceedings. She can do that excellently well without needing to take any decisions beyond Yes or No.

For this one evening, she dimly realises, since the start of her shopping trip, she has been able to lay – and more, has laid – her burden aside.

Castle, having provided himself with considerable amusement from the unusual success of his mischievous misleading of Beckett, had then spent the game with three-quarters of his attention on the board (with an occasional increase to full concentration any time at which it looked like Beckett might win) and the other quarter on unobtrusively bringing her closer and closer, mainly physically but also, as the game had progressed, emotionally. In fact, he hasn’t ever seen her like this: even a month ago she’d been quiet and miserable. Tonight, she seems happy. As happy as he’s ever seen her, that is. Beckett’s life seems to be remarkably and distressingly devoid of joy. He thinks that he can, and should, try to solve that: certainly temporarily and then more permanently. Well, for a while, anyway. Permanence is a long way ahead of where he’s at, right now. (But it sits at the back of his head and niggles at him, rather than disappearing as such ridiculous ideas should.) It’s hardly as if Beckett’s throwing herself into his arms, either. In fact, the only way she’d got there is because he pulled her there. So it’s fine.

He deliberately exaggerates his dismay when she sends his men back to their start, and his triumph when he returns the favour, and gradually the Beckett he knows thins and melts somewhat and she relaxes and smiles and laughs. (and once he’d swear there was a giggle) It’s all thoroughly satisfactory, and becomes even more so when he wins. He likes winning against (his mind insists on trying to replace against with over) Beckett. Who is currently not-Beckett. It occurs to him that
he deserves a prize for winning – well, he doesn’t exactly deserve it because she’s barely played and he’s been playing it for years but suddenly he wants to tease her and make her smile some more. It’s good for her, smiling. She should do it more often: not her precinct sardonic version but a genuinely happy smile.

So he winds her up about wanting a prize and she snarks but not nearly as edgily as he’d expect her to, and then promises to buy him M&Ms the next day. Well, he’ll hold her to that, but right now he’d much rather hold her to him. He’s ready and moving when she finally puts that damn coffee cup, which has been the last obstacle for ten minutes, down. And rather as he had already surmised, granted that she’s given consent, she lets him lead the way and kiss her as he chooses. Still not passive, though. Definitely not. It’s just that once again she isn’t leading, isn’t driving. Once again, she’s curled in and soft and open and very definitely not Beckett. Possibly not yet Kat either, but a lot closer.

He keeps on kissing her, demanding her response to that but not making further advances for now. Kat, he is sure, wants affection. Affection doesn’t preclude excellent sex, of course – but right here and now he wants Kat to come back, and his best chance to find her is to major on affection. Besides which, and most unusually, he’s enjoying it as it is, rather than planning the move to the next base. How odd. It was the same the first time. That was odd, too. Not his usual style at all. He shrugs that thought away and goes back to kissing, exploring her mouth and discovering that he’s addicted to it. Or possibly addicted to her.

Beckett is rapidly falling into the comfort of being simply Kat, even if Castle will never know that. Her confidence that she can be Kat tonight, though, has suddenly been dented, since Castle has unaccountably and unfairly stopped. Oh. Oh, okay. Not stopped. Instead he’s moved round to – ooh – just the right spot on her neck which always makes her wriggle and that’s an interestingly determined reaction to a wriggle. She moves slightly to open the curve of her neck, which has the useful side-effect of widening the gap at the top of her shirt. She likes this, even though she could also stand him returning to the more forceful kisses of the previous occasion, before they’d gone to bed. That’s better, he has. It’s as if he’d heard her thought. Beckett-wanting-to-be-Kat wants petted. Cosseted. And very conveniently, that’s what’s happening. No hard-edged lust, finally no need to take charge or control or command. Unconsciously, she cuddles closer and emits a soft, happy purring noise.

Castle hears the purr with delight. Beckett’s back to soft and relaxed and pettable and this time he is not going to spoil it by mentioning Kat. Kats, cats, and all forms of feline, strokable, purring kittenish-Becketts by whatever name are much better dealt with by actions rather than words. Certainly for now. Words, maybe, later. Much later.

His eye, and very shortly thereafter his mouth, is drawn to the gap at the neckline of Beckett’s shirt. It could, he thinks, be usefully made just a little larger. He undoes one single button to achieve this. Tonight is now about slow, gentle affection and definitely not about flaring hard-edged sex. He thinks that he might just enjoy that too. Well. No might about it. He is enjoying it. So, clearly, is Kat. This is Kat. His Kat.

He kisses her deeply and she purrs some more. That’s addictive, too. He could become addicted to his Kat making that noise very, very quickly. Or maybe he is already.

It occurs to him that calling her Kat out loud will be fatal, quite possibly literally. He’ll keep that pet name to himself, certainly for now. Maybe in due course he’ll call her it, when he’s discovered why she’s so very closed-off normally and can be sure that it won’t upset her; but even then he’ll keep it quite private between them, a name that only he uses, that only he can use.
Hard as Iron

Eventually, half-drunk on the intoxicating effects of kissing Kat, (definitely Kat. His Kat.) Castle realises that it is almost midnight and he should have gone home hours ago. He reluctantly peels himself away from their mutually enjoyable make-out session and explains.

“I have to go home.” But he doesn’t move: instead he cuddles her close again. She feels so very right tucked against him; she fits. It’s surprising: okay, so the very first moment he’d seen her he’d wanted her; but however much he hides it under thick layers of double-edged comments, blatant innuendo, sheer irritating-ness and barely leashed flaming desire; he is, now (it had taken around ten days, till he worked out part of her story and raw lust changed to something else) deeply intrigued by the woman behind the cop; and, though he hasn’t quite realised it himself yet, is already feeling considerably more for her than simple sexual attraction, however heated.

Here in his arms, she fits. The right size, the right mind: fitting into him as neatly as the two halves of an old indenture would match. But some of the zigzags are still folded back, not yet matched. Her secrets. Her story. His story has largely (at least as an adult) been played out in the bright lights of the paparazzi flashguns and the columns of page six: all PR is good PR, from his viewpoint, when it comes to selling books. She’s a fan: she’ll probably know it all. Some of it is even true. But here, now, that’s not relevant, because she fits.

Still, as little as he likes it, he has to go. Reluctantly, he releases his grip, his hands attempting to delay the point of separation, lingering on her slim waist. Her legs swing away: he has unwanted freedom to stand, to fetch and assume his coat, to leave. He doesn’t want to leave her: leave her alone in this smart, joyless apartment, a living space with little sign of life, a residence that’s not a home. But yet she said that she’d spend Christmas with her father, so surely there will be light and life and laughter then. Surely it will be so.

He shakes off the moment of depression, the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come, retrieves his outerwear from where he’d hung it, and notes with disfavour that his cheery Christmas scarf, decorated with fat Santas and drunken red-nosed reindeer, is still damp, clammy as he wraps it round his neck. Nearly-Kat has risen to see him out, and with stunning self-control he confines himself to a dropped kiss on her hair, and refrains from telling – not asking – her to get her coat and come home with him, to somewhere that can – he can – bring comfort and joy to her bleak life.

Her door closes behind him with a hollow sound by which, he muses fancifully, like Cinderella’s midnight chimes, Kat turns back into Beckett as soon as it closes behind her as she leaves.

He’s far closer to the truth than he realises.

Beckett readies herself for bed in a state of unusual contentment, buoyed on the almost-unique sensation of having spent an evening freed of the weight of her cares and culminating in the strangely reassuring position of being held close without expectations: where she need not be the driver; desire, oh very much so, but softly, slowly. Affection, not simply lust. She falls asleep with a smile still on her lips.

Even when Beckett wakes, the unaccustomed atmosphere of happiness hasn’t dissipated. She even – finally – purchases an small pack of tasteful Christmas cards and spends a few moments scrawling suitable messages in them: her father, Lanie, the boys. Not the Captain – that’s brown-nosing and it’s not the tradition. She looks at the remaining two cards, and considers, chewing her lip. Finally she scribbles a banal message of seasonal good wishes, conveying no personal
sentiments whatsoever, heads it generically to *The Castle Family*, and signs it with an indecipherable squiggle in which only a B can be discerned as a recognisable letter.

She addresses the envelope neatly in printed capitals and leaves it, with the others, in her desk drawer for later. She is not entirely comfortable with this idea, though she feels she ought to make an effort. After all, Castle’s intervention had allowed her to purchase a gift for her father that she’s sure he’ll like, and then have a peaceful evening.

Her indecisiveness is disturbed by a new case. She shoves all the envelopes in her coat pocket and gets moving in the general direction of Alphabet City. In a dingy walk-up bedsit is a twenty-something, who’s been stabbed and then left to bleed out. The driver’s licence provides a name, Josiah Carver, and his unlocked phone gives them a variety of friends and – ah ha! – family and best guess for a girlfriend.

Castle rolls up to Alphabet City and, soon bored with this banal death, wanders round the bedsit as annoyingly as a fretful five-year old, and almost as usefully. By the fourth occasion of him fiddling with things Beckett is thoroughly fed up and has stopped trying to call him to order. If he misses the ride back to the precinct it will be his own fault. However, just as Lanie issues orders for the corpse to be taken back to the morgue, turns to Beckett and repeats her mantra (always the same words): *I need to get him on the slab*; just as Beckett turns to Lanie and speaks, he bounds back up to them.


“You off your head? No, not now. Wait till I’m cleaned up and got you some results. Anyway, I got yours back at the morgue.”

Beckett looks a little chagrined at her own poor timing. “When will you have some results?”

“Dunno yet. Call me at the end of the day if I haven’t called you already. We can have a Christmas drink after.” The boys wander up as soon as someone mentions *having a drink*, looking hopeful. Castle looks equally excited. “Girls only,” Lanie says firmly. Their faces fall. Beckett takes pity – well, sort of pity – upon them.

“You can have something else instead.” It’s like feeding baby birds. They all turn to her with shiny-bright expectant faces. She produces the envelopes and distributes them: interestingly awaiting the results.

Esposito is first to rip his envelope open and discover the card. His shocked face is really quite amusing.

“What the hell, Beckett?” Ryan is merely silently dumbfounded. Oddly, Castle is suddenly saying nothing at all. She’d thought he was about to speak, before Espo got in first. He is, however, now listening very intently.

“It’s a Christmas card, Espo. Surely you’ve had one before?” Esposito glares.

“A ‘course I have. But I ain’t never had one from *you*, Beckett.”

“Nor have I,” interjects Ryan.

“I have,” Lanie says smugly. “Every year.”

Castle still says nothing at all. Beckett can feel him looming behind her. She has the sinking
feeling that this is going to raise more questions than she wants to answer. (So that would be more than no questions at all, then. She asks questions. She doesn’t answer them.)

“So why this year?” Esposito asks aggressively.

“Five-year anniversary of the team,” says Beckett lightly. “Thought we should celebrate.” Esposito looks dyspeptically at her, and turns his glare up a notch. It has no effect at all. It never does.

“If you don’t want it, Espo, there’s a trashcan over there,” points out Beckett.

“I never said that.” Esposito takes a firmer grip on the card, as if he might be deprived of it. “I’m gonna frame it. Written proof that you do know what Christmas is.” Beckett sees the abyss opening right under her feet. Esposito carries straight on dropping her into it. “Bet you’re still taking the Christmas Day shift though.”

“So?” says Beckett. “Someone has to.”

“Someone don’t gotta do it every single year,” Esposito says very firmly. “When did you last not take it? Huh?”

Beckett becomes painfully aware that Castle is now looming even more obviously. He still hasn’t said a word, nor has he opened his card. She firmly cuts this discussion off, from the bottom of the hole she’s got herself into.

“Okay. We got work to do.”

“You always got work to do,” Esposito mutters, almost under his breath. It is, regrettably, painfully obvious that Castle has heard it. “The rest of us got lives to lead.”

“Lanie, call me as soon as you’ve got anything,” Beckett says briskly. “Ryan, you see if you can get any camera footage. Esposito, you start canvassing. Ryan can join you when he’s done. Get the uniforms on it, and get that beat cop to give us all the story too.”

“What are you going to do?” Ryan asks.

“I’m going to talk to the family, then the girlfriend.” She doesn’t need to assign Castle. He’ll follow her whether she wants it or not.

Unsurprisingly, he’s right on her tail as she goes to her cruiser. She can feel his questions burning holes in her coat. He barely waits for her to get in and close the car door – she certainly hasn’t got her seat belt done – before he starts.

“You didn’t say you were working Christmas Day.” It’s not – quite – an accusation. Beckett’s hackles rise as she starts the car.

“Someone has to,” she repeats wearily.

“You volunteered.” How’d he work that out? “You volunteer for it every year.” This is all entirely irrelevant. She steers in the direction of 2nd Avenue.

“So?”

“So you said you were going to your father’s for Christmas.” And that is definitely an accusation.

“I am.” Her voice is cold and remote. It doesn’t invite any further interrogation. It is entirely and
distressingly ineffective.

“When?”

“What possible business is that of yours? But straight after shift, since you’re so interested.” She is furiously, bitterly angry that he’s questioning – and none too subtly disagreeing – with her choices as to how she spends her Christmas. She buries her fury in her hard, icy shell and doesn’t let it out. Emotions don’t help, and she doesn’t need to waste them on Castle when he’s in this mood. She doesn’t owe him any explanations of that choice at all. And, she remembers, he’s here for research. She doesn’t want her past, or her father, researched.

“So, this case,” she starts.

“Forget the case, Beckett.” Castle sounds annoyed. Too bad. This is simply not his business. She pulls over. “What?” he says, shocked.

“Out.”

“What?”

“Out. I have work to do. You’re not helping with the case, which is what you’re supposed to be here for. So go home. Come back when you’re ready to think about the real issue rather than irrelevant diversions.” Castle stays sitting like a stump in the passenger seat.

“No.”

“Okay, sit there, then.” She switches off the engine, undoes her seatbelt and opens her door. She has completely lost her temper, and she really does not care that she’s acting like a five-year old by storming off in a cloud of fury.

“Where are you going?”

“To tell the family.” She steps out the cruiser and slams her door shut behind her. Then she reopens it, briefly: throws the keys in his lap. “You can drive it now. You always wanted to.” She’s summoned a cab and is gone before he’s untangled himself.

He has no idea where the family can be found, because he was bored and not paying attention in the walk-up. That had been a mistake. He takes the driver’s seat, makes major readjustments to the seat and mirrors, (crashing Beckett’s cruiser is not a good plan) drives it back round to the Twelfth and parks it neatly. It’s not nearly as much fun as he’d thought driving her car would be. Then again, he’d rather thought that she’d be in the car with him when he did. When he takes the keys up to her desk she’s not there, nor does it look as if she’s been there. She must have gone straight to the family. He’d have thought she’d have gone back to the Twelfth first. He considers waiting, and then considers that he’s overstepped enough today.

In the short drive back it has become borne upon him that he had no right whatsoever to question Beckett’s shift pattern or Christmas Day choices, and also that – for once – she’d been quite justified in handing him his ass for doing so. He’d simply been so appalled by her – well, not lie, but he’d thought she’d lied and that had flicked his switches – and utter disregard of the holiday that he hadn’t thought before he opened his mouth.

He decides that discretion is by far the better part of valour for the rest of the day, and though he would have liked to follow Beckett around to the interviews and ask his own questions and generally assist, he doesn’t trust himself not to say something stupid. More stupid. So he goes home, uncomfortably conscious that he’s lost every inch and more of ground that he might have
gained yesterday.

“Who the hell are you?”

“Detective Kate Beckett, NYPD”

“Nuthin’ to say to you.” The door starts to shut in her face. Mr and Mrs Carver are not reacting well to a cop showing up on their doorstep. If she wasn’t bearing such bad news, she’d leave and pass that information on to the beat cops. Just in case it might be relevant.

“It’s about Josiah.” The door stops moving.

“Joe? What ‘bout Joe? What’s that boy done now?”

“I’m sorry to tell you” – she sees them get it before she’s said anything more – “that Joe was stabbed earlier today.”

“Guess you’d better come in, then.”

Beckett’s trained eyes assess the small apartment in a single comprehensive glance as she starts down her questioning. She doesn’t get much out the parents: no enemies (she doesn’t believe that); no misbehaviour (she comprehensively disbelieves that); no knowledge of what he might be doing to get stabbed. (She does believe that. This pair may know a lot about a lot of things, but it doesn’t seem like they know much about their son since he moved out. She’ll get more from the girlfriend.)

She’s no more than an easy ten minute walk from the precinct. Still fuelled on fury, it takes her six. She isn’t going to be questioned about her choices, still less her reasoning, by a ride-along nuisance.

She reaches her desk in a still-unshed flurry of annoyance, clacking heels warning off any smart comments, and drops the victim’s mobile on her desk, noticing the presence of her car keys and the absence of Castle. By the time she’s got a cup of horrible but caffeinated hot liquid that claims, in defiance of truth-in-advertising laws, to be coffee, she’s refocused on the crime. She puts the numbers through the database herself and gets the call list. Just because Ryan normally does it doesn’t mean she’s forgotten how. Then she drops a note to the local uniforms. When she’s done that she decides that she’s given it enough time to be relatively calm and takes herself off to interview the girlfriend.

The girlfriend lives back over on the other side of the precinct. She turns out to be a bleached-highlight blonde, whose attributes are only too obvious in her skin-tight t-shirt and painted-on jeans. She is predictably and volubly emotional. Beckett thinks extremely cynically that they’ve probably been together a month. Her assumptions take a sideways knock that she admits she entirely deserves when it turns out that she’s been with Joe for two years and they were planning to get engaged soon – “At Christmas, we were going to have a big family dinner: we wanted to do it at Thanksgiving but Joe hadn’t had the overtime so he wanted to wait so he could rack up the hours and the pay in the run up to Christmas. He said he wanted to get me the ring I deserved…” Her voice dissolves into snuffling tears.

“What was his job?”

“He managed a warehouse in Brooklyn. It shipped machine parts. He just got more hours this summer so we could get married…” She dissolves again.
“Do you know why he’d be in a walk-up in Alphabet City?”

“That’s where Mick lives.”

“Mick?”

“Joe’s pal. They would’ve been going to watch the game together, prob’ly meeting there before they went to a bar.”

Beckett takes Mick’s full name and address, which indeed matches the address where the corpse was found, and leaves the girlfriend to her unhappiness.

After Beckett’s finished with cross-matching Mick to the phone records, and having sent Ryan and Espo to interview him while she does, it’s the end of the day. Well, technically it had been the end of the day an hour ago and she should have called Lanie. Oh well, Lanie doesn’t clock-watch either. She taps the number and sure enough Lanie is still in the morgue.

“What do we got, Lanie?”

“Not a whole awful lot, Kate. You wanna come over and have a look?”

“Sure. I’ll be there in twenty.”

She shows up in the morgue in short order, and perches on a clean steel autopsy table. There is indeed little to see. Beckett harrumphs disgruntledly, and turns to happier thoughts than the lack of clues.

“D’you still want a drink now we’re done?”

“Yes. I want cold drinks and hot men, not cold men and hot drinks.” Beckett refrains from any comment. It doesn’t stop Lanie. “What about you?”

“Cold drinks sounds good.” There’s an expectant silence. “Lanie…” Lanie mutters, just below audible level. “What was that?”

“You could do with a hot man too.”

“No thanks. Seen you weeping into your wine enough. Romance is dead.”

“Sez you,” Lanie says bluntly. “Just ‘cause you ain’t looking doesn’t mean it’s not out there.” She pauses. “Or sitting right by your desk.”

Beckett shrugs. “Maybe Santa Claus will drop one off on Christmas morning.”

“The effort you don’t put in to finding a live one, he might as well drop off a multipack of batteries.” Beckett chokes. Lanie is outrageous.

“Let’s go get a drink,” she says hurriedly, before Lanie can carry on. She wouldn’t put it past Lanie to give her a very inappropriate present, at this rate.

“Sure. And while we’re drinking, you can tell me all about working with Writer-Boy. That man is cute. You should take advantage of him.” She grins lasciviously. “All sorts of advantages. I’m sure he’d like to take advantage of you.” Her grin widens. “I’ve seen him eyeing up your handcuffs.” It becomes a snigger. “And your skinny ass.”

“Drink, Lanie,” Beckett says very firmly. It’s wholly ruined by her scarlet cheeks. She really
doesn’t want to think about all the ways Castle could – did – appreciate her body. Nor does she want to think about how he went and spoiled it just when she was thinking that he could at least provide the chance to lay her load down occasionally. She doesn’t need criticism of her choices. That doesn’t help her cope. Fortunately Lanie attributes Beckett’s blushes to her outspoken commentary and doesn’t ask difficult questions. Well, no more than usual, anyway.

When they’ve found a bar and a bottle of wine, Lanie takes another tack. “How come you’re distributing Christmas cards like confetti?”

“What, four cards is confetti these days?”

“It is for you. You never do cards. Well, one for me and one for your dad doesn’t count. What’s changed this year?”

“Told you, five year anniversary.”

“Castle hasn’t been around for five months let alone five years, but you gave him a card.”

“Couldn’t leave him out once I’d given the boys one. That would have been rude.”

“Since when have you worried about upsetting Writer-Boy? You shove him away all the time. You should pull him in and kiss him. That’d solve your Saturday night problem. Though so would a skirt and some lipstick.”

“Lanie, I’m fine. I’m not looking for some Saturday-night stand.” Lanie growls at her, much to Beckett’s surprise.

“You are an idiot, girl. You should be out having fun, not sitting around fretting and thinking about murder. You should kiss Castle under the mistletoe.” That’s a remarkably restrained comment, for Lanie. “And then you should drag him home by his hair and jump his bones.” Ah. That’s not restrained at all.

“Don’t wanna.” She doesn’t. She’s not spending time with someone who can’t respect her decisions. That won’t lighten her load. She doesn’t need to be made to feel guilty. More guilty. Sometimes there are no good choices, and all you can do is live with the choices you’ve made. She turns conversation to the perennial topics of films, clothes and holidays and keeps it there till the wine is done – Lanie, as ever, has the bulk of the bottle – and the evening is over.
Saturday morning finds Beckett in the precinct, studying the limited information on her murder board and considering the best leads to follow. Esposito and Ryan had discovered that Joe had got into an argument in front of a Canal Street stall, but camera footage shows it isn’t Mick with whom he was arguing. The boys have gone back out to bring the stallholder in. Rather them than she: it’s snowing again.

Interrogation throws up that the stall holder had been suffering a spate of shoplifting and is professionally pissed off with all Christmas shoppers, teenagers, and indeed every person under Heaven, no doubt including Santa Claus. When he tries to apply his attitude to Beckett she hits straight back and instead of collecting in Christmas takings the man will spend his afternoon with a police sketch artist describing the other man who had been with Joe. By the time the sketch is done and she’s chased through every possible line of thought it’s well past dark, it’s still snowing, and it is very definitely time to go home. It had been time to go home hours ago, but there’s nothing to do in her apartment except solitary reading.

She picks up a ready meal on the way and some soda. She doesn’t often have alcohol at home: only if she’s expecting Lanie. She almost never drinks alone: twice only, in ten years. That way lies disaster, and the memories. She doesn’t need either of those. She makes her solitary dinner and drinks her solitary soda and watches a solitary movie in preference to reading a solitary book.

Around about nine there’s a knock on the door. When she opens the door there is Castle, with a box in his hands and a sheepish expression.

“I’m sorry. About yesterday, I mean. I shouldn’t have questioned your decisions.”

Beckett’s look is not inviting. It says very clearly no, you shouldn’t have.

“So I brought you something to make up for it.” She raises an eyebrow. “Mince pies. And brandy butter. Home-made. Well, the brandy butter. Not the mince pies. They came from Myers of Keswick.” He becomes aware that he is babbling and forcibly stops. She steps out of the doorway and gestures him in.

“What is a mince pie, Castle? And why on earth would I want to put brandy or butter on meat?”

Castle puts the box down on her kitchen counter and starts peering at her oven and pressing buttons. “Have you got a baking tray?”

“Huh?”

“A baking tray. They need warmed up. They’re not nearly as nice if you don’t heat them up.”

“Castle, what are these?” Oh. That didn’t sound like cuddly soft Kat. That sounds like irritated Beckett.

“Mince pies.” She looks wholly blank. “A British thing. They’re full of fruit – raisins and mixed peel and a sweet sauce – and a little bit of alcohol. Sweet pies. No meat at all. There used to be when they were invented but not now. You have them with brandy butter – butter sweetened and whipped with brandy. Or rum. Or I suppose you could use any sort of spirits.” Beckett looks slightly more receptive.

“Okay, so now that you’ve invaded my kitchen and kidnapped my oven in order to roast pies that
sound as if they’re meat but aren’t, with a sauce that sounds rather like heart-failure-in-a-dish, when I’ve already had dinner, how about explaining?” But she’s smiling.

“They’re a Christmas tradition in Britain. I had them on a book tour once. No-one likes them here.” He pouts. “Alexis won’t have them anywhere near her, and my mother claims they go straight to her liver, though I can’t imagine that her liver would be hurt by anything short of weapons-grade plutonium.” He pauses and regroups. “Anyway. I thought that you might like them, so I brought them over.”

“And the butter?”

“Brandy butter. Oh. Well.” He colours very slightly. “I made it. It’s traditional, too. It’s really easy. I could give you the recipe, or make some for you to take to your father’s.”

There’s an infinitesimal stiffening in Beckett’s shoulders. “That’s sweet of you, Castle, but we’ve got it covered, thanks.” She hands him a baking tray. “I guess I’d better try one.”

Castle files the small reaction for later and looks around Beckett’s apartment. It’s no more Christmas-decorated than it had been two days ago. He doesn’t have the impression that it’s going to become decorated between now and Christmas Day.

“Don’t you have a tree?”

“Nope.” She looks at him. “No point, when I won’t be here.” Castle ignores that bait – the challenge in her eyes is obvious – and slides two pies on to the tray and into the oven with smooth efficiency.

And then he turns round to Beckett, who is standing far too closely behind him for resistance to his urges to be anything other than useless, looking curiously at the remaining pies and clearly planning to poke one to see what happens, and with the same smooth efficiency draws her into his arms and kisses her. She gives in to it without a single protest by word or deed and when there is no resistance he takes charge of proceedings and starts to explore and investigate and take her mouth more deeply, holds her closer until she drops the shell and softens into him and accepts his lead. He thinks she needs to relax, and he knows how to achieve it. He wants to find Kat again: to work out what triggers the need to be Kat, who simply wants comfort and affection and not to be in charge. Curiosity has always been his besetting sin.

He runs a firm hand over her back to encourage her to curve closer, settling it in the small of her back, and continues to provide the searching, forceful kisses that she had liked so much. Eventually he stops kissing and simply holds her, stroking her hair and still keeping her close.

“That’s more like it,” he says with satisfaction. “You taste even better than the mince pies.”

There’s an indignant squawk below his chin. “What?” He tips her face upward and kisses her deeply again. “Definitely. Conclusive proof.”

He tows her towards the couch and notes with some interest that she still isn’t arguing. Seems he’s forgiven. Next time, he thinks, he’ll be more careful. Something that he simply does not understand is behind all this: the occasional odd reaction, the solitary life, the lack of celebration, the change to her personality that takes place in her own space. Being careful, however, does not preclude providing kisses, affection, and generally taking the lead. It’s particularly convenient that what Beckett, in this interestingly different guise, may like matches rather well with what he likes to provide. Not that he didn’t also enjoy the fast, hard results of Beckett taking charge, but he didn’t like the feeling of being second-best it left him with and he is determined that he will not be regarded as in some way second-best or being settled for again.
Beckett is confused. It’s not a feeling she particularly appreciates, especially at home. Nothing at home confuses her. She eats, she sleeps, she reads or watches TV or a movie, she surfs the net. Insofar as she ever does, she relaxes: sometimes she plays her guitar quietly, she does yoga. This apartment is her still centre, a place where there are no distractions and no memories. She has no photos, and her pictures are abstract: soothing swirls of colour that calm the mind and demand little. The only memories are in the dedications pages of the books that line the walls, and she doesn’t look at those.

This is her sanctuary and her haven: her hiding place; few people come here. Her father, though she prefers to visit his home; Lanie, though she prefers that they go out. And now spoilt, sexy Rick Castle, who turns out to be interestingly capable of providing something she needs. If only he can do so without researching, without asking any difficult questions about her history, without asking about her choices, without ever asking Why?

Here he is, bouncing into her quiet apartment with some peculiar form of food that he’s insisting she tries, forcing Christmas spirit on to her, and now simply pulling her into his arms and under his lips and kissing her as if there’s no question at all but that she’ll allow it; not asking for decisions or demands, but only that she consent and enjoy where he takes her. A chance to forget is on offer: an evening where she can lay down the cases and lay down the memories and rest from the road. Think of it as a Christmas present.

Her soft contentment is disturbed by the oven timer chiming. Castle makes a noise that’s an interesting combination of happy expectation and irritation and lets go of Beckett in favour of dealing with his pies.

“Where do you keep plates and cutlery, Beckett?” She unfolds herself and rapidly sets out two plates, two forks and a spoon to deal with this brandy butter stuff.

“This better be worth it, Castle.” Castle smiles wickedly at her.

“If you don’t like the taste I’m sure I can find something else that tastes good.”

“I’ve only got water, or soda,” she deflects.

“Water will be fine.” But he wonders the more. She’s perfectly happy to have a social drink, but she has none at home?

He slides the pies on to the plates and offers her the butter: she looks very suspiciously at it but takes a dollop and sits at the table. Castle looks mildly unimpressed by that – clearly he’d been hoping for some snuggling on the couch, but she has the feeling that these little pies will collapse into a pile of crumbs as soon as she puts a fork into them and picking pastry out the cushions isn’t her preferred form of entertainment.

The pie oozes unctuously over her tongue, the brandy butter that slathered it oiling its path. It’s delicious. Delightful.

And abruptly familiar. She falls off the seat away from the table and into her bathroom without a word of explanation or apology. She feels as if she’s going to throw up. She presses her forehead to the cold tiles around the mirror and can’t stop the memory slicing through her.

A year after. Christmas time, and they were trying to pretend everything was normal, everything was fine, even though it hadn’t been normal or fine for almost a year, even though her father was already slurped at noon, even though she was tense and unhappy and waiting for the real misery to start. But families are together at Christmas, so that’s what they did. Pretending everything was
fine: a small tree, lopsidedly decorated; tinsel, hung drunkenly from pictures, a holly wreath lurching from the door. But pretending everything was fine. After all, it’s Christmas time: there’s no need to be afraid; at Christmas time, they let in light and they banish shade. If only.

They’d eaten Christmas dinner. Well. She had eaten, though the food was all from a good store: she’d had no time to cook and her father neither ability nor sobriety: everything was ready-made and required only reheating. Her father had drunk most of his meal, and by dessert was on the verge of maudlin weeping over memories of times past, already starting on the road of *Do you remember?* Do you remember how your mom made chestnut stuffing? Do you remember when we got your first bicycle? Do you remember last year when your mom was here? Why isn’t she here now? Who did this to us, Katie? Why haven’t they found them? Why? Why?

So many *whys*, and no answers. Only more wine, and then – oh God. And then brandy, and he’d brought out those little pies and said – oh God – he’d got them in some little Brit-owned shop and he’d doused them in the brandy but she’d had to try one to stop the dinner becoming a total disaster even though it already was and then the day had gone the way it always did and she ended up putting her father to bed and cleaning up the spilt booze and vomit. No wonder she’d forgotten them. She’s tried so hard to forget all of those days, and anyway he’d been too drunk to tell her what they were.

She scrubs her teeth frantically, trying to wipe away the vision in mint toothpaste and then mouthwash, holding back the tears and the memories. It’s not like that any more: her father is sober and Christmas will be dry and as long as she’s near him or he can call her whenever he has to then he’ll stay dry. She’s his mainstay and his strength. But she can’t face those pies. For a moment or two she stands, leaning, still, against the cold tiles, re-establishing control, pulling Beckett who can cope with anything back over herself, the shell that will get her through this. She can get through this. She’d got through everything else. This is simply a memory, and she is stronger than her memories.

She walks back out.

“You okay, Beckett?” Castle sounds genuinely concerned. She doesn’t look at the table, keeps her eyes on his face.

“Yeah,” she lies. “Must have eaten something at lunchtime. My stomach…” She lets him take an implication she hasn’t stated. “D’you mind… I don’t think the pies will agree with me.”

Castle looks at Beckett, armoured to the nth degree, and wonders what she’s hiding. She does, though, look greenish, and it’s fairly clear that she’s upset. He just doesn’t believe it’s *only* an upset stomach. He helps her clear away the plates, noticing that she is not looking at the remaining food on hers.

Then he tows her back to the couch and arranges her next to him, pulls her legs up over his lap and cuddles her in without asking permission or indeed waiting for consent.

“What’s really up, Beckett?” He doesn’t want to call her Beckett, but there’s no other name he can use and get away with. She doesn’t answer, only curls into him in an inviting way against which he isn’t proof. His arms tighten without any conscious decision. “Tell me what’s wrong.” His tone is firmer, building on the knowledge that sometimes she doesn’t want to take the lead. So he’ll try now, he’ll try to lead her to… oh. Beckett is quite definitely back.

She’s dragged his head down and his mouth to hers and right now she’s invading him in a way that strongly suggests the next stop is her bed. This isn’t anything to do with an upset stomach at all. This is a very deliberate move to stop him asking questions and to forget whatever it is that has
disturbed her. Maalox for memories, he thinks alliteratively – and stops on that thought.

Memories. Taste and smell invoke memories. She tastes of peppermint mouthwash. He’s wrenched away from thought because her hands are already opening his belt, the button and the zipper. No. If they are going to do this – and they are going to do this – they’re going to do it his way. He catches her hands to stop her.

“No.” She looks up, a flick of abandoned hurt through her hazel eyes. “Not like that. That’s not what you really want. Leave it to me. You don’t want it like that; you want someone else to lead.” There’s an uncertainty behind her expression. “Not lead like that.” She relaxes very slightly. “Nothing you don’t want, no pushing, no questions.” Another degree of relaxation. Ah. That’s what she’s hiding from. Questions. “All you have to do is agree, or not. Nothing else. We’ll take it from there.” He’s projecting conscious confidence; reassurance that she can rely on him to give her what she really wants. He’ll work out why she might want it, and what is really going on, later. For now, though he really hadn’t planned this, matters seem to have fallen – well, into his lap. Curiosity may be his besetting sin, but he’s pretty keen on lust too, even when this isn’t just lust any more.

He tucks her in more accessibly, and slides a gentle palm around the curve of her jaw, the line of her sharp-cut cheek; his other arm behind her, supporting her, dropping diagonally to his hand on her hip, softly stroking, intent in the control in his fingers, restraint in the gesture. Affection, assertion, but no need for aggression, from either of them. For a moment he thinks that she’s going to object to his assumption of the lead, but then her hands fall lax on his shoulders and she lets him position her as he pleases and suddenly, almost unexpectedly, Kat is back, pliant and pettable and perfectly placed and pleased to be kissed. It would be a terrible shame not to indulge her, and Castle tries very hard never to disappoint when it comes to indulgence.

He starts slowly: a delicate nudge of his lips to hers, a soft request for entrance, not denied; and then a more forceful press of his tongue, a swooping raid to take possession and show her that in this he has every intention of leading the way. His hand on her hip shifts to turn her into him, then slides up her back and into her hair and keeps her there, freeing his other hand to drift along the lean line of her leg as his mouth drifts along the base of her cheek and round to her ear and that small spot that he found the first time and hasn’t forgotten since. He hears her soft mew with satisfaction and kisses it again to produce that same noise, which this time is accompanied by a wriggle.

“Like that?” he rumbles deeply. She makes a soft murmur of agreement, without distinguishable words, and cuddles closer. A slim hand runs round his neck to lodge in his hair. He drops to her shoulder, opens a button to give himself better access to the smooth skin covering her clavicles, draws a wet line along and back again and hears her gasp and feels the immediately tighter grip with pleasure. When he lifts, traces a finger over her lips and her tongue flickers out to twist over it, runs the finger down again to the opening of her button-down, she leans back against his arm to provide access: heavy, sleepy, darker eyes allowing him his way. Another button opens, an edge of white lace peeps out, and Castle’s lips follow his finger downward to the creamy curve of skin. There’s no haste to his movements, no need to hurry, just slow assertion of intent and desire, leading without pressure.

Beckett curls in and gives herself over to sensation and firm, steady, controlled touch of hands and mouth, happily responsive to the growing heat between them. She essays some unbuttoning on her own account, discovering warm skin and nicely firm muscle under the smooth cotton, and as she strokes over it is rewarded by a deep growl and a return to hard, deep kisses and a firm hand palming over the edge of lace. She arches into it, pressing peaked nipples against the resistance and using her grip on Castle’s wide shoulders to try to pull him over her.
He doesn’t move.
“No need to hurry, Beckett. Just let it happen. I told you I’d give you what you wanted. You don’t want to decide, or be in charge. So don’t. I’ll make the decisions. You just have to say if it’s not what you want.”

“No decisions?” Really no decisions? Really just let herself be swept up in the moment and not have to think or decide or be strong? Really have someone else be strong instead: be stronger than she?

“No decisions,” Castle says firmly. “No decisions, no questions. Whatever it is, lay it down for now. Let go, Beckett.” He enforces his point with a hard fingertip across her lips. “Do you want this? That’s the only decision you need to make.”

“Yes.” It’s the last word she needs to say. Castle lays her back and slides out from under her legs, kneeling beside her.

“We’ll start here,” he purrs, and just for a second Beckett wonders if this had really been a good idea: if letting herself be Kat with Castle isn’t going too far, letting him into parts of her mind that she doesn’t want to share. He sounds more dangerous, suddenly, more predatory; and for the first time she realises something she hasn’t previously: that Castle always gets his own way. It’s not obvious, and that happy-go-lucky playboy sexy charm hides it extremely well, but still, when it comes down to it, it’s Castle who ends up with the prize, whether that’s interfering in the original case or following her around or getting her to go Christmas shopping with him.

And then he kisses her again and sweeps a hand over her stomach and she gives up that and indeed any other line of thought in favour of running one hand into his hair to ensure he doesn’t stop or move away and stroking the other hand over his revealed chest. He’s assertive but not aggressive, forceful enough for her to be wholly sure that he’ll do it right, and Beckett simply slides away into Kat-who-likes-strong-men and enjoys it.

Just like the previous time, she doesn’t get the option to roll away afterwards. It appears that Castle likes cuddling. Cuddling hasn’t really formed part of her love life: too much of an admission of weakness, too much of an insight into the world behind her eyes and her walls. She has to remember that she has other commitments, that she’s made other choices, that the only option left to her is strength. The occasional evening where someone else makes decisions doesn’t change that the only person she can rely on is herself, and anyway she doesn’t need to compare Castle-as-father to her own father, which right now will only remind her of what she’s lost. It’s very nice to be cuddled and cosseted but it doesn’t change what her life has become.

Eventually Castle has to go. He can’t take her with him, and she still isn’t telling him what was up with the pies, but he’d promised no questions and that’s where he’ll stay. He’s got more of what he wanted, anyway: soft Kat in his arms, and soon it’ll be soft Kat in his bed not just in hers. And Badass Beckett too, of course. He likes them both. Oh yes. As long as Badass Beckett doesn’t give him that unpleasant feeling of being second-best, or settled for, or that he’s missing the point somehow. He doesn’t like that at all.

He wanders home a little less happy than he had been.

Back in the bullpen on Monday, some progress has been made. The sketch the stallholder had reluctantly produced has thrown up another suspect, who’s on his way to Interrogation now. Just
in time for the interview to begin, Castle shows up full of the joys of Christmas and – much more usefully – with a large box full of the joy of doughnuts and other forms of pastry. He looks a little blue when he discovers that the bullpen is certain to have finished every last crumb before the interview is done.

“You can always buy more, Castle,” Beckett points out, not enormously sympathetic. “Or miss the interview, if you like?” That’s accompanied by a rather evil grin. She’s perfectly well aware that Castle will sacrifice any quantity of food (and sleep) as long as he gets to do the interesting bits. She wonders whether she could bribe him with food to do some of the uninteresting bits, such as paperwork, and decides that there probably aren’t that many doughnuts in the world.

“No. I’ll just have to buy more,” he grumbles. He doesn’t say that he’s disappointed: that he’d wanted to share them with Beckett in particular, since the mince pies had been a washout.

The interview, however, is not a washout. This friend of Joe’s is maybe – on a good day, with platform shoes – five-ten tall and around six-ten wide, and definitely not in need of any more doughnuts. He may not have much of a physique, but despite the thick Bronx cadence he has a reasonable mind and, it seems, a gift for observation. He also turns out to have remarkably dextrous fingers. CCTV shows him neatly nipping small valuables as he wobbles past each stall. When confronted, he’s not exactly repentant.

“Gotta make my rent somehow, and ‘s not ‘s if they’ll miss it. ‘S all knock-off anyhow.” He grins, and his four chins roll in harmony. “Doin’ the tourists a favour, stoppin’ them gettin’ fleeced.”

“Stealing, Benny. You were stealing.”

“Naw. Just…” he thinks for a moment… “recirculating.” There’s a muffled snort by Beckett’s side. She kicks Castle in rebuke. He winces.

“While you were… recirculating… did you see Joe getting into any arguments? Anyone getting in his face?”

Benny shakes his head, setting up a small wave pattern over his cheeks and jowls. He’s sweating. Beckett clocks it with considerable and concealed satisfaction and starts to go in for the kill.

“You sure about that, Benny? You’re looking a little nervous there.” More rivulets baste his face. “Your pal is dead, Benny. Don’t you worry that whoever killed him might be after you next? It’s not like you’re anonymous. They’ll pick you out no problem, the way you look.” She lets that sink in. Castle preserves a mildly menacing silence beside her. He’s not bad at that, for a non-cop: he must have picked it up from Espo. She can’t imagine that he really needs it for his writing: laptops are not known for picking up on atmosphere.

“You best chance to stay safe is to tell me everything you know, Benny. I can’t help you if I don’t know the truth.” She stops there. She knows she’s got him. She only needs to let him realise it for himself. Fortunately Castle knows enough – works well enough with her – by now to recognise when to keep his mouth shut. Gaping, ominous silence stretches across the interrogation table.

“Okay,” Benny blurts. Beckett doesn’t twitch a muscle though she’s thoroughly pleased to have bluffed him. “So Joe was with me, but he don’t like it when I lift stuff so I don’t let him see. But the guy”-


“The stallholder guy – he was gettin’ in Joe’s face about things disappearin’.” He looks sulky. “It
wasn’t Joe’s fault. He shouldn’t have had them at the front. Just askin’ for them to walk.”

“Right into your pockets, Benny.”

“Like I said, recirculation.”

“So what happened next?” Castle asks.

“Stallholder started yellin’, Joe yelled back, suddenly there’s fists flyin’ an’ I dragged Joe outta there before he got in trouble. He got a temper, Joe.” Realisation dawns. “Had a temper.” His moon face slumps into discomfort. “Stallholder was still yellin’ he’d take it outta Joe when we were round the corner.”

They continue for a while, but fat Benny doesn’t know anything more than that. Now, though, the stallholder is looking a lot more interesting. Beckett sends Ryan and Espo to pick him up again. While she’s waiting, she examines the empty box where the pastries used to be, and thinks that a doughnut is just what she needs. Shame there aren’t any left. She becomes aware that Castle is peering plaintively at the space where pastries once were too, and shares a mutually sympathetic – and hungry – look.

“I could get some more,” Castle suggests. Beckett looks at her watch.

“No time. Boys’ll be back with our suspect” –

“Suspect?”

“Yeah, suspect. He didn’t tell us about much of that, did he? Gotta wonder why not.”

“Oh.”

“Anyway, they’ll be back in a few minutes. So no time for doughnut runs.” But she looks a little regretful.

“I’ll buy you a meal later,” falls out of Castle’s mouth. “Or come to dinner, and I’ll cook.”

Beckett considers. She’s still thinking when the boys roll back in a few minutes later with the irritated stallholder between them and she doesn’t have to think about difficult questions like going to dinner with Castle any more.

“So, Jake,” she opens up, best menacing tone on show, “how come you didn’t tell us the full story last time you were here?”

“I told ya enough. Rest din’t matter.”

“I’ll decide what matters,” Beckett snaps. “Not you. I think it matters a lot that you were throwing punches at Joe.”

“Never hit him. Din’t matter.”

“Really. So it didn’t matter that you were the last person to have an argument with him and next thing he winds up dead? Because I think that matters a lot.”

“Never touched him.”

“That’s not what the witnesses say.”
“So I took a swing. So what. He was liftin’. Deserved everythin’ he got.”

“I don’t think he deserved to be dead,” Beckett observes, coldly.

“Stupid lowlife’s no loss.” He evidently realises that this line of conversation is not improving Beckett’s view of him. “Din’t know where he lived. So it wasn’t me.”

And no matter how much Beckett pushes, aided by sharp interventions from Castle, they get no further. She has to let him go, but she is perfectly certain that there’s more to it than Jake-the-dubious-stallholder has admitted. She sets Ryan to investigating camera footage and Espo to arranging another canvass – this time with photos of both Jake and Benny. Then she spends some time glaring at the murder board and running scenarios in her head. Jake is looking more and more like her killer with every moment. This is not a Beckett-flavoured case. This is extremely mundane and does not require any of her team’s normal jaw-dropping brilliance. She humphs. It’s not that she wants to re-run The Silence of The Lambs, but… she could do with something that would give her an excuse to be spending hours in the precinct.

Beckett becomes aware that Castle is regarding her with an air of expectation.

“Yeah?” she says, pulling her head out of the pack of options and possibilities that she’s shuffling.

“Boys are back.”

“Oh?”

“Camera footage.”

“Yeah?”

“Guess who was caught on Candid Camera with a switchblade?”

“Jake.” Castle looks very disappointed.

“You guessed. That’s no fun. I had this amazing theory to astound you with…”

“Save it, Sherlock. Sounds like we got the guy.”

They have got the guy. Jake caves under the evidence and is taken away, only an hour after shift should have ended.

Castle acquires an air of happy resolution and a wide, Christmas-flavoured grin.

“Dinner time, Beckett.” She looks bemused. “I said I’d get us dinner. Or cook it.”

Oh. Yeah. She’d accidentally-on-purpose forgotten that. Why couldn’t Castle have forgotten it too?

“I…” She can’t think of an excuse that might actually be believable. I don’t want to is both rude and requires an explanation, which latter is an even less desirable outcome than being rude. She really does not want to be either rude or provide explanations.

But she doesn’t want to go to the loft for dinner. She doesn’t want to watch Castle be a doting father, supporting his daughter; rather than his daughter supporting him. She doesn’t want to see all the trappings of Christmas around a bright, cheerful loft; or to eat festive food, or to drink festive drinks. She doesn’t want to take the risk that some other inadvertent action or item will trigger the memories and leave her sickened and reeling. And especially strongly, she doesn’t want
Castle to know her father’s weakness and pity him, or still worse pity her, or use it to inform his book. It’s sheer luck that he hasn’t yet put it all together, but she can’t go on relying on luck. He’s beginning to look curiously at her. Hell.

“Okay,” she says, almost hiding her reluctance. “Where shall we go?” Please not the loft please not the loft please.

“I’ve got some nice food at home – and some very good wine, Beckett. I saw how much you liked that Bordeaux the other night, and though we finished it” – he looks momentarily regretful – “I’ve got something very similar that I think you’ll like.” He smiles happily, clearly thoroughly enthusiastic at the thought of feeding her at the loft. “Let’s go.”

Oh no. She should have been rude. Or suggested somewhere. Even McDonalds would have been better than this. She turns around to pull on her coat and not incidentally hide her face for long enough to reinstate a brightly, blandly, socially acceptable expression.

“The wine’s sorted, Castle, but what do you mean when you say ‘nice food’? Should I worry that this is a foray into molecular gastronomy?” He stares at her, open-mouthed. “Close your mouth, Castle. You’re catching flies.”

“That is so hot,” he breathes. “Foray. Molecular. Gastronomy. Three wonderful words in one sentence. If I didn’t think you’d shoot me I’d kiss you on the spot.”

“I will shoot you if you try.” Castle looks mischievous and Beckett takes a prudent step out of range. She wouldn’t put it past him to have a bunch of mistletoe in his pocket just on the off-chance that he could use it to annoy otherwise calm detectives. Or something like that. Fortunately the elevator arrives, full of cops and noise, before he can do anything outrageous. She’s sure that the skim of his hand over her coat-covered hip is only because the elevator is busy and crowded.

On the way to the loft, she’s not nearly as sure. He’s an inch closer than discretion or work relationship might indicate, as if their – associations – have given him a right to brush hands with her, to trail fingers discreetly across her hip. He always seems to get what he wants, she thinks again, and the thought doesn’t make her entirely happy.

Castle is happy. Beckett’s coming home with him, and he can feed her, produce some excellent wine, and generally provide her with Christmas cheer, warmth and sociability. A few kisses probably won’t hurt either, though not in public. He’s carefully pinned some mistletoe over his study door. On the inside. Contentedly thinking of the possibilities which it offers, it takes him several minutes to realise that Beckett isn’t exactly exuding enthusiasm. She’s not unenthusiastic, precisely, but there isn’t any wholesale forward momentum either.

“What’s up, Beckett?”

“Nothing.” She almost sounds truthful. “I’m fine.” And then she deflects. “What’s for dinner, Castle?”

“Slow cooked beef in red wine. Good for winter evenings. It’ll stick to your ribs, Beckett.”

“What?”

“Stick to your ribs. It’s a British phrase.” He smirks at his own cleverness. Beckett rolls her eyes at his pretension.

“American not good enough for you, Castle? Translate, for those of us who lack your particularly
well-honed ability to show off.”

Castle looks artificially wounded. “You have no appreciation of the finer points of vocabulary,” he says teasingly. He knows perfectly well that Beckett has and uses an extensive vocabulary. Usually to chop him off at the knees, it’s true, but still…

“Actually, I took a short course in etymology once.” Castle chokes.


“College,” Beckett says un informatively. She hadn’t wanted to get into a discussion about it, but his statement had pricked her over-developed pride and she’d bitten back without thinking. “Dinner sounds nice.” She doesn’t pursue the phrase he’s used. She doesn’t want to talk about Stanford.

“Bread and butter pudding, too. My special recipe, with orange and lemon.”

“That’s a very old-fashioned meal for Mr Latest-Tech. I’d have expected nouvelle cuisine.”

“Age has its benefits,” Castle oozes, waggling his eyebrows meaningfully. “All that experience, just waiting to be put to good use. Tried and tested over a long period. Satisfaction is always guaranteed.” His flirtatious words and eyebrows are not matched by the look in his eyes, which is considerably darker and more intense. Still, he isn’t doing anything about it. She rolls her eyes, because it’s expected of her. She has to be normal.

“Anyway, Alexis likes it.” His expression alters to the – always slightly disconcerting – look of parental pride cut with some surprise that he has such a wonderful child. It scratches along Beckett’s nerves. She knew Alexis would be there. But she’s going to have to maintain her bright social exterior, all the while feeling guilty that she feels resentful. She shouldn’t feel resentful, and she shouldn’t have the knot in her gut that she suddenly does about sitting through a pleasant meal in good company. It’s a childishly unpleasant reaction and she is a better woman than that.

But she doesn’t want to go. She knows what she’ll see: she saw it when Castle dragged her out shopping. Happy families, supportive, loving, interested parents. Silly comments and shared experiences. Her step falters.

“You okay there, Beckett? Slipping on the snow in those heels of yours?” It’s a good excuse, and she seizes on it without considering the implications.

“Yeah. Don’t they clear these sidewalks?” She hasn’t even finished the last word when Castle takes her arm in a very Victorian fashion.

“There. Can’t let you fall. How would you chase down criminals with a sprained ankle?”

“You could do it for me. Get some exercise, do something socially useful, and best of all you’d need all your breath for running so you wouldn’t talk. Win-win.”

“Unkind,” smirks Castle. “Very unkind. You won’t get your pudding if you’re nasty to me.”

“If I’ve got a sprained ankle I wouldn’t be wanting to gallivant around anyway.” Castle mutters something under his breath. “What was that?”

“Coming to dinner is hardly _gallivanting_, Beckett. It’s a normal social interaction.” But he’s turning the word over on his tongue again and again, as if he’s tasting its flavour. “We could gallivant.” His eyes sparkle. “We _should_ gallivant. We’d have fun. We could” – he thinks for a
moment – “go to Coney Island. Or the Sea, Air and Space Museum. Or the top of the Empire State Building. Or the Statue of Liberty. Or” –

“Or not,” says Beckett decisively. “It’s winter, it’s freezing, and I am not gallivanting anywhere except home after the dinner you’ve dragooned me into.”

“That’s not gallivanting,” Castle grumbles. “That’s no fun. And I didn’t dragoon you into dinner, either.”

Uh-oh. There’s a thought arriving in Castle’s annoyingly excellent and perceptive mind. She can see it.

“You don’t want to come for dinner,” he says, surprised and hurt all at once.

“I’m here, aren’t I? Walking towards your loft. If I didn’t want to come to dinner I’d have said No much earlier.” She infuses it with all the considerable sincerity she can muster, and conceals any hint of fakery. Castle makes a suspiciously disbelieving noise, but seems to be convinced by the direction her feet are taking.
Wish I was at home

The loft is as brightly Christmassy as ever, and in fact Beckett is convinced that there are even more presents piled under the excessively large – but beautifully decorated – tree. She wanders over to it, and finds that it’s hung with an eclectic combination of bought and made ornaments: some clearly made by a very small Alexis, some that look as if – she would never have expected that – that Castle made them. There is a particularly delicate wire snowflake that catches and reflects the light, which she’s just reaching out to when Castle reappears behind her with two glasses of wine. Beckett jumps, and snatches her hand away guiltily.

“It’s okay, Beckett. It’s not nearly as fragile as it looks.” Unlike, Castle thinks, Beckett: who currently seems to be far more fragile than she looks. He is not at all sure, despite her denial, that she wants to be here, and her normally expressive eyes are dully shuttered. But she’s never shy of making her point, so he can only assume that whatever is wrong is not being made worse – and may be made better – by her being here.

Beckett reaches back to it, and runs her fingers carefully over the silver-gilt wire. “It’s lovely,” she says, without a hint of a quiver in her voice. “Did you make it? It doesn’t look bought.” She’d had two little wooden Christmas trees to hang on the ends of the real one they’d always had, once. One her mother had made. One her dad had. They’d been lost, and she’s had no time nor inclination to make one of her own.

“Yeah… for Alexis,” Castle replies, with a hint of embarrassment. Beckett turns round, and finds him almost on top of her. He steps back, hastily. “Have some wine.” She takes it from him, and repairs to the couch, settling herself in a corner, the wine held in front of her like a shield. Castle doesn’t follow her.

“What are you doing there, Beckett?” he asks.

“Drinking my wine?”

“No, no, no. You need to be over here.” She raises a quizzical eyebrow. “I have to make the dessert. So you need to come and sit at the counter so you can admire my skill.” Her eyebrow rises a little higher, connoting complete disbelief. Castle’s voice drops into a tone that shouldn’t be permitted. “Skill is critical, Beckett. Precise movements, careful control, the perfect quantity to leave you wanting more.” He smiles wickedly. “You can’t possibly appreciate it if you’re all the way over there. How would you join in?”

“I’m quite happy to watch you do all the work. Just like you watch me do all the work in the precinct.”

“C’mon, Beckett,” Castle wheedles. “I can’t talk to you if you’re all the way over there.” He acquires a wholly faked look of horror. “You won’t get any more wine if you’re there. Disaster!” A very odd flicker runs across her face and as swiftly away again, before Castle can place it. He’s about to employ some more persuasive words – and possibly gestures – when she appears to give in to his entreaties and comes over to sit at the counter. A very discreet flick of glance shows him that her wine is, if not untouched, barely started. In the back of his brain, neurons start to spark.

Spark is damped down as he concentrates half on his bread-and-butter pudding and half on a light, sociable, and bantering conversation in which he absolutely does not mention the Christmas Day shift, mince pies, Christmas decorations and parties, or the fact that Beckett is barely sipping her wine. He’s a little unamused that Beckett has come to dinner but doesn’t actually seem to be
wholly happy about it. He’d rather she’d simply declined. Fortunately, at that point Alexis comes bouncing down the stairs, full of the joy of the season, and likewise full of conversation. Beckett is perfectly nice to Alexis, interested in her chatter and fully attentive to her, so Castle really has no reason at all to think that there is some constraint in the air.

But there is. He can’t put a single finger on what is wrong, but something is very wrong. Beckett’s being sociable and friendly, Alexis is enthusiastic and happy, and he ought to be pleased and reassured. It’s just that whatever Beckett’s voice and expression is saying, her eyes aren’t saying anything at all. Which is a little upsetting, and a very little annoying, made more so because there isn’t anything tangible to be upset or annoyed about. She still isn’t drinking her wine, either. Maybe he’ll find out what’s going on now dinner’s done.

Beckett has consented to coffee – if she’d declined he’d have been considering committal proceedings, or possibly a referral to the ER – but though she’s still producing bright, bantering, and above all normal conversation he has the strangest feeling that she’s thoroughly miserable. He takes their coffee through to the study in the faint, lingering hope that he can find out what’s wrong. He ushers her in, shuts the door, and pulls her quite firmly into his arms.

It very nearly works. There’s a hint of a melt into him… and then it’s very clearly Badass Beckett, not Kat. She stands straight and absolutely unyielding for a second, then steps back. Castle lets go of her without an argument.

“What’s wrong, Beckett?” There’s more than a hint of irritation in his voice. “You’ve been off all evening.”

“Sorry,” she says apologetically. “I’m tired. I didn’t mean to spoil dinner with you.” Which she hadn’t. She’d only come because she couldn’t think of a way to refuse without upsetting him. She’s rapidly deciding that that had been a very bad idea. She’d have done better to upset him a little bit much earlier and then gone home and let them both get over her refusal than come, try her hardest to make nice while all the time battling furious resentment and – say it, Kate – jealousy at a proper father-daughter relationship, and clearly not quite succeed. She wants to go home and let out all her misery and resentment and try to get over her stupid, selfish, pathetic feelings on her own.

“I’d better go home and get some rest.” She smothers a yawn. She is, now that she has stopped and solved the case, actually, genuinely, weary. Not just tired, which a good night’s sleep might solve, but weary in body and soul. She needs a break from the relentless round of cases they’ve had. Maybe it’ll be quiet for the next few days.

Castle is still looking at her with a certain amount of aggravation, though her apology seems to have lowered the previous tension, and disbelief. It really doesn’t help her mood.

“Thank you for dinner,” she says politely. “If there’s spare dessert, could I get a doggy bag?” It’s exactly what she would say if she wasn’t feeling so raw. Castle smiles, but it doesn’t really reach his eyes.

“Sure, Beckett. Let me put it in a box.” And he does, all the time sure that something is wrong that she won’t tell him. It never crosses his mind that she might find the homely, warm and welcoming atmosphere of his loft and family difficult to deal with. Why should it? She’s never mentioned anything that might give him the impression that she would. She’s still got her father and she’s sharing a family Christmas with him. The earlier spark of neurons has been quite quenched by his annoyance at the constraint and tension, and, he discovers, he’s actually quite glad to see her go, not least because he still cannot put a finger on why he thinks something is wrong, and seeing her here is merely accentuating the problem. Anyway, it’s not like she seems to want to stay. Which
aggravates him more, which he knows perfectly well is because he’s frustrated. He doesn’t like either frustration or aggravation, especially when he neither wants Beckett to stay nor wants her to go.

When the door closes behind her he pours himself another large glassful of his excellent wine – and that’s another annoyance, she’d hardly drunk any of it and he’d been sure she’d love it – and relieves his confusion by playing shoot-’em-up games till he’s killed enough monsters to be relatively sanguine again. He wanders out to find Alexis raiding the fruit bowl – can’t she raid chocolate, or his alcohol, like any normal teen? – and decides to probe a little.

“Did you think Beckett was a bit off, pumpkin?”

Alexis looks at him with some confusion. “No. She was just like normal.”

Oh. “Not tired, or upset?”

“No, dad. Just like normal. She’s more interested in what I’m doing than your other friends. Why?”

“Nothing. I just thought…” Clearly he’d been wrong about what he just thought. Alexis would be quick to notice if there were an atmosphere. She’d always noticed when it was Gina. And now he’s been a little short with Beckett, who will certainly have noticed, and who will let it pass her by, never ask about it, and generally give him the impression that she has no desire to talk about anything at all which might possibly involve real emotions. Whether she has any desire to talk or not. Which irritates him all over again.

Beckett has gone home, changed into leggings and a t-shirt, and is going through her yoga forms with perfect muscular control and immense self-discipline. Her body is totally obedient to her commands. It’s doing nothing for her roiling mind at all. Normally she finds that the effort involved to control the poses forces her to concentrate on something other than whatever has wound her up, but even when she moves from backbend to tree she can’t stop thinking about how petty, selfish and nasty her feelings are.

She also can’t stop the feeling of squirming unpleasantness that Castle, who is not short of intelligence or perception, either has, or is just about to, work out how mean-minded she is. Then she feels even worse.

She goes to bed on a black cloud of unhappiness, guilt and resentment, and when her alarm sounds to start the day she is no better off. She hopes that Castle won’t show up today. Then she hopes he will, and they can just be normal. Then she hopes he won’t again, because he’s sure to ask questions and want to talk about it. She doesn’t want to talk about it when she can’t even work out what she thinks about it.

The precinct is full of bonhomie and everyone discussing their Christmas plans, Christmas shopping, Christmas visitors and Christmas meals. Except Beckett, who is pretending to concentrate on her paperwork and putting in a few comments every so often to make it appear that she’s listening and happy that everyone’s having a good time. She can already sense that half her bad mood is because of the imminence of her own flat, trying-too-hard, ignoring-history Christmas.

She does love her father. She really, really does. But she doesn’t like that she can never rely on him; that despite his twice weekly AA meetings she’s always a little tense around him, always a little suspicious that it won’t last. Five years, he’s been dry, without a single lapse, and yet she
can’t quite make herself believe that it’s all better. She knows it’s never cured, only controlled. Therefore, she can’t talk to him about anything difficult, and sometimes she would really like a father’s advice, not just her friends’ thoughts. Sometimes she would like just to be unconditionally loved and to have someone that she could lean on without a shadow of a doubt about their view of her weakness.

But there’s no point being maudlin or grieving or resentful. She’s not going to have a parent, so there’s no point wishing for it. She’s had her bed made for her, and there’s no other choice but to lie on it. Alcoholism as Procrustes, in fact, fitting you into its frame whether you like it or not. She distracts herself with another pointless form. It doesn’t work. She mulls over the coming Christmas dinner: all bought from a good store, all easy to prepare. Her father will do that. He can do that. He can’t cook, though. Not like – she turns her mind away from that thought, because if she starts down that line she will lock herself in the restroom to cry with the memories of when home was like that, and crying hadn’t solved anything for five years while her father had his head stuck down a bottle and it won’t solve anything now.

“Beckett? Beckett!” It’s Ryan and Esposito, in stereo. “We’re all goin’ out after shift. You comin’? Lanie’s comin’ too.” Why not?

“ ‘Kay,” she says, and thinks nothing more of it.

At end of shift she’s done nothing but paperwork all day and is certainly ready for a change. Castle hasn’t shown up, which has allowed her to try to get past her unworthy envy, and a drink with the team sounds like a good plan. At least, she doesn’t have a better plan. She doesn’t, in fact, have a plan at all, except takeout and TV and her yoga mat. If she doesn’t sort her head out soon, she thinks bitterly, she’ll be so adept that she can take a second job as a yoga instructor.

She should have expected this. Castle’s sitting guarding a batch of beers and clearly waiting for them all. The boys are wholly delighted. Lanie is wholly delighted. Beckett is not wholly delighted. She’d only just managed to bring herself back to calm, and now she’s going to have to watch every word she says, all evening. Though she notices that Castle doesn’t exactly look overwhelmingly pleased to see her, either. There’s a distinct shadow behind his eyes.

At least, she thinks, some time later, Castle hasn’t asked any questions. He’s his usual self, and that means that Beckett can be her usual self, and everything is back to normal. She slowly sips her beer, and gradually sense comes to her. If the problem is her, which it is, when she’s at the loft, which it also is, then the simple answer is not to go to the loft. Easy. How had she not seen that earlier? Because you were too busy being pathetically envious and resentful, her mind answers. Well, now she won’t be. No triggers.

And if that’s childish running away from the situation, rather than dealing with it, well, she doesn’t let herself know it. She can’t possibly admit that seeing Castle and Alexis reminds her, as if it were at knifepoint, of everything she’s lost. She can’t possibly admit to her shamefully petty feelings, especially to someone that can’t understand them. She also doesn’t want to upset either of them by being unable to control her feelings – her control may be legendary, but testing it to destruction is plain stupid. She’ll be adult and friendly and just stay away from the loft till she can cope.

“I’m outta here,” Esposito says.

“Me too,” Ryan admits. “Tomorrow’s gonna be paperwork all day again. Least it means I can finish my Christmas shopping.” Esposito makes a disparaging noise.

“You still shoppin’? You bought up half the city, lookin’ at all the stuff you got every lunch break for a week. How’d you need more?”
I got friends and family, Espo. Lots of family. An’ my family does Christmas big-time. Everybody round, big family dinner…” Esposito groans.

“You’re gonna tell me it’s crackers an’ party hats and bad jokes, ain’tcha?”

“Nothin’ wrong with that,” Ryan says defensively. “‘S traditional. Family’s important.”

“Sure is,” Lanie interjects. “I’m having the big family Christmas as well. Course,” she says very smugly, “I did all my shopping weeks ago.” There’s a chorus of disgust and Lanie how could you’s. “I’m just naturally organised.”

“Helps that none of your clients care about speed,” Esposito grumps. “You get to go any time you like. We gotta deal with all these real people, who – ya know – want answers.”

“I’ve got you guys always wanting answers,” Lanie squawks indignantly. “Always hassling, even when you know how long the tests take to run. They don’t get quicker for you asking.”

Castle sneaks a peek at Beckett under his eyelids and, when he finds she’s not looking at him, pokes her to attract her attention.

“Beckett, watch the floor show,” he whispers mischievously. “Better than the Comedy Club. Wanna bet that Lanie comes out on top?”


“Watch, Beckett. Don’t you think that Espo and Lanie are arguing a bit obviously?” Beckett looks at him, dumbfounded.

“No.” Then she smiles, very, very evilly. “But you could test your theory…” She leaves an inviting gap for Castle to fall into, which he duly does.

“How?”

“Well, since I’m perfectly certain that you can find some mistletoe somewhere nearby” – Castle’s eyes begin to crinkle in mirth – “if you dangled it above them you might find out…” He snorts.

“You don’t love me, Beckett,” he says mock-pathetically.

“Nope. But I’m sure you’re about to tell me why.”

“You’re putting me in the line of fire.” Her eyebrow lifts. “Winding up Espo is one thing. Winding up Lanie is another. She must know all sorts of untraceable poisons and fatal implements. She’ll use them on me if I pull out mistletoe over her head.” He suddenly grins very, very evilly himself. “But she’ll forgive me if I put it over your head.” Beckett chokes on her drink and squawks on her own account.

“No fair, Beckett. So now you owe me some other form of amusement.” Her jaw drops. Castle smirks some more. “I haven’t played Sorry for at least four days,” he says insinuatingly. She
flaps her jaw a couple of times, to no effect. “Scared to lose?”

“You have got to be kidding.”

“You are scared. You know I’ll win.”

Castle had spent his day, which had not started precisely early courtesy of his shooting monsters until the small hours, fretting around the constraints he thought he’d sensed, Beckett’s lack of affection, and Alexis’s complete denial that there had been any problem at all. In the end, he goes with Alexis’s view, and concludes that since Beckett had spotted his irritation she’d been understandably reluctant to stay. He’d not gone to the precinct because he hates paperwork with a passion, and it bores him silly. And when he’s bored, he has a tendency to get into trouble, and some last vestige of self-preservation had told him that trouble, in this instance, would likely mean trying to wrench some answers out of Beckett, even though he’s no longer sure that there are any answers to have.

So instead, he’s come out with the gang, exchanged happy conversation with Ryan and Espo, bantered with Lanie, and watched Beckett sip her beer so slowly that it’s probably three years more aged when she finished the bottle than when she started. It could have petrified in that time. She’s been half-disconnected all evening, and she looks tired. Maybe that’s all that was wrong – and she’d said that she was tired, so that’s it. He’s been an ass, but she’ll let it go, because if she’s tired she might want to be soft, affectionate Kat later.

His opportunity arises after he declines to be murdered by Lanie for everyone’s entertainment. If he just prods at Beckett’s overweening pride a little, he’ll be able to go home with her. And sure enough…

“I am not scared you’ll win. Bring it on.”

And since the party’s breaking up anyway, it’s very easy for Castle to leave when the others do and to point out that since they’re going in the same direction they should share a cab. Even if Lanie does look thoroughly sceptical, she doesn’t open her mouth.
You win again

The cab is quiet: largely companionably so, though every so often Castle opens his mouth, stops, and shuts it again. The words what was wrong last night are trying to cough themselves out of his throat, no matter how much he knows that this would be a very bad idea. It’s a particularly bad idea because Alexis hadn’t noticed anything wrong at all. And, of course, because Beckett is not precisely keen on having her actions questioned by someone who has only been around her for three months or so. Affection, sex, food, wine or silly games provided or not.

Fortunately they reach Beckett’s block before Castle’s impulses to achieve suicide-by-Beckett can overtake his survival instinct. He bounces out behind her, pays the driver before she can and gets growled at, moderately gently, for his pains, and follows her upstairs.

“Coffee? Soda?” Beckett asks. Still no alcohol, this close to Christmas? Doesn’t she ever have anyone round for a drink?

“Coffee, please.” At least it’s hot. It’s freezing outside and although Beckett’s apartment is at a comfortable air temperature the lack of any decoration or festive adornment gives it a chill atmosphere.

“Okay. You set up the game, then. It’s on the shelf over there.” She gestures in the direction of the bottom bookshelves, where Castle can spot the box – and the wrapped box for her father. So she hasn’t taken that over to put under their tree yet either?

“Don’t you put presents under the tree in advance?”

There is a half-second hitch before she answers, and Castle, looking round at her, notices a sudden rigidity in her back and a pause in the process of coffee-making.

“No. Always at the last moment,” Beckett says lightly. “Stops people cheating by trying to look through the paper or get an idea of the shape.” Her words are casual. Her shoulders and back are stiff. The coffee continues to be made, although a sprinkling of grounds is on the counter not in the pot.

They had done so, once: put presents under the tree as and when they were bought; an ever-growing pile of multi-coloured wrapping and strange shapes. She had done, the second year, not that there were many for only the two of them.

There had been even fewer by Christmas Eve: her father having fallen into them, drunk; and, still drunk and incapable of realising the significance of the wrapped parcels, tearing the paper and leaving them scattered: too wasted to understand that it was Christmastide. The vomit hadn’t improved any of the presents, either. The next year she’d taken them round on Christmas Day, and the tradition had stuck. She doesn’t know if any of the first five years’ presents had survived the twelve days until the Epiphany. She had never asked, or commented. Since then, each present has survived, and been displayed, or worn, or used, with pride: another way in which her father proves that – with her unstinting support – he controls his demons.

She finishes making the coffee and brings it over to where the game is set up and ready.

“You can be blue, Beckett. Matches the uniform I’ve never seen you wear.” He looks salaciously hopeful.

“Uniforms do it for you, do they? I’ll remember that, so I don’t raise your temperature by wearing
one.” He makes a very disappointed face. “The uniform is polyester: not warm in winter and too hot in summer. It’s not nearly as good as it looks.”

“Who’s starting?” says Castle, instead of how about I buy you a pure silk version and then take it off you very slowly, which would not be good for his continued existence. Still, Beckett seems to have got over her constraint of the other evening (he is still sure she was off-form, despite all intelligence telling him he’s an idiot) and she’s a little more relaxed than she was earlier, and whatever had spooked her is gone again.

“I thought your friend said that you cut to decide who goes first? Are you trying to sneak an advantage, Castle?”

“Curses,” he cries dramatically. “Foiled again.” Beckett rolls her eyes, and cuts. Castle follows, and is unreasonably triumphant when he gets to begin. It doesn’t actually help him, as Beckett points out, since if he doesn’t get the right cards he still won’t be starting a man. She is considerably underwhelmed when he does.

“Are you sure you didn’t stack the deck, Castle,” she humphs as, yet again, the card she draws is useless.

“I’m wounded. How can you think that I would cheat?” His eyes twinkle and crinkle as he grins at her. “I’m just lucky. You know what they say, Beckett. Lucky at cards and lucky in love.” His grin gets even wider. Beckett humphs again. She really does not like losing, does she? He starts a second man and advances his first a little further. There’s a very small noise of considerable displeasure, swiftly suppressed, next to him. It occurs to Castle that Beckett hasn’t disagreed with his deliberately misquoted thesis on luck. He decides to push his luck, and slides closer, putting an arm round her.

“What’s this, Castle?” She taps the hand on her shoulder, surprisingly gently.

“Well, Beckett, I believe that technically it’s called a hug. Have you heard of them? Usually provided between friends when one of them seems to need it. You’re tired, and tired people need hugs. Well-known fact.” He grins some more, and doesn’t move his arm. There’s another tiny humph – this one conveys a certain amount of disbelief – but no movement away. More surprisingly, there’s no denial. So she is tired.

The moment is broken by a squeak of satisfaction. “Sorry!” says Beckett with no apology at all, and sends his furthest advanced man back to the beginning. Castle returns his attention to the game, and is still winning that several minutes later. Beckett is also still within his arm. Win-win, in fact. And thinking of winning, the best thing he can do is win this game as quickly as possible and then proceed to claim a prize, just like last time. The same prize will do very well.

So that’s what he does. Beckett is – well, trounced would be a good word. He’d expected more of a battle, but luck seems to have deserted her today, and now she’s looking down at the remnants of the game without any particular annoyance at having lost. He would have expected it, given her general competitiveness. (He’s competitive too. He just hides it an awful lot better. Or indeed, unlike she, hides it at all.)

He turns her round towards him. “I won,” he points out.

“Yes. And?”

“I get my prize.”
“More M&M’s, Castle? You’ll get fat if you eat all those sweets.” Castle smirks.

“Not likely, Beckett. I take good care of myself. A healthy mind in a healthy body.” His smirk becomes more of a lazy smile. “But you needn’t worry. I don’t want M&M’s.” He leans down. “I want a kiss.” And he takes it, and when she doesn’t protest, takes another: slower, longer; and when she doesn’t protest that either, simply carries on kissing her in an entirely possessive fashion. She’s still far too much Beckett for him to think that she’s truly relaxed, but kisses can be very relaxing, if properly delivered.

He brings her firmly closer, pulling her on to his lap where she can be more readily accessible, holds her against him when she shivers slightly and then bends to her full mouth once more. This time she opens for him before he’s done more than barely touch his lips to her. He nibbles her lip delicately and then kisses her slowly and surely. Affection is high on the agenda, suddenly. Tired Beckett might, he hopes, want to be Kat, or at least less Beckett than she’d been last night.

Beckett had known that this was a possibility from the minute Castle had dropped his arm around her, and decided to let the chips – or the Sorry cards – fall as they might. When he kissed her, gently and yet with a definite note of intent, it went a long way to reducing the tension that permanently inhabits her at this time of year consequent upon her hatred of the season. When he carried on kissing her, and hoisted her into him without any effort, she was reminded that he’s big, strong, and perfectly capable of taking care of himself. And, of course, his family. She shivers slightly, likewise reminded of the way in which her father is the opposite, and finds herself tucked in and kissed with rather more determination.

She eases into his clasp a little, settles against him more comfortably, and opens to his demands. It doesn’t take long to succumb to them, to let the heat build between them, to press into him and bring her hands to his neck, and then, having consented to his invasion, give herself up to whatever he might do.

What Castle might do is vexing him extremely. He might pick not-quite-yet Kat up and take her to her bedroom and make love to her in all the ways he wants to and that he already knows she would enjoy. He might indulge in some heated petting on this couch (and then, perhaps, take her to bed). Or he might continue this as a relatively gentle make-out session, much as had been so very effective a few days ago, with nothing further. Right now, the last seems the best idea – at least for the moment – as it’s his best chance of relaxing Beckett into Kat. And after the last couple of days, he wants to know that he can turn her into Kat again. She’s been far too Beckett, and far too tense, and far too not his.

So that’s what he does. He doesn’t make the mistake of stopping to think, which has only ever led to being right back to hard-shelled Beckett and that very unpleasant and peculiar feeling that the incredibly good sex is in some way – or he is in some way – second-best. Which is another unsubstantiated but persistent nagging feeling in his mind. He’ll just enjoy himself – and whichever version of Beckett, Kate, Kat or whatever personality appears – for now. Hard upon the thought, he kisses her again, never having stopped stroking her gently – affectionately – across her back.

She’s nicely responsive, but it’s disappointingly clear – from an…er…affectionate point of view – that she’s also very weary. The niggle that has been plaguing him recedes somewhat. He cuddles her in, encourages her head to fall neatly upon his shoulder where he can, if so inclined, (and he is) drop occasional kisses on her hair or cheek, and simply snuggles. Affectionately. Beckett – or possibly nearly-Kat – is yawning and otherwise quietly soft in his arms: quite different to how she had been yesterday in his loft.
Maybe a day of quiet paperwork has soothed her. It’s been pretty full on for the last month, and while he’s stayed as late as the case demanded or the team could stand, Beckett’s hours have been – from the number of used coffee cups on her desk when he gets in – maybe double his? She’s never left before him, and from snippets of overheard gossip she gets in before the boys and leaves after them too. No wonder she’s exhausted. Now it’s all stopped, just in time for Christmas, and all the team spirit and adrenaline that has kept them going has been flushed away. It’s probably much like his feelings when he’s written frantically – either while inspiration lasts or because his deadline is approaching – and when he’s finally done, crashes.

In that case, he hopes that Christmas will be corpse-free, to give her – all the team – a break; and after that, she won’t be weary or tired and – surely? – that odd constraint will not reappear. She’ll come to his loft, and be content there. It’s likely that her family Christmas will help, too: time with her father. He plops another undemanding buss on her hair, and is instantly rewarded by a snuggle closer. Beckett’s slim hand has curled itself into the front of his shirt, and her head has tucked itself into the angle between his shoulder and neck. Very nice. He ensures that she is completely wrapped into his arms, leans his cheek on the top of her head, and idly surveys the décor of her apartment. He’s not looked closely at it, before, being more concerned by its occupant and their… interactions. So to speak.

It’s very clean and tidy. It’s also – he searches for a word, and finds only vague. Nothing is definite: it doesn’t have a clear personality – at least, not one he would ever associate with Beckett. The furniture is curved, and plump; the few knick-knacks are largely abstract or impressionistic, with the exception of the little amethyst bird he’d seen last time. The pictures are all abstract: soft, swirling patterns in soothing, peaceful colours: greens and blues; a creamy, buttery yellow; a hint of chestnut brown. Organic colours, somehow. The pictures might have been landscapes, or seascapes; but they’re unclear, an illusion of meaning that fades and dissipates as he looks at the picture again. He doesn’t remember much about her bedroom: he’d been… distracted. Still, soft furniture and soft pictures and colours not withstanding – there are no photos, he realises abruptly – the lack of festivity leaves it chill. He shivers slightly, and pulls Beckett even tighter in.

She squeaks, and Castle realises that he’s holding her too tightly for her to breathe properly. He loosens his grip a little: enough so that she doesn’t actually suffocate, and returns to his musings. Beckett has, he notices, kicked her shoes off. She has pale pink nail polish on her toes. It’s not very Beckett. Far too girly – but very cute. It doesn’t fit Beckett, still in her sharply tailored precinct garb. It might fit Kat, but he has no idea what Kat might wear. He has no idea who Kat might be, except that she wants soft affection and not to be in charge.

He certainly has no idea why there might be a Kat at all.

Before he can pursue that thought, though, Beckett (or whoever she is), shifts in his lap, glances at her watch, and sighs.

“It’s after eleven, Castle. Shift starts at eight thirty. I need to get some sleep.”

Castle smiles lazily at her. “I could help you sleep, Beckett.”

“Yeah, you could read me a story. That’ll send me to sleep.”

“That wasn’t quite what” –

“Sleep, Castle. Alone. Not with. I’m too tired.” She slams her mouth closed on that admission.

“See, I knew you liked me,” he smirks smugly. But he cuddles her closer, and strokes her hair, and
gradually she eases again. Too tired? That implies – which is undoubtedly why she cut the words off short – that if she weren’t tired she’d be happy to indulge in rather more than soft making out and cuddles. He indulges in a small amount of both, and then reluctantly untangles himself to go home.

Beckett takes herself to bed in short order and falls asleep on the thought that everything’s okay – as long as she doesn’t go to the loft for the moment. It’ll all be much easier – everything will be less raw and she won’t be so pathetically, pettily resentful – after Christmas. Well. After mid-January, anyway.

Castle takes himself home and, not being exhausted and being something of a night owl anyway, repairs to his study and tries to think. Specifically, he tries to put together a number of disparate niggles that he has accumulated. Chief among them are the odd pauses and hitches in Beckett’s normally smoothly polished façade: when to put presents under the tree; mulled wine; brandy butter; mince pies; a slightly odd reaction to the alcoholic; a complete lack of festive cheer; and volunteering for the Christmas Day shift every year and then losing her temper with him in a completely wholesale fashion. And, of course, her constraint at his loft and lack of constraint in her own apartment.

None of it makes sense as a whole, and each individual item – mostly – has had a perfectly logical explanation. He shouldn’t be second-guessing her behaviour, and he shouldn’t be imagining phantoms and fancies where none exist. His imagination is – not for the first time – running away with him, he concludes. But he’s still indefinably dissatisfied when he sleeps, and when he wakes. It’s very irritating.

Irritation is somewhat relieved by the provision of another substantial box of doughnuts and pastries, of which Beckett eats rather more than her fair share by dint of a crowd-scattering scowl and the use of the ripped off box lid as a tray. She wrestles her prey back to her desk, puts her arms around it protectively and further defends the doughnuts by placing her Glock very obviously next to them. Then she eats them with an air of considerable pleasure, a very satisfied smirk of triumph, and – to Castle’s mind, at least – a wholly unnecessary amount of happy noises, lip-licking, and finger sucking. Purely, of course, to remove the frosting and sprinkles from her hands. Fortunately she finishes that game just before he is forced to make either a sharp exit or to kiss her.

“Those were good,” she smiles happily. Castle wonders where she put them. She’s so slim he’d have thought that so many doughnuts would have caused her stomach to protrude, much as if a snake had swallowed a pig. Fortunately, he stops that thought before it exits his mouth and shortly thereafter life exits his body. He surreptitiously flicks a glance over her. Nope. No protrusions.

“Creepy, Castle. Quit staring.” He shrugs.

“Never seen doughnuts disappear so fast. Is that a cop thing?”

“Yeah. You snooze, you lose round the bullpen, especially where doughnuts are concerned. Gotta be quick.”

“I noticed,” Castle grumbles. “I brought lots and they’re all gone. I barely got one, and you had several. You’ll get fat. Or you’ll have an upset stomach.”

“Nope,” grins Beckett smugly. “Cast iron stomach, here.” She pats it. “Never had an upset stomach in my life.”

There’s a very disconcerting flicker across Castle’s face. Beckett thinks it’s either disbelief or
realisation, which is very confusing. Oh. Oh shit. She suddenly remembers that she’d claimed an upset stomach after the first bite of mince pie. Even more disconcertingly, Castle doesn’t follow up with the obvious question. But all through the rest of the morning Beckett can see his sharp mind working. She’s only too relieved when he wanders off, claiming that he’s bored of watching paperwork and is going off to do some more Christmas shopping.
Ring out for Christmas

Castle is also extremely relieved to wander off. Not hauling Beckett into Interrogation and forcing some answers out of her – especially when he isn’t quite sure of the questions he wants answers to – is definitely the best plan but equally definitely forcing some answers is the plan which he wants to implement. So he removes himself from temptation and from a situation in which his rising irritation is likely to pre-empt common sense.

He is, in fact, quite seriously annoyed with Beckett. The proximate cause is that he’s caught her in an outright lie. If she’s never had an upset stomach then she was quite definitely lying to him when he brought the mince pies round. The secondary, tertiary and quaternary causes are all the other little niggles that he’d thought about last night and that are back in full force. He doesn’t like being lied to, for any reason. He also doesn’t like unsolved mysteries and unanswered questions. And finally, he especially does not like Beckett being a liar, a mystery, or a question. It gives him that same squirmingly unpleasant sense in the pit of his stomach that he’s not important enough to her for her to tell him the truth: that he’s still second-best.

He trudges home, unamused and unhappy, with none of his normal ability to see the bright side of life. By the time he gets there, some twenty minutes later, his annoyance has hardened into determination that Beckett will tell him the truth. A last sliver of sense tells him not to pursue that tack today, or tomorrow. After Christmas. It’s not as if he was intending to be in the Twelfth before then, anyway. He’s got plenty to do before Christmas Day. (And if there isn’t enough to do to keep him away, he’s perfectly sure he can find things to do which will.)

The loft is empty, which probably means that his credit card limit is rapidly getting full. At least the card his mother knows about. Castle looks around at the comfortable, cheerful, Christmassy loft and is himself comforted and cheered. He really does love Christmas-tide, he thinks. All the good things in life are summed up in it. However tough his early life had been, Christmas had always been full of laughter and love and happiness, and he’s done his very best to ensure that his family have the same now. He’s sure Beckett will have a good time with her father, he thinks – and rapidly pushes the thought of Beckett away. He doesn’t need to think about her till after Christmas. He doesn’t want to, either.

On Christmas Eve Castle wraps his way through another pile of amusing, silly, or just plain mischievous stocking presents, and then concentrates happily on pre-preparing a Christmas dinner that would feed not just the three of them but thirty-three. And every time he catches a stray thought of Beckett peeping round his mind, he shuts it off, no matter how attractive it might be to think about her snuggled up to him. He mashes some sweet potato, and concentrates harder on the food, and resolutely does not think that he could just pop over to the precinct and say Merry Christmas to everyone. It’s more difficult than he would have expected, had he thought about it, which is unconsciously even more irritating. The sweet potato is mashed smooth before he’s even noticed he’s started.

Beckett notices that Castle doesn’t drop by on Christmas Eve and doesn’t think twice about it. He’s sure to be busy at home. She blocks off the stab of pain that she won’t have nearly such a pleasant time. There’s no new body, there is a lot of very tedious paperwork, and it will be Christmas tomorrow and she is not looking forward to anything after her shift is over. It’s worse, because she has the following days off and she has no plans. She doesn’t want to have plans. She certainly doesn’t want to have any conversations with Castle in which he might ask difficult questions that have answers which she doesn’t want to give. She’s too brittle, at this time of year, to answer, and
she can’t stand the pity she knows she’ll see if she did.

She buries her head in her paperwork and resolutely does not think that it would be nice if Castle did drop by. It’s surprisingly difficult, and the feeling of impending trouble and the squirmingly unpleasant knowledge that not only has she lied flat out to him but she’s been caught – and at some point pretty soon she’s going to either need to explain why or feel uncomfortable every time she sees him – does not help. By the end of the day she has a tension headache that is, for once, not entirely caused by the thought of tomorrow. It’s a familiar companion, this time of year.

The bullpen is very quiet, on Christmas Day shift. Minimum staffing to cover the day, and those that are there aren’t happy about it. Except Beckett, who’d rather be there than in her solitary apartment or exchanging strained conversation with her father for any longer than she has to. There are so many things that they don’t talk about: the past, the family, the season, the memories. So many triggers to avoid. If he ever does fall again, it won’t be her doing: she’ll have been the safety line that holds him. No-one will ever be able to say that she should have done more, done it differently. She’ll be strong for him, because he needs all his own strength for himself. And part of that is sharing Christmas dinner, however hard it might be.

The time passes all too quickly, and there is no reason to delay departure. No bodies have dropped: even criminals and killers, it seems, celebrate the joy of Christmas Day. Beckett forces her dragging feet to their normal swinging stride and makes her way to her father’s apartment on the Upper East Side. There will be no problem parking, today. Plenty of people are out of town with their families. It also means that she can leave and be home as soon as she wants to. No hanging around in dingy subway stations waiting for a train packed with drunken revellers. Or even sober revellers. She doesn’t want to meet any revellers of any sort.

She’s so very tired of doing this. So very, very tired of pretending that they’re normal. She’d just like one Christmas where she went away, alone, and didn’t have to try. She’d take an oil rig in Alaska, if it meant she didn’t have to try. And then she feels bitterly unhappy and guilty that she doesn’t want to spend time with her father, who she loves, and who loves her.

She pulls up and parks close by, blows her nose and checks that her make-up is still presentable, puts her bright, sociable, love-you-Dad face on and rings his doorbell with absolutely no hint that anything at all might be preferable to Christmas dinner with her five year sober father. Nothing is, because nothing else would be any better.

Dinner is delicious. Naturally. It has no hint of Beckett’s own generally un-traditional cooking and consequent flaws in any attempt to cook a traditional Christmas dinner. It also has no hint whatsoever of alcohol. She had, as always, chosen the food with intense attention to detail and a wrenchingly painful conversation with the suppliers. She and her father manage comfortable conversation about her job, the precinct, his work, and the ridiculously snowy weather, and don’t mention anything important. Until her father smiles at her and starts down a new line.

“So, Katie, is the Rick Castle you keep mentioning the same Castle as writes books?”

“That?” she answers, not particularly enthusiastically.

“How on earth did that happen?”

“He probably bribed the Mayor,” she grumps. “I don’t know. I’ve got to put up with him following me around whether I like it or not. He’s a pain in the ass.”

“You went Christmas shopping with him, Katie. That doesn’t sound like a pain in the ass to me.”

Her father’s eyes crinkle. Beckett realises that actually he suddenly sounds more engaged with her
life than for some time. “And I really like the look of this game you’ve got me, so if Rick Castle can write books that you like and find games that I like I think I really ought to meet him.”

Beckett spits out her Coke. “Dad!” Her father grins happily.

“Joking, Katie. Joking.” She splutters some more. Just for a moment it’s all going well and it’s Katie and her dad, just as it should be. Just as it used to be.

“Let’s play this game of mine, then.” And for another hour, it’s still just as it should be. Beckett wins – by a short head, since neither of them are precisely experienced at the tactics and strategies, and makes them both coffee, and it’s been the most relaxed Christmas in years, so far. But gradually they run out of things to say, and the game – third time takes all, and Beckett edges it – can’t make up for it entirely.

“Time for me to go, Dad,” Beckett says, mid-evening.

“Sure, Katie. See you soon. Come and play this game again. I’ll beat you next time.”

“You can try. I won’t make it easy on you.”

Some impulse she doesn’t understand sends her to hug him, in a way she hasn’t managed for a while. And just for a moment he hugs her back and he’s her father, there for her to lean on.

She makes it all the way into her car before the feeling fades; but fade it does. It’s been a good Christmas, relatively speaking: for the first time she thinks that her own Dad might be still there, somewhere underneath the fragility. But she still knows, however good today has unexpectedly been, that his fragility still binds her to being strong.

She drives home, enters her chill, undecorated apartment, picks up her little amethyst bird and sits on the couch, stroking the cool stone mindlessly. Her parents had brought her it from Quito: they’d been while she was in college, and surprised her with it that Christmas. Before. She keeps it, because she loves it, and it’s the only memento in her home. Something about the cock of its head and the little black stone eyes reminds her of her mother’s quick intelligence. She couldn’t bear to have photos, but this… is okay. More than okay.

Eventually, she goes to bed, dry-eyed.

Castle wakes up on Christmas morning in a mood of joyous expectation. He really does love Christmas, he loves giving people presents, and he loves the happy family atmosphere around him. He’d been to the Christmas Eve service with Alexis last night, though he prefers the old-fashioned name Watchnight service, so redolent of the Magi, the shepherds, the Host above, and the world waiting for the Child to come, sung full-voiced and full-hearted the carols and the hymns, and gone home soothed and eased.

It’s Christmas morning, and Castle is blissfully happy.

He’s still blissfully happy at the end of the day. Christmas dinner was perfect – even his mother’s parts of it – his presents had been received with appropriate reactions – the wrinkle cream he’d given his mother as a silly, annoying stocking present had induced a very satisfying squawk and purple hue to her face, though the jade bead necklace he’d spent considerable time locating had made up for it. He sits happily among the detritus of presents and wrapping paper and food and wine, half-watching It’s a Wonderful Life for the twenty-fourth time, and thinks that his life is really pretty much perfect. He’ll have a lovely Christmas, and after Christmas he’ll go back to following Beckett around, get her to tell him what’s wrong and why she lied to him, and then spend
some quality time reassuring her that whatever it is it’s not a problem. Christmas is a season of goodwill and forgiveness, after all.

Beckett is back at her desk Monday morning, not particularly refreshed but rested. She’s not done a lot, these last few days: slept, read, cooked reasonable if simple meals, watched TV that requires no thought and involves no triggers.

It starts again immediately. Whatever peace there might have been over Christmas and the subsequent weekend, it doesn’t continue into January. They are frantically busy. The still-lingering effects of the financial crash, the global downturn and the general inability of people to control their tempers and their guns, knives or fists, has upped the homicide rate noticeably. It’s as busy as it had been before Christmas: a conveyor belt of relatively simple murders. It wouldn’t give her team any problem at all, except for the volume. They’re not the only ones. Every team is overloaded, and since Beckett and her boys are the best, and the fastest, they end up taking the brunt, helping out with everyone else’s workload as well as meeting their own.

There’s no time for anything, for a week and more. Beckett barely goes home, the boys are little better. Castle brings them lunches and doughnuts and makes endless cups of coffee, but his particular brand of thinking isn’t required and there isn’t any opening for him to talk to Beckett alone. Even if there were, she’s focused on the task and nothing else.

Castle turns up on Friday next, looking for inspiration, Beckett, and something a little more interesting than the banal, petty, domestic murders that are all there have been so far, nine days into the New Year. He finds none of these things.

“Hey, Ryan, Espo. Where’s Beckett?”

“Personal day. Won’t be in.” That’s very strange. Personal day? Not a sick day? That, he might have understood. Though he wouldn’t have put it past Beckett to struggle in anyway. They’re absolutely flat out and Beckett, workaholic, obsessive has taken a personal day? This is beyond weird. His curiosity is triggered.

“No-one for you to annoy, Castle.” Esposito grins companionably at him. “Need some help, though. We’re as busy as ever. C’mon. Take a look at this one. You’ll like it. Wife caught her husband cheating and shot him.”

“So? That’s boring.”

“So after she shot him she cut off his dick and posted it to the other woman.”

Castle’s eyes open wide. “Really?”

“Really,” Ryan says, black humour on full display. “Added a note, too. Suggested the girlfriend should have it stuffed and motorised” – Castle sniggers – “and that with a couple of AA batteries in place it would be better than the real thing.” Snigger turns to full on laughter.

“The lady had style,” Castle says, eventually.

“Sure she did. What she didn’t have was sense. She left her fingerprints all over it and wrote the note in her own handwriting.” Ryan shakes his head at the idiocy of murderers. Castle stops sniggering and has a thought.

“How come if you’re so busy Beckett took a personal day? She never goes home. None of you
do, when it’s this way. Never seen her take a break.”

The boys’ faces turn identically blank. Castle’s instincts trip on to high alert. They don’t know? He doesn’t believe that for an instant.

“She always does,” Esposito says. Castle waits. “ Doesn’t matter how busy we are. Montgomery always gives it.” That all sounds true. “She never says why.” That’s true too. It’s also entirely misleading. Castle, who is extremely good himself at misleading through the careful use of absolute truth, spots the evasion without any effort.

“Do you know why?” Esposito’s previously friendly face closes off. Even Ryan manages a degree of coldness.

“Up to her to tell you. She don’t talk about it. We don’t ask.” They turn identically cool shoulders to him. It’s very clear that there is nothing to be gained – and much to be lost – from pushing further. The boys have been pretty welcoming, to date, but their loyalty is to Beckett. He’s not going to get any answers here.

“Okay,” he concedes, gesturing apologetically. “Sorry. What else have you got?” The moment passes as they hunker down to another round of very tedious murders. Castle sticks it out till lunchtime, when peering at indistinct CCTV footage has left his eyes metaphorically bleeding, buys lunch for everyone, and then slinks away to the catcalls and friendly hazing of the boys.

He sends Beckett a text on his way out. Came to the precinct for inspiration. Where can I find some? RC. There’s no answer by the time he gets home. There’s no answer an hour later. There’s still no answer after dinner, six hours later, nor by bedtime. The needle on Castle’s internal meter for detecting oddities and mysteries is now firmly in the red zone.

Beckett has spent the day with her father. They’ve done this each year since he got sober: making sure he’s not alone. If he were alone, he might be tempted, and if he were tempted, he might so easily fall. He’d said spend the day with me, Katie. Keep me strong, the first year. He hadn’t needed to ask twice, or the following year, or ever again. Beckett had explained, only once, to Montgomery, and he’s never quibbled, no matter how busy they may be. He knows Beckett will cover the time.

She never has her phone on, on this one day. She gives her father her full attention. It’s the least he deserves: no distractions. This year, they go out for lunch (burger and shake for her, burger and soda for her father) and then return to his apartment through the icy, biting wind and occasional flakes of snow to play Sorry and cards for the afternoon, and then after dinner to share coffee – but not memories – and play some more games.

Despite the improvement of Christmas, on this anniversary of their loss her father is withdrawn and quiet: the games, the lunch, the dinner not really helping. Conversation is strained and full of pauses: Beckett proof-reading every sentence before she says it in case it should cause pain. But she can’t make her excuses and leave, not when every miserable look tells her that he needs her to stay. She can’t take the chance that leaving will send him over the edge, when he’s so clearly hanging by a thread.

She goes home late in the evening, still carrying the burden of holding her father to sobriety. When she switches her phone back on, and finds the text from Castle, it’s too late to answer. She’ll see him tomorrow, no doubt.

Strung out on the high-tension wire of the day, of locking down her own feelings to keep her father safe, it doesn’t occur to her that Castle might still be looking for some answers as to why she lied –
he’s not asked about it yet – and certainly not that he might be curious why she wasn’t at work today. She’s far too tired to worry about might-bes for the next day. They’re already horribly busy, and she needs sleep to recover from today and to be ready for tomorrow.

She wakes to her alarm – thankfully not Dispatch calling – and drags herself through the shower and dressing, finding it harder than she should to motivate herself. It’s always the same, the following day. When they’ve been quiet, she’s taken a second day, but that’s not possible this year. Work will help. Or at least help her forget her father’s quiet desperation, his clinging to her.

She’s so very tired of being strong.
The bullpen is just as busy as it had been two days ago, and the pile of paper on Beckett’s desk just as high. She gets straight down to it, flips a casual *Hey* when Ryan, and shortly after him Esposito, get in, and concentrates fiercely on making up for her day’s absence.

By ten, she’s made a noticeable dent in the paper skyscraper – maybe ten storeys removed out of the twenty or so. There may be a way still to go, but it’s substantial progress. She’s reaching for the next file when her phone rings. She doesn’t recognise the number.

“Beckett.”

“Detective Beckett?” She doesn’t recognise the voice, either. It’s a woman, and she sounds upset. “It’s Mrs Berowitz.” Uh? Berowitz, Berowitz… Oh. Oh God. The alcoholic husband. “You said…” she can barely force the words out through her embarrassment and misery… “if there was anything. Please – could I see you?”

“Yes. Can we make it lunchtime, Mrs Berowitz? Come to the precinct around twelve-thirty, and we’ll go somewhere to talk.”

“Thank you. Thank you so much.”

“Mrs Berowitz?” comes from behind her. Oh, hell. Now she’ll have to make some excuse to keep Castle away. “Wasn’t that the case just before Christmas, with the alcoholic husband?”

“Yes.” Her tone is very definitely discouraging.

“What did she want?”

“To meet me. Today.”

“Oooh. Why? Has there been something new? Did we get the wrong guy?” Beckett rolls her eyes without a trace of humour.

“No. And it’s not *we*. She just wants to see me. It’s not about the case.”

“But I’m your partner. Your shadow. Wherever you go, I get to go.”

“If I catch you in the women’s restroom, you’ll find out just how wrong you are,” Beckett deflects.

“C’mon. It’s got to be about the case. Why else would she want to see you?” Beckett can’t answer that without explaining about her father, and she isn’t going to do that.

“She wants to see *me*. Not you, not both of us. Just me. It’s not about the case, so you’re not joining in, Castle. Get it?”

Castle is very unimpressed by this. He’s perfectly certain there’s more to it than Beckett’s just said, and shutting him out of interviews is not the deal that he arranged. A plan begins to unfold in his brain, largely connected with weaselling himself into this interview. It’s entirely unreasonable of Beckett to have case-related interviews without him – and no matter what she’s just said, he’s sure that this is related to the case: how could it not be? It’s not as if Beckett has any real life outside her job. Anyway, she’s already lied to him once, so she could easily be doing it again.

He doesn’t admit to himself that this is as much driven by his still-prickling irritation over his
discovery of her original lie about the mince pies, and his still-raging curiosity about her absence the day before, neither of which have yet been explained, as the actual issue at hand. It’s a work related interview, and he should be there, he thinks aggrievedly. She has no right to shut him out.

He doesn’t notice the warning sign right there at the front of his head. He hasn’t put a limit on she has no right to shut him out. Even if he’s technically thinking about work matters, he’s actually letting the lack of information about other areas of her life infect his current thinking.

He spends the remainder of the morning evolving a plan and “helping” with the run of mundane cases. Beckett looks tired, he notices, and justifies his plan to himself as taking some of the weight from her shoulders. She knows his insights can be helpful. It’s not as if she hasn’t been working really hard this morning: he’s never seen paperwork so ruthlessly demolished. She’s hardly stopped to drink her coffee, even.

“Do you want me to pick you up some lunch, Beckett?” Castle asks, shortly before twelve thirty. She looks up at his question.

“Yeah. Thanks, Castle. I don’t think I’ll have time to go out, what with everything.” She waves wearily at the remaining pile on her desk, which is rapidly growing smaller, in the hope that he’ll infer that she means the workload on top of the meeting. “Chicken salad and a soda, please.” She reaches for her wallet, and hands over some bills. “And something sweet. Looks like I’ll need the sugar high to get through this lot.”

“Okay. You don’t need something sweet though. You’ve got me.” Beckett growls and then rolls her eyes.

“Not the same, Castle. I need energy.” She does. She’s been flat all day and it’s a real struggle to keep her concentration, not least because she keeps expecting Castle to open up a discussion about why she lied. She really does not need what is bound to be an emotionally intense discussion with a woman who clearly needs help, but she simply cannot let Mrs Berowitz suffer alone once she’s asked Beckett for that help.

Castle bounces off to pick up lunch, much to Beckett’s relief. He’d been a bit odd about not being able to join in, but he seems to have got over that, and she is very grateful that he’ll get her something to eat. She can feel her blood sugar dropping by the minute. By the time he gets back she’ll be done.

Mrs Berowitz is a little late, and when she calls Beckett her voice is already breaking. Beckett steers her in the direction of a nearby coffee bar, and supplies them both with caffeine. She doesn’t notice Castle wandering past the window on his way back from buying lunch. Castle, on the other hand, certainly does notice Beckett.

“Thank you for seeing me,” Mrs Berowitz chokes. “I’m sorry to disturb you, but you said” – she sniffs, and tries to pull herself together – “you’d been through this.” Beckett nods. “He’s getting worse and I don’t know what to do.”

Beckett winces internally. Mrs Berowitz isn’t going to like this conversation, she knows that already. Mrs Berowitz still thinks that she can save her husband. Mrs Berowitz is dead wrong.

“Mrs Berowitz,” she begins, gently.

“Julia, please.”

“Julia. I went through this with my father, when my mother died.” She takes a slow breath, and
tries to keep calm. “I tried everything.” Another slow breath. Mrs Berowitz – Julia – is watching
her as if she’s the Oracle. “And nothing worked. I couldn’t save him.” Julia’s face crumple,
and she reaches for a tissue in her purse. “I spent two years trying, until I started listening to what Al-
Anon was telling me.” Julia’s crying. Beckett reaches for her hand, clasps it firmly, lets it go. “It
nearly killed me to step back and leave him be, but he’d have dragged me down with him. You
have to step away or” –

The door to the coffee bar opens behind her as she’s saying “or it’ll bring you down too.”

“I brought your lunch over, Beckett.”

Beckett spins round and pierces Castle with a look that should have killed him stone dead on the
spot. “Excuse me a moment,” she says, without a hint of her incandescent fury showing in her
voice. She rises from her table, walks out of the café, and explodes.

“What are you doing, Castle? I told you that only I would be talking to Mrs Berowitz. It’s nothing
to do with the case. Now stay the hell out. You’re intruding into a private conversation and
you’ve done enough damage by interrupting. You knew perfectly well you weren’t included.”
She spins hard on her heel, goes back into the café, through the window of which Castle can see
Mrs Berowitz weeping, and returns to her discussion.

Beckett remains with Julia Berowitz for another hour, by which time she’s completely wrung out
and fighting off a severe headache. She’s had to share her own experience, which is gruelling, and
try to sympathise with this unfortunate woman, who doesn’t want to hear the grim reality that she
can’t save her husband; all she can do is save herself. Julia only leaves on Beckett’s promise that
Julia can always call her.

Beckett knows she should go back up to the bullpen, but her head hurts so much that she can’t see
straight and she’s beginning to feel nauseous. She recognises the symptoms of an absolute monster
of a headache (it’s not a migraine, she never gets migraines, a migraine would involve strange
smells or visual disturbances: it’s only a very bad headache that two Advil will cure. She’ll be fine
later on if she lies down for a while) calls Montgomery, and catches a cab home. Shortly thereafter
she’s flat out on her bed, trying to find a cool patch of pillow to ease the pain.

Montgomery is not at all surprised that Beckett calls. If they hadn’t been so appallingly busy he’d
have sent her home anyway. She’s never at her best on January 10, and though he’s never found a
problem with her work she’s always quiet and withdrawn. He is a little surprised that she was out
at lunchtime and more so that Castle’s put a lunch bag down on her desk. Some
miscommunication there, surely? Especially since Castle’s looking at the elevator doors and
clearly expecting her back.

“Castle?” Montgomery wanders out into his bullpen. Everybody except Castle becomes very busy
and exudes look-how-hard-I’m-working from every pore.

“Yeah?”

“Beckett’s not coming back today.” That’s a rather odd expression on the writer’s face.
Montgomery’s instincts twitch.

“Oh. Okay. Guess she won’t be wanting her lunch, then.”

“Do you know where she was at lunchtime? It’s not like her to ask for a lunch and then not eat it.”
Montgomery is none-too-subtly fishing. Castle’s face flickers. Montgomery waits, quietly,
inviting Castle to speak.
“She said she had to meet Mrs Berowitz, from that case before Christmas where her son got murdered. I remember it because Beckett said the husband was an alcoholic. She asked me to get her lunch so I thought she’d be back.”

Montgomery only just controls his face. No wonder Beckett’s called him sounding like death warmed over. It’s just as well he’d told her she could go. He nearly hadn’t, what with the pile of work they’re dealing with, and only his knowledge that Beckett would move heaven and earth not to let the team down had changed his mind. He knows what she’s done. She’s poured out compassion on someone she’s only met once and left herself empty. It makes her a brilliant detective, but some days Montgomery wishes that she’d be a little less generous to the bereaved. She works far too hard as it is.

“Okay,” is all Montgomery says, without emphasis. Castle casts him a suspicious glance. “She’ll be back tomorrow.”

Castle is sure that Montgomery knows more than he’s saying, but he doesn’t know him well enough to ask any of the questions boiling in his mind. Starting with why isn’t Beckett here? And since there is nothing for him to do, he might as well go home himself.

The loft is quiet, and empty. This suits Castle fine. He makes a drink, retires to his office, and sketches out some plans for Nikki Heat. When that palls, he plays with his latest computer game, and thinks about a pleasant dinner for himself and Alexis. Then he remembers that Alexis is out tonight, at Paige’s. In fact, she’s been out all day. It’s another irritation. He would have liked some company this evening. A peaceful afternoon was what he wanted, but now he’d like someone to talk to.

He rummages in the fridge and finds the makings of a decent dinner. That, some ice-cream, and a glass of a white wine that has somehow escaped his mother’s notice, improves his mood somewhat. He’s bored, though, and just a little lonely, and he has no inspiration to write.

When Castle is bored his mind starts to work, not always in helpful directions. This evening’s direction, however, is definitely helpful. Not, initially, pleasant, but helpful.

He’s – well, pissed – with Beckett. Beckett didn’t come back after lunch. Beckett’s lying to him, and keeping secrets from him, and not letting him shadow her properly.

He also, though, has the unpleasant feeling that he let himself down earlier, by quite deliberately ignoring Beckett’s instruction because he didn’t like it. Ow. He doesn’t like that feeling. It pursues him for a few moments, and by the time that’s passed he’s realised that he owes Beckett an apology, just as much as she owes him one. The absolute fury in her eyes should have told him he’d got it wrong right there and then. She wasn’t lying to him about that being a private meeting, and he’d interrupted. Ow. So now he just needs to find out why she lied about something as trivial as not liking mince pies. It wouldn’t have been a problem, she only needed to say she didn’t like them.

Hmmm. Time, Castle thinks, for a discussion with Beckett. Get it all out in the open, like two adults are supposed to do. And since impulse control is not one of his strengths, and, now that he thinks about it, he would very much like to clear the air and then indulge in a nicely cuddlesome Kat – or a nicely naked Beckett, depending on her preference – in his arms, he collects his coat, scarf and a hat – it’s freezing – and bounces off to her apartment, happily thinking that they will sort it all out, just like he’d thought they should on Christmas Day, and it’ll all be fine.

He’s knocking at her door, a little snow-dusted, not long later. Beckett peers round it, blearily.
“Oh,” she says. “It’s you. What do you want?” She doesn’t sound enthusiastic or, he suddenly works out, awake.

“I came to talk to you.” Beckett manages a look of confusion.

“Why? I’ll see you tomorrow. Couldn’t it wait?” Her attempt at snark is ruined by a jaw-breaking yawn followed by a wince. Castle steps inside and, in a Pavlovian reaction to pain on female faces, cuddles her in very gently. It’s about that moment that he realises she’s wearing a robe, with bare feet, and it’s none too warm. So he pushes the door closed carefully and walks over to the couch, which, since he hasn’t let go, means that Beckett ends up on the couch too.

“Can’t this wait, Castle?” she repeats, wearily. “I’m not in the mood.” Castle thinks about sweeping her up into his lap, and then looks at the furrows in her brow and the tight stress lines at her mouth and eyes. He recognises the signs. Instead of sweeping her up, he very carefully moves her on to his knee and even more carefully massages her temples with the tips of his fingers.

“Headache, Beckett?” There’s a dispirited hum of assent. “Just stay still.” The broad pads circle very gently over the lingering traces of pain. She stays quite still for a moment, and then leans limply into him. Castle, suffering an unusual and severe attack of common sense, drops the idea of a detailed conversation for the moment in favour of the idea of a comforting cuddle, and continues to rub Beckett’s temples. Gradually the furrows smooth out, though she doesn’t evince any signs of life or enthusiasm beyond the slight rise and fall of her ribs as she breathes.

“Is that better?” he asks softly.

“Mm.” She clearly makes some effort to speak. “Yes. Thanks, Castle.”

There’s a question in her face that she’s too tired to articulate. Castle, who likes helping people and likes more having soft Beckett (even if it’s not softer, and in search of affection, Kat, unfortunately) in his arms, slips her hair back behind her ears, tuts when it won’t stay put, and very gently tips her face up.

“I learned ages ago. People in the theatre were always stressed, and you can’t just not go on stage – at least if you want to have a job tomorrow. So I saw people doing this, and it worked on Mother – along with Bloody Marys,” he grins, and there’s almost a hint of a smile, “and it comes in handy sometimes.” He has a sudden awful thought. “But I’m not trying it on Ryan or Esposito. No way.”

“I don’t think you’ll ever be asked, Castle,” Beckett manages to say, though the snark it should carry is noticeably lacking.

“Phew.”

That seems to be it, as far as Beckett talking is concerned. On the other hand, life is seeping slowly back into her expression and the creases of pain have disappeared. Unfortunately, this means that she slips off his lap. Disappointment is mitigated when she stays leaning on his shoulder instead, caught in the crook of his arm. It’s beautifully comfortable.

“Want a drink, Castle?” Beckett asks, after a few moments. Castle considers. He does indeed want a drink, if only because it gives him an excuse to stay longer and snuggle up with Beckett some more, with a possible opportunity for kisses if her headache has gone. What he emphatically does not want, though, is his ill-regulated mind and mouth asking questions that will probably kick off an argument. He considers for another moment. Surely he, wordsmith extraordinaire, can phrase his questions carefully enough not to mess this evening up? He answers himself in the affirmative.
His words and word craft have made him millions, after all.

“Yes please.”

In a short time coffee arrives. Castle re-envelops Beckett with no difficulty at all and not even a hint of resistance. He’s just plotting what to say when Beckett opens her mouth.

“About the mince pies.” Castle nearly drops his coffee in surprise. “I didn’t want to upset you when you’d gone to all that trouble to bring them and make that butter stuff.”

Beckett is not speaking one word that isn’t absolutely true – she’d swear to it all in court. That doesn’t mean that her words aren’t very carefully chosen. But she’s uncomfortable with her original lie and she wants to clear that up. She doesn’t like feeling that she’s let herself down – in both her own eyes and Castle’s. She carefully doesn’t consider which one makes her feel worse. She wouldn’t like the answer.

“I’m sorry,” she continues. “I should just have said I couldn’t eat them.”

“Oh,” Castle says, rather blankly. He hadn’t expected this, and he’s rather wrong-footed and certainly confounded by her apology. Oh, however, isn’t really an adequate response. Beckett’s already shrinking away from him. He eases her back towards him again. “Next time, just tell me, okay? I’m not going to get upset if you don’t like eating something. Unless it’s ice-cream, of course. If you don’t like ice-cream that’s a deal-breaker. It’ll prove you’re a pod person. Some alien in human shape, here to invade the earth and turn us all into algae-eating mind-wiped cattle that other aliens will prey on and” –

“Castle! Stop. I like ice-cream, okay?”

“Oh. Okay, then.” He sounds almost unhappy that his doomsday scenario has been defeated.

Beckett seems to have livened up marginally, from walking dead to merely half-dead, under the effects of head massage, apologising (still astounding!), and Castle’s general variety of verbal insanity. Castle notices that her robe is soft and satiny, and that its dull deep green shade brings out the hints of green in her eyes. He pats her shoulder, still gently, and discovers that the robe is very strokable. So he does.

Then he remembers that he needs to apologise too.
Someone who'll take care of me

“I’m sorry I interrupted your meeting, Beckett.”

“That’s okay.” She doesn’t say anything more. Specifically, she doesn’t explain what the meeting was about. Castle clamps down on the words cramming his throat and just manages not to ask. Beckett looks wanly at him. Clearly she’s not entirely with it.

“Did you want anything more, Castle? Because I really just want to go back to sleep. Can everything else wait till tomorrow?”

“Sure.” He has a thought. “I know. Come round for dinner tomorrow. I wanna talk to you without being interrupted every five minutes.”

“Tomorrow’s Sunday, Castle.”

“So?”

“So I can’t come round. I always have dinner with my Dad on Sunday evening if I’m not working.” She does. It’s part of the way she supports him. It’s also very convenient, however. “How about I meet you somewhere for coffee instead? There’s sure to be somewhere halfway.”

“Why not come round for coffee instead?”

There’s a sudden tension in the air, and as suddenly it’s gone. Beckett shakes her head firmly and then winces. “Ow,” she says, pauses and regroups. “Your loft is as full of interruptions as the precinct, it just has fewer corpses. Actual corpses, that is. I’m sure it’s got lots of fictional ones.” She breathes in, out, slowly, as if she’s trying to dull more pain. “Let’s go somewhere we won’t be interrupted.”

This sounds like a very good idea. The last thing Castle wants or needs is his daughter or mother either listening in (if he and Beckett are in his office) or joining in (if they’re in his family room) It’s just that he is also sure that there’s an underlying meaning to it that he’s not understanding.

“Okay. Let’s go to Ferrara’s.” Beckett looks at him. “It’s on Grand Street.” Intelligent life is no longer apparent in her face. “I’ll write it down for you.” He’d wanted answers, but he’s obviously not going to get anything more coherent than a mutter now. She’s now pale and wan again. He scribbles the address on a handy notepad he’s found on her desk, adds a time, writes another copy so he himself doesn’t forget (which would be fatal), looks at Beckett, who is drooped on her couch and whose eyes are trying to shut, and kisses her briefly on the top of her head without causing any painful movement at all.

“Till tomorrow, Beckett,” and he’s gone.

Beckett takes herself very cautiously back to bed to avoid moving her head in any half-way sudden manner at all, and is shortly out cold again. She doesn’t awaken until after nine the next morning, and still feels a little fragile as a result of the doozy of a headache from yesterday. A shower, some breakfast, and a coffee help, though she’s still not quite at her best when she leaves to make her way to Ferrara’s. Still, if Castle’s chosen it it’ll have good – or excellent – coffee – actually, she knows it does. Her brain is really slow, this morning: she’s been there, and it’s great coffee – which will improve matters, and as soon as her stomach realises she’s eaten the shaky feeling will depart. Or she can have more food. There are always nice things to eat in Ferrara’s. The thought of lemon cannoli, or sfogliatella, cheers her up immensely. The realisation that she can provide
Castle with an explanation – which will not involve a single lie, but will keep him away from her father’s …er… issues – which will keep him happy and stop him asking questions, is even better.

She gets there first, which is moderately surprising, and is halfway through the first of two cannoli and two-thirds down the excellent coffee before Castle shows up.

“Sorry,” he says. “Alexis needed to talk.” Not something Beckett will challenge, but also not something she really wants to think about. She doesn’t like the reminder that her father isn’t there when she wants to talk.

“No problem. Are you going to get some coffee?” She grins, and drains her cup, offering it to him. “C’n I have some more, please?”

“Sure, Oliver.” It takes her a second to catch on, and smile.

“No gruel, thanks. I’ve plenty to eat here.” Castle looks at the remains of the cannoli, stretches towards them…

“Ow!” Beckett’s smacked his fingers.

“Paws off my breakfast, Castle. I’ll buy you your own, if you want some, but you’re not having mine.”

“Oh, Beckett. Of course I want some.” He leers. She removes the leer by passing over a bill, and Castle retires, defeated, returning with two large cups of coffee and a cannolo of his own. His momentary absence in search of caffeine and sugar-laden breakfast has given Beckett the instant she needed to organise her thoughts. She decides to begin before Castle can direct the conversation in ways she doesn’t want.

“About Mrs Berowitz,” she starts.

“Mmmm?” Castle hums hopefully.

“She wanted to talk about her husband. See if I knew anywhere that might help.” The question is obvious on Castle’s face. “I told you that you see a lot of – that – when you’re a beat cop. She was hoping for something more than AA.”

Castle winces. It really hadn’t been about the case, had it? He’d interrupted a really difficult conversation, and no wonder Beckett had been mad at him. “I’m sorry. Could you help her?”

“Not really. AA’s the best bet for her husband, unless they can afford rehab. A lot of people go to Al-Anon for support.” She doesn’t mention anything else that she’d tried. She doesn’t want this to become personalised. Her father is not a spectator sport.

Castle is, for once, quite satisfied with Beckett’s explanation. Coffee passes off pleasantly, the short distance in the same direction before Beckett peels off to her own devices is spent comfortably discussing nothing in particular, and Castle reaches home nicely contented.

Right up till the moment he remembers what he’d inadvertently overheard when he crashed the meeting. It’ll bring you down too. That had sounded like rather more than beat cop experience. Then again, he’s seen Beckett’s ability to empathise with her witnesses and the families of the victim. He’s sure she hadn’t been lying in the coffee bar, so it must simply have been that. He forgets it, almost instantly.
It takes him a fortnight to realise she hasn’t been to his loft once since before Christmas. Not only that, but he hasn’t had a single glimpse of soft Kat since... well. Since before Christmas, too, as the night she had a headache really doesn’t count. There’s always been some reason for her not to come, but now that he thinks about it, it looks like a deliberate pattern of avoidance. It’s always on her terms, on her territory, and because he hadn’t noticed it he’s gone along with it. It’s easy, and her apartment is always private – but he wants her to come to his home and be part of his life.

Oh. He doesn’t feel like he’s part of her life, never mind her being part of his. Spending time with her - no, that’s not true either. He doesn’t spend time with her. They have sex. Spectacularly good sex, but it’s always smooth, slick, sardonic Beckett and she never just wants to cuddle, or only play with the game she’d bought. She doesn’t share, either. They discuss books, or films, or current affairs. She never mentions anything personal, and while she asks how Alexis is, or his mother, and seems interested in the answers, he somehow feels the constraint and tension rising every time, and cuts it short.

Okay then. He is going to invite Beckett over and this time he will not accept any excuses. The next time he sees her outside the precinct it will be at his. He feels much better, now he’s decided that. He doesn’t want a friends-with-benefits arrangement, although he’s not even sure this qualifies as that – especially as his definition of friends involves some knowledge of each other’s lives – in fact, this is worryingly close to a booty call. If this is going to go anywhere – and he has some very firm ideas about where it should be going, starting with discovering Kat again – then it needs to be a lot better balanced.

So when the day is done and the paperwork – it’s been paperwork for two full days, which is astonishingly boring – is put away, he begins.

“Time to go, Beckett.”

“Go where? I was going home.”

“Come home with me. I’ve got a really great recipe that I want to try out.”

“I…” He can see the search for an excuse rising in her eyes as they step into the elevator. She still hasn’t thought of one when they step out of the precinct.

“No excuses. Come on.” He tucks an arm into hers and ignores her splutter, marching them determinedly towards a free cab. When they’re safely settled in, he gives his address to the driver and stops Beckett complaining by the simple tactic of pretending to settle her scarf more firmly round her face.

Beckett does not want to do this, but she doesn’t want to explain why, either. Surely she can manage one evening? She’d managed not to have to go to Castle’s for a while now, and she’s past the worst period for dealing with – or propping up – her father, so maybe it’s time to have another go. Even if it’s upsetting, she’s an adult and she can keep her unworthy, petty, jealous feelings out of this. It’s hardly the collective Castles’ fault that she’s envious of their close family life, and she has got to get over this. Better start now.

She slips a fine hand under Castle’s broad palm, and is ridiculously reassured when he closes fingers round it. Even through each of their gloves she can feel the warmth and strength of his grip. She can do this. But deep inside, unnoticed, she wishes that she needn’t do this. She doesn’t consciously think it, but a tiny niggle says Castle always gets his own way, and he’s got his own way now. Discomfort and irritation lurk unnoticed in the back of her brain, where she doesn’t spot them.
The cab drops them at the base of Castle’s building, and she shivers. Castle wraps her in, automatically – he’s developed that habit in the last couple of weeks, and it is also very reassuring. It’s so unusual that someone takes care of her – the boys wouldn’t dare, and she’d never really noticed that Will did, seeing as they were both so busy with their respective jobs that it didn’t register – that she hasn’t quite worked out why she’s letting it happen. She’s just enjoying it.

Castle has not wrapped Beckett in simply to keep her warm, but also to be able to read her reactions. She may have an excellent poker face, but she doesn’t have total body control, and small twitches and tells will inform him of far more than her expression. Right now, it’s the lack of small tells that is giving rise to some concern. She’s very slightly stiffening up, as if she’s bracing herself for something mildly unpleasant. He’s seen her like this if she’s interrogating the nastier versions of low-life. He saw her like this another time, or more than once, but he can’t quite chase down the memory. It’ll come, if he ignores it. But he doesn’t see why Beckett should be uncomfortable here, and it leaves him with a small subconscious niggle.

The niggle is by no means subconscious by the time dinner’s over. Beckett’s being nice and friendly and civil and interested in Alexis’s conversation – and it’s all entirely artificial and forced. A further month of shadowing her has given him considerable confidence in his ability to read her, and he is absolutely positive that she is tense, tending to actively uncomfortable. In a sudden blinding leap of instinct he realises that she is very, very uncomfortable with Alexis. Hiding it well, but now that he looks he can see it. He really doesn’t understand that. How could anyone be uncomfortable with his amazing daughter?

Alexis doesn’t seem to have noticed anything, which is some consolation. And as Castle watches, he also realises that Beckett may be forced and artificial but she’s putting an awful lot of effort into hiding it from Alexis, which argues that she doesn’t dislike Alexis. So something else is wrong. Something about being here. He doesn’t like that at all, and he’s not in the mood to hide it. In fact, he’s downright annoyed by it. He makes coffee, Alexis disappears, and he settles them down in his office. At least there, there is an illusion of privacy.

“Did you enjoy dinner, Beckett?” There’s more of an edge on that than he’d meant.

“Sure,” she says, a little uncertainly. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Castle says sarcastically. “Maybe because you didn’t want to come here in the first place and you’ve been faking it all evening?” There’s a flick of hurt over her face, gone almost too quickly for him to see it. Her face turns into her interrogation shell.

“What are you talking about?” Big Bad Beckett is suddenly much in evidence.

“You only came because I didn’t let you make excuses like you’ve been doing for weeks. You’re perfectly happy never to come here. All you seem to want is a booty call in your apartment on your terms. Well, that’s not what I want. I’m not doing this any more.” He pauses to take a breath, having emptied his lungs on pushing the words out.

Beckett’s entire face and body locks down cold. “Really,” she says frigidly. “Funny, I would never have realised that you didn’t want it when it seemed you were having so much fun with me. Guess I made a mistake.” She stands up smoothly. “See you around, Castle.”

She’s most of the way across the loft before he’s even worked out that she’s leaving. She’s gone before he’s realised what she said. Well, he’s not going after her. She didn’t let him finish what he was trying to say, so she can just stew. Time enough to see her at the precinct when a body drops. She’s had it all her own way so far and he’s rather had enough of that. If all she wants are booty calls he’s not up for that.
No body drops, and he spends the day writing on and off, not particularly well, but it might be useful some other time or spark some inspiration, and in between surfing the net, the fan sites, and playing his latest shoot-‘em-up. He has a very pleasant dinner with Alexis, too. Up until dessert. He’s just getting the ice-cream out and teasing her about the plainness and limitation of her toppings when she opens up.

“Dad, why didn’t you go to the precinct today?”

“No body, pumpkin.”

“That doesn’t usually stop you,” Alexis says, regarding him with an unusually beady eye clearly borrowed from her grandmother.

“I was writing,” Castle points out. “I go to the precinct for inspiration, then I write. Paperwork is very uninspiring.” Alexis looks sufficiently sceptical for him to think that she has a future as a House of Representatives Committee chairman grilling investment bankers. They’d cave in an instant. He, however, is still her parent, and – he hopes – immune to it.

“Is it because you had an argument with Detective Beckett last night?”

“What?”

“You had an argument with her, didn’t you?”

“No,” Castle says, truthfully. They didn’t have an argument, because Beckett left before it got that far. Typical Beckett, shutting down and shutting out without even trying to talk about anything. She didn’t even let him talk, never mind talk herself.

Alexis raises an eyebrow in a gesture that looks horribly like she’s picked it up from Beckett. It doesn’t improve Castle’s mood, or view of Beckett’s behaviour, at all.

“Alexis, I don’t answer to you,” he says, slight sternness tinging his tones. It increases notably on his next thought and words. “And eavesdropping on my conversations is something I thought you’d grown out of age seven.” Alexis flushes. “Don’t do it again. I don’t listen in to your conversations and I won’t tolerate you listening in to mine.” She droops apologetically.

“I couldn’t hear the words, anyway. Just the tone. You were loud.” Castle looks fixedly at her. “Sorry, Dad. I just…” she trails off. Castle hugs her forgivingly.

“Just what, pumpkin?”

“I-like-Detective-Beckett,” she rushes out. Castle stares at the top of her head in amazement.

“Really?” Ooops. That wasn’t a good thing to say.

“What do you mean ‘really’, Dad? She talks to me as if I’m an adult. She’s got a real job and a real life.” It’s just as well Alexis can’t see Castle’s face. Every word Alexis is saying shows that her view of Beckett is so different from what Castle currently thinks that he can’t believe it. “She’s totally different from Mom and Gina.”

“Oh,” Castle says rather confusedly. “Okay. I’m sure Beckett will talk to you if you want it. So long as you’re not disturbing her when she’s working.”

“I wouldn’t do that!” Alexis is offended. Castle looks hard at her. “I won’t!”
“Okay.” Alexis finishes her ice-cream and then bounces off to her room, apparently perfectly pleased with life. Castle makes himself a coffee and repairs to his study, contemplating with equal shares of irritation Beckett’s behaviour, the lack of solid, soundproof walls in his study, and his lack of inspiration so far this evening. He’s rather rocked that Alexis is so keen on Beckett, when all he can see is Beckett’s complete discomfort at being anywhere near this loft. Since it’s not Castle with whom she had a problem, it has to be Alexis. She was only hiding it to be polite.

He doesn’t tie up Beckett’s discomfort in his loft with her strenuous previous efforts not to come here in any logical way for some further hours. In fact, it takes him till the next day to see that if she isn’t comfortable here, of course she’ll make sure that she doesn’t show up. Cause and effect.

The next morning there still hasn’t been a body, and he’s still irritated, with a heavy coating of outright annoyed. He turns his irritation into focus on his chapter and begins to write. For quite a long time, it works. Unfortunately, his stomach tells him it’s lunchtime very forcefully, pulling him out of his imaginary world and returning him to reality. Reality, in this case, being that there is no body, no excuse to go to the precinct, and therefore no excuse to pin Beckett to an interrogation room wall and shake some answers out her. He isn’t going to go until there is an external reason. If she wants to mend matters, she can put some effort in. If she doesn’t, well, he’ll know she never meant it. Pain bites at him, but he ignores it.

He goes back to writing, for the rest of the day, waiting for his phone to ring. It doesn’t.
Beckett had gone home, looked at the cans of soda in her fridge, wished passionately that she had a bottle of vodka to mix with them, and finally cast herself down on her couch and been miserable. She doesn’t understand at all why Castle had invited her round to dinner just to ditch her, and she’s too upset to try to work it out. Eventually she stops herself crying, changes into soft leggings and t-shirt, and goes through her yoga forms, trying to calm her mind. Needing to stop to blow her nose and blot her eyes every so often does nothing to assist in regaining her composure.

It had all been going so well, too. She’d been getting over her stupid jealousy of Castle’s relationship with his daughter – okay, so she still wasn’t wholly comfortable, but she’d been getting there – and all she’d needed was a little longer to be sorted out. Just a little longer, so that she could relax out of that hideous strength that she needs to get through Christmas and New Year, past the anniversary; past the need to hold on for her father, and the risk that she’d let something slip. And he had been better, this year. They’d played the game she’d bought him and it had been good…

She dissolves into tears again. She’d bought the game at a shop Castle had shown her and they’d played it too. Now she won’t. She’s hardly going to take it to work, is she? It’ll just sit there on the shelf, as lonely as she. Another wasted effort, another waste of time. She sits on her yoga mat, head on her knees, and wonders if she’ll ever find another opportunity to have someone who would have let her be Kat. She doesn’t think so, and right now she doesn’t even want to try. The universe obviously doesn’t think it’s in the cosmic scheme of matters.

Eventually, she goes to bed, in her quiet, cool sheets and coverlet, her muted, soothing colours and pretty, abstract patterns. And in the morning she wakens, washes, and dresses in her formal, Beckett armour of sharply tailored pants and jackets, stiffly collared and cuffed button-downs; her gun and shield in place. If she’s not allowed to be weak sometimes, she might as well prove that she’s strong.

There’s no new body, and no reason to call Castle. Only paperwork, and plenty of it. A diktat’s come down from 1PP: the cold case rate is too high: there’s to be a concerted effort to solve them. Beckett’s team hardly have any, but wider team spirit leaves them as busy as anyone as they help where they’re needed.

It’s what Beckett needs. Too busy to think, too busy to care, too busy for more than a few hours’ sleep a night. Too busy to miss Castle.

And then a new body drops a couple of days in and she has no choice but to ring him. So she hammers her voice and her feelings into complete submission to her will and calls him, though she’d have paid a small fortune to pass it off to Ryan.

“Rick Castle.”

“It’s Beckett. We got a body. Sara D Roosevelt Park, at Hester Street. We’re on our way.” Click.

When Castle gets to the crime scene Beckett, Ryan, Esposito and – oh Lord, Perlmutter, why couldn’t it have been Lanie? – are all staring at the corpse. Castle muscles his way into the group next to Beckett, who flicks a glance at him.

“Hey, Castle.” She doesn’t sound anything other than neutral. Right back to how she used to
sound, in fact, last November. He suddenly wonders, for the first time, what she’d heard him say the other night. Because right now, he’s not at all sure that she heard what he thinks he said. If she had let him finish she’d have understood, he thinks, still irritated. Anyway, this is hardly the place to open a discussion about it.

“What happened?”

Perlmutter looks up with his trademark snide stare and speaks with his trademark snide tone.

“She got murdered. Have you thought up a theory yet, Mr Castle?” The word farfetched – it’s the nicest word that occurs to Castle’s thesaurical brain – is clearly intended to be inserted in that sentence.

“Perlmutter,” Esposito snaps, “how about you do your job so we can do ours? Stop flappin’ your jaw and get choppin’ her up.” Castle looks at Espo, mouth open. Espo winks at him when Perlmutter – and Beckett – aren’t looking, and makes a feed-the-birds gesture. Ryan follows up with a small grin. Perlmutter harrumphs and huffs and shortly loads the corpse into the morgue wagon, telling Beckett that he’ll have something for her shortly. It doesn’t seem to make her any happier with the day.

“Oh. This is Susan Godley. 29, not married – at least, her driver’s licence still says Miss, not even Ms – lives in the East Village, works at Canobank.” Beckett turns to Ryan and Esposito. “You two take her workplace. Anything you can find out, but I don’t suppose you’ll get much this time round.” She makes a face. “All those financial types are either close-mouthed or bragging. Either way they never say anything useful first off.”

She flicks back to Castle. “I’m going to go back to the bullpen, find out next of kin, then go see the family.” She waits a beat. “You coming, Castle?”

“Sure.” For an instant he’d thought she wasn’t even going to ask him. That would be a whole other level of neutrality. He slides into the passenger seat of the cruiser, but Beckett doesn’t hurry to get in, looking around the scene again. Finally she takes the driver’s seat, fires the engine, and starts for the precinct.

“What were you looking for, Beckett?”

“Anything unusual or off,” she replies. It’s not exactly informative.

“And?”

“And what?”

“And was there anything unusual or off?” There’s a lace of irritation through his words.

“No...” There’s a note in that which suggests very strongly that Beckett had hoped, or thinks, that there would be something, and hasn’t found it. There’s another note which suggests that the conversation is firmly over, and so it proves. Beckett has an air of furrowed-brow thinking, and there’s a strong sense of her shuffling options and considerations in her head, amplified by the twitching and tapping of her fingers on the steering wheel. Not a single syllable of her thoughts exits her mouth. This is hardly unusual, but it’s not making Castle any happier.

Back in the precinct Beckett spends a few moments hunting down next of kin information, emerging from a fog of computer data triumphantly waving a scrawled name and address. At least, Castle assumes that this is what the chicken-scratchings convey.
“Got it,” she says. “Parents.” Her look of triumph as she’s beaten the IT into submission has faded rapidly in the face of the unpleasant, necessary, task ahead of her. She looks at her watch. “It’s late. You don’t have to come if you don’t want to.”

What? Beckett’s never asked him that before. Never. Not once. He’s never deserted a live investigation. Why on earth would she think he would now? He’s just chewing on that gristly thought when her phone rings, diverting her reach from her coat to the device.

“How?”

“Okay.”

“Nothing on tox?”

“Anything else?”

“Oh. Right.”

“Prints? DNA? Anything?”

“Okay. Let me know as soon as you do.”

She looks crossly at her phone and then at Castle. “That was Perlmutter. Susan Godley was hit with a blunt instrument – we knew that right from the moment we showed up, but he can’t be more precise yet – no tox, no alcohol, no drugs, no sex” –

“Was there rock and roll?” Beckett glares.

“No prints, and no DNA. No murder weapon, either.” She mutters bitterly under her breath. It sounds very much like useles man why isn’t Lanie on this? Castle certainly sympathises with that. Perlmutter is unprepossessing in looks, intelligence and personality. He has all the charm and sparkling wit of a brain-damaged cockroach. Just as well he’s in the morgue and not allowed to practice on real live people.

Beckett is drawing a timeline. In the middle is a window for time of death, centred round five a.m. She glares at that, too.

“What’s up? You’ll set the board on fire if you stare at it much harder.” The glare is turned back on him.

“She wasn’t dressed for clubbing. So what’s an unmarried twenty-nine year old doing in a park at five a.m?”

Castle doesn’t engage brain before opening mouth. “Why don’t you tell me? You’re a hot unmarried twenty-nine year old. You don’t go clubbing. What would you be doing in a park at five a.m.?”

Beckett acquires a very strange look indeed. If he’d been asked to define it, he’d have plumped for the word agonised. But then it’s gone again, as if it had never been.


Or alternatively, trying to talk her father into going home rather than finishing the bottle. He’d come rather too close to street drunkenness on one too many occasions, before she’d abandoned him, and then past it. But he isn’t like that any more, she reminds herself. He hasn’t been for five
years. She flicks another glance at her watch, face twisting almost unnoticeably, and shrugs into her coat and scarf.

“Time to go tell the parents.”

Castle follows her out to her cruiser.

“Our victim couldn’t have been looking at corpses,” he points out.

“No. Last I heard Canobank was a bank, not an outpost of the NYPD’s Homicide division,” Beckett snips.

“So why else would a single” –

“We don’t know she was single.”

“attractive, twenty-nine year old be in the park? She wasn’t in running kit, she wasn’t in clubbing gear, she wasn’t dressed up.” His eyes widen. “I know! She was meeting her CIA handler. Espionage. Working in a bank was her cover story.”

“I don’t think so,” Beckett says discouragingly. “Most likely she was going home after pulling an all-nighter.” She frowns. “It’s off.”

“What’s off?”

“I don’t know yet. Something.” She frowns even more ferociously. But that’s where it stays.

The parents are devastated, clinging to each other for support, world shattered in one sentence, breaking around them. All Beckett’s empathy is wasted on the barrier of their shared grief. They try to be useful, though, despite their agony: maybe it’s the only way they can make something better of this hour. Between boyfriends, they think. A good girl: came by every week for family dinner. Doing well at work: hoping for a promotion soon. Never really spoke about what she actually did, or knew: confidentiality was key. Didn’t want there to be any chance any of them could ever be accused of insider dealing. Apparently it had happened to one of her co-workers, and he’d been sacked out of hand, after a brief investigation.

Beckett keeps her poker face, at that last. There’s a thought. She carries on, but no more apples fall no matter how hard she shakes the tree. She leaves on a cloud of soft, sympathetic thanks and farewells, echoed by Castle.

“I’m going back to the precinct,” she says as she pulls away from the kerb. “Can I drop you off somewhere?”

“Why? Aren’t I coming back too?”

“There won’t be anything more tonight. Perlmutter’s off-duty” – she makes an annoyed noise at the fortunately absent ME – “and I’ve got other work to do. 1PP’s put a purge on old cases, and we’re all busy.”

“I could help.”

“Paperwork, Castle. Not your strong point.” And, of course, she doesn’t want him there. She wants peace and quiet and solitude and definitely not the man who ditched her two nights ago. Still, she’s been strong all day. It’s not as if she had let him get under her skin. Not at all.
Castle makes a mutinous face. “I can help,” he grumbles. Beckett is unmoved. “You’re supposed to let me shadow you. How’m I supposed to know how the precinct ticks if I don’t see all of it?”

“Use your imagination, Castle. You’ve got plenty of it.”

She’d have said that right back at the beginning, too. In exactly that get-lost-playboy tone. She’s shutting him out. First she wouldn’t come to his loft, then she walked out on him, and now she’s behaving just like she did in the beginning. He’d wanted something better than a series of booty calls, and she’d blown him off without even letting him finish or explaining why. Now she’s acting like it’s all his fault. Well, it’s not his fault and he’s not going to behave like it is. Nor is he going to allow her to shut him out. He’s got a book – likely a series – to write, and he’s not going to let that be spoilt just because Beckett’s played him for a fool.

He retreats into silence and thought. He’d really thought that she might be up for a proper relationship, and she’d simply walked away. Her loss. It doesn’t bite any less today than it had two days ago, and telling himself he’s well rid doesn’t help either. He will at least extract an explanation from her, but not now.

“We’re here,” Beckett’s cool, clear tones interrupt his thinking. Here is Broome Street, and specifically his building. “See you tomorrow. Maybe Perlmutter will have got his finger out his ass and found something useful by then. Wish it were Lanie.”

Castle is left with no option but to get out the car – at least, unless he’s willing to start an argument. He isn’t, and he’s also not willing to take the chance that Beckett really meant that she was going back to do paperwork and old cases. Regardless of what he had said, that provides him with neither background nor inspiration.

Beckett makes her way back to the Twelfth in welcome solitude punctuated by the irritated tapping of her fingers on the wheel. For as long as she can be irritated by the case she won’t be made miserable by the rest of her life. Even if “that’s not what I want. I’m not doing this any more” is on repeat loop in her head. She’s got far too much to do to think about that.

The bullpen is quiet and gloomy, and the pile of cold cases casts shadows across Beckett’s desk. By some quirk of lighting and the alignment of the pile of files, the shadows look as if they’re reaching out to claw at her. She shivers, and shakes off the momentary chill. There are no ghosts here. Only the job and the case and a way to forget. She’s a success: everybody knows it. But here and now, the ravenous maw of 1PP needs fed and satiated: or she won’t be a success for long. She stands between the living and the dead; between her team and the brass. And between her father and perdition.

She pulls the first file from the pile, and begins.

In between the cold case files, and occasionally during, as questions or points occur to her on the live case, Beckett scrawls her thoughts on a separate piece of paper, or on her murder board. The man sacked for insider trading keeps pressing on the front of her head. After four old cases, and with the clock rounding on midnight, she’s too tired to continue. She’ll go home, and return early. The murder board, now bespattered with her thoughts, blindly watches her leave, somehow reproachful: as if she should stay longer, press on further, work harder. She still has to push herself to do more, do better, to push away the burdens of her life. After all, she hasn’t found any other way to do so, and her previous hope that she might have found a way had been broken on the wheel of Castle’s words and her inability to be comfortable seeing him with his family. Nothing else, but to work and forget.
Dawn slithers greyly through her curtains, and brings her to wakefulness. Tired as she is, once her eyes have opened she can’t find sleep again, shrugs on her daytime self and begins again.

She’s sipping a second cup of coffee and scowling at the latest cold file when Esposito saunters in.

“Yo, Beckett.”

“Hey, Espo.” Esposito casts a darkling glance at the murder board.

“Get somewhere? Gotta lot of stuff up there, wasn’t there last night. You been home?”

“Yep. Had some thoughts, wrote them up. D’you want to add what you got? Anything from the co-workers? Has Ryan started on cameras, cell phone records? How’d she get to the park anyway? Do we know?”

Espo looks unimpressed at the memory of talking to the bank staff. “Not much. Shut their mouths as soon as we flashed the badges.” Beckett scowls even more blackly.

“Nothing?”

“Didn’t say that,” Espo smirks. Scowl changes to outright glare.

“What do we got, Espo?”

“We got the name of the guy who got fired for being suspected of insider trading.” Beckett’s glare changes to a feral smile.

“Do we now? Make me happy, Espo. Tell me that Ryan or uniforms are picking him up.” Esposito grins in return.

“Guess I’m makin’ you happy, Beckett. ‘Cause that’s what’s happenin’ right now.” Her smile acquires fangs.

By the time that Ryan and a couple of sizeably burly uniforms have returned, Beckett’s had sufficient time to sharpen her smile, fangs and mood into razor-edged focus. The reason for a couple of big uniforms becomes obvious as soon as she looks into Interrogation from Observation – this man is himself big, and fit, and in a very, very bad mood. That suits Beckett just fine. She’s not at all impressed by the greed-is-good, big swinging dicks of Wall Street, and she’s not in the best of moods herself. This guy looks as if he’s up for a fight and to try to intimidate her. Boy, is he in for a nasty surprise.

“Espo, Ryan, I’m going to take this one alone,” she says. “He’s just the type to think he can outthink or outmuscle a woman, so we’re going to use his stupidity against him.” The boys grin back at her, nastily. They’ve watched this game before, and it’s always entertaining. For them. It’s very rarely any fun for the one on the other side of the table.

Beckett delays for a psychologically significant time precisely calculated to let the suspect wind himself up to fury at being treated like an ordinary person. After all, he’s wearing a designer suit that probably cost 3,000 dollars or more, his watch looks like a Breitling, and he’s wearing a very obvious signet ring. He clearly thinks he’s the top of the tree.

She walks in.

“What am I doing here? You’ve no right to hold me. Do you know who I am?”
“Yes. You’re James Cardon, lately fired from Canobank for insider dealing. You’re lucky you’re not in an orange jumpsuit.” Beckett’s voice is cold and contemptuous, designed to reduce arrogant fools to a small pile of waste inside three sentences.

“That was a mistake. I’m suing. That bitch lied.”

“Who lied?” This is almost too easy.

“Susan. Susan Godley. The uber-bitch of compliance. She invented the whole thing to have me out. She hated me. She just wanted to get back at me for having the job she wanted and making megabucks while she was pulling down peanuts.”

“So she was in compliance? Hardly likely to want your job as a trader. Looks like her job trumped yours, though. After all, you got fired.”

“So? I’ll get a better deal. No skin off my nose.” Beckett raises a cynical eyebrow.

“This day and age? You’ll be lucky to get a job sweeping the streets. She’s screwed your life up, and you’re trying to tell me you’re not bothered? Guess what, Cardon, I don’t believe you. You’ve been out of work for three weeks already because of her.” There’s fury blazing in his face, now, but sweat on his lip. Beckett starts to go in hard.

“I bet when we run your financials we’ll find that you’re living way beyond your means, Cardon. You’ll have to sell that pretty watch.” She’s taunting, pushing. Because he hasn’t asked the obvious question – Why am I here? And he’s so convinced he’s the smartest person in the room that he hasn’t asked for a lawyer either. Perfect. Just what she likes. Stupidity all dressed up in self-importance.

“Fuck that, cop. I’ve done nothing wrong.”

“I’ll decide that.” She waits a beat. “Where were you between four and six this morning?” It suddenly, obviously, dawns on him that he’s in serious trouble.
“What the hell is this about?”

“What were you?”

“In bed.” Beckett raises a nastily sceptical eyebrow.

“Really? Whose bed?”

“My own bed.”

“Really. You sure about that?”

At that point there’s a knock on the door. It’s Ryan.

“A moment, please, Detective Beckett,” he says, in the formal way they use when they want to
prove to a suspect that she is quite unquestionably and unmistakably the one in charge. (She’s
always in charge.)

“I’ll be back,” she says ominously.

“What is it, Ryan?” He grins boyishly at her.

“Well, Beckett, I got building security footage from the vic’s building, her work, and this asshole’s
building too, and while you’ve been fretting him and sweating him, I’ve been running it. Guess
what?”

Beckett acquires the edged, predatory expression of a starved tiger looking at a tethered goat.

“You found something.”

“I sure did. Two somethings.”

“Spill it, then.”

“Spill what,” comes from behind her. It’s Castle.

“Hey, man,” chirps Ryan. He turns back to Beckett. “Cardon went to her building late last night.
Hung around for a while, then left. ‘Bout four thirty, she left. Colleagues told us she liked to start
really early: she was often talking to Europe, sometimes even Hong Kong or Dubai. Time zones.”

“Time zones are a pain,” Castle interjects. “When I’m on book tours I’m always trying to work out
what time it is so I’m not calling Alexis to say goodnight in the middle of class.” Beckett ignores
the irrelevancy.

“So what was the other something?”

“Well, Cardon went back to his building and never left again, so his alibi checks out.” Beckett
wincses. Sending down a rich, arrogant asshole would have been highly satisfying. “But come and
look at this.”

They make their way to the tech room and Ryan loads up the footage. “This is the view from the
street cams from her building towards the park. Lookee here.” He points to a figure. “That’s
Susan.” He runs a few frames forward, and points again. “That’s someone falling into step behind
her, and if I go back” – he does – “you can see them waiting for her.”

“Someone who knew her habits,” Castle points out.

“Even if Cardon could have slipped out again, that’s not him.” Her voice holds a tinge of regret.
“Far too small, and female.”

Espo joins them. “Looks like someone really wanted to talk to our vic.” He peers at the screen.
“Looks like an argument.”

“Okay. Let’s see if we can get a better view, or anything that might help us identify her. Can we
track them any further? Ryan, you get more footage, closer to the park and the crime scene. See if
we can pick the suspect up catching a cab or in the subway, or at an ATM. It’s a long shot. While
Ryan’s doing that, Espo, you go back and ask her co-workers who she’d had a row with recently.
Get uniforms canvassing for witnesses on that walk. At four-thirty in the morning, we’ll be lucky
even to get the pan handlers, but they might as well try.”

“What are you going to do?” Castle asks, not entirely innocently.

“Let Cardon out,” Beckett growls, “then try to think about what was off at that scene. Shake some
info out of Perlmutter, too.”

While Beckett clacks off, with annoyance in every tap of her heels, to release Cardon, Castle
reviews her murder board, and is considerably more irritated than he has any right to be when he
realises that it contains an awful lot of thinking that clearly took more time than just this morning.
And he missed the interrogation, which would have provided him with a substantial quantity of
inspiration and fixed Nikki Heat’s demeanour firmly in his head again. It takes him a few
moments to realise that Beckett hasn’t returned.

Castle slides into Observation, and notes with gathering annoyance that Beckett is still
interrogating Cardon. She’s taken the cuffs off him, though, and her expression and demeanour is
less hostile and more focused than if he were still a suspect. But Castle should be in there, not out
here watching. Still, he can’t interrupt. He’ll simply have to wait, shut out of the action again.
Shut out her life, shut out the case. She’s put up all her walls again, and he hasn’t the faintest idea
why. She’s the one who walked out, and yet she’s behaving like he’s the bad guy.

He watches and listens, and a few minutes later Beckett exits, with Cardon.

“We might want to talk to you again, Mr Cardon. Don’t leave town.”

“You can’t say that.”

“Yes she can,” says Castle, helpfully. Cardon looks bitterly at the two of them and leaves.

“Why didn’t you let me sit in?” Castle asks as the elevator door closes behind Cardon.

“Because he was a misogynistic jackass who thought he could out-think me. If you had been in
there he wouldn’t have reacted the way I wanted.”

Oh. Okay then. That makes sense, he supposes. He just doesn’t like it, which reminds him of his
earlier grievance.

“And what about all the extra points on your murder board? I thought you said you were working
“I was. But just because I’m working on an old case doesn’t mean I don’t have ideas on the new one. So when I did I wrote it down.” She looks coldly at him. “Would you prefer I forgot them? Lost a possible lead?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Of course not.” He can’t argue with that either. It’s all so very sensible and reasonable and he still feels as if she’s shutting him out. “So what did he tell you?”

“Nothing useful. She got him fired – and I’m sure he deserved it – but he didn’t know if anyone else had been fired, if anyone disliked her, or anything outside his fat arrogant greedy head. Useless.” Her face contorts into a grimace. “And thinking of useless,” she carries on, “now I need to call Perlmutter.”

Calling Perlmutter only gets them summoned to the morgue. Perlmutter, it appears, wants to show them something. Well, he wants to show Beckett something. But Castle isn’t going to be shut out any more, and besides which, him showing up will irritate Perlmutter immensely.

It does. Perlmutter is extremely irritated, and doesn’t scruple to show it. Rather stupidly, though, he ignores Beckett’s obvious desire for answers in favour of sniping at Castle. It takes – oooohhh, around three seconds? – for that to backfire.

“Doctor Perlmutter! Are you going to say anything useful or are you going to behave like a playground toddler some more? Quit trying to rile Castle and do your job. We’re not here to listen to you making an ass of yourself.”

Castle stares at the back of Beckett’s head. She’s defending him. Well, standing in the way of Perlmutter’s nastiness, anyway. What on earth is going on here?

Perlmutter sulkily coughs up the limited information he’s found: mainly that the blow was struck with limited force, probably by someone slightly shorter than Susan Godley, but through sheer misfortune had connected at the right angle to kill her.

“That’s it?” Beckett says. “Nothing more?”

“That, Detective, is it. There is no more information. You and your pet Malamute can leave now. Stop distracting me and let me get on with some real work.”

It is quite possible that Beckett is going to shoot Perlmutter. Her hand has even dropped to her hip. Castle, while appreciating her sentiment, is strongly of the opinion that if she’s going to go down for murder it should at least be in a good cause, not for squishing a cockroach. He very cautiously – he doesn’t need shot, either – taps his fingers over the hand on her gun, and puts his other hand very gently on her shoulder to turn her to leave. The fact that he would like to punch Perlmutter’s lights out isn’t really doing much for his mood, either; but at least he and Beckett are back on something approaching the same page.

Beckett fulminates high and wide about Perlmutter all the way back to the precinct. She doesn’t draw breath till they’re halfway there, when Castle jumps in.

“Beckett, your insults are no doubt heartfelt, but they’re very clichéd.” There’s a growl from the driver’s seat. “I’ve got some much better ones for you. Alexis gave me a book a couple of Christmases ago called Shakespeare’s Insults and it’s got some wonderful ones.”

“Like what?” Her words are brisk, but he can hear that he’s caught her interest.
“Well, there was ‘thou deboshed fish thou’.”

“I get the fish bit. But deboshed?”

Castle shrugs. “Debauched, apparently. I looked it up.” He grins happily. “Then there was ‘Thou art like a toad; ugly and venomous’, and ‘Thou cream faced loon’ which I really liked.” Beckett is already sniggering before he’s finished the second insult.

“And finally: ‘Some report a sea-maid spawn’d him; some that he was begot between two stock-fishes. But it is certain that when he makes water his urine is congealed ice.’” Castle smirks.

“C’mon, Beckett. You can’t say that this doesn’t describe Perlmutter precisely.”

By then she’s laughing almost too hard to drive safely.

“Stop, Castle. At least till I get us back. I don’t want to crash.” She splutters again as she mutters “cream faced loon”. They’re closer to normal than in weeks, as the journey passes with muffled snickers and sniggers and snorts, every time one of them thinks about the insults.

Ryan has been reviewing camera footage from around the park. There’s not enough of it, and it’s significantly impaired by the number of blown bulbs in the streetlamps, but there’s some. And that some has the same shadowy figure within it, leaving via East Houston. And while there aren’t that many street cameras at the exit, there are street cameras at the subway station and there are cameras in the subway station and suddenly they have a clear view of their shadow-perp as it pushes its hood back and is revealed to be female (as suspected), with short dark hair and a curvaceous figure.

“I’ll see if the techs can enhance the picture,” he says.

“Can we get that to Espo anyway for the canvass? Might help.”

“She’s little,” Castle says, incredulously. “How does anyone that small hit hard enough to kill someone?”

“You’d be amazed,” Ryan says. “Tap the right point and it’s all over.”

“And you can’t tell in that coat how fit she is,” Beckett points out. “For all we know she’s the state weightlifting champion for Illinois.”

“Doesn’t look likely,” Castle notes.

“That doesn’t mean it isn’t true.”

“One case we got, Perlmutter told us the hit was by someone six-foot eight. We went looking for a basketball player. Turned out to be someone five-foot three, an’ shaped more like the basket ball.”

“Huh?”

“He was standing on a table when he coshed the vic.” Castle sniggers at Ryan’s tale.

“Are you saying I shouldn’t make assumptions?” There’s a very tiny tension starting to become apparent.

“Yes. Cop work needs an open mind. So she might be the weightlifting champion of Illinois. It’s not very likely, though. What is possible is that she goes to a gym somewhere and does some training, from the way she moves. Or she could just be a yoga nut and do it at home. Point is, we
don’t know. Till we find her, we don’t know anything. Till we get the footage enhanced, we
don’t know anything more than a guess at her height – and she could be wearing flat boots or
heeled boots so we could be up to four inches off either way – and that she’s got dark hair. She
could go to a salon this morning and be blonde or red or brunette or blue.”

Beckett stops for breath.

“So we need someone to recognise the photo, or get the sketch artist to do a new one?”

“Yes. Till then, assumptions just lead us down the wrong track.”

Castle can’t help his pointed look at her following that comment.

“Yeah?” she says.

“You never make assumptions?”

“No. I rely on what the evidence and the witnesses tell me and follow the leads and then we cross-
check them. That’s what we do.”

“Is it?” Castle mutters bitterly. It’s not what she’d done in his loft. She’s never checked her
thinking about that. She just walked out.

Beckett and Ryan are discussing how fast the footage can be enhanced and don’t hear him.

Matters might have been superficially lightened by the back-and-forth in the car, but nothing’s
actually fixed. Castle goes and makes himself a coffee and then, when the caffeine hit has soothed
him slightly, makes another, and one for Beckett. He might be irritated, but he won’t be rude.

Nor, it seems, will Beckett. “Thanks, Castle,” she says with a small smile. “I need it. I hate those
Wall Street traders. Best way to deal with them is to reduce them to nothing.” Her teeth flash
white and sharp. “Works every time.”

“Sure does,” Ryan says from behind Castle. “Makes great watching.”

“Watching? You weren’t in there?”

“Naw. No way. It only works if Beckett’s in on her own. They either try ‘n come on to her or they
try to treat her like a fluffy-headed idiot. Then – bam! And they’re looking for their balls in the
trash.”

Ryan and Beckett exchange a satisfied smile. Castle’s mood has improved immensely. Not just not
him, but not anyone. That’s…very bearable. Very.

“Wish I’d seen it,” Castle droops, theatrically.

“Get here a bit earlier, then,” Ryan suggests, grinning. “We brought him in not much after eight.”

first time this morning. “I wouldn’t have been able to learn anything. Too busy yawning.”

Further banter is prevented when Beckett’s phone rings. “Beckett?” Indistinguishable mutters.
prints. But they’re not matched.” Her face twists in annoyance. “Where’s Espo?”

“He went to pick up the footage.”
“What footage?” Beckett raps out.

“The footage from Canobank’s reception area. Seems our girl had a very angry visitor, couple of days ago. Day before we found her.”

“Ooohhh,” Castle says happily. He can hardly wait till Esposito returns, bouncing in his chair and far more fidgety even than normal. Fortunately Espo is not long. Beckett is beginning to look as if she’s going to shoot him if he doesn’t calm down.

“It’s her!” comes in quadruple stereo. It is, indeed, the woman from the subway footage.

“She wasn’t happy, was she?”

“Screaming mad.”

“Espo,” Beckett says coolly, “tell me you got a name out of the receptionist.”


“And what else, Espo?”

“She was Cardon’s girlfriend.”

“What are we waiting for? Go pick her up.”

“Uniforms are already on it, Beckett. Thought I’d come an’ give you the good news. Might cheer you up. You’ve looked like someone pissed on your parade all week.”

Castle pricks up his ears. Beckett’s been miserable? Good, he thinks, unworthily. That makes two of them. His thought is swiftly followed by why? He wonders again what she thinks he said. Then he stops wondering, because he knows. He said he wasn’t doing it any more. And she walked out before he could say I don’t just want booty calls. Well, if she’d waited for an explanation she wouldn’t be miserable. Of course, nor would he. He takes a proper look at Beckett. Miserable appears to be an understatement.

“C’mon, Castle. Carrie Franks is here.”

Interrogation matters are back to normal, it seems.

“Yeah, that was me. So what? That bitch got my fiancé fired.”

“Fiancé?” Castle says, surprised.

“Yeah. She wanted him for herself. Couldn’t stand it when we got engaged.” Beckett strongly doubts that, from the picture of the victim she’s built up. Still, if it keeps this woman talking… Carrie Franks is as arrogant and stupid as her boyfriend – fiancé – and is making much the same mistakes. Beckett lets sympathy seep into her voice and picks up the thread that Castle’s tugged.

“When did you get engaged?”

“Month ago.” Ah. But…

“Can I see your ring?” Castle asks. “I’m a bit of a connoisseur of fine jewellery.” Beckett only just stops herself shaking her head, but it works.

“Haven’t got one.”
“That’s unusual,” Beckett says, concerned interest in her voice. The rhythm and flow of their joint interrogation is sweeping Carrie up. Beckett is extremely interested, but concern isn’t her primary feeling. Suddenly she realises what was off at the scene. If Susan Godley was on her way to work, why wasn’t she wearing the right number of accessories? She had make-up on, so why not more jewellery? It’s Rule 101 of professional female work – if you’re not a cop, of course. She should have had earrings, a necklace and at least one ring – most likely. Maybe a bracelet, as well. She’d had earrings and a slim pendant – but nothing else. “Why not?”

“We had one all picked out. Jamie” – Jamie? Pet name, clearly – “showed me it in Van Cleef & Arpels. It was beautiful…” Her face twists. “And then that bitch Godley started the investigation and he was fired and couldn’t put the deposit down. When his name’s cleared, we’ll go back.”

Beckett’s mind is racing through the implications. From the focused aura beside her, so is Castle’s.

“I’d like you to write out your statement, please, Ms Franks.” And don’t scare the horses here. “We’ll leave you to do that.” She passes over pen and paper, and they exit, back to the murder board.

“That’s what was off.”

“What?”

“No ring. She should have had one. We need to ask her mother what she normally wore. Ryan!”

“You?”

“Get that reception footage enhanced as far as you can. I wanna know what jewellery our victim was wearing that day – necklace, rings, bracelets.”

“On it.”

“You think she did it.”

“I do. I think she did it and took the ring. Espo!”

“You, boss?”

“You get down to the morgue – if I have to go see Perlmutter I’ll likely punch him if he doesn’t quit with the snide remarks – and see if he can get any traces of wearing a ring and any prints from Susan’s hands. I know it’s a long shot. When you’ve done that, get Cardon back and ask him about this ring and engagement.”

“I think she did it too,” Castle says. “It fits the story.”

“C’mon, then. We need to go see her parents again.”

Beckett is not talkative, in the car. Castle recognises her running thoughts and leads and evidence trails, and doesn’t interrupt. Building theory together this morning, and sharing the interrogation, has returned him to some equanimity. It’s also returned him to some ability to reason and think. Mostly, what he’s thinking is that he needs to do some thinking. He could usefully start at I rely on what the witnesses tell me. Oh. Ooops. He told her he wasn’t doing it any more and she took him at his word. Relied on what he told her. No assumptions required. And Kate Beckett would never bother with anything within a hundred miles of begging for a second chance.

But. That’s all very well, but. She wouldn’t even dip a toe in the water of a relationship, let alone
dive in. And if that’s how she feels, there’s not much point hoping for more. Better to cut his losses and stop now. Except that there had been soft, affectionate Kat. Until suddenly there wasn’t.
They’ve pulled up at the parents’ block. Beckett leads the way with her normal swinging step, strength and purpose in every pace. Just as they’re about to knock, though, her phone rings. She holds a hand up to pause Castle, and takes the call.

“Beckett.”

Castle observes closely as the colour drains from her face.

“Okay. Lunchtime. One o’clock. Same place. I’ll be there.” She clicks the phone shut. There is no explanation. “Sorry about that.” She raps on the door before anything can be asked.

“Mr Godley, I’m sorry to bother you again, but could we ask you and your wife a few more questions?”

“Yes,” he says heavily, grief weighting the words. “But be quick, please. We… we need peace.” He lets them in and ushers them through.

“Mrs Godley,” Beckett says gently, “did Susan normally wear jewellery to work? A necklace, or a ring?”

“Oh yes. Both a necklace and ring. She was always very smart. She said it helped remind people that she was a serious professional in a serious job. Some of the people she met were inclined to forget that, just because they made millions in bonuses.”

Beckett exchanges a swift look with Castle. “Could you describe her jewellery, especially her ring? Or would you work with a sketch artist to have a picture?”

“If it helps, sure. Anything to help you find her…” she starts to tear up. Mr Godley puts an arm round his wife, and she leans into him. Leans on his strength, Beckett thinks, sadly, and doesn’t show it by a single flicker. Not like the Berowitzes. No evidence of that, here.

“What do you need?” Mr Godley says. “We’ll do it.”

“If you could come down to the Twelfth Precinct this afternoon, I’ll arrange for you to sit with a sketch artist who’ll draw a picture of the jewellery that we can circulate.”

“It’s missing?”

“Yes.”

“That was my grandmother’s ring,” Mrs Godley is now in full-blown tears. Her husband gathers her in. Beckett watches, and a tiny stiffness enters her spine.

“It wasn’t valuable,” he says. “But it meant a lot. The necklace she bought herself, with her first paycheck.”

“What does the ring look like?”

“A pearl, with tiny diamonds round it. Looked a bit like a flower. A daisy. She wore it on her right hand, fourth finger.” He embraces his wife. “Could you…” He throws a glance at the door. “We’ll come down at two-thirty.”
“Thank you,” Beckett and Castle say in unison, already rising. The last thing Beckett hears as the door closes is soft words of comfort and consolation. Her shoulders tighten further.

Castle is confused. Beckett, he knows, pours out compassion on the victim’s family. And so she has. But now she’s all tensed up and it started halfway through that interview. Not to mention the phone call beforehand, which she isn’t mentioning. Beckett has far too many odd pauses and hitches in her conduct, he suddenly realises. The problem is, there doesn’t seem to be any reason for them. Hm. Maybe that would repay some thought. Later.

“Lunch, Beckett,” he says thoughtlessly.

“Can’t, sorry. I’ll pick something up on the way back.”

“Can’t?”

“I’ve got things to do. Do you want to come back to the precinct or shall I drop you off somewhere and see you later? I’ll be back by two for the Godleys.”

“Okay.” What else can he say? “Precinct, please.” But… Beckett had said same place. Not usual place, which implies it’s not a person she meets often. Hm. Castle makes a huge leap of logic which is totally unsupported by any minor little props such as facts or evidence, and concludes that this is Mrs Berowitz and that means that Beckett will be in the same coffee bar as last time. Hm. It won’t hurt to check it out. This time, though, he definitely won’t go in and interrupt. He’ll just pass by, and observe.

And then he’s going to go home tonight and do some serious thinking, because nothing he is seeing makes any sense at all.

Castle’s line of thought is somewhat supported when Beckett turns in the direction of the previous café in which she’d met Mrs Berowitz. He locks down the desire to follow her and goes up into the bullpen to see what the boys are doing.

Eating lunch, is the answer. The footage is still with the techs, and Perlmutter is trying to find more prints, so there’s not a lot to be done except for Castle to report what they found.

“So where’s Beckett?”

“Don’t know.” He doesn’t know. He suspects. Strongly suspects. “She said she had things to do and she’d see us at two.” He changes the subject. “I need lunch. I’d offer to get you some, but you started without me.”

“If you’d been in earlier you’d have been hungry too.”

“Yeah, well. Sure I can’t get you anything?”

“We’re good.”

Castle wanders out and wanders in the general direction of the café in which he’s surer by the moment Beckett is sitting. He’s equally sure that she’s with the unhappy Mrs Berowitz, and as he casually detours by the café he has that confirmed. One swift and penetrating glance through the windows shows him Beckett with her arm round her. He deduces that there are tears, wonders why Mrs Berowitz is leaning on Beckett, whom she wouldn’t have known from Adam – or Eve – two months ago, and adds it to his list of matters for later. His sharp mind is now very busy indeed, and remains very busy all the way through lunch.
Mrs Berowitz is married to an alcoholic. Last time, Beckett was talking to her about Al-Anon. Last time, Beckett had claimed that as a beat cop you see a lot of that. Last time, he’d forgotten that Beckett had said it’ll bring you down too. A beat cop doesn’t know that. Not, at least, from being on the beat.

Stop. Stop right there. He needs to tuck this away and not forget it. But right now, he needs to concentrate on the case, and not on maybes and might-bes and wannabes, because…

Because Beckett’s just come back, and she looks like hell. Not that it stops her tearing into the case again, wanting to know where everything has got to.

“Footage due back any minute.”

“Put the fear of God” – shouldn’t that be the fear of Beckett, Espo? It’s worse – “into Perlmutter. He promised me results before four.”

“Good. The Godleys are coming in shortly to work with the sketch artist. Susan should have had a pretty distinctive ring on. She didn’t. I’m liking Carrie Franks more and more.”

“Makes a good story,” Castle points out. “You deprive me of my ring, I’ll deprive you of yours. It fits.”

And on that highly positive note the Godleys arrive.

Once they’re settled comfortably, Castle follows Beckett to the break room where she’s making her coffee in a way which suggests that it’s all that’s holding her in one piece.

“You okay, Beckett?”

“Fine,” she says. Castle hums sceptically, and receives only a filthy look in return. “I am fine.” She stalks back to her desk. Shutting him down and out, again. He’s good enough to contribute to the case but not good enough for her to talk to? Nothing new there, but he doesn’t have to like it.

Beckett would rather be anywhere than here. Her preference would be her own apartment, on her own, with two Advil and – though this would astonish all who know her – a cup of herbal tea. Camomile, for preference, though peppermint would also do. Julia had been… difficult. She, too, had been just that difficult, once; that disbelieving. And so, when someone else needs her strength to lean against, to rage and rail and fight against reality – she couldn’t refuse. She can’t be weak, when someone else needs her to be strong.

The Godleys need her to be strong. To fight for their dead daughter, find the culprit and find them justice. They need her to be strong, and leaving for her own peace would be weakness. This case is almost broken, and she’ll see it out before she takes her rest. She can be strong: for them, for Julia Berowitz, and for her own self-respect. She can be strong for as long as she has to be. After all, she’s managed it for the last ten years. Why change the habit of an adult lifetime?

Enhanced footage shows Susan Godley wearing the ring during the argument. The sketch artist produces a picture in short order, which matches up.

“Okay. Let’s get uniforms canvassing pawnshops and jewellers round about where she was found with the picture of the ring and a shot of Carrie.”

“On it,” Ryan says, and decamps to start it going. “We don’t have a lot of the day left to get to them.”
“I know,” Beckett says. “But get them started, so they can carry on first thing. Perlmutter come up with anything yet?”

“Just called me,” Espo says, sidling up to the group at the murder board. “Smears, but no clear prints. No help.”

“No change there,” Beckett mutters darkly. “I’m going to see Montgomery. See if he thinks I’ve got enough for a warrant to search Carrie’s apartment.” She’s halfway across the floor before Castle gets round to reacting, and by the time he does the door is shutting.

“Sir?”

“Mmm?” Beckett runs through the evidence and the case to date. “Okay, Beckett. I think you’ve got enough for a warrant.”

“Thank you, sir.” She starts to turn to leave.

“A moment, Detective.” Montgomery is formal.

“Sir?”

“I don’t want you in here after seven tonight. Understand? I know you saw Mrs Berowitz today” –

“How?”

“Saw you,” Montgomery says laconically – “and I can see you’re exhausted. I’d send you home now but you’re on a case. If you’re not out of here before seven, I will order you to leave. The cold cases will wait. Got it?”

“Sir.”

Beckett exits before Montgomery can confound her any further.

“Did we get it?” Castle asks, the boys listening hopefully.

“I have enough for a warrant,” Beckett says, with a strong emphasis on I. “So if you can all contain your enthusiasm, I’ve got to type it up stat and get it into a judge before they all go home.” She’s already opening up the form, staring at the screen as if glaring will hurry up the document loading slowly.

“Why didn’t you let me come too?”

“I didn’t stop you. It’s only a warrant request. Nothing new. You know all about the case, and you’ve seen me get warrants before.”

“I’m here to shadow you.”

“Better luck next time, then.” She looks at her watch, winces, and starts to type. She hasn’t much time to get this done. “Gotta get this together. I’m running out of day.”

When she next looks up, Castle is gone. She hadn’t noticed him say goodnight. Maybe he hadn’t. It wouldn’t surprise her, really. It’s not as if there’s any reason he should say goodnight specially to her. She finishes her request for a search warrant and prints it out to sign. That’ll go into the system now, and then she’ll go home, since she’s been ordered to.

So that’s what she does, one short step ahead of Montgomery’s looming wrath. Home is quiet, and
cool, and soothing. She has some dinner, two Advil, and tea; and doesn’t look at the game on the shelf or the row of Richard Castle books in the book case. Instead, she spends half an hour on slow yoga forms, and then loses herself in re-reading Chekov’s short stories, in Russian. It takes all her concentration, which was the idea. No-one rings her, and she doesn’t ring anyone except her father. She calls him every week. See him Sunday for dinner, ring him during the week – she’s later than usual this week, they’ve been so busy – and he goes to AA two or three times every week, first thing in the morning. He never misses.

Which thought brings her back to Julia Berowitz, crying in the café for the life she doesn’t have any more. It’ll never be the same. She might save the marriage, but Julia can’t save her husband, just like Beckett couldn’t save her father. Only he could change himself. He had. But it had taken five years of hell for him to realise it, and even now it’s fragile. They’re so careful of each other: they never talk about it now. He’d apologised, and made amends, and done everything that AA recommends; but she’d never been able to listen to it again and she’s never, ever told him how much he hurt her, how the scars still pull and ache and all her memories of her mother are in some strange way soiled and tainted. Why are you so like her? I can’t stand it. Go away. And in the next breath – the next gulp of whiskey – You’re so like her. You’re so strong. Don’t leave me, Katie. She’s had to be strong, because she never had the chance to be weak. She’s not sure she knows how to stop being strong, any more. She’s not sure she knows how to share her burdens.

Not that it matters. There’s no-one to share them with. She couldn’t get over her petty, pathetic, disgusting jealousy of Castle’s happy family life and unsurprisingly he’d ditched her because she couldn’t hide her discomfort at being exposed to it. If she’d been stronger… if she hadn’t shown her weakness: been as strong as she is any other time… hidden her history better… He might not have known how she felt but that doesn’t really matter. He’d have done it earlier if he’d realised how unpleasantly envious she was. No point crying about it. None at all. It doesn’t stop the tears dripping.

She’ll just have to go back to the one place that’s always provided some surcease, some mercy for her guilt, the one place she’s always a success. Her job. She’ll find her strength in her work: those burdens lighter beside the crushing weight of her personal load.

She always has found strength in her work. It’s just as well. There’s nowhere else to find it.

Castle had gone home with a generic farewell to the bullpen which, he noted with some irritation, Beckett hadn’t seemed to hear. She’d been wholly focused on her warrant. He cheers himself up with preparing and eating dinner with his family, and then retires to his study with a small glass of good Scotch and a large mug of excellent coffee. He is going to solve this mystery of Beckett for his own self-satisfaction. And then he’s going to twist it, change it, and use it to inform Nikki Heat, because Beckett is supposed to be his inspiration and he is supposed to be allowed to shadow her and she is not providing him with any help at all to do either.

And if all of this is actually driven by pricked pride and a large measure of hurt that she simply walked out and wouldn’t listen to him or even try paddling in the shallows of a relationship or show him anything at all about who she is, ever since Christmas – well, he can’t force her to be friends, or lovers, and he isn’t going to try. Her loss. She didn’t like his loft and his family, and he’s never going to be happy about that.

He has a gulp of his coffee, and a sip of whisky. Reversing the quantities is not good for clear and focused thinking. So. Start with the Berowitzes. She’d identified Mr Berowitz as an alcoholic and said it was because of being a beat cop. She’d – he’d forgotten, till now – sent him off and taken a moment before she followed. She’d refused to let him come with her to see Mrs Berowitz – both
times — and the first time he’d overheard it'll bring you down too and the second time Beckett, touch-me-not Beckett, had had an arm around her. The first time Beckett hadn’t even come back to the bullpen, and the second time she had but she’d looked like hell.

And then there are the other discontinuities. No booze in her apartment. Lying about the mince pies and brandy butter, and then the taste of mint toothpaste. A tiny pause when he’d offered mulled wine. She drinks, but barely — the only time he’s seen her drink was on her birthday. And she’s entirely uncomfortable in his loft with his family: right from the very first time before Christmas, in fact, now he thinks about it. Every time she’s been faced with Alexis. She doesn’t believe in Christmas, though she had Christmas dinner with her father, and she takes — volunteers for — the Christmas Day shift every year. She doesn’t do presents under the tree. She took a day off when they were flat-out busy, and Montgomery approved it, and the boys wouldn’t tell him why but he’s sure that they know. And, of course, her mother is dead. And most of the time she’s cool, slick, sardonic Beckett; but just occasionally she’s been soft, cuddly and affectionate Kat. When she isn’t Kat, he’s always felt that it, or he, is in some way second best. Settled for.

He writes it all down, in neat, organised bullet points, as if he were planning a story. (He is.) Then he looks at it for a while, letting his mind absorb each point without trying to fit them together. Then he does something he usually does, when researching, he interrogates the internet — specifically, press databases.

Ah-ha. Johanna Beckett, criminal attorney, murdered 9 January 1999, leaving a husband, Jim, and daughter, Katherine, age 19. Well, that explains the personal day, he supposes. That’s a history and a half. It explains the boys’ reactions to him asking, too. That’s not something they’d simply throw out there. It’ll make a superb back story for his character, changed around a little. He opens his laptop and starts to sketch it out, lost in the words.

Some time later, coffee cold, whisky untouched, Castle re-emerges from the depths of his tale. As so often, whilst he’s been buried in explosive, unstoppable creation; the recesses of his brain have been chewing over the rest of the story — in this case, the rest of the Beckett story. And what it all adds up to is that she is considerably more familiar with alcoholism than merely observation as a beat cop would provide.

His first thought is that it was her. Teenager hit with massive trauma — not unheard of. But he swiftly rejects that, since if it had been her, she wouldn’t touch a drop. She does. So, not Beckett. He investigates the internet some more, and finds that Jim Beckett is listed as a practising attorney — and indeed partner — at a very respectable firm. So, unlikely to be her father. Not impossible, though. He makes more coffee, and drinks it and his whisky, and thinks some more.

He hasn’t reached any more conclusions by the time he goes to sleep, and he’s not exactly satisfied with those he has reached. She might be familiar with alcoholism on a personal level, but that doesn’t explain the whole anti-Christmas feeling. Her mother might have been murdered in January, but that doesn’t explain the familiarity with alcoholism, unless it provoked it, for which he has no evidence at all. There is no obvious reason why any of it should make her uncomfortable with Alexis, because Alexis has effectively lost her mother too, so there should be a connection. And none of it explains the dual personality of slick, sardonic Beckett and soft, cuddlesome Kat.
Talk to me, don't talk to me

Chapter Notes

This will be the last chapter I'm able to post for a few weeks: apologies for the unavoidable delay. If you are interested, the same story, considerably further ahead, is on Fanfiction.net under Garrae, and you may read it there if you prefer (or are that interested).

When Castle arrives in the bullpen the next morning it’s empty of the team. When he looks at his phone there’s a message that he hadn’t heard arrive. R & E on the search warrant. Unis picking up CF. Interrogation. It was sent thirty minutes ago. He looks around, and spots Beckett coming back to her desk.

“How long have you been here?”

“No.”

“Coffee?”

“No. She’ll be here any moment.” It’s perfectly sensible, but it still feels like a rejection. Beckett’s desk is, he notices, bestrewn with coffee cups. Three coffee cups.

“How long have you been here?”

“Shift started at eight.” It takes Castle a moment to realise that that wasn’t actually an answer.

“When did you get here?”

“What does that matter? Before shift began, so I’m always ready to go.”

“How am I supposed to shadow you if I don’t know when you start?” Beckett looks briefly exasperated, and then blank.

“Okay. I was in at seven. We don’t just have this case. We’re helping out to reduce the cold cases. So I came in to get a start on those. Then we got the warrant. Those don’t wait. Espo and Ryan had to go straight away, and they found the ring. Stupid woman had put it with her own jewellery. It doesn’t even fit her.”

“You didn’t call.”

“I texted you as soon as they went to pick her up.” There’s a distinct air of what more do you want? The potential for argument is instantly removed as Beckett is informed that Carrie Franks is back in Interrogation. “C’mon.” There’s fire in Beckett’s eyes. “Let’s go get her.”

Half an hour later it’s all over. Carrie has been reduced to bitter, vitriolic confession by a combination of Castle sympathising with the story and Beckett’s cold contempt. The boys have the evidence, and Carrie Franks is taken away.

“Now what?” Castle asks hopefully, in the break room where they’re all partaking of celebratory
caffeine.

“Back to cold cases,” Beckett says. The boys make faces.

“Is that it?”

“You don’t have to stay. It’s not likely to be interesting.”

“Aw, who’s gonna keep us amused, Beckett?”

“We’re here to work, boys.”

“I want to help.”

“Okay. You can start checking witness statements on this one.” Beckett hands him a file.

“What’s it about?”

“Twenty-seven year old man, found dead, stabbed, in December. Tox said he was fuelled up on cheap booze. Looked like he’d been on the streets, first off, but he hadn’t been there for long.” Castle makes a disappointed face. “We don’t just do the weird ones. Everyone deserves justice. See if you can spot anything.”

Castle notices a small tightness at the corner of Beckett’s mouth, and a small stress line between her eyebrows, and decides to probe a little.

“Why this one?”

“Top of the pile.”

Castle dutifully begins. Beckett is buried in the next folder. The boys have picked up one each. The team is quiet and thoughtful.

Beckett, alongside her focus on her own cold case, is only too glad that the top one off the pile was that one. She doesn’t want to deal with cold cases which involve anything more than the normal run of mundane murder, and right now she really doesn’t want to deal with anything involving alcohol. Who knows, maybe Castle will spot something. She doesn’t care where justice comes from, only that it comes. Her team is successful, and it’s staying successful. If Castle helps it stay successful, that’s fine. But she needn’t go out of her way to invite him in. It’s up to him how much shadowing he needs to do.

And then her phone rings. It’s her dad. This is something of a shock. He doesn’t normally ring in the daytime.

“Dad?” she says, with a hint of panic that causes Castle to flick a sharp glance upward as she rises to move to a less public place. He hears Is something wrong? before she’s shut the conference room door behind her. That’s…odd. Off. He’d thought it wasn’t her father. He’s very rapidly rethinking that conclusion.

The story makes sense, if it’s her father. It all makes much better sense that way. How hadn’t he seen it? It’s the only narrative that makes the story coherent. But how’s he a lawyer now, if he’s an alcoholic? And why, if he’s an alcoholic, is Beckett not supporting him by spending the whole of Christmas Day with him? She’s got plenty of compassion for people she doesn’t know and isn’t related to, but none for her family? He can’t imagine that he wouldn’t spend the time on his family, and thinks less of Beckett for her apparent choice.
Filled with satisfaction at having worked out the issue, and a certain amount of displeasure and indeed discomfort at discovering Beckett’s feet of clay, Castle turns his attention on to the cold case. He pokes it and prods at it and makes up innumerable theories to explain why a twenty-seven year old would suddenly be on the streets. None of them fit even the scanty evidence which is on file. On the other hand… he’d not been on the streets for long. Castle looks at the photos. The corpse hadn’t been wearing much, when he considers how cold it had been when the man died. A new theory evolves itself. What if… he’d been trying to get warm? What if, tanked to the gills on cheap booze, he’d tried to snuggle down in a doorway that was already occupied, and got a little too snuggly with the occupant? What if… the occupant didn’t take kindly to it, and – accidentally or otherwise – poked a knife into him?

It’s very boring. Not a fun case at all. But it might actually be the answer. Not that they’re ever going to be able to prove it. He tries the theory out on Ryan, who is intrigued, and Espo, who is moderately disgusted.

“That’s sick, man.”

“But plausible. Is there footage of that doorway?”

“Not now, there won’t be. ‘Bout a week is the best we can hope for. This one’s over a month. No chance.”

“Later, Dad. Bye,” comes from Beckett, returning to her desk. Castle interprets her brisk tone as brushing off her father because she’s too busy with work. He doesn’t see how cold cases can prevail over helping one’s family. His opinion of her behaviour drops a little lower.

Beckett had gone into the conference room to talk to her father in privacy. Privacy from Castle, that would be. He doesn’t need to be handed any more ammunition.

“Is something wrong? Are you okay, Dad?”

There’s always the heart-clenching fear that it’ll be the slurred, incoherent speech of years ago: pleas and tears and anger; and then her leaving to collect him from whichever bar or dingy dive or cell he’d ended up in. The image of him sprawled on the grass in Central Park: dirty, incontinent and paralysed by alcohol, has never quite left her: tears streaming down his face as spittle or vomit and urine soaked his clothes. Until she’d had to stop: had left him there – wherever there was – to lie, or die, in his own filth and degradation: when she didn’t take his calls, and watched her phone ring out, or go to voicemail, hearing his drunken, pathetic begging for her to come. Every time, it shredded her soul. She wanted to save him, but she couldn’t.

Later, she learned that walking away was the only way she might have saved him: that only when an alcoholic hits rock-bottom can he realise that only he can save himself. She knows it, intellectually, and at times repeating it, a mantra, was the only thing that had stopped her going to try, and fail again, to save him. But she can’t, deep down, heart and soul, believe it.

So she pours herself out to the families and the victims and the search for justice, and pours yet more of herself into holding her father to his fragile sobriety, always trying to make amends for abandoning him in his hour of need, always trying to prove that she can provide the support and help to others that she hadn’t given her father then. Trying to fill the unfillable void in her heart that walking away from him had left, that has never healed. No matter how often her father tells her that she did the right thing, that he would never have gone to rehab if she hadn’t walked away, that she saved him by leaving him – she can’t escape her guilt.
“I’m okay, Katie. But… I have to go to Miami for a week. Tomorrow.”

“Miami? Uh? Why?”

“Conference. Bill pulled out last night when his big deal didn’t close, but mine did so I’ve got to substitute for him. The firm doesn’t want to waste the money.”

“Do you have to present?”

“No, not this time.” Beckett sits down hard and breathes an inaudible sigh of relief. One trigger fewer. “You’ll be there?” She knows he doesn’t mean physically. She, and his sponsor, whom she has never met – doesn’t want to meet. She’s afraid of what she might see in his eyes – will be on the end of the phone, whenever, whatever, her father needs.

“Yeah. Always there for you, Dad,” she says softly, determination behind the velvet. She quickly changes the tone: they never get too close to the emotional areas. Too dangerous. She might reveal too much – she might let slip her own anger and pain. He can’t take that: it’s too much for him. So she’s always walled it up and walled it off. Now, she’s really, really good at walling her feelings off. Though not quite good enough, it seems. Castle saw the truth. Saw the ugly truth and didn’t like it.

She has to be cheerful and teasing and make sure her father never, ever, knows she’s pretending. “Will you bring me back a present?” she says, as if she were still four, and sniggers at her father’s snort.

“Sure I will, Katie. Would you like a purple dinosaur or a Barbie doll?” She laughs out loud. Another danger point safely rounded. There are always danger points. So far, she’s always rounded them.

“Seeing as I won’t see you Sunday, do you want to come round for dinner tonight?”

“That’d be nice.”

“Okay, come about seven. Better get back to the files. Cold cases. Ugh.”

“See you later, Katie.” She opens the door and starts back into the bullpen.

“Later, Dad. Bye,” she says briskly, and sits down. Castle flicks her a look of reproach tinged with contempt. She ignores both the look and the pain it causes her. It’s no more than she expects. She concentrates on her files and reminds herself, several times, that her father has been dry for five years and that there’s no reason he’ll break that record now. It’s just that conferences make her nervous. All that networking is all too often fuelled on drinking.

“I’ve got a theory on this case,” Castle says.

“Yeah?” She can’t deal with insane theories.

“I think he tried to get warm and got a bit too close to someone else, who stabbed him.” Oh. Not such an insane theory.

“Okay, that’s plausible. Why don’t you run with it? Your chance to do real cop work.” He looks surprised. Still, she doesn’t have time to help him right now. She needs to make arrangements for next week. They have a process for this, but she needs to make it happen straight away. Normally she has more notice. She stands up and aims for the Captain’s office.
Castle’s left behind, annoyed, again. He’s been in a state of almost permanent irritation and ire since Beckett walked out his loft, firstly because he really didn’t want to find out that she’s not on the pedestal he’d been trying to put her on, and secondly because he feels (not that he’ll acknowledge it) that if he’d been a little more careful with his wording she might not have walked. It has absolutely nothing to do with the fact that he’d wanted her to stay, and he’d wanted her to like his family, and he’d wanted to discover her. Absolutely nothing at all. And he is not going to go running after someone who doesn’t even care properly for their own family, let alone someone who doesn’t like his.

The door closes behind Beckett. Montgomery looks up, surprised.

“Yes, Beckett?”

“Sir…” She swallows. She’s done this before, and every time it’s as embarrassing and painful as the first: guilt that she’s not giving her all to the job, guilt that she’s not giving her all to her father. “My dad,” she forces out. “It’s another conference. He only told me just now but he’s going tomorrow, for a week.”

Montgomery looks at her sympathetically. She hates that look: the mingled pity and respect.

“Oh, Beckett. You team up with Esposito, as usual. Ryan can babysit Castle. Won’t do either of them any harm, though I’ll be on the lookout for any reports of aliens and CIA agents. I’ll have a word with Ryan and Esposito.” Neither of them mention telling Castle. Montgomery assumes Beckett will. Beckett assumes that Montgomery, Esposito or Ryan will. She certainly won’t. Can’t. Only Montgomery, Ryan and Esposito know, inside the bullpen, and Lanie. She doesn’t show off her scars, and her father is not a circus freak to be pointed out and stared at.

Beckett comes out of Montgomery’s office, and doesn’t offer Castle an explanation. Shortly, Ryan and then Esposito enter, exit a few moments later, and don’t offer Castle an explanation. They do, however, offer him coffee and chit-chat – oops, exchange of information and leads – in the break room. Beckett declines to participate. She has a tight furrow between her brows and if she clutches her pen any more tightly it will snap.

“What’s up?” Castle asks.

“Shifts for next week,” Espo says casually. “Always a few changes. People get sick, that sort of thing.” Castle casts him a somewhat jaundiced look, but there’s no evidence that any of that’s untrue.

“Why not all three of you?”

“Dunno. Just the way it is.” He smiles evilly. “Maybe it’s because Beckett’s taken too much time off.” Ryan snorts his coffee out. Castle smiles tightly, without much mirth.

Conversation turns to Castle’s theory, and any way at all of finding any evidence. Short of interviewing every panhandler within four streets each way, there doesn’t seem to be much of a chance. On the other hand, as Esposito points out gleefully, that’s why uniforms were invented. The three men grin at each other, and Esposito goes off to exercise his inner dictator and start uniforms on the canvass.

Beckett is buried in the next cold case when Castle returns, the furrow in her brow deeper than ever. She’s even less conversational than usual, and doesn’t seem nearly as interested as she should be that the boys thought it was worth a canvass: she just accepts that Espo’s organised one and doesn’t ask about anything more. Lunch comes and goes, the cold case files come and go, and
Castle gets steadily more bored. At four, he’s had enough, makes his excuses and leaves. Beckett’s soft, neutral goodbye is the first word she’s said since two. She’s been quiet ever since her father rang. Maybe, he thinks, she’s feeling bad about her father.

He’s right about how she feels. It’s just that he’s right for all the wrong reasons.

Being at home does not improve Castle’s mood. Alexis is at an extra music lesson and then orchestral practice. His mother is out, for which he is thankful. The last thing he needs is her particular brand of – quote – keeping his feet on the ground. It’s not necessary – he has never forgotten his childhood – and it’s certainly not welcome. Normally he succeeds in letting it wash over him, but not today.

He tries to write, but keeps stalling on pieces of police procedure that he simply doesn’t yet know. He’d know them if Beckett would simply let him shadow her like she’s supposed to and been ordered to, he thinks acidly; leaves an almost-blank space on the page between square brackets with a short note of the matter to be checked, and moves on.

Four similarly empty spaces later, two coffees downed and ninety minutes passed in barely acceptable writing, Castle’s patience has expired. He hates not being able to write continuously. His frustration expresses itself in an ever-growing desire to explain the facts of life to Beckett: to wit that if she doesn’t let him shadow her properly and start to play nice, he’ll go back to Montgomery or Bob and make damn sure that she does. Whether she likes it or not. He needs to write this book. The characters are screaming to be let out and he can’t not write them. But he has to be able to do it properly: have the details right and the story realistic. He has to see what Beckett sees and feel what Beckett feels and absorb every tiny detail of her work and life into his mind and out through his fingers and into his words.

It doesn’t occur to him, while he’s fretting, that at least half his frustration is that he doesn’t know Beckett: what makes her tick, why she reacts the way she does, why she won’t open up to him – and why she won’t be his. And while he doesn’t understand her, Nikki won’t come out right: a little off in tiny ways, but enough to annoy him.

Frustration fuelling him, he abruptly decides that it’s time to tell Beckett how it’s going to be. He’s allowed to follow her around, and she has been ordered to let him. So that’s what’s going to happen. No more shutting him out and hiding inside her own head and not telling him what’s going on or letting him participate. No more expecting him to know what Ryan and Esposito know and not caring that he doesn’t. There are going to be some ground rules, starting now.

Beckett is surprised by the harsh knocking on the door. Can’t be a bailiff, she’s paid all her bills and rent on the nail. She is horrified to find Castle on the other side when she opens it. She doesn’t want him in her apartment. Her father is due in less than half an hour and she doesn’t want him exposed to Castle’s censorious, penetrating gaze. She blocks the doorway and is unceremoniously shunted out of the way.

“I’m coming in.” He shoves in, and shuts the door hard behind him. “We are going to talk about you shutting me out in the precinct. You’re supposed to let me shadow you and you aren’t. You barely tell me anything – I’m surprised you even call when a body drops.”

“I’m not a babysitter and you’re not deaf. It’s up to you to keep up. Everyone else manages. If you need to research” – there’s a vitriolic emphasis on that – “then listen and learn. We have real work to do, dealing with real people with real losses. Your fictional” – that same emphasis – “characters come a long way behind.”
“You just won’t admit I’m useful, will you, in case it makes you look bad.”

“You’re not a cop. You’re not here for altruistic motives. You’re here so that you can write more best-sellers. Well, writing books comes a long way second to getting justice for the victims.”

Castle loses his temper in one infuriated burst of rage.

“How would you know what my motives are? You barely speak to me. Ever since Christmas you’ve treated me like a flesh-and-blood sex toy.”

“Is that what this is all about? Your hurt pride? Who was whose sex toy? You ditched me, not the other way round.”

“You didn’t bother to let me finish what I was saying. I wasn’t ditching you. You walked out.”

“I’m not doing this any more” – he’s equally vicious – “doesn’t leave much room for misinterpretation. Anyway, it doesn’t matter. You were making it pretty clear that I didn’t measure up to your high standards.” The twist of her mouth and acidulated tone makes it clear what she really thinks of his standards.

“You made it pretty clear” – he’s equally vicious – “that you couldn’t bear seeing my family.” The colour drains from her face and lips. “So it’s true. I couldn’t believe it.” Hearing himself, seeing the truth in her pallid visage, the last small traces of control that he had maintained are lost. “You can’t bear any family at all. I suppose it’s not surprising, since you don’t do much to keep what’s left of yours together. You won’t even spend the whole day with your father at Christmas.”

“You know nothing about my family.”

“On the contrary, I know enough. Murdered mother, alcoholic father. You don’t support him through Christmas: you’d rather be at work. Some family you’ve got.”

Her hand rises, then falls before any contact is made. Her face is frozen.

“Get out,” she spits. “Take your sanctimonious ignorance back to your precious perfect little family in your perfect little life. You know nothing about living with an alcoholic. You know nothing about my life and my family. Nothing. You’re not wanted here and you’re not needed or wanted in the precinct.” She opens the door. “Goodbye.”

“Am I interrupting something, Katie?”

“Dad?”
“Dad, you’re early.”

“Who’s this, Katie?” Jim Beckett looks worriedly from one to the other, not missing the tension sparkling across the doorway.

“This is Rick Castle and he is leaving.”

“Castle? Rick Castle? The writer? The one who’s shadowing you?”

“That’s me,” Castle says tightly. This is Beckett’s father? This small, slightly uncertain man with deep cut lines around his eyes and an indefinably fearful look, as though the world is a dangerous place, like to break him? He looks from father to daughter, who is now standing between Castle and her father in a manner that strongly suggests that she’s making sure Castle can’t approach him. The arrival of Jim Beckett has not lessened the strain around them one iota. In fact, it’s risen.

“Nice to meet you.” Jim wriggles round Beckett to extend his hand to Castle, who automatically shakes it. “You helped Katie find my Christmas present, didn’t you? She said you did. It’s a great game, thank you. We’ve played it a lot already.”

The floor falls out of Castle’s world on the final sentence. They’ve played it a lot already. It’s barely a month after Christmas, and they’ve played it a lot. Jim is still talking. “I don’t know what I’d do without Katie.” Pride shines from his face. Castle recognises that same pride as that which he takes in Alexis, and feels the punch landing in his gut. “She’s always there when I need her.” Another punch.

“Dad,” Beckett says, “I’m sure Castle doesn’t want to know this. He’s leaving.” Jim is undeterred. “But he’s your friend, Katie. You told me so much about him at Christmas” – Beckett’s wince is missed by Jim but not by Castle, and Jim carries on quite happily – “so he should know. She pulled me through,” he says, turning to Castle. “Keeps me sober. She saved me. It’s why I gave her my watch.” Castle is now as ashen-pale as Beckett. His edifice of assumptions is crumbling around him. “I’d never have stayed sober without her.”

“Dad!” Beckett’s command voice whipcracks through the air, and everything stops dead. “Castle needs to leave. He’ll be late for his family.” Another crippling gut-punch lands with the accent on the last word. “Goodbye, Castle.”

“Nice to meet you,” Jim smiles.

As the door closes he catches a glimpse of the protective posture that Beckett has assumed for her father, as if he, Castle, was a danger to him. No more punches, he’s punch-drunk. That last vision was the knockout blow: putting him down and out on the canvas.

The story isn’t what he thought it was. He’s got everything wrong. Everything. He’d mentally criticised her for making assumptions. She’d relied on his spoken words. It was he who’d made all the assumptions, and every single one of them – except that she couldn’t bear his family – seems to have been wrong.

“So that’s your Rick Castle. Not quite what I expected,” Jim says meditatively.
“Don’t worry, Dad. You won’t be seeing him again. I don’t think he’ll be shadowing us for long.” She smiles brightly and entirely falsely, and forcibly dismisses Castle’s cutting comments from her mind. They’re simply untrue, and he doesn’t understand. He’ll never – lucky him – understand. Now if only she can think of a way to ensure that he doesn’t try writing about it...

“Now, what about this conference? Jet setting again?” It’s deliberately distracting.

Her dad starts to expound on the niceties of anti-trust law and international regulation and the importance of the conference and the speakers, and in trying to follow the jargon and concepts Beckett has no headspace for anything else. She keeps her father well away from the subject of Castle all evening, and fortunately he seems to be happy to follow her lead.

Still, late in the night in her solitary bed, the knowledge of what Castle really thinks of her bites hard. Of course he’s wrong. He knows nothing. But that doesn’t help.

For the next week, Castle barely sees Beckett at all. The boys have closed ranks around her and somehow he’s always with them, never with her. With Ryan, in fact. Esposito partners Beckett, and even when a body drops it’s Ryan who calls him. Nobody explains why. Espo and Beckett are on the trail and out the bullpen as often as possible, though when Castle arrives in the morning – early, to fit with Ryan’s hours – the murder board is ever more extensively decorated. He has no idea when that is happening and by now is too uncomfortable – fuelled almost entirely by guilt and disgust at his own behaviour – even to ask. He hasn’t seen her for long enough even to try to apologise, and the longer he can’t, the worse he feels.

At the end of the week, he’s had enough.

“What’s up with Beckett?” he asks, concealing both annoyance that no-one is telling him what’s going on and fear of finding out that she’s decided to call his – well. Not bluff. But if he does take the nuclear option, then so might she. She hasn’t yet told Montgomery what had happened, has she? Surely not. He’d have been kicked to the kerb. She certainly hasn’t told the boys: he’s still alive. But if he tries to force matters back to where they were, she will. Oh, shit, he has so totally fucked this up.

“Nothing.”

“C’mon, Ryan. Don’t give me that bullshit. Why’s she out with Espo this week rather than you and Espo paired up?”

“That’s what Montgomery wants.”

“Why?”

“Not our business.” But Ryan’s clearly uncomfortable, and equally clearly knows more than he’s saying. Castle decides to take a chance.

“I know about her mom and dad.”

“You know? She told you?”

“I met her dad,” Castle says, and nothing more. It’s not lying. He did meet her father.

“Okay then. It’s nothing to do with you. Her dad’s away. Some high-powered legal conference in Miami. She worries, in case he slips up, even after all this time. So Montgomery pairs her with Espo.”
“Why?”

“Otherwise she’d go out alone” – Castle only just doesn’t wince: clearly he doesn’t count at all – “with me ‘n Espo paired up. Montgomery doesn’t want her on her own if her dad needs her.”

“Huh?”

“If he needs to ring her, he does. She only doesn’t take it if it’s a takedown or an interrogation.” Castle has the same gut-punched feeling he’d had the other night. “Sees him every week. With him all day on the anniversary. Day after, sometimes, too, if we’re not so busy.” Oh, shit. How did he get this so badly wrong?

“Why Espo?”

“He can make her stop. Only he and Montgomery can. I can’t. Never could. Montgomery can order her, and Espo… Espo’s tough. Tough as Beckett, and if he really has to, he can march her home.” Ryan stares out the break room window past the horizon. “If they don’t do something, when he’s outta town, she never stops. Always here. If there’s a live case, she works it. If not, she picks up a cold case.” He stares some more. Castle barely breathes. “I think she’s always done it. Did anyone tell you her history?” Castle only makes a soft negative noise. “Stanford. Transferred to NYU after her mom. Top from the Academy. Fastest woman ever to Detective. Might just be fastest person ever. All while he was…ill.”

“Yeah,” Castle murmurs, but Ryan isn’t paying him any attention at all.

“Her dad fell apart after her mom… passed. Five years. Then he went into rehab. He’s been clean five years, but she still doesn’t like it when he’s not here. So we worked out a system. If he’s away, we work it so she can always take his call.”

“Oh.” Oh fuck. Five years?

Ryan turns and gives him a very straight look. “That why you’ve been sulking? Because she wouldn’t let you follow her this week?” Ryan-the-detective takes over. “What’s going on between you and Beckett?”

“Nothing.” And that is the stone cold truth. Absolutely nothing at all. She wouldn’t explain why she doesn’t like his family and he made assumptions about hers. So nothing at all is going on, and nothing at all will be going on, and both of them are just fine with that. Not.

“Really? You expect me to believe that? Man, you’re full of shit. You’ve been glaring at Beckett for a week, an’ before that you were all goo-goo eyes. Man up. If she turned you down, at least pretend to be cool with it.”

It’s like being savaged by a sheep. Unfortunately Castle is feeling more like a wolf than a blade of grass, and bites back just as hard.

“It’s got nothing to do with that. I’m here to shadow Beckett and not one of you bothered to tell me that this week she’s going off with Espo and I’m following you. Sure, following you is interesting, but don’t you think one of you might have clued me in to the change?”

Ryan looks a little embarrassed. “No-one told you?”

“Not till you did now,” Castle snaps. “Far as I knew, I’d been left for dead. You treat your corpses with more respect than that.” And now Ryan is wholly embarrassed.
“Hey, look, sorry, man. I thought you knew that Espo was partnering up with Beckett for the week, even if we never told you why. We don’t talk about her shit to people who don’t already know, and we’re not starting now. She keeps it private.”

Castle is disarmed. Mostly. It’s perfectly reasonable that the boys won’t spill Beckett’s personal life to him unless they thought Beckett had let him know already. Not that he feels in the least guilty for letting Ryan tell him all of that. Still, nothing that Ryan has said has relieved him of any of his feelings that he has acted very badly and let himself down. On the other hand, neither has it relieved him of any of his feelings that Beckett could have at least told him something. And he still has no idea why she doesn’t like seeing his family and she doesn’t like visiting his loft.

He leaves as soon as departure is possible, without any questions being asked as to why. He doesn’t want to see Beckett till he’s cleared his own head. At this point, seeing her only makes him angrier – at both of them. He is not the only one at fault here. Absolutely not. But when he’s cleared his head and thoughts – then he is certainly going to see her.

She could have told him. She could have told him something. But she didn’t. She didn’t tell him anything at all. Locked it all down and wouldn’t share. She could have… she could have leaned on him. She could have.

It never occurs to him that she had tried to lean on him, and that she’d failed to get past her own barriers, broken like a wave against the wall of the very strength and protectiveness that he applies to his daughter, that could have supported her.

Beckett has spent the week trying to avoid, evade or escape Esposito’s watchful eye. It hasn’t worked. He’s seen her home – in an entirely unromantic and indeed distinctly perp-walk fashion – and made sure that she gets coffee – frequently – and eats. Her dad has called a couple of times: he’s likely called his sponsor a bit more often than that. But now it’s Friday, and he’s on a plane home, and she can relax.

At least about her dad.

Next week – oh, thank God, she has this weekend off – Espo will go back to partnering Ryan and she will have to put up with Castle’s judgements and misconceptions and assumptions. Or worse, he’ll have reset his thinking thanks to her father’s appalling openness – and she’ll have to put up with apologies and seeing the pity in his eyes. She cringes at the thought. She can’t stand pity. It doesn’t help her at all. Pity implies weakness, and she can’t afford to be weak.

It’s one reason why she’d never told him anything. She can’t stand pity. It’s not her story to tell anyway: it’s for her father to decide who and when to tell, but she cannot cope with the look in people’s eyes once they know. And now he knows, and she cannot bear to see the way he’ll look at her. She has to stop that. However she can, whatever it takes. She can’t bear for him to put the rest of the pieces together, and to realise how weak Kat really is. Worse, he’ll use it in his book. It’s just too good a background for him not to do so. She can’t allow that, either.

But she has the weekend off. She’ll see her dad on Sunday for dinner, and they’ll play Sorry, and she won’t let on for an instant that she wishes she’d never met Castle, never gone Christmas shopping with him, and never so much as heard of the game of Sorry. And for the rest of the weekend she will not be Badass Beckett, and she will not be in the precinct, and she will not be on call, and she will not see anyone at all. She is weary. Bone-deep weary, both in body and mind. All she wants to do is sleep, and rest, and not think, and not need to be strong. Just for two days, she can stop.
But still, she can’t switch her phone off, in case her father should need to talk to her. So she can’t really, truly, wholly, stop.

She sleeps heavily and wakes late, logy and still exhausted on Saturday morning: catching up from the fractured sleep she’d barely managed through the week, when she’d been unwilling to go to bed early in case her father rang at the end of the long conference evening events and might be upset if he thought he’d woken her. Not that going to bed early would have helped: she couldn’t sleep in any case. She’d managed to avoid Espo’s beady eye in the mornings, and evaded his questions about when she’d got into the bullpen. She knows he knows. They just don’t talk about it.

Espo, in fact, is the only person who knows who has never regarded her with pity, never pressed her – even inadvertently; Ryan, once only, made that mistake – and never asked about it. He knows, and because he never, ever asks, he’s the only person she can bear to work with on those weeks. She had had to explain it to Montgomery, stuttering out her pain-edged request, but because their little triangle is so effective, he let it run rather than handing her her ass for interfering in his management of the team.

She just wishes she could have put aside her bitter envy of Castle’s happy family home. Telling herself that she could never have lived up to his standards of how a family should be, or how she should feel on seeing a proper father-daughter relationship, doesn’t help. It would all have come crashing down at some point, so it’s probably best that it was before either of them got any further into it. That doesn’t help, either. Why is doing the right thing so very, very painful?

She does her chores unenthusiastically, gets some easy food in for the weekend, stocks up on sodas, curls up on her couch and reads, desultorily, an undemanding book. Lunchtime comes and goes, her food pleasant enough. She can’t raise the energy to do anything. The weather isn’t helping, either: cold and snowy. She hates winter: she’s never truly warm, however many layers she wears. She thinks that it’s maybe more of a mental chill than physical. She carefully doesn’t think that she’d been warm before Christmas, curled into Castle. No point in maybes or might-have-beens.

She’s still on the couch, barely having moved since lunch, not quite sleepy, not at all awake, and wholly weary even now, when her door sounds. She drags herself off the seat, and stumbles to the door. She doesn’t want to see anyone.

She especially doesn’t want to see Castle, who – this time – she has identified through the peephole before she opens up. She doesn’t open the door, instead she shuffles back to the couch and ignores him. The door is quite heavy enough that – in warmly socked feet – the sound of her movement is inaudible through it. If she pretends she isn’t here he’ll go away. She really, really, doesn’t want to see anyone. She just wants to be on her own and not have to be anything for anyone; not have to pretend or assume a brave face, not have to be strong. Not to be Detective Kate Beckett, best of the best; not to be Katie, always supportive; not to be anyone’s muse or inspiration or partner; or, of course, not to be anyone’s disappointment or object of pity or contempt.

Not, in fact, to be anyone. If only she could simply... disappear.

Well, it’s her weekend off, and she can pretend that she has disappeared. She ignores the repeated rap on the door and pulls herself into herself, just like a taciturn tortoise. The rapping stops. She relaxes, and returns to her undemanding afternoon. She remains undisturbed for another couple of hours, when her phone cheeps with a text. Since her father never texts, and no message of any importance (that is, one which told her that her father needed her) would come by text, she ignores that too. An hour later, the phone cheeps again. It’s beginning to annoy her. She only wants to
stop, and someone’s stopping her.

But duty causes her to swipe on, and read down. Both texts are from Castle. The first says *are you around? Want to talk.* The second says *where are you? Can I come see you? Want to talk.* Neither, to Beckett’s mind, requires a response. She’s too tired to see anyone. Even Lanie would be too much. She’s just… not here. Not anywhere that she might see anyone. *Detective Beckett is not at home,* frivolously floats through her mind. That would be nice. A butler or a footman to lie about her whereabouts whenever she didn’t want to be disturbed. She decides that she’s not going anywhere more today, and slides herself into a loose, comfortable t-shirt and sweat pants, with a warm hooded sweatshirt to keep herself cosy.

An hour later Castle texts again. And then another hour after that. And then her door sounds, about as long after that, she thinks annoyedly, as it would take not to have an answer, find a cab, and arrive. *Why can’t he just leave her alone?* Most people would assume she was busy, or out of range, or just plain didn’t want to talk to them. Especially people who have made it very clear she’s not their cup of tea. She doesn’t need him rubbing his perfect life in her face.

She is not at home. Therefore, she doesn’t answer the door.

And then her phone rings. Loudly.

Castle had spent the majority of Friday evening and Saturday morning in intense contemplation of the current position. He faces the nasty truth, blunt and unpleasant, that Beckett unfailingly supports her father. No wonder she’d almost slapped him. He’s only surprised she didn’t hit him full force. Having faced up to that, he thinks about the rest. Works her ass off, right from the beginning. But Ryan had said her father had been sober five years – and drunk for five years before that. So how was she managing both? Surely there aren’t enough hours in the day?

His mind flits to something else. Not only has she supported her father, but Mrs Berowitz. And then, every victim’s family member with whom he’s seen her. She’s lavished support on people she barely knows – and, *ow,* he’d mentally marked her down for it, because he’d *assumed* it was instead of supporting her father. Instead, it had been *as well as.*

So who supports her? Well, there’s a question. He doesn’t really have an answer to it, because he’s never noticed that Beckett actually needs or wants support. Anything but. She’s the most self-reliant, downright prickly person he’s ever met. Except those couple of early encounters, when the prickly shell had fallen away, and that strange soft Kat had been revealed, but still, that hadn’t been support, and she certainly hadn’t asked for anything. In fact, he slowly realises, the closer Christmas had drawn, and the more he’d tried to bring her round to him and his life, the less she’d asked for or wanted and then after Christmas she’d never come to his at all until he’d forced it. That hadn’t precisely worked out well, either.

He’d expect support to come from her team, or friends, but from what Ryan said she relies on working ever harder in place of anything else, and always has. He doesn’t get that. Yet another thing he doesn’t get about Beckett. Maybe he should write a different book: *The Hundred Enigmatic Faces of Kate Beckett.* The only problem is that he really doesn’t understand the story. It should be simple. Murdered mother, ten years previously. Alcoholic father, five years drunk, five years dry: supporting him every step of the way. Best cop in town: whether that’s solve rate or victim support. And so tightly wrapped that she seems to survive on coffee and work and needs nothing and no-one else. Except that there had been Kat.

He puts it away to fester. It’s not simple at all, and he is still missing something: the link that tells
him why she won’t come near his family, why she doesn’t like seeing his daughter. Till that’s worked out, he’s not going to be comfortable. But. But he can remove one source of discomfort.

*Face facts, Rick. You were wrong about her. You said a lot of things, and you were wrong. Man up and apologise for that. Maybe then you can both have an adult conversation.* It’s not as if he’s likely to have anything else. He’d called her out on disliking his family, and she hadn’t denied it. He hadn’t been wrong about that. Anyway. He needs to apologise for what he’d said. Then he’ll feel better: his conscience will stop pricking at him.
He starts by going round, though he isn’t exactly fond of the idea. He needs to apologise, and he’ll do it face to face. Apart from any considerations of manners, he needs to see the small tells and reactions to try and decipher this mystery; to find his missing link. There is no answer when he knocks. He leaves, disappointed, but not concerned. It’s Saturday, after all, and plenty of people go out. He waits for a while, attending to the normal activities of the weekend, and then sends a neutral text: *are you around? Want to talk,* hoping that she’ll take it in the spirit that he means. There is no answer to that, either. That’s a little more concerning, though it’s still only five. For all he knows, she went to a matinee or a movie.

He gives it another hour, and texts again. Having made the decision to apologise, he simply wants to get it over with and move on. She’ll have to work with him next week, and he really does not want this hanging over them in the bullpen. It’s all difficult enough without adding that, and the chance of a private discussion in the precinct is not so much limited as non-existent, whether that transpires accidentally or on purpose. Still no answer.

After another two hours and two more unanswered texts, he goes back over again. There is no answer when he raps on her door. So this time, he calls her cell.

And hears it ringing, inside.

*She’s there,* he thinks. She’s in there, and she’s not answering the door. He knocks again.

Beckett listens to her phone ring and realises that she has been caught out. She never goes anywhere without her phone. She should have switched it off, but she can’t switch it off, because she can’t ever take the risk that she lets her father down. Never again. And now that provision of support has betrayed her. Not opening the door, when it’s obvious she’s here, would be childish, silly, and above all weak.

“What do you want?” She stands foursquare in the doorway. Unwanted pity scrolls through his face. “I’m busy.” Busy trying to disappear. Busy trying to stop, trying to forget. Seeing Castle only makes her remember his cutting, hurtful words – he’s so very, very good at memorable words – and her inability to rely on her father. “You made your point, so what are you doing here? Surely you should be with your *family.*” She is hatefully satisfied to see him flinch.

Castle’s flinch, unfortunately, is followed by a step forward. Beckett has the choice of staying put and being walked into, which would entail him touching her, which is bitterly undesirable, or stepping back, which will entail him being inside her apartment. Also bitterly undesirable, but likely to be marginally less painful and certainly shorter. Let him say what he likes and then leave. No point in provoking an immediate fight. Let him say his uninformed sayings and let them all wash past and away. He knows nothing, and understands less, and so nothing he can say will make any difference at all. Besides which, she now knows exactly what to do to ensure he leaves and never looks into her life again. It’s the least worst outcome of the ones which seem to be available.

She steps back, and away, turning her back on him and returning to her nest on the couch. Every line of her posture connotes indifference; every inch of her face is cold. Her apartment is as vague, empty and chilly as every other time he’s seen it.

“What is it?” she says again, with a snap.

“I came to apologise. For what I said.”
“Accepted,” she says politely, and nothing more. Not even *goodbye*. She’s perfectly still, perfectly calm, perfectly untouchable. Slick, sardonic Beckett, barriered to the max.

“Don’t you even *care*?”

“Why should I? You have no idea about any of it, so your thoughts don’t matter. It makes no difference to me what you think.”

Castle looks down at her. “You almost slapped me. You *cared* then.”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have.” It’s entirely unclear whether she means the almost-slap or the caring. “I have a lot to do.” *So go away and let me do it* is very clear. Castle looks around. There’s a coffee cup on the table, and a book. The television is off. The apartment is perfectly tidy. Beckett is wrapped up in unlovely sweats and woolly socks. There’s a certain pinched tightness in her face which suggests she might be cold, though the apartment’s temperature is pleasant enough.

“Sure looks like it,” he says sarcastically. “You aren’t dressed for going out, your apartment’s perfectly tidy, and you’ve been doing nothing all afternoon. Except ignoring me.”

“I don’t have to answer you outside of the precinct. I don’t answer *to* you anywhere. What I do with my days off is my business and mine alone. Your research doesn’t extend to my personal life or my father’s. Now please go back to your family. We have nothing to say to each other. You said everything you needed to.”

“I got it wrong.”

“It’s not important. You didn’t know.” Her indifferent tone is the final nail in his coffin.

“I didn’t know because you didn’t tell me. Just like you didn’t tell me why you were upset by mulled wine or by Christmas or why you were seeing Mrs Berowitz.”

“Why should I tell you? Our life is not your business. It’s private. I’m not putting it up for you to use in your book. It’s bad enough you follow me around.” She swallows, convulsively, and begins. “I wish I’d never met you.”

Castle is rocked back by the force of her statement. “You wish you’d never met me?” He stands stunned. She clearly means every word of it. There’s bleak silence in the room.

“Yes. I wish you’d never appeared in my life. I wish I’d never agreed to go for a drink with you, and never agreed to going Christmas shopping with you, and never gone to your loft. I should never have got involved with you. It was never going to work.”

“You’re wrong.”

“No. I was wrong to get involved. Go back to your family, Castle.”

“You keep saying that. *Go back to your family*. What’s your problem with my family?”

She stiffens, almost infinitesimally. Almost. He’s hit something. “What’s your problem with my family, Beckett? That’s what this is all about, isn’t it? You can’t deal with my family.”

It’s the perfect opportunity to end all this for ever, just as she’d planned.

She spins to face him, skin dead white and eyes blazing. “No. I can’t deal with your family.” He
hears the echo of his own words in hers, and the knife stabs through his gut. She holds his gaze. “So let’s call it quits now. It’s never going to work.” But then her eyes drop away, just that betraying fraction of a second before she turns from him.

“What aren’t you saying, Beckett?” He will force the truth from her. There’s more to this story. “Tell me the truth about why you don’t want anything more.”

“You want the truth? Fine. *Have* the truth. I can’t deal with seeing you with Alexis.” The colour drains from his face. “Happy now?”

Castle turns and leaves without another word, the door closing quietly behind him.

He’s all the way home and putting his key in the lock of the door when the whole mess comes crashing down on him. She can’t deal with seeing him with Alexis. It’s the one thing he couldn’t have dealt with: the one blow this can’t survive. She was right. It’s never going to work. If she can’t deal with them together, it’s never going to work. Better keep to the precinct, and the bullpen, and the cases. He sits alone in his study, mourning what might have been. He’d really thought that they could have something, but not if she can’t deal with him and his daughter.

He admits to himself that he’d been flailing for ways not to lose her, to try to find an excuse for her behaviour. It’s not just about the book. He’d wanted more. He’d wanted soft, affection-seeking Kat just as much as he’d wanted Detective Kate-hard-ass-Beckett. It occurs to him that she’d stopped being Kat with him after the first time he’d persuaded her to dinner at his loft, with Alexis. She’d never quite softened into Kat-ishness with him, after that. So why’s she trying to drive him away, rather than look for ways they could make it work? That’s easy. She doesn’t think it can work. She said so. He wonders why, if she feels so strongly, she’d bothered to try and hide it from him and Alexis until now. He sits, solitary, as time passes, seconds falling as coldly as the snow, as icy as Beckett’s words.

Misery doesn’t stop his mind working, looking for a story he likes better, an explanation that fits. This feels all wrong. The sympathetic, supportive, compassionate Beckett of the precinct, pouring out support and her arm around a crying Mrs Berowitz, the Beckett who’s always there for her father, the one who’d hidden her feelings so well that empathetic, sensitive Alexis hadn’t noticed a thing, doesn’t fit this hard, cruel conversation. Beckett had put her comments in the bluntest, most unpleasant way possible: hadn’t softened the blow at all.

She’s done everything possible to look like the bad guy. In fact, she has done everything she could to make him think the worst of her, right the way along since he’d said *he* wasn’t doing it any more, and the only thing that had got in the way of that perception was her own father, who had let him know enough of the truth to show that she might not be as bad as she’s painted herself. No explanations, no excuses, no wasted words. She’d hit the one point guaranteed to make him walk away, no questions asked, no reasons wanted.

But it doesn’t feel right. None of it feels right.

She’s made sure she looks bad enough that he won’t come near her, or her history, or her father, ever again. He’d kept asking questions and looking for the story and she’s kept hiding. He should just accept that it’s all a total bust, and walk away.

She’d accepted affection from him for just as long as he didn’t get too close to the real story. He’d even said it: *no questions*, after the mince pie fiasco, and she’d relaxed and been with him. As long as he was there without really being there. She didn’t want to lead, but she didn’t want to reveal anything to him that might show him why. And every time he paused and it seemed that he might ask something that would uncover the past, she reverted to slick-shelled, sexy Beckett and took
charge herself. Which, he now realises, is why he felt it was second-best every time she did it. Because it was. She was doing it to shut down his questions. To move him away from areas she didn’t want to deal with.

Oh. Oh, oh, oh. She was only Kat when she wasn’t thinking about – or being reminded of – her history. He takes a leap of intuition – it certainly can’t be justified logically – and decides that she could only be comforted and relax when she could forget.

But she’d said that he should stay away from her father and his life – not just hers, his too – and she’d tried very hard to shut her father down, as well, when he’d been talking about it. And then she’d been in that strange, protective posture, as if she’d been shielding her father from him. She’s never told him anything about her family, or her history: he’d had it all from Ryan, or worked it out from tiny clues, or from her father’s words.

But why has she done any of it? – oh God. He knows the final reason why, abruptly. He’s writing a whole book based on her, and he’d even been angry because he didn’t know her story and couldn’t make Nikki right because of it: he’d used her mother’s murder to write a whole backstory but it hadn’t been enough. Oh God. She thinks – and she is right because that’s exactly what he just did with her mother – that he’ll use her history in his books. Oh God. She’s protecting herself from him, but mostly she’s protecting her father.

So she had told him, Castle, something sure to make him walk away and not ask any more questions at all. Okay, it’s also the absolute truth. But it isn’t the truth in the way she’d ensured that he’d interpret it. She pushed him away to protect her father… and didn’t hesitate to do it. Ryan had said it, without knowing it. Ryan had told him that Beckett was always there for her father.

Hold on. She supports her father. All the time. Oh, hell. She can’t bear seeing a normal father-daughter relationship, because she doesn’t have one. And he’d gone and shoved her into situations where she had to watch a normal, supportive, parent-child relationship, and then he’d been angry and upset because she was so uncomfortable.

She has, in fact, played him. She’d told him the truth in exactly the way most likely – dead certain – to ensure he never came near her again. And she’d been right. He’d been planning, all the way home and right up till five minutes ago, to tell Montgomery that he was done. He’s got enough for a single book, and he’d have found a new inspiration.

He wonders, far too late, what had happened after she walked out his loft. He wonders what he’d find, if he went back over to her apartment now, and whether it would be anything other than the barrel of a Glock pointed at his head.

And he wonders what’s going to happen when he makes it clear that he’s not leaving the precinct, and he’s not letting her be a martyr at his expense when she hasn’t even asked him if he’ll use her dad, and he is not giving up on her.

Beckett is still sitting on the couch, not caring about anything. Stopped, in fact: disappeared from view. She’s done what she had to do to support her father and keep his suffering private, except as he chooses to disclose it. She won’t have him gawped at by a horrified public; ruin his reconstructed life because it won’t take the gossip rags five minutes to find him and splash his past around, destroy his career and profession and send him right back down into the depths.

She would love to put her burdens down, but doing so always seems to mean explaining, and she will not drag it all up from behind her walls where it’s safely imprisoned. She could only lay
down her load when people (she doesn’t think Castle) weren’t aware that she had the load to lay down. She’d rather anything than be looked upon with pity; anything rather than have to abandon her father again.

Anyway. She’s dealt with the instant problem. She won’t have to deal with Castle any more. He’ll get what he needs to from the precinct, leave in the near future, and he can make up the rest. It’s all fiction, after all. No need for hard reality.

Later, dinner eaten and book finished, she goes to bed, curls into her comforter and isn’t really warm, and doesn’t cry; just as she hasn’t cried over her father in years, just as she doesn’t cry over the choices she’s made.

She never uses the word sacrifice.

She doesn’t do much on Sunday, either, sleeps late, again, does little, again; until she has to go to her father’s for dinner. She steels herself to that, as well. He’ll want to play games: because that’s how they always cover the difficult gaps in conversation.

So they do play games. But Jim also wants to talk.

“Is everything okay, Katie?”

“Fine, Dad.”

“It’s just not like you to be having a row with your co-workers.”

“Castle is not a co-worker. He’s following us around for research. He wants to write about the NYPD.”

“I know he’s following you. But at Christmas you said he was quite useful, and it sounded like you were friends. He looked nice enough, the other night. Bit quiet, though. I thought you said he never stopped talking.”

“He was leaving. He’d been talking.” Oh yes, he’d been talking. Just as well her father hadn’t heard it.

“You mean you were having a fight, Katie.”

“What? No.”

Jim looks penetratingly at her.

“Katie, I couldn’t hear the words, but the tone was audible from the moment I got out the elevator, and the two of you were squared up like you were in the ring at Madison Square Gardens. So don’t give me that look.”

Beckett concentrates on her move, and sends one of Jim’s men back to home. She doesn’t say Sorry.

“He’d come to complain that he wasn’t seeing enough of the work. It got a little heated. He followed Ryan around last week and that seemed to sort it out.”

Jim looks at her again, in a way she hasn’t seen for many years. Parental disbelief is a large part of it. I-know-you’re-lying is most of the rest. Just for good measure, there’s some amusement.

“Katie, I may be old, but I’m not stupid. That argument had nothing to do with the precinct. That
“It’s your go, Dad,” Beckett diverts. Jim draws his card, glances swiftly at the board and manages to send two of Beckett’s men back to home by sliding.


“No need to gloat.”

Jim grins. “I like this game. Where did you say you got it?”

“I’ll take you. Next Saturday. I don’t remember the store name, but it’s only a couple of streets away from my apartment. I’m sure I can find it again.”

“That would be nice.”

Beckett grins happily as she manages to start a man off again. “There,” she says. “Catching up with you. I’m not having you winning every time.”

“So what’s really going on, Katie?”

“Nothing. Everything’s fine.” Just as long as Rick Castle stays out of her life.

“Hmmm,” Jim mutters, sceptically. “Katie… you don’t have to put your life on hold. Have some fun. Patch things up with your Rick Castle. You don’t fight like that with someone you don’t care about. Go fix it.”

She can’t fix it. She doesn’t even want to try to fix it. And she can’t ever tell her dad why she won’t be fixing it. So she smiles happily and agreeably and finishes the game, and demands another one because she lost, and then another to settle who’s the champion this evening.

And afterwards she goes home and reads for a while and then she goes to bed and not for one single moment of any of that time can she forget her father saying *patch things up. Go fix it.* But she can’t patch it up. There is no patch which will fix this rip.
Where can I be safe?

Monday morning Beckett is ensconced in a pile of cold case files and apparently oblivious to the world around her. Esposito arrives not long after she had, casually greets her, receives a vague wave of fingers and leaves her to it. Ryan rushes in a little later, complaining about the subway, and receives the same vague wave of fingers and a brief and unsympathetic look up.

For the next hour Beckett doesn’t look up from her desk, and when she does do so it’s only to take a brief break, make herself another cup of coffee, and sit back down again without spilling it. The boys don’t disturb her. They’ve enough work of their own to do without the risk that she might add more. Besides which, it’s fairly clear that she doesn’t want disturbed. Ryan tips Espo the wink that Castle wasn’t exactly on form last week either, and both of them draw perfectly accurate conclusions from that. Materially incomplete conclusions, but accurate. They are detectives, after all.

Castle shows up around ten, announcing his arrival by dropping a bag containing a bear claw and more carefully placing a large coffee in front of Beckett, who produces a neutral statement of thanks and manages not to look him in the eye while doing so. The death-grip on her pen belies her apparent calm.

“Morning, Beckett,” he says brightly. Under the brightness there is a certain firmness of tone. “What are we investigating today?”

“Cold cases.”

“Oh good,” he says. The boys look at him with astonishment. Beckett notably fails to look at him at all.

“You don’t have to stay and be bored.”

“It’ll be a nice quiet day.”

“Hiding from your publisher again?”

“That too.”

Too does not sound good. Too sounds as if there is another reason for Castle to be glad the day is quiet. Beckett takes a swift, all-encompassing glance at him. He looks as happy-go-lucky as ever, which is all wrong. He should be cold and angry and withdrawing: as reproachfully contemptuous and sure that she’s the bitch she made herself appear to be as he was on Saturday a week ago, and Saturday just past, when she’d thrown the ugly truth at him. But he isn’t. Is he dumb, or what? Doesn’t he have the intelligence to despise her and leave her alone? Doesn’t he have the sense to walk away from her toxic life?

Surely he couldn’t work out what she was doing? Surely it’s not a case of he’s got so much intelligence he’s worked out that she was deliberately making herself out to be the bad guy? Not that that was hard. She is. She is pettily and pathetically and disgustingly jealous of Alexis’s relationship with Castle, and every time she sees it in action, it hurts. So it fitted very nicely with the need to keep her dad safe. She hadn’t said a single word that wasn’t true. He can’t be that clever. He just can’t.

She passes him the next file from the top of the pile and goes back to her own file. She is frantically compartmentalising the harsh words of Saturday and her desperate desire to have him
leave into a spare portion of her brain; to be cool and reserved and to ignore him and pretend that he’s just the annoying writer who showed up one day and pushed in and who she doesn’t need to care about at all.

“Don’t you want to know why I’m happy about a nice quiet day?”

“No. Cold cases do not make me happy.”

“Why not?” Castle asks, momentarily distracted.

“It means we didn’t solve them first time round.” She looks back down at the file in front of her, and makes a face at it. “Not that these came from our team. Maybe a fresh eye will spot something they missed.”

Castle makes a choked noise and pretends to have swallowed his own coffee the wrong way. That’s all too close to what he’s intending to point out to Beckett, later. Specifically, his fresh eye, pointing out something she’s missed: to wit, that he is not letting her get away with her tactics. He wants her back and he’s not going to walk away without a fight. He doesn’t need to use her dad in his book, he’s decided, he just needs to know how it affected Beckett to get Nikki’s reactions right. He could even remove – though it will pain him: it’s brilliant writing even if he says so himself – enough of the backstory based on her mother, or change it a little more, to make sure it isn’t too close to reality.

He’s still not entirely sure why he’s bothering making all these adjustments simply to try to catch a woman who hasn’t exactly evidenced an overwhelming desire to be with him – except that she’d become soft Kat in his arms and he is sure that that meant more than just I want a booty call affair. He wants much more than a booty call affair. Deep down, he is sure that they would be great together, and he’s sure that he wants to write more than one book in this Nikki Heat universe so he needs her for that too, and he’s sure that she needs more life than she’s got. He’s got plenty of life to share.

And that’s where he pauses. His life involves his family. And while Beckett had put it, quite deliberately, in the worst possible way: she hadn’t been lying. Seeing him with Alexis is something she has a very hard time dealing with. This is still a major, major, problem. Still, if they can – if she will – only talk about it, then they can work something out. Can’t they? He thinks they probably can, because Beckett had taken such care to hide her feelings from Alexis, and from him, which argues that she was trying to resolve or get over them. Whether she will talk is an entirely different matter. Well, he’s going to try. If it doesn’t work, then that’s fine. At least he’ll have tried. He ignores the pang of conscience at his own lie.

Lunchtime, where Castle had hoped to begin, is a total washout. Beckett informs them all that she’s got a lunch date with Lanie, and disappears on the word. Castle is left having lunch with Ryan and Esposito, which, while pleasant enough, was not the plan.

“Lanie, want some lunch?”

“Huh?” Lanie says, blindsided by the completely unexpected request.

“I’ve done nothing but cold cases all morning, and it’ll be the same all afternoon. My eyes are bleeding and my brain is mush. Do you want to get some lunch with me?”

“Sure.”

Arrangements are swiftly made, and when Lanie walks into the diner Kate is already there, sipping
a soda and tapping her fingers impatiently.

“What’s up? You look as if you’re ready to shoot people.”

“No…” Kate says slowly. “Not really. I just hate cold cases, and that’s all we’ve got.”

“So you’ve got no Writer-Boy staring at you? Or improving the view from your desk?”

“Oh, he showed up. Nothing for him to do, but he showed up anyway.”

“Awwww,” drawls Lanie, in the most irritating voice she can manage. “That’s nice for you. He must be sweet on you.”

“I don’t think so,” Kate says. Lanie looks disappointedly at her. “I don’t think he’ll be around much longer.” Lanie looks even more disappointed. Then she drills a glare into Kate.

“What have you done, Kate? You’ve done something to make sure he leaves, haven’t you?”

“No. It’s up to him if he stays or goes.”

“Don’t you lie to me, girlfriend. You’ve got that look you get when you’ve done something that you think is right but hate anyway. What have you done?”

“Nothing.”

Lanie stares fixedly at her. Kate can’t hold her gaze. “What. Have. You. Done?”

“Told him the truth, okay? Told him the truth, that I can’t bear watching him with his daughter. Happy now?”

Lanie gapes at her, utterly appalled. “You did what?”

“I can’t. I can’t look at them being so happy and all the way it should be. I used to have that. And then my dad jammed his head down a bottle of whiskey and nothing was ever the same again.” Lanie winces. “Every time I see them it reminds me. I can’t deal with it at this time of year. I can’t deal with any family” – she spits the word – “at this time of year, but I can’t stop dealing with my dad, can I? I have to keep my dad safe.”

Her eyes are wide and glistening. She hasn’t touched her sandwich. Lanie reaches out a hand to her. Kate draws back sharply.

“So there you have it,” she says flatly. “Not pretty. Jealous of a perfectly normal family and sick-scared that my dad will get caught in the cross-fire. I’m in no place for any sort of relationship. Better to end it.”

Lanie’s never heard Kate say anything like this. She’d never realised that it ran so deep. Then again, she’s never seen Kate anywhere near anyone with a kid before, either. Will had been solo. Commitment free. Not that Kate had let him share in her commitments. Oh no. Half the reason they’d broken up was because Kate wouldn’t show him her fractured father. She hasn’t had anything other than casual relationships since.

“D’you want one?”

“Oh, sure I want one, but it’s not gonna happen here. No point trying.”

“You seemed pretty into him. What aren’t you telling me now?” Lanie fillets Kate with a
dissecting glare. “You got it on. Didn’t you? You got it on and the minute he tried to get any
closer than a booty call you started backing off as fast as you could find reverse. An’ I bet he
called you on it.” The flinch tells Lanie everything she needs to know about that. “You are so
dumb.”

“And he’s writing his book,” Kate continues, baldly and bitterly, ignoring Lanie’s words. “Using
me as his inspiration” – another venomous twist on the word – “and how long d’you think it’ll be
before he uses my dad as a character? Bad enough that he’s using me. As soon as he puts a
drunken father in, everyone in the world will know who it’s based on and it won’t take the gossip
rags and the legal gossips ten seconds to dig up all that past and ruin Dad again. And it’ll be me
who pulls him out the mire again. I can’t do that again. I can’t watch my dad fall into the booze.
It nearly killed me to walk away and accept I couldn’t fix it last time. I just can’t do it. I can’t bear
his calls coming up and having to ignore them.” She pauses, blinks, blinks again, and her face
shuts down completely.

“I’m not letting my dad down again,” Kate says, terrifyingly determined. “I can’t let him down.”
She looks at her watch, and her face contorts. “I have to go. Lunch hour’s over. See you.” She’s
out the diner before what? has left Lanie’s lips. Lunch hour is not over. They’ve barely been there
half an hour, and on cold-case days, if they do meet up, it’s a good opportunity to take most of an
hour. Kate’s left her sandwich, too. She hasn’t taken a single bite out of it. That’s not good
either. Kate is normally quite good at eating when it’s in front of her. It’s when it’s not in front of
her she tends to forget. Lanie finishes her own wrap, pondering. She is pondering whether to risk
life and limb by intervening, or let it run for a time.

Because Lanie is absolutely dead certain sure that Kate Beckett likes Rick Castle an awful lot more
than she’s admitting. She is also dead certain sure that Kate has not discussed her father with Castle
at all, still less checked any of her assumptions about what he might write. And finally, Lanie is
also absolutely dead certain sure that Mr Beckett would be quite seriously upset if he knew that his
daughter was sacrificing herself to protect him. Lanie, in fact, wonders if Mr Beckett knows
anything at all about how his daughter behaves. Still, she’s not going to get between Kate Beckett
and her dad. Nor is she going to get in between Kate and Castle. That is a very, very bad plan.
And possibly fatal. She’s just not sure for whom.

She looks at her watch and realises with annoyance that she has to get back to her lab and slab. She
wouldn’t have minded another half hour to think about what she might do. It’ll wait. Fools may
rush in where angels fear to tread, but Lanie Parrish, MD, is neither fool nor angel.

Beckett just had to get out. She’s said far more than she should have, even to Lanie, and she needed
to leave before her emotions got any more the better of her sense and control. She shouldn’t have
said any of that. Ever. She aims for Tompkins Square Park, which at lunchtime on a dank
February day is unlikely to be populated by anyone who might disturb her. She’s got twenty
minutes, tops, to get herself back under control. Compartmentalise, Kate. Get it together.

Snow, wet flakes only a step above sleet, is falling on her: leaving her soft beret and scarf speckled
white on the dark red, staining her shoulders. The damp flakes weigh her down, and her whitening
shoulders slump. The snow greys the ends of her hair, not covered by her hat. The burden of her
choices hunches her back, and she feels old and defeated. She stares unseeingly at the falling snow
adding to the dirty covering of the ground. So has the weight of her choices accumulated, covering
the frozen earth of her walled off life.

The advantage of sitting here, huddled in her warm coat and hat and scarf; feet in boots, is that the
raw, damp air chills her emotions as it does her body; the creeping frigidity of the Snow Queen’s
icy kiss, with her being cast in the role of Kay. No Gerda here, to melt her icy heart and shell through loving warmth. She doesn’t look for that.

She doesn’t look for comfort, either. Comfort comes with questions, and she’d rather not have any of those. She’d rather simply be slick, sardonic, and largely solitary Beckett. It’s so much safer that way. Look what’s happened today. She’d lost control, admitted how she feels to Lanie – and she’d seen Lanie’s reaction. Appalled horror. She’d be even more horrified if she knew that occasionally, on the worst and darkest days back then, Beckett had wished for it all to be over, for that one final, fatal call that begins I’m sorry for your loss. And it’s all because Castle had showed up on Saturday and rocked her right out of her normal composure and control and she hasn’t got it back yet.

She shivers. It’s time to get back. She pulls her shell around her and re-asserts her precinct personality, radiating her confidence in her ability to do her job and be the best. At least she has that. She can always rely on that. Professional success, tangibly measured by clear-up rate. No-one can argue with or judge her poorly or condemn her for her work. No-one.

Whatever condemnation might otherwise arrive.

Back in the bullpen, there is light and noise and warmth and bustle. None of it warms her at all, nor does she expect it to, nor will it, nor does she want it to. Unfortunately, there are cold cases still: no new body; and even more unfortunately there is still the too-perceptive, too-discerning gaze of Castle. She really thought – hoped – that he would have gone home.

“You’re covered in snow, Beckett. Have you been secretly making snow angels without me?” She musters an eye-roll. “That’s not fair. We could make snowmen. Have a snowball fight.” She doesn’t think so. Why can’t he just take the brick she’d applied to his head and go away?

“No. It’s snowing. I was out. In the snow. So I’m snowy.”

Castle looks at the melting snow on her coat and beret, raises his eyebrows in a sceptical fashion that blazes in neon lights that is more snow than a short brisk walk would leave, and doesn’t comment further.

“How’s Lanie?” he says instead. That is also not a helpful topic. Compartments. This is the precinct compartment.

“Fine,” she replies, in a way designed to shut that line down, and opens the cold case file in front of her in an I’m busy don’t interrupt way. “Ugh,” exits her lungs as she begins. The file is not inspiring. It’s obvious who committed the murder. The problem is that there isn’t enough evidence to prove it. She closes that file. No-one is going to authorise the overtime for a canvass of the neighbourhood in the detail needed. Not that there’s time. The diktat to close cases has left uniforms at a premium. She leaves a scribbled list of suggestions for progressing the case when time and budgets allow – so that would be the day after never, then. Sometimes, you simply have to accept reality. She winces, snaps the files shut with an assertive crack, and pulls the next one towards her likewise assertively.

Castle quietly pads off to the break room and meditatively makes himself a coffee. Some thinking seems indicated, and he isn’t going to do it while sitting next to Beckett, who might read his thoughts in his face. Currently, she’s as wholly barriered as he’s ever seen her. If she did see Lanie for lunch – and he is not presently inclined to believe that without question, given that she’s misled him a few times recently – then it was a pretty short and unhappy meal. Her eyes are tired and there are tiny lines of tension all around them; her mouth is tightly pinched and not kissable at
all. There was too much snow on her outer garments for a brisk walk back from lunch, and, he
realises, she looked (and still looks) cold, as she had done in her apartment on Saturday.

He sips his coffee and contemplates the position. Beckett looks no happier than she has at any time
since she pushed his buttons and he walked out. He hasn’t seen a single trace of Kat since before
Christmas – he’s decided that her debilitating headache doesn’t count – and right now she’s nearly
as warm as an ice sculpture. This time, he recognises it as a defence mechanism. Don’t get
involved, don’t explain. Don’t ask, don’t tell. And if you manage all that, then you won’t get
hurt. Of course, there will be no joy, either. He thinks of her smart, cheerless, joyless, vague
apartment: its abstract pictures and lack of souvenirs or mementoes or photographs. There had
been no photographs at all. No memories. Nothing to be attached to. He wonders, if he asked her,
what she’d save if her apartment went up in flames. Maybe he should ask her; maybe that way
he’d learn something about her. He drains his cup and returns to his chair. Beckett doesn’t look
up.

“I’m bored, Beckett,” he whines theatrically. “Amuse me.” From the annoyed expression on her
face, laced with frustration and tinged with terror, he thinks that she might be beginning to work
out that her underhand tactics are not going to pay off.

“I have a job. I have work to do. I am not a circus clown or a children’s party entertainer.”

“No, no. You don’t need to be a clown.” Beckett looks very like she’s about to add No, because
you are, in a tone with no humour at all. “I had a thought.”

“So have I got a thought. My thought is that I should get on with my work without any
distractions.”

“A little distraction would be good for you,” Castle drawls, and lets just enough heat appear in his
gaze to make his meaning – and memories – obvious. It has no apparent melting effect on Beckett.
If anything, the touch me not exclusion zone deepens further. “I’m not expecting a song-and-dance
show. It’s just a game. Ryan and Espo could play too.”

“We all have plenty of work to do.”

“C’mon. It’ll take two minutes at most. Six if the boys join in.”

“No. Since you won’t shut up till this is done” – Castle whoops, mentally – “then get on with it.”

“It’s easy. I ask one question and you have to answer truthfully straight back.” He sees the anger
rising. “Nothing inappropriate. All questions and answers suitable for a first-grade audience.”

“Get on with it.” She sounds really irritated, now.

“I’d rather you’d said Get it on, you know,” Castle says soulfully, improving the shining hour not
at all, and scoots his chair back. Unexpectedly, nothing happens that he would have needed to
avoid. “Never mind.”

“Just ask already. Maybe then I can get on with important matters rather than pandering to your
inadequate attention span.”

Castle looks wounded. “Okay,” he grumps. “No need to be nasty.” His attention span is perfectly
fine: it’s just that it’s not on cop work right now. It is, on the other hand, quite firmly on Beckett’s
massive irritation that he’s still around. She really does want him gone, doesn’t she? The funny
thing is, that she doesn’t look at all happy about anything. Castle’s firm conviction that she’s
trying to get rid of him to protect her father strengthens. “If your apartment went up in flames, and
you could only save one single item apart from what you were wearing, what would it be?”
Won't you please, please help me?

“My bird,” Beckett says instantly, to Castle’s utter astonishment, and then immediately turns to her file.


“One question. One answer. One minute. All of which are now over. Either be some help, be quiet, or be gone.” Her voice is wholly uncompromising. It’s pretty clear that she expects him to go home. He considers, briefly, whether staying or going is more likely to get him what he wants: being a discussion with Beckett where he explains to her some of the facts of life which she doesn’t appear to understand. Or, much more likely, that she doesn’t want to understand and is therefore ignoring. Well, she isn’t going to get to ignore them. Starting with not ignoring him. Over the course of the day he’s become entirely convinced that he’s correct in his assumptions and that Beckett is pursuing an entirely ridiculous course of martyrdom and self-sacrifice for no good reason at all. In fact, all she had to do was tell… him… about… it. Oh. Like bear-trap closed-off Beckett would tell anyone anything about anything. Good call, Rick. Of course she wouldn’t. She barely knows you. Bed or not.

He returns to the break room – he will be swimming in coffee at this rate – and ponders a little further. He has a sharp-horned dilemma. He has to push her in order to break this deadlock, but pushing her has not exactly brought him unqualified success. Ah. Yes. Pushing her into visiting his loft and seeing his family (trying to bring her into his family) has been – and will for some time continue to be – spectacularly unsuccessful. Pushing her by detailed – or any – questioning, likewise. Being invited to hers, partially successful, if he counts booty calls as in any way successful. Arriving at hers and providing undemanding – as in no questions – affection and/or sex – the two are emphatically not the same – universally successful. The only problem is that since Christmas it might as well have been a series of paid-for escort service calls, and he is not prepared to be a live action sex toy. But… and but. He smiles very slowly and very dangerously, in a way which would terrify Beckett.

But… she wants and needs affection and to be Kat… and if he doesn’t ask any questions he might – er – persuade her back to Kat-ness. Slick, sarcastic, sexy Beckett does slick, sexy booty calls. Kat didn’t. Kat did soft making-out and cuddling and someone else taking the lead. (But not taking charge. A careful and fine, but very necessary, distinction.) He slips back into memory and tries to remember how he had managed it previously.

That’s it. He’d gently – but definitively – made the first move; gently and then more forcefully (she’d liked that) kissed her and held her comfortingly tightly against him; and she’d let it happen, fallen into it with him and become softer, purring and contented Kat. He returns his focus to the world around him, moves to the door and peruses Beckett’s tight, tense face and posture, and abruptly wonders when she was last able to be Kat; when she last relaxed and let go. He doesn’t expect that her fragile, failed father can provide her with any respite, rather the reverse. She supports him, he’d finally, far too late, worked out.

Quite the reverse: she gives her father respite. It is, he recognises, quite possible that the last time she truly relaxed (because she is surely not relaxed now) was… well. Was when? Not since Christmas. Not even when he went home with her from the bar before Christmas, though that was close. He hasn’t seen her relaxed since after the mince pie fiasco, and that had been more luck than judgment. That time, he’d promised not to ask questions, and she’d relaxed and then they’d made love and she’d been softer Kat, whom he’d been able to keep close and hold tucked in his
arms. So, no questions. Not yet. And a reassurance that he won’t write her father into Nikki. If she weren’t so fretful about her father, then maybe she wouldn’t be so fretful about coming to his and seeing him with Alexis.

Right. He has a plan. Show up, explain some of the realities of life, keep showing up, and then take – very carefully, he doesn’t want shot or otherwise incapacitated – the lead, to show that he can support her. That means, therefore, staying around until she leaves – or maybe a better option would be leaving now and returning shortly before shift ends.

He wanders back out of the break room, bids everyone a cheerily collective farewell, receives some colourful commentary from the boys and a nondescript mutter from Beckett, and departs with a thoroughly satisfied, predatory smile that, had she seen it, would have told Beckett instantly that her worst fears are about to be realised: Castle is indeed far too intelligent and hasn’t bought her actions at all. He’s still smiling dangerously when he gets home.

Beckett is unimpressed by both Castle’s boredom – he didn’t need to show up today – and his desire to play Twenty Questions. She wants him simply to go – where is entirely irrelevant as long as it’s elsewhere – and his comment about distraction and the scorching glance which accompanied it merely induces a feeling of dread that she hasn’t achieved her aim of driving him away. She tells herself firmly that it’s only an instinctive reaction of Castle’s which means less than nothing and would be applied to any female in his line of sight who was not actually in a coffin. Even then he’d probably try to find out if it were a vampire and thus ripe for flirtation. That sensible thought doesn’t prevent the sinking feeling in her gut, and telling herself that she’s done quite enough to show him that she’s toxic and he should quit the game isn’t helping either. She has put him off. Permanently. She has. She has to have done.

His question is stupid. Her apartment is not likely to catch fire. However, her answer exits her mouth without the involvement – and certainly without the permission – of her brain. That’s it. Question time is over. Castle disappears again, thankfully, and Beckett is left thinking about her small quartz bird: its bright black stone eyes, its cheerfully orange bill and lavender tail. It’s her only tangible memento, only bearable because it isn’t obviously a reminder. There are a few photos, in a box, at the back of a closet. It’s all she managed to save. She looks back down at the case file and concentrates very hard on it. There is no clear missed lead here either, but she has to review the whole file. Castle returns, and she mentally braces for the next assault on her hard-won control. She needs him to go. She needs time in the undemanding company of the boys, who don’t ask anything of her except that she leads their team to the best of her ability. That burden, she can bear. That burden, though, she chose for herself, rather than it being forced upon her, and it comes with teamwork, which helps. It never removes the majority of the weight, but even a little lightening of her load gives her strength to carry on.

Astoundingly, Castle leaves. Finally he’s taken the hint. Beckett’s biting tension eases marginally, and she manages a solid hour of concentration with no distractions. Her smooth, superficially settled shell hardens and deepens. It’s all going to be just fine. He’ll leave, her dad will be safe, and it will all be just fine.

As long as she clings to the knowledge that she’s made the right choice. The easy choice would have been to pretend and lie and then secretly, hiddenly resent the position, simply to hang on to a half-arsed, uncommitted affair with no trappings of a relationship at all, with none ever arising. That, she couldn’t have borne. She can bear the lack of any support.

She’s borne it for ten years, after all. She’s used to it.

Another hour passes in intense focus, sadly to no further effect. Beckett is beginning to contemplate
the end of shift, and, rather unusually, the idea that she might go home at shift-end and lose herself in the quiet peace there: maybe strum her guitar a little, maybe cook her dinner. She could have blinis, she thinks. Yes. Warmed blinis, with a little smoked salmon, and a little sour cream; and then a winter-weight chicken dish, slightly fiery – no. Shashlik. She hasn’t made shashlik in a very long time. She’ll have some lace potatoes, and some green beans, and some flat bread. Planning her dinner improves her mood, and remembering that she has some Russian tea as well makes her more content. She’s plotting her exit time and route home to collect all the necessary ingredients in a cloud of general satisfaction when, simultaneously, her phone rings and Lanie appears from the elevator.

“Beckett.”

“Kate…” She’s already moving to the stairwell. “Kate… I… I… I didn’t know who to call. Just… Kate, please?”

“What’s wrong? Where are you?”

“Home. I need help. He’s… he went out and he’s not home and he wasn’t really warmly dressed” – it sounds trivial, but it’s not: it’s so easy simply to fall asleep and freeze, especially when drunk – “and I can’t reach him on his cell.”

“Was he at work?”

“He called in sick.” Definitely drunk, that means. At the beginning of the day, or still so from the night before.

“When did he go out?”

“Eleven.” When bars start to open. She knows the timings: the terrifying clock-watching. And it’s after five now. “He said he’d only be a few minutes.” They always do say that. There’s the sound of uncomprehending tears. “It’s been so much worse, since…” That would be a trigger. But he’d already been on the downward path. If not this, then another thing. The words have trailed off: that sentence not needing to be completed. She’s moving out of the stairwell, back to her desk, shrugging on her coat and scarf as she powers down her computer, puts her papers away, picks up purse and beret.

“I’m on my way.” She swipes off.

“Kate.”

“Not now, Lanie. I gotta go.” She can’t stop for Lanie, and anyway she’s really not interested in continuing their earlier conversation in any way. Lanie’s expression had been very revealing. Said it all, really. Astonishment, tinged quite heavily with horrified disgust. Another good reason she shouldn’t get too close to – other people. She is simply not a nice person, and she’s tired of pretending to herself that she is. It’s not that she doesn’t want pity because it implies weakness, though that’s a large part of it: it’s that she doesn’t deserve it when, if people knew the truth of what she had felt and what she had done, they wouldn’t offer it. She’s run out of pretence.

“Kate, wait!” Lanie lays a hand on her arm Beckett doesn’t have time for this. She shakes Lanie’s hand away, not gently.

“Lanie, let go. I gotta go. Out the way.” She pushes past and calls the elevator. Lanie’s on her heels. “I’ve no time for whatever it is you want.”

Lanie is left staring at Kate’s chilly, blank face and get-out-my-way demeanour as the doors close.
That is not what she came here for. She’s been brushed off like an annoying horsefly.

“Where’s she going?” she asks the boys. They look almost as befuddled as she does.

“Dunno. Got a call, rushed out.”

“Now you know as much as we do. Nothin’.”

“Didn’t you have lunch with her?”

“Yep.” Lanie doesn’t add to that.

“You did?”

“Hey, Castle,” arrives in resigned surround-sound.

“Yes, I did,” Lanie affirms. “Not that it lasted long. What’s it to you? And what’s wrong with Kate?”


“You tell me,” Lanie says bitterly. “According to the two stooges here” –

“We got three now,” Esposito puts in, “seein’ as Castle’s showed up again.” It’s Castle’s turn to growl.

“ – she got a call and left. Shoved past me and as good as told me she didn’t want to talk to me.”

“‘S right,” says Ryan.

“A body dropped and you didn’t call me?”

“Don’t be dumb. If a body dropped we’d all be there.” Castle knows that, but he’d rather look dumb than reveal what he thinks has happened. Two options: Beckett’s father or Mrs Berowitz. On balance… he’d bet on Mrs Berowitz, if only because if it were her father there would have been some noticeable consternation, not just a bit of pushing past.

“Oh,” he says, pretending befuddlement. “Okay. Who wants to come for a drink, then?”

This idea finds more favour than most which he suggests, and the entire gang decamps to a comfortably unpretentious bar in the vicinity. As Lanie puts it, no point in walking further in the snow than you have to. Nobody mentions Beckett’s abrupt departure again, though Castle catches Lanie casting him peculiar glances throughout the next couple of hours. She doesn’t ask anything, though, and nor does he. If Beckett and Lanie are at odds, then the safest place to be is a galaxy far, far away.

Beckett resists any temptation – however slight – to use the lights and sirens, and proceeds at a strictly legal pace to Mrs Berowitz’s smart, expensive apartment in a smart, expensive location. They’d lived in one of those, once, until she’d moved out and gone to Stanford, and then her father had drunk the equity and then the bank had strongly suggested that he downsize. When she’d come back, she’d found somewhere else to live. She’d tried to live with her father, but it didn’t work. She wasn’t a child and he… he wasn’t sober. It had taken six months for her to realise that it wouldn’t work. It hadn’t stopped her spending a lot of time there. She simply hadn’t kept her possessions there, or had a room. There’s a lot of value in this apartment. She wonders, cynically,
how long it will last.

Julia is only too relieved to see her. Beckett recognises the signs of desperation and knows that, unless she can bear to have the woman hanging on her neck all the time – just as she, Beckett, had done with her training officer, and before that with her guidance counsellor – she will need to persuade her to seek and then accept professional help. She can’t give the support Julia needs, never mind the help she wants. She can’t even help herself, most of the time. She couldn’t help her father then.

But she can help Julia now, and she does, and she will.

“He still isn’t answering. Thank you so much for coming.” She’s almost hysterical. This needs calmed down, or it will be useless.

“Okay,” Beckett says soothingly. “Tell me everything. Could I maybe have a coffee, please? It’s cold out.” Something to do, to occupy Julia’s fidgeting hands, to bring her down a little. She’s the sort of woman who needs to be doing.

“Oh… yes, of course. Sorry. I should have offered.”

“No, of course not. You can talk to me while you make it, if you like?”

Beckett’s cool, gentle tones are already having an effect. Julia is less frantic, though naturally no less worried. She’s beginning to think, Beckett can see. She automatically starts the kettle and finds delicate china cups; puts them on a pretty, fragile tray with cream and sugar in jug and bowl; and sets it out as if this were a meeting of the Temperance Movement in 1880. While she does that, she talks, just as Beckett had wanted. Well. Not wanted. But she can’t fail to help.

“He wasn’t well, last night. Stomach bug.” No, Julia. He was so drunk he was throwing up. “He’s lost so much weight.” Yeah. That’s how it goes. Not much nutrition in alcohol, and they don’t eat when they’re passed out drunk. “So he called in sick this morning, and I let him sleep so he got some rest,” or came out his coma, more likely, “and then he got up and we had breakfast and he ate properly – I made waffles” – Beckett recognises the focus on small details of normality to hide the reality of living with alcoholism – “and had some coffee and then when it got to eleven or so he said he’d go out to the drugstore because he needed some shaving cream. He should only have been a quarter-hour.” That’s how it goes. He’s in a bar. Beckett thinks about this end of town.

“Where’s the drugstore?”

“Two blocks west and south. The Duane Reade.” There’s a bar just another block down. Beckett would bet most of Julia’s expensive jewellery that she’ll find him there. She hopes she’ll find him there. The alternatives are not pretty. “He said he’d only need a lighter jacket because he’d only be ten minutes. He never gets cold. My hands are always cold but his never are…” Julia is very close to crying.

“Okay. I’ll go and have a quick look round. Whatever I find, in about half an hour, I’ll come back. Okay? But before I go” – this is not going to be easy – “I want you to think about exactly what he’s wearing and maybe find me a photo so that if I can’t find him quickly we can do something about it easily.” Beckett doesn’t say – so we can search the hospitals and morgue. That won’t help. It may be necessary and it may already be true, but it will certainly not help.

When she gets back, too, she’s going to have to tell Julia all over again that she can’t save her husband. She can only save herself. She has to get professional help.
It doesn’t occur to Beckett that she’s laying out her soul to help Julia, where she need not and will only suffer by so doing. It doesn’t occur to her that she’s compensating for not saving her father when he needed her by trying to save Julia and her husband. It certainly doesn’t occur to her that this is hardly congruent with being the ball-breaking bitch she believes she’s been since Christmas, culminating in the discussions of Saturday and today. In fact, she thinks that if she were a better person she’d not be trying to escape the pressure of Julia’s desperation and belief that Beckett can help; she’d not be hoping that Julia will let go of her and take professional help instead; and she’d not be hoping that she can find Mr Berowitz in the first bar so that she can go home, where there’s no-one wanting or needing her and she can disappear; because in all those cases she should be happy and willing to help, not wishing she wasn’t here, that she’d never caught the Berowitz body at all. Just another way in which she’s selfish and unkind.

She puts her coat, scarf and beret back on and goes out into the gathering dark and the cold.
Everybody's looking for something

Beckett finds the relevant Duane Reade easily enough. This isn’t her patch, but she’s lived in Manhattan all her life and it’s not too difficult to work it out. She shows her shield to a passing store worker and swiftly finds that, as she had suspected, Mr Berowitz had never entered the store. She starts to look around for bars immediately. They aren’t far to seek. She’s rapid and focused: half an hour is not very long and there’s a reasonable amount of ground to cover.

She doesn’t think, as she searches for Mr Berowitz, that she’s hiding from herself, Lanie, and above all Castle by doing this: using her detective skills, in which she has total and wholly justified confidence, to help someone else where she can’t see a way – hasn’t even looked for a way – to help herself.

The first two bars – it’s just as well she hadn’t bet the jewellery – are a bust. No-one remembers the man, or recognises the picture. The third is a little more useful.

“Sure, lady. He came in just after opening. Started on the beer. ‘Bout lunchtime, had a whiskey chaser with a couple more beers. I stopped serving him after the third whiskey, told him to go home an’ sober up. Can’t afford for there to be trouble here. You never know when a quiet drunk like that will snap. I don’t need the beat cops takin’ an’ interest every night. Bad for business.” He stops suddenly, remembering that he’s talking to a cop. “Not that there’s anythin’ that wouldn’t stand bein’ looked at,” he says hurriedly. “Just the customers don’t like it.”

Beckett thanks him and leaves, and makes a little mental note that she should suggest – in a friendly, I-heard-something-that-might-be-useful way – to the local precinct that this bar might repay a random visit. Co-operation, that’s the game. You never know what might be important to another precinct, so it’s always best to pass it on.

She’s running out of the half-hour she said she’d be. She retracts her steps to the Berowitz apartment, heavily, trudging through the snow and slush. She can see the pattern of her evening already, and it doesn’t involve blinis or shashlik. It involves memories, and pain, and the death of hope. She wishes she could simply turn tail and run away from all these people who lean on her, or who want more of her than she’s able to give.

The hope on Julia’s face dissolves instantly. “You didn’t find him?” she says hopelessly, and in it Beckett hears a tinge of you failed me.

“No. Julia… he was in a bar. He was there till lunchtime, then he left.” No point telling her that he’d been thrown out. Not yet. “Is there anywhere he might have gone? Any places he went often, or friends he might go and see?”

“No.” Oh, hell. This is really not going to be pretty, is it? “Julia, I think we should see if he’s been picked up. Can I use this photo?” Julia is crying now. Beckett understands that. She’d done it so often herself, before and after she walked away, until the tears had run dry. She pats Julia awkwardly on the back. “I’ll need to go back to my precinct to do it.” The abandonment on Julia’s face stabs sharply on her conscience. “I’ll let you know as soon as there’s anything.”

All the way back to the Twelfth she relives the guilt and shame of abandoning someone who needs her: saving herself at the expense of another’s peace of mind. She can’t do what is needed from Mrs Berowitz’s home – but she could have stayed, and asked another to do it for her. She was drowning in her grief, and had to swim for shore. Alone. Carrying another would have sent them both under. Will send them both under.
But it hurts. Seeing the raw pain of abandonment in another set of eyes hurts.

She parks up at the precinct, notes without surprise that it’s coming up for seven pm, and attains her desk without needing to do more than wave briskly at the desk sergeant on her way past. She’ll order takeout in a while, when she’s hungry. It doesn’t occur to her that she should be hungry now. She hadn’t eaten her lunch, after all.

She starts the process of trying to find Mr Berowitz and, once she’s called each precinct – no point expecting it to be possible to run searches against the database this early in proceedings: it won’t yet have been updated reliably for anyone picked up this afternoon– makes herself a coffee and ponders pizza. She can’t be bothered with anything more complicated. She calls up a delivery service, accepts that she’ll have to share the pizza with the desk sergeant, and promptly forgets about it. She starts down the darker line of making enquiries of the morgue, thankful that Lanie had left for the day. Some helpful – her mouth twists – person would undoubtedly let Lanie know she was calling, otherwise.

Since she’s here anyway, she might as well have a look at some more cold cases while she waits for her results. She ought to call Julia, too. Presumably Mr Berowitz – what’s his first name? She isn’t sure, offhand – hasn’t turned up at home, or Beckett would have got a call. She pulls a file into the small puddle of light from the lamp on her desk. Then she recognises that as her putting off the necessary but unpleasant act of calling Julia, and forces herself to dial.

“Julia? Kate Beckett.”

“Have you found him?”

“Not yet. All the enquiries are out, and I’m waiting for the results. I’ll let you know as soon as I’ve heard anything.”

“Thank you,” Julia says faintly. It’s fairly clear that she isn’t holding out much hope. She wouldn’t find any in the databases, either. They’ve returned nothing, as yet. Beckett’ll try again in a few hours.

When her phone buzzes, Beckett suddenly remembers about her pizza, and expects it’s the desk sergeant. She doesn’t look at the screen as she answers. “Sergeant Baker? Is that the pizza? Wanna take what you want, and I’ll be down in a moment for the rest.”

“Beckett? Are you in the precinct?” Oh, fuck. What the hell is Castle calling her for?

“Yes.” No point denying it. She’s given it away. Compartmentalise. Again.

“Good. I’m coming over.”

“I’m busy.”

“New body? Can’t be. You’d have called Ryan or Espo.” No point denying that either, and from the smug, self-satisfied tone of Castle’s voice he’s been with them for the last couple of hours.

“Listen very carefully.”

“I vill say this only vonce?”

“What?”

“Bad UK TV show I saw once, on a book tour.”
“Castle, listen to me. Do not come to the precinct. I am busy. I do not have time to talk to you.” There’s a click as the call is cut. By Castle. Good. Maybe he has finally got the point.

When her phone rings again it’s the desk sergeant. This time, she checks the screen before she answers, though. With the way her luck’s running, it would be Lanie if she didn’t do that.

“Pizza here, Detective. Thanks for sharing.” She goes down, retrieves the third that’s left – enough for her: Tony Baker knows how much he can take for dinner from every detective in the precinct – and wanders back up to her desk, starting on the first slice in the elevator. It might not be blinis, or shashlik, but it’s fine. If there were only some results on the search for Mr Berowitz, everything would be perfectly fine. She disappears into the break room for some water and to start another coffee brewing, and returns to her comfort-food pizza.

She’s wiping her fingers on a handy Kleenex and finishing the coffee when there’s the first ping on her search. It’s come from the Tenth, over in Chelsea. She takes the call. White forty-something male found dead drunk outside a cheap bar. Half frozen. He’s in the cells, sobering up. No wallet, no ID. Looks like he’s been rolled.

“If I send you a photo, could you tell me if that’s your guy?”

“Sure. Would be good to get rid of him if it is. He’s a mess. Cell’s a mess. We’ll need to hose it out.” It’s worse when it’s your kitchen, Officer. Trust me, that’s worse. She snaps the photo into being a photo on her phone and e-mails it off. A few minutes later she gets the reply. No. Sorry.

Dammit. Of course it couldn’t be that easy or quick. But it’s still snowing, and now she’s really beginning to worry. If he hadn’t really been dressed for the weather, and he’d been thrown out one bar for being too wasted to be served, then he might well have wandered. Might have fallen asleep, on a bench. Might have frozen, and so died. Every year, some do. It’s only luck her father hadn’t. Her next calls come from Midtown North, and South. Nothing there, either.

“What are you doing?”

Beckett’s head whips round. For one swift moment Castle sees absolute horror in her face, before she locks it all away. Ah. She still thinks she’d got rid of him.

“Working a case. Good night.”

“Uh-uh. I shadow you. So I am shadowing you.” He smiles sunnily. “I’m staying till you leave.”

“You’ll be very bored. Go home.”

“Nope. If I’m bored, I’ll find a distraction.” The smile is even sunnier. Beckett looks as if she’s about to launch into a tirade of incandescent and – she would think – hurtful fury. It won’t hurt him at all, because she’s trying to push him away, so he doesn’t believe a word she’s about to say. Her mouth opens – and her phone rings.

“Beckett.”

“Yes?”

“Okay. I’ll be there as fast as I can. Thanks. I owe you, O’Leary. I’m sure you’ll collect pretty soon.”

“Bye.”
She starts to pack up her desk and then put on her coat. No explanation is offered.

“What’s going on? Where are we going?”

“Nothing you need to know about. Favour for a friend. I thought I’d made it perfectly clear where I stood, and you certainly made it clear where you stand. This is not your business. Go home.”

“No.” Beckett freezes. “I’m coming with you and then we are going to have a talk about what you said on Saturday.”

“Nothing more to say.”

“You might not have anything more to say, but you are damn well going to listen to me. You’re not going to stop me shadowing you, either.” He’s not – yet – angry. He is, though, determined. He follows a silent Beckett to the elevator and out to her car, and gets in without a further word from her.

“Where are we going?”

“Central Park Precinct.” That’s bitten off.

“Why?”

“Nothing to do with you.”

“What’s happened to Mrs Berowitz?”

Beckett nearly runs the light. “How did you know?” she emits, utterly horrified. She stares at him in the harsh red glare of the stop light under the streetlamps. “This is nothing to do with you.”

“It’s nothing to do with you either, but here you are, running round the city in order to help out someone you don’t even know.”

“What I do off-duty is none of your business.”

“It’s not off-duty, though. You’re doing it as an NYPD Detective. Aren’t you?”

He’s got her there. She is. If she weren’t, she shouldn’t be using the systems, and if Montgomery found out, she’d be the wrong end of disciplinary proceedings. But this is going to be difficult enough without Castle there observing every twitch of her face and hitch in her gait. She had done this so often…

“Yes,” she growls.

“Then I’m shadowing you.” There is an extremely chilly silence. “Are you going to tell me anything?”

“It’s not mine to tell.”

Castle decides to wait until after they’ve got to the Central Park Precinct. And then he’s going to go home with Beckett and shake some answers out of her. Or stroke them out of her. Whichever works fastest. The journey is completed in the same chilly silence with which it began.

It doesn’t dawn on Castle till he steps out the car to enter the unfamiliar precinct that Beckett might be locked down because finding Mr Berowitz will raise the ghouls of sharp-clawed memory. How
often, he wonders, had she done this to retrieve her father? He unobtrusively moves a little closer. Beckett doesn’t react at all. Beckett, in fact, hasn’t even noticed. Mainly because she’s staring at the desk sergeant.

“Sergeant Hardon? You’re still here?”

“No. He’s still dry.” She smiles, chopped off short. “Five years.” The smile disappears. “Detective O’Leary told me you’d picked up a Mr Berowitz in the Park? He’s involved in one of my cases, so I’ve come to take him off your hands.”

“Well, no-one better than you to deal with him, Beckett. He’s a mess.” Castle detects a wince.


“While you’re catching up, I’ll get the guy up. You got something to keep your unit clean? You might want it.”

“Yeah. Sheet in the trunk.”

“Beckett!” joyfully rumbles around the room. Shortly thereafter Beckett disappears into the embrace of something that appears to be a Bigfoot without fur. He’s huge. At least – Castle estimates – six-ten, broad in proportion, and clearly in top condition. And he’s hugging Beckett – he’s lifted her off her feet – and isn’t dead. “When’re you coming to spar with me again? You don’t call, you don’t write…” Castle is not used to feeling undersized, but he’s feeling very small right now. And very unreasonably jealous. Beckett’s relaxed and is smiling and he should be the one who can make her so, not this overgrown mass of masculinity with a badge.

“I don’t send you flowers either, O’Leary, but that’s ‘cause you ate the last lot.” She smirks at him. “You were supposed to wear them in your hair.” O’Leary has a buzz cut.

“Not my colour, Beckett. You sent pink. You know I only like orange.” She laughs. Laughs. She’s been ignoring him all day – all week – and she’s laughing with this genetic mutation? “Who’s your friend?”

“That’s Richard Castle. The novelist. He’s shadowing us.” O’Leary looks closely at him. “Really?” He sounds amazed. Castle is gearing up for a round of sarcastic and unpleasant comments about annoying tag-alongs. Bit like a lot of the Twelfth had managed in the first day or two, in fact. “He’s nicer looking than his picture, Beckett. How come you scored the pretty boy and I didn’t?”

“Hold on a moment, what? “I never get the good ones. Can’t you send him our way for a while?”

“O’Leary, you’re taken. Stop hitting on the man.”

“O’Leary, you’re taken. Stop hitting on the man.” What?

“Shhhhh, Beckett. Don’t tell everyone.”

“They all know. Ever since you brought Pete to the NYPD Christmas party.” Castle’s jaw drops.


“Really?” He sounds amazed. Castle is gearing up for a round of sarcastic and unpleasant comments about annoying tag-alongs. Bit like a lot of the Twelfth had managed in the first day or two, in fact. “He’s nicer looking than his picture, Beckett. How come you scored the pretty boy and I didn’t?”

“Hold on a moment, what? “I never get the good ones. Can’t you send him our way for a while?”

“O’Leary, you’re taken. Stop hitting on the man.” What?

“Shhhhh, Beckett. Don’t tell everyone.”

“They all know. Ever since you brought Pete to the NYPD Christmas party.” Castle’s jaw drops.

“Yeah, but you got a celebrity. Think how much kudos I’d get with him on my arm. I’d be on page six. You don’t really need him. You’re pretty enough without adding the pretty man. C’mon. Lend me him just for a day or two.” The man is practically pleading to be allowed to play
with him. Castle contemplates how nice it is to be appreciated. Then he contemplates the likely effects of this tectonic plate-sized cop knocking him over. He thinks he’ll stick with Beckett. He’s rather less likely to suffer serious injury if she falls on top of him.

“Nothing doing, O’Leary. If he wants to come and hang out here that’s his lookout. Up to him.”


“Beckett, you are no fun at all. If you won’t lend me him, d’you think he’ll sign my book?”

“Ask him yourself. He’s right there, and as far as I know he’s not deaf or stupid. Though if he’s not stupid he should really start running right now.”

The mountain turns to Castle, who produces a bright celebrity smile.

“If I go get my book, will you sign it? It’s Storm Fall. Couldn’t come to the signing.”

“Sure,” Castle says, burying his bemusement at the whole situation under the exigencies of being a best-selling author. O’Leary rumbles away, and shortly rumbles back again. Castle has never seen a mobile mountain before. The book looks tiny in O’Leary’s enormous hands.

“What’cha writing now, Mr Castle?”

“About the NYPD. That’s why I’m shadowing Beckett and her team.” O’Leary makes a noise like an avalanche. Eventually Castle realises he’s laughing.

“Well, Mr Castle, if you want some stories you come by. I remember when Beckett wasn’t a hotshot Detective.”

“O’Leary…” Beckett says dangerously.

“Really?” Castle says, with a sidelong glance at Beckett.

“Oh yes. You’d never think such a tiny little thing could be so scary, would you?” Tiny little thing? Beckett? Tiny?

“O’Leary, it’s not me who’s little, it’s you who’s a giant.”

“You’re little,” he says happily. “Bet’cha if you took your heels off Mr Castle would think you’re little too.” Beckett growls at him. “Aw, c’mon. If I can’t tease you in front of your boyfriend when can I?”

“What?”

“Ao, c’mon,” O’Leary says again. “Way he was looking at me hugging you? If he’s not your boyfriend, you really need to have a chat.” He grins mischievously. “But if he isn’t please can I have him?”

Beckett has lost her smile and is clearly on the verge of bursting. Possibly into flames. Very fortunately for both Castle and O’Leary, who Castle is now thinking is a really, really good guy with whom he should have a long and detailed discussion involving much beer, at that point Sergeant Hardon reappears with something that looks like a panhandler who’s found the stock room of a really good tailor.

“Here he is, Detective.” Necessary paperwork is completed. Castle spends the couple of minutes
Beckett takes to complete the papers in observing Mr Berowitz, while trying not to inhale any air that’s been too close to him. It’s fortunate, he reflects, that it is late, and the roads will not be too busy. The close confines of Beckett’s car are, bluntly, going to reek, even with the windows down and the air-con running on full, both of which he really hopes he can arrange. Now he understands why the sergeant had asked about keeping her car clean.

Beckett appears entirely unaffected by the state of Mr Berowitz. Clearly, however, both the sergeant and Detective O’Leary are expecting that she is affected by it, because they are now both regarding her as if she were a primed grenade.

“Thanks,” is all she says. “I’ll take him away now.”

It appears that Mr Berowitz is currently too drunk to care that Beckett is removing him. She guides him out with a hand on his shoulder, which gesture Castle would not have made for the entire total of his last Derrick Storm royalties, and steers him to her car.

“Make sure he doesn’t wander, Castle,” she says. Her voice is empty, and he wonders what her memories are. She pops the trunk and extracts a plasticised sheet, which she rapidly, efficiently and in a thoroughly practiced fashion drapes over the back seats. “Bring him here.” She puts Mr Berowitz into the back seat in standard cop fashion, hand pressing down on his head. Then she brings a plastic bowl out the trunk and puts it on his lap. “I won’t make you sit with him, Castle. You’re not a beat cop. Get in.” Her voice is just as dead as a moment ago. He doesn’t query anything. Making Beckett’s life harder at this point is not sensible.

Mr Berowitz survives the journey without further inconvenience to anyone except the stink of stale vomit and alcohol. Castle rolls his window down before he’s even fastened his seatbelt and makes absolutely no comment or conversation at all. Not soon enough they’re parking at the Berowitzes’ block.

Beckett extricates Mr Berowitz – she doesn’t ask Castle for help and something about the experienced way she brings him out the car lets him know that this is not her first rodeo, nor yet her thousand-and-first, but he props him up as Beckett shuts the car, and then takes quite a proportion of his weight. His coat can be cleaned.
Mrs Berowitz is far happier to see her husband than Beckett remembers that she was when seeing her father at any stage after the first month or so. Perhaps that’s marital love. Perhaps it’s just relief.

“Thank you, Kate. You brought him back. He’ll be so upset tomorrow.”

“Julia… Julia, he needs help. You need help.”

“But… but he’ll be fine.” Beckett’s face twists before she can stop it.

“Julia, he won’t be. You can’t save him. You can only save yourself. Trust me on this. You cannot save him unless he wants to save himself.” She’s entirely forgotten that Castle is in the room. He’s very carefully behind her, out of sight and out of mind, listening hard.

“I can,” Julia weeps. “I can. It’ll be different. He won’t do it again.”

“I have to go,” Beckett says. Her voice is empty again.

“Thank you.”

Beckett escapes without further laceration of her feelings on her razor edged memories, wanting only to go home and hide herself away now that the crisis is over: now that she’s poured herself out and left herself emptied; now that her memories have swooped upon her. It’s not till she’s at the door to the building that she remembers that Castle had been in the Berowitzes’ apartment with her and had heard every word she said.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” He recognises that there is no point asking really? Or are you sure? Or even saying Come here and let me hold you till it’s better. So instead he decides to try to force some truth out of her, because after all she’s trying her best to convince him that he shouldn’t want to be here so he might as well use that to his advantage.

“You don’t normally do Missing Persons.”

“No.”

“Why’d you do this one?”

“He had been a witness. We might still need him to testify.” It’s totally unbelievable, and she knows it. An alcoholic is never going to be called if there’s any alternative. Castle doesn’t comment, but his scepticism is palpable. He sits in the passenger seat, window still down to allow the freezing February wind to clear the toxic air and atmosphere, and waits for her to move off. Then he starts again.

“Are you going to carry on lying to me?”

“This is none of your business. I didn’t ask you to come with me. I told you not to.”

“You needed the help. You need some company now.”

“No. I don’t. I’m fine.”
“If you were fine, you’d tell me why you did it. But you’re not fine. You need to talk about it, but you won’t.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” But if she doesn’t talk about it, he knows, she’ll fall apart. She’s already halfway there. The stress fractures in her voice are evident.

“So I’ll tell you. I think that Mr Berowitz had gone out and gone missing, and then his wife called you to help because she’s been talking to you about how to cope. You gave her your card, didn’t you? The very first time, you gave her your number because you knew exactly what she was going through, because you already had. And then she called and you went to have lunch with her the day after the anniversary of your mom’s… death” – he doesn’t, can’t, say murder – “even though you were half-dead yourself from dealing with your father the day before. And you did it again two – not even two – weeks ago. And you’ve been doing it all evening since – when? Five? Half-past? It’s nearly nine now. You’d been out looking for him. You’d called every precinct in Manhattan. You called the morgue. Like you used to do.” He hears her breathing change, rasping across her throat.

“Shut up. This is not your book. This isn’t your story. You have no right to dig into anyone’s life. You’ll only use it in your books.”

“I will promise you that I will never use your dad’s story in my books. Never. That’s what you’re doing. You’re protecting him. You could simply have asked me to leave it out and told me why. I would have done. If you’d asked me.”

“You had no right to know. It’s his story. Not mine. You’re shadowing me for the story. So why should I believe you when you say you won’t use my dad’s?”

“I’ve never lied to you. Can you say you’ve never lied to me?”

There’s a silence. Castle returns to the main point. Beckett’s knuckles are white on the wheel, her eyes locked on the road and her mirrors.

“You did it all because you know what she’s going through. You can’t not support her, even though you don’t know her at all. You went out of your way to help her. You go out of your way to solve crimes to help strangers. You do everything and beyond to help your dad. Why don’t you want anyone to know that, Beckett? Why are you trying to make me believe the worst of you?” Tell me the truth, Beckett. Talk to me. Let me in.

“Shut up!” Her voice has cracked.

“I will not. You deliberately tried to drive me off by pretending you’re a ball-breaking bitch who hates my daughter. You’ve managed to get into a fight and push away your best friend and I bet it’s exactly the same thing. Well, I don’t believe you. I don’t believe any of it. You’re martyring yourself supporting your father and any stray who comes along at the expense of making any other life for yourself.”

“You have no say in how I live my life. You know nothing about it.”

“Yeah, because you don’t tell anyone. Now you don’t want friends? You leaned on me. Right up till Christmas, you leaned on me. What’s changed?”

“This conversation is done.” But she isn’t denying or answering those last statements. “This is your block. Good night.”

“And if I don’t get out? If I just stay here? What’ll you do then? Storm off like you did last
time?"

“If you don’t get out, I will take you back to the precinct, have you removed from my unit, and put you in a cell.” The flat, dead tone indicates that Beckett will do precisely that. Castle removes himself from the car. The tyres scream as Beckett takes off at pace. Castle goes up to his loft, spends a precisely calibrated hour and a half in concentrated thought, and then takes himself out to find a cab. He had never had the slightest intention of leaving that conversation there. He is going to break through this wall whatever it takes. She needs something, and he is going to provide it. At this point, that might include a conversation with Roy Montgomery which would result in mandatory suspension till she gets some serious therapy. It’s perfectly obvious that Beckett is right on the edge, and he doesn’t at all understand how the others haven’t seen it already.

Beckett takes off in a screech of tyres and probably leaves rubber on the road. She can only just see clearly. Castle’s ripped her protective layers right open at the worst possible time, and she’s about to take a route that she’s only taken twice in ten years to put everything back together again: once when she finally realised she couldn’t fix her father and declined to take his call for the first time, and once when she killed her first man. Humpty Dumpty, she thinks bitterly. Every time she falls she glues her shell back together again, but there’s no substance left within it. She’s used it all up now.

She stops at a late-night store and makes a single purchase. As soon as she’s in her door she puts it in the freezer. Then she showers, changes into warm nightwear, soft woolly socks, a heavy towelling robe. She’s so cold. Everything’s cold, and dark. There’s only a tiny puddle of sulky light from her table lamp, a small bedside light left on in her bedroom. She sets her alarm to loud. She’ll need it: she’s on shift tomorrow.

And then she curls up on her couch and systematically begins.

Castle raps assertively on Beckett’s door some time after ten. He’s not expecting it to be answered the first time, and probably not the second or third either. But he has to try. He doesn’t know quite what he’ll do after that, but he’ll think of something. At this stage he might well use blackmail. He is therefore absolutely astonished when he hears the lock turn over and the door start to open without a second knock being required.

When he steps in she isn’t the first thing he sees. She’s behind the door. He has a crystal clear view of a shot glass, dregs in the bottom, finger prints in the condensation still dripping down it; a cold bottle of vodka open on the table, ice on the outside; a noticeably large volume already gone. Barely a light on, no food apparent. Beckett still hasn’t appeared from behind the door and he is already terrified by what he’s seeing. Beckett drinking? Beckett drinking alone? Two vodkas is the most he’s ever seen her have and that was the first time he ever saw her off-duty in any way at all. Come to think of it, she didn’t drink the second of those. Now it looks like she’s put down several in a lot less than two hours.

“Cassle? What you doin’ here?” she slurs. Oh, fuck. This is the very last thing he’d expected. She’s drunk. Or if not drunk yet, sufficiently close already that the alcohol hitting her bloodstream will do it for her even if she doesn’t drink anything more. “Have a drink.” She moves to the kitchen with only a modicum of stagger, and reaches for another shot glass. She proffers it to him. “Drink with me.”

“Beckett? What are you doing?”

“Drinking. Works f’r everyone else. Why shouldn’t it work f’r me? Don’ I get t’ forget?” Castle
simply stares at her. “‘S easy. Ev’ryone else gets wasted, forgets, gets help. Why not me?”

“Beckett…” He has absolutely no idea what to say.


“Couldn’t do what?” He doesn’t get an answer. She splashes vodka messily into her own glass and then, clearly remembering her party manners, into his. Some of it hits the floor. She doesn’t seem to notice, slaps the bottle back on the table.

“Naz’drovie,” she toasts, and downs it in one. Castle doesn’t follow. He desperately decides on a risky play.

“Kat?”

“Not Kat. No-one wants Kat. Kat might as well’ve drowned with her dad in Jack Daniels. So no Kat. Kat who walks alone.” She looks at him, her wide eyes blurred. “Drink with me, Cassle.” She turns petulant. “‘F you won’t drink, go home.”

“I’m not going home.”

“Then drink. Drink or go home.”

“No.” He picks up the bottle, and puts the top on. Then he takes it over to the kitchen and puts it in the highest place he can reach.

“What’re you doin’? That’s mine. Give it back.” She weaves towards him.

“You’ve had enough.” She’s a petulant drunk, but not – yet? – aggressive or belligerent.

“I wan’ it.”

“Can’t have it.” He catches her on the way to the cupboard. “Stay here.” She flops against him, then pulls away, weaving back to the couch.

“No point.” Uh? “You won’t support me. I’ll have to s’pport you, just like always.” What?

“No. I can.”

She looks disbelievingly, blearily, at him.

“You won’t. No-one does. Doesn’ matter if I wan’ them to.” Suddenly she’s singing, in a full and excellent, if slurred, mezzo. “Nobody’s on nobody’s side. Better learn to go it alone, recognise you’re out on your own, nobody’s on nobody’s side. Never make a promise or plan, take a little love where you can…” She trails off. “‘F you won’t drink with me, take me to bed.” Her expression is a lot more sloppy than seductive.

Oh no. That is an even worse plan than matching shots with her would be. This is just wrong on so many levels that he doesn’t know where to start. Suddenly he has an idea. He turns back to her kitchen and pours her a large glass of water, with a smaller one for himself. Then he returns to the couch.

“Okay. We’ll both drink and we’ll play a game.”

“Don’t wanna play a game. Wish I’d never got the game. It was just another stupid mistake.
Shoulda known. *Nobody's on nobody's side,*” she sings again.

He’ll think about that later. “Different game. Every time you answer a question, you get a kiss.”


“What do you want?” He carefully avoids any name.

“Wanna disappear. No-one wanting anything.” She shivers, and doesn’t realise through the fog of neat vodka that she’s answered.

“Drink.” She does so. When she shivers again Castle gathers her into his lap. He doesn’t kiss her. “I don’t want anything.”


*It’s going to be a really sore head,* Castle thinks.

“‘F you saw inside my head you’d run away.” She looks at him, unfocused. “You were s’posed to run away. Why’re you here?”

*Ah.* So she did mean to drive him off. “To see you.”

“Don’t believe you. You got angry. Din’t wanna see me here. Din’t want me at all. ‘S fine. You c’n go home.”

“I’m not going home. I’m drinking with you.” Even if it’s only water. She makes a sloppy attempt to stand up, and doesn’t make it. Castle declines to help her one way or another, and when she lands back on him puts his arms back round her. For all the reaction he gets to that he might as well have been a stranger.

“Why don’t you want to be Beckett?” *In vino, veritas.* As long as he takes this carefully, he should be able to interrogate enough words out of her to work out what on earth is going on here.


“It is now.” Strangely, the firm tone works. She downs around half of it.

“No Beckett. She’s disappeared.” She keeps using that word. *Disappeared.* As though she wasn’t Beckett at all. “Gone away.”

“Where’s she gone?”

“Just gone. Back again another day. Who cares, ‘s long as she’s back tomorrow?”

“I care.”

“No you don’t.” It’s utterly matter of fact, and strikes him like a wrecking ball. “You wan’ the stories. Not people.” There’s a stunned silence. Castle has absolutely no idea what to say. Again. “Beckett – me – I’m not a story.”
“Who are you?”

“I’m the mist on the moor,” she says, abruptly mocking, “I’m the footprints in the sand.” She tries to stand up again. This time she makes it, for a moment, then flumps back down next to Castle.

“Why’s Beckett gone?” If he can’t have where, (into the vodka bottle, he reckons) or who, (though this is not Beckett, Kate or Kat) he’ll have why.

“Too many people needing her. All of you wan’ a piece of Detective Kate Beckett.” There’s a vitriolic twist on that. “Big bad Beckett. She huffed and she puffed and she blew her dad’s house down. Din’t see him. Din’t speak to him.” Her face crumples into messy tears, tracking darkly down her face. “Din’t take his calls.”

Castle tries to turn that into something that makes sense. The only immediate answer is that she’d not supported her father in his early hours of need. His arms drop from her in instant recoil. Her dad needed her and she wasn’t there? How could she not be there for her father, her only family? He stands up, uncaring of her distress as she had ignored, by her own admission, her father’s.

“Told you you wouldn’t stay.”

He is stopped short, three strides from the door with his coat half on.

“You were s’posed to leave. Now you are. All sorted.”

He turns around, slowly. He’s made a whole bunch of assumptions in the last two minutes – and he’s been dead wrong every time he’s done that so far. Every assumption he’s ever made about Beckett has been wrong.

He’s missing something.

“Go home t’ your family.”

He looks at her, huddled in the corner of her couch where she’d landed up when he stood up, recoiling from her rejection of her father: dead eyes, dead still, dead drunk. Fat tears are still crawling down her cheeks, smearing make-up behind them. She’s not a pretty drunk. She’s also not asking him to stay.

Something else is going on here. He hasn’t uncovered nearly enough of the story.

“My family doesn’t need me tonight.” He so nearly says but you do.


“It’s on the table.”

“No. My proper drink. You took it away. You had no righ’ t’ take it. Gimme it back.” She heaves herself out of her corner, and stumbles towards the kitchen, on average aiming for the cupboard into which he’d put the vodka. He intercepts her halfway there, and steers her back to the couch. As before, when he’s definitive, she doesn’t argue, though she’s muttering sloshily about her drink all the way. He gently pushes her back down, and puts the water back in her hand. She drinks most of what’s left.

While she’s drinking, Castle is thinking. She keeps talking as if Beckett is someone else, someone who isn’t here. It’s almost as if Beckett doesn’t exist in reality, and yet he knows she does, every
minute of every day. Beckett’s disappeared. Beckett – Beckett said she couldn’t. Couldn’t help. Beckett said – Beckett said *You cannot save him unless he wants to save himself*. To Julia, and Castle hadn’t understood. Then. He’d thought she meant that she’d kept trying. She’d meant that she had to *stop* trying. *You can only save yourself.*

*You can’t save him. You can only save yourself.*
What's the story?

Castle’s normally sharp mind finally kicks into gear and he begins to chew on the information which he now has. Beckett – or whoever is currently sitting next to him – has passed into a half-asleep, comatose state; not exactly – not at all – curling towards him. She is, in fact, leaning away from him, and, oddly, her consumption of alcohol may have elicited a few answers but it’s raised the barriers between them higher than before. They’d been mile high earlier: now they’re stratospheric. He won’t, yet, try to change that. Whether it worked or not, she’s in no state to agree, or indeed remember.

So, what does he know? Not assume, which has so far been a total failure, but know.

He knows that she pours herself out for her father and to strangers. He knows that she’s deliberately tried to push him away. He knows that she’s had a disagreement with Lanie, but he doesn’t actually know what it was about. He knows that she thinks that he should stay away because she thinks that he’d run for the hills anyway if he knew what was inside her head. No questions, she keeps saying. Stay away: from her father and his story; stay away from her past.

Stay away from her.

Not exactly, though. Stay away from her history, her personality, her heart, her soul. He could have her body, as long as he didn’t have her. So he only got to see Kat by accident, when she was already stressed and wrung out; he’s only had answers tonight, when she’s drunk.

Oh. He’d seen Kat by accident, and then more by his design when they’d played Sorry. But then he’d made it clear he disapproved of her choices around Christmas, and then (worse in her eyes) asked questions, and tried to push her into his life which – oh fuck, he knew this a week ago – triggered memories.

He’s still missing something, but when he flicks a brief glance at his watch it’s after midnight. He discovers that Beckett is asleep, curled tightly in a corner of the couch. He needs to go home because of Alexis, but if he goes home, will Beckett simply wake, retrieve her vodka, and carry on? He could prevent that, but should he? That thought is parked as he looks at her. She seems to be out cold. One thing he can do is ensure that she’s on her bed, not on the couch: she’s going to suffer enough tomorrow.

He sighs, stands, and picks her up. There is no reaction at all: she’s dead weight in his arms. The thin trickle of illumination from the sidelight and creeping from the bedroom is only just sufficient for him to arrive there unscathed and lay her on her bed. He gazes down for a moment, wishing he could see into her mind; wishing he had extracted more information; wishing he knew how to move her needle back to normality; wishing that she’d believe that he could and would support her.

Wishing he understood. But that’s one thing which he can, perhaps, achieve: understanding. Tomorrow, when he’s slept on it: when the story’s roamed his dreams and knit up its ravellment into orderly links.

Beckett wakes to her screeching alarm with a foul taste in her mouth, a foul pain in her head, and a foul feeling of disgust with herself. She takes two Advil, drinks a pint of water to chase the Advil, scrubs her teeth and tongue till her gums ache and steps into a scalding shower. Once she’s washed and sufficiently steam-cleaned that the stink of stale alcohol is no longer in her nostrils, she has another pint of water and a double strength black coffee. Then she is capable of dressing,
applying her make-up, adjusted to try to hide how tired, miserable and hung-over she really is, and leaving to get the subway to the precinct. She doesn’t remember much about last night, and in particular she doesn’t remember how many she’d had to achieve that desirable amnesia. She certainly won’t risk driving when she may well still be over the limit. She makes it to her desk comfortably before shift starts and any of the team are in. Temporally comfortably, that is. Physically she is not comfortable at all. She concocts another extra-strong coffee, returns to her desk, winces at the brightness of the screen and strip-lights and, by the time Espo has arrived twenty minutes later, is deep in the pile of cold case files.

“Yo, Beckett.”

“Hey, Espo.” She’s not conversational. Espo doesn’t care. He and Beckett have been tight for years and she obviously isn’t right, now or last night. He’s got a sure-fire cure for that, though.

“C’mon, Beckett. Ain’t seen you in the gym for weeks. You need to spar, or you’ll lose your edge. I’ll hold the bag for you, or give you a workout.”

Beckett looks up, slowly. Espo clocks the lack of expression on her face and the lack of brightness in her eyes. “Nah. Maybe later.”

“No,” he says firmly.

“No,” she says equally firmly, and drinks her coffee. “Leave it, Espo.”

“No. You look like shit. So you can come punch it out or you can tell me what went down last night that you didn’t need us for. Lanie wants to talk to you, too.”

Beckett’s face betrays nothing. “Or option three: none of the above. I’m not wasting time sparring when I’m on shift with work to do. Go do your own work, and leave me to get on with mine before we’re both in trouble.”

Espo would argue, but Beckett’s turned her eyes and attention to her papers and is radiating do not disturb at laser intensity. That in itself still wouldn’t stop him, but Montgomery coming in certainly does.

“Morning, detectives,” Montgomery says cheerily.

“Sir,” comes in tandem from Beckett and Espo. Montgomery wanders into his office. Espo makes himself a coffee and starts on his work. Beckett remains firmly focused on her file. After a while Espo watches her go into the break room and make herself more coffee, and then observes the pitch of her shoulders and tension in her spine as she returns. She’s just seated herself again when Montgomery peers out of his office, surveys his domain, and spots his prey.

“Detective Beckett? A word, please.”

“Sir.”

The door shuts behind her. Fifteen minutes later it reopens. Beckett, two spots of high colour gracing her cheekbones, returns to her desk. Ryan, who has appeared in the interim, glances at Espo, who shrugs. He has no idea. Both of them glance at Beckett, who doesn’t even notice, let alone react. The pages of her file continue to turn in a measured manner. Some several many moments later, she departs in the direction of the restrooms. When she re-emerges, she looks no different at all. Ryan and Esposito shrug at each other again. Beckett continues her work, and doesn’t talk.
Montgomery’s summons is not unexpected, merely unwelcome. She’d hoped, clearly in vain, that Sergeant Hardon would have kept quiet. No such luck.

“Beckett, you were up at Central Park precinct last night.”

“Yessir.”

“Picking up one Mr Berowitz.”

“Yessir.”

“Who was piss-drunk and in no state to be any help to anyone in any investigations.” Beckett says nothing. There isn’t really anything to say. “Wasn’t he?”

“Yessir.”

“And Castle went with you.”

“Yessir.”

Montgomery puts his elbows on the desk and rests his chin on his hands, dark eyes focused on Beckett, who hasn’t shifted from parade attention since she shut the door. “At ease, Beckett. I didn’t get you in here to rip you a new one.”

“Sir.” So why am I in here?

“Ten days ago, you were having lunch with Mrs Berowitz. Then your father was off on a conference for a week. And last night for no apparent reason you quit the precinct like your tail was on fire and then the next thing that happens is you picked up Mr Berowitz.” He pauses, clearly expecting commentary. Beckett declines the trap.

“Have you had any time off since Christmas except January 9th?”

“I wasn’t on shift at the weekend, sir.”

“I have here your overtime reports. According to these” – he taps the sheet – “you’re due some days.” He looks at her expressionless face. “I could make you take them.” A flush of colour creeps along her face. She says nothing. “I won’t. Yet. But I’m paying attention, Beckett, and I’m not liking what I’m seeing. You need to ease off. You’re trying to save people, one drunk at a time. You can’t do it. Stick to the victims and your dad and let AA take the rest.”

“Sir.” It’s not agreement, nor disagreement. Montgomery doesn’t press the point. He doesn’t think that he needs to. He changes the subject.

“How are you getting on with Castle?”

“Fine, sir. He’ll be done soon, I think.” Montgomery looks sharply at her.

“He’ll stay as long as he needs to, Detective.”

“Of course, sir.” Montgomery raises an eyebrow. Disbelief is obvious. Again, though, he doesn’t think that he needs to press the point.

“If I think you need time off, because you’re not taking proper breaks, I will enforce it, Detective. I suggest you start planning how best to take your days. I expect your leave request to be filed by the end of the week.”
“Sir.”

“Dismissed, Beckett.”

“Sir.”

Her miserable irritation touches her face with renewed hot colour as she returns to her desk. She won’t let on to the boys that there’s anything wrong. She doesn’t need time off. She doesn’t need Montgomery telling her not to help Julia Berowitz. She just needs a nice complicated case to take her mind off everything. Especially, to take her mind off the nagging feeling that she’s forgotten something important, which is not improving her hang-over. She goes back to her file. Ten minutes later, a hazy memory coalesces into unpleasantly solid reality. Castle was there last night. In her apartment. She feels sick, and it has nothing to do with her lingering hang-over. She makes for the restrooms with her purse, desperately controlling her desire to run out of the bullpen.

The cool ceramic tiles of the restroom wall soothe her hot skin. She can’t remember what happened last night. She doesn’t know what she might have said, or done. She tries to pull her stampeding thoughts into order. She’d woken up in the same clothes she’d been wearing when she started throwing back shots. Therefore she had done nothing… really stupid. What she might have said, though – oh God. What might she have said? She bolts for a cubicle, locking herself in until she’s sure she has control of her stomach. When she’s certain she’s not going to turn inside out, she exits the cubicle, and then washes her face and hands in cold water, re-applies her make-up, picture-perfect, breathes deeply and slowly several times, and goes back to her desk, praying frantically for Castle not to come to the precinct today.

For a good long time, prayer seems to have worked. At eleven a.m., her prayers are definitively rejected. Castle arrives with an expression that would suit a cat stalking a broken-winged bird, deposits coffee and a bear-claw in front of her, and sits down in an unpleasantly permanent fashion.

Castle had slept through uncomfortable dreams, largely figuring Beckett walking around in a high-tech exoskeletal covering: transparent but utterly impermeable to sound or emotion. It’s not difficult to work out where that one came from. Knowing, however, doesn’t improve his view of it, and he’d really hoped for a bit more insight from his subconscious. Could do better, he tells himself. A shower, a shave, and good coffee don’t really help him.

He knows as much as he’s going to know without some serious assistance, which he isn’t going to get from Beckett. He won’t get it from the boys, who’ve made it pretty clear that they won’t talk about their colleague unless he already knows everything, and he’s unlikely to get anything from Lanie, who barely knows him except as Beckett’s shadow. A few beers and some chit-chat over corpses is hardly a foundation for a conversation that would have been difficult even if he and Lanie had been BFFs since high school. He wonders if the appropriate course is, as he had thought earlier last night, to have a detailed conversation with Roy. It seems rather… nuclear, as options go.

He makes more coffee, and wonders idly how much Beckett must have needed to get going this morning. He’s been in that state (though not for a long time) and he didn’t have to turn up at work the next day. She doesn’t have that option: the demands on her are unceasing…

That’s what he was missing. She’d said it, and he’d missed it because he’d been focused on the drinking, the disappeared and the assumption that she’d ducked supporting her dad. She’d said several variations on Beckett helps everyone, everyone needs Beckett, I’ll have to support you just like always. That’s hardly flattering, he thinks, displeased. She’d also said no-one wants Kat. And finally, and possibly most importantly couldn’t do it before. I couldn’t.
Couldn’t *what*, Beckett? Couldn’t save your father? And then, slowly, it becomes clear, monster rising from the swamp: she had to walk away to save herself. What has that cost her?

The story falls into place. She’s… over-compensating. Saving everyone now because she couldn’t save him then: had to walk away. *If you saw inside my head you’d run away.* Yeah. No wonder she said that. He’d made it perfectly obvious what he thought of her actions – only the ones he’d seen, such as the Christmas Day shift – based on his own happy family life and his own smug, self-satisfied assumptions about what he’d do – based on no knowledge at all. It’s very easy to think you could do it, when you’ve never had to. Very easy to judge and condemn. He thinks about the revolting, degraded sight of Mr Berowitz. Beckett had dealt with that same revolting object in her own father, for – he guesses – some considerable time. And then she had to walk away… and no matter how much her father says she saved him, she either doesn’t believe it or is still drowning under the weight of that decision.

Not the boys. Not Lanie. Not Roy. Jim Beckett. That’s where he’ll find his answers. That, and some very specific research. Okay. Research first. Jim Beckett later, because he knows where to find him. He turns to his laptop and starts to hunt down alcoholism, and then, a little after nine, takes himself off to talk to some of the support groups available. In return for a nice donation, he’s pretty certain they’ll be happy to answer everything he asks.

After two meetings and an hour and a half, Castle wishes he’d never, ever asked. He’s learned far more than he ever wanted to know, and he doesn’t think he’ll ever be able to scrub the caustic knowledge from his head and imagination. For all the disgusting physical manifestations of the alcoholic, worse by far were the stories of their families. The one continuous narrative is that the family takes far too long to recognise that they can’t save their black sheep until it wants to be saved. And usually, that means that the alcoholic has to hit rock bottom first, and stay there till the family stops trying to fix it for them. By that time, he learns, all too often the family has fallen apart, individually or together.

He leaves a good deal more sobered (not an accidental word choice) and disillusioned. He is also a good deal ashamed of his judgemental assumptions. And finally, he is a good deal more understanding of why Beckett didn’t want to come near his apartment or watch him with Alexis. It’s more important than ever that he talks to Jim Beckett: that small, half-broken man who’s braver and more determined than Castle could ever have imagined or believed until this morning; in contrast to his daughter, who had originally appeared wholly strong and unbreakably hard, but who now seems to have been more broken and damaged by her father’s previous actions than Castle had ever realised.

He makes his way to the precinct, collecting coffees and a bear claw on the way, which he places neatly in front of Beckett, who appears as ravaged, under some truly artistically deceptive make up, as he might have expected from her state last night. She doesn’t look at all happy to see him. This is not news. Every time he shows up it proves to her that her efforts to get rid of him have failed.

“Morning, Beckett,” he says neutrally.

“Hey,” she mutters. She flicks a half-glance his way, and then goes back to her file.

“More cold cases?”

“Yes.” She chops the word short.

“Good. We can go out to lunch, since you wouldn’t come out yesterday.”

“No. I’m busy.”
Castle looks at her. Beckett does not look at him in return. “You’re not lunching with Lanie. Surely you’re not going to work through lunch on cold cases?”

“Yes.”

“You’d rather work on cold cases than have a nice lunch?”

“Yes. I’m not hungry and I don’t want lunch.” Castle notes the line between her brows and the slight redness of her eyes. She hasn’t touched the bear claw. The coffee, however, is gripped between her hands. His voice is quiet.

“You don’t have to eat. Just come out of the bullpen with me. I wanna talk to you about last night.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“We can talk about it here or we can talk about it somewhere else.”

“Or not talk about it at all. I choose the last.”

“We’re going to talk about it.”

She doesn’t answer. She simply turns back to her file. She’s too tired to have this fight and he can’t drag her out of the bullpen at lunchtime. Her stomach will invert if she tries to eat: as much from tension as the remnants of the hang-over. She just wants to finish the day and take her emptied self home to rest.

“Not now, but later, Beckett, we are going to talk about this.” His voice drops further. “You need to know what you said.” He looks her straight in the eye. “You were wrong about me. I was wrong about you. Let’s talk, and make it right.” He reverts to his normal tone and normal volume. “If you won’t come to lunch, I’m not watching you review cold cases all day. That’s boring. Maybe there’ll be a new murder tomorrow. Call me if a body drops?”

“Yes,” she says, dispiritedly. She doesn’t have a choice about that, Montgomery’s made it clear that she has to.

Castle stands up, not coincidentally blocking Beckett from the view of Espo and Ryan. He rapidly slides both hands over hers where they are still locked round the coffee cup, and squeezes gently.

“It’ll be okay. Trust me.” He lets go of her cold hands, and wanders off. Beckett watches him leave, tries not to think about the potential for disaster that he represents, and tries harder not to think about the warmth in his enclosing palms.

Castle hadn’t really expected Beckett to come out for lunch with him, and therefore is not disappointed. The conversation he intends to have with her will be much better held in her apartment, with no audience, in any event. He intends that this particular discussion will include a substantial amount of holding her close and keeping her warm and showing her that he’s a support, not a millstone. He hopes that she’ll let him in. In the door, that is. Into her heart and mind… well, that’s a big ask right now. They’ve both screwed this up finely, and right now he’s the only one who seems to think it’s fixable.

He pulls out his phone and looks at the new contact he’d put there this morning. He doesn’t want to do this. But he has to. How hard can it be, to deal with Beckett’s father? He takes a deep breath, and dials Jim Beckett.
“Jim Beckett,” a firm, professional tone answers. Castle had half-hoped for a PA, but his luck hasn’t been in for weeks and it looks like that’s not changing now.

“Mr Beckett? This is Rick Castle.” There’s a short, surprised silence on the line.

“Mr Castle. This is a surprise.” Jim Beckett does not sound like the small, nervous man he’d met. Jim Beckett sounds like the partner in a respectable firm should do: assertive and composed.

“I wondered if you had some time to see me,” Castle says, rather more formally than he’d anticipated.

There’s a soft clicking which Castle accurately identifies as the checking of an Outlook calendar.

“I could see you at five. I don’t expect this is about a need for a new attorney, is it?”

“No.”

“Hm. Okay. I can’t say I’m surprised, after meeting you the other week. You didn’t strike me as a man who was shy about getting what he wanted. Come to these offices at five and we’ll take it from there.”

Castle hadn’t wanted to wait till five. Castle had wanted to take Jim Beckett somewhere for lunch and thoroughly cross-question him about Kate Beckett. Castle had thought, based on how Jim had looked on his previous meeting, that Jim Beckett would be an easy pushover.

Castle thinks he might have been dead wrong. And since he has been dead wrong about most things, he starts to wonder why Jim Beckett today is so different from the man he’d met ten days ago in… difficult… circumstances. Was he wrong then, or is he wrong now, or has he been wrong both times? These Becketts… never who or what he thinks them. But because one of them really matters, he’d better try to understand.

He frets his way through the day till it’s time to leave.

Beckett struggles through the day until shift ends at five, and without Montgomery needing to so much as twitch in his chair is gone before anyone can say anything at all. In fact, it takes Ryan and Esposito a few minutes to notice that she’s left.

“Beckett’s gone!” Ryan notes in amazement.

“Ha ha. Good joke, bro.”

“No joke. She really is. Desk clear, purse gone, coat gone.”

Espo makes a big play of looking at the calendar, and then out of the window. “Nah. Can’t have. Moon’s not blue. No national holidays. ‘S not her birthday.”

“Maybe she’s got a date?”

“Huh?”

“Beckett was looking pretty green this morning. I’d say she was hung-over but we all know she never drinks that much. If she’s not ill, I’ll eat my service cuffs, no ketchup.”

“Kate was ill?”

“Hey, Lanie.” Lanie ignores all normal conversational niceties.

“Kate is ill?”

“Sure looked like it,” Espo says casually. “She’s gone already. Best thing for her.”

Lanie is nonplussed. Kate had shown no signs of illness yesterday. Massive emotional stress yes, physical illness no. She’s a doctor, dammit, even if she only doctors the dead, and she’s pretty sure she would have noticed the imminent signs of an illness bad enough to send Kate home immediately at the end of shift on only the following day.

“Okay,” Lanie says slowly. “I came over to see if she wanted some downtime, but I guess not.” Her busy mind is working. She doesn’t believe Kate is ill, but she does believe that she’s gone off to hide and lick her emotional wounds. “Seeya, guys.” She departs the precinct, and barely waits till she’s out the elevator before dialling Kate’s number.

“Beckett.”

“Kate, it’s me.”

“Oh.” That’s not a good start. “Hey, Lanie.” That’s only marginally better.

“Wanna come out for a drink?”

“No, thanks. Late night last night. Bed early for me.” Kate’s light, airy tone should be reassuring, but Lanie is anything but reassured, after yesterday.

“You okay, girl?”

“Sure. I just need a good night’s sleep. My PJs are calling to me.” And that’s no more reassuring than the last sentence, because it’s so completely Kate-normal it’s obviously fake. “How about Friday?” Now Lanie knows there’s something up. Kate usually thinks about going out on a Friday night on Friday afternoon. This feels like Kate putting Lanie off the scent. Which means there’s a scent to be put off. Hmmm. Castle might know something. He’d been a little off-beat all evening yesterday, too.

“Okay. You take care of yourself, girl.”

“Sure, Lanie,” Kate says, with exactly the same exasperated almost-affection that she always does. “Bye.”

“Bye.”

Well, now. What is Lanie’s girl doing? Lanie supposes it’s marginally better than the complete shut-out that Kate had applied yesterday, but she doesn’t get the feeling that Kate’s really planning a full-on girls’ night with civilised drinks (not many), good food, and a proper conversation about how she is. She’d force her way round, but she’ll feel a complete dumbass if Kate’s in PJs and she wakes her up – and Kate’s not exactly going to be pleased if Lanie does disturb her.
Beckett has gone home to investigate the headache-curing properties of Tylenol and some bland food. Toast. Or maybe grilled cheese, or mac ‘n’ cheese. Something very simple and undemanding. She’s trying very hard not to think about anything that happened since this time two days ago.

She takes her Tylenol – no need for the heavy-duty Advil now – and changes out her tailored work garb into soft, warmer yoga pants, t-shirt and sweat top, puts some Kraft packet mac ‘n’ cheese on, adding butter and some black pepper to improve it slightly, and pours a large glass of water. She’ll get to coffee, later. It won’t stop her sleeping. It never does. And she will go to bed early. She will get herself back on track. She’s had her meltdown moment for the year. Time to get straightened out and fly right.

She mops the floor and, despite the freezing February air and flurries of snow, opens the window to remove the slight but sickening smell of the spilt – she assumes she spilt it – vodka. Then she finds the bottle, on a higher shelf than she could have reached in the state she was in, tips the remnants down the sink and runs the water for long enough to rinse all the odour away, and throws it into the recycling chute. She has a gut-wrenching knowledge of how it reached that shelf. Another thing that she really didn’t want to remember. Goes right along with the memory of his warm hands round hers this morning.

She eats her dinner at her table, closes the window. Then she puts on a Dobie Gray album, and pulls out her yoga mat, and begins on the slow, smooth forms that need all her muscle control and concentration. She hasn’t worked through them for – oh. Weeks. No wonder she’s stressed and stiff and unhappy. It’s too cold and slippery underfoot to run, and Espo was right, she hasn’t been in the gym for weeks either. She needs to get herself together. If she’d been paying attention to what she should have been doing to keep herself grounded then she wouldn’t be in this state, she tells herself, and ignores the stab of conscience that tries to tell her she’s lying. She’ll be fine by Friday, and go out with Lanie, and everything will be back to normal.

But a still, small voice keeps talking in her head. It sounds exactly like Castle had earlier. You need to know what you said. Let’s talk, and make it right. Later. Yoga doesn’t overcome or silence the words. She keeps working through the forms, perfecting them, but all the time the words are there.

Castle ensures he is smartly put together and in business mode when he leaves to meet Jim Beckett. He is not at all sure of what to expect, or indeed what he wants to say, or ask. It doesn’t seem to matter which Beckett he encounters, every single one of them confounds him.

Reception put him in a clean, corporately decorated boardroom, supply him with coffee and leave him to wait for Jim. They don’t seem surprised to see him: presumably that’s professional practicality. A few moments later Jim enters, dapper in a well-cut suit, wearing a tie. Castle feels nervously underdressed without a tie of his own, even though he hates them, and is glad he’d put on a smart jacket and dress pants, at least. Jim extends his hand and shakes firmly. Castle takes a good look and notes again the harsh-cut lines around his eyes, and a slight air of uncertainty, well covered by a professional poker face. He hides that well on the phone.

“Thank you for seeing me,” Castle opens, hiding his own considerable uncertainty as to the wisdom of this meeting under formality and a steady voice. Earlier, it had all seemed so easy, fuelled on his desire to fix matters and (not that he’s admitting it) some shame-fuelled annoyance with Beckett’s inability to tell him anything or to trust him. Trust me all in all, or not at all. She’s aiming for door number two.

“Nice to see you again, Mr Castle.” Jim produces a surprisingly gamin smile, making him look instantly ten years younger and giving him a considerable resemblance to his daughter.
“Rick, please.”

“Rick. But only if you call me Jim.”

“Okay.”

“So, why did you want to see me?”

Castle swallows, as Jim waits quietly. The air in the room is still. “You know I’m shadowing Be – your daughter.” Jim nods. “For my next book. Likely it’ll be a series.” He stops. That’s not relevant. “This was a bad idea. I shouldn’t have come.” He shifts in his chair, preparatory to standing. “I’m sorry to have wasted your time.”


“Do it right I need to understand Beckett – Kate, so my character is based on her but isn’t her. She won’t let me because she thinks it’ll hurt you. I promised her I wouldn’t use you – and I don’t want to use you – but she doesn’t believe me. So I need to tell you that whatever she tells me won’t go in any book.”

“Why?”

“Because then she might believe it.”

“Would it be true?” Castle’s temper incinerates at the question. One damn mistrustful Beckett after another. He bites out his answer.

“It would be. But since you have to ask me to my face if I’m a liar, I think we’re probably done here. I can’t make either of you trust me, all I could do was tell you that. Now I have. Thanks for your time.”

Castle stands up, infuriated with himself. He should never have tried this: it’s likely made matters worse. Why he thought that speaking to Jim Beckett would improve the position escapes him. He really should have learned not to act on his impulses by now. It’s the same Beckett brick wall all over again. Must be inherited. Or genetic.

“Sit down,” Jim says firmly. Castle doesn’t. “Sit back down, son. Katie protects. It’s what she is. She thinks she’s protecting me, and maybe that’s true, but I heard you pair arguing all the way down the hall and it didn’t sound like it had much to do with writing any book to me.” He acquires that gamin look again. “Sounded to me like her mother and me used to be…” Castle gulps. What if he’s triggered Jim’s memories? “Don’t worry. I’ve come to terms with that. The meetings help.” He pours himself some water, and gestures at the coffee. Castle shakes his head, still standing, hand on his jacket. “I told Katie to patch it up with you. She needs a friend.” There’s a rather knowing glint in Jim’s eye, for an instant, swiftly altered. He drops his eyes to his water glass, and suddenly slumps a little, becomes the smaller, uncertain man Castle had first met.

“So, because… because I met you already and I liked you, and if you were lying to me you’d not be walking away without trying to get the story… If you were lying you’d be wanting the story from me, but you’re not. So sit back down, and I’ll tell you it.” Castle sits, finally, waits while Jim gathers himself, slips into listening mode: creating the atmosphere where people simply talk.

“You know the bare bones. I told you, the other day. Thought you were her friend, from what she’d said.” He breathes slowly. “For two years she tried to pull me out it, and then she walked away. After that, I bumped along the bottom, but it took a long while to realise, and then I tried to fix it myself. Didn’t work. Finally I went to AA. If she hadn’t stopped trying to save me, I’d
never have come out it. I’d be dead. I couldn’t lose Katie too, and that’s what pulled me through: knowing that if I didn’t fix myself I’d never see her again. After three months dry, I called her. She’s been there for me ever since. Gives me the strength to carry on, because she had the strength to walk away.” Castle thinks that Jim’s told this tale before, probably at his meetings, maybe to others. “The craving doesn’t go away, but every day I don’t give in is another win. I just keep putting one foot in front of another, and if keeping the mask on is too much, Katie’s always there. She keeps me strong. I only have to talk to her, or see her, to remember why I stay sober.”

He looks up, his expression raw. “She saved me, by walking away. She saves me every day, just by existing. She carried me, when I couldn’t stand. I tell her so, and she should know it.” There’s silence, emotion heavy in the bland, corporate room. Jim looks down again. Castle has no words. This is not a conversation that’s to be repeated, ever. Remembered, but never repeated, except perhaps in summary, to Beckett. “But I worry about her, now. She should have a life of her own. She should be telling me about friends, not just her team. I thought when she talked about you she might…” he trails off.

“She might,” Castle says, unbidden, and manages to stop before he reveals to Jim that Beckett is drowning in guilt. Jim doesn’t know that: so much is clear, and Jim ever knowing that is likely to be a very, very bad idea. Castle is still surprised that Jim said anything, never mind as much as he has.

“She should,” Jim says, and stops. Suddenly he smiles. “You’ve got a daughter, too. Bet she doesn’t listen to you as much as you think she should.”

Castle grins in return. “Nope. But then I don’t listen to her as much as she thinks I should, either.” There’s a moment of fatherly solidarity.

“Katie always does what she thinks is right. Even if people get hurt along the way. It’s fine when she’s at work: that’s her job. She’s not so good at seeing that it’s not always the best way outside work. It can be a little tricky to convince her that she’s wrong.” The gamin smile peeps out again. “Good luck, Rick. I hope I’ll be seeing more of you with Katie.” It turns to a mischievous grin. “Preferably at a slightly lower volume.”

“Thanks,” Castle says very sincerely. “I think the second part might depend on your daughter, though.”

Jim sniggers. Positively sniggers. “I think you might be good for her. She could do with a friend who won’t be pushed around.” He extends his hand to Castle, shakes firmly. “Thanks for coming by. Brave step, son. Now, one more thing.” Castle looks down at him, bemused. “That game shop where Katie got my Christmas present – what’s the address?”

Castle gives up and laughs. “Got a piece of paper?”

He goes home in a better mood than for weeks, changes out his constrictingly formal clothes, and manages a civilised dinner with his family without mentioning anything much about the day except a lengthy complaint about the boring nature of cold cases and paperwork. Then he collects himself together and departs for Beckett’s apartment.

He can hear music faintly through her door: an older style that he doesn’t recognise. He knocks firmly to be heard over the music, and is astonished that the door opens. Beckett is (yet again) in sweats, with her hair messily tied back, and is gazing wearily at him, as if she knows that he’d just keep knocking till she let him in. There’s a yoga mat on the floor and a used plate by the sink. He steps inside, closing the door behind him. Beckett’s already turned away from him: all he can see is her hunched shoulders, her defensive posture. Shutting everything out, or away. Shutting him
out, just like she’s done since Christmas, just like she’s doing with Lanie, just like she’s doing in the precinct.

And suddenly he can’t bear it any more. He takes two fast steps and spins her round, into his arms: holding her tight against him and turning her face up so she can’t avoid his eyes. “We are going to talk about this. You’re not going to avoid it any more.”

“Because that’s what you want. And you always get what you want, don’t you, Castle? Fame, fortune, family. Fucking me, literally and metaphorically. The story, whatever it takes. What about what I want? Or doesn’t that count?”

Castle doesn’t move, and doesn’t let go. He had expected this outpouring of vitriol, this last-ditch defence.

“You want someone you can rely on. Someone who’ll support you. You just never said so, till yesterday.” The fight and anger and stiffness is all sucked out of her. Abruptly, he’s holding her up. “Don’t you need to know what happened yesterday? What you said?” He’s almost coaxing, softness in his voice, walking her backwards to her couch, never letting go, nestling her into him, petting gently: enough determination to show her that he’s not going to be put off as easily as before.

“It doesn’t matter,” comes defeated from her lips. “You’re going to keep pushing till you get what you want. What’s the point in fighting it?”

“Why fight, if you want it too? I told you’d got me wrong, just like I got you wrong.” She doesn’t say anything; she doesn’t fight; she doesn’t try to move closer or further away.

“Just remember that I told you I couldn’t bear seeing your family. When you start to hate me because I can’t be what you think you want. When you walk away again because you need something I can’t provide. You want someone who doesn’t exist. I’ve used me all up, Castle. There isn’t anything left for anyone else.” She pulls herself out his arms and stands up. “When someone tells you who they are, you should listen. I’ve told you who I am, over and over. Why won’t you just listen, and leave?”

“Because that’s not who you are.” The calm tones don’t reach her. She’s backing away from him towards the window. “I’ve been listening to your actions, not your words. And they don’t match.”

She laughs, once, with no humour at all. Bitterness pours through her voice. “Don’t match? Don’t match? Let me put it simply for you. I walked away from my own father when he needed me most. I’ll do the same to you. Save us both the trouble, Castle. Walk away now.”

“No.”
Never gonna give you up

She’s arrested in her movement.

“No. You don’t walk away from anyone who needs you. Not till it’s the only way to save them.”

He pauses, and takes a breath. “Nor will I. You need me, and I’m not walking away from you because that won’t save you.”

“You can’t save someone who doesn’t want to be saved. Don’t you get that?”

“Sure I do.”

“So why are you here?” I don’t want saved hangs loud from the end of her words. The lie in that clangs louder still.

“Because last night you told me you wanted someone to support you. Someone to save you. Since you were too wasted to lie, I’m going to listen to the truth. In vino veritas, Beckett. Or in your case, in vodka. Your actions don’t lie. You’ve spent yourself not walking away from anyone who needs you ever since you once – once, Beckett, in your whole life – had to. And that saved him.”

“Don’t. Don’t make me out to be something I’m not. You’ll only be disappointed.”

“And when are you going to stop making yourself out to be something you’re not? Huh? You doth protest too much, Beckett. Every time you make yourself out to be some ball-breaking bitch who abandoned your father, every time you try to convince me that I should run as fast as I can in the other direction, all I hear is someone trying to convince themselves they don’t deserve any help. If you were that woman you wouldn’t have tried to hide your discomfort from Alexis so she wasn’t hurt, you just wouldn’t have cared. If you didn’t care about how I feel, you wouldn’t be trying to push me away so I don’t get hurt more later, you’d have an affair with me and you just wouldn’t care. If you didn’t care you wouldn’t be trying to save both Berowitzes, but you are.”

He stands up from the couch and paces the five slow steps that’s the distance between them. He doesn’t hurry, but Beckett doesn’t move.

“You care, Beckett. If you didn’t you’d have never gone back to your father, never been there for him. If you didn’t care you’d have pretended everything was fine with me and lied about it. If you didn’t care you wouldn’t have been crying about it last night.” He reaches her, and stops. “I thought you were doing what you tried to make me think you were doing. You almost made me believe it. But you’re not that woman – and I’m not that stupid.” He stretches out, and places two hands firmly on her waist to draw her back in and cosset her close against his shoulder. “Lean on me. You know you can. You know you want to. Come here, Beckett.”

And suddenly she does, dropping the physical resistance, letting herself be brought in and held against the broad chest and wide shoulders, caught in strong arms; letting herself be warmed. So Castle thinks, anyway. Physically, he’s reached her, which he supposes is a step forward. Mentally… that might be more of an issue. She’s been soft in his clasp before, but it hasn’t reached her brain. He wonders, briefly, if she might have been right: that this will never work because she’ll never be able to get past her own demons and guilt; she’s empty, she’ll never be able to give him anything because she’ll use it all for her father and the victims.

And then he pushes that all away. He can fix this. All of this. He can fix her, or bring her to a place where fixing might be possible, given time. He can. Because all she needs is someone to
lean on when she can’t stand up any longer, someone to hold her up when she’s emptied out, and he can be that.

He brings them back to the couch, and cuddles her in. Affection had been right, way back when. It’ll still be right now. Assertive affection, and no questions. Questions can wait, explanations can wait. Judgement – can wait forever. He has no right to judge when he wasn’t there.

Beckett had known that there was no point in refusing to open the door. Castle will simply stand there and keep knocking until he’s let in. Always gets his own way, she thinks bitterly, and if at least three-quarters of the bitterness is because she knows that he’ll leave when he finds out she simply isn’t, now, capable of being who, or what, he wants and he won’t listen when she tries to pre-empt that whole can of worms being opened, well, she can live with that too. She’ll just have to keep trying. Maybe this time she can get through to him that she’s a bad deal, and he’ll take the message. She has to try. She’s not going to let him carry on with his rose tinted spectacles and happy optimism that everyone has some good in them somewhere. She can’t afford to be soft and comforted in his arms or leaning on his strength, because it won’t be there for long.

So she lets herself spill out all the anger and bitterness and hatred of the choices – choices? There were no choices: it’s the path her father’s disease forced her down – that she’s made and puts it all out there in the bluntest, nastiest terms she can manage.

It doesn’t work at all.

It doesn’t matter what she says, how she says it or the vitriolic truth in her tone: all he says is that her words now don’t match her actions at any time, don’t match her words last night, holds her close and then comes after her when she’s pulled away and tried again to convince him that this can never work: to hold her close again and tell her that she can lean on him.

And suddenly it’s just easier to give in. Let him have what he thinks he wants. He’ll find out he was wrong soon enough. It’ll only end in tears, when she walks away to support her father because that’s the one thing she absolutely, definitely, for ever and ever, cannot put second. It’ll only end in tears, but he won’t accept that till it happens: he won’t listen when she tells him who she is. He thinks he can live with that, but truth is, he’ll only put up with it for a short time. He’ll ask questions, and want answers, and then he’ll be bored, and leave, when no answers are given. He’ll give her a little space of peace, and then he’ll want more. Not just answers, but he’ll want the story, he’ll want her in his loft, he’ll want her to spend time with his family. But none of that is going to happen fast enough for Castle. He wants quick answers, speedy solutions; he’s bored by the slow grind of basic work.

They’ll be over in a month. It won’t even be long enough for him to be upset. She… well, that’s likely to be a rather different story. But a month’s peace… priceless, right now, and she’ll take the possibility of peace now in return for the crippling pain later.

She doesn’t realise that she’s weeping until the slow, hot tears crawl down her face; and then she dashes them away and scrubs her cheeks dry on a sleeve; turns her head from view and doesn’t make a sound. Crying has never helped anything, and it’s not going to help matters now. She made her choices long ago, and she’s been done with weeping over them long, long since.

She hadn’t reckoned on Castle actually paying attention.

“You’re crying,” he says. He doesn’t sound nearly as surprised as he should do.

“I’m not.” She’s perfected the tone on her father, in those first dreadful months. He could never tell that she was weeping. After a while, she’d learned how not to weep at all.
“You are.” Castle takes hold of her chin and turns her face towards him and up. “Why are you crying?” It’s a question she chooses to treat as rhetorical, assisted by his musing intonation. He cossets her face into the crook of his neck and pets her hair, soothingly. “Could it be because you’re cold and miserable? Snuggle in, and get warm. Or maybe you’re upset about the Berowitzes. Or could it just possibly be because you don’t think there’s any chance of this lasting?” She doesn’t answer, though she colours. “I guess we’ll just have to see.”

Castle is not at all surprised by Beckett’s lack of confidence in the situation, nor by her unhappiness. But she’s cuddled in his arms – where she ought to be – and he’s got enough confidence for both of them, that they can work it out. She’ll be ready to talk, eventually. Not now, probably not soon, but eventually. He continues the undemanding, unquestioning affection that’s the only thing that is likely to work. She’s not arguing, or pushing for anything else, or switching to the slick sex that was only a distraction from the real story. Here, for her, he isn’t second best, and he won’t be second best. He’s the one she needs; the one who can hold her up if she needs it.

He drops a few casual, gentle kisses on her hair, drinks in the scent of her shampoo and nuzzles his nose into the top of her head. She’s so tired, he thinks, and if she’d only stay curled in and let him take care of her again then she’d feel better. Or fall asleep, which might be a more desirable option. He hugs her more closely, and doesn’t try for more, and gradually the air of tense misery and bitterness begins to dissipate. Still, he couldn’t exactly describe this as leaning on him. Not yet.

After a further while of undemanding contact and peaceful embrace, Castle thinks that Beckett is calm enough to be reminded of her words of last night. After that, he’ll have to tell her that he’s been to see her father, and after that – if he is still alive – well, he’ll just have to take that as it comes.

“Beckett? Are you awake?”

“Huh? Yeah.”

“We need to talk.” She’s instantly not relaxed, pulling away from him and out his embrace for the furthest corner of the couch, eyes guarded, shoulders rigid. Braced, he thinks. “About what happened last night.”

“No, we don’t.” It’s flat.

“You can listen, then, and I’ll talk.” He casts a sidelong glance. “Nothing happened except that you actually talked about what you felt.” The relaxation he’d half-expected is non-existent. He alters tack. “Do you want to know what you said?”

“No.”

“Really?”

“No. I don’t need to know any of this. I was’ – there’s a hitch in her words – “drunk. Nothing I said means anything.”

Castle disbelieves that instantly and on principle. He also wishes that getting Beckett drunk again wasn’t wholly unethical. Or alternatively, that he didn’t care about whether it was ethical or not.

“I met your dad today,” he says instead, and waits for the explosion. Strangely, there isn’t one. “I told him that he wouldn’t appear in any book I wrote.” Still nothing. She’s completely blank-
faced. “He said you saved him.”

“He always does,” Beckett says bleakly. “Maybe he even believes it. It’s not true, though. He saved himself. I had nothing to do with it. Everyone has to save themselves. You can’t do it for them, or make them do it.”

“Doesn’t mean you had nothing to do with it. He says that you walking away was the thing that made him try.” She shrugs, as if she’s heard it all before, as if it means nothing, but deep in her hazel eyes there’s a green flare, as swiftly gone. Ah. Not nothing, then. “He said that you save him just because you’re there.” Another flare, and an odd reflection, as if there’s a second surface to her eyes.

“I abandoned him,” she grits out, and the odd reflection resolves itself into a sheen of moisture that doesn’t gather and doesn’t fall. “I walked away and did my own thing. Never went near him.”

“That’s not what he says.”

“He was drunk. He doesn’t remember.” Castle abruptly realises that Beckett is, in fact, talking, and only just manages to conceal his surprise.

“He says that’s what saved him. You walking away. He says it showed him that he’d never see you again if he didn’t get dry.”

“I watched him drown for three more years,” she cries. “Three more years when I didn’t go to him, didn’t take the calls, waited for a cop to show up on my doorstep. Again.”

“Why is that any different from what you told Mrs Berowitz to do?”

“I told her to get help. I didn’t get my dad help, I just walked away and let him drown.”

“Did you? Or did you leave him the pamphlets; the numbers; the adverts?”

“No good, if he wouldn’t read them.”

“Now, how about answering the question I asked,” Castle says. “Did you?” He’s half-turned towards her, blue eyes focused on her face, pinning her to the truth.

“For a while. Then I stopped.” The gleam in her eyes ripples and pools. Castle reaches for her and catches her back into him just as the first drop trickles down, heedless of whether she’d had any intention of moving towards him or not.


“Don’t. Don’t say that.”

“Come here, then.” He wonders what’s wrong with the rest of it. Then he realises that, inadvertently, he’s sounded like he’s soothing a child. Beckett is not a child, though she may need soothed, and memories of childhood are definitely not required. He kisses the top of her head, being the only accessible point, instead, and runs a hand over her back. It’s not a gesture he would ever use on a child. He thinks he’s got this, suddenly. Adult affection, not bonbons for a small child. She doesn’t need – or want – babied. She does need to know that she will receive support and comfort appropriate to an adult. It’s always been (very) adult affection that he’s offered, and to which she’s responded.
Castle considers for a reasonable space of time. Normally, he has two main modes of operation – at least since he divorced Gina. Childlike enthusiasm (or childishly irritating) and adorably charming; or parental. The third mode, which hasn’t come out to play much recently, except before Christmas with Beckett, is the one he needs here: smooth, suave and above all adult, whether that’s dinner or drinks or sexuality. That’s what had worked originally: a certain degree of assertiveness (but always and only with consent); a certain degree of simply sweeping her into the moment. Kat – the Kat who hasn’t reappeared, really, since he questioned her Christmas choices – liked not leading.

So if Beckett doesn’t want anything that might remind her of her childhood, and Kat doesn’t want to have to take the lead… logically that means –

He puts both hands round her face, turns it up, and kisses first both cheeks, where the tears have trailed, and then, slowly and firmly, her lips, tracing the seam. One hand drops back to her hip, to hold her in; the other stays curved around her head, fingers twining into her hair, thumb stroking the edge of her cheek. He doesn’t press for entry, but sticks with a small tease of tongue along her mouth. He’s waiting for a response before taking this any further: waiting for her to react as she had done the first times, to curve in and open up and let him taste and explore and take her mouth and turn her soft and purring and close-in.

And she does. Finally, a small re-connection, as her lips part and her hand rises to his shoulder. Permission granted, he deepens his kiss, explores, and then possesses: leading but not driving, turning her into him, angling her head, sensing her relax against his body: softening. As she softens, he becomes more forceful, more demanding, invading; more overtly masculine and assertive. A firm hand holds her against his hardness, and suddenly she wriggles into a better position and her hands come around his neck to hold him tightly and she makes a quiet little noise and is pleasingly pliant and pettable and purring. Yes, purring. He’s found his Kat again.

Cuddlesome, kissable Kat. He strokes over her leg, her hip, her back: long soothing, drugging strokes that keep her soft and eased and his; never stopping kissing her, assertive and forceful and possessive, but never tipping over into roughness, or domination, or hard-edged lust. Support through strength, which she can draw on if she’ll let herself.

He’s got what he wanted. Well. Maybe. He’s found his Kat again, and that’s good. On the other hand, she’s as like to spook, run and hide, shut him out or turn on him as any untamed wildcat. So he’d better decide if he can live with that, because if not then this is a truly dreadful idea. For both of them. He’s not done so well with dealing with it so far. Then again, she hadn’t exactly told him enough for him to understand why she behaves as she does. Now he understands.

He looks down the likely road ahead. If she’s prepared to give it a go – and he’s not too sure about that – then even with goodwill and understanding and…and... it’s going to be rocky. He’s never needed to worry about that before, and he’s never been bothered enough to fight his way through. His previous affairs, and relationships, haven’t involved any problems that either party cared enough to work on and surmount.

And yet. He’s already fought harder for this than for anyone else (except his daughter, but that’s not at all the same) without even knowing why he was fighting. Even when he told himself he was going to walk away he couldn’t stay away. Even when she’s told him flatly where she’s at he couldn’t walk away and stay away. This is not hopeful. This may be insanity.

This might be love.

Her dad talked to Castle? So Castle really meant it: that their history won’t be the foundations of his book. But even so, Beckett can’t bear to be pitied or felt sorry for. And she still doesn’t, deep
down, believe that she didn’t abandon her father. She still doesn’t, below that from where she hasn’t excavated it, believe that anyone can care enough for her – betrayer, abandoner – to stay with her, when there are so many more attractions out there to take them from her. She’s spent the last eight years trying to make up for her betrayal by supporting her father and in the work that’s brought her complete professional success, but because her father loved Jack Daniels more than he loved her, when she needed him most, nothing since has truly healed that wound.

No-one’s been there for her: why should this be different? And yet Castle just keeps coming back, in contrast to everything and everyone else. It doesn’t seem to matter what she says or does or what he says or does – he told her it was over and she told him she couldn’t stand seeing his family, after all, and yet he’s here, and she’s here, tucked up in his arms – they just keep spinning back to each other, gravitationally attracted without intelligence or thought entering into it. Every time he shows up she eventually lets him in, as unable to deny him as he seems unable to walk away; every time he pulls her in and wraps her up and holds her, every time she’s brought close in to his strength, she falls all over again; she lets herself believe that this time it could all be different; that he might really get it; that he really might be able to be there for her. It’s insanity. And yet she’s here in his arms, safe and warm and comforted and eased, and she feels better for the first time since before Christmas. It might be… something more.

Time to step up, Kate. Time to try. Because a ghost of a chance that Castle will care enough to stay is better than no chance at all.

“Will you play a game with me, Castle?”
His hand stops moving abruptly, surprise in the jerk of his arm, in the flash through his dark blue eyes.

“A game?”

“Yeah.” She doesn’t quite meet his gaze. “Play Sorry with me?” She can feel colour along her cheekbones, rising with his penetrating look.

Castle is surprised. He’d rather thought that Beckett-who-had-almost-become-Kat would want to stick with the deep, forceful kisses that he knows she likes. Then he parses the sentence, and examines her face. The streaks of red limning her cheeks and her inability to meet his eye argue a certain embarrassment. Ah. A way to apologise? They haven’t played Sorry since… before Christmas. She’d said, deep down drunk in the vodka, that she wished that she’d never got the game, that it had just been a mistake. That it had been her mistake had been heavily implied. So offering up the game now… is a peace-offering. Taking them back to a point where they were… comfortable. Before she started stepping back and pushing him away; before he started asking questions and, those questions left unanswered, making assumptions.

“Sure.” And time for his own step. “If I set it up, could I have a coffee, please?” Because the last time they’d played, they’d managed coffee and cuddles and soft Kat and both of them comfortable with each other.

“Sure.” She slides off his lap and aims for the kettle. He aims for the game, slightly dusty on the same spot of the shelf that it had occupied last time, and concludes that it hasn’t been touched since before Christmas either. He brings it back and opens up the board, shuffles the cards, and puts the little blue men out for Beckett and green ones out for him. The soothing scent of good coffee permeates the room, and somehow warms it. Shortly a tray appears bearing large mugs full of coffee, with creamer, nutmeg and cinnamon. Shortly after that, Beckett appears beside him, a slight air of uncertainty around her. Well, he can solve that. He remembers how to do that, at least.

He slips an arm around her, encouraging her to move closer, and this time, as last time, she does. As last time, too, she adds enough creamer and spices to her coffee to obliterate the original taste. Odd, that. In the precinct, and indeed most of the time, she puts only a dash of milk in; in the mornings she likes latte; but here, in her own soft, vague, undemanding space where sometimes he’s found a Kat not a Beckett, she likes her coffee softened as well. He takes that as a sign that she’s relaxed again, and doctors his own coffee with a pinch of cinnamon and a moderate dose of creamer.

“Who’ll cut first?” he asks.

“You can.”

Beckett wins the cut. Then she manages to get three men started while Castle is still staring disconsolately at a succession of useless cards. She’s brought one of them home while he’s still locked out the board, and the other two are moving smoothly round. She only needs one more to start, and he’ll have no hope of winning at all. He doesn’t like that. He wanted a game, not a procession. But he is gradually cuddling Beckett closer and closer and…. And finally he’s got a start.
“Sorry!” he bounces, and not apologetically at all sends one of her little blue men back home.

“Humph,” she mutters, and immediately draws a one to restart it.

After that it gets a lot more even, and every time Beckett says Sorry Castle hears an apology for more than simply sending his piece back to the start. His luck is not quite so unrelentingly bad, and his tactical acumen and far greater experience allows him to catch up. Almost. Beckett gets the rub of the green and plops her final blue piece home just ahead of him.

“I won,” she exults. “I beat you even though you’ve played this for years.”

Castle doesn’t hesitate.

“You get the prize, then.” And he leans slowly down and in, and smoothly takes her mouth. He doesn’t hurry: explores thoroughly and when she’s perfectly responsive keeps kissing her until she’s lax, only then lifting off.

“How’s that my prize?” Beckett grumps. “That’s the prize you insisted on when you won. How do you get a prize when I won?”

“Would you have preferred M&Ms?”

“Might have.”

“I don’t have any sweets. You’ll have to have me instead. I’m sweet.” And he kisses her again. “See? Very sweet. Much better than M&Ms.” He picks her up and nestles her neatly into him. “There. Your prize, Beckett, is a Castle-heater. Individually tailored to your needs to keep you warm and cosy whatever the temperature.”

Beckett rolls her eyes at him, but stays where she is, her hand creeping on to his midriff and then her head pillowing itself on his shoulder. He’s warm, and large, and indefinably stable. Not like she is. She feels more like she’s endlessly balancing on a wobble-board. Here and now, though, she can be still. No questions, no decisions, no need to be. She shifts a little to tuck herself in more tidily, and Castle’s arms reflexively tighten to keep her there. It’s a very odd feeling, to be enclosed like this. Will hadn’t been much for cuddles… well, no. That’s not true. She hadn’t been much for cuddles, and Will had taken the hint. This is different. Castle is not only into cuddles, but appears to be convinced that she should be, and she doesn’t seem to be arguing. For now, all her tension and bitterness and need to fill the void in her soul are quiescent. For now.

Until her conscience, fuelled on history and unacknowledged hurt, steps in.

“This won’t work,” she murmurs sadly.

“Why not?” Castle asks softly.

“I can’t do it. I don’t know how. You’ll want more and I haven’t anything left.”

It’s the opening he’s been, unknowingly, waiting for, and he doesn’t hesitate to seize it now it’s there.

“You don’t need to know how,” he says, confidently. “All you need to know is that I do. No decisions, except whether you want to try. No need to lead or worry about it. I’ll do that. All you have to do is let me lead, and say no when you don’t want something.” He stops, thinks for a moment, and starts again. “But if something’s upsetting you, at least tell me that you need space, or need a hug, or even just that you’re not in a good mood. You don’t even have to tell me what it
is if you don’t feel you can.” No questions. He doesn’t like unanswered questions, but there will be a pattern if she will tell him when she’s upset, and that pattern will answer the questions without her ever saying a word. Besides which, he has the main answer. Over-compensating.

“But you’ll want more. You already did.” And it didn’t work, he hears. You ditched me. He hadn’t meant it to be so. He’d wanted to shift it up.

“Don’t you want more?” and he answers his own question. “You do, don’t you? You want someone who’ll let you stand down for a while.” His voice softens. “If you could only stand down for a little bit, then all the rest would be okay. You’ll not be empty: you’ll fill up again. Stand down here, with me, and then stand up again.” His hand gently, firmly, slides around her waist and over her back, landing between her shoulder blades and holding her close. “Come here. Let’s not worry about anything else now. Come here, and be easy.”

“I’m not easy,” she snarks, but gently.

“Eased, then.”

Eased. Eased is good. Eased is very good. She curls in, bringing her knees up and around his hip, her face pressed into the muscle over his shoulder, her arm around his neck: chest to chest. She’s wrapped in, kept warm, held just tightly enough that she can feel his strength being applied. That’s not accidental, she thinks. He’s rather delicately making a point. She essays a move away, just an inch or two, and discovers that, though she is able to separate, there is a very slight delay. She nestles back in, and finds to her complete non-surprise that the same tightness reappears, without any delay. She stays there, breathing in the mixed scent of cologne, Castle, and comfort, eyes closed.

Castle cossets his armful of soft, lax, stood down Beckett, holding her tightly enough that she can absorb the leashed power that’s around her: protecting her. For a while there’s silence, and peace. Occasionally she moves a little within his grasp: a small wriggle to stay close. It’s thankfully similar to the second time he’d been here, when they’d played their game and then gently made out. A little more similarity wouldn’t hurt…

He kisses the top of her head, and then down a little to her hairline at the edge of her cheek. Beckett-who-still-isn’t-quite-anyone-else-yet turns her face a fraction to expose the cream skin to his lips. It’s not an invitation he intends to refuse. He drops tiny, barely-there touches down the outline of her visage, encouraging her to turn further towards him, and, when she does turn, moves across to taste the full lips and soft mouth and suggest that more is on offer if she should want to play. She opens for him and brings a hand into his hair to pull him closer and suddenly it’s all lit up: she’s right there with him and he’s dived in and taken her mouth hard and deep and forceful and she’s totally, wholly responsive. His fingers slip under her sweats, untuck the t-shirt beneath and connect with soft, satiny skin, gliding over the small of her back, not exploring under the edge of her yoga pants now, but upward to spread his span wide, warm palm taking the slight weight as he turns them both and scoops her up to lay her out between him and the back of the couch.

“What to do?” he muses. “I could keep kissing you” – he demonstrates, and nibbles briefly at her neck where she’ll wriggle and purr – “for as long as you want. Or you could tell me you wanted more… or I could carry on until you told me to stop.” He smiles lazily. “You don’t have to decide anything at all. Nothing you don’t want, nothing you don’t like. Just yes or no, any time.”

“Kiss me, Castle.” Kisses are good. Kisses are…easing. Kisses are the place to start. “You choose, after that.”

“As you wish,” and he bends down, which most conveniently allows her to undo several buttons of
his shirt and slide her own hands over his warm, muscled, torso. She’s lifted and pressed in. There’s a slight noise indicating lack of male appreciation. “Are you still cold?”

“No.”

“So you don’t really need this.”

“Not if you’ll keep me warm.”

Her sweatshirt promptly decorates the floor. Castle’s hand returns to her back, under her t-shirt, and his broad chest does, indeed, keep her warm. He spends some time kissing her, which also keeps her warm, then moves to nibble softly at her ear, run a tongue tip over the small nerve behind it to make her squirm slightly and then nuzzle quietly, and then slide down to the curve of her neck and the jut of her clavicle. Her breathing rises in time with his, and the gentle making out begins to become more heated, movement more rapid, less controlled. Her hands start to roam over his chest, one of his moves round to start to tease at the edge of her bra, then slips upward to cup the small mound and rub over her. It sends heat and sparking desire flashing through her, the connection between them snapping into place instantly, and she stops worrying about anything under the leashed power and forceful, drugging hands and mouth that take her higher, hotter, wilder in his grip. The t-shirt joins the sweatshirt, and both are shortly joined by Castle’s shirt.

Castle emits a satisfied, predatory growl which slinks straight down every nerve Beckett possesses and lands up in the liquid heat building between her legs. “More?” he asks, but somehow it isn’t really a question, it’s reading the need from inside her head. She pulls him back down to her and kisses him. It’s not the slick, practised preludes to slick, practised, sex that they’d had almost every time; it’s not, though, the surrender which wholly lets him lead and leaves herself swept up. It’s something new: a wanton desire that’s taken over; something that she hasn’t felt before. She claws into the hard muscle over his back, and fires the short fuse. Castle simply scoops her up, half carries her to the bedroom without ever stopping kissing, touching and lighting her up, and then strips them both without any further ado. They’re both so desperately hot for each other that there’s no more foreplay, no more teasing, only a completely primal coupling that leaves her limp under him, totally possessed as he in his turn bears the marks that she’s inflicted.

Eventually he rolls off, but doesn’t let go. Primal or not, cuddling doesn’t seem optional. She’s held in, and it’s stupidly protective because she doesn’t need protected. She does that: it’s her job. It’s her life. But it’s stupidly comforting, too. She simply stays put. It’s possible that her legs won’t hold her up yet. It’s also possible that she likes the feeling too much to move away from it.

Castle is as much intrigued as satisfied – and he is currently very satisfied. Still, even though Beckett isn’t making any effort to move away, he’s not inclined to let her escape. That’s a whole new facet of her kaleidoscopically variable off-duty personality, and it’s very, very interesting. He hadn’t expected it. He also hadn’t expected that it would have such an inflammatory effect on him. He’d intended to indulge in the same gently assertive leading that had produced Kat, but instead she’d tugged his head down to meet her mouth and suddenly they’d melded into one explosive, unthinking reaction.

He strokes unconsciously over her skin, not asking or demanding anything by word, look or touch. For now, for her, a little closeness, a little peace, a little space simply to be, without needing to be something to somebody. She only needs to be here, standing down for a little time, forgetting everything except that he’s here with her and holding her close and giving her respite. In this one thing, he’s far stronger than she, and she can and should draw on his strength. If only he were sure that she knows that, and knowing that, would rely upon it. But that’s a niggle for another time.

It dawns upon him, there naked in her bed with her naked against him, that neither of them really
has much reason to trust each other, yet. Sex isn’t love and love isn’t trust until they’ve each earned it. He shivers, a little chilled, and Beckett moves slightly to pull a coverlet across them. He’d thought she was asleep.

“Thought it was me who was cold,” she murmurs, and he realises that she is pretty much out of it.

“I’ll keep you warm,” he answers.

“‘Kay.” She curls up into him, and he strokes over her waist till her breathing deepens and slows and she is certainly asleep. In true sleep, in which he hasn’t seen her until now, she’s relaxed, her face smoothed out and emptied of its usual drive and force. She looks younger, but there are tiny stress lines around her mouth and eyes which are disguised by her on-duty shell. He does a small amount of mental math, and works out that from age nineteen to twenty four she’d been dealing with her father. Or forcing herself not to deal with her father. That’s an impressionable age. A bad age for bad things to happen.

An especially bad age to find that your parent is… unreliable. He pursues that thought. Unreliable… which in the context means never there when you need him. Always off with something else. Something being the bottle. Something… he loves more than you.

Ah. Over-compensating for her own so-called betrayal and hiding the feeling of being betrayed.

His mind wanders back to the idea of serious therapy. He wonders if she’d had any, because if she did, it didn’t work. She whiffles into his chest, naked and slightly sticky and sweaty, as he thinks further, plotting the story from the clues he has. All the odd little hitches and pauses and starts and stops – must have been from fanged, clawed memory of some disaster.

It’s Christmas time, there’s no need to be afraid. At Christmas time, we let in light and we banish shade… Or not. Especially not if you’re running up to a traumatic anniversary. How much booze does an alcoholic need to forget the triggering event, and how long beforehand might they really tie it on? More than a couple of days? More than the two-plus weeks that would take it back before Christmas Day? That’s a lot of bad memories all tied up into society’s Christmas expectations of life, love and happiness; all wrapped in shiny paper and a big red bow. Christmas with your family. Everyone sharing presents and love. Everyone enjoying themselves, laughing and joking and playing around; and under all of it the story of the season, of redemption. For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given: and the Child came with Love to redeem the world. It’s the whole centre and meaning of Christmas: the power to redeem and the forgiveness of sins. Castle’s faith is well-hidden and rarely noticed, even by himself, but he believes very strongly in the power of love and forgiveness.

But what if you can’t forgive yourself? What if you think you’ve forgiven those who have trespassed against you… what if maybe you haven’t really managed that either? That’s a lot of unacknowledged guilt to carry. Can’t forgive your own actions, and then can’t accept that you haven’t forgiven the other’s actions. Because you’ve tried so hard to forgive, convince yourself you’ve forgiven, and do what’s expected of you.

Definitely therapy. The only question is how. This is far too deep-rooted for Castle to even think about fixing. In fact, it’s buried so deeply that Beckett probably hasn’t realised it yet. The abandonment and that she can’t forgive herself, sure she knows that. She’d vomited it all out on a tide of vodka. The rest… not so much. Ten years of pain, five of believing she’s forgiven her father and never being quite sure why she’s still uncomfortable, still unhappy; and all the time pouring herself out in every possible direction to fill the void in her soul; all the time her guilt deepening the abyss.

He holds her close, and, dry-eyed, weeps for her.
Castle, some dark time later, squints at a clock and finds it to be after eleven. He should go home. He should go home and be there for his daughter. Family first, family before anything. Oh. Ohhhh. He’d never put that together with his reactions to Beckett’s actions. Pushed one of his nuclear buttons, she had. Anything that looked like abandoning family… his non-present, one night stand sperm donor non-father had abandoned them, Meredith had abandoned Alexis… Oh, oh, oh. No wonder he’d reacted so very, very badly. Unspoken assumptions… triggered by his own past.

But he’s identified them now, so he can pull them out into the disinfecting sunlight of knowledge and watch them shrivel up and die. He snuggles down again, content, and finds comfort of his own in the lax warmth of her form against his chest.

“Beckett,” he says into her ear, after a longer time. “Beckett, I’ve got to go home soon.” He follows it up with a slight shake of her shoulder, and when that doesn’t work, a slightly harder shake. She doesn’t stir. Well, that’s not quite true. She curls up closer into him and wraps her arm more tightly round his ribs. This is very pleasant and very unhelpful. He can’t go anywhere with Beckett clinging like a limpet to his middle. He has an idea, and strokes around her face. An eyelid rises, an eye glares at him, and the eyelid falls again. It’s like trying to wake the Cyclops.

“Wakey, wakey,” he entices.

“No.” She burrows into his chest and pulls the coverlet over her head.

“Don’t, then. But I have to get home.” He rolls a little, and detaches her. At least, that was the plan. Rolling a little has settled him on top of naked Beckett, neatly placed exactly where all sorts of deliciously pleasurable naughtiness might occur. That was… not a good idea. She is definitely not asleep now. Which is not to say that her eyes aren’t large, and hazy, and very sexily sleepy. She blinks, slowly.

“You seem to be pretty pleased to see me awake, Castle,” she drawls. It’s his turn to blink, and then to smile, lazily.

“If you’d woken up a little more quickly, I’d have been even more pleased. Never mind. You’re awake now.” He looks down at her, and moves a little. Her sleepy eyes turn dark and widen. He leans down, slowly, brings his hands around her face and then kisses her deeply. “If you’re awake, then I can kiss you properly. Can’t I?”

“Mmmmm.”

That sounds like agreement. It feels like it too, since her hands are sliding into his hair and bringing him down to her. So he kisses her again, tasting her lips, slipping his tongue between them, quick raids to entice her to pursue him and open up, but she’s not being caught in that trap, so he nips her lip to tease her and she tries to retaliate but he takes advantage and steals her mouth and isn’t possession nine points of the law?

Once he’s taken her mouth, he’s found soft, open Kat who likes him to be sure, and searching, and certain of where he wants to take her; sure of how he wants to make love to her. Her certainty – at work – is diamond hard, has to be, so off-duty, having someone else’s certainty to lean on… is restful. He stays exploring her mouth for a time, stroking a hand down over her smooth, silky skin, not pushing, not hurrying: no forcing the pace. He carries on with the same slow seduction until
Kat is loose-limbed and moving under his touch, then, assured of his welcome, begins to stroke into more dangerous areas, palming her breasts so she arches into his hands, slipping downward over the flat abs, the jut of her hipbone, the neat curls, the heat and moisture of her sensitive core. She twists under his experienced, Erotic ministrations,moaning quietly and then more loudly as he slithers down to lick and suck and taste her nipples; descends further and she writhes as his mouth meets the damp folds and his tongue laps over them and flicks over-stimulated nerves and then pushes in, slides out, over nerves again; repeated and repeated so that she arches and writhes and cries his name and comes.

And then he slides into her body as his tongue retakes her mouth and she’s kissing him as if the world will end tonight, legs wrapped around him to pull him deeper and she’s just as responsive, as gorgeously hot, as lost in him as he’d wanted and needed; as he is, once more, lost in her.

They’re wrapped in post-coital quiet when Castle remembers that he needs to go home. This time he achieves it, not without regret that he simply can’t stay. Then again, he’s never been able to stay. The first couple of times were too early, and then it was the slick sex that didn’t take them anywhere. But now, he wants to stay; to keep her close and, most importantly, be there when she wakes so that she doesn’t simply revert to walled-up, closed-off Beckett without knowing that he’ll be there when she wants to stand down.

Beckett is woken by her phone. It’s Dispatch, with a new body for her. She’s up and out in quick time, fully focused on the case and dialling Castle as she goes. By the time she’s reached Hamilton Fish Park, the team is there. She’s not sure whether it’s a good thing or a bad that it’s Lanie on the case, not Perlmutter. Perlmutter is a pain in the ass, but he won’t ask her any questions. Lanie’s a far better ME, but it comes with the Inquisition.

“What have we got?” she inquires, looking down at a twenty-something-not-a-lot African-American man, in winter weight sports gear. As she does, Castle arrives and peers at it. He’s standing an unnoticeable fraction closer than normal, concealed from the others by his heavy coat and by his brandishing a large cup of coffee at her. She takes it without even thinking. It’s cold, it’s undoubtedly about to snow, again, and standing around is very chilling even wrapped up in warm clothes. And, of course, Lanie is regarding her with an ominously penetrating glance. The chill in her body is joined by a chill in her soul.

“The hole in his shoulder is a single GSW, but that shouldn’t have killed him. My bet is that he drowned in the pool, but I’ll need to get him back to the morgue to find out. Gimme till this afternoon. I’ll call you soon as I know.”

Lanie gives her team of cleaner-uppers instructions and the body disappears towards the morgue. Unfortunately, and predictably, Lanie does not. Beckett wishes that hiding behind Espo would not be a complete giveaway that she really does not want to talk to Lanie at all, and finds herself deserted as Ryan and Esposito rapidly depart at Lanie’s glare, taking a reluctant Castle with them. She locks down, the more relaxed mood with which she had woken, which had started to drain when she’d seen Lanie, and which had then been somewhat reinstated by the coffee Castle had brought, wholly evaporating. She doesn’t want to talk to Lanie. Still, she’d managed to avoid conversation last night and she can avoid it now.

“Time of death, Lanie?”

“Gave it to Espo already.”

“Okay, I’d better get back to it. Call me when you get something.”
“Kate, what was up Monday?”

“I was busy.”

Lanie looks at her. Beckett looks back, with a degree of cool challenge.

“You weren’t busy at lunchtime. You dashed off like someone bit your butt, girlfriend. So what was up?”

“I had things to do.”

“Kate, you need to talk about this.” Beckett’s face locks down even more tightly. “You really do.”

“I really don’t. It’s all done.” She turns. “I need to get back and get started. See you Friday?”

“What’s all done?” Lanie says to Beckett’s departing back, and gets no answer. “Tonight, not Friday. And you had better be ready to talk to me,” she adds, unheard.

Beckett’s better mood on waking is thoroughly ruined, thanks to Lanie. She returns to the bullpen and glares at her already-decorated murder board. Esposito has started the timeline, and Ryan is interrogating databases to get an ID. Castle is fiddling with a piece of paper and staring at the picture of their victim.

“Hey,” he says happily, and, as the boys aren’t looking, smiles with a very male edge of appreciation and memory.

“Hey.”

“Lanie have anything more?”

“No.” That’s snipped off. Castle deduces that Lanie had tried to pick up where – he presumes – she had left off on Monday.

“Shame,” he says blandly, and doesn’t comment further. “Coffee?”

“Please. I’m cold. Standing around the park looking at a dead runner really didn’t help.”

“Runner?”

“Runner. Thought you’d have noticed that, Mr Observation.” Castle can’t exactly say that actually he was paying much more attention to Beckett, whose adrenaline and tension had been high when he got there and who had been regarding Lanie much as if she were a small bomb. He’d have been paying more attention to Beckett anyway, to see if she had rebuilt her walls against him, but that hadn’t been obvious in the face of the threat from Lanie’s beadily interrogative stare.

“Okay, Ms Supercop, what’d I miss?” Beckett follows him to the break room, which is good.

“The shoes. Those weren’t bought for show: those were serious gear. Expensive. His clothes were the real deal too. This wasn’t some joe who runs to look good, this was a serious athlete.” She frowns. “I’d have expected a college logo somewhere, but I don’t remember one.” She moves to the door. “Hey, Espo?”

“Yo?”

“You remember any sort of logo on our vic’s gear?”
“Naw. I can call the morgue, if you want?”

“Yeah.”

“On it.” She stalks back toward the coffee machine where the aroma is tickling the air. Castle watches the way she walks and accurately concludes that the case is the only thing on her mind. He also accurately concludes that this is an entirely deliberate focus to avoid thinking about anything else, such as Lanie’s questions, or last night. Detective Beckett, on the job. Murderers, beware.

“Why would someone shoot a runner?”

“Envy.”

She raises a brow. “Okay, let’s tug on that. Competitors? I’d like that better if there was a logo on his pants or top.”

“Did he die of the shot or something else?”

“Shot. Even though it wasn’t fatal the shock would have laid him out for long enough to freeze – hypothermia – or he drowned because he breathed in the snow and slush. So the shot killed him, even though it wasn’t cause of death.”

Castle finishes preparing the coffee and hands a mug over. Beckett wraps her fingers round it in a way which suggests that they are still cold, despite her gloves having been on outside, and smiles a brisk precinct smile.

“No theories yet?”

“Plenty of theories. If it wasn’t a rival, maybe it was a distraught girlfriend.”

“That’s unusually normal for you.”

“Or he was a CIA messenger who was shot by a Chinese spy before he could reach his drop point.”

“And… back to the usual insanity.”

“Or he was that speedy runner from Men In Black. You know, the alien that Will Smith nearly catches before he’s a Man In Black?” He looks at her quivering lips. “You do know, don’t you? You watch sci-fi films.” He grins widely. “You’re a fan. Who’d have thought it? Buttoned-up Beckett likes sci-fi movies.” He smiles soulfully. “I have a huge collection. We could watch them together.” His voice drops. “I’ll bring them all round to yours.” It’s added fast enough to remove the instant stiffening in her back.

“Beckett,” Ryan says from the doorway, “I got something.”

“What’ve you got?”

“His name’s Asher Washington. Lives off Avenue D. Got the address.”

“Field trip?” says Castle hopefully.

“Yep. Let’s go. Ryan, see what else you can dig up. Next of kin would be good.”

“On it.”
Asher Washington’s apartment is, unsurprisingly, locked. The building superintendent produces a key, after some persuasion and the application of the most ferociously vicious stare Castle can ever remember Beckett emitting. It’s on the sixth floor but at least there is an elevator. The Stairmaster at the gym is one thing. Panting geriatrically after Beckett’s no doubt Olympic standard stair-sprinting would be quite another. Which tweaks a memory.

“How did you know about the serious gear?”


“I thought you did yoga.”

“It is possible to enjoy more than one sport, Castle.”

“I could think of another sport you’d enjoy,” he leers. There’s a disgusted noise. It’s reassuringly normal. Under the influence of a nice new case, Beckett is apparently perfectly contented, and in the absence of Lanie, beginning to relax again. He determines to keep it that way.

They look around the small studio. It’s relatively tidy, only a mug on the side. A bowl, cereal and a spoon are out, but unused. On further exploration, the bed is semi-made, and the towel in the bathroom is dry. A button-down and dress pants are over a narrow chair.

“Looks like he went out for a morning run before breakfast, and meant to come back to shower and eat.” She pokes around a little. “You see any phone, laptop, anything like that?”

“Laptop’s here,” Castle says, pointing at the nightstand drawer. “Got any gloves?”

“Sure.” She tosses him a pair and puts one on herself. “Okay. If he’d had a phone on him at the scene Espo or Ryan would have found it. Bit weird to go out without one in this weather, but if he was on a short run he might not have bothered. So it ought to be here.”

Castle looks around hopefully, in a random fashion. Beckett starts at one side and works methodically through each area and drawer.

“A-ha!” they say together, spotting an edge of phone peeking out from under a cushion. Beckett pulls it out, and swipes it. Naturally, it needs a passcode. She taps in a sequence. It opens up.

“How’d you know the code?” Castle says with astonishment. She smirks, happy as always to have pulled off a trick that he hadn’t.

“Magic,” she says, and wiggles her fingers. Castle pouts. Behind the childish expression, he notes again that Beckett has now become more relaxed than she has been for some considerable time. He wonders how much of that is the case and how much last night – and how long it will last, either way.

“C’mon,” he whines.

Beckett sighs. “Most people never change the initial code. I always try it first. Seven times out of ten, it works.”

“Oh. That simple?”

“Yep.” She’s glaring at the contacts list. “Where’re his parents?” She scrolls down, muttering darkly. “They should be here.”
“Maybe he doesn’t have any.”

“Huh?”

“Maybe he doesn’t have any. An orphan. Little Orphan Asher.” Her brow creases as she thinks, tapping her phone already.


“What did Ryan have?”

“You’re not gonna believe this.”

“He really is an orphan? I knew it!”

“Yeah. Your crazy theory was right.”

“Say that again, Beckett. I don’t think I heard it.” She glares.

“You heard.”

He slides up to her. “Didn’t. Temporary deafness.”

“You did.” A hand sneaks over her waist and away. “Don’t.” He opens his mouth. “Just… don’t. Please. Not when I’m working.” Stress has crept into her voice. Oh. Fine while she’s on the case. Not fine as soon as she’s distracted. What had Ryan said? If they don’t do something, she never stops. Oh.

“Okay.”

She nods, once, in thanks. “Let’s get back and see what the boys have.” The stress has – almost – disappeared from her tone. “We can get lunch on the way.”

Beckett’s lunch consists of a small sandwich, an anaemic salad and a fruit salad. Castle quirks an eyebrow, and gets a scowl in return. He subsides, before he can put his foot in it. Although putting his foot in the salad might improve it. Even slush would have more nutrition than that salad. His lunch consists of a much more substantial Mexican wrap. Beckett doesn’t seem to notice. She’s eased off again, now she’s back in the bullpen.

“Beckett, we got next of kin. An aunt and uncle. Placed with them when his parents got dead in a motor accident. Parents were pretty well off, well insured” – Ryan smirks: it’s clear that’s all come from his digging even if Espo’s doing the whole of the talking – “so that’s likely how he could afford to live in Manhattan now. Works at Schickoff & Schultz.”

“Who?”

“Attorneys, based in Midtown.”

“That’s where Dad’s firm is.” Beckett wrinkles her brow. “Wonder if he knows anything about them? I might see what the gossip is. Lawyers gossip like a knitting circle – except about their clients, when it might actually be useful to us.” Castle blinks at her disgruntled tone. “What? They never give us any useful information on a case. Professional ethics.” She scowls. “I do get it. Brought up with it. It’s just sometimes…”
“Unhelpful?”

“Yeah.” She glares at the innocent desk, then breathes out and smiles nastily. “Still, there might be some non-client gossip.”

Beckett has had an idea. It is extremely unlikely that her father will know anything about Asher Washington, though he might be able to give her some background on the firm and if she’s really lucky, some gossip. It is, however, very likely that he will be free for dinner tonight, which means that she will be able to avoid Lanie. Perfect. Of course, she will have to deal with her father, but since Christmas that’s been slightly easier, mostly. Slightly easier. Her father has been more… fatherly. Relaxed. Less… fragile. And it had all started at Christmas, with the game, and she’d talked about Castle, and somewhere her father seems to have got the idea that there’s more to it than she’d told him, and… and it seems that in thinking about Katie with a… a… something… sort-of-not-quite-maybe-relationship, he’s rediscovered something of himself.

“Beckett!”

“Uh?”

“Did you even hear me?”

“No. What was it?”

“Are you and Castle going to go talk to the relatives?”

“Oh. Yeah. Sure.” She snaps back into focus. “Ryan, are you waiting for street cams?” He nods. “Okay. Espo, you start tracing bank, purchases, anything that might tell us what he was into that might get him killed. If Lanie calls, ask her to text me and we’ll swing by the morgue on the way back. Castle, give me five and we’ll get going.” She disappears in the direction of the restroom, and on the way back calls her father.

“Dad?”

“Katie? Is something wrong?” He sounds concerned.

“No, nothing. I need some help on a case, and you might be able to help.”

“Me? I’m not a criminal attorney.”

“No. I need some gossip.” Her father squawks.

“I don’t gossip.”

“C’mon, Dad, you all chatter like the Sewing Circle. I need you to tell me about Schickoff & Schultz. Can I meet you for dinner?”

“Sure, come over and I’ll cook. I don’t know a lot about them, though.”

“Anything’s more than the nothing I’ve got. See you about six-thirty?”

“Sure.” There’s a pregnant pause. “Katie… if this is a case, shouldn’t you be bringing your Castle-fellow with you?” Her father sounds – mischievous. “After I’ve unloaded the information, we could all eat and then have a nice evening.”

“Dad! No, I wasn’t going to bring him.”
“I think you should,” Jim says. “If you don’t, I guess I’ll just come by the precinct after work and tell you there. That way you’re doing what you’re supposed to: letting him shadow you.”

Oh God. Now her father’s turned matchmaker. How the hell did that happen? She’d been pleased that he was being a little more fatherly… but this is not pleasing at all. Her father is still talking.

“So that’s agreed. You’ll both come by around six-thirty. See you later.” And he dials off before she has a chance to argue. She’s left there with her jaw hanging open. Her own father has just sandbagged her. She walks out, shell-shocked.
“What did you say to my dad?”

“Uh?” Castle says articulately. Say what, Beckett? She sounds equal parts shocked and pissed at him. Or maybe at her dad. “What do you mean?” They’re just getting into her car.

“I asked if we could have dinner and he could tell me about the law firm and he insisted you came too.”

Castle sits there with his jaw on his lap. Her father did what? “Uh?” he says again. All his normal words and brain function appear to have run away. If he had any sense, he’d be following them.

“Did you give him that idea?”

“No!” Absolutely not. Never. Oh, hi Jim, will you help me get your daughter into my arms even though she’s doing her best to drive me away? That’s a really likely way to help his cause. “I went to tell him that I wouldn’t put him in my book. I told you that. He told me his story and asked me where the game store was. Nothing else.”

There is a strange noise permeating the car. It sounds as if Beckett is growling. When he glances over at her, she’s clamped her teeth into her lip and looks like she’s about to scream.

“I do not need this,” she mutters blackly. “I can’t deal with this.” Suddenly, all her tension is back. She’s obviously had a very unpleasant thought. Castle worms a hand over to hers, and skates over her fingers, aiming for reassurance. She doesn’t react. “I don’t need another thing to worry about.”

“Worry about what?”

There’s a pause. He’s still rubbing lightly over the back of her hand where it rests on her leg. “Dad,” she says, and stops that short. Castle waits, unusually quietly. Nothing more arrives. They pull out into the traffic, which gives Beckett an excuse to concentrate on something else.

“So what do we do?”

“Go,” she says. She doesn’t sound exactly overjoyed. “I need that gossip.” There’s something else there, but he isn’t entirely sure what it is. It almost sounds like she’s picking the better of two bad options. He’d pick at that thought till he’d uncovered the meat of it, but they’re almost to the right spot, and, under the shadow of the case, Beckett’s pulled herself back to normality.

The relatives are cool and collected. At least, they are right up to the point Beckett asks if Asher had any enemies. The aunt dissolves into tears.

“No. No-one. He had a nice girlfriend, a good job, friends. He had everything. Everyone loved him.”

“What about his running? Did he have a club?”

“No. He said it calmed him down. Work was really demanding. All those targets. So he always ran the same route so he didn’t have to worry.”

“What sort of attorney was he?”
“Corporate. He didn’t” – her husband breaks in –

“He hadn’t had a chance to specialise yet. He was only twenty four. He had everything in front of him.” Beckett freezes for the tiniest fraction of a second, and then recovers.

“Could you give me the names and addresses of his girlfriend and his close friends?”

“Yes. As much as we can.” Castle knows that this will be for cross-checking with the phone.

“Thank you. Was there anyone at work that he talked about a lot – good or bad?”

They look identically blank. Beckett lets the silence stretch out.

“He mentioned his boss occasionally, but I don’t remember anyone else.”

Beckett takes meticulous notes of the names and addresses. While she’s doing that, her phone chirps with a text, but she doesn’t look at it until they’ve left the Washingtons’ apartment.

“Is that Lanie?” Castle asks hopefully.

“Yes. We’d better go by the morgue. She’s got results for me.”

Beckett doesn’t sound as excited by that as she normally would. Castle thinks back to the earlier thought that she was choosing dinner with her dad as a least-worst option, and rapidly concludes that Beckett is still at odds with Lanie and is ensuring that Lanie can’t make anything of it – for now. He wonders whether to don his vest, and then decides that this would be a little provocative. He’ll just have to dodge the flying subtext. Though this is Lanie. Subtext is far too subtle if she’s decided she wants to make a point.

Asher Washington is laid out on a slab, opened up. Beckett gazes down at the corpse, and then at Lanie. “What’ve you got for me?”

Lanie regards Beckett beadily. “Single GSW to the shoulder. .308 calibre. Shattered the bone, but didn’t kill him. Shock probably knocked him down.”

“So what did kill him?”

“Drowned. Slush in his lungs. But I think he had a little help with that. See these bruises?” Castle and Beckett nod in unison. “Someone held him down.”

“Held him down?”

“Yup. Long enough for him to drown, then left him there.” Lanie continues with technical detail for a few moments. “Tox was clean. Hadn’t had so much as a Tylenol.”

“Anything else?”

“Nope. No tattoos, no notable marks. Clean as a whistle.”

“Okay. Thanks, Lanie.” Beckett starts for the door.

“Where are you going?”

“Back to the bullpen.”

Lanie puts herself between Beckett and the door. “In that case I’ll see you later.”
“I’m busy. Seeing my dad.”

Lanie’s mouth flaps wordlessly.

“She is,” Castle says helpfully.

“I am,” Beckett says bluntly. “So I need to get back. I said I’d see you Friday.”

“Yeah,” Lanie says very sarcastically. “You did. Right about the point you wouldn’t say anything about anything. You need to talk to someone.”

“I am not having this discussion. I’m certainly not having it on work time and in public.” Beckett has developed an icy anger which Castle has not previously seen directed at Lanie. She stalks out. Castle turns to follow and is stopped by Lanie.

“What’s going on? She’s been weird since Monday.” Castle looks convincingly and stupidly blank, and shrugs.

“No idea. See you later,” he says hurriedly, and escapes, quickly enough for it to be clear he’s not swapping secrets with Lanie.

Beckett is not looking forward to Friday. She’s not looking forward to this evening, either. When Castle exits the morgue at some speed and slides into the car, she’s staring at the sidewalk, thinking that her life would be massively easier if her father wasn’t matchmaking and her so-called best friend wasn’t trying to play psychiatrist. They’ll both be disappointed in her: and she’ll end up picking up the pieces for her father and trying to avoid seeing the disgust in Lanie’s face.

A large, warm hand lands over hers and completely envelops it. “You okay?” Castle asks.

“Yeah. I’m fine.” But his hand is very comforting. She doesn’t shake him off, as she had earlier: for a brief moment lets his strength flow into her. “Let’s go.”

Back in the hubbub of the bullpen progress is being made. Espo and Ryan have split up the friends between them, and are cross-referencing at near-light speed. Beckett’s got the girlfriend and is running her down. Social media is such a wonderful help to cops. She’s fairly sure it wasn’t why Facebook was invented, but she’s not complaining. In fact, Asher’s Facebook is also a good place to look…

“What the hell?” she emits. “Guys, get a load of this.”

“Wow.”

Asher had been wearing a GoPro. That’s…quite unusual. Especially since it hadn’t been on the body. “Did unis pick it up on the search?”

“No.”

“Hmm.”

Not only had he been wearing it, but he must have been a bit of a geek, because he’d been sending a series of shots to his Facebook page. The final clear photo is timed at 5.03 a.m. After that it’s shots of slush, up close and not personal, every five minutes. The same slush. There are three slushy photos. Then there’s nothing more.

“Well, that gives us time of death,” Ryan says. “5.03 to 5.08. That’s a lot better than Lanie can do.”
“Not quite. It gives us time of shot, within a five minute window. Time of death will be around 5.18 to 5.23, plus a few minutes.”

“Oh. When the camera stopped transmitting.”

“Yes. It’s pretty dark around then.”

Espo jumps in. This is his specialist subject.

“Need to be a pretty good shot to hit a running man in the dark when it’s winter, even if it’s not a kill shot. We need to cross-check who Asher knew who could shoot.”

“What’s your odds, Espo?”

“If he didn’t slip on the snow, an’ if I had my rifle, at up to 600 yards ten outta ten, even in the dark. Wouldn’t want night vision. Spoils it. But there ain’t many like me,” he finishes smugly. Beckett lets the arrogance pass. Espo earned that arrogance long since, out in the desert.

“So we’re talking about a pretty good shot, then,” Castle says.

“Yeah. We oughta check ranges, that sorta thing. Someone who can shoot that well is gonna be practicing somewhere and he’ll have been noticed.”

“Might be a woman, Espo,” Beckett says dryly.

“Ain’t many like you out there, either.” Castle flicks a surprised glance at Esposito. “Beckett can shoot straight. Can’t beat me, but she don’t do badly.” She grins ferally at Espo, who grins back, and just for a moment it’s two predators together against the world. “Second best in the bullpen.”

“I’ll beat you one day,” she says, bravado sparking. “And I’ll publish it in every paper in New York State.”

“Su-ure you will, Beckett. Only if I’m shooting from a sickbed.” Beckett laughs. This is an old, familiar argument that they’ve been having since the day they teamed up and Espo told her that girls can’t shoot. She’d taken him up on the competition, and though she’s never beaten him and never will, their comradely vying had improved her scores and marksmanship to be second-best to him in every case. Some days, that’s all she’d had to cling to: going to the range with Espo to give her something that required total concentration on the days after her father had needed her, once he got dry.

“I’d like to see that,” Castle says. “Can I try too?”

“You?” comes in stereo.

“Me. I’ve done a bit of shooting.” Beckett and Espo exchange glances, and another of those predatory smiles.

“Okay. Maybe when this case is over.” She looks up at her board. “Let’s see what we’ve got. Corporate attorney and runner, shot with a rifle, then drowned when that didn’t quite work. Head cam missing. Shooter was pretty good but nothing like Espo.”

“Prob’ly not ex-Forces, then.”

“Guess it’s time for the grunt work. We’d better get on with it.”

And they do. For the next couple of hours it’s heads down. Even Castle appears to have caught the
bug, although it mostly manifests in the provision of coffee and intense concentration on his phone. Beckett is, he knows, using the need to chase leads to forget about all the other issues surrounding her.

“Beckett.”

“Oh?”

“We ought to be going. You said you’d be at your dad’s at six-thirty. It’s after six already.”

Oh. Is it? How did that happen? “Thanks.” She looks at her pile of papers, picks it up wholesale, and stuffs it in the drawer. The computer is equally condignly dealt with. “There. Done.”

“You goin’ home, Beckett?”

“No, to see my dad. Remember? Legal gossip.”

“Oh, yeah. See you tomorrow.”

“Night, boys.”

“Night.” Castle echoes her.

The drive up to the Upper West Side becomes increasingly quiet as the cross-street numbers rise. Castle tries to make conversation, but after the third completely non-relevant response from Beckett he stops bothering and simply observes. Beckett is retreating back into a brightly polished, smiling, superficially attractive shell which most people would think was entirely appropriate for seeing their family. Castle recognises it instantly as the same one he had seen when he’d dragooned her round for dinner at his, recalls her wish that no-one would need her, and switches his observation skills to high.

“Hi, Dad.”

“Jim.”

“Hello, Katie. Rick.” Beckett’s eyes widen momentarily at the informal addresses between her father and Castle. That is… not necessarily a good thing. She doesn’t need them teaming up. It’s just… squicky. Which is an absolutely horrible word which doesn’t belong in any adult’s vocabulary but is the only one she can think of which fits. As if seeing her father wasn’t a fragile enough construct, now she has to worry about what Castle’s undisciplined mouth might give away, and worse, what he might spot.

She doesn’t remember that she’d told him, deep dissolved in vodka, that she’s tired of being needed, of everyone wanting to lean on her; that she wants to disappear. Therefore, she isn’t aware that he’s already on alert.

“I made us all dinner,” Jim says cheerily. “Chicken and salad. I got us an apple tart and cream for dessert.”

“From Fairway?” Beckett says hopefully, regarding the tart on the counter hungrily.

“Yes, Katie. From Fairway.”

“Good. I love their tarts.” Castle resolves to feed her one, every so often. He watches Beckett with her father, and detects a tiny brittleness in her voice. She’s trying very hard to show her father
she’s delighted.

“Dinner will be ready in a moment. You can ask your questions over the meal, Katie.” Jim grins. “Do you want to read me my rights first?”

“Dad!” Beckett sounds deeply offended. Jim grins even more widely. Castle moves around the small apartment, as neat as his daughter’s, but more decorated. There’s a photo of Beckett in dress uniform. More surprisingly, there’s a wedding photo. Beckett is really very like her mother. Another reason for Jim to dissolve into alcohol. She must have been a constant reminder of what he’d lost. While he’s been thinking, the table has been set, water glasses and jug put out, and Jim is placidly tossing salad.

“Which firm did you say it was?”

“Schickoff & Schultz.”

“Mm. Can’t say as I’ve really come across them. I haven’t heard anything bad about them, either. Sorry, Katie. No gossip.”

“Nothing?”

“Nothing.”

Castle watches with appalled interest as Beckett turns slightly and is clearly struggling not to say why didn’t you tell me that at lunchtime? She swallows it down, clears her face of ire, and says lightly, “Shall I put the salad out?” If it had been anyone except her father, Castle thinks, they’d have been cut off at the knees for pulling that trick. Or at the neck.

“Can I help?”

“I think we’re good, thanks. You could pour.” Castle does as he’s told, as Jim puts chicken on plates and Beckett distributes them about the table.

Conversation is stilted. Castle can’t think of a topic that he’s comfortable introducing, and Beckett, having received no useful information at all, is trying to talk about the lousy weather and how much she hates the snow because she can’t run without falling over.

“It’ll be gone soon,” Jim points out. “Then you can go running as much as you like. Take care, though.” Castle would have said the same to Alexis, in much the same tone.

“You say that every time,” Beckett says, with that same brittleness as earlier, covered by a cheerful grin. “I’m not six, you know. Not even sixteen.”

“You’re not. But you’re still my daughter and I’m allowed to nag you.” Beckett’s hand is below the table, finger twisted into the belt loop of her pants.

“I carry a gun,” she points out. “I even know how to use it.”

“Not the point, Katie. I’m your dad and I have nagging rights.”

“Isn’t that supposed to be bragging rights?” It’s perfectly Beckett, if you can’t see her hand.


“So, Rick,” Jim grins. Castle abruptly starts to worry. “That game you convinced Katie to buy for
“Yes?” he says suspiciously. Beckett has tensed up even more.

“Fancy a game now? We’ve only played it with two.”

“Castle’s had lots of experience,” Beckett says quellingly. “It wouldn’t be fair.” That sounds like Beckett wants to leave, but can’t or won’t simply say so, likely for fear of upsetting her father.

“Scared you’ll lose, Beckett?” Castle says automatically.

“I beat you last time,” she snaps back.

“You have this game too, Rick?”

“Oh, that was Beckett’s set.” He realises what he’s said when Jim raises an eyebrow and Beckett pins him with an absolutely appalled glare.

“When was that, Katie?”

“I bought it the same time I got yours. I liked it enough that I thought I’d have it too.”

“And when did you beat Rick?” Castle is reminded that Jim is a lawyer.


“That’s nice. You took my advice.” He fusses around finding his own set and setting it up, thereby missing – though Castle certainly does not – Beckett’s frown. It seems very like Beckett is not happy about whatever the advice was, which Castle surmises is related to her dealings with him.

Castle’s feeling that Jim is broadly supportive – at least unless his daughter gets hurt – takes firm root.

The game covers a multitude of sins of omission, Castle discovers. Omission of a huge number of conversational topics, starting but emphatically not finishing with family, friends, social occasions, work, and what Beckett (whom he simply cannot think of as Katie) does in her time off. The last is hardly surprising. Beckett doesn’t seem to have time off. Unfortunately, he also notices that Beckett is resolutely cheerful. Nothing comes out of her mouth – nothing has come out of her mouth since they came in the door – that isn’t positive, bright, cheery and designed to ensure that her father knows absolutely nothing about how she really feels. As far as her conversation with her father goes, she’s living a Mary Poppins life, practically perfect in every way. No-one ever helps Beckett, she had slurred. But she’s not letting her father see that she might need help.

Her father’s easily explained: that’s because she supports him, and doesn’t think that he can support her – or thinks that putting any strain on him will have bad results. So she doesn’t tell him anything. She lets the boys see a little – just the tiniest crack, because she’s had to, to make the team function around her need to support her father at all times. For the same reason, Montgomery knows, and maybe a bit more because he was there before, when Jim was drowning in rye whiskey and Beckett was burying her pain in work. Maybe Lanie knows a little more than the boys – and again Castle wonders what had gone down at that aborted lunch. And he, Castle, knows a lot more than any of them but only as a story. He hasn’t lived any of it.

But now her father’s beginning to suspect that his bright, blazing, beautiful daughter isn’t as brightly burning as she should be; as she’s trying to make him believe.
“Come on,” Jim encourages his pieces as they progress around the board.

“I told you Castle would win,” Beckett notes.

Castle is indeed winning, though not as easily as he would have liked. Jim’s sharp legal mind is clearly as quick to absorb game strategies as his daughter’s, and Castle is having to put in some effort to stay definitively ahead. Beckett, on the other hand, seems to be almost entirely indifferent to whether she wins or loses. Sure, she’s making all the right noises of disgust or delight, but it’s the same smooth superficial shell which she had assumed as they arrived, and it’s all an act. She is, very subtly and very surprisingly, ensuring that she loses – and therefore that one of he or Jim wins – as quickly as possible without it being spotted. Castle’s conviction that Beckett really, really wants to go home – or leave here – is strengthened. He considers his options, and decides that the general discomfort of the evening and Beckett’s underlying tension should not be increased or prolonged. It then doesn’t take him long to win.

He looks at his watch and fakes startlement at the time. “I’m sorry,” he apologises, “but I need to get home. Sorry to break up the party – and deprive Beckett of her chance for revenge. Thank you for dinner.”

Jim looks a little rueful. “I forgot you would have to get home.”

Beckett bestows a hug on her father, which Castle notices is not precisely the sort of bear hug he’d expect or deliver with Alexis, in either direction. It seems that just as Beckett is constrained around her father, he is likewise constrained around her. “See you Sunday, Dad,” she says. No-one would believe that she wasn’t entirely enthusiastic about the idea. No-one, that is, except Castle. The same brittle stress fractures are in her voice as have been there all evening. He wonders how it can be that Jim doesn’t notice, and then chides himself for stupidity. Jim will never have heard any other type of voice from her since Beckett left Stanford.

Castle expects Beckett to slump, or breathe a sigh of relief, or in some way relax, as soon as they leave. That simply does not happen. He does not, however, expect talking or explanations, and receives neither. They get into Beckett’s car; she maintains her smooth shell; she drives him home and drops him off.

He doesn’t ask where she’s going. He knows.

Beckett parks at the Twelfth, waves casually as she passes through the entrance and gets into the elevator, and attains her desk; where she takes out her papers and switches her computer on. A pile of new papers are skulking on her desk. Only once the accoutrements of her wholly successful career are assembled around her does she allow herself to breathe deeply, dissolve the shell, hunch her shoulders for a moment and then straighten them again – and then go to brew herself a coffee.

She examines her murder board, which has acquired some new decoration which she regards appreciatively, fitting this new information into the murder-map in her head. Ballistics is still awaited – she growls: she wants those results run through the databases as soon as possible – but time of death is confirmed at 5.30 a.m., stomach contents are consistent with not having eaten breakfast – dinner, yes, pasta with a healthy quantity of green vegetables and fruit – and there are some interesting new photos of the friends and relatives. What there is not is any indication of who might have shot Asher Washington, or why. She sips slowly and, as if she were brewing good
coffee, allows the information to percolate through her mind.

Back at her desk with another cup of coffee and a dog-eared packet of M&M’s which she had found at the back of her drawer (she is carefully not looking at the sell-by-date, although it is extraordinarily unusual that these have hidden from her for more than a day or so: candy is normally gone in a flash), Beckett begins to review the new papers. They include the results of the phone contacts cross-checking, which throws up nothing untoward – unis can do a first follow up of all of them except the girlfriend, with whom Beckett will deal tomorrow. It’s too late now.

She works her way down the pile, processing and fitting more and more tiles into the mosaic of her thoughts to build a picture. Right at the bottom of the papers, some time later, are the results of the call records. Pay dirt!, she thinks, and also makes a mental note to chew Ryan out for not making sure this was on the top of the pile where she would see it at once. She’s not inclined to give him leeway for not expecting her to see it tonight: since she’s always in before him she would still have had to fight through the rest of the pile to find it before he rolled in. After that, however, she’ll praise him lavishly for his work – as he also deserves – in finding this series of calls. The same number had called Asher three times the previous evening, and been answered all three times, and then at 5a.m. this morning.

Beckett thinks rapidly. If Asher’s phone had been with him while he was running, it’s most likely that he would have stopped running to answer it – everyone does, and lawyers more than most. And that would have given his killer a shot at a stationary target. But Asher didn’t have the phone with him and so the shot was – well, taken on the run, as it were. Her lips twitch with the black humour. So, a much harder shot, and a semi-miss, necessitating the next step, suffocating or drowning Asher in the snow and slush of Hamilton Fish Park.

She ruffles back through the papers for the ME’s report. The bruising pattern on the shoulders – oooohhh, and on the back: that was apparently a knee – indicates a reasonably – so she thinks – wide hand span. She puts her own hand on a convenient ruler to try to get an idea of scale. Hmm. Her span is actually not too much smaller. The photo shows that the finger-markings are not unusually widely spaced, which militates against her searching for a tiny keyboard player with a multi-octave stretch. She won’t rule it out – no assumptions at this stage of a homicide investigation – but it’s not a hot prospect. She thinks some more. Castle has large hands, she thinks abruptly, and taps out a text. What’s your hand span if you were pushing someone down?

She’s scowling blackly at the lack of a ballistics report and the complete absence of fingerprints on the body, when her phone rings. This time she looks at it before answering.

“Beckett.”

“My hands are seven inches wide, without really stretching, if I were pressing down on someone’s shoulders. Why?”

“Checking up,” Beckett says un informatively.

“You’re working the case without me. That’s not fair.”

“I had a thought. Don’t make me regret asking for your input.”

“You should let me” – but the electronic scream of a call waiting interrupts that statement.

“I have to get this,” Beckett says. “Night.”

The call is from O’Leary.
“Beckett, you know that guy – Berowitz – you picked up the other night?”

“Yeah?” Her heart plummets.

“Beat cops picked him up again. D’you need him before I call his wife?”

“No,” she says, forcing her voice not to shake. “No. Call his wife. I don’t need him any more.”

Don’t call me. He’s not my problem. Orders. (But it isn’t quite orders. She’s just choosing to interpret it that way.) He’s Julia’s problem. But she knows that in the very near future her phone will ring and it will be Julia, failing to cope, needing support, needing someone to cling to; she knows that she’ll listen, repeat all her advice; she knows Julia won’t listen to her.

And she knows that, in consequence, tonight she’ll keep on working until she buries her guilt that she can’t or won’t go over to the Berowitzes.

So it transpires, exactly as she had expected. She eventually falls into bed at well past midnight, though at least this time she had gone home. She had considered the break room couch, being nearer, but remembered just in time that she doesn’t have a full change of clothes here. She has no desire for another discussion with Montgomery.

Her late night had enabled her to reach the bottom of the cold case pile. Those hadn’t gone away simply because a new body had dropped. No such luck. However, she thinks smugly, the whole pile is sitting in the out-tray waiting to be returned to whichever unlucky cops were originally responsible. Not only that, but she has prepared the leave request upon which Montgomery had insisted, albeit with gritted teeth. Still, she’s done it. She’s requested to take all her days at Easter, carefully avoiding spring break week, just when he’ll also have to balance all the other non-parental requests. Serve him right. On those satisfying notes, she finally finds sleep.

In the morning, she’s not exactly in bright and early. Early, yes. Bright is not precisely the word. She’s still tired and consequently a little fuzzy-headed, and she aims straight for the coffee machine. The first cup doesn’t touch the sides. The second is a little less desperate. The third actually contains some milk. She heads for her murder board and spends some quality time sitting on the edge of her desk contemplating her evidence and swinging her feet thoughtfully. Then she starts to scribble on a handy pad of paper. When Esposito appears, she’s ready.

“Yo, Beckett.”

“Hey, Espo,” she grins. Espo instantly looks nervous. “I was thinking.” And now he looks downright scared. “Did you get anything from ranges, shooters, that sort of thing?”

“No yet. I put calls out all over, but no-one bit.”

“Keep pushing. That number Ryan found – and why’d he hide it at the bottom of the pile? – did we start tracing it?”

“Started. No result last night, but maybe he’ll get a hit this morning. He was waiting for the triangulation off the towers, to try to get a location.”

Beckett explains her theory about the 5a.m. call. Espo hums as he works through it.

“Makes more sense, that’s for sure. Don’t know anyone who’d set up to shoot a running target.”

“Unless they were skeet shooting,” Castle says happily from behind them. Beckett jumps. Espo starts. Castle proffers coffee to Beckett, and is impervious to Espo’s half-scowl.
“Skeet shooting?”

“It’s possible,” Esposito says. “But then he might have hit clean.”

“Who is this guy, anyway?” Beckett says with irritation. “Where’s Ryan? I want that number run down.”

Fortuitously, Ryan appears almost upon the word. Less fortuitously, so does Montgomery, who casts an all-encompassing glance around, notes the cold case files with a raised eyebrow, and more pertinently their location piled high in the out-tray; enters his office and clearly discovers the leave request right at the top of his in-tray.

“What is this?” he says, dangling it between a finger and thumb tip in case it should explode.

“My leave request. The one which you asked for, sir.”

“Denied,” Montgomery snaps. “Resubmit, taking at least four of your ten days within the next two weeks.” Beckett’s mouth opens. “If you argue, Detective, you’ll be taking them starting right now, followed by another four unpaid and a write-up for dissent.” Her mouth snaps closed. Nobody around her dares to say a word as she stalks to her chair and begins to stab at her keyboard.

Ryan and Espo decamp to their desks and Ryan, at least, starts to run down the number Beckett wants. Castle plops down into his normal chair and discreetly inspects Beckett as she glares a pair of scorched holes into the screen. Five minutes later she collects a sheet from the printer, slashes an infuriated signature across it, and stalks across the room to deliver it to Montgomery. On the way back, she stops at Ryan’s desk.

“You got that number yet?”

“I’m on it. Soon as I get it, you’ll know.”

She turns to Esposito, with a sharp swish and flick of the tail of her jacket.

“Anything popped on shooters?”

“Not yet. Still running down ranges.”

Beckett makes a noise whose overtone and pitch might be equalled by an F-15 at full after-burn. Fortunately it’s not at the same volume. The precinct windows wouldn’t survive. She turns on her heel and removes herself from the vicinity of the bullpen with a machine-gun rattle of clacking heels.

Castle looks at her form poised in the break room doorway and decides to give her a moment. It would all have worked out beautifully, if Ryan hadn’t high-fived Esposito and bounced up from his desk to go chasing after her.

“Beckett! I got it!”

“The number?”

“Yeah. Dumbass didn’t use a burner phone.”

“What are you waiting for? Go pick him up.”

“Don’t you want to know who was calling?”
“Who?”

“His uncle.”

“What?”

Ryan shrugs. “That’s who the phone’s registered to.”


“What’re you gonna do?”

“I’m going to see if I can find out if Asher had a will, and what his parents’ wills said.” She’s dialling as she finishes the sentence.

Ten minutes later, she’s smiling ferally at the phone as she swipes off. Ten minutes later, by which time the tapping of her fingernails has dug small crescents in her desk, her e-mail pings. She opens the attachments, curses under her breath, and flicks back to the e-mail.

“Thank God. There’s a Cliffs Notes summary.”

Castle springs out the chair to come round and read over her shoulder, leaning on the desk and only just preventing himself touching Beckett. She’s working. Later, however, he’s going to see when she requested that leave. He’s got a plan or two.

“Asher inherited from his parents – but it was on trust till he was twenty-five. We didn’t get that from the earlier search. He was paid a certain amount per month – explains how he could afford the rent – but he wouldn’t get the rest till his birthday. Trustees were – ah. The aunt and uncle. Hmm. Wonder if they were skimming?”

“And if Asher died, all the cash went to them,” Castle says, reading down the rest. “Pretty standard clause.”

“Ryan needs to run their financials. He can do that while I’m talking to them.”

“While we’re talking to them.” Beckett rolls her eyes at him. “What? I know about wills.”

The interview is nasty, brutish, and very short – all on the part of the aunt and uncle. They lawyer up in five minutes flat.

“There’s nothing at all to be done about that,” Beckett growls, as the Washingtons depart.

“Mungojerrie and Rumpelteaser,” Castle says.

“Uh?” Beckett’s mind has already moved on to how to break them.

“Cats. TS Eliot’s Practical Cats, to be precise. Notorious cat burglars.”

“Is this relevant to anything at all?”

“You quoted it.”

“If I did it was accidental. Burglarious fictional felines have nothing to do with this case. Focus, Castle.”
At that point Espo breaks in before the discussion turns into an – er – catfight.

“Beckett, they both shoot. Membership at the Westside Rifle and Pistol Range at 20 West 20th.”

“Yeah?” A little crease forms between her brows. “Both?” In the single word there’s the note that means she’s running shifts of possibilities and variants. “But that means” –

“that either of them” –

could have shot him,” they say together. Esposito muffles a snigger.

“Right,” she raps. “Ryan!”

“Yo, boss?”

“Financials. Fast as you can. Espo, get down to that range and find out how good this pair are.” She bares her teeth in something that is definitely not a smile. “Castle, later on we’re going to get them back and sucker them. If they double teamed, then we’re going to find that Uncle Carson’s got a perfect alibi, and Aunt Estelle doesn’t. No-one ever expects that the woman’s the better shot. Once we’ve got financials and the range’s story, we’ll have enough for a warrant. That can be executed while we’re interviewing them.” Another tigerish flash of teeth. “Got them.”

“Got who?”

“The Washingtons, sir.”

“Good work. Explain.” Beckett does. Montgomery matches her shark-like smile. “Okay, Beckett. Get the warrant typed up as soon as you can and make it happen.” He pauses and regards her in his most Captainly fashion. Beckett has a single instant in which the smile starts to slide off her face and realisation replaces it like snow turning to slush and flowing into a drain. “As soon as this case is done, you take your first days, and don’t be here till Monday. The rest of your leave request is granted.”

He smiles seraphically at the assembled team and wanders off to his office, leaving the Beckett bombshell to tick-tock down to detonation. At least, that's what Castle expects.

She can’t react. She can’t explode. Standing and screaming obscenities in the middle of the bullpen is not who she is. She’s coped with all the rest of her life by locking down and never letting her feelings show and she can and will do it now. She pulls all her emotions back down inside her head and looks round at the three men.

“Right. I want my days off,” she says. “So let’s get this done.” Before anyone can say anything, she disappears in the direction of the one place none of them can follow.

The restroom is cool and quiet. Beckett breathes deeply and runs the water till it’s cold, then soaks her hands to the wrists in it: using the chill to cool her own hot-running anger. She stands there, still and silent, for several moments, until she’s calm enough to go back. She doesn’t want time off. She doesn’t want to be at home: prey to the possibilities that Julia will call; that Lanie will force her way in; that her father will make his expectations clear – clearer; that Castle might use it as an opportunity to push her further and faster than she’s capable of dealing with. He always pushes, and whatever he might have said the other night about – in summary – accepting the situation, she doesn’t believe that he won’t push the pace. He’ll want more, he’ll want too much, and she has very little left to give. And yet the warmth of his hand over hers in the car yesterday, and the warmth of his big body around her on other occasions, had helped: had let her find her own
still centre and start to refill her reserves.

She dries her hands, and walks back out into the bullpen, perfectly composed.
Two hours later Ryan has produced financials, Esposito has extracted vast quantities of information and shooting statistics from the range – and from the smug grin he’s displaying has done it by spending some time showing off to the range officer – and between them all they are moving matters around the murder board like pieces in a chess game. White Queen to move and mate in two. Two perpetrators in Interrogation, that will be. All Beckett needs now is the signed warrant, and she’s typing at machinegun pace to finish it off and find a handy judge. With a final decisive tap of the Enter key, she stretches up and sighs.

“That’s it sent. I’ll give it a few minutes and then call the court to finish it off. As soon as it’s e-mailed back, we’ll start. Castle, uniforms’ll go pick them up. When we get them in I want to look at handspans. Ryan, Espo, you two supervise the search. We’re looking for the GoPro in particular.” She stands up and stretches again. “We’ll hit them with the money first.” Pause. “I need a coffee.” She aims for the break room, Castle following.

He watches her quick, competent hands creating two cups of coffee and pushing one in his direction while already drinking her own, noticing more today the tell-tale small callouses from shooting practice, as the current case is all about shooting. There’s no indication at all of what she may feel about her enforced vacation days, no indication of anything other than her desire to wrap up the case.

“If we break them,” Castle opens, “before dinner time,” – Beckett turns a gaze on him which says louder than words What do you mean if? When – “then d’you want to go get a burger after?”

There’s an uncomfortable silence, not at all disguised by Beckett continuing to swallow down her coffee. Castle thinks she’s about to refuse.

“I don’t know. Leave it,” she says, before he can start to persuade her. “Leave it till later.” The fractures are back in her tone. Castle slides a little closer and brushes a finger over her waist, swift enough to be undemanding, slow enough to make a point.

“Later, then.” His finger traces over her hand as she puts the emptied cup down. His voice drops. “Or we could simply go to yours and get takeout.” He quits the break room before she can answer, leaving his silky words to work on her.

The warrant has come through while they’ve been drinking coffee, and suddenly it’s all speed and bustle and uniforms going off and Ryan and Espo following with identically happily predatory smiles at the prospect of closing this case down and not needing to do any more overtime. Beckett doesn’t look nearly as happy at that idea as would relieve Castle of a nagging worry that Montgomery’s pushed Beckett the wrong way. She might have said she wanted her vacation days but he doesn’t believe that.

“Why have my clients been arrested?” a sharp-suited attorney demands.

“Because your clients have been skimming money from Asher Washington’s trust fund, and he would have found out next month, after his twenty-fifth birthday.” Beckett is short, forceful, and absolutely certain.

“We did not!”

“Don’t say a word,” the lawyer says.
“I can prove you did. Here” – Beckett tosses a bundle of statements across the table – “are the withdrawals you made from the trust fund account and the corresponding amounts arriving in your bank account.”

“Asher knew all about them and agreed.”

“Did he? That’s not what he told his colleague, when he asked him for some advice.” She’s bluffing, but she hasn’t told a lie. Castle may be a wordsmith, but in the interrogation room she’s as brilliant with words as he. Estelle has paled to corpse-like grey. Her hands are flat on the table. Beckett looks at the span. Her hands aren’t unusually large, but they’re wider than Beckett’s. “We’re searching your apartment now. If we find Asher’s GoPro there…” she lets the implication hang in the air. “Even if we don’t we’ve enough to send you down for grand larceny, and then I’ll take your hand span and I’ll prove that you held Asher down after you shot him so he drowned in the slush.”

“What did you do, Estelle?”

Beckett turns on Carson Washington. “Don’t start down that line. You called Asher just at the time he passed the pool. You knew he’d stop to take a call.” She drills a hard stare at both of them. “You told me he always took the same route. So you knew just when to ring so your wife could take the shot. But he didn’t have his phone so she took the shot anyway.”

“This is all conjecture. You have no evidence.”

“We have the financials, the phone records, and enough to send your clients down already.” She shoves back from the table and stands. “You’ll be taken down for processing and then into Holding.”

At that point Ryan knocks. Beckett exits, Castle on her heels. “We got it. In the trash in their building.”

“Good work.” Beckett re-enters Interrogation.

“We found Asher’s camera when we searched your apartment.”

“That doesn’t prove anything,” the lawyer says contemptuously.

“Really? Because that camera was on Asher’s head when he was running – and when he was shot.”

“You can’t possibly make that statement, Detective.”

“It was transmitting to his Facebook account.” Castle says, with a nasty gotcha expression.

“Every five minutes,” Beckett adds. “Right up until it stopped. We have timed photo evidence. The only way that camera got from Asher to your apartment is if one of you took it.”

Estelle crumples. Carson lets out a defeated sigh. The lawyer looks bleak. “May I have a minute with my clients, please?” he says. Beckett nods once, sharply, and stands again.

Outside Interrogation Castle turns to her, carefully maintaining a sensible separation. “Looks like you got them, Beckett.”

“We got them. All of us.” Well. Well now. Castle didn’t exactly think that he’d contributed a lot to this case, unlike some others. But he’s not going to turn down being in Beckett’s good books either, and if she thinks he helped he’ll take that. Her expression is a strange mixture of deep
satisfaction at the win and unhappiness that now she’ll have to take her two days of vacation.

The lawyer pokes his head out the door. “My clients would like to make a statement.”

And state they do. Anything and everything that they think will exculpate them from Murder One. Castle listens with ever-increasing disgust as they whine about their poverty (their apartment alone is worth way over a million dollars) and how much they’d done for Asher (very little: he was already in the first year of college when his parents died) and… and… but Beckett’s switched off next to him. She hadn’t – they hadn’t – known that. Suddenly she re-focuses. No-one who didn’t know her would have noticed the instant’s blankness; the biting tension that scraped across her back and whitened her knuckles and that she then put away. He will be leaving with her, and spending the evening with her, and letting her dissolve that stress in whatever way she chooses to refill her reserves. Whatever she chooses: whether that’s food, or soda – not vodka – or games – board or adult – or simply affection and soothing silence.

He says nothing about her momentary pause when it’s all over and the Washingtons, still making excuses for their greed-induced murder, are taken away. Beckett’s writing up the report as tidily and efficiently as always: clearing the paperwork before she has to leave.

“So, Detective. Dinner at Remy’s or takeout for two?” he murmurs mischievously: eyes twinkling within the laughter lines. She taps out a few more words, finishing a section, presses Save, and looks up, briefly.

“Takeout,” she says tiredly, distracted, he thinks, by the need to finish the report and the unwanted prospect of her enforced leave. His mischief hasn’t registered at all.

“Sure. Thai?”

“Okay.”

And so when she finally slashes her signature across the report and files it, tidies her desk and shuts her computer down so that she can leave, Castle pads along and out beside her, not drawing attention to himself. He’s settled in the passenger seat before Beckett even notices properly, and then she doesn’t object: simply sighs a quietly exhausted sigh.

“Time for you to go home. What do you want to eat?”

“Pad Thai. Shrimp.”

Castle taps out an order, puts in Beckett’s address, assesses the traffic and the likely delivery time, and puts a thirty minute delay on delivery. Beckett is clearly using all her remaining concentration to drive: and she’s aiming for hers, not Broome Street, which means that either she doesn’t object to his having invited himself for dinner or (more likely) she’s too tired to have realised. He wonders vaguely when – or if – she slept last night. He wonders much more intensely what triggered such tiredness. Okay, he knows she went back to the precinct, but she called him relatively early in the evening… Oh yes, that call she took that cut his call short. Hmm. How to find out what that was all about?

An answer hasn’t occurred to him by the time they reach Beckett’s, but then he isn’t being politely requested to leave either. Since they’re now inside, and there will be a short delay before dinner arrives, that leaves a number of options. He goes with the easy one: sitting on the couch next to Beckett, who has disposed of her gun, badge and heels and slumped down into the corner; putting an arm round her – and not asking what’s tired her out.
Astoundingly, it works. She nestles in a little more closely – not nearly closely enough for Castle’s
taste, but it’s a start – and then lays her head on his shoulder, which is definitely to his taste. He
pats gently.

“Dinner should be here in about twenty minutes.”

“Good,” she replies, and leaves it at that. Strangely, the silence isn’t chill, or intimidating, or even
blocking the possibility of questions or answers. More astoundingly, after another moment, she
speaks. It’s as if she’s too tired to filter her thoughts, too exhausted to hold her barriers against
him. Against everyone.

“O’Leary called last night. Picked up Mr Berowitz again.” Her words are slow, forced out against
remembered pain; memories of taking those calls. “Wanted to know if I needed him.” Her voice
trailed dismally through the silence. “I said no.” Misery begins to tinge the previously comfortable
silence. “He was Julia’s problem. Not mine.” She gulps in air. “She needed to go get him. Not
me.”

“Not you?”

“Julia called me. Wanted me to be there. Wanted help. I listened.” She stops. “Told her where to
get help.” Castle’s hand tightens around her upper arm. “I wouldn’t go to her.” Another gulp.
“She cried. Dad… Dad used to cry.” She pulls right away. “I wouldn’t go,” she says again, bitter
agony laced through each word. She stands, and walks to the kitchen, stiff-backed, pulls plates
from a cupboard and cutlery from a drawer; two glasses and a jug from another cupboard; fills the
jug with water, sets the whole lot at the table. Opposite each other, not side by side. All the brief
openness is gone.

The door sounds at that point, and Castle stands up to answer it and bring in the takeout. Setting it
out covers the silence, and eating more so. Eventually, though, it’s done, the table is cleared, and
there are no longer any ordinary courtesies, offers to share sides or to try each other’s dishes, to
break the suffocating weight of memories and guilt.

Castle looks at Beckett’s rigid spine as she fusses with the kettle and coffee, waits until she’s put
everything down on the table in front of the couch, and then steps up to her, places both hands on
her waist and smoothly draws her into him. He doesn’t yet kiss her, simply holds her close and
waits till she should soften and curve and lean on him.

Except that isn’t happening. She’s held rigid by unhappiness, instead of softly in his arms, and it
seems that holding is not enough to change that. So, as before, as every time, he smooths his hand
over her back to end by tipping her head up, bends the few inches to kiss her, takes and keeps
possession of her mouth and shows his strength not by muscular grip but with soft, sure assertion
that draws her in – and draws her tension out. Slowly she eases, stands down, leans into him and
on him; but her hands are still at her sides, limp and lax. He ceases kissing, but doesn’t move his
hands, keeping her against him, foreheads touching, and then he shifts her head so it’s lying on his
shoulder, tucked into his neck; turns and seats them both, she on his lap and still leaning in.

“He would cry, and beg me to come and get him. I wouldn’t go. I wouldn’t answer. He’d cry and
beg until my voicemail was full. I never went to him. I just let him cry.”

Castle abruptly realises that Beckett had never blocked her father’s number; and worse, that she’d
heard each desperate, drunken plea. She had forced herself to listen and not to answer, or go. That
must have taken inordinate self-control – and fed her inordinate guilt. She’d made herself suffer:
self-flagellation to punish herself for leaving her father alone – and she may not know it but she’s
still doing exactly that. She owes the Berowitzes nothing now she’s found them justice, but still
she pours out help and then feels guilty when she said no more. She won’t show her father anything that isn’t bright success and cheerfulness – and won’t disagree, get irritated, get angry, or be upset however much it might be justified. However much he might need to hear it. Over-compensating.

He thinks, again, that Beckett really needs some external help. He just doesn’t know how to suggest it. So he doesn’t, just sits with her in his arms and exudes solid comfort and affection, giving her a chance to stabilise, petting her hair gently and – well, she is right here and he is only human and male – watching for another chance to kiss her. Kisses seem to help.

Talking to Jim will not help, and he shouldn’t even be thinking that he might. It’s not up to him to interfere. It really isn’t, and she’ll run like a rabbit if he does. Beckett needs to talk to her father – which is almost as likely as her taking the leading role in an outdoor production of Lady Godiva in Central Park. But… for as long as she won’t understand that she’s burying her guilt and unhappiness, for as long as she doesn’t understand that she hasn’t forgiven herself and probably hasn’t really forgiven her father… that’s not going to happen.

He kisses the top of her ear, peeking through her hair. She wriggles a fraction, not away from him, more to make herself comfortable; her hair falls away and reveals some more of the edge of her ear. Castle kisses that, too, and when there’s a tiny little hum, barely audible, drops butterfly kisses down it. Comfort is his main aim, though he won’t say no to providing anything more.

He has an idea. “Would your dad talk to Mrs Berowitz?”

“Uh? What?” Beckett wakes up from her miserable stupor and stares at him. “Why?”

“Well…” Castle’s thinking hadn’t got past the initial idea. He rapidly assembles his thoughts into some vague semblance of order. “I just thought that maybe he could tell her that she can’t make it work. From the perspective of Mr Berowitz. I thought if she heard it from someone who’s been there and done that and come out the other side, she might believe it.” Beckett’s face is flabbergasted. “I know she heard it from you, but if she heard it from your dad it might have more impact.” He stops. Beckett is utterly still.

“My dad?” she says, dumbfounded. “My dad?” But she hasn’t dismissed the idea out of hand, she isn’t crying, and she hasn’t shot him. Yet.

Beckett’s brain is fried. She would never, ever have thought of that. Never. She’s so used to thinking of her father as a man who needs help and support, that she’d never have turned her head round the idea that he could give it. (He certainly hadn’t given it to her – but that was then, and this is now, and she hasn’t asked him in five years.) At first blush it sounds like a way out Castle theory on a par with CIA spies and Men in Black aliens… but in among Castle’s way out theories there are often some workable ideas. This… might just be one of them. She eases down from her shocked stillness, and starts to think.

Pro: it might actually bring the truth home to Julia. That’s a huge advantage. Con: her dad has never met Julia and this is going to come out of nowhere. He might spook, and spooking might be fatal. Pro: she could be there to stop him spooking. Con: Julia might start to cling to her dad, which would not be helpful. (A nasty little voice says at least it wouldn’t be you. She squashes it, with venom.) Um. Pros seem to outweigh the cons, here. Probably. Enough to talk to her dad. Yes. Okay.

“Okay.” She nestles back in. “Let’s talk to Dad about it. See what he says.” She lays her head back on Castle’s ample shoulder, tired simply from making the decision. He’s nice and cosy and comforting. She likes being cosy and she likes being petted and finally Castle seems to be back in
a place where he will do both and take a gentle lead and not ask any questions at all. She wriggles into a perfectly comfortable alignment, curls herself up against him and finds with a complete lack of surprise that she is gathered in and held close.

It’s even less of a surprise when Castle, after a particularly short pause, encourages her to look up at him by carefully moving her head off his shoulder, and starts again where he left off before his idea, dropping little kisses round her face and finally ending up on her lips. She opens to the first touch of his tongue asking for entrance, and lets herself fall into the sensuality that surrounds her: firm mouth, firm hands, firm muscle in the chest and arms between which she is held. Assertion, affection, and no pressure to do or be or answer or support.

It’s everything she needs, right now.
In the darkness

Castle is unsurprised to find that Beckett has dissolved into soft Kat, open to being kissed and petted and possibly more. He’s dropped one major bombshell idea on her, and that’s definitely enough. Beckett is not fond of surprises. If she’s fallen into being Kat, it’s because she’s finally relaxed and feels – well, safe with him. For now. So don’t spoil it, Rick. You know what to do – and what not to do. And what to do is to kiss her firmly and deeply and to let her responses tell him where to take her after that. It’s already late, and she’s already exhausted, and even if she needn’t go to work tomorrow he’s not an oafish boor.

She makes a small, contented noise: not quite a purr, not merely a hum; and stays open to kisses and cossetting and petting without taking any action herself that would indicate a desire for anything more. She’s as cuddlesome as she’s ever been, and he is not inclined to refuse her the affection she so clearly wants – and more clearly needs. Anyway, he’s missed this easeful closeness, the lack of any need to move further or to do more: he doesn’t need to be anything more than her lover; he doesn’t need to perform or show off or prove himself. In fact, those are all tied up with the feeling of being second-best that had plagued him following the spectacularly good, but slick and meaningless, sex. He’s always felt much happier after gentle making out and letting that take them where they will.

He concentrates on kissing her some more, deep and possessive, but not rough, not demanding, not overwhelming. Enough to show her how much she should be his, how much he wants her, how deeply he cares; enough to prove that this is – must be – more than physical. She still fits. Even now he knows her story – most of her story, maybe not all but enough – she fits in his arms and his mind and, he hopes, will fit into his life. Eventually. For now, he needs to be easy and take this easy. There are enough difficulties already in their way without creating more.

Beckett is happy simply to be kissed. She’s run out of energy, and of the ability to maintain her barriers, so it’s just as well that it’s only Castle here: Castle who’s heard the worst already and hasn’t – yet – run. She still can’t really believe that she’ll ever be enough, but for now this is enough. She doesn’t need more. Only rest, respite, and being moored in the haven of his protective embrace. Worrying about everything else can wait till tomorrow, when she has the vast empty void of the dank February day, stretching greyly before her: the only break in the void being the unwelcome memory that she will have to see Lanie tomorrow night.

Seeing Lanie is not appealing. Not seeing Lanie, however, is likely to be momentarily satisfying and then productive only of more trouble. Lanie is already making far too many ill-tempered enquiries and Beckett has already given away far too much. She shudders, despite her best efforts not to, and when Castle stops kissing her in consequence, buries her head in his shirt and shrinks back into herself.

“You okay?” he asks. Beckett can hear him not asking anything else, and even through her reasserted bleakness, appreciates the effort. Still, she doesn’t look up at him.

“Yeah,” she drags out. “Just… Lanie.”

Castle understands far more from that than he expects Beckett knows or would want. Lanie had been discomposed and somewhat annoyed on Monday, never mind that pointed exchange in the morgue yesterday. Their lunch had not gone well and Beckett’s been skittish around her ever since. Castle concludes from the accumulation of small clues that Beckett had said something on Monday lunchtime that either she hadn’t meant to, or that Lanie hadn’t liked, or that Beckett thinks Lanie hadn’t liked. Which of those options, singly or in combination, it might be is anybody’s
“Leave Lanie be. Come back here instead.” Castle’s tone has dropped into a deeper register, a little more assertive, a little more seductive, a little more insistent that she should simply stop thinking and start relaxing into him. It becomes apparent to Beckett that he would be perfectly prepared to help her stop thinking. She curls back in and lets him take hold of her again, her head back on his shoulder and all her exhaustion breaking over her. It’s been a long day, and even if it’s not late, she should be seeking her bed. Alone. Even if she’d like nothing more than simply to be held, cuddled and cosseted and close; breathing in the indefinably soothing scent of wide, warm male – well, no. Of Castle – and falling asleep on the tendrils of his cologne winding through the air.

But that is not a good plan. It really is not a good plan. It’s too much, when she’s so empty. He could fill up not just her body but her mind and her soul: take over her life and personality. She’s a flat grey canvas, where he’s in Technicolor 3-D. It’s too tempting, and too easy, and she can’t.

She can’t even watch him with his family. She has a brief vision of how he is with his daughter, in the welcoming warmth of his loft, and still cannot face watching it for real. Even now. It’s too much like what she once had and doesn’t have and even if now that her father’s a touch more fatherly she can’t get past the last ten years just like that.

None of her thoughts show on her face. “I need to sleep,” she half-yawns. Castle cuddles her in and does precisely nothing to help her with moving away from her nest in his lap. Rather the reverse, in fact. Moving means effort, and effort means that she’ll have to sit up straight, and unfold her legs, and stand up, and walk. Even making the first movement involves pushing against the static resistance of Castle’s clasp.

Oh. Castle is moving. Well, that saves her the trouble. He rearranges himself to the edge of the couch, although strangely she’s still on his knee, and then stands her up as he himself does. He manages this feat without ever letting go of her, and when they are both standing, he’s caught her against him in a smoothly powerful grip which is swiftly followed by a smoothly possessive kiss, both of which, she is sure, are designed to show her just how much strength he can apply at times when she wants – or is it needs? – it. And she does want it (him), and she does need it (him) – but it’s still a very bad plan, though it’s difficult to remember why that should be so when his tongue is in her mouth and his hands are keeping her pulled into him and his hard body is pressing into hers. Everything’s on offer, but she doesn’t have the emotional capital to purchase it. Her self-view that she’s simply no longer capable of giving any emotions back is stopping her moving forward. She’s been locked into her own frozen world for so long that she doesn’t know how to get out. She doesn’t even know that she needs to find a way out.

She pulls away, diminished and slumped. “Stop.” He does, immediately, loosens his grip and looks down at her, concern sliding through his eyes.

“It’s okay, Beckett,” he says.

“It’s not okay. You shouldn’t be wasting your time here. I can’t even face going to yours. Can’t bear seeing your happy family. It’ll never be enough. I’ll never be enough.” She steps away from him, white and drawn, pain in her eyes; forgetting her resolution to try.

“You’re doing it again. Trying to make me run away. I told you that you don’t need to worry about this. You don’t need to worry about anything about this. If I think you’re enough that’s up to me. If you don’t want to do this, that’s different, but that’s not what you’re saying or doing. I’m all grown up and I know what I want and what I’m doing. And what I want is you.” He takes the single long stride that’s all he needs to reach her again. “Now come back here and stop being unhappy,” he says firmly, tucks her right back in and kisses her without a hint of doubt. She yields
under his certainty: cedes control and lets him take as he pleases. She doesn’t want to fight it: wants to slip under the radar and be soft Kat who can stop supporting everyone, only for a little while. Only for now, while he still thinks he wants her. So she sinks into his kisses and curves into his body and lets her mind dissolve into sensation.

Castle wants to kiss Beckett or Kat right into her bed and then move on from kissing to considerably more intimate connections: trying to find her under the layers of icy unhappiness, trying to find her, find where she’s hiding from him. He’s not sure she knows that she’s hiding at all: everything she says indicates that she thinks this shell is who she now is: poured out till she’s empty.

But life’s not like that: people don’t stay empty, they refill, restart. Love is endless, infinitely replenished. It’s a river, not a pool, flowing continuously. It’s only that Beckett pours out too much, too fast, and has nothing – so she thinks – poured back in. Drawing too much from her aquifer, and not waiting for it to refill. Not letting it refill, because she’s not letting herself absorb anything from anyone. Love may be infinite, but if it’s only going one way the flow will fade to a trickle.

He wants to kiss her right into her bed and make love to her. He’s going to do the right thing, the hard choice, kiss her the way he wants to but then step back and leave. It wouldn’t be making love: he’s not sure it ever has been making love, and he is no longer going to be satisfied with anything less. So tonight he is going to go home, and think, and tomorrow, not too early, he is going to come back round and they are going to talk through his plan to detach Beckett from Julia Berowitz by use of Jim Beckett.

Still, he kisses her smoothly, deep, sure and still wholly possessive as she’s painted over his body, all his confident stability and strength at her disposal. For all her trained muscles and honed fitness, she’s very soft right now. Slow strokes slide over her back, firm mouth takes hers until he has to stop, because more will mean they won’t stop.

“Time for me to go,” he murmurs.

“Yeah,” she says. “See you Monday.” She’s completely neutral: not asking for anything. Clearly, she’s not expecting anything. It’s all up to him and she isn’t going to ask.

“No. I’ll be by tomorrow, around eleven.” She looks up, quickly, down again. “We’re going to talk about Mrs Berowitz talking to your dad, a bit more, when we’ve both slept on it. Make sure that it’s still a good idea in the morning. And,” he smiles, “I wanna see you tomorrow. Off duty. See what my Beckett does in the daytime when she’s not detecting.”

She’s gaping at him. He takes advantage of her befuddlement, kisses the tip of her nose and escapes before she realises that he’s completely contradicted her suggestion – and more importantly before she realises what he has just said. That had just… slipped out. His Beckett? Ooops. Even if it had felt totally natural and amazingly good on his tongue. He’s most of the way to the elevator before he hears what sounds like a muffled – that’ll be the door muffling it – squawk. Best to be out of here. He can’t outrun a bullet, unlike he can a squawk.

His loft is quiet and peaceful: comfortably happy and cheerful even without the noise and bustle of his eclectic family, all bouncing around and off each other like affectionate pinballs. He pours himself a glass of wine and repairs to the couch to ponder his idea. The more he ponders, the better he likes it. Jim and his daughter may be completely uncomfortable around each other – and both hiding it – but Jim hadn’t hesitated to push him, Castle, very hard indeed and clearly isn’t nearly the clinging vine that his daughter thinks he might be. Neither, too, is Beckett the strong-rooted oak her father believes her to be. Hm. This idea might have more advantages than simply
showing Beckett that her father is stronger than she thinks. It might just show Jim that Beckett is in trouble of her own. He doesn’t think he’ll mention that, though.

Beckett doesn’t think at all. She puts herself to bed and is instantly asleep, exhaustion overtaking her. She doesn’t wake, and if she dreams she doesn’t remember that either.

She wakes slowly, unwilling to leave her cocoon of bedclothes for the empty stretch of the day and the extremely unpleasant thought that one way or another she’ll have to put up with Lanie’s unspoken but obvious condemnation and intrusive questioning. Still, it’ll be the only time. By the end of their evening Lanie’ll never come near her outside work again. Lanie’s going to try to force her to talk about it, and she isn’t going to, and after about an hour Lanie’ll lose it, and she’ll go home, and that will be that.

She drifts in and out of sleep for a while, until she realises it’s after nine and remembers that Castle promised – or threatened – to arrive at eleven. She lurches out of bed and into the shower and then into jeans and a soft, warm green jumper of which she’s particularly fond. Coffee helps. Coffee always helps. She texts Lanie a time and place – at least that way she’s in control of the timing and Lanie will not come barrelling round to force a fight here where the only option will be throwing her out bodily. Not discreet, quiet or controlled, that. Not at all. She can get through this without being anything other than cool, calm and polite. She forcibly puts it out of her mind.

When Castle shows up, she’s quietly reading and sipping a third cup of coffee; not thinking about anything else at all. The rap on her door is somehow happy and bouncy, very much like Castle used to be right up until Christmas, has been since a little after he’d met her father on her doorstep. She opens the door with her normal sardonic personality firmly in place.

It doesn’t last past the first minute. Castle tidily closes the door behind him, hangs up his coat and scarf, and almost in the same movement grasps Beckett by the waist, tugs her inexorably towards him, and when she lands up where he wanted her runs his hand up into her hair, angles her head for easy access, and takes silky possession of her mouth before he’s even said hey.

“You taste of coffee,” he smiles. “I could get used to that.”

“Really?” she says cynically. “You can get coffee on every street corner. Or if that’s not enough for you, you could move to Seattle, where it’s every second shop.”

“This is much nicer. Shop bought coffee doesn’t taste like this.” He bends a little and takes her mouth again before she can complain further. Far too late for her composure he stops. “That’s much better.” He strokes her hair down where he’s ruffled it up, and continues down to the soft green angora of her jumper. “That’s nice, too.” He grins happily. “Very strokable.”

“I didn’t put it on just so you could compensate for not having a pet rabbit when you were a child.”

“Aw. You should have.” He strokes over her shoulder and down her back. “You’d be ample compensation.”

“I am not a pet.”

“No,” he says amiably. “Pets are small, soft and fluffy. You’re tall.”

“And not soft or fluffy.”

“That too.” He carefully doesn’t point out that under his kisses and hands she can be very soft indeed, and that the jumper is the closest thing to fluffy that she could be wearing except for live angora rabbits. Which would be silly. They’d probably run away, and then she wouldn’t be
wearing anything at all… This is not a good line of thought. He pulls his errant mind back on to a track where it won’t get him committed or arrested, and where they won’t be ending up in bed in around…ooohhh… five minutes or so.

“Did you think about what I said?”

“Do you want coffee?” Beckett says, completely ignoring his words.

“Please.” He gives her that concession, but once they’ve sat down with the mugs, he begins again. “I thought about it some more, and the more I thought the more I think your dad could really help Mrs Berowitz.”

“Why?” It’s her work tone, not quite interrogative, more the one she applies to any moderately recalcitrant witness.

“Well, she’s not listening to you, even though you’ve” – he hopes this isn’t about to go horribly wrong – “been where she is, so maybe she’ll listen to someone who’s been where her husband is and who’s come through it. See that it can be done – and how.”

Beckett stares into her coffee mug. It had seemed like a possible idea last night. But in the cold light of morning, she wonders if this isn’t just shirking her duty to help: passing it off to someone else because she doesn’t want to carry on. She’s already said no to Julia once, and it’s still squirming guiltily in her gut that she did.

“She’s not Dad’s problem,” she says. “It’s not fair to drag him into it.”

“She’s not your problem either,” Castle points out very bluntly. “You shouldn’t be dragged into it either.”

“She needs me.”

“No, she needs help. It doesn’t have to be you who gives it to her. You’re helping her try to find the right help, but that isn’t you. She’s not listening to your experience so you’re not the right help. Besides which, I think your dad might be happy to help you out.”

“He shouldn’t have to.”

“How d’you know he wouldn’t want to if you don’t even ask? He can always say no.”

“Yeah, right,” she says bitterly. “Because his history of saying no is so good.”

“That’s not fair. He’s said no for five years to his addiction. If he can say no to that every hour of every day, he can certainly say no to this.”

Beckett subsides. Put like that, she is being unfair to her dad. She winces. She’s just let slip that she really doesn’t quite trust him, still, after five years’ sober and counting. She hunches around her coffee cup. After a moment, Castle’s arm arrives around her shoulders. She retreats further into herself.

“So what do you think?”

She shrugs. Castle clearly has every intention of getting his own way again. But it’s she who will have to pick up the pieces if it doesn’t work. Though she’s the one who’s picking up the pieces of Julia Berowitz anyway.
“I don’t know. It’s not Dad’s problem.”

“Let’s not do it, then.” Perversely, Castle’s caving in to her objections sends her down the path of thinking why not?

“But… you just said it was a good idea.”

“Yeah, but he’s your dad. If you don’t think he can handle it, you know him best.”

She stops on that. Does she really know what her father can handle? He can handle those conferences, albeit he calls his sponsor and he calls her every time he needs to. But he’s a thousand miles away, and calling isn’t the same as someone taking the glass away from him. He has to do that himself, every time. Maybe… maybe he’s stronger than she thinks.

“Let’s ask him,” she says, still uncertainty in her voice. “Tomorrow. He’s at work today.”

“We could go ask him tonight.”

“Can’t. I’m busy.”

“Busy?” Castle is shocked. He’d had plans for the rest of the day and the evening, and it hadn’t involved Beckett being busy.

“Lanie.” Beckett doesn’t sound precisely enthusiastic. Castle remembers that she’d said to Lanie that she’d see her Friday, in the morgue. He’d rather thought that it wasn’t going to happen, but it seems like it is.

“Oh. Well, let’s go do something fun.”

“Like what?”

“I’ll buy lunch and then we’ll work it out. C’mon. I can hear a pizza calling to me.”
Ensconced in a comfortably informal pizza joint with satisfyingly large quantities of pizza – separately: Castle declares that pizza requires anchovies and Beckett declares that no anchovy will ever pass her lips – in front of them, the question of how to fill the remains of the day stays unanswered for some time while the consumption of pizza takes precedence.

“So what shall we do?”

Beckett munches her pizza and doesn’t answer.

“When are you meeting Lanie?”

“Six.” That’s bitten off.

“Can I come too?” Castle says annoyingly.

“No.” He pouts. “No. Women only.”

“What can we do between now and six?” Castle muses. “I mean, I can think of lots of things” – he leers – “but you’ll only say that they’re inappropriate and then I’ll be upset and we won’t have any fun at all if I’m upset.”

Beckett looks remarkably unimpressed. “I think I can occupy myself if you start sulking,” she points out.

“I don’t sulk.”

“You’re pouting right now.”

“I am not.” Beckett flips on her phone and takes a picture.

“See?”

“That is not a pout.” Beckett raises a disbelieving eyebrow. “It’s an expression of dismay.”

“Otherwise known as a pout.”

“Let’s have coffee,” Castle diverts. “We still haven’t worked out what we’re going to do.”

“We?”

“We,” he says firmly, and before she can quibble carries on. “What would you normally do on your days off?”

“Chores,” Beckett says. His face falls.

“Really? Nothing interesting?”

“Nope. We don’t all have cleaning services and personal shoppers.”

“I don’t have a personal shopper. I do all my own shopping.” He doesn’t comment on the cleaning service. Of course he has one. Wouldn’t everyone, if they could afford it? He has memories of his mother cleaning to keep their bodies and souls together, in between parts – and sometimes
during. He remembers the reddened hands and callouses; the way she’d stretched up and breathed deeply, painfully. He’d rather use a trusted agency with the latest equipment and safety standards – and never have to do it himself.

“Today’s a vacation day. No chores. C’mon. Think of something you’d like to do and haven’t done. I’m completely at your disposal, handsome face, rugged body and all.” He waggles his eyebrows. Beckett acquires a wholly bored expression which is only redeemed by the fact that she quite deliberately assumed it and she knows that he knows that she did. She says nothing. “There must be something you want to do?”

“No.”

“Are you sure you want me to choose? I might suggest something you hate. Like a Brussels sprout tasting extravaganza.”

She makes an absolutely disgusted face. “No Brussels sprouts. Ugh.”

Castle thinks for a moment. “I know. Let’s go to the Paris/New York design exhibition. It’ll be interesting.”

They get the subway to 103rd Street. It’s easiest and fastest, Beckett points out, and ignores Castle’s grumbling. Castle would have preferred a cab, in which he could readily have indulged in some mild hugging and general cuddling-in. The subway is not conducive to either, and he is quite sure that Beckett will not need his help to balance herself.

Indeed she doesn’t, and the subway isn’t nearly busy enough for him to be able to find a good excuse to press against her. Where are the crowds when you need them? Crowds do not happen, tourists are not present on a cold Friday in February, and there is no more excuse to be cuddlesome at the end of the journey than at the beginning.

The exhibition is actually interesting. Naturally, they disagree about what’s interesting, and disagree more about the relative merits of Art Deco over neo-romanticism – surprisingly, it’s Castle who argues for Art Deco and Beckett who prefers neo-romantics. Most people who knew them both would have thought it would be the other way round. Castle thinks about the swirling, inchoate abstracts in Beckett’s apartment and understands why she wouldn’t want the clean lines and curves of Art Deco. Too precise for the soft, rarely-seen Kat who sometimes, only sometimes and only at home, inhabits the otherwise commanding, decisive, rigid-certained Beckett.

For the first time in several weeks, indeed almost a couple of months, they’re wandering around in reasonable harmony, quarrelling gently about their respective preferences and artistic or architectural merits of each display. Castle’s extensive travelling gives him a broader appreciation, Beckett deeper and rather narrower. The afternoon passes almost without them noticing, punctuated by a short visit to the café where Beckett insists on paying for the coffee and Castle humphs disgustedly at her for so doing. He takes his revenge for that by unobtrusively taking her hand as they return to the main museum and not letting go. She essays a little tug, Castle declines to let go, and her hand relaxes into his. A little assertiveness, just to see what happens, and what happens is that she lets him have his way.

As the afternoon draws to a close, Beckett’s hand in his develops a certain tension, and her conversation starts to become less engaged. Castle tries to shift in closer, but she’s entirely unreceptive and indeed her hand is withdrawing from his, not actively; but her grip has dropped completely and if he weren’t holding on her hand would fall away, much like she’s putting space between their bodies. Chill is drifting over her as six o’clock approaches, frosting her eyes and cooling her voice: even the skin of her limp fingers seems to be cold.
“I need to go,” she says quietly, neutrally.

“I’ll walk you there,” Castle replies, mildly metaphorically since it’s far too far to walk in a reasonable time. Beckett merely shrugs, and turns for the exit. He recognises the same unemotional shell locking into place as she’d had on the way to her father’s, not yet covered by the polished cheerfulness that she’d assumed then. Possibly not at all intended to be covered by cheerfulness, or the slick sardonic cynicism of the precinct. This feels more like… armour. Undisguised armour. Beckett, he realises, is not only expecting a fight, she’s already put up her defences.

At Astor Place Beckett bids Castle farewell – he objects, but she doesn’t need him there at all: this is going to be unpleasant all ways round and an audience for even the opening skirmishes is not needed – and huddles into her full-length coat and scarf, beret covering her head and gloves on. It’s still close to freezing, and anyway she is cold no matter the external temperature.

To her relief, she’s beaten Lanie to the bar. She finds a corner table out of the way and as far from the bar as possible – this discussion will not be improved by publicity – and orders a soda. She’s not hungry, and doubts that she will be later. She doesn’t want to drink anything alcoholic. Her emotions were far too close to the surface on Monday and adding any mood altering substances now isn’t going to help her stay calm.

“Hey, Kate. You got a drink?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

Lanie returns with a glass of wine and clicks it down in a determined fashion. Beckett takes a sip of her soda and lets Lanie begin. She has no intention of doing so. Lanie is not proof against the technique.

“So what’s up with you, girl? You’ve been off all week. Are you okay?”

“How do you mean?” Kate says smoothly. “Everything’s fine. Solved the case, no problem.”

Lanie’s stress-measuring speedometer goes from nought to sixty in less than two seconds at Kate’s evasion.

“Don’t give me that crap, Kate. You ran out on me Monday lunchtime, you ran out on all of us Monday evening, and you’ve been avoiding me ever since. Now what the hell is going on?”

“I told you, nothing. I was really tired Tuesday. I told you so. Then we had a case. I said I’d see you tonight, and here I am.”

“Don’t give me that. You said plenty Monday lunchtime till you spooked and fled. Not one word of it was fine. You got so many issues you could stock the library. Now, girlfriend, you start spilling them instead of hiding them.”

“Lanie, I thought we were here for a nice evening with a drink and maybe some food. I didn’t come out so you could practice psychiatry or boost your application to be a CIA interrogator. I don’t need all this questioning from you. Everything’s fine.”

“You need something. You could start with not disappearing off and shoving me out the way. I still got bruises.”

“I had things to do.”
“More important than us?”

“Yes,” Kate says flatly, in a way that admits no disagreement. Lanie does not appreciate the bluntness.

“So it wasn’t a case. It was an excuse so you didn’t have to talk to me.”

“It wasn’t about you and it wasn’t an excuse. I had to go. Nothing to do with any of you at all.”

“You might have had to go then but you could’ve made up for it later. So you’re gonna talk to me now. Let’s start at the beginning with what you said on Monday. Why did you say that to Writer-Boy?”

“Not going there, Lanie. You made it pretty clear what you thought on Monday. We don’t need to talk about it any more.”

“You’ve got no idea what I thought.” Lanie is thoroughly frustrated and wishing that she wasn’t so much shorter than Kate, especially when Kate adds a cynical look and raised eyebrow to the mix. Slapping Kate would be hugely satisfying and might let some light through the rocks in her mule-stubborn stupid head. “You never gave me a chance to say what I thought.”

“You didn’t need to say anything. Now, are we going to have a nice evening or are you gonna carry on?”

“You know what I thought? I thought that you were talking so much bullshit.” Lanie has utterly lost it. Any last remnants of control are gone from her voice under Kate’s calm gaze and deflections. “Your life is a freaking disaster and you won’t do anything about it. Look at you. All you do is work and run away from everything and everyone that might knock some sense into you. You won’t even try to sort yourself out.”

“I don’t need sorting out. I’m just fine as I am.”

“Crap. You’re using your dad as an excuse not to fix your life and I think you’ve been doing it for years. Your dad doesn’t need you smothering him and I bet he’d hate it if he knew how you were behaving. You went all out to make sure you said something to make you look so bad to Castle he’d never come near you again just so you didn’t have to fix your life.”

“Shut up, Lanie,” Kate says warningly.

“I won’t. Someone’s gotta tell you the truth sometime. You need help, Kate. I don’t know what’s wrong with you but you are fucked right up. The Kate I used to know would never have deliberately gone out to drive someone off like you did. The Kate I used to know wouldn’t be shutting me out like this. You need to get some help before you crash big-time.”

Kate stands up, drops a couple of bills on the table, and gazes coldly at Lanie. “So much for a nice evening with my friend. Guess that’s me told,” she says, without any discernible emotion. “Good to know where we stand and what you think of me. No doubt I’ll see you when you’re next on duty, Dr Parrish.”

Lanie clamps a hand on her wrist. “No, you don’t. You’re trying to do just the same to me as you did to Castle. Well, you’ve just overdone it. You’re trying to manoeuvre this fight and me somewhere I can’t call you on your bullshit. Epic fail, girlfriend. If you think I’m that dumb you thought wrong. So you can sit back down or I can get you sent to mandatory therapy. You just watch me do it.”
“I don’t think you’re my doctor or my boss.”

Kate hasn’t shifted to sit down at all. Lanie doesn’t give a single inch. Over the last few days she’s been thinking, and what she’s been thinking is that Kate is spiralling downward with nothing and no-one to stop her. She’s also been thinking that best friend or no best friend she’s going to have a little chat (or something like that) with Writer-Boy, who may or may not have been stupid enough to believe Kate, but hadn’t exactly looked driven off on Wednesday. In fact, he’d looked rather more entrenched than for weeks.

“I think I’m the only person who’s giving you it straight. Sit down, Kate.” Lanie stands up and pushes Kate into the seat, who, not expecting it, sits down hard and inelegantly. Lanie shoves the cash back into her hand.

“What the hell, Lanie?”

“Sit there, shut up and listen. You’re heading straight for a breakdown if you don’t stop all this.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“So what was with you Monday? And Tuesday? Espo said you were sick, but you weren’t. So what was really up Tuesday?”

“I told you, I was tired. Late night Monday. So I went to bed early.”

“Yeah, right. More of your crap. You’re never tired. You’re never hung-over because you never drink. You’re never upset because you never let yourself be upset by anything. You’re locked into your own little world where you can pretend you don’t need anything. Who’s there when you do need help?”

“Lanie, enough. I don’t need help. I did need a nice night out. Since I’m not going to get it, let’s just go home now.”

“No. You’re not going home. You’re staying right here” – and Kate’s phone starts to ring.

“Beckett.” Lanie watches her face go taut and her mouth pinch white-lipped around the next words.

“Yes. I’ll be there shortly.”

She shrugs her coat on, still on the phone, and picks up her scarf and beret, dropping the crumpled dollar bills on the table. “Julia, I’m on my way,” she says tightly. She cuts the call and looks at Lanie. “Got to go.”

“What?”

“Got to go. This was a washout anyway. I’ll see you around.”

She’s gone before Lanie can close her mouth.

Left to her own devices and most of a glass of wine, Lanie swipes the money Kate had left from the table before it blows away under the air conditioning, and ponders. That had not precisely gone well. Lanie had intended to be briskly sympathetic and tease the whole story out of Kate, and then suggest with some earthy humour that she at least find someone to keep her bed warm. Instead she’d been suckered into losing her temper in less than five minutes, and even if Kate needs to hear the truth Lanie’s screwed up any chance of that by the way she’s put things. And why’s Kate walked out like that anyway? It can’t have been a body, she’d have got her own call as the ME.
Can’t have been an acquaintance of Kate’s dad, she’s never mentioned him having a lady friend. So who’s Julia, and why is Kate dancing to her tune? Apart, of course, from the perfect excuse it gave Kate to leave. Bit like Monday, really… A bit like? A lot like. Right down to the expression on Kate’s face.

Lanie takes a mouthful of wine and wonders what to do next. She remembers that she wanted a little talk with Castle, who himself had been remarkably evasive on Wednesday. Unfortunately, she doesn’t have Castle’s cell number. That’s a major oversight which she intends to rectify sometime in the next thirty seconds. She calls Esposito, instead.

“Espo.”

“Yeah, Lanie? Why you calling on a Friday night? You missing my handsome face?”

“No. I want Castle’s number. You got it?”

Esposito makes a disgusted noise. “Lanie, are you tellin’ me you’d rather spend time with him?”

“Javi, quit it. I’m not in the mood for your ego. You got his number or not?”

“Why d’you want it?”

“That’s my business. You got it, or do I need to call Ryan?”

Esposito reels off the number.

“Thanks.” Lanie rings off, and contemplates the wisdom of her next move. Still, it doesn’t sound like Kate’s going to be talking to her any time soon, so she can’t get into more trouble than she’s already got herself into.

“Rick Castle,” oozes down the phone.

“Castle, it’s Lanie.” Oozing stops.

“Lanie? Why are you calling? I thought you and Beckett were having a night out. Do you want my handsome company to join you?”

“Kate just left.” There’s a stunned silence from the phone. “I wanna talk to you. Can you get round here?”

“Why?” Castle doesn’t sound nearly as humorously acquiescent as usual. “I’m not getting in between you and Beckett.”

Lanie declines the bait. “Who’s Julia?” she asks instead. “And why is Kate running off as soon as she calls?” Castle starts to swear, not particularly under his breath. “Castle, what’s going on?” But she’s talking to a dead line.

“What the hell is going on here?” Lanie asks her wine. It doesn’t answer.

Castle is rapidly dialling Beckett. He’s more relieved than he’d like when she answers.

“Beckett.”

“Beckett, Lanie just called me. What’s going on? Why are you going after Mrs Berowitz?”
“He’s disappeared again. I can’t not.”

Castle recognises that trying to stop Beckett at this point will be counterproductive, to say the least. Later, however... later, he needs to know why she’s gone off like this. He suspects, from the mere fact that Lanie called him wanting to talk – much the same as in the morgue, with added emphasis – that the evening hadn’t been going well. Mrs Berowitz’s call might have been very convenient. However, the fact remains that Beckett is once again pouring herself out where she really cannot help. This is not good, and in fact, infuriating.

“I’ll come and help. Where are you?”

“It’s okay. I’m fine.” She is damn well not fine and he is not having this. It’s going to stop. One way or another.

“Beckett, stop arguing. I’m coming. Where are you? If you don’t tell me I’ll simply go to the Berowitzes’.” He’s bluffing. He can’t remember exactly where they live, though he thinks he’d get the street right. Grudgingly, she gives him the address. She is at the Berowitzes’ apartment. “Did you drive or do I need to bring a car?”

“Car, please. I don’t have mine.” Ah: straight from the bar to the Berowitzes’. Not good.

“On the way.” He departs at some speed.

When he arrives Beckett is trying to get details of where and when Mr Berowitz was last seen. Mrs Berowitz is crying as she opens the door. Beckett looks as if she’s about to scream.

“Julia, you have to help me here. I can’t do anything if you can’t tell me when he went out and where he said he was going.”

“Hello, Mrs Berowitz. I’ve come to join my partner. Rick Castle. Hey, Beckett.”

“Castle.”

He sits down next to Beckett. Mrs Berowitz looks tearfully at him. Beckett’s tension is sky-high. Castle unobtrusively taps a finger on her hand to catch her glance, when Mrs Berowitz isn’t paying attention. “Lemme,” he murmurs. Beckett shrugs doubtfully, but then nods.
Help me if you can

Castle smiles sympathetically at Julia. She visibly calms under his practiced charm and engaging attention. “Julia,” he says gently, “I know this is really hard for you. We just wanna help you. Tell me all about it, so we can.” He sounds – and probably is, Beckett thinks – utterly sincere. Julia is wholly drawn in and focused on Castle. Beckett pulls in her personality and stays completely unobtrusive. This is Castle’s show now, and the best way to get this done is to let him run it. She watches him create the only-focused-on-you atmosphere which, with only a minimal shift of tone from kindness to heat, would seduce anything female, and not a few males, within hearing distance. Julia is emphatically not proof against it.

“He didn’t come home from work. When I called him” – she looks piteously at Castle – “his PA said he hadn’t been there since lunchtime. She said he hadn’t any meetings after lunch but he was meeting a client for lunch. But he hadn’t come back.”

“Where was lunch?” Castle asks. Beckett is caught up by the bitter familiarity of the tale, fighting back her memories.

“Le Rivage, on West 46th Street.”

“Oh,” Castle says happily. “I know it. They do lovely salmon.” Beckett jabs him, and he gets back on task. “Okay. If it was with a client, he’d have been wearing a suit, yeah? He takes his work seriously, doesn’t he?” Beckett suppresses a wince, and thinks cynically that he probably won’t have a job in a week. So had her father fallen, as soon as he had started failing to return from lunch.


“That’s really good, Julia. Did he have a coat or scarf? It’s still pretty cold out.”

Beckett bleakly admires the application of Castle’s full, focused attention, warmth, charm and personality on an unhappy, upset and over stressed woman. Certain similarities are not lost on her. But there is a difference, and it’s in the look in his eyes. This isn’t personal. He’s sympathetic, but he’s not invested. It’s probably why it’s working so well for him – for them: getting them everything they’re going to need. In another ten minutes they have every scrap of information Julia can remember and a number of pieces that she probably hadn’t known she knew. Castle turns his very best appreciative smile up to full, bulb-blowing wattage and directs it straight at her.

“Julia,” he says very sincerely, “Beckett – Kate – and I are going to go and get started on finding David. If he comes home before we call you, will you call us?”

“Yes,” she agrees, unhappily. “But… can’t one of you stay? Please?”

Castle forestalls Beckett’s words. “No,” he says, somehow making it a regrettable matter. “We can’t do what we have to from here. It’ll need both of us to search. Have you got a friend, or someone who’d come round to spend some time with you?”

Julia sniffs miserably, but consents to phone a friend who – they wait while she does – comes over straight away. The friend turns out to be a rather motherly type who gathers her in and shoos Castle and Beckett out the door. It’s barely shut behind them when Castle grabs Beckett by the shoulders and glares at her.
“What are you doing? You were going to step back, not right into it. We were going to ask your dad to talk to her, not go running after her and searching for her husband all over again.”

“He’s missing. It’s not like I got a call from another precinct or O’Leary to say they’ve picked him up again. He’s gone. People die if they go to sleep drunk outside in this weather. Are you saying I should leave him to die?”

“No! Of course not. But why you?”

“Because I’m the one who can. You don’t know how it feels to be waiting for someone who doesn’t come home.”

“I do. I lost Alexis in a shop once, took me half an hour to find her. I was desperate.”

“Half an hour? Try two days. Try finding your father sprawled like a wino in the park, covered in vomit and urine, at dawn.” So that’s what she’d have been doing in a park at 5 a.m. He understands that hitch in her speech now. “Try doing that for two years. Try listening to him beg you to pick him up for the next three.” It’s the same agonised bitterness and old, cold fury that she’d had on Tuesday. “How can I not help her? I’ve been there.”

“You’re still there,” Castle spits back at her. “You’ll never not be there until you stop trying to save everyone else because you didn’t save your father. That’s the bottom of all of this. Nothing to do with family at all.”

There is a horrible silence. Finally Beckett breaks it.

“You too?” She deliberately blanks her face and voice. “I should have known.” Acid sarcasm coats her words. “You and Lanie. Should I expect this from Ryan and Esposito too? Or have you already gone tattling to Montgomery? When did you cook this up? Yesterday? Or Wednesday? Didn’t I give you the right answers on Tuesday?” She’s backing away. “Guess I know what you think too.”

Castle takes one stride and catches her shoulders again, only just not shaking her. “I have never discussed you with Lanie. Nor with the boys, nor with Montgomery. I’m quite capable of drawing my own conclusions about what’s wrong with you.”

“What’s wrong with me? Nothing’s wrong with me.”

“Yeah, right. You’re still compensating for walking away from your father and you still can’t forgive yourself for doing it.” Her eyes dart past him, hunted, searching for an escape route. “You can’t forgive him either. You think you have, but you haven’t really. You’re all closed up because you feel guilty about that and every time you see me with Alexis that bites. It’s not your past, it’s your present.”

“Well, well,” she says sharply. “If it isn’t Herr Freud. I hardly think this is the place for a psychiatric consultation.” Every word is razor-edged. “They’re usually confidential.”

“You’re right, it’s not,” Castle says, tightening his grip on her. “Which is why I’m taking you back to yours and we are going to talk.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Just try stopping me, Beckett. Just you try it.” At this point, he’d welcome the chance to prove that whatever she thinks, he’s much bigger, much stronger, and, regardless of all her training, at close quarters weight and muscle will defeat her.
“I am going back to the precinct and starting to search for David Berowitz. You can do whatever the fuck you like as long as you’re nowhere near me.”

He stops. He’d forgotten the whole reason they were here in the first place.

“I’m searching too. You dragged me into this” –

“I dragged you? You wouldn’t stay away.”

He ignores that.

“and I’m staying. I’m starting at Le Rivage, if you’re going back to the bullpen.” His tone hardens. “I’m not letting you avoid this any more. You’re going to crash. If you carry on without me, I will go straight to Montgomery. You won’t help yourself, and you won’t let anyone else help, so maybe being ordered to do it will work.”

He lets go of her and steps back, no softness in face or tone or words. “With me or without me, Beckett. It’s up to you what happens next. Me, or Montgomery. I’ll call you when I’ve talked to the maitre d’ at Le Rivage and we’ll decide what to do next with the Berowitzes. But one way or another we are having this conversation tonight or I am going to Montgomery first thing on Monday morning.”

He leaves her there, staring at him, white faced. He hates what he’s just done, but he’s too angry with her really to regret it. Something needs done, and when he analyses what she’d just said it sounds like Lanie gave her the same talk. Maybe he should have talked to Lanie, but that simply seems like inviting absolute disaster and worse, breaching such trust as he has won, all the way round. Although at this point there isn’t much that isn’t a disaster.

It’s not until he’s halfway to Le Rivage that he remembers that Beckett didn’t have her car, and by that time it’s too late to go back. On any of it.

As a result, when he manages to reach the restaurant and talk to the staff, he’s rather more intimidating and less socially charming than usual. Answers are rapid, but not terribly helpful. Mr Berowitz had eaten with a companion – Castle is really not that interested in their food – shared a bottle of wine though the other man had drunk almost none of it, and when the other man had left had finished the bottle, paid, and left in relatively good order. No, he hadn’t seemed inebriated. No, he was perfectly steady on his feet. Yes, he had his coat and scarf. No, he hadn’t wanted a cab. Is Mr Castle likely to visit them any time soon?

Castle returns a pleasant, vaguely positive response, thanks them tangibly for their time and departs. That was a complete washout. Now what? He ought to call Beckett and tell her that there are no clues here, but he’s too angry with her really to regret it. Something needs done, and when he analyses what she’d just said it sounds like Lanie gave her the same talk. Maybe he should have talked to Lanie, but that simply seems like inviting absolute disaster and worse, breaching such trust as he has won, all the way round. Although at this point there isn’t much that isn’t a disaster.

Coffee helps. Coffee usually does help, he finds, to clear his thoughts. He’s annoyed that Beckett ran straight off as soon as Julia Berowitz called her. But… if Alexis or his mother went missing, no matter where it might be, he’d call Beckett, because he could… oh. Because he could depend on her to do everything to find them, and it wouldn’t just be because she’s met them, or because she’s her partner, but because it’s who she has become. So how’s that different from Mrs Berowitz? He’d do exactly the same, and he’d be furious if she wouldn’t help…

But there is a discontinuity, and it’s not about whether she helps, it’s about why she helps. It’s her
avoidance technique. Avoidance of getting a life, that would be. Avoidance of listening to the truth. He wonders again what Lanie had said to her. And she really does need to hear the truth. Not that anyone can force her to.

Oh. He’s trying to force her to see it, and Lanie’s trying to force her to see it, and that is having exactly the effect he should have expected. She’s slammed down the shutters and she’s backing away from both of them as fast as she can hit reverse. Hell. He’s let emotion – specifically, anger – overcome good sense again. He drains his coffee, doesn’t call Beckett, retrieves his car and drives off to the Twelfth.

Beckett is not at her desk. There is no evidence that Beckett has been at her desk. He has no text or voicemail indicating where she is. He looks around, briefly, sees absolutely no evidence that Beckett is or has been in the bullpen since yesterday, and returns to his car, utterly at a loss. He can’t believe that she would abandon the search for David Berowitz, not after she’d promised Julia. But if she’s not here, how can she be searching? She can’t access the databases from home, and she surely won’t be randomly checking bars all over Manhattan. She couldn’t be searching any other way: this isn’t on the books and Montgomery will not be happy if he finds out. Ah. That’s why she’s not in the Twelfth. Well, that primarily. Avoiding him, Castle, might well be a close second.

So what’s she doing, and why’s she risking serious trouble? The second is easy. She won’t let someone die, and even Montgomery will have to cave in the face of protecting life. He’ll do something, though, if he finds out. This wouldn’t be consequence-free. Beckett’s leave might be accelerated. As might her next scheduled medical. Neither of which tell him what she’s doing. He leaves again: no point in sitting in the bullpen with no Beckett and no inspiration. Reluctantly, he takes out his phone. He’d wanted to get the drop on her: to arrive with no warning. That’s not going to happen.

“Beckett.”

“It’s Castle. I’ve finished at the restaurant. Nothing useful. He went out in his coat and scarf: that’s all they could tell me.”

“Okay. You might as well go home, then.” It’s cool and sensible. It’s also exactly not what’s going to happen. “Nothing more you can do.”

“Uh-uh. I said we were going to decide what to do next with the Berowitzes and that’s what’s going to happen. So where are you?”

“I’ve got all the help I need. I don’t need you here too.”

“Where’s here?” He can hear familiar sounds in the background, but he knows she’s not in the Twelfth. If he hadn’t known that, he’d have thought she were. So…

“Precinct,” she says briskly, unemotionally. He notes the extremely careful wording. She hasn’t said which precinct. Technically, she isn’t lying. In which case, he knows precisely where she is, and with whom. There’s only one person she could prevail upon to help her, and it’s the man-mountain O’Leary. If O’Leary weren’t gay, Castle would already be furiously jealous, and even though he is gay, Castle is still having a very hard time controlling his bitter feelings that she’s partnering up with anyone else.

“I’m at the Twelfth,” he says bluntly. “You are not.”

“And?” It’s equally uncompromising.
“And I’ll be at the Central Park Precinct shortly.” There’s an indrawn breath. It might be surprise, or it might be annoyance, or it might be upset. He really does not care.

“I don’t need you here. We got it. Go home.”

“No. I’m on my way.” He slices the call closed without compunction, and when the phone rings and Beckett’s number comes up on display, ignores it. He’s pulling up at Central Park Precinct less than twenty minutes later – the advantage of the time of night.

The desk sergeant, a different, much younger man than Sergeant Hardon, calls Detective O’Leary on Castle’s polite request, and shortly Everest rumbles towards him.

“Mr Castle,” he says happily. “Come to pick up Beckett?” Uh? “She don’t look so good. I think she’s sick. Don’t know why she came up here to do this search, but she said since we picked him up – well, not me, I’m Homicide, but the uniforms – it was more likely we’d have something sooner. And it’s good to see her. She don’t come round half often enough.”

He droops a little, reducing himself to a mere six-nine. “She never comes to see us much any more. First time in a couple of months was when you were there too. She wouldn’t come over on Wednesday to pick that man up again. Just said she didn’t need him an’ to call his wife. But now she’s here an’ asking me to run the searches to see if she can find him. It doesn’t add up.” He shakes his head sadly. “She shouldn’t be here if she’s sick. I don’t wanna catch the flu. I got things to do. You gonna take her home, Mr Castle?”

“Call me Castle, Detective. Or Rick. But the Twelfth just call me Castle, and you’re a friend of Beckett’s, so…”

“Really?” The man is star-struck. It’s insane. Any moment now he’ll be asking for a PR shot. It’s ridiculous.

“Shall we go and find Beckett, O’Leary?”

“Sure. C’mon up. I left her with my computer running searches.” He turns round, causing a small vortex in the elevator. “D’you know why she’s looking for this guy again?”

“He went missing.”

“So? She doesn’t need him as a witness.” The elevator doors open on the bullpen. Beckett isn’t visible. “Where’d she go?”

“Restroom?”

“She was right here. See, there’s her purse.” The mountain bends over and prods it.

“What are you doing to my purse, O’Leary? Get your own.” Beckett hasn’t yet noticed Castle, because he’s sneakily concealing himself.

“Brought your boyfriend, Beckett.”

“What?” She pales. Castle steps out from behind O’Leary and smiles blandly, with an edge of told-you.

“I said I’d help find him. Did you forget that?” She’s silenced. “What have we got?” Beckett doesn’t answer.
“Nothing,” O’Leary says. “There aren’t any hits in the system. He’s not there. No-one’s rung to say he’s picked up. Our unis haven’t found him in the Park. Yet.”

Beckett is slumped in O’Leary’s chair, looking a little like a child in an adult seat. Her feet don’t touch the floor. Castle suspects that it had to be ordered specially, in extra-wide. If it wasn’t for the expression of frustrated annoyance on her face, she’d look wholly childish. And, of course, the pallid crawl of pain. Castle can see exactly why O’Leary thinks she’s sick.

“Beckett,” O’Leary says, “you don’t look good. I think you should go home. I’ll let you know if anything comes up. Pete’s outta town, so I got nothing better to do tonight.” He grins. “ ‘Less you wanna lend me Castle.”

“Have him,” Beckett says. “If you can persuade him to stay.” O’Leary misses the edge. Castle doesn’t. He subtly moves out of arm’s reach of O’Leary, which in practice means about ten feet. She casts a bitter glance at him, and a more resigned one at O’Leary. “I need to make a call,” she says, and slides off the chair towards the break room. Castle follows, and whips into the room before the door can be shut.

“I need to call Julia,” Beckett says wearily. “Tell her there’s nothing yet.”

“Then you need to stop.” He takes a step towards her. “You won’t get anywhere if you’re too tired to think. And if you’re still here when someone who knows you turns up, other than O’Leary, it’ll get back to Montgomery in a heartbeat and you’ll be up the creek without a canoe.”

“Paddle,” she says automatically.

“That too. Do you want suspended?” She shakes her head. “Then call Julia and then I’m taking you home.” There’s rather more of an edge of threat on that than he’d really like, but he can’t stop it and truth to tell he doesn’t want to. Shaking sense into Beckett’s idiocy would be enormously desirable if only it weren’t for the fact that he’s never laid rough hands on a woman (without some very explicit consents) and he’s not starting now whatever the provocation.

Beckett dials. The call is short and unhappy – on both ends of the line. When she swipes off she sits down, a little hard. She’s still pallid.

“Okay. We’re going. C’mon.” Castle exits the break room without bothering to check that Beckett is following and aims for O’Leary, who is occupying every last inch of his adapted chair and whistling a tune – probably – at the screen and his papers. He looks blissfully happy.

“O’Leary,” Castle smiles, “I’m going to take Beckett home so she doesn’t give you the flu.” O’Leary grins right back.

“Sure, Castle. Lemme know if she’s trying not to leave. I’ll give you a hand.” Castle grins too. The thought of O’Leary simply removing Beckett bodily is quite amusing. “If anything pops, I’ll call her.”

“Don’t. Call Mrs Berowitz instead,” Castle says. “She can come and get her own husband.”

“Okay,” O’Leary says amiably, and then goes off at a tangent. “Will you bring Beckett out for a beer or two? Like I said, she hardly comes to see me any more.”

Castle spots a different opportunity: to wit, getting O’Leary out for much beer without Beckett. Extracting a little more of her history from someone without emotional involvement might help. Well, without family or romantic (huh? Romantic? That’s not quite the word he would use, yet) involvement.
At that point Beckett emerges and the moment to ask O’Leary is lost. He’ll do that some other time.

“Come on, Beckett. Home time.”

“Thanks, O’Leary,” she yawns. “Owe you.”

“You can buy me a beer sometime soon. Bring him with you. I like him.”
“I can get the subway home,” Beckett says, as soon as they exit the building.

“I’m taking you.” Castle replies inflexibly. He follows up with a hand on her shoulder that doesn’t give the impression it’s likely to let go.

“I don’t need a babysitter.”

“No,” Castle says amiably. Clearly that wasn’t what Beckett was expecting. She looks like a stunned codfish. “You don’t. But you do need company, so I’m taking you home. Or I’ll meet you there, but it’s cold out and my car is warm and right here, so why would you want to walk to the subway, wait for a train, and walk from the subway home, getting cold, when you could be chauffeured home in cosy comfort?”

While he’s talking he’s walking them to his car, opens the passenger door for Beckett, and gives her a gentle prod to encourage her to get in. When that isn’t effective – or possibly isn’t noticed through her coat – he encourages a bit more forcefully, and as is becoming common when he’s assertive, she goes along with it, sitting down and automatically doing up her seatbelt. He shuts the door, gets in himself and pulls away, heading for Beckett’s apartment. She doesn’t talk, all the way there. Nor does Castle. Talking will wait till they’re inside. Preceded by some very physical comfort.

Inside, Castle doesn’t hesitate for an instant before wrapping Beckett into his body and cuddling her in. His hand cradling her head into his shoulder has the happy side-effect that she can’t complain at him. Yet. He aims them both at the couch and sits them down comfortably. Well, he’s comfortable. Beckett is rather more tense than he’d like. He pets gently, not making his earlier mistake of forcing hard truth upon her when she’s already unreceptive and angry. Challenging her in that upfront way when she’s trying to save someone – however undeserving that someone might be, however much she’s reinforcing all her self-destructive patterns of pouring out herself instead of working out what the basic problem is – was stupid. Not that he was alone in his stupidity: Lanie seems to have made the same mistake, probably repeatedly, this week. He might want to force her to confront her issues, but it isn’t actually going to fix them.

She had said it, after all. *You can’t save them unless they want to save themselves. You can only save yourself.* Right now, she doesn’t see that she needs to save herself, still less that she should want to.

“Now, Beckett, just stay here and snuggle in.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You should go home. I’m sure your family would like to see you.” She tries to unfold from him.

“Stop wriggling. They’ve seen me at dinner and I’m not needed. Mother’s out and Alexis is at a friend’s for the night. Come back here.” He tucks her back in, and hangs on. “Now,” he says again, “are we still going to talk to your dad tomorrow about seeing Julia?”

Beckett’s surprise at that turn in the conversation is shown through her sudden loss of rigidity. It’s obvious she was expecting him to go back to the earlier fight. He takes advantage and snuggles her in further, tips up her face and drops a teasing peck on her nose.

“Are we?” he asks again.
“Stop it.”

“Stop what?” Castle asks innocently.

“Stop pretending you care about anything other than fixing me. You only came back to force me into talking” – she might as well have said torturing small animals – “so stop pretending there’s anything else. Go home. I’m fine. You can try tattling on me to Montgomery if you want. It won’t work, and I’m not going to be blackmailed by you. We have nothing to talk about.” She tries to break out his hold again.

“I was angry with you. You just went running straight back into the pain, and we’d only just agreed that there was a different way.” He stops. He doesn’t want to say I hate seeing you hurt. I hate it that you suffer. And I hate that you could fix all this if you’d just listen to why you’re doing it and then get help, but you don’t.

“So what should I do? Let him be lost, maybe let him die of hypothermia, because I might get a bit upset? You don’t get it, do you? We sign up to protect people, not give up when the going gets a bit tough.”

“No. I know. I’m still angry, though, even though you couldn’t do anything else, could you?” He sighs. “I don’t know if I’m angry with you or the situation or both. But you can’t keep on like this. Right now you need to stop and stand down.” He shakes her gently. “You’re supposed to be off-duty. Come here, and stop. For now. Later, we’ll see about everything else. O’Leary can manage perfectly well without you.” He’s gradually pulling her closer and closer. “He seems like a pretty competent guy.” He’s managed to pull her up on to his lap, where he likes her; where he can cosset her in and try to retrieve the situation.

If he wants to retrieve the situation, that is. He considers whether actually he should precipitate the explosion and then try to sort it out. It would be very easy. All he has to do is repeat his conclusions as to why she’s using herself up and trying to push everyone away, and watch the bomb go off. But there’s another huge assumption, right there. He’s assuming that she’d allow him to be anywhere near her afterwards. That’s a mistake. She wouldn’t. So it wouldn’t sort anything out at all, and he’d be in an even worse position than he is now. And so would she.

He keeps her embraced, and leans his head on her hair, a softly affectionate gesture. “Stand down, Beckett,” he murmurs again. He pets her a little, nothing sexual, coaxing her to relax and forget the failure of their search. He can feel the tension still coursing through her, her gaze still skittering around her soulless apartment, as if she’s still searching frantically for an escape route: but her body isn’t pulling away from him. Her body never has, when she’s like this, only her mind.

“Did you call your dad?”

“When?” she snips. “Never got a chance.”

“You could do it now. It’s not so late.”

“Suppose so.” She doesn’t move. Castle hands her the phone. She stares at it as if it’s alien tech that she’s never seen and can’t operate. He curves her fingers around it so that it doesn’t fall to the floor.

“Beckett? You don’t have to.”

“We decided,” she says emptily. “No point putting it off.” She swipes her phone on, and taps a speed dial key. Terrifyingly, as she does she recovers full Beckettness and when the call connects
is bright, breezy and cheerful. It’s possibly a good thing that it isn’t a video-link, though.

“Hey, Dad. I got something and I thought you could help me out with it.”

“What, Katie?”

“Well… it was Castle’s idea really…”

“Oh, yes? Should I expect surprises?”

“Er…” she runs out of words.

“I’m intrigued, Katie.”

“Dad, can I come over tomorrow and talk to you?”

“Sure, but why can’t you give me a hint now?”

“It’s a bit delicate.”

“Do I need a shotgun?” Castle splutters very loudly. “Is Rick there with you?”

“Yes, Dad,” Beckett says resignedly, casting Castle a sulphurous glare. “Well, he can tell me, then. Pass me over.” Beckett doesn’t, not amenable to parental pressure, and also unwilling to let Castle have a free hand with suggestions. The whole situation is far too near the knuckle right now.

“No, it’s fine.” Castle glares in his turn. She puts the phone on speaker. “There’s this couple. Their son was murdered before Christmas. He’s… he’s drinking too much. She needs help, and she won’t listen to me. Castle thought” – she’s basely putting all the responsibility on him – “that maybe you could talk to her.” She stops. There is dead silence on the end of the phone. “Dad?”

Terror rises in her gut. “Dad? Talk to me?” There’s a strangled breath on the end of the phone. Castle’s grip has tightened on her, nervousness apparent in his fingers.

“Really?” her father wheezes. “You want me to talk to her?” He pauses. “I think you’d both better come round tomorrow. I’ll see you at ten. Night.”

“Dad?” But he’s gone.

“What just happened?”

“I don’t know,” she says slowly. She stands up. “I think you should go home. I’ll see you at Dad’s at five to ten. You remember where it is?” She moves to her desk and scrawls the address on a scrap of paper. “There you are.” She comes back to give him it.

Castle doesn’t stand up, doesn’t take the scrap of paper, and doesn’t answer the point about going home. Instead he reaches out, places his large hands round Beckett’s slim waist, and tugs sharply once to land her back in his lap.

“I don’t think I should go home. You’ll fret yourself into flinders. Then you’ll stay up too late and sleep in and I’ll be left at your dad’s all on my own and unprotected. He said he had a shotgun, and if you’re not there he’ll aim it at me. You can’t do that to me.”

Beckett looks almost familiarly irritated at his nonsense. He tucks her in more closely. “See? Human shield.”
“My dad is not going to shoot you,” she points out. “But I might.”

“Then who’ll protect you from your dad? I won’t be able to.” He pauses the flow of persiflage and pets some more, warmth and affection in each stroke. “You know,” he says slowly, “it’s funny, but if I had to guess I’d have said your dad was trying not to laugh at you.”

“Laugh?”

“Yeah.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

Beckett doesn’t probe further. Her father’s behaviour has left her scared and shaky, regardless of Castle’s thoughts. She’s not at all convinced that she hasn’t just made a major tactical error and pushed him beyond his comfort zone. What if tomorrow he’s hung-over, or worse, wasted? She’s held him together for so long, what if she’s shattered him? He’s been so very fragile. If he falls, it will be her fault, her responsibility: she’ll have pushed him past his limits.

Castle notes Beckett’s tension rapidly overwhelming her and wonders why she’s so ready to assume her father’s weakness, when it’s so obvious that to resist his resident evil, his addiction, he must be incredibly strong. He’d said it: he’s said no every hour of every day and she’d – it’s clear, now – not believed it then. She doesn’t believe it currently, either. He decides on distraction, not a small amount influenced by his own wants. Petting, which had not actually stopped at any time since he pulled her back down on to his lap, becomes a little more intent, less of a pat and more of a stroke. Still providing affection, but rapidly being coloured by seduction. His soothing strokes become longer and slower; lingering as his fingers drift down the edge of her face, slipping over her shoulder to caress her arm and, not incidentally, encouraging her to relax into him.

It takes a long time to ease her down. Beckett seems to have been frozen by the risk she thinks she’s taken. He wouldn’t quite say she was shivering, but she feels in his arms as if the absence of motion is through sheer force of will. He tries to infuse his warmth into her, but it doesn’t seem to have any effect until he’s wrapped her in so tightly that he can sense each shallow breath that she takes.

“Stand down,” he murmurs in her ear. “Leave it all up to me. You know I can give you what you want. All you need to do is decide yes or no. After that you don’t need to think any more.” He drops a tiny, teasing, insinuating peck on the sharp-cut side of her face, and she turns into it. He takes it as an invitation. The next kiss lands on her jawbone, then he tracks across her cheek to land at her lips. “Yes or no,” he entices.

“Yes,” she breathes, and he replies immediately, wordlessly. This communication needs very few words. Yes, and please, and more, and mine, and yours: that should be plenty. His mouth can communicate very nicely without words. Very active lips and tongue, and possibly even teeth, but no words.

He kisses her deeply, forcefully: soft lips under his already surrendering to his leadership, yielding and easing and then ceding to him. He easily takes charge, readily asserts a little authority and lets her fall into his sensual web. His hand runs into her hair, re-angles her skull for perfectly slanted access not only to her full mouth but to the curve of her neck and the nerve that will complete her accession to his will; his other hand drops from her arm to her leg.

Castle’s fingers are still on her thigh, stalking her surrender to desire, little points of heat
blossoming under her skin and skittering along her nerves. She opens a little under his soft pressure, and shifts to curve into his hand more fully.

He teases lightly: tip-tapping barely-there touches, a little frivolity, playfulness rather than hot intent or focused desire, shifting the mood towards pleasure and pleasing, mutual give and take instead of anger or dark unhappy undercurrents of sadness and unspoken, unrecognised resentment. A space of light and happiness, harbinger of warmth in her chilly life.

He has no illusions that this will last.

Beckett allows herself to give in to the promise of warmth and strength implicit in Castle’s body, curls a little further inward and strokes into the soft short hair at the back of his neck. She seeks the heat in his body to dissipate the ice in her own; the temporary passion and promise in his lips to defeat the knowledge of the future. She might as well have something good, while it lasts. While he lasts. He’s already trying to make this more, ignoring her warnings, trying to force her into the mould of his assumptions about families and happiness and how things should be. It can’t last, it can’t work; and soon enough he’ll make one assumption too many, and go. He’s wrong, anyway. She has forgiven her father. She has.

At least he knows – oh, he really, really knows – how to do this, just as she likes, just as she wants. He wants her, and if she can’t have love she’ll settle for his lust. He’s smoothing delicately powerful strokes over her spine, encouraging her to stand down and be soft Kat (not that he knows about Kat, she thinks) who simply likes peace, serenity and calm, vague colours with no hard edges: Kat who doesn’t have to shoulder any burdens and can forget about steel-strong Detective Kate Beckett who is all hard edges. Only for a small space of time, only here under the passion and power and potency of the hands and mouth and body of another.

She only needs this one night, she thinks, forgetting that this week alone he’s been there with her some part of every evening, starting with the night she spent with a solo shot glass and deep-chilled vodka till she could glue her eggshell personality back together again. No need for the King’s soldiers or the King’s men here.

She forgets all of that, that it’s become not just a series of nights but every night; forgets the looming visit to her father yet to come; forgets it all in Castle’s broad hands on her back and leg, soothing and then warming, trailing little ripples of desire across her. She emits a contented little noise and he keeps stroking to bring her ease and relaxation; to leave her boneless and lax against him and surrounded by his scent and indefinable sense of masculinity. She’s never been feminine, except here where he makes her so. She is, now, quite definitely purring.

“Like that?” he entices. “Let’s do some more of what you like.” His deep sable baritone surrounds her and seeps into her skin, heating her from the inside out. He opens a button, and another: all the way down, eases her shirt from her pants to settle his broad palm under the silky fabric. His fingers search and find the catch of her bra; opening it confidently to slide around and over her ribs. He removes her shirt in one polished move, her bra with a second. This is sheer seduction, and she is surely seduced. She presses into his palm, and he moulds gently, flicks a thumb softly over the peaked nipple, kisses her mouth hard and then bends to flutter down her neck and over the curve. She’s breathing harder, making sexy little noises of encouragement as he plays mobile lips over her and then draws her into his mouth and it feels so good. She pushes more demandingly, and pulls his head closer. He turns to the other side and repeats his attentions and oh, she could be taken all the way just from this: more Castle. And he does give her more: plays and presses, licks and sucks, strokes and nips and she’s sky-high, writhing and moaning and not caring how she sounds, how desperate she is, as long as he doesn’t stop.
He doesn’t stop. She loses all sense of time and place, only aware of him and how he makes her feel, and then loses all awareness entirely.

“There,” Castle growls, “that’s better. Now, let’s try even more things you like.” He simply stands with her still held against him and carries her through to her bedroom. He strips her pants from her, disposes of the majority of his own clothes with alacrity, and leaves her watching him as he prowls towards her. She expects him to remove her plain cotton panties, but he doesn’t. Instead he uses the fabric to slide over her, the friction driving her up again. She reaches for the hard length against her hip, to try to drive him wild as he is her, grips and slides and suddenly it’s hot and frantic and she’s naked and he’s over her and inside her and three hard thrusts and she’s all gone.
Can't face my life

Afterwards, though, she’s tense again, her relaxation only temporary. When Castle returns from his brief excuse-me she’s curled around a pillow, spine turned to the centre of the bed, eyes shut. It’s perfectly plain that talking to him is not on her to-do list. Unfortunately, talking to Beckett is on Castle’s to-do list. *Proper* talking, not an escalating argument. At least, that’s the plan.

He decides to wrap himself around her where, even if she doesn’t talk, the changes in her body will provide him with some clue as to her thoughts. Maybe, “Come here,” he murmurs. “Lemme hold you.” She shuffles back a little, and he spoons her gently, but in a carefully judged way which will, if required, allow him to keep her there. “You’re all tensed up again, and after I spent all that time convincing you to relax.” His voice has dropped into a velvety purr. “What’s wrong? Do I need to massage all the knots out your back?”

“That is *not* my back, Castle.”

“Ooops,” he says unrepentantly. “My hand must have slipped. Now, what’s wrong? Tell me all about it.”

“I’m fine. Nothing’s wrong except you’re stopping me sleeping.”


“Flattering. Not.”

He digs strong fingers into her back, and works the tense spots. After a little time she starts to hum softly, almost a purr of her own. “What’s up? Worried about your dad?” All the knots instantly retie themselves. “Yes, then.” He goes back to untangling them, pressing firmly. “He’s stronger than you think.”

“How would you know? You weren’t there, you weren’t picking him out the gutter, you weren’t leaving him behind and listening to his drunken crying.”

“No. But he faced me down.”

“So? I do that all the time.”

“So, your father is pretty tough. I’d back him against my publisher, who eats live grizzlies for breakfast. He’ll be fine. I know you’ve spent all this time protecting him from everything you can, but he’s strong. He doesn’t need as much protection as you want to give him.” She jerks under his hands, instinctive negation. “I know how you feel.”

“You don’t.”

“I do. I’m a *parent*, Beckett. Don’t you think I wanted to protect Alexis from every bruise or skinned knee, every failure and heartache? But I couldn’t. She had to grow and experience and learn for herself. I’ll be there for her, but I can’t smother her.” She wrenches herself away from him on the words and is out the bed, the bathroom door locking behind her, before he has even realised she’s moving.

He has no idea what happened there.

He rolls on to his back and stares into the dark ceiling. They really need to talk, but he has no idea
what triggered that disappearance. So he simply lies quietly, doesn’t try to think, and listens carefully for anything that might indicate what Beckett is doing. Not that it will make a lot of difference, since she locked the door against him. He can’t hear anything, either.

He slips out of the bed, pads soundlessly across the room, puts his ear to the door, and waits, breathing silently. Just as he’s about to give up he detects a small rustle, which might well be a towel pressed to someone’s face. Good for muffling noises. (Also good for suffocation, though he hasn’t yet used that piece of knowledge in a book. It was a little too pettily domestic for Storm.) After another moment, there’s a slightly more accentuated breath, with a cadence that he identifies as locked-down misery. Okay then. He gives it a moment or two more, hears nothing else useful, and then taps on the bathroom door.

“Beckett?” he says, when there’s no answer.

“Go home.” Well, that’s not helpful. Nor is it a comment to which he’s intending to pay any attention.

“You can’t sleep in a bathroom.”

“Go home.”

“Come out.”

“Go home.”

“Going.” As far as the next room. He rustles his clothes in a putting-them-on fashion, picks them all up, slips his shoes on, and walks across the floor, out the bedroom, through the apartment and then opens and closes the front door. Sneaky, and possibly doomed to failure, but it’s got to be worth a try. Then he drops his clothes out of immediate sight, takes his shoes off very, very quietly and waits in her living room. After a few seconds the silent air is moved by a sound which is quite definitely misery. The noise emerges from the bathroom and, by the sounds of rustling bedclothes, sites itself in bed. He continues to wait. After much too long the noises drift into the slow soft breaths of near-sleep, at which point Castle silently pads back into the bedroom, notes that Beckett is curled up into a tight, defensive ball barely occupying a third of her bed – and placed nowhere near the slight dent that his weight had left – and slips back into his space to pull her firmly over his chest and tuck her into his arm.

“Stop hiding. Just tell me what’s upsetting you. Or at least tell me you are upset, rather than running off.”

“I’m upset. Now go home.”

“No. I’m going to cuddle you till you’re not upset any more.”

“I don’t want you to. I want you all to stop trying to fix me and stop trying to make me be who you think I should be and stop pretending any of you have a single fucking clue about living with alcoholics and how you cope with it.” She heaves in a breath. “I’ve done my time in therapy.” It sounds unpleasantly similar in tone and view to I served my sentence. “I’ve dealt with all of this. I don’t need to go through it again and I’m not going to discuss it any more.”

Castle – for once – does not lose his temper at Beckett’s stubborn refusal to accept that there is the slightest problem. He wants to. He wants to pick her up and shake her and then drive her to the nearest therapist and have her committed until she recognises that there is an issue and she does need to deal with it. He’s sure Lanie would help him.
Instead, he says placidly, “Okay then. We won’t talk about it. I’ll still cuddle you, though. Cuddles are good. Hugs make everything better.” Whatever she’s just said, she hasn’t actually tried to move. If she had, he would have let go. If she tries now, he’ll let go: not that he’ll like it, but he will. Besides which, sitting waiting for her to emerge from the bathroom, he’s evolved a plan, which depends on Beckett still being prepared to speak to him at ten a.m. tomorrow morning, or at the very least not having shot him. So instead he maintains amiability, kisses her hair softly, and drops into sleep still hugging her.

He wakes up far too early for a Saturday morning: the harsh buzz of what must be Beckett’s alarm scraping his ears raw. There’s a muttered curse from the far side of the bed, and the buzz is switched off. Some time during the night Beckett has detached herself from him and stayed detached. He’s not impressed. He’s less impressed when she vacates the bed and occupies the bathroom. Door locked, again. He could have improved her shower enormously, given the chance.

Castle is still here. This is not at all helpful. He’d been far too ready to drop the conversation last night despite all his suggestions about how far he would push it, (and she really does not want to call his bluff about Montgomery knowing) and consequently Beckett is still thoroughly suspicious of his motives for staying over. Her nice hot shower doesn’t wholly help. Setting her hair and make-up and general demeanour to Detective-Beckett-normal, however, and then ignoring Castle’s hopefully lecherous leer as she dresses in her assertively tailored shirt and dress pants, does. Camouflage is not only for the military.

“Bathroom’s there, if you want to wash. Spare toothbrush in the cabinet. I’ll put coffee on.” She’s entirely brisk, precinct-normal Beckett. And why does she have a spare toothbrush? She shouldn’t need to have a spare toothbrush.

The toothbrush is still in its wrapping. Being a curious soul, he looks at it as he unwraps. It looks like it was bought about two years ago. He feels happier immediately, which is entirely ridiculous because he only met Beckett six months ago. He showers and brushes his teeth, hunts around for a few moments and, slightly guiltily, borrows a handy and very feminine razor (he is not meeting Jim looking like a panhandler) and shaves rather uncomfortably. He just wishes he didn’t have to get dressed in yesterday’s clothes. There isn’t quite time to get home and change, and it makes him feel indefinably dirty.

Or maybe that’s just how his plan makes him feel. Soiled, tarnished, and grubby. But this cannot go on. It really cannot go on. He’d rather feel smudged and dirty now than watch Beckett continue as she has been. He can’t fix her. Therefore, he needs to push her towards a situation where someone else will help her fix herself. He’s going to use her guilt about her father to make that happen, and it makes him feel smirched and dishonest, but it’s the only way.

Beckett inhales her first coffee as she does every day, scalding, strong and barely touching the sides as it goes down. She’s refilling her mug as Castle appears, and diverts to fill his too. Her look as he approaches is her normal professional, civil demeanour. She’s going to treat this as just another way of dealing with a witness. As long as she hangs on to that concept, this will pass off perfectly well. Nothing to worry about. But the coffee hasn’t eased the sick nervousness in her gut. She can’t call her dad: that would prove to him that she doesn’t trust him and she absolutely can’t do that. She sips her coffee and lets it salve – but not cure – her fears: coating herself in the cool shell of command and the confidence she has at work.

Castle is inching closer to her, presumably hoping she either won’t notice or won’t object. She doesn’t know why he bothers sneaking, when he’s so very bad at it. He’s about as inconspicuous
as an elephant, and makes the same amount of noise. She’s expecting the arm to arrive around her, and is not surprised at all when it does. She is rather surprised at how comforting it feels. She’d been rather surprised by how familiar it had felt to wake up next to Castle, too. Untangling herself had been a necessity, though. Snuggling in would only have led to trouble. Trouble, in this case, meaning being late for her dad.

Her dad is quite suspicious enough – and far too busy trying to match-make them as a consequence. When it all goes wrong, he’ll be upset if he thinks he’s contributed to the failure. He’d made it fairly clear that he thought she should have some fun with Castle, and now he’s trying to make that happen. More assumptions about who she should be and how she should behave. And when this all goes wrong, her father will expect her to be upset, no matter how she hides it, then try to shoulder some of a blame that isn’t his, and she’ll be watching to make sure he doesn’t try to drown it: all the time knowing that the blame is hers.

Therefore, she makes no attempt to move closer or snuggle into Castle’s embrace. Instead, she projects calm confidence and nothing more. She can’t afford not to. She has to get through this morning by herself.

“More coffee?” she asks. “We’ll need to go soon.”

“No thanks.” He wants to say stop pretending, stop acting, lean on me; because you need something or someone. Instead he forces himself to stick to neutrality and his plan. “Any breakfast?” He looks plaintive. “Breakfast is a very important meal, Beckett.”

“Dad’ll have something,” she says. “He usually does.” She gives a social smile. “He thinks I should eat more. I’m sure he’ll have catered for you too.”

“Okay,” he pouts. “But it’s very unfair of you not to have any breakfast.”

“Stop pouting, Castle. You’re supposed to be an adult.”

“Nah. Acting like a nine-year old is much more fun.” Beckett rolls her eyes and sighs. Castle leers. “Except in certain circumstances, of course.” She sighs again.

“Time to go.”

Castle grins happily. “We’ll go in my car. I get to drive.”

“Huh?”

“Well, I drove you home last night. So my car is here. So we might as well use it.” Beckett just knows she’s looking fairly nonplussed. Castle improves the moment. “Come on. Time I did some chauffeuring and paid for the gas. You always drive. My turn.” She opens her mouth to argue and then realises that they really do have to get going.

“Okay.” The stunned look on Castle’s face is almost enough to remove the worry from her gut. Almost. Maybe it’s as well he’s driving. Her concentration is a little shot right now, and it’s not only because of her father. How did Castle stay all night? How did she not realise – and why has she taken two cups of coffee and almost an hour to work it out? Where the hell is her brain? She needs to pull herself together and get on top of the day, stat. She can’t afford to make slip-ups with her dad – and what with Castle staying the night (seriously? How?) there are a whole new set of danger points to be negotiated.

Traffic is light, and they’re pulling up outside her dad’s at the right time. Castle is a remarkably smooth driver, but when she distracts herself by asking about it, he mutters something embarrassed
about how it put a constantly-crying baby Alexis to sleep and changes the subject hurriedly to the excellence of the milkshakes at Remy’s. Beckett has never seen Castle drink or order a milkshake, at Remy’s or anywhere else. However, she does appreciate the change of subject. She really does not need to know about parental interactions. Her worry returns full-force, and by the time they’re knocking on the door she’s close to chewing her fingernails off. Mentally, of course. To the uninitiated eye she’s bright and cheerful.

Castle is waiting for disaster to ensue. He just isn’t quite sure what sort of disaster to prepare for, on what sort of scale. This could be anything from the relatively mild issue of knocking over the milk, through an alien invasion, right up to the ultimate disaster of drinking Beckett’s coffee. He recognises his frivolity as a cover for his nervousness that Jim has fallen back down his alcoholic rabbit-hole, and – since Beckett hasn’t – knocks on Jim’s door.

Beckett notes with thoroughgoing relief, which she only just manages to hide, that her father is bright, bouncy and stone-cold sober. One problem down. In fact, he is sporting a very mischievous expression that she last saw over the Christmas dinner table when he informed Beckett that he, her father, ought to meet Castle. It very belatedly occurs to Beckett that her dad has achieved this on more than one occasion. Hard upon that thought she wonders if her dad is messing with her deliberately. Surely not? Now she’s really losing it.

“Breakfast, Katie?”

“Sure, Dad.”

“Please,” Castle adds. He can feel his stomach shrinking by the second. Doesn’t Beckett eat? She must eat. He ought to pay more attention. He’s sure he’d notice if she was much thinner, though. After all, certain areas would be smaller – he had better stop that line of thought in her father’s house. It’s unlikely to be good for his health.

Jim produces enough breakfast to feed a pride of hungry lions. Castle makes substantial inroads, Jim puts away at least twice what Castle would expect, and Beckett has one waffle with fruit and four more cups of coffee.

“Katie, you should eat more,” Jim says.

Beckett winces. “Dad, it’s lovely but I’ve had all I want. If I have any more maple syrup I’ll grow leaves.”

“Okay. If you’re finished, then” – he looks at Castle, who unconcernedly acquires another mouthful of bacon, grinning as he swallows – “you can explain this idea that you’ve cooked up.”

“He cooked up.”

Castle’s grin turns to a seraphic smile.

“You said you wanted me to talk to some woman you collected on a case because her husband is drinking too much.” Castle notes with some amusement that Jim is winding his daughter up, and Beckett hasn’t yet realised it.

“Yeah…” she drags out.

“You don’t sound too convinced.”

“I… didn’t think you’d want to get involved.”
“Hm. Why ever not?” He fixes Beckett with a beady eye. “I think it might be interesting.” Her jaw drops. “My sponsor’s been telling me I ought to do a little more for others. Part of the program. This might be a good way to start. Tell me a bit more.”

Beckett outlines some of the details. Castle observes a series of carefully concealed omissions from the history, starting with lunches with Julia and definitely including going chasing round Manhattan looking for David Berowitz – come to think of which, they haven’t heard from O’Leary about that. To the best of his knowledge, Beckett hasn’t checked her phone either. He is definitely not reminding her about it. She doesn’t need dragged into that and the whole point of being here is that she starts getting dragged out of that. Oh yeah – he’d told O’Leary not to call Beckett, but Julia.

Jim smiles. Castle’s instincts all go on full alert. Something’s up here. He doesn’t know what, but as a sneaky father himself, he’s sure that something is up. At that point he remembers that he had a plan too.

“Oh, okay,” Jim says. “Let me think about it for a few minutes. We can talk about something else. Rick and I can discuss daughters – didn’t you say you had a teen, Rick? If she’s anything like Katie was, you’ll have your hands full.” Beckett squawks.

“Alexis is pretty sensible,” Castle says, ignoring Beckett’s disgruntled mutters. “I don’t know quite what I did to deserve that.”

“Good luck,” Jim says with feeling. “You got a picture?” And now Castle is absolutely sure that something is going on here, because Jim has inadvertently – or is it inadvertent? He looks oddly satisfied – just played into his plan. He extricates a relatively recent photo which he has on his phone and passes the device over. “She’s pretty,” Jim says. “Doesn’t look much like you, except around the eyes.”

“Just as well,” Beckett mutters blackly.

“She hated her hair when she was a pre-teen, but now she’s really proud of it.”

Jim looks at the picture again. “I’ve got some photos of Katie as a child,” he starts.

“Dad!”

“I’d love to see them,” Castle says simultaneously.

Jim looks at Beckett, who appears to Castle to be close to explosion. And then she looks back at her father and pulls it all into herself and simply says, “Fine,” with a cheery smile.

Photos? He still has photos? She’d thought they had all been… lost. Her father is bustling around to some purpose, and rapidly produces several albums. Castle is full of bright-eyed enthusiasm. She is not. She doesn’t need reminded how it used to be. She hardens her shell. She can get through this. She wonders what her dad is doing, though. It’s not like he and Castle are best buddies. At least he hasn’t been freaked out by the suggestion of talking to Julia Berowitz.

She slips into a detached reverie of her own, not paying any real attention to what’s going on, until the sound of chortling Castle breaks through. “She did?”

“Did what?” she snaps, coming to full attention.

“Walked out of ballet class and refused to go back because the teacher was picking on someone.”
“Dad, how about we leave my past misdeeds out of this? I don’t need them revisited.”

“I didn’t think that was a misdeed, Katie. Your mother was very proud of you.”

Beckett flashes back to that day. Now, she merely wonders if that action hadn’t simply been pre-teen manipulation under the guise of helping someone. She’d been looking for a way out of ballet in any event. This way she had been able to claim a principled reason. Bit like her reasoning for not collecting David Berowitz, really. Or her reasoning for abandoning her dad. She curls into herself a little more, and loses herself in her dark thoughts.

“Katie,” her dad is saying. “Wake up.”

“I’m not asleep. Have you finished with the ancient history?”


“Rick was very impressed,” her dad says, grinning mischievously. “He’s offered to show me all his photos in return.”

“He’ll need a truck to bring them here, I should think,” Beckett responds absently – and suddenly wakes up. Unfortunately it’s too late.

“Oh no. He invited us over to see them.”

“What?”

“Rick’s invited us over for dinner tonight.”

Beckett glances once at Castle, and then back to her father. Both of them, after a slightly flummoxed expression on Castle’s face, now look oddly and similarly determined that this should happen. This is clearly the other shoe that didn’t drop last night. Catch-22. She can do what she wants to do, which is say No, and then have to explain to her father why; or she can sit it out and try to get through it without giving anything away. Or, of course, she could shoot both Castle and her father. The last would solve more problems than it caused, though on the downside she’d have plenty of time to contemplate her problem-free life in Bedford Hills Correctional. Or maybe she could make it to a non-extradition territory in time. She could go straight from here to JFK and leave for … Guatemala, say.

“Really?” she says calmly. “How nice.” She doesn’t notice her father’s sharp glance at her tone, since she’s regarding Castle’s bland expression. It says more clearly than words ever could Who’s calling whose bluff now, Beckett?
Castle doesn’t think that this Valentine’s Day is likely to hold anything other than a massacre, now. Sure, he’d had a plan. But it seems like Jim had also had a plan, which was a lot more far reaching than Castle’s plan – and Jim has managed not only to execute his plan but drag Castle right into the middle of it too. Jim, Castle reflects bitterly, is a very clever man indeed. Not to mention Machiavellian. Castle had only planned to let Jim see Beckett’s inability to participate in any family memories of her own, and let him draw his own conclusions. Jim, on the other hand, had very expertly manoeuvred Castle into inviting both Becketts for dinner. He hadn’t even realised that was what was happening until Jim had said *That’ll be great, Rick*. Oh, *fuck*. He is so dead. He is deader than dead. No-one will ever find his body. He’s about to be incinerated. Cremated. Torched. There won’t even be ash left.

Jim, Castle thinks, is about as weak as a tsunami, and he’s just been drowned in a combination of his own and Beckett’s assumptions about her father’s stability and strength. On the other hand, since Jim’s lit the fuse, he might as well take advantage of it. He returns Beckett’s fulminating stare with a bland look.

“It will be nice,” her father says happily. “Someone else’s cooking – you told me Rick was a good cook over Christmas lunch – and good company. What time shall we arrive?”

“Oh” – Castle is slightly flustered by the turn of events – “seven. Don’t bring anything.” He colours. “But…”

“Soda’s fine for me,” Jim says without any embarrassment. “You don’t need to stay dry.” He produces that same gamin smile he’d had in his own offices. “I’m looking forward to it already.”

And if that isn’t a hint to leave, Castle will eat every single book of Patterson’s last, excessively large, print run without ketchup. “I’d better go get started,” he says. “Want a ride, Beckett?”

“I’d rather you stayed, Katie. Tell me a bit more about Mrs Berowitz. I think I should have a chat with my sponsor before I make any promises, but I’d like all the facts first.”

“See you tonight,” Castle produces through a rictus grin, and makes for the door in a rapid scuttle. He can’t help feeling that he’s just dodged a Beckett bullet – though he’s not sure from *which* Beckett – and that Beckett is *not* about to dodge a Jim Beckett bullet.

The door closes behind Castle. Beckett can’t decide whether that’s good, because it removes the temptation to pull out her gun (which she hasn’t actually put on this morning, not that this lack is presently impinging on her violent thoughts) or bad, because now she’s being questioned by her father.

“So, Katie. Now tell me a bit more about Mrs Berowitz.” Jim fixes her with a parentally interrogative stare. “You can start with why you’re helping her out at all.”

“Her son was murdered.”

“How many murders do you deal with every year? Every month? Katie, why did you get so involved with her?”

Beckett doesn’t answer. There is no good answer. All her answers start and end with *because I know what she’s going to go through and I couldn’t leave her to it all alone. Like I was alone.*
“Katie, I get that you feel sorry for her. Fellow feeling. You’ve been there.” She stares at him, wide-eyed and appalled. This is a matter they simply never discuss. “You don’t need to dance around it,” Jim says gently. “It’s not going to upset me if you say so.” It won’t upset you. Really? In that case why have you avoided this topic for years? It never occurs to her that he might not have wanted to upset her. “Anyway, she’s not your friend or family. Why haven’t you simply sent her to Al-Anon or therapy and let her go? It worked for you.” Beckett conceals a violent shudder.

“I…” she starts, and can’t find a following word.

“Katie, I’m worried about you.” Oh fuck, not you too, Dad. Will you all just stop worrying about me!

“I’m fine.” Jim raises an extremely sceptical pair of eyebrows at her. “You don’t need to worry about me. Work’s fine, I’m fine, and I even took your advice and patched things up with Castle.” The sceptical look doesn’t diminish.

“Hm,” Jim hums, with an inflection that brings back an unpleasant memory of being grilled about teenage misdeeds. “Why don’t I believe you? Except for the patched up piece. I notice you didn’t say fixed.”

“Dad, this is not a cross-examination and I’m not a witness. You’re chopping semantics. Castle and I are good.” More sceptical eyebrows.

“That’s nice,” Jim says blandly. “Because it looked to me like you weren’t too keen on dinner at Rick’s. Bit surprising, if you’re all good. Just like it was surprising that you didn’t even look at the photos – if only to stop Rick seeing all the ones of you as a cute toddler.”

Beckett casts up silent and bitter imprecations to the unresponsive skies. When did her dad suddenly start being interested in her life again? This is not helpful. Everything is fine. Everything is just fine. As long as everyone stops asking questions, worrying, and generally interfering.

Jim unobtrusively surveys his Katie. He’s not at all satisfied by her explanations. True, she’s seemed fine for all of the five years he’s been sober, but now he’s worried about her, and it really got going right about the moment he overheard her arguing with Rick. He’s relied on her to be there for him for the last five years because she’s always been right there for him, and he’s only recently realised both that and that it’s become something of a habit. One he thinks he ought to cut down. He remembers his own words to Rick, talking to cover the clear fight and everyone’s embarrassment. Always there when I need her. But he doesn’t need her nearly as much as he likes seeing her or speaking to her, or nearly as much as she thinks he does.

This morning has all been rather peculiar, he thinks with lawyerly understatement. As had been the collective Sorry game. Katie had been oddly uncompetitive, for someone who’d been playing to win since she was old enough to hang on to her toys. Katie, Jim thinks, is hiding an awful lot of somethings. How fortunate that he had met Rick. Now, about this broken bird of Katie’s...

“Well, anyway,” he says, leaving it for now till he can do a little self-analysis, (and a lot of Katie-analysis) “about this Julia Berowitz. Sounds interesting. I’ll talk to Ed, and let you both know tonight, if I can get hold of him. I’ll meet you at Rick’s. You’d better tell me where it is and, just in case there’s some problem on the subway, give me his cell number so I can call.”

“You could call me, and I’d tell him.”
“I taught you better manners than that, Katie. Always make your own apologies.”

Beckett provides the address and, with well-concealed suspicion, Castle’s number. She is not at all happy about any of this. However. It’s one evening. She’s had time to get over herself and her stupid, petty, selfish resentments. She’s past the danger point of early January by some way. She can deal with this in a civilized, grown-up fashion. And she will. She has to. If she can get through this evening, then clearly there’s nothing that needs fixing. She’s just fine. It was just a temporary blip. Lanie and Castle are wrong.

“Anything else, Dad? If not, I’d better go do my chores. I’ll see you later on.”

Jim moves across to give his daughter a hug, and doesn’t miss the slight stiffness before she returns the gesture.

“See you later, Bug.”

He watches her depart with an agitated click of heels that, as her dad, he is fairly certain equates to her four-year old pout, and pours himself another cup of coffee, since it’s there. Then he settles down to do a little hard thinking. He may be in his late fifties, but he is neither old nor stupid, and over the last month or so it’s become apparent, courtesy of the rather large personality of one Rick Castle and Katie’s wildly varying reactions to said Rick Castle over the previous couple of months, that Katie is not as happy as she’s been making out.

He frowns gently. At Christmas, Katie had been – for her – quite loquacious on the subject of “Castle”. Then she hadn’t mentioned him again. Then he’d walked into that row. Then Rick had come to see him, clearly annoyed with Katie (Jim can understand that. Katie’s stubbornness was annoying when she was a teen. It hasn’t improved any with age.) but perfectly capable of putting up a fight of his own. Jim thinks that Rick would be good for Katie, and is certainly not above some well-designed parental interference, starting with the Sorry game and continuing with both today’s breakfast and suckering Rick into inviting them both for dinner tonight.

He leans back in his comfortable chair and smiles angelically at the ceiling. Now to call Ed and discuss whether this way-out idea of Katie’s would be a good plan. He really thinks that it might. Ed’s been suggesting for a while that he should consider being a sponsor. He’s always declined. But… maybe he should reconsider. He’ll park that. He can’t be available all the time. Being an attorney tends to occupy quite a lot of his time.

He picks up his phone and stores Rick’s number in it. He wants a little discussion with Rick when Katie is not present. A father should get to know his daughter’s male acquaintances, after all. One never knows when a shotgun might be appropriate. Though in this case, he might need to apply it to Katie.

He taps a speed dial. “Hi, Ed. It’s Jim. No, no problems. Quite the opposite, in fact.”

Castle spends the remainder of the morning in several excellent food stores plotting a meal suitable for anywhere between three and five people, though he’s rather hoping that his mother will not form part of the group. He’s not really convinced that she will be a mollifying presence at what is absolutely certain to be an uncomfortable meal. He still has no idea how Jim suckered him into issuing an invitation. He’s not even sure that he actually did issue an invitation.

It is going to be difficult, to say the least. Beckett – Kate Beckett, that is – hasn’t been near the loft since he told her he wasn’t doing it any more and she assumed they were over. He doesn’t imagine that she’s going to be any more comfortable here than she was then, and he hates seeing her locked
down and pretending to enjoy anything with artificially social manners. *Jim* Beckett is definitely stirring the pot, but if his mother is there then that’s a fight waiting to happen. His mother’s over-exuberant alcohol-fuelled diva-ness is hardly likely to mesh well with a dry, dry-humoured attorney. And then, of course, there’s the fact that Beckett is likely to believe that he was in on Jim’s shenanigans, so that’s Castle’s chance of a pleasant evening gone west, and then there’s Alexis. Alexis will no doubt be delighted to see Beckett, who in her turn will *not* be delighted to see Alexis at home with Castle and therefore will be contrasting her own relationship with Jim in every second of the whole fiasco.

He considers, in no particular order, screaming, fainting, and emigrating, both now and, quite possibly, later. He is so dead.

He’s been home a while, morosely playing shoot-em-ups (and imagining Jim’s face on every victim) until he can expel his frustration by chopping vegetables and ripping lettuce for the salad. The dressing won’t need vinegar, he thinks, all it’ll need is Beckett glaring at it to sour it. He returns to shooting aliens and enemies.

His cell phone chirps with, when he checks, an unknown number displayed. “Rick Castle,” he says suavely. It might, after all, be a *good* unknown caller, such as a seller of dubious blue pills of which he has no need, or an insurance salesman. Surely he’s due for something to go right today.

“It’s Jim Beckett.” Nope, nothing is going to go right at all. He just left Jim’s. He shouldn’t hear from Jim till he turns up around seven tonight. “Rick” – he pauses, and Castle suddenly realises that Jim is a touch embarrassed – “I…er… don’t exactly want you to tattle out of school, but… um…” Castle sees that the light at the end of the tunnel is the oncoming, flaming asteroid aiming straight for his head. He knows what Jim is going to say next even before he utters the words. “…is there something up with Katie?” *Oh fuck fuck fuck. Why me?*

“Shouldn’t you be asking her that?” he retorts, and as rapidly realises his error.

“So there is. I knew it.”

Castle returns to the relative merits of screaming, fainting and then emigrating. He’s heard that Belize is quite pretty.

“Why ask me, then, if you knew?”

“To see what you’d say.” Castle can’t stop his irritated growl. “Now I know that you’re worried too.”

“How?”

“If you weren’t, you’d have denied it.”

Castle decides, not for the first or indeed fifty-first time today, that he cordially detests clever, Machiavellian attorneys in general and Jim in particular. He might as well start on the cyanide now, since he’s never going to survive dinner.

“What’s Katie not telling me, Rick?”

Castle’s patience expires without a whimper. “Ask her yourself. I’m not telling tales on a grown adult.”

“Oh, I will. But right now I’m asking you to tell me straight what’s up.”
“No.”

“I’m Katie’s father. You can’t tell me you wouldn’t be interrogating your daughter’s boyfriend in similar circumstances.”

“No, I can’t. But just because you’re Beckett’s father doesn’t mean I have to answer you. If you want to know what’s wrong, ask her. I’m not telling you her business.”

“So you do know?”

“That is none of your business. It’s between Beckett and me and no-one else. This friendly chat” – the acid in Castle’s tone could dissolve rock – “is done. See you at seven. Bye.”

“Bye,” says Jim to an empty line, and grins widely into thin air. He knew Rick was the right sort of man for Katie. He’d have thought a lot less of him if he’d actually answered. Still, he will have to find out what’s wrong somehow. Maybe he’ll manage to find out more over dinner. Katie really hadn’t been too keen on going. He begins to arrange his thoughts, much in the manner he would for a work meeting at which he might not be too sure that his client was telling him the whole story. Legal analysis can be so useful, Jim thinks a little cynically, for taking the emotion out of a situation which is bound to result in strong emotions.

Less cynically, and more worryingly, he wonders how long he’s been missing the signs that his daughter has been hiding her thoughts and feelings from him – and why she’s doing it. He considers the need to take inventory of the situation, and whether, although he thought that he had made amends to Katie, there is work still to be done.

That thought leads him to wonder whether Katie thinks he’s made sufficient amends. She’s always said so… but then, she never raises the subject. He’d always thought that meant that they’d made it right. Now he wonders if they really have. He lapses into some serious thought about how cheerful Katie always seems to be when she sees him. Of course, that’s on a schedule. She hadn’t been cheerful at all when he’d walked in on that row. Come to think of it, Rick had looked like he’d seen a ghost when he, Jim, had started talking, and Katie had shut that whole conversation down right quick, and then packed Rick off in short order and distracted him on to talking about the conference all evening. Jim wonders exactly what that row had been about. He’d assumed it was the equivalent of a lovers’ tiff, and Katie hadn’t said anything the next time he saw her to cause him to disagree, but… now he’s realised something’s off, he is not nearly as convinced. Sure, lovers’ tiff was likely part of it, but there’s more.

He should have applied some intelligence to this a couple of weeks back, he thinks. Dammit, what’s the point of the twelve steps – and in particular the tenth step – if he doesn’t do it? Rick hadn’t come to talk to him about the book, in fact, though Jim had only really heard Rick’s promise not to use his history. He’d actually said that Katie wouldn’t let Rick in because she thought it would hurt him, her father.

Oh, Katie. What the hell are you doing? What the hell are you hiding?

Jim acquires a nastily sinking feeling that Katie’s view of what he needs from her is entirely different from what he thought he was asking of her. He thought that he was asking for sociable family time – except when he was forced to attend conferences, of course – she seems to think that she’s protecting him from every last breath of wind. Oh, God. Not for the first time, Jim wishes that Johanna was still there. She had always been much better at understanding Katie than he had. Well, he’s all there is. He’d better get on and deal with this. Be parental. Or paternal.

If Katie was locking Rick out (Jim is sure that Katie is considerably more fond of Rick than she’s
letting on) in case Jim got hurt… what else is she locking out? And… could she be doing so to keep protecting him? Rick had certainly thought that, and Jim had been rather impressed by Rick. Okay, dinner tonight just got a lot more important.

He settles back in his chair, flicks idly through the family photos, and remembers Johanna and Katie, as they all used to be, until it’s time to go. For all the sadness of the drifting memories, he’s not in the slightest tempted to seek out oblivion.

Beckett is staring morosely at the appalling weather and wishing she could go and punch the bag for a while. Since that’s not possible, thanks to her enforced leave, she settles for some soothing music and a high level yoga workout which takes all her concentration if she is not to knot herself into a painful state of pretzel-ness. (It would stop her being able to go to dinner, but the ER isn’t that much fun.) She may be flexible, but she is not a contortionist. After a long session, she is around half-way soothed, and certainly capable of preserving her composure all the way through dinner. She showers, dresses again in clothes which reinforce her daytime, confident, Detective Kate Beckett persona, determines to pick up a box of chocolates on the way as an appropriate gift for a guest to bring, and departs.
Castle spends the latter part of the afternoon cooking, with intense attention to detail. Never have vegetables been so precisely and evenly chopped to join such perfectly and precisely chopped meat within a casserole dish. Neither has lettuce ever been shredded with quite such ferocity, or radishes topped and tailed so harshly.

Many things have contributed to his lack of harmony. He is still annoyed with Jim. His mother is present, and has taken the opportunity to make several digs about the lack of alcohol (at four p.m.?) available before people get here, and about the lack of Beckett for some time. She had strongly implied that Castle should have invited Beckett over far sooner and that if she wouldn’t come it was Castle’s fault. Alexis was delighted that Beckett was coming, but had compounded Castle’s bad temper by agreeing with her Grams. Castle is not notably keen on being dressed down by his family, especially when it’s based on unfounded assumptions, and had, as a result, been rather sharper than he normally is with Alexis, who has retreated to her own room and resolutely refused to assist with anything, claiming that homework takes priority. His mother had not, unfortunately, taken sufficient umbrage to retreat from the loft. Neither of them have really registered that Beckett’s father is coming. And, of course, Beckett is going to be in an appalling state of tension from the get-go, and he can do nothing at all about it.

This evening is shaping up to be a disaster comparable only to the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, with a rather lower probability of survival.

However, dinner is cooking, everything is in readiness, and the loft is full of the delicious aroma of a wonderfully tasty winter beef stew, with dumplings, and an apple and blackberry pie for dessert. There will be warm bread rolls, and the salad is appealingly green and red. The table is cheerfully green and red too: he’s used a tablecloth with a holly pattern. Maybe a cheerful atmosphere will induce a more cheerful evening.

The door sounds at seven, and despite Castle’s best efforts Alexis flings herself down the stairs and gets to it before he does. There goes his last chance to have even a moment’s private conversation and reassurance with Beckett – if it is Beckett – before the first circle of hell opens up to swallow him.

At seven p.m. Beckett knocks on Castle’s door, an expensive box of chocolates in hand, and her social face painted on. She wouldn’t admit out loud to the usefulness of a Mission Impossible false face, but if one had appeared in her apartment she’d certainly have considered applying it. Naturally, the door is opened by Alexis, who is chirpily and sincerely delighted to see her. Beckett is suitably civil and happy to see her too, aided immensely by the need to hand over the chocolates, enquire about the tantalising aromas, and come inside and take her coat off. She has left her gun at home. No point in making it easy to be tempted. There will be quite enough flashpoints over dinner, she is sure.

Surprisingly, she’s arrived ahead of her dad, who turns up – also bearing chocolates – just as she’s being encouraged to sit down with a drink. This time Castle makes it to the door first, though that’s probably because Alexis is peppering Beckett with questions about how being an ME works.

“Jim, come in.” Jim sniffs, and acquires a blissful expression.

“I haven’t smelt cooking that good in years.”

“I thought Beckett” – Jim starts – “Kate, sorry, I get used to hearing her called Beckett so…” he
trails off that line and restarts – “was a reasonable cook.”

There’s a not-too-muffled snigger. “Katie? Cook? Sure Katie can cook. But she doesn’t cook like this. We never have casseroles or anything like that. She only cooks that Georgian food she likes or pasta. Or salads.” His nose scrunches up in mild disgust, with which expression he closely resembles Beckett.

“Georgian food? That doesn’t sound too bad, though I never liked grits. I like peaches, though.”

Jim is looking pityingly at him, shaking his greying head. “Not the state of Georgia. The country. Katie never told you she was in Kiev for a while?”

“No.” Kiev? Kiev, Ukraine?

“She speaks some Russian. Actually, a lot of Russian.” Castle hadn’t noticed that, either. “Likes Russian literature.” He’d seen that she had a lot of books, but he’d never got close enough to her bookshelf really to register what they were.

“Are you telling stories again, Dad?” Beckett says sardonically.

“How did you guess?”

“Detective.”

“Oh yes.” He grins at her.

Alexis comes up, and extends a hand. “Mr Beckett?” she says brightly, “I’m Alexis.”

“I know,” Jim grins. “Your father told me about you.”

Alexis smiles back. “He does that,” she says. “I’m really quite normal. Don’t pay any attention to him.”

“Don’t be like that, young lady. Everybody’s daughter is the most wonderful daughter ever. It’s the rule. I’m fairly sure there must have been a case about it back in the day.”

“You’re a lawyer?”

“Yep.”

“Great!” Jim looks completely flabbergasted. No-one is ever pleased to meet a lawyer. “You can tell me all about it. Next year we’re supposed to start thinking about internships and I really want to be a bit ahead of the game…” She drags Jim to a chair, sits next to him and starts to grill him. Beckett watches from a safe distance, somewhat confounded by the turn of events and the amusement on her father’s face.

“Pumpkin,” Castle says, and has to repeat it, more sharply. “I think Mr Beckett would like something to drink. We have a choice of soft drinks and sodas.” Alexis is recalled to some semblance of party manners and Jim is shortly provided with a soda to wet his throat as Alexis returns to cross-examining him, in the nicest possible way. It doesn’t appear to Beckett that her dad has any objection at all to spilling out answers to all her questions. They’re getting on beautifully. This is good. One less danger point, or tension. It really is good, how comfortable her father is here, in a family environment.

But deep down in the nasty little dark corner of her soul where she puts all her pathetic bitterness
and envy of Alexis’s relationship with Alexis’s father, a little seed of guilt and resentment that Beckett’s dad can so easily be sincerely comfortable with Castle and his daughter starts to germinate. *Maybe*, its rootlets imply, *maybe it’s just that your father isn’t wholly comfortable with you. Maybe your façade isn’t quite good enough. Or maybe he hasn’t really forgiven you for walking away, whatever he’s said.* None of that makes it to her conscious mind. She sips her wine, and tries to ignore her vague, unpleasant feelings of discomfort, forcing herself to happiness that her father is welcomed in so warmly.

Castle is presently pleasantly surprised at how well the beginning of the evening is going. Alexis has clearly taken to Jim – she’s never had a grandfather, and it’s not as if his mother is ever going to be described as grandmotherly – and he’s equally clearly enjoying being grilled. Now, if only introducing his mother could go as well… and here she is.

Martha arrives at the top of the stairs and – well – makes an entrance, in one of her usual eye-scorchingly colourful outfits. Neon fuchsia-pink, with fringing.

“Darlings,” she emotes, stage charm on full power. “How lovely to see you. Her eye falls on Beckett. “Detective Beckett – surely I can call you Katherine – I’m so glad that my son had the sense to invite you back again. He’s been so sulky without you.” Both Castle and Beckett wince. “And you must be Katherine’s father.” Martha looks him up and down appraisingly and then produces a blindingly attractive smile. “I can see you in her.” Jim melts under the statement. He’d been so used to everyone saying how much Katie resembled her mother, that when someone points out that there’s a resemblance to him, he’s powerless against it. “Come and talk to me, while these young fry do things to our dinner. I’m sure we’ll have lots in common.”

Castle watches his mother annex Jim from Alexis without pause for breath and simply hopes that she’s not sizing him up for her next conquest. He has to say that he had not expected his mother to take a liking to him. Broadway diva meets buttoned-up corporate lawyer is not normally a happy mix. Especially when one is dry and the other is emphatically not. He flicks a glance at Beckett, who is now back to being cross-examined by Alexis, and notes with relief that she seems to be perfectly okay too. Somewhat flabbergasted by the effect of Hurricane Martha, but that’s pretty much the reaction of any normal person to his mother. He breathes a silent sigh of considerable relief, and relaxes into the evening.

Everything still appears to be going just beautifully partway through the meal. His cooking is excellent – certainly it’s disappearing rapidly – and conversation is flowing. His mother and Jim have, of all things, bonded over Samuel Beckett plays.

“You know how it is, you look up famous people with the same surname to see if you’re related way back - we weren’t, but it was fun finding out – and go see a play, and I found I liked it.” Jim is self-deprecating. Martha becomes enthusiastic.

“That’s what made you famous, Mother,” Castle points out. “Popular, simplistic culture.”

“Pshaw. Just because I act in it doesn’t mean that my range is limited to it, Richard. If that were true, you’d only read mysteries, since that’s all you write.”

Castle is silenced. Beckett sniggers, and Alexis outright laughs. Castle retires to his casserole, defeated, and consoles himself with his wine.

Over dessert, he continues to observe Beckett. He’s becoming less and less sure of her mood as
time goes on. Not that she’s ever chatty, but though she’s playing her part in conversation with aplomb he has the strangest impression that she’s more firmly retreated into herself than even that previous, disastrous occasion. It’s the same tense air of constraint, hidden behind the same cheerful social shell and conversation. What worries him is that he’s not clear about why. He’d expected her to be uncomfortable with Alexis, again – or still. It doesn’t seem to be wholly that, though there is a certain amount of reserve there, and the funny thing is that if he’d been asked to bet his life on it he’d have plumped for the major source of constraint being her father. It’s very odd. This time, after all, everybody’s absorbed her family into theirs. Sure, it’s no doubt disconcerting how readily Jim has been assimilated, but that should ease matters, not make them worse. Probably, he thinks, it’s a hangover of memories from the previous visit, and he can cure that soon enough.

Castle carries on his monitoring as he makes coffee. Jim, Alexis and his mother are still all happily arguing, with Beckett adding occasional sardonic stirs to the pot. It’s not till he catches a sidelong glance from Jim to his daughter that he puts it all together and realises that Beckett’s bright social manners are primarily for Jim, not for the collective Castles. Ah. Jim had been very politely definite about removing Castle and keeping Beckett, earlier. That would have been an interesting conversation to overhear. If Jim is working out that something is wrong – and his earlier call to Castle indicates that he certainly is – then Jim’s glances at his daughter aren’t simply the normal round of dinner party discussion. He’s watching her almost as carefully as Castle is, without the comfort – comfort? It’s hardly comfortable – of knowledge. Castle’s earlier tension and worry ratchets back up as he follows the undercurrents around the table, thanking his stars that his mother and daughter are wholly oblivious to anything other than the surface conversations.

Over coffee, it becomes clear that Beckett is beginning to look for an exit. She’s very subtly drooping, not quite yawning but not quite not, tiny indications of tiredness from a woman who never seems to tire in ordinary conditions. It’s all very clever and very careful: even his mother hasn’t spotted that it’s not completely real, and of course at after ten it’s quite believable that anyone would be tired. The interesting question is whether Jim has noticed the play. If he has, he’s not giving a single sign of it. It’s all very irritating. Castle had wanted Beckett to stay on after Jim left, for some gentle cosseting and more coffee, to make sure she was okay. She’s put that out of court.

Beckett can tell that she’s beginning to lose her ability to stay calm and civilised and appreciative of the efforts the Castles have made to welcome her dad in. She does appreciate it. It’s just that she’s watching her dad effortlessly relate to Alexis, who has an effortless relationship with her own father. It’s really good. It’s just that she doesn’t have that sort of relationship with her dad, and it’s pretty painful to watch him slot in and get on better – perhaps not better, but more easily – with a relative stranger in a family situation than he does with her. Painful, that is, because the only reason for it is clearly that she’s doing something wrong. It can’t be her father: that’s been amply demonstrated over this evening.

She’ll just have to try harder.

But not now. She needs to go home and regroup, not least because her unworthy feelings are beginning to get the better of her and there is no justification at all for them. Everybody’s been warm and welcoming and she simply needs – in a phrase Esposito often uses – to sort her own shit out. It’s barely acting for her to reveal tiredness: she is genuinely tired, and it’s well after ten. It doesn’t take long for her to have laid the groundwork to say, “I’m really sorry to break up the party, but I’m going to have to go.”

“I suppose it’s time I went too,” Jim puts in.
“You don’t have to go just because I do,” Beckett points out. “You can stay as long as the Castles like. I haven’t given you a curfew.” She smiles, mischievously. “Not like you used to try on me.”

“Not that it worked. No, Katie, it’s time for me to get home. These old bones” – Martha coughs – “I’m sorry, Martha, but I don’t have a fascinating job to keep me limber – need a good night’s sleep.”

Coats are assembled and the formalities of leave-taking exchanged. Finally the door closes and Beckett can escape. Unfortunately before that can occur her father needs to be disposed of, and he is disposed to talk.

“That was a really nice evening, Katie. Your Rick sure can cook. I like his family, too, though it must get a bit lively at times.”

“It was great,” she says. Her father glances sharply at her.

“Sure? I thought you were a bit quiet there at the end.”

“Just tired. Work’s been pretty busy since before Christmas.”

“I thought you’d had a couple of days off?”

“You know how that goes, Dad. Takes two days to work out how tired you really are, and then it lands on you.” She smiles, and changes the subject as they walk out past the doorman. “I didn’t know you liked Samuel Beckett?” Surely she should have done?

“I was dragged along when a colleague had a spare ticket. I didn’t expect to enjoy it – I’d rather have been at a baseball game – but I did. Guess you can teach an old dog new tricks.”

“You’re not that old. Look, there’s a cab. You’d better take it – there’s one right behind for me.”

“Okay. Night, Katie-bug.” He hugs her, and they depart to their separate cabs.

Beckett is barely halfway home before her phone tings with a text. You okay? Naturally, it’s from Castle. Fine, she sends back, and ignores the fact that actually she doesn’t really feel fine at all. She has not enjoyed this week at all. It’s left her with the unpleasant squirming in her stomach that makes her feel that however much she gives it isn’t ever enough.

She has a nice hot soothing shower and a nice hot soothing cup of hot chocolate and reads a nice soothing book of no literary merit whatsoever (but some hotness), and then she goes to her nice soothing bed, whose sheets are cool. Absolutely none of which soothes the twisting in her gut at all, which is still there in the morning, when she also remembers that she doesn’t know what happened with David Berowitz and she doesn’t know what her father decided about Julia, and she’d totally forgotten both matters. (not giving enough, her subconscious growls)

Jim occupies his cab and contemplates the evening with less than perfect happiness. He had very much enjoyed the collective Castle family, though he thinks that if he lived in that sort of chaotically emotional, theatrical atmosphere he would collapse into insanity within a week. Though maybe that’s just Martha. Certainly Rick has an aura of solid stability about him. Now, there’s a point. Why should he, Jim, think that that’s an advantage in dealing with Katie? Katie’s been a point of stability all through his troubles, and since. So why on earth is he suddenly thinking that Katie needs some stability of her own? He knows he’s not been stable for her, but he’d thought that her team, and that Lanie friend of hers, and her professional success (of which he is incredibly proud) had bolstered her: and she’s always been so down-to-earth and capable. He’s
never felt that she’s looking for support.

Which of course doesn’t mean that she doesn’t need it, from somewhere. And like it or not, his alcoholism – he faces that squarely – has meant that she doesn’t look to him. Question is, is she looking for it from anyone, because he’s not at all sure that she is. Rick clearly wants to provide it, but equally if he is being allowed to, about which Jim is not at all sure, there’s nothing in public to clue anyone in. Rather the reverse, in fact. She’d been subtly out of sorts all evening, despite the welcoming atmosphere and despite the fact that Katie had done and said everything right to make it seem as if she’d been having a perfectly pleasant evening in perfectly pleasant company. He wonders if Rick had picked up that Katie had brought the evening to a close by pretending tiredness, though the set of her eyes had indicated that it wasn’t entirely put on. She’d used to do that as a child, when something was wrong. Jim’s only problem is that he isn’t sure what had been wrong, except that it had all started when he’d manoeuvred Rick into the dinner invitation.

Well, it’s too late to think now. He’ll think in the morning, and then he’ll use the excuse of calling Katie to tell her that Ed had thought him talking to this Mrs Berowitz a very fine idea to try and work out what’s really up. Maybe she’ll open up over that nice game she’d bought him. He falls asleep relatively content.
Livin' lies

Castle had fallen asleep without further thinking, and on waking is distracted by the need to make breakfast and listen to his redheads dissect the previous evening.

“Mr Beckett was fun, Dad. Do you think Detective Beckett would let me see him again? I didn’t get to ask everything I wanted to.”

“I suppose so.”

“A very charming and cultured man,” Martha declares. “So nice to have someone who appreciates intelligent drama and can discuss it. That was the most interesting conversation I’ve had in months. Do try not to upset Katherine again, kiddo.”

“Thank you, Mother,” Castle says dryly. “What does the day hold for you?”

“Don’t try to change the subject.” Castle conceals his horror remarkably well. “I really enjoyed seeing Katherine again. You should make this a regular thing. She and her father were having a simply marvellous time.”

Castle wonders whether his mother is blind, stupid, or had merely had one glass of wine too many. Beckett had not had a simply marvellous time, and her one word reply to his concern didn’t help. Jim might have had a simply marvellous time, and certainly a much better time than his daughter, but Castle’s main concern is Beckett, and he is by no means reassured this morning.

When breakfast is done and cleared away, Castle retreats to his study and taps out a text to Beckett. Coming over. See you in half an hour. He is quite deliberately not making it a request. Since he doesn’t phrase it to require or expect an answer, he is not worried when he doesn’t get one.

Beckett’s morning coffee is disturbed by her phone.

“Beckett,” she clips, not caffeinated enough to soften it.

“Katie, it’s me. I forgot to say yesterday, that I spoke to Ed and he thought that it would be an excellent idea if I spoke to your Julia Berowitz. Now, how do you want to do this? She doesn’t know me from Adam.”

Beckett pulls her thoughts into order. “I’d better introduce you,” she says decisively. “Otherwise she won’t have a clue.”

“Okay, when? Today? No point waiting. We’ll both go.” He wants to see Katie with Julia. Of course, Ed had suggested he have someone with him too, just in case it was all more difficult than he expects.

Beckett stares at the phone. That’s a little more pushy than her dad usually is. Still, if he’s in, he’s in. He always used to want to get on and deal with things. No point waiting, he’d said about everything other than fishing. Get it done and have time for other things. She must have learned it from him.

“I’ll call her in a moment, then I’ll call you back.”

“Not yet.” He pauses for a beat. “Katie, what was really wrong last night?”
“Nothing. I told you, I was tired.”

“Mm. Like you used to be ‘tired’” – she can hear the quotation marks – “whenever we went to see your grandmother?” Oh, no. No, no, no. She is not going there. “You might really be tired, but I know you and you were putting some of that on to get out. You did just the same when you were small and something was wrong. So what’s wrong, Katie?”

“Nothing is wrong, Dad. Stop fussing. You’re turning into a mother hen. I was tired and I wasn’t going to spoil the evening by falling asleep in Castle’s coffee.”

“I’m sure he wouldn’t have minded,” Jim says mischievously, and on her aggrieved squawk returns to seriousness. “You didn’t want to go in the first place, and you were a little on edge all night. So if you’ve ‘patched things up’ with Rick, what’s the problem with his place?”

“Dad, there is nothing wrong. You’re imagining things. Now, do you want me to call Julia or not?”

“Sure I do. And then call me back.”

“Yes, Dad,” Beckett says, in a tone that belongs to her stroppy teenaged self.

She swipes the phone off, annoyed already with the day, then notices Castle’s text and further notices that he’ll be here in about ten minutes. This does not improve her mood one iota. She wanted peace, quiet and above all solitude to pull herself together and grow up. She does not need parental interference, medical interference, or pseudo-psychiatric interference. She had her therapy and she’s done Al-Anon and she has dealt with everything. She just needs to sort her shit out. Which does not require Castle, Lanie, her father, or anyone else. If she wants her father off her back, though, she can best achieve it by calling Julia Berowitz right now. She dials.

“Julia? It’s Kate Beckett.”

“Hello,” comes miserably down the line.

“Julia,” she dives straight in, “do you remember I said I’d been where you are?”

“Yes,” drips down the phone.

“Well, I’d like to introduce you to my dad,” she blurts out, and doesn’t stop for breath or objection. “I think he could really help you. Are you free this afternoon?” And breathe.

“Ye…es,” Julia says. “David should be home too…” She doesn’t sound entirely convinced of that, to Beckett’s sensitised ears. On the other hand, O’Leary clearly found him and got him collected. A rill of relief runs through her. “Come over about two-thirty. Will your partner, Castle?” –

“That’s right,” Beckett agrees, and doesn’t argue with the designation – “come too?”

“I can ask him.” This is turning into a three-ring circus, she thinks acidly, but can’t see a way out.

“Thank you, Kate. Thank you.” Don’t thank me, Julia. I’m not doing this because I want to. I’m doing it in the hope you stop clinging to me and just leave me alone.

“See you later.”

She cuts the call and dials her dad.
‘Kay, dad. I spoke to Julia, and we’ll all go see her at half past two. She wants Castle there as well. That okay with you? Let’s meet just outside her building and go in together.” She gives her dad the address.

“Fine. See you later, Katie.”

“See you, Dad.” She swipes off, ignoring a noise that might have been her dad trying to start a different line of conversation.

She might as well put the kettle on. Castle will no doubt show up any moment, and she needs something to take the edge off the day. She’s just filled it and switched it on when the door sounds. She ignores the ridiculous ripple of relief that he’s here.

“Hey, Beckett,” he smiles.

“Hey.”

Castle pushes the door shut without looking at anything other than Beckett and catches her before she has taken another step. “C’me, he says, unnecessarily, and wraps her in. Having caught her, he doesn’t give her time to protest before angling her head and kissing her deeply.

“What was that about?” Beckett huffs.

“Saying hello.” He kisses her again, keeping her tucked in. “Seeing as I didn’t get a single kiss last night because you sneaked off early despite my amazing cooking skills and five-star hospitality.” Another kiss. “And because you want kissed just as much as I want to kiss you. Win-win.”

“Says who?” she grumps.

“Well… you haven’t shot me, and you were kissing me back, so I guess you do. You can say you don’t want kissed if you want, though.” There is a considerable absence of any sort of comment, so he kisses her yet again, taking his time, nibbling provocatively on her lip, exploring and possessing until she’s relaxed and responsive. “There. That’s better. All caught up.”

“Huh?”

“You deprived me last night, so you need to make up for it now.”

“No, I don’t think it works like that. Unless you want a harassment suit?” But she’s smiling at him, and wrinkling her nose, and looks a whole lot happier than five minutes ago. Still wired up, though. Hmm. The slight relaxation is unlikely to last once he embarks on a dissection of last night, but he might as well start on a good note.

“I’d rather have coffee.”

“How’d you know there might be coffee?”

Castle simply gazes down at her pityingly. “Beckett, this is you I’m looking at. There is always coffee. The day there isn’t I’m taking you to the ER because you will be almost dead. Besides which, I heard your kettle go off.”

“Hmph.”

Coffee arrives. Beckett arrives on the couch and Castle’s arm arrives around her before she can do anything he doesn’t want her to do, such as move away. Here we go.
“I rang Julia,” she says, and all his plans are abruptly deferred. There is no point at all precipitating a likely-to-be-shattering argument if there’s going to be a full-on emotional meeting in the very near future. “She’ll see Dad. She wants both of us there, too.”

“When?”

“Two thirty.”

Castle smiles lazily down at her, deciding that some relaxed fun is indicated to defuse the Beckett stress-bomb. “That gives us” – he checks his watch – “three hours. We could have a lot of fun in three hours. We might even get lunch. I’m sure we’ll both be hungry.”

“Dim sum.”

“What?”

“Dim sum. For lunch. RedFarm, on Hudson. It opens in about half an hour.”

“Too early. And I wouldn’t get a chance to do this.” He removes her coffee cup, gives up any plans to force the issue of last night until later, and turns to the far more pleasant pastime of turning Beckett into a melting mess of Kat-ness in his lap.

He starts with the hard, forceful kisses that she likes more every time he provides them, and uses the cover of invading her mouth to bring her closer in where he can slide a hand up under her soft v-neck sweater and find – oohhh – warm skin and not a lot else. Her skin is so infinitely strokable, and he’s never been able to resist temptation, and since – how did that happen? – it appears that his button-down is not, in fact, buttoned down or indeed up, it would be ungenerous not to do the same. Her sweater is shortly decorating the cushions, and Beckett’s beautiful body is decorating his, skin sliding against skin, his shirt being slipped from his broad shoulders and her hands gripping as he leaves her mouth and wanders down her neck, past her clavicles, to turn and lay her back and tease her through the pretty, lacy cotton bra.

If only they didn’t have to go anywhere, Castle thinks, they could spend a delightful afternoon in a combination of leisurely exploration and very satisfying conquest. Still, he can certainly make Beckett turn into a very happily purring Kat. He loves her firm breasts, so perfectly sized for him to play with, whether with hands or mouth. Right now, it’s mouth. He’s got other plans, for which his hands will be required. Although he is perfectly capable of undoing zips (and indeed buttons) with his teeth, he doesn’t actually like the metallic taste it leaves, though that will swiftly be forgotten in the delicious taste below.

Anyway, he’s having far too much fun tantalising Beckett-now-just-about-Kat, who is half-purring, half-growling a commentary that seems to include a substantial number of naughty words and who is lax and responsive below him. He teases more, and takes the opportunity to open her jeans and insinuate a questing finger into the damp heat within. She writhes against him and whimpers a little, trying to bring her own hands down from where they’re clasped around his neck to undo his belt and pants, but he won’t let her. He doesn’t want this to be fast and hot and over: a quickie before lunch, he wants to take it more slowly and leave her wholly relaxed and eased. Stood down. This is so much nicer than having the talk.

He catches her wicked hands and repatriates them to above her head where they can’t interfere with his plan to leave her breathless, then looms up over her and begins to slide her cotton panties back and forth until she’s moving with the friction, murmuring in her ear and telling her what he’s doing, what he’s going to do, how hot and wet and just plain gorgeous she is when she’s like this, how later on he’ll have more time and he’ll touch her and taste her and tease her and take her and
all the time his growling, dangerous baritone keeps driving her up, leaving her desperate until his large fingers dip beneath the cotton and delve into the slick heat and tight flesh and rub over the hard knot of nerves and she is not purring but there are definitely claws digging into his hand. He lets go so that he can lean down and take her mouth hard and thrust with his tongue as he does with his fingers and now she’s clawing at his back to drag him down closer, heavy on her and he worries that he’s too heavy but she doesn’t seem to care as she moans once and comes around his hand.

He snuggles her in and wraps around her, turning so she’s atop him and pillowing her head on his shoulder. If they had more time, he’d simply pick her up and carry her – very macho – to her bed and then make love to her all afternoon. Unfortunately, they don’t. Still, there’s always later. If they aren’t in the middle of a blazing row, which is quite likely, especially since he’s still intending to have the talk. Last night has not removed his conviction that Beckett needs an intervention. Rather the reverse.

He lies there, holding her close, keeping her warm and softly petting her back in long slow strokes, till she’s humming contentedly, comforted, soothed and relaxed. Sprawled across him, she’s soft and satisfied in almost the way she has only been once before: way back when, almost at the beginning, when she’d been able to be Kat with him because he knew nothing. She’s still not quite wholly Kat: he still hasn’t seen that soft side of her outside his arms, though he’s sure it must exist simply from the décor of her apartment and the way she has sometimes curved into him: as then, as now, as she will again.

“I’m hungry,” she says prosaically.

“So’m I,” Castle discovers. “Dim sum?”

“Yeah…” Beckett drawls, and wriggles over him to – he thinks – stand up. Then she smiles evilly. “In a moment. You seem a little…uncomfortable. We’ll sort that out first,” she murmurs, slips off the couch on to her knees, and…well, that’s not dim sum she’s eating. He’s gone in no time at all. She’s really very good at that. He just wishes he didn’t have the slight feeling that she’s distracting him. He doesn’t like that feeling. He doesn’t like it at all. It’s too close to the feeling of being second best that he’d had straight after Christmas.

“I want lunch,” Beckett says, smirking evilly as she tugs on her sweater. “Let’s go.”

Castle doesn’t want to go anywhere except to Beckett’s bed, where he can undress her slowly and return the favour with interest, and turn his slight discomfort into something better and more honest. However, he’ll need to pull himself together so they can have some lunch before seeing Mrs (and maybe Mr?) Berowitz.

RedFarm produces delicious dim sum and a couple of noodle courses of which Beckett steals far more than her fair share. It reminds Castle of her approach to doughnuts. He’s surprised she hasn’t rapped his fingers with her chopsticks. However, time to go comes round all too quickly, and as he refuses to let Beckett contribute and pays, she’s already retreated into her precinct persona.

“We’ll meet Dad there,” she says briskly, and leads Castle out of the restaurant.

The Berowitzes’ apartment is perfectly clean, when Julia lets them in. Perfectly clean, with that tinge of lemon cleaner and slightly antiseptic smell that indicates very recent cleaning. A swift glance at Julia’s hands indicates tiny chips in her nail polish, a slight redness which Beckett recognises as the result of a scrubbing pad. She mentions none of that to the others, and notes that there is still a sheen of dampness across the kitchen floor. She would bet that the same sheen is present in the bathroom. Keeping up appearances, or putting on a brave face, it’s all the same.
“Julia, this is my father, Jim. He…”

“I’m an alcoholic,” Jim says, as if it were an AA meeting. He doesn’t flinch, and his voice is quietly confident. Julia does flinch. Reality is not what she’d wanted, clearly, but here it is in her living room. “I’ve been dry for five years now.”

“Oh.” Julia turns to something that she can deal with. “Would you all like coffee?”

“Yes please,” comes from all three of them.

“I’ll just get it started. David will be here in a moment. He…” Beckett sees the moment she realises that was working late isn’t going to cut it on a Sunday afternoon. “…didn’t sleep well, so he went out for a walk to clear his head.”

Jim looks at Beckett as Julia disappears into the kitchen, and raises his eyebrows. Beckett shrugs, indicating that it’s up to Jim. Castle stands up and follows Julia, from where Beckett can hear him offering help and comparing the relative merits of types of coffee and flavours of creamer. It occurs to both Becketts simultaneously that Castle is applying his particular brand of charm and domesticity to reduce Julia’s tension and nervousness, and when he re-emerges carrying the tray for her and expounding on the excellence of a particular type of Brazilian coffee of which even Beckett has never heard, Julia is much less frightened.

“Julia,” Beckett says softly, “we’ve talked a lot about what’s going on. I’ve tried to help, but I think you need more than I can give. I don’t know if you’ve gone to any of the groups I suggested yet?” Castle can see Beckett’s white knuckles pressing down hard on the cushions of the elegantly old-fashioned couch. Their harshly knotted tension is not reflected in her calm voice.

“I don’t need to. David’s not… that. He’s just a bit stressed. He’ll be fine.”

“I used to say that,” Jim points out. “So did Katie here. It wasn’t true. Every time I said it I really meant it – at that moment. But then… then I would need a little help, and then a little more, and then I needed to block out the past.”

“The past?”

“Didn’t Katie say? My wife – her mother – was murdered.”

“She didn’t say. You didn’t tell me that,” Julia accuses, looking for a reason not to listen.

“No,” Beckett says. “I didn’t.” Something in her voice catches on Julia’s confected annoyance. Castle throws a quick glance at her, and returns his attention to Julia. Unobtrusively, his finger sweeps over Beckett’s tight knuckles. It makes no difference at all.

“It might all be okay now, Julia. But you’ve been calling Katie because you need some support, so you know it isn’t really okay. When she asked you, you said you would talk to me. I’ve not done this before” – he smiles nervously – “so I don’t really know what happens now. Why don’t I tell you about how it was for me?”

Julia nods. Beckett’s fingers bite into the couch. Castle wishes that Beckett were absolutely not here, because this is going to be hard. Jim takes a breath, and a mouthful of coffee, and begins.
“The police came, and told us. Katie and me. And for a few days I couldn’t believe it: I kept waiting for her to come back, for it all to be a mistake. I knew it wasn’t, of course. But I pretended. I found that having a drink helped me pretend. Helped blur the edges. That was how I began. I’d always liked a drink, but I never wanted more than one when my wife was there. She made up for it.”

Castle looks at Beckett’s tight jaw and doesn’t dare to touch her again. From the set of her lips, that last is something she hadn’t known.

“But she wasn’t there anymore. For a while, I got through work, but… but everything reminded me of my wife. I had to block it all out. Katie had to go back to college, so I could hide it for a time, but then when she came home – saved all her money and came home for a visit after a month – it all came out.”

Beckett remembers. She remembers all of it: the alcohol and the depression and the tears and the accusations and the desperation. Oh, she remembers. She’s never been able to forget.

“After that it all spiralled. Katie tried everything she could. She poured the bottles down the sink, but I hid them and bought more. She tried to talk to me, she tried to get me to AA. She cleaned me up and listened to me promise I wouldn’t do it again. I always did it again. I always lied, to everyone. You do. You lie to your loved ones. I lost my job. One long lunch too many, one time too often I didn’t show up. Katie cried, and came back home for good, and changed to NYU, and I promised, but I still lied. It didn’t matter. Nothing mattered but getting another drink. I cleaned out my bank account.”

He looks very straight at Julia. “If Katie had been a minor still, I’d likely have cleaned out hers.”

Julia flinches.

“Then I started drinking in public. Got picked up a few times, and a few times more than that. Katie would come get me, take me home. Guess you’ve done that?”

“Kate went and found him. She brought him home the first time.” Jim draws in a breath. “She went and looked for him for me. I didn’t know who to call.”

“How often?”

“Twice. But once in the middle you wouldn’t,” she says, accusing again. “You didn’t help that time.”

“David wasn’t lost that time, he was already at Central Park Precinct,” Beckett reminds her. “You could go get him from there. He was safe.” She is not meeting her father’s gaze. She doesn’t want to see his disgust that she wouldn’t help Julia then. Destroy his last illusion about who she is.

“Well, anyway,” Jim continues, though it’s obvious to Castle that he is intending to have a father-daughter discussion in the very near future and it is not going to be a happy one, “it didn’t matter what Katie did or said or tried, I wasn’t listening. As long as she was there to bring me home.” He pauses.

“And then she didn’t. They called her, and she said she wouldn’t come. Said she couldn’t help me. I spent the night in the tank. Not for the last time. But she walked away from me.” Beckett is resolutely not looking at anyone. She can’t bear to hear the break that’s in her father’s voice: the
break she’d put there; she can’t bear the memories of him crying and begging till her voicemail was full. She knows what she’ll see in Julia’s face. She’s seen it in her own mirror, often enough, she saw it in Castle’s face and she doesn’t need to see it again. She needs out of here. This is too much. Too many memories. She’d worried about the effect on her father. She should have worried more about the effect on her.

“I could never do that,” Julia gasps, horrified. “I couldn’t let David…” Jim looks sadly at her.

“It took me a while. Nearly three years. But one day I realised that the only way I’d ever see Katie again was if I got dry. I needed her, but she wouldn’t come if I wasn’t sober. I couldn’t lose her, too.”

He takes a long breath, and downs the rest of his coffee.

“What I’m saying, is that you have to hit bottom. You have to want something more than you want to drink. For me, it was my daughter. But until you decide that, no-one else can really help you.”

He stops. Julia is silent, liquid at the corners of her eyes. Beckett is frozen-faced and only just hanging on to control, and Castle still and quiet in his corner of the couch next to her.

“But… but… but David’s not like that. He’s not. It’s just a blip.” It’s the last straw. Beckett can’t do this any more. Julia is wilfully not getting it, and she can’t stand watching this car crash any longer.

“Stop fooling yourself, Julia,” Beckett says harshly. “He was drunk when I came to tell you we’d got the guy who did it. You called me after Christmas because you couldn’t cope. You called me again a couple of weeks later, because you couldn’t cope. Because he was drinking. He went out to get a drink when you called me because he’d gone out without warm clothing and told you he was just going to the drugstore – and I brought him home dead drunk from Central Park Precinct. It’s not a blip. He has a real problem. You keep calling me because you don’t know what to do. I’ve told you, and told you, and you don’t believe me. My dad’s telling you now. You cannot save him by yourself, Julia!”

She stands up, wounded and furious, close to weeping. “You can’t save him at all. He needs to save himself. All you can do is protect yourself so that you come out the other side in one piece. It’s up to you, Julia. I can’t help you because you won’t listen to me. Maybe you’ll listen to my dad. I couldn’t save my dad. It didn’t matter what I did until he decided to save himself. I couldn’t save him and neither can you. You’ll just have to live with it, whatever you decide.”

She takes two swift, slicing strides to the door and is gone. Julia starts to cry. Jim and Castle exchange glances. Beckett will have to wait, though Castle’s first, almost overpowering instinct is to go after her, because Castle can’t leave Jim to drown. That would finish Beckett. Hard choices, where every answer is wrong.

It’s Castle who starts, sympathy in every syllable.

“Julia, I know it’s hard. But Beckett’s right. You need to take care of yourself too. Now, where’s David? Jim needs to talk to both of you.”

“I don’t know,” Julia wails. “He promised he’d be back for lunch and he wasn’t and I thought Kate would help me find him again. But she won’t, she’s gone.”

“Kate can’t help you any more, Julia. She’s not in Missing Persons, she’s in Homicide. She’s been risking her career already to help you, and if her boss finds out she’ll be in real trouble.” Jim flicks
Castle a sharp glance. “Her boss told her not to. Orders.” Castle is pretty sure that’s true, because otherwise she’d have gone to get David Berowitz the second time, and she’d never have left O’Leary to it the third. “You need to call it in to your precinct. They’ll help you. Kate can’t, Julia. No matter how much she wants to, she can’t.”

_I am going to get this through your head, because otherwise you’ll just keep leaning on her and she’s breaking under it: she’s snapping like a dry stick._ He only hopes he won’t find Beckett dead drunk in her own chill apartment. Again.

Jim picks up the tag. “Katie put it harshly, Julia, but however you cut it, she was right. If David’s gone missing again then you need to call it in.”

“They won’t help. He’s not been gone for long enough.”

“You can still call it in so that if they do pick him up they’ll know to call you. At least then you’ll know he’s safe.”

“Then what? You’re telling me to abandon him. I can’t do that. He’s my husband.” She sniffs, messy tears bleeding down her face. “I love him,” she mumbles. “I can’t…”

“Katie loves me,” Jim says firmly. “Maybe too much. If she’d walked away earlier… let me hit rock bottom… maybe I’d have got cleaned up sooner. I would never, ever have stopped if she hadn’t walked away. It was the only thing that did stop me.” In Jim’s tired, older gaze Castle sees _maybe I wouldn’t have damaged her so if she’d walked away sooner._ Because whatever else this meeting has achieved, there is no way that Jim can now think that his Katie is in any way okay. She’s proven that quite spectacularly.

“What should I do?” Julia asks brokenly.

“Call Al-Anon,” Jim answers. “Call Al-Anon like Katie told you to and listen to what they say. You’ve got to have someone for you to lean on, because you’ll never survive without it.” _You’re nothing like as strong as Katie, and even Katie’s broken. And I never realised._ Jim keeps his voice calm, sure and positive. It takes all his remaining calmness. “We’ll stay while you call Missing Persons, and if you want, we’ll stay till you’ve called Al-Anon.”

“You’re nothing like as strong as Katie, and even Katie’s broken. And I never realised.” Jim keeps his voice calm, sure and positive. It takes all his remaining calmness. “We’ll stay while you call Missing Persons, and if you want, we’ll stay till you’ve called Al-Anon.”

“Your friend,” Castle says. “The one who came over Friday night. Would she come over again?”

“Elaine? Probably.”

“Call her too, then. You need friends.”

Under the unwavering gaze of Castle and Jim, Julia does what they ask. When she’s done, she looks piteously at them. “Really? Really like that?”

“Yes,” Jim says gently. “Really like that.” But somehow Castle doesn’t think he’s just talking about himself.

It takes another half hour for Elaine to show up, during which time every footstep in the hallway leaves Julia whipping desperately hopeful glances to the door and turning away, desolate, when no key turns, no knock sounds. By the time there is a knock, everyone’s on edge. Castle is desperate to go after Beckett, and Jim just looks desperate. They are only too glad to be shooed out.

“We need to talk,” Jim says. “But not now. I can’t do it. I need” – he stops. He’d been going to say _I need to see Katie_, but actually he needs to talk to Ed, because for the first time in a long time he isn’t sure that he can say _no._
“I’ll stay with you, if you like.” Jim looks at Castle.

“And?”

“Till you’ve got a hold of your sponsor.” Jim’s jaw drops.

“Uh?”

“I saw a lot of” – Castle stops, and inelegantly continues – “stuff. When I first went mega. You think I don’t know what you feel like right now? I’ve got a daughter too. You want to blot it out till you can deal with it. Let me deal with it for now. You make sure you’re okay, and then we’ll see. If… Jim, if you fall because she’s upset, she’ll never forgive herself. You’ve got to talk to your sponsor, you’ve got to hang on. You’re all she’s got.”

Castle’s never been less smooth with his words – but he might never have been more serious, either. He has no compunction about making sure that Jim gets what he needs, because there would be no way back from the other option. Not for Jim and not for Beckett. He knows that Jim’s view of his Katie has just fallen to pieces around him and, so much more like his daughter than he knows, Jim is drowning in guilt for not seeing it.

This hadn’t been anyone’s plan. But it’s where they all are. It looks like Castle might be the last man standing, the last bulwark against the surging tide.

Jim is already dialling when Castle looks back down at his lined, suddenly age-slackened face.


“Sure,” he says. “I’ll get a cab from wherever you’re going to.”

“Then you go find her, Castle. Someone has to. She needs help.”

There isn’t any talking in Jim’s car, a perfectly adequate if spartan Chrysler, until they’re pulling up at what must be Ed’s place. Castle meditates on how similarly Jim behaves, when hurt, to Beckett: drawing in and closing up. Jim and Katie: two peas in a Beckett pod. Hiding how they feel from each other so as not to hurt each other, and ending up with both of them worse hurt than if they’d never tried not to hurt each other in the first place.

There is one key difference between them, though. Jim, however painfully, has learned to ask for help. Beckett has not.

Castle sees Jim into Ed’s small apartment and then turns his footsteps towards the street and a cab back to Beckett’s. He hopes she’s there, because he can’t think of anywhere else to start looking if she’s not.

Beckett had simply had to escape before she fucked up any further and turned on her father. Every lacerating memory of five years of agony had been dragged back up and surrounded her in high definition. Every last vision and sound of her father falling apart had reasserted itself with appalling clarity; every time she had abandoned and betrayed him. She can only hear the break and the pain in his voice when he’d said but she walked away from me. And under that, her own old unhealed wounds: it had taken him five years to love her more than whiskey: she still can’t forgive him for that; still can’t believe that he won’t relapse, that he won’t abandon her as she did him.
She goes home. Where else is there to go but her chill, joyless, lonely apartment with its abstract patterns and interior-designed lifelessness? She can’t go to the precinct, she can’t ring O’Leary and ask him to search for David Berowitz. She can’t go anywhere. She’s not hungry, and her stomach cramps at the thought of food. She has some water, and for a minute thinks that even that will come back up. She curls up on her cool bed until the nausea passes, and only then realises that she’s crying: ugly mascara tainted tears staining her pristine pillowcase: black smudges on her linen matching those on her heart.

She doesn’t respond to the knocking, later, nor to the ringing of her phone, nor yet to the message Castle leaves: *I know you’re there. I can hear the phone. Open the door and let me in.*

She can’t bear to see anyone: she’s broken in public and she can’t face another seeing her own weakness. She couldn’t give compassion to Julia and she deserves none herself. So, later, after one single text: *leave me alone. Please give me space. I can’t see anyone,* she ignores Castle’s two forceful messages on the theme of *if you need anything you call me, okay?* in exactly the same way, and at the same personal cost, as she had ignored her father’s, all those years ago. Then, she’d saved herself and let him drown. Now, she’ll let herself drown. There’s no reason not to. She’d *seen* her father’s horrified face as she’d rounded on Julia. He hasn’t called, and she knows why: he can’t believe that she doesn’t feel the same way about him. She sends him one message: *Are you ok? Dad, please answer me.* There is no answer.

All this time she’s been there for him, been his mainstay, and the one time she asked him to do something that she couldn’t do she couldn’t bear to see it through: couldn’t even hold herself together through his story and then ran out on him.

Abandoned him, just like she had then, and now he’s not answering her.

She drags herself through cleansing her face and body, and finds an unstained pillowcase: forces herself to set her alarm, though she’d rather go nowhere. There have been no more messages or calls. She deletes the earlier ones, and sends Castle one further text. *I’m sorry, I couldn’t face seeing anyone tonight. Was my dad okay? He’s not answering me.*

The answer is swift. *He was okay. Are you okay?*

*I don’t know,* she thinks. *I don’t know,* and doesn’t answer.

Alone in the unforgiving dark, she pushes herself into chill, unemotional quiet, and thence to sleep. She wakes long before her alarm, and, freed from Montgomery’s dictated leave, simply goes to work. It’s the one place she can still feel that everything is under her control and that what she does is worth something.

In her enforced absence, another pile of cold case files have grown, fungus-like, on her desk. Without enthusiasm, she begins. After a while, she makes herself coffee, more for a break than any desire to have anything in her stomach. Some time after that, the boys roll in, separately but not far apart. Montgomery appears, and as swiftly disappears to a meeting at 1PP. It stops him asking questions. It does not stop Esposito, however.

“Yo, Beckett. Why was Lanie lookin’ for Castle’s number Friday night?”

“Don’t know. Why *was* Lanie looking for Castle’s number Friday night?”

“Don’t give me that. She was out with you.”

“Oh, that was a question? I thought you were practising for your stand-up routine.”
“Me?” Espo puffs out his chest and strikes a macho pose. “Yeah, sure. Headliner at the Comedy Club, that’s me.”

“Target for rotting fruit, more like,” Ryan snips.

“Like you could do it,” Espo flashes back. “You couldn’t find a punchline at a boxing match.”

“Better than you, then. You couldn’t even find the ring.”

The boys descend into bickering and Beckett tunes them out. It takes them some time to realise.

“Beckett?”

“Hmm? Have you stopped fighting yet, or do I need to referee?”

“Never mind that. Why’d Lanie want Castle’s number?”

“No idea. Hey, here’s a thought – why don’t you ask her?” There’s enough of a Beckett bite on her words for the boys to back off.

Beckett returns to the paperwork. Her phone remains entirely silent. She still hasn’t heard anything from her father, and that terrifies her. As soon as it’s even faintly civilised to do so, she texts him again. She doesn’t call, in case – so she tells herself – he’s in an early meeting. In truth, it’s in case he doesn’t pick up. But she doesn’t let herself think about that.

A short while later, her phone rings. It’s her dad. She swipes on with trepidation, praying he’s sober.

“Katie.” He is. Oh, thank God for that.

“Dad,” she answers, already aiming for the quiet, private space of the back stairwell. “Are you okay?” No-one – certainly not Ryan and Esposito, whose interestedly flapping ears have pricked up – would have guessed at her inner turmoil. “You didn’t answer me last night.” She doesn’t show how terrified she’s been.

“I’m sorry, Katie. I spent some time talking to Ed last night, but I’m okay. Rick made sure I got there.” His words pierce her. Her actions, her decisions – his suffering. If he’d talked to Ed, he’d been close to the edge. Close to falling, and all because of her choice to involve him. “More to the point, how are you?”

“I’m fine,” she says, putting mildly exasperated affection into her tone, as if he were reminding her to be sure to wear a scarf in the cold weather.

“I’m sorry, Katie. I spent some time talking to Ed last night, but I’m okay. Rick made sure I got there.” His words pierce her. Her actions, her decisions – his suffering. If he’d talked to Ed, he’d been close to the edge. Close to falling, and all because of her choice to involve him. “More to the point, how are you?”

“I’m fine,” she says, putting mildly exasperated affection into her tone, as if he were reminding her to be sure to wear a scarf in the cold weather.

“Katie…” The exasperation in her father’s voice is not mild. “Katie, that is a flat-out lie. You were really angry with Mrs Berowitz yesterday and I’m” – but she doesn’t let him finish, his tone flicking her on the raw edge of her unacknowledged insecurities and lack of forgiveness: tiredness making old grief and memories sharp, removing her hard-won, years-old control and concealment of all her feelings.

“Yeah. I was harsh with her and it was unjustified and I should have done better and you’re ashamed of me for it. Well, I’m not sorry. She needed to hear the truth. Maybe if someone had told me the hard truth earlier I wouldn’t have wasted so much time trying to save you when I never could. Maybe I wouldn’t have thought I could be enough if I just tried harder. Maybe I’d have known that while I was still picking you up when you fell I’d always come second to whiskey. Maybe I’d have known all of that. Maybe I wouldn’t still be trying” – she stops dead. *Trying to*
make sure you never do it again. Trying to make sure you love me.

“Trying what, Katie?”

“I have to get back to work.”

She cuts the call and crashes down to sitting on the cold concrete stairwell, head on her knees. Her phone rings, and she doesn’t even look at it when she declines the call and turns the phone off for good measure. In the chill silence, a floor below the bullpen, she simply… goes away, thinking of nothing at all.

All her choices have led her here. She’d tried so hard, and in the end it’s all been just as useless as trying to save him had been, ten years ago. He saved himself, and she saved herself at his expense, and now both of them know it.
Nothing left to lose

In the bullpen, Ryan and Esposito are still squabbling over who can tell the best jokes, when Montgomery returns from 1PP with a Cheshire-Cat grin. He fixes them with a beady-eyed glare, whereupon they discover that cold case files are really excessively interesting.

“Where is Detective Beckett?”

“She was here a moment ago, sir, but she took a call,” Ryan shrugs.

“Hmm.”

“Should we tell her to come see you?”

“No. Just keeping an eye on you all.” Montgomery smiles in a very I’m-the-boss way. “Castle shown up yet?”

“No, sir. It’s a bit early for him. It’s barely ten.”

Montgomery harrumphs at the laziness of best-selling authors and retires to his office well-satisfied with his morning so far.

Half an hour later, as he’s perusing the precinct solve statistics with a warm, smug glow of happiness that they are still the best by a mile – top again, that’ll show Stannard at the Twenty-Third – he becomes aware of a noisy disturbance. This is not the way he runs his bullpen. No sirree. If he’d wanted noisy disturbances he’d have joined a Vice team. Corpses are his preference. Nice and quiet with no noisy disturbances.

He emerges from his office wrapped in Captainly authority and stands ominously silent as he takes in the scene before him. Detectives Ryan and Esposito, together with Castle, appear to be starting a free fight with Medical Examiner Dr Parrish, who has no business being here at all. The one small consolation is that Detective Beckett is sitting at her desk getting on with her caseload and appears to be playing no part in this kerfuffle at all, despite the fact that it is practically on top of her. At least one of his detectives knows how to behave. She looks up, notices him, calmly caps her pen and waits for Armageddon to descend. He notices in passing that she’s pale and looks unwell, but that can wait for a few moments. She hadn’t looked too well last week either. He’ll deal with that when he’s dealt with the rest of this ungodly mess.

“What is going on here?” he enquires dangerously quietly. There is instant silence. The four protagonists look shamefaced. Well. Three of them do. Castle does not. “Explain.” No explanations are forthcoming. Montgomery decides to divide and conquer.

“Dr Parrish. What are you doing here?” Dr Parrish says nothing. “No reason. I see. In that case, get back to your morgue and stop distracting my detectives.” There’s an instant in which her eyes flash. “Now.” She goes, though for a moment he’d thought she was going to say something useful. No such luck. She hisses something at Beckett as she passes her.

“Castle. What is going on?” Castle looks blandly at him.

“Nothing. I just got here.” Montgomery glares at him. He recognises a complete evasion when he hears one – he’s had twenty-five years of practice in Interrogation. A flicked gaze past Castle reveals that Beckett has returned to her case file.
“So why are you arguing with my Detectives?”

“Arguing is such a harsh word. We were having a lively discussion.” Montgomery growls, but recognises that swapping semantics with Castle is very unlikely to get him anywhere. He’ll deal with him later.

“Ryan, Esposito, my office. Now.” They are there faster than light speed. Einstein would have invented a whole new theory had he ever met Montgomery in this mode.

By the time Montgomery has finished his words Castle is at Beckett’s desk, talking in a low-toned, urgent voice that, regrettably, means that Montgomery can’t overhear without moving much closer. That would be a little too obvious.

As is Beckett getting up and running for the women’s restroom. Okay, Castle can be very irritating, but that’s a bit of an overreaction. He ignores Ryan and Esposito cowering in his office, and marches back to Beckett’s desk.

“What is wrong with Beckett?”

“She went green and ran for the restroom,” Castle says.

“When she’s back, both of you come see me.”

Montgomery goes to demolish Ryan and Esposito, from whom he obtains no more sensible answers than he had from Castle. He doesn’t believe for a moment that it was an argument about baseball, but when Ryan starts insulting the Mets and Espo retaliates by dissing the Yankees and it gets heated in no time, he’s left with nowhere to go except a comment that he prefers football, which gets him a disgusted look from both of them. He packs them off with a few well-chosen words about appropriate behaviour in the precinct, as opposed to that which he might expect from sugar-hyped toddlers at a play centre, and then waits for Beckett and Castle to show up, passing the time by clearing forms from his in tray.

Ten minutes and five forms later he is still waiting, and none too happy about it. He looks out into the bullpen, and sees Castle sitting in his usual chair and no Beckett. He returns to his forms. Another ten minutes later he looks out again, to find them both missing. He stalks out.

“Ryan!”

“Sir?”

“Where are Beckett and Castle?”

“Castle went to find her. He hasn’t come back.”

Castle had known it was going to be a bad morning from the moment he woke up an appalling two hours later than he’d meant to, with no communication from Beckett. He’d hoped that she’d let him in, but by the time he’d got there he suspects she’d been so deep in her own guilt she wouldn’t have even if she’d wanted to; punishing herself for breaking under intolerable strain. But she’d answered the text…and she’d asked for space, and he’d said at least tell me – and she did. But she didn’t answer the later text, and he knows that’s because she wasn’t okay at all. He should have gone after her immediately so that she didn’t have to be alone, but then he’d not been able to leave Jim. If Jim had been left alone, he might have…relapsed. Choose your poison. Leave Jim to fall, and watch Beckett fall apart. Leave Beckett to run, and watch Beckett fall apart.
This had not been the plan at all.

As if that had not been bad enough, as he’s getting into the elevator Lanie rushes in.

“I was looking for you,” she says. “Don’t you answer your phone?”

“Uh?”

“Been texting you.” Oh. Yes. Those would be the texts he’s been ignoring in the hope his subconscious would work out what to do with them.

“I’ve been busy.”

“What’s up with Kate? What happened Friday? Why didn’t she call me? Why didn’t you call me?”

Fortunately they reach the bullpen before Lanie stops firing questions at him long enough to wait for an answer. Castle sees Beckett’s head flick up at the elevator’s ting, note both of them, turn an unpleasantly sickly, pallid shade of white, and drop her head again. Had she really thought he wouldn’t be here today?

Lanie whips across the floor to Beckett’s desk. Castle could have told her that would be a bad plan, but at that point his phone rings, and he stops to answer it.

“Rick.” Oh, hell. Disaster number three, arriving on track two. “Rick, did you manage to talk to Katie last night? Because she wasn’t making any sense this morning and she lost her temper with me.” Jim sounds outright scared. “She never loses her temper.” Castle chokes. That’s not precisely his experience. “Not with me. I thought she’d grown out of it. She used to have a temper. She said she wasn’t enough… She’s always been more than enough. She could never let me down: I’m her dad.”

Castle ignores the question and answers one that wasn’t asked, instead. “I’m at the precinct with her.” It’s true. Not quite as Jim will take it, but it’s true.

“Good. I… should I come by?”

Castle casts a glance at Beckett’s desk, where Lanie has now been joined by Ryan and Esposito. “I don’t think so. I’ll…” He doesn’t know what to say. “I’ll let you know. Not now. I’ll make sure she’s okay.”

He joins the others, who are already some way into an argument.

“I want to know where you ran off to on Friday.”

“None of your business.”

“You stood me up.”

“You could have had me instead,” Espo flirts. Lanie looks him up and down assessingly.

“I’d rather have a puppy. Better looking and more fun.”

“What? I’m much more fun than a puppy.”

“You’re a macho idiot. I want someone who knows the difference between Merlot and Malbec.”
“Both machine guns, aren’t they?”

Ryan laughs. Lanie doesn’t. Castle notices that Beckett is pretending to deal with her case file and playing no part in the argument.

“Girl! Where’d you go on Friday?”

Ryan looks at Beckett’s tight face and thinks it might be his turn to take a hit for the team. Whatever’s up, Beckett’s theirs, and he and Espo have swapped two glances that say keep Lanie off her. They’ll ask their own questions later.

“I went to the theatre,” he says. Esposito splutters disgustedly.

“Wuss. Why weren’t you in a bar like a real man?”

Ryan smirks. “Because she was really cute. I can put up with a lot of bad acting when I get to cuddle up to a cute girl.”

“That’s disgusting.” Lanie’s been effectively distracted. Unfortunately it only lasts for a moment. “I wanna know where you ran off to.” She looks round, and spots Castle. “And you. Why’d you put the phone down on me? You know what was goin’ on. Start talking.”

“You called at a bad time,” Castle smirks.

“Don’t you give me that shit, Castle.” She jabs him in the chest. “You ran off faster than Usain Bolt. Why?”

Tempers and voices have risen spectacularly. Maybe that’s why nobody notices Montgomery prowling up until he speaks.

“What is going on here?”

Oh, Lordy. Now they are all deep into shit bayou (which lies some way past shit creek) without paddles. Castle watches Lanie being despatched condignly, and takes mental notes for later use. As Lanie passes Beckett, she hisses, “This conversation is not done. You need help, girl,” in tones promising pain and suffering. Beckett doesn’t even look up.

He exchanges compliments with Montgomery, who is clearly thoroughly displeased with them all, and as he watches the boys being sent to the principal’s office, slides up to Beckett, to balance on her desk. He hasn’t heard her say a word, and she’s doing a really, really excellent job of ignoring everything and everyone around her.

“Beckett.”

“Please, Castle. Not now. Let me… Can we not do this right now?”

“Beckett, you’re not right. Your dad called me. He’s worried about you.”

“He needn’t. I’m fine.” But her eyes say something entirely different. They say: tell him I’m fine. Lie for me.

“Beckett, you know you’re not fine. You lost it at Julia’s, you’ve lost it with your dad this morning. He went straight to his sponsor yesterday after you left. I went with him.”

On balance, saying that was a mistake. Beckett turns a horrible shade of greenish-white and flees precipitately for the restroom. Half a second later Montgomery arrives, no doubt to demand
answers with menaces. Great. This is all about to collapse around their ears.

This was still not the plan.

He waits for a few minutes, but Beckett doesn’t return. Castle gathers up his courage and decides to break all the societal taboos that have been ground into him for the best part of forty years. He follows Beckett and taps on the restroom door. There’s no answer. He squirms uncomfortably – and goes in. Somewhat to his relief, since he really does not want to explain this action, there is no-one else inside. He can hear shuddering breaths.

“Beckett?” he says quietly. “Beckett, Montgomery wants to see you. Us.” He waits. “You’ve been in here nearly a quarter of an hour. If you don’t come out, likely Montgomery will start asking why.”

The stall unlocks. Beckett does not look good at all. She’s still green, and her brow is damp, tendrils of her hair straggling across it. There is dust on the knees of her dark pants. When she turns to rinse her mouth and wash her hands, there’s a slight tremor in her movement. Castle extends a hand to touch her stiff shoulder, and while she doesn’t shy away (which he had expected) she doesn’t curve into it either. Her face in the mirror is terrifyingly blank, her eyes still empty. Hollowed out. He’s seen her hurt, upset, smiling or angry: sometimes two or three at once. He’s never seen her… null.

She looks as if she’s a dead woman walking.

He clasps her close, and it makes no difference at all. She’s so tightly wound together that he doesn’t think she’s noticing anything beyond the inside of her head.

“We have to go see Montgomery.” She opens the door, turns in the direction of her Captain’s office, forcing her feet across the floor. Ryan looks up, opens his mouth, catches Castle’s negating stare, and looks down again.

It’s Castle who taps on Montgomery’s door, and Castle who pushes Beckett inside, and Castle who closes the door behind them. But it’s Montgomery who takes one short look at Beckett and pulls a hipflask out his drawer.

“Drink, Detective. That’s an order.” He thrusts the opened flask into her hand and watches her carefully to be sure she swallows. She grimaces and coughs, but a little colour comes back to her face. Montgomery repossesses his flask. “Now. Sit down before you fall down. You look like shit, Beckett.” His Captaincy has fallen away in the shock of apparently ill Beckett. She’s never ill. She only ever looks this bad on… oh, shit. On 9 or 10 January. Not that he’s seen her on 9 January more than once.

Montgomery is not stupid. He’s also not got to the position he holds without being able to pull a lot of half-hints and clues together very fast indeed. Clue one: Beckett’s ghost-white, ghastly expression. Clue two: Castle’s half-protective lean. Clue three: ME Parrish and this morning’s argument, put together with last Monday’s rapid exit that had left ME Parrish looking very irritated indeed. And clue four, bringing it all together, Sergeant Hardon’s report, a week ago. Looks like something in Beckett’s locked down private life has risen up to bite her, and he is rapidly coming to the conclusion it’s to do with her dad. He can’t think of any other reason for her to look like that.

“Now that you look as if you might live, Beckett, how about you explain what’s wrong?”

“Nothing, sir. Just a bit under the weather.” Montgomery isn’t watching her face – that’s a waste of time. He’s watching Castle, who has just failed to control the rapid flicker of an expression of
extreme worry. So. Beckett is evading, if not quite outright lying. There’s a surprise. She rarely reveals anything that isn’t directly relevant to her work.

“Why didn’t you call in sick?”

“I felt okay when I woke up.” Castle’s expression flickers again, but this time it looks more like puzzlement, cut with a fair helping of disbelief. So that might be half true.

“Well, now,” he says, to give himself some time to think. “Where were you at ten? You weren’t at your desk then either.”

“I…took a few moments.” Now Castle looks bewildered – and then suddenly realises something. Ah. That’s interesting. That statement is all true, but he’s missing something. Oh yes. Ryan had said…

“That when you got a call? Who called you, Beckett?”

“My dad.” And that wasn’t a surprise to Castle, either. Which – Castle’s lack of surprise, that is – is quite a surprise to Montgomery. Several blocks fall into a pattern. Element one: Castle has got closer to Beckett than expected. Element two: he’s met Beckett’s dad. Hmm. Hardon had said there’d been a civilian with Beckett. He’d known then that the civilian was Castle. He should have asked a couple more questions at the time.

“He okay?” he says casually.

“Yeah.” Another wince. Another – if not a lie, certainly not the whole truth. Beckett’s looking sick-white again – as soon as he got on to the topic of her father.

“If you need some time to take care of him,” he starts. He never gets to finish. Beckett turns as green as a Louisiana tree frog and hightails it for the restroom again. Montgomery looks directly at Castle, who is now not even trying to conceal that he is looking very worried indeed. “What in hell’s name is going on here, Castle?”

Castle smiles weakly. “Stomach flu?” Montgomery’s face darkens into a scowl, and he pushes the door mostly shut and returns to his desk.

“Don’t. Don’t give me that crap. You think I don’t know Beckett’s hiding something? Tell me straight. Is her dad still sober?” It’s the one question Castle can answer truthfully, at least as of ten o’clock this morning.

“Yes.” Montgomery relaxes infinitesimally.

“Good.” He looks beadily at Castle. “I know there’s a lot more to this. I’m not going to ask you because I don’t think you’ll tell me and anyway it’s not your place to. When Beckett comes back, send her in. You stay out.”

Castle leaves, dismissed, and returns to his chair, to fiddle fretfully with paperclips and pens and his phone. No-one says anything. Eventually Beckett reappears, face and lips still bloodless, eyes dull.

“Montgomery wants to see you,” Castle says, before she can sit down.

“I suppose you told him everything?”

“He didn’t ask. I didn’t tell. Maybe I should have. Maybe he’ll see there’s a problem anyway.
Throwing up in the restroom isn’t exactly normal.”

She says nothing. Then she walks away, a heaviness in her spine and step. Castle returns to his fretful fiddling as she passes through Montgomery’s door. All it needs to complete the scene is Abandon hope, all ye who enter here above it.

“Shut the door, Beckett.” She does. Montgomery doesn’t speak, making it very obvious he’s examining her. “You don’t look any better. Do you need another shot of whiskey?”

“No. No, sir.” Her face twists at the thought. She doesn’t want any alcohol at all.

“Now. Sit down. I told you Tuesday you should be easing off. Either you’re sick, or something else is wrong. Either way, I’m not having someone out on the job who’s not at full performance. I’m benching you for two days because I don’t want the rest of us catching your stomach bug, if that’s what it is. After that, you need to decide how you’re going to pull yourself together, because you’re not going out on a case till I’m sure you’re fit for it, and right now I don’t think you’re fit for duty.”

Beckett stares at him, aghast. “But sir…”

“No. You’re not right and I’m not taking the chance that you or anyone else gets hurt because of it.” He gives her a very straight look.

“But sir, my work is fine. No-one’s complained. You haven’t criticised anything I’ve done. I’ve done nothing wrong and you’re benching me.”

“I’m benching you because you’ve thrown up twice this morning and you’re not recognising that you’re not fit for duty. If you can’t recognise that, you can’t do the job. Your judgement is impaired, Detective. I know you’ve got problems at home, too.”

“I…” she can’t say don’t under Montgomery’s minatory stare.

“The minute I mentioned your father you ran for the restroom for the second time this morning. Don’t tell me there isn’t something wrong there. You need to get yourself sorted out, Detective Beckett, and if that means benching then that’s what will happen. I want you out of here in fifteen minutes, and on Wednesday morning you will report to me to discuss what is wrong and what you are going to do about it, after which I’ll decide what will happen next.” He peers at her, and drops the hardass Captain for a moment. “Beckett, we’ve managed to work around your dad’s…issues…for a while now. No shame in asking for some help now if that’s what you need. But you need to work out what you need. Take the time.” He leaves it there. She says nothing. For a moment, Montgomery thinks she’ll break and tell him something. And then she stands.

“Dismissed.”

She looks as if he’d fired her. “Yes, sir,” she says, and leaves.
It's all over now

Beckett walks past Esposito, Ryan, and finally Castle as if none of them were there. She doesn’t stop at her desk, but enters the break room, downs a glass of ice-cold water, and stands utterly still. She’s been benched. Montgomery’s benched her. She can’t comprehend it. She’s done everything right, at work. Always. She’s not let a single ball drop. She’s given it her all. And now, suddenly – it’s not enough.

Nothing’s been enough. She is not enough. Not for her father, not for the job she loves. Not for her friends, and not for anything else. Ever since her father got drunk, nothing’s ever been enough. He’d destroyed her life then, and now all the choices she’s made since had only rebuilt it on shifting sand. Just like the house built on sand in the parable: the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell.

She puts the empty glass in the sink, walks out, shuts down, and leaves without a word, with only one single, agonised, desperately pleading glance at Castle.

Castle watches Beckett, who’s moving on autopilot, completely switched off. “What happened?” he says, but doesn’t get an answer. He doesn’t think she hears him, or sees him, lost in her own world. He follows her down in the elevator, towards her car, into the passenger seat. “What happened?” he asks again, more sharply, but puts a hand over hers. Her fingers are chilled under his warmth.

“I’m to go home till I’m not throwing up.” There’s almost as much emotion in her words as there is on the face of a porcelain doll. She’s almost as pale, too.

“I’ll come with you.” She shrugs, a minimal movement, and neither objects nor approves, but there is still that same agony in her eyes. There is no more talking as she drives precisely through the Manhattan streets. He doesn’t try to start a discussion then, nor when he goes up with her to her apartment, nor when he enters. She slumps on her couch, cold hands lying still, inactive in her lap. All her fire has gone out.

“What did Montgomery say to you, Beckett?”

She turns to him where he’s standing, turns so slowly, an ungreased spindle, spinning without purpose.

“I’m benched.” She might as well have been saying that the sky is grey, so little does her voice change.

“How long for?” She doesn’t answer that, looking through him with those empty, lifeless eyes.

“He sent me home. I’ve done everything I could do for the job, I’m the best in the precinct, and he’s still benched me.” Her breath catches. “Nothing I’ve done was enough. Nothing I could do has ever been enough,” she whispers, but Castle hears her anyway, and his heart breaks for her.

Breaking heart or not, this is his last chance: now, when she’s probably hit bottom. It’s going to be hard. She’s probably going to hate him. But maybe, just maybe, she’s in a place where one last push will tip her into realising that she has to do something.

Only Beckett can save herself. He can’t. He can only walk away, and hope she saves herself. He takes a breath – and before he begins, Beckett says, “It’s all fallen apart.”
“Everything I’ve done for my dad, and I still couldn’t be there yesterday when it mattered. What’s wrong with me, that I can’t listen to his story?” She looks up, straight at Castle, pain scarred across her face and agony blazoned in her eyes. “Why can’t I even do that?”

Castle sits down hard, next to her. He’d psyched himself up to tell her hard truth in the faint, last hope that doing so would bring her to realise that she needed something more than her empty life, but there’s finally a chink in the armour and she’s broken, about one minute before he was going to do his damnedest to break her. He is unimaginably relieved. Breaking Beckett would have broken something deep in his soul.

“Because you haven’t ever talked to him properly about it, have you?” He draws a shot at a venture, though he’s noticed that open and honest conversations about how they feel have not exactly figured in the Beckett family dynamic, or indeed in any form of the Beckett personal dynamic. She winces. He drops an arm around her. “In fact,” he says slowly, hoping that his timing is better than he usually manages, “you haven’t ever talked to anyone properly about it, have you? You thought you had, but…maybe you didn’t.”

“I went to counselling. Therapy. Al-Anon. I did everything you’re supposed to do. I went through all of it. Forgave him. Listened to him as he went through his twelve steps. He made his amends and I forgave him.”

“Did you?” Castle asks calmly.

“Of course I did! It wasn’t him. It was the booze. It’s a disease.” Her voice rises, a little frantically. “It wasn’t his fault.”

“So why’d you never get angry with him now? After all, he wasted your time by dragging you over when he knew nothing about Schickoff & Schultz. Anybody else trying that on you would have been turned into ground beef. Or when he suckered me into inviting you both to the loft. Why didn’t you tell him the truth, Beckett? Why didn’t you tell him that you weren’t up to going because it upsets you?”

“It’s not his fault,” she says miserably. “It’s not his fault.”

“What’s not his fault?”

She doesn’t answer, leaning forward on to her knees with her face hidden. Castle lifts her face with his hand under her chin. “Talk to me, Beckett. Why’s it not his fault?”

“It never worked. He just drank more till he couldn’t hear me.”

Uh-oh. If she upset him… Jim had said she never loses her temper. I thought she’d grown out of it. She’d merely rammed it down because he drank more whenever she did.

“If I upset him...” She trails off. “I did forgive him.” But she sounds like she’s trying to convince herself.

“Beckett, at least stop lying to yourself. I mean, I’d quite like it if you stopped lying about this to me too, but listen to yourself.” She’s not hearing him.

“I can’t do this. I can’t lose it like this. I have to be there for them but I’m so tired of always being there.”
This time, she’s sober when she says it, and she shivers under his arm around her shoulders. He slides closer, hoping to warm her.

“Why does it have to be you? Why can’t you lose it?”

Suddenly she turns away from him.

“I let him drown. I walked away and for three years more he drowned. Every knock, every phone call, he could have been dead. And I did nothing to stop him. I can’t bear it happening again. I couldn’t watch him kill himself and I couldn’t stop him.” She stops.

“But now I can.”

In that, he hears all the full-force determination of Detective Kate Beckett, who can’t ever be Kat with anyone else. The reasons for Kat are beginning to become clear – and the reasons for Kat never being there in anyone else’s company are equally emerging, because she’s been shielding his past from the whole wide world. If you are always hiding history, and always waiting for the call… whether for support or to tell you about failure… you can never be off-duty. Not, at least, if you’re still compensating for walking away. Not if you can’t forgive yourself, and consequently also believe you’ve never been forgiven. Not if you can’t believe that you can be loved, because of the decisions you’ve made… because your father loved alcohol more than he loved you right at the point where you needed him most.

Castle pulls Beckett back round, a little more forcefully than her physical non-resistance would warrant. “Not when you’re like this, you can’t.” He holds her gaze. “You need to stand down, stop, and work out why you’ve finally started to lose it. You need to talk to someone who knows what they’re doing.” Incipient argument rises in her face. “No, listen to me. You could talk to me – you can talk to me, but I don’t understand enough to help properly. You won’t talk to Lanie. If you don’t sort this out in your own head it’ll just keep happening.” He has a flash of inspiration. “If you don’t talk to someone, you’ll upset your dad more. He’s already sure there’s something wrong, so if you don’t get it sorted he’ll start trying to find out about it. That’s not what you want, is it?”

“He can’t do that.”

“So head it off. Go talk to someone. It’ll get Montgomery off your back, too.”

He picks her up and resettles her against him, tucked in his lap. Her face is buried in his neck. “I did all of it. And now I have to do it all again?” She’s not talking to him, though: she’s talking to herself. He strokes down her back, slow, gentle and completely non-sexual; affection inherent in the movement and touch.

“Stand down, for now. Take some time, stay here. Lean on me.” Be eased, be soothed. Be mine. “You just need time to think it through.”

He doesn’t suggest that he should help further: though he’ll hold her close and listen to her for as long as she wants or needs, he can’t solve this. Far too many risks in trying that: he knows nothing about what she went through except for his recent research, and under the Detective’s shield and gun she’s as fragile as spun sugar. His general confidence in his ability to make things right does not extend to a complicated psychological issue rooted as deeply as this. For once, he recognises his limitations. He can be supportive, and comforting, and there to make her stand down, he can provide the assertively physical sexuality that she both likes and needs, he can potentially (if she lets him) allow her to be the softer woman that sometimes she has to be to balance her day-to-day command, but he can’t cure this. Instead, he simply cuddles her.
“I don’t want to do it all again. I did it. It was bad enough then when it had a purpose. When I
needed to do it. I really worked through it, so I was ready…”

Castle startles, and then has to soothe Beckett back into her curled-in position. He has a horrible
premonition that Beckett doesn’t mean excavated all my feelings but did it as fast as possible to be
done with it.

“I got through it. My therapist was really pleased with how fast I sorted myself out.”

He knew it. He also wonders what sort of therapist would have let Beckett get away with that sort
of superficial analysis. Though… if she’d been at college, or just starting out, likely she couldn’t
afford a really good therapist. He wonders, though, if she couldn’t afford decent therapy, how
she’d managed this apartment? It doesn’t fit, because if she can live on Manhattan she can afford a
competent practitioner. If she’d bothered really to look for one. Much more likely that she took
the first available NYPD therapist, or one on the NYU list if it was that early, who missed her
completely overdriven personality. Beckett is very good at deception. Self-deception, which is of
course a particularly effective way to deceive everyone else. No doubt she really thought she’d
done it right. It’s her whole history: be the best, the fastest, the first to the finish.

It’s just a shame that she tried that for therapy too, where it really does not work. So he’s read,
anyway.

He hums, non-committally, and strokes some more. Gradually the biting tension in her spine
smooths out. She’s still buried in his chest, though. Words are occasionally emerging, and while
that happens he’s not going to do anything to change it. Not while there’s still a very decent chance
that she’s talking herself into going back to therapy. He really does not want to take the nuclear
option.

He’s still softly cuddling her a few minutes later, no further words having escaped but a suspicious
amount of slight sniff having eventuated, when, much to his annoyance, his phone starts to ring.
One look at the number leaves him not so much annoyed as terrified.

“Rick Castle,” he says, and disentangles Beckett to move her slightly away from the phone.

“Rick, how is Katie? She’s not at the precinct. I called but she isn’t picking up…”

Jim sounds very worried indeed – but sober.

“She’s with me.” Beckett looks up, working out to whom he’s speaking, and tenses up
immediately. “She’s fine.” She eases very slightly on finding that Castle will lie to her father
Yeah, she’ll call later. We’re a little” – he develops a smug, very male, pleased tone – “busy right
now.”

“What the hell, Castle?” Beckett’s indignant tone adds veracity to his inducement of Jim’s
misinterpretation.

“Really?” Jim says. “This sounds like something I do not want to know about my daughter, Rick.”

“Okay,” Castle says amiably. “Do you want to talk to her? She’s right here next to me.”

There’s an embarrassed silence from Jim’s end of the phone. “No,” he says eventually. “I’ll catch
her later. Bye.”

“Bye, Jim.” Castle swipes his phone off and smirks at Beckett, who, in the rush of aggravated
annoyance at his insinuations to her father, has more colour and life than at any time since yesterday morning.

“What the hell are you doing? That was my dad! And you made him think… you… you oversexed arrogant brain-dead idiot.”

“And it worked,” Castle says smugly. “He’s not worrying about you right now. He might be polishing his shotgun, but he’s stopped worrying.”

Beckett flaps wordlessly at him. He brings her back close in and tucks his arm around her irritated frame. “You look better, too. I like you when you’re cross. It’s very cute.”

She growls. Actually, positively growls. He hears it with a wash of relief. Growls mean that Beckett is starting to recover some normality.

“Now, we can sit here and you can stop fretting and stand down and be easy and not think, or we can sit here and you can think about what you want to do, or we can get some food, because everything’s better on a full stomach and it’s lunchtime.”

“I’m not hungry.”

Castle shrugs. “Okay.” It was worth a try, and a single missed meal won’t hurt him. Much. He draws a little pattern on her arm. “We can just stay here then.” He smiles sleepily. “Come here and be easy, Beckett. Just take some time to think it through.” He pulls her closer, and nuzzles her hair. “I know what you need. You just need some space. Time to stop. Time out.” He nuzzles some more, easing around her as he does. “We can have time out.” He has an idea. “Let’s play your game. Think about that, and not think about anything else.” He smirks. “I’ll beat you, though.”

“You think?” Beckett’s voice is sharp. Appealing to her competitive spirit has pulled her out of her slough of despond, he thinks.

She sets up in quick time. Anything so that she doesn’t have to face going through her memories all over again. The first time had been bad enough. And if she plays, Castle’s strong arm will remain around her and his confident presence will still be here to keep her safe, and maybe it’ll be enough for now: enough to calm her down and ameliorate her corrosive fear that she’s damaged her father by saying too much and hurt where she should be helping.

Castle calmed her father. In the most annoying possible fashion, but he made it believable. For her father, at least. Her dad believes that she’s fine. Of course, he now also believes that she and Castle are having an affair, but… that’s a problem for another day.

What she does about it all… that’s a problem for later, too. For now, don’t think about it, Kate. Play the game, and concentrate on that. Ignore the twisting that hasn’t left your gut since yesterday afternoon, and that you don’t want food because your stomach won’t keep it down. Just… play the game.

Which game, of course, is an open question. Sorry is not the only game in town. The game of regrets and apologies is also in play, though whose are to be made to whom is also an open question. Still. She needs to draw the cards, and let them take her where they may.

Beckett scrapes the first game, fuelled on most of a pot of coffee. Liquid, at least, seems to stay where it should. Castle wins the second.

“Third time’s the charm, Beckett. Winner takes all.”
“Last game, then.” The afternoon is slipping by, and it’s time to wrap this up. Time, too, to face up to reality. She needs to think. She’s had her little space of time out. She sets the board up once more, and when they begin finds that luck is not with her. It seems like an omen. Castle wins, again, without even needing to try hard.

“There,” he says happily. “I win.” Beckett is busily tidying the pieces and board away. He catches her hands in their restless motion. “Leave that a minute.”

She shakes her head. “No. I need to put it away.” There’s an odd tone in her voice, as if she means more than the game. He drops his grip from her, and waits as she places it carefully on the lowest bookshelf. She stays there, not returning to the couch but moving to the window, picking up her little stone bird from the side table and cradling it in her palm, stroking its head as if it were real.

Castle comes towards her, intent, focused and sure of himself, and draws her in, strong and smooth. “I won,” he says suavely, and takes her little bird from her, setting it down delicately on its table. “I won, and I’m claiming my prize.” He runs one hand into her hair and angles her head precisely. “Traditionally, my prize is a kiss.” He lowers his head to hers, slowly, giving her time to object. She doesn’t. When his lips touch hers she opens for him, and he kisses her deeply, firmly; holding her to him and perfectly certain of his aim. His Beckett is broken, but maybe from the pieces he’ll recover both Kat and Beckett.

“You don’t need to decide anything now,” he murmurs, “but you need to think about what you want.” He kisses her again, slowly and decisively. “I had the definite impression that you wanted me,” he whispers into her ear.

She’s instantly rigid, tense. “Is that the deal, then? Fix myself because that’s the only way you’re going to stay?”

“No.” She relaxes back against him at the instant, reflexive denial: so fast that it could never be taken for a lie. “I said I knew what I want and what I’m doing.” He smirks evilly against her cheek. “You.” There’s a disgusted mutter. He returns to serious. “I don’t say I wouldn’t prefer that you weren’t unhappy or upset or overstressed, though. But that’s up to you.” He kisses the top of her head. “I’m here, and you’re here, and that’s what matters right now. Everything else can wait till you’re ready. It’s all up to you, now.”
Threatened by shadows

“It’s not, though. There’s no choice. Montgomery won’t let me back without knowing what’s wrong and what I’m doing about it, my dad’s asking questions and if I don’t have some sort of plan he’ll get upset and then he might… I can’t bear it if he does. I can’t let that happen.”

Castle clasps her closer, and encourages her head to pillow itself on his wide shoulder. Then he smoothly walks them back to the couch and seats himself with Beckett still clasped in beside him. After a while in which nothing is said and less done, she speaks again.

“First I went through it for real. Then I went through it in therapy, and Al-Anon. Then I went through it when Dad got dry and was doing his twelve steps. He worked so hard to get dry.” She gulps in air. “I couldn’t tell him I didn’t want to hear it again. Not when he was so fragile. I couldn’t let him fall again when I could hold him up. They have to make amends, you know.” He knows that, now. “And he did. How could I throw it back in his face?” She’s drifting in unhappy memory. Castle continues simply to hold her, and for once refrains from any comment at all except an encouraging hum.

“I couldn’t stand to remember it all. He doesn’t remember what he said, or did. I wasn’t going to remind him.” Frustration and furious grief lace her words, tumbling from her in a cataract of old pain and a mess of unhealed, bleeding wounds. “What good would it do him to know that first he said don’t leave and then he told me he couldn’t stand to see me: he couldn’t bear it? How does that help him? He never meant it.” The next breath is close to a sob. “He never meant any of it. So how could I reopen it? I couldn’t let it happen again.”

Her father had said don’t leave? Uh-oh. Because she had. She walked away. Left. And then he got sober and she’s never left him, or anyone else who’s asked for her help, ever again. But, too, her father had said he couldn’t bear to see her. At nineteen, maybe twenty, that’s going to cut deep, and the total contradiction means she would never be sure of the right path to follow. And now, she’s making sure she never does anything that makes him not want to see her. Such as – not at all at random – lose her temper with him. Or indeed anywhere near him. Or tell him anything that isn’t bright and cheerful. Or reopen old wounds. Or bring up old memories.

Or think that anyone else could really care for her.

“I could just work. No need to think about anything else, unless Dad called.”

And now her hard focus and intensity, why she wouldn’t accept his touch in Asher Washington’s apartment, the reasons she goes running back into the (or any) precinct when she’s upset, are also frighteningly clear.

“I couldn’t bear to be reminded, so I made sure when I came home nothing did. Only my bird. So I could stop and not think and not worry. Unless Dad called.”

Oh. No mementoes. No personality. Nothing that might be solid enough to fix on – and nothing that would need her to be strong, or focused, or give anyone anything. Only soft vagueness and no demands. No more need to care for anything or anyone than… than a cat. Or a Kat.

Kat is suddenly totally clear. Semi-schizophrenic, and terrifying, but totally clear. He cossets her in, and still says nothing. Anything he says now will likely be wrong, in some way he won’t understand till it’s all too late and they’re ripping each other apart with lacerating words again. If he’d known this before Christmas, maybe… Well. Maybe don’t mean anything, and any regrets
are a waste of time now.

No wonder, too, why she’d thought she could push him away so easily. She thought she’d abandoned her father… but before that, her father had not just abandoned her but effectively told her he couldn’t bear her. So of course she thought that all she’d have to do was show him her true feelings for him to run as fast as he could in the other direction. After all, her own father had, without even knowing how she felt, and if he could, everyone else should. His arms tighten around her without conscious input, instinctively wanting to provide the strength that she hasn’t been able to lean on from her own family.

She’s drawn into herself, tight-wound and cramped, leaning away at any opportunity until he brings her back: knots in her shoulders and misery written on her face.

“Come here,” he says softly. “Come here, and forget for a little while. Sure it’s all up to you, but you’ve got all evening, and all tomorrow, and plenty of time to think about what you want.”

“What I want?” she says bitterly. “I wanted my dad not to be stuck down a bottle. I wanted not to be pulling him out the pit. I wanted to have Christmases that weren’t all either spoilt or wracked with memories of how they were spoilt. Mulled wine vomit. Meals drunk not eaten. Ruined presents. Being told I wasn’t her. Nothing I could do could ever make it better. At least on Christmas shift I could be making something better for someone, even if it wasn’t what I wanted.”

Castle manages not to wince.

Beckett wrenches herself away and stands up. “Two years in,” she spits out acidly, “I wanted it all to be over. Just so I’d never hear him again, begging drunkenly for me to save him, and in the next breath blaming me for being so like her that all he could do was blot it out.” Her fists are clenched. “So tell me, family man, when do you stop being part of a family? When’s it okay to decide you don’t have one any more? Because that’s what doing what I want would mean. He saved himself and wanted to be a family again. He needed me. So don’t tell me I can have what I want. I can’t. That was all lost ten years ago.”

She turns away from him. “You don’t get it. You’ve never had to. If you’re lucky, you never will have to. You make your choices and then you have to live with them.”

“Yeah,” Castle says heavily, though he doesn’t mean agreement by it. “But… things change, Beckett. Matters move on. Maybe there are more choices now than there used to be.”

Her shoulders hunch. “There are no choices. Keep him sober or watch him die. Those are the choices. I can’t have what I want because he took it all away from me. He can be happy and think he’s got a family because he doesn’t remember any of it.” Her voice spikes. “I can’t deal with anyone’s happy family because he ruined ours.” Castle is already on his feet and moving fast to her as she realises what she said. “I didn’t mean that,” she sobs. “It wasn’t his fault.” Castle cradles her against his shoulder and clasps her tightly: his body hard about her and his hands strong, enveloping her.

Truth hurts. Truth is currently being sobbed out into his chest. Because she had meant it, and she knows it, and this might be the first time she’s ever admitted it.

“It wasn’t your fault either.”

“But I’m the one who has to deal with it.”

“Beckett… it wasn’t your dad who couldn’t deal with Julia. It’s not your dad who can’t deal with
family. It’s you. You’re not dealing with it any more.” He stops her pulling away. “I can make you happy, but – you know, it’s very disappointing, because I specialise in making people happy – you don’t stay happy. So short of keeping you in bed all the time… which I really wouldn’t mind because we’d both be very happy – maybe it’s time to try and find a way round it?” He deliberately makes his voice a little frivolous, a little teasing; but under that the point is iron hard.

She stays still against him.

“You can’t go on like this. Eventually, you’ll crash.”

There’s a sobbed, indrawn breath, and another, more serious, attempt to pull away. This time, again, Castle doesn’t let her go. The indistinct noises against his chest might, with a little imagination, become something like Lanie said that.

“She said it, Montgomery said it, I’ve said it. Even your dad said it – didn’t he? If everyone’s telling you you’re crashing, isn’t it time to change course?”

He tows her back to sitting down, never letting go of her. The dam’s broken and the floods have come; and the fortress of her control is washed away. She’s diminished and broken, and for a moment he’s furious and disgusted that her father’s conduct and weakness has made her so: has ruined the life she should have had. But that won’t help now, and it’s not to Castle that her father has made, or may make, his amends. It’s not for Castle to judge Jim Beckett.

It’s not for Castle to judge anyone who’s been part of this mess. He’s never been there, and God willing he never will be. He can see clearly now how everything has always been part of the whole. Family is just a burden to be borne, always hiding the real issues – stay away from families. Other people only want you when you’re strong – never reveal weakness. Don’t reveal your feelings, don’t explain, and don’t ever talk about anything difficult, or confrontational, or that might cause disagreements. Don’t let anyone close. They’ll only let you down. Love is conditional and readily withdrawn – don’t fall in love, don’t even look for it. All of it’s a weakness, and everyone needs you to be strong.

And if someone will give you momentary ease – take a little love where you can, because it won’t be there as soon as they discover who you really are, and what you really think. So don’t tell them. Or, because despite everything your integrity is iron hard and ice cold – tell them who you think you are and watch them run. Or never let them close enough to need to know.

Don’t, in fact, let anyone know anything.

But now she’s going to have to, or lose everything, and that must be terrifying. One way or the other, she’s going to have to tear herself apart and stick herself back together. The only question is – will she take the hard choice to build herself up or will she take the easier route, give up and stay in her empty, joyless life? She’s always made the hard choice before…

Maybe she’s tired of the hard choice. Maybe she’s tired of the battle. Maybe she’s simply tired. But he can’t bear the thought that she might not fight for them, for everything they might be. He shivers, because she hasn’t fought for them much to date – rather the reverse. She’s done everything possible to push them apart, most of the time, and then it’s been resigned acceptance and flat statements that he’ll leave when he realises she’ll never be enough: bitter comments about her own inadequacy.

Oh. Why fight for a relationship that you want (he hopes she wants it) when that doesn’t get you it. Fighting for her father failed. Walking away – in the end, succeeded. It’s not even playing hard to get. It’s… another learned response. She’d walked away from Julia Berowitz, too, in the end.
She’s had to walk away from everything she wanted. So, however inadvertently, in the end going after her had been the only thing that would work. But it isn’t working, now.

But… she might still walk away from everything. She might still walk away from being a cop, she might still walk away from him, she might still walk away. She’s so tired. She’s so tired of everything, and she still won’t lean on him unless he brings her in and makes her do so, because she still doesn’t believe that she won’t have to prop him up just like everyone else around her.

And, of course, she’s flat out said that she isn’t enough. To him, to her father.

He holds her close, and waits. He’s said and done enough, and more will be counter-productive. He’ll simply keep her tight-clasped in his arms, and be that still point of stability around which she can spin: the axis of her world.

Time passes, and with each sad, silent minute Castle becomes ever more convinced that Beckett will simply give up. He’s fairly sure she no longer knows or cares that he is there: she isn’t leaning on him, she isn’t curling in, or away. She’s static, barely breathing, and, most frighteningly, her eyes are dry and empty. She should be crying. She should be upset by the choice before her.

But of course, crying didn’t help. So she doesn’t cry, doesn’t show upset. Doesn’t show anything.

She’s so very, very good at not showing anything.

Just before he’s about to consider giving up on waiting for her to take the final step; just before he’s about to consider leaving: anything to break this fatal spell where she doesn’t seem able to reach out to anyone and he can’t reach her; just before he has to take the nuclear step and walk away, as she had done: last resort to show her that she’s hit bottom – she comes out of her stasis.

“I don’t want to,” she says emptily. “I don’t want to do this all over again. I shouldn’t have to.” She stops. Castle’s gut twists.

“But I can only save myself,” she says, and bursts into tears.

Castle is no stranger to comforting crying women, or, more often, daughters. He is almost a complete stranger to comforting a hopelessly sobbing Beckett. The only other time she’d been crying, she’d tried to hide it, and shut it down. This time she’s doing neither. He applies the same basic principles as he would do for any weeping female, (well, not really. There are some significant differences in approach and attitude) firmly lifts Beckett into his lap and embrace, pillows her head into the space between muscled shoulder and neck, and pets her hair undemandingly. Eventually words make themselves faintly distinguishable through the tears.

“I have to do it,” she sobs desolately. “All over again. It’s not fair.” In her voice and words is the note of the devastated teen, still grieving for her mother’s loss as the next disaster overwhelmed her, not the voice of the confident adult. “Everybody needs me to do something.” Castle cossets her, and says nothing. “I need to do something.” She rasps in a breath. “I don’t want to do anything. Why’s it me who needs to do anything?” She stops, and breathes again. It sounds defeated. “But I have to.”

She slumps, not so much in body, which is already bent as if broken, but in spirit; then tries to pull away again. “Let go,” she says dully. “I need to think.”

“Nope,” Castle says, cheerfully contradictory and completely resistant. “Stay right here.”

“I don’t w…”
“Don’t tell fibs, Beckett. You do want to. You just want to be eased. You don’t have to do anything, here with me.”

“I need to think.”

“No, you don’t. You need to stop. Don’t think, for a while.” He colours, unseen. “Trust your feelings, not your brains.” Trust that I can give you this, whenever you need it. Trust in me. Stay with me. “You know you’re safe for now.” Safe in your Castle. He continues stroking her hair, a little less softly, a little more assertion that she should simply stand down and follow his lead. There will be nothing more than affection, for now.

He has a sudden thought. “All you’ve ever needed to do with me is say yes or no. All you need to do about this is say yes or no to seeing someone who can help. That’s all. Just yes or no: one decision, and then you don’t need to decide anything more. You can just stay right here with me and be eased, whatever you decide.”

One decision? Only one, simple, decision? Yes or no. No need to decide anything more. Just stay right here in his arms and forget: let him be stronger than she, let him support her. He’s not asking her to do anything, or be anything, she realises, he’s only asking her to decide whether to let someone else help. That doesn’t force her to be anything at all. It may, however, mean that she will have to talk. But not to someone who can be hurt, or upset, or filter it through their own assumptions. To someone who doesn’t care.

That, she slowly works out, means someone who won’t know and won’t care whether she’s weak or strong, who won’t pity her, who won’t use it against her or make it public or ever think about it again. Maybe…maybe it would all go away? She curls up into herself. She’s never made it go away. No matter how hard she tried, how much therapy she’d had, how hard she worked, how quiet and unmemorable her apartment, how much her father told her she’d saved him.

She’s never believed that. He saved himself. She had nothing to do with it. She could only save herself.

Except she didn’t.

If everyone around you thinks you’re crashing… maybe you already did, and just hid it. Maybe you crashed long ago, and never…noticed. Maybe you’re…broken. Never stuck yourself back together. Just held the fragments together because you put yourself under so much pressure they couldn’t fly apart.

And then Castle came along and let her stop. Let her stand down, lifted the pressure outside that stopped the pressures inside exploding her. So it all came crashing to a stop. She’s come crashing to a stop. No precinct to keep her together – none of the pressure that she chose to deal with the pressure that she didn’t choose.

She’s always been the best, the fastest, the strongest. And none of it has helped. The man who’s surrounding her now, though… a restful evening in a quaint shop, soft fingers against crippling headache, a silly game, strong arms and a firm body, and the ability that no-one else has ever had to let her be soft, stood down Kat. To cosset her and protect her and cherish her. She only needs to let him. He’s made it clear that he can; he’s made it clear that he will.

But here and now, just for once, it’s all up to her. Castle isn’t pushing. He isn’t trying to get what he wants, though it’s clear what he wants. It’s entirely in her hands. Live, or exist. Forward, or static.
Love, or guilt.

Yes, or no.

“Yes.”
Pay the price

She’s crying again, or maybe that should be still. She hasn’t stopped crying since she said, “Yes,” half an hour ago. The box of Kleenex is rapidly diminishing, and she’s no prettier weeping when sober than she had been weeping when drunk, only a week ago. Only a week, since Julia and David Berowitz had triggered disaster. But no. This was inevitable from the moment Beckett met the Berowitzes. The last straw, when her back was already breaking.

He keeps his arms around her, keeps her tight against his chest, keeps passing her Kleenex and stroking her hair, keeps dropping tiny kisses on her head, keeps silent. When she stops crying (should that be if? So many tears.) then he’ll think about anything else.

Finally, she snuffles damply to a halt. Her eyes are swollen and red, her nose is also red, and there are mascara trails down her cheeks. Castle has never seen her objectively less attractive, except when she was also drunk. Subjectively, he’s never seen her more attractive. At last: true emotion, true feelings.

She sniffs soggily, and blows her nose, and slumps back into him, still coiled into herself, muscles knotted and tense, face hidden, buried in his shoulder. He takes the option of least difficulty and begins to work at the stiff muscles and tension, pressing firmly to untangle them; not making the mistake of murmuring soothing nothings. She’s not a child, and she’s not looking for a parent. Anything but. It was his being a parent that began the trouble, and that’s still not resolved. She doesn’t even really want to think of him being a parent. But under his strong fingers she’s relaxing: soft against him and letting him make this stress better.

But she’s agreed to see someone. Possibly under some duress – from Montgomery, not from him (though he’s just as glad that the point was taken away from him by Montgomery, because he’d been psyching himself up to make the same point with an equally my-way-or-the-highway choice, and he is not at all sure that she’d have accepted it) – but it’s been her decision and he didn’t press her one way or the other. Of course, he’s nearly bitten through his tongue so that he didn’t, but it’s paid off, because she hasn’t run away, told him to leave, or shot him.

On the other hand, she hasn’t called her father yet, and she’s going to have to do that before the awkward silence when they next meet becomes even more awkward, and possibly then becomes full of loud noise and flying buckshot. (That’s – the buckshot, that is – entirely unnecessary. He has no intention of fighting this hard and then walking away. That’s not his trick. He doesn’t do that.) The day has worn on: it’s late afternoon and the light is gone. He sighs. She’s only just become peaceful, and it’s about to be broken again.

“Beckett?”

There’s a noise that might be urgh.

“Beckett, your dad might just be starting to worry. About your stamina, if nothing else.”

“Wha’?”

“Well, the last thing he knew is that you’d call him later because we were busy. Which we have been.”

“What?”

“Beckett, wake up!”
“Ugh,” she says, but intelligence returns to her face, slowly. “What did you say?”

“We told your dad you’d call later because we were busy.” That slowly percolates. Then it meets memory.

“No,” she says, crossly, “that’s what you told him.”

“By now he’ll really have polished his shotgun. And loaded it.”

Beckett doesn’t appreciate the humour. Nor does she want to call her dad, especially since the last call had…er, not exactly gone well. She doesn’t say anything one way or the other.

“He was really worried. He called – must have been pretty soon after he called you this morning, and then that was the second call when we were back here. He isn’t upset, he just wants to talk to you.” Castle pauses. “I think he wants to make sure you’re okay.”

She says nothing, again. Her father had certainly sounded annoyed with her first thing this morning. Then again, she’d got pretty annoyed right back at him. She supposes that she ought to call him. It would be the proper thing to do. The adult thing. The responsible thing.

She doesn’t want to be proper, adult, or responsible. She doesn’t want to make her dad feel better by lying to him about being fine. If she has to talk to him, she wants to spill out all her years-long hurt and bitterness and then simply dissolve into an ugly puddle of acid and venom. He got to say anything, under the cover of Jack Daniels. At first it was Jack Daniels… by the end it was anything which was 40% proof or more. Anything to give him oblivion. He doesn’t remember any of it.

She hasn’t forgotten a single word.

She hasn’t forgotten a single word that destroyed their family, but somehow he gets to be accepted into Castle’s happy family sociability and doesn’t feel a single pang that he’s no longer a father; he can help Julia Berowitz where she can’t; he caused all the problems and yet he is forgiven and she… well. She has never been able to say anything. Words, or tears, didn’t help.

*His* suffering has brought him redemption. Hers – only Gethsemane, re-sited to a dank alley, and then an endless Golgotha. Christmas has never meant love, or forgiveness, or redemption. Only harsh and bleeding memories.

But still she can’t do that. She can’t descend to that level. She just… can’t. Mustn’t. Because the only thing she has left to cling to from this whole horrible situation is that she has unfailingly supported him since the day he got dry and never, ever done anything to screw that up.

Until she nearly had, this morning. She absolutely cannot do that ever again. She can’t live with herself if she screws up her dad. She takes a few deep, slow breaths, trying to calm her pulse and be able to speak in her normal voice; trying to find her usual control and bright, cheerful tone. Castle’s fingers are still loosening the knots in her shoulders and back: warm and strong on her skin, but as fast as he untangles each hard nodule another appears.

“Oh, okay,” she says, but it’s not an acceptance, nor yet agreement. “I’d better do this.” Castle looks at her, listens to the adamantine tone, watches the stress rise in her shoulders again, sees pain flicker in her otherwise empty eyes. She stands up, searches out her phone, doesn’t return to sit next to him. She stares out the window, takes another shallow, hurting breath, then swipes on her phone and dials.

“Dad.”
“Yeah. Are you okay?” She sounds totally chipper. Her face, however, is pinched and her lips tight. “Good. Yeah, I’m fine.” Her voice has a grin in it. Her mouth does not. “Yes, he’s still here.” She squawks, and it’s the first genuine sound she’s made since she picked up the phone. “Dad! No! And if you bring your gun round I will arrest you for threatening behaviour. That’s totally unnecessary.” There’s a pause in which Castle expects there is a certain amount of paternal commentary. He would do so. Forcefully. “No, Dad. Absolutely not.” Now it’s Beckett being forceful. “No. Not at all.” Another pause, into which many words emanate – Castle assumes – from Jim. “No, Dad. I’m sorry. Don’t worry about it. I’m fine. We’re good.”

She’s lying. She’s not fine, she and her dad are not good, and nothing is likely to be fine until she stops lying to her father about how she feels. It’s her dad who controls himself, it’s he who is strong enough to resist every temptation, every day. It’s not up to Beckett, and all this self-censorship isn’t helping either of them. Her face is closed and white, and yet not one single note of stress beyond her normal level of tension – that would be the stress fractures in her voice every moment she talks to her father – is evident. It brings a whole new, appalling meaning to poker-faced. She has as much life in her as the fireplace implement.

“Yes, see you Sunday. Love you, Dad. Bye.”

She swipes off, puts the phone down very gently next to her stone bird, and disappears into her bedroom. Castle is left looking at the space where she had been a second ago, until his brain starts to operate and he realises that she’s probably run for cover. He pads after her.

She’s sitting on the side of her bed, staring hopelessly into thin air. “I have to do this,” she says. “I can’t go on like this.” Castle drops down next to her. “I can’t screw him up. I can’t.” His arm steals round her waist.

“You’re not doing it for him, Beckett. You’re doing it for you. If it’s good for your dad that’s just a bonus. It’s not about him any more. It’s your life.”

“Life’s not like that. I can’t just ignore what it does to him.”

“No, that’s not what I mean.” He hopes this will come out right. “You’ve given him ten years when one way or another you’ve put your life away so he can have his. But Beckett, right now he’s not just stronger than you think, he’s stronger than you. Time for you to let him be strong. I think… I think he might need to be strong for you, now? He wants to be your dad, not your burden. I think you should let him.”

There’s silence. There’s been a lot of silence, since eleven this morning.

Beckett is thinking. Thinking about her dad is marginally less painful than thinking about therapy. She’d thought, at Christmas, that there had been something of her father re-appearing, but then it had been buried in the pain of Julia Berowitz’s following in her footsteps, through the bitter weather of the winter of alcoholism. He’d made it through Miami on two calls to her – a year ago, it had been every evening. She’d not considered the reduction properly: he’d needed to lean on her much less. He’d pushed her at Castle and pushed at her about having a life. And, of course, he’d been able to cope with Julia, and with her own subsequent loss of temper at him. But still… habits are hard to break.

“And if you’re wrong?” she says, eventually.

“I’m not suggesting you cut him loose. Just that you… I don’t know, Beckett. I don’t know how you let him be your dad.”
Strangely, Castle’s sudden uncertainty is actually almost reassuring. He doesn’t have all the
answers either. It’s not a test, or a demand, or an ultimatum. It’s a thought. She doesn’t have to do
it, and she doesn’t have to decide now. She wriggles into a more comfortable alignment, and tucks
herself in.

“Okay,” she says uncertainly, and then more strongly, “okay. But… not now. I can’t do it right
now.”

“You don’t have to. Stay here” – he brings his arm a little tighter round her – “with me.” He thinks
for a second. “Well. This is your apartment. You live here. It’s me who’ll have to stay with you.
If you want me to.”

“It is I.”

“Uh?”

“You said, ‘it’s me’. It is I. Thought you were a writer? Shouldn’t you be better at grammar than
that?”

Castle looks at her, aghast. “You are criticising my grammar? You? When I have with my own
eyears heard you say ‘What do we got?’ That’s… that’s…”

“Reprehensible?”

“You are not going to win me over with ten-dollar words.” Beckett smirks at him, but under it her
eyes are still bleeding pain. “You could win me over in other ways…”

“And what might those be?” An eyebrow quirks in counterpoint. She’s trying so very hard to be
normal…

“You could stop pretending you’re okay. I know you aren’t, and you don’t need to pretend. I said
a minute ago you should think about letting your dad be your dad. How about letting me hold you
up for a while? You don’t have to be strong all the time.” His eyes go far away, and return hot.
“Though I really like it when you do the badass bit in interrogation. You don’t need to do it here,
though. Just be whoever you want to be when you’re at home.” He pauses. But some more blunt
honesty is required. “I want you to stop hiding how you feel. You do it all the time, and I get that
you didn’t want to spook your dad, but I don’t want you to do it with me. I’m not that fragile, and
if you’d only talked to me – even a little bit – earlier we wouldn’t have had nearly as many upsets.”

He tips her chin up and smiles softly down. “It’s a bit late, but how about a New Year’s
resolution? Two. One each. You tell me the truth about how you’re feeling instead of hiding it,
and I won’t push you to do anything you’re not ready to do, like come to the loft, or make
assumptions about why. Deal?”

She puts her hand over his knee, where his other hand slips over it, engulfing her in his broad span.

“Deal. Just… sometimes I need space. If you don’t push me then, I’ll tell you as soon as I can.”
She looks him in the eye. “I might not be able to.”

“As long as you try.” He wraps her in. “As long as we both try, we’ll be okay.” He kisses her
forehead, gently. “It’ll all be okay.” It sounds like a promise, and when he kisses her brow again,
a vow.

The smile turns sleepy when she bites her lip uncertainly; his arm tightens around her and she
draws in a sharp breath. She’s suddenly very aware that they are sitting on her bed. She is also
very aware that Castle is extremely likely to become assertive, so to speak, if she shows the slightest hint of interest or desire. It doesn’t exactly take much to make him so. Privacy and her not objecting. Nothing else appears to be needed. Only a single, simple decision. Yes, or no. But…

“You’re thinking too loud. Stop thinking so loudly. It’s not peaceable at all.” She nestles in, under a slight encouragement from his arm. “In fact, stop thinking unhappy thoughts. It’ll disturb you. Worse” – he grins – “it might disturb me. Who knows what might happen if you disturb me? I might turn into a monster.”

“I will remind you that I have a gun.”

“Killing monsters needs silver bullets.”

“Only if you’re a werewolf. Vampires need to be staked.”

“It’s disturbing how hot it is that you know that. Just as well I’m not a supernatural being.”

“I might still shoot you.”

“Let’s not have any shooting bullets,” Castle drawls lazily. Somehow Beckett has become completely wrapped in. “Let’s think of something else to do. Any suggestions?”

“No-o.” But she deliberately doesn’t sound convincing. “You’re the one with the crazy ideas.”

“I have a crazy idea,” Castle says, picking up his cue. She quirks an eyebrow at him. He pouts insincerely. “But you don’t like my crazy ideas.”

“Doesn’t stop you producing them in the precinct.”

“I don’t think I’ll be suggesting this one in the precinct,” he murmurs. “You’d shoot me.” and he dips his head and kisses her, at first softly, teasing gently at her lips until she’s turned into him and opened a little under his mouth and then he stoops to conquer without quarter: firm, sure and insistent that she should soften and then melt into him. He’ll hold her up, hold her in: strong and stable no matter what; he’ll be the eye of her particular storm, no matter how it rages around them. The kiss deepens and strengthens, fire licking down his skin and searing his veins, the instant reaction to her being there in his arms tightening his clasp and shifting her on to his lap to have her closer where he can pillage and plunder as he pleases and know that she wants it, needs it… maybe loves it.

Certainly, she trusts it. Him. She must do, to have cried all down him and not hidden it and told him some truth. He kisses her more searchingly, still deeper, a hand behind her head and knotted in her hair, holding her in place: his assertiveness turning her softer and lax, receptive. Not passive. Never passive, neither is she submissive, but receptive and responsive. No leading required: no burden of command. Only her, and him, and nothing else, here and now.

His hands grasp possessively, his mouth moves round, flickers over the tendon in her neck, the tiny nerve behind her ear, and she mews very softly and then, while he continues his teasing nibbling and her hands come to his shoulders to lock into the soft, thick cotton of his shirt, it becomes the unformed, contented noises that might finally mean that he’s found, or resurrected, soft, strokable Kat.

Soft, strokable Kat whose hands are currently under the yoke of his shirt and stroking over his chest, unbuttoning as they go. This is… this is the time to stop worrying and thinking and act.
“Is this what you want?” he rumbles, sliding one hand down over her waist, hip, thigh, pulling her ever closer.

“Yes,” she breathes. “You.”

She curves into him as he reaches down to push off her shoes and then returns to her collar and starts on the fastenings of her formal, work button-down. He goes back to kissing her as his fingers slide the buttons and placket apart, revealing a cream, minimally adorned bra which despite its lack of ornamentation is astonishingly sexy. That’s probably because it’s framing Beckett’s beautiful breasts, which are a sight at which Castle will happily spend a very long time staring without ever getting bored. He doesn’t think he’ll ever be accustomed to them. He traces a finger over the thin line of lace edging and then follows it with his mouth, leaning Beckett back against his arm for convenient access. She doesn’t entirely approve, since it’s meant that she has to stretch a little to continue touching him. That was a definite, if muted, growl of discontent. He’ll just deal with that. He much prefers her purring and pettable.

He toes his own shoes off, lays her down against her plump pillows with her shirt spread open, and joins her: his arm under her neck. This gives her the chance – of which she instantly takes full advantage – to undo the remaining buttons and push his shirt off his shoulders.

“Do you want this, or me?”

“Can’t I have both?”

“Only with me. Only with me, Beckett.”

“Both.”
Love to love you

He doesn’t hesitate. He dips down, occupies her mouth without a hint of hesitation, and pulls her tightly against him, naked chest to mostly bare skin. His hand slips down to unfasten her bra, runs around under it to loosen it from her ribs, plays a little under the fabric with the soft flesh and then removes it. She murmurs wordlessly in pleasure as his hand slips over the revealed curves, palming and then gently shaping and moulding; pushes into his searching hand and holds his head to hers as if she’s never going to let him go. She’s never held him so before, as if he’s the spar to which she’s clinging: even when she has been soft she’s never been – oh. Trusting. Trusting that she can hold on to him and take from his strength, just like she’s done since she threw him that utterly desperate, wordless plea in the precinct.

So he’ll give her it. All his strength and all his stability, there for her. He presses power and passion into the kiss, possession into the hands around her, showing her in every point of touch how much he has to give, how easy it is for him to support her, how easy it should be for her to rely on it, and on him.

He segues smoothly into firm masculinity and stops thinking about anything other than making Beckett-who-is-now-Kat feel very, very good, which will make him feel very, very good, and then when they are both feeling very, very good he’ll cuddle her in and cosset her comfortably and both of them will be much happier for the rest of the evening.

His palm returns to moulding her breast, fingertips gently teasing at her nipple till it hardens and peaks; repeats on the other side. His kiss is deep and sure, and she’s tucked close enough to be kept warmed from the heat of his body. His hand wanders downward, skimming over her not-quite-prominent ribs, settling briefly on her waist to turn her against him, then lay her back again as he reaches the edge of her pants and flitters to the button and zip. Shortly, her pants are gone, and his follow.

He turns her into him again, and one long leg curls around him to hold herself close. He presses into her, and she shifts a little against the pressure and opens a little more. One hand keeps her tight, stretched over the fine skin of her back so that her naked breasts are rubbing against his own bare chest; one slips down to stroke her slim rear and then through and into the heated, damp cleft between her legs, covered only by the thin pale cotton of her panties. She moans softly, and moves to the rhythm of his hand as he works her up.

He stops kissing her lips to turn on to his back and slide her over him, nipping teasingly behind her ear and no longer needing to hold her to him. Conveniently, this leaves both his hands free to pet and stroke, and so he does: one hand sweeps the length of her back to as far down the silk of her inner thigh as he can reach, the other continues to wander lazily over her ass and the damp fabric, sliding and pulling it; her small sexy noises captured by his mouth on hers, and then the panties are lost.

He doesn’t stop kissing her as he rolls them to put her beneath him, where he can transfer his tantalising little kisses from lips to neck to shoulders and collarbones; no marks on her translucent skin, that’s not what this is all about. He moves lower, smiling against her, and finally puts his mouth to her breasts again. This time she arches up into him, soft murmurs of encouragement becoming less soft and more breathless: he tugs a little and nips very carefully and sucks harder and she likes that, oh yes. She may not be marked: her skin pale and perfect, but he will have half-moon bruising on his back, a finger-length below his shoulders. Her words, such as they were, have degenerated into ohhh, occasionally cut with Castle!
He’s deliberately slow. He could have brought her off already, but the slick, fast, repetitive sex hadn’t ever been in any way fulfilling: he wants her to enjoy it and he wants to enjoy her without feeling ever so slightly second-best afterwards. It’s going to be different now, and slow, easy, and satisfying is so much better than anything else. Her stomach muscles tighten under the trail of his tongue; her hands are clamped around his head and she knows where he’s going with this, twisting under him as he smiles lazily up at her.

“Lie back and enjoy it,” he says happily. “I will, and I’ll make sure you will.” He prevents any commentary on that piece of deliberate smuggery by taking one slow, forceful lick across her. She definitely enjoyed that. His hands lie lightly – for the moment – on her legs; he wriggles into the most effective alignment, and begins his second most favourite pastime: teasing and taking her with his wicked, mobile, flexible mouth, with a twist of his tongue around her over-stimulated nerves which makes her cry out, with slow licks and circlings and sucking and a little penetration which causes her to writhe and then arch and then shatter completely.

Castle slithers up the bed and cuddles Beckett in firmly. She’s not going to need to roll away or wriggle off or shut herself away, this time. She’s going to be able to stay safely in his arms and then when she’s ready (he is so very ready) he’ll please and tease her some more. She wriggles a little to fit more comfortably against him, her head on his pectoral, a leg thrown over his, an arm draped over his ribs; the whole of his Beckett snuggled against him in the way he’d wanted right back at the beginning. He returns to slow, swooping strokes over her back, running over the sharp protrusions of her vertebrae and then the soft satin of her translucent skin. She’s just a little thinner than she should be, her skin a little more drawn, her face a little more tired.

Shortly, she starts to curve into his easy stroking. She shifts a smidgeon over him, and the hand that used to be around his ribs essays some stroking of its own: first of pecs and the flat nipple to be found there; then towards his hip, and then inward until her clever fingers close around him. She emits a satisfied, sexy little noise and he can feel her smiling ferally against his skin. And then he very definitely feels a sharp nip on his chest and a tongue soothing it and he might have been slipping into the comforting pattern of stroking and snuggling but he certainly isn’t any more. He is very much wide awake.

He becomes even more awake as her wicked hands slide up and down, gripping just tightly enough to hint at that tighter, hotter grip to come. She plays a little, teasing over and then under to stroke full, heavy weight, and his breathing deepens and turns harsher; his grip on her tighter, stronger. The soft tips of her fingers contrast with the scrape of her fingernails: the contrast driving him up, firing his blood.

He flips them over, for her to be spread out beneath him, desire in her face and seduction in her touch, and there’s no more comforting, simply hard hot motion. He pushes into her as she arches into him; a tight glove squeezing around him, and it’s perfect. She pulls his head down to her lips and kisses him, till he reverses the polarities and takes her mouth in time with his stroking into her body, and she opens completely and takes him home; digs her fingers into the firm muscle of his back as he thrusts and he groans and she moans and his fingertips find the bundle of nerves so that it changes to a cry and she clenches about him and it’s all gone in the white-heat rush of her and him and them together.

Afterwards, she’s cosily cuddled into him, wrapped up close and held firmly. Finally, the stiff tension that she’s suffered throughout the two previous months has released. He amuses himself by dropping little kisses on her hair and intermittently trailing his fingers over a mildly ticklish point on her waist, which makes her wriggle and squeak. Otherwise, she’s utterly boneless and still.
“Did you know you purr when you’re happy? Just like a cat,” he says, not entirely innocently.

“Purr?”

“Mmmm. Yes. You should let me stroke you till you purr a lot more often.” He demonstrates with a soft trace over her breasts and back again. She makes an inadvertent small noise that is quite close to a purr, so he continues until it’s quite definitely a contented purr. “See? You like it, so you’re happy, so you purr. Which I like, so I’m happy too.” He carries on. So does the purring. He manages to keep his mouth closed on the words You’re Kat again. My Kat. He just hopes he isn’t thinking them loudly enough to be heard anyway.

The stroking becomes a little more determined, and reaches a little further down, and the purring stops being purring and starts to become panting and then gasping and then writhing against his wicked touch and then becomes a long sigh of release.

She’s fallen asleep, still in his arms. When she wakes, he’ll still be there. So will her issues, but he’ll still be there to hold her up as she makes her decisions. He curls around her: large and solid, enveloping her slighter form; protecting her even as he falls into sleep himself.

Beckett wakes because she’s hot. Roasting, in fact. It takes her a moment to understand that the oven is actually Castle, and that extracting herself will not be simple. Simplicity is not aided by the realisation that if she weren’t being broiled alive she would be perfectly happy to stay exactly where she is, curled in and largely covered. Hmmm. There is a solution here. She shuffles the coverlet backwards a distance, and uncovers one of her arms and half a leg. That helps immensely. A small further wiggle allows her neck and collarbones to emerge. Perfect. She allows her eyelids to droop shut again.

When she wakes up again, it’s full morning. Castle is still there, but the cadence of his breathing doesn’t sound like sleep to her, and when she stretches and turns slightly his eyes are open: bright and appreciative.

“Hey,” he says softly, and kisses the end of her nose.

“Hey,” she mumbles, through another stretch and yawn. “Coffee.” She practically falls out of bed and stumbles out to the kitchen, automatically grabbing a robe on the way and donning it on autopilot. As normal, filling and switching on the kettle requires no neural input whatsoever. Castle pads after her, yesterday’s shirt on over boxers, looking ridiculously alert for only just awake and no coffee ingested. Beckett is sure there is a place in the world for morning people. It’s simply that their place is not forcing their shiny happy morning personality on her. Fortunately Castle is not talking. Yet. It’s rare for him not to talk, but clearly he has instantly recognised her inability to function before coffee. She manages to find a single firing neuron and therefore puts out two mugs not one. She regards this as success.

Coffee restores her brain, from the first mouthful. Unfortunately, it reminds her of why Castle is here, what happened yesterday, and what she now needs to do. She slumps under the weight of necessity, and drains her mug without a pause, only to put the kettle on immediately to make another one. Chain-caffeinating. It’ll be chain-chocolate to add to it as soon as she can muster the intelligence to shower and dress. The frivolous thought doesn’t lighten her mood for more than an instant.

It’s not the likely cost of therapy. She has savings, and a good health-care plan. It’s having to do it all over again. It’s having to accept that she can’t have done it right the first time.
It’s having to accept that the last five years have been a lie. That all her efforts with her father have been built on an untruth – unknown, but that doesn’t help her now. Now, she wonders why she bothered, if she couldn’t do it honestly. What’s her dad going to think, when he finds out that their whole fragile relationship was a lie? What’s he going to do? How’s he going to feel when he learns that all his so-painfully, painstakingly made amends were falling on stony ground?

What’s going to happen when her dad discovers she’s been, however inadvertently, lying to him all this time? He’s not going to be happy. There’s an understatement. He was annoyed with her behaviour with Julia, he was suspicious about her behaviour at Castle’s, and their brief call yesterday evening didn’t touch on any matter of any importance at all even if they’d both said sorry. Everything passed over, covered up. This, though…this can’t be covered up. Even if she could for a time, at some point the therapist – she remembers this from last time – will point out that she has to listen to her father’s explanations and amends and respond to them.

Last time, she’d thought she had responded honestly. Mostly. She’d been so relieved he was really sober that she’d been happy and forgiving and loving. She’d thought that that was enough. So anything that might point to a different answer was… ignored. Buried. She ought to be happy, and she had to make sure he never sank again, and so anything that might cast either in question was ignored. Locked away, hidden from her dad, and then she pretended it didn’t exist and shouldered her burdens and kept him safe.

But all of it was lies.

She’d taken the – the easy route. And taking the easy route, letting her father think it was all better, pretending to herself it was all about supporting him when it was also all about not having to do it properly, has led to her a place where she’s let herself down and let her father down.

He’s not going to be proud of her now. She never had saved him: he did that himself. But her support wasn’t even honest: it was just a way to pretend she’s the daughter he wanted to have, not the one he’d told I can’t stand it. Go away. I can’t bear it. To be the one to whom he’d said You’re so strong, don’t leave me.

She drinks her coffee and thinks her bitter, lacerating thoughts; lost in her own head. It’s not until a Kleenex arrives in her hand that she realises she’s crying. Again. The Kleenex is followed up by her now-empty coffee mug being removed and her whole self being collected in and cuddled close. There’s been a remarkable amount of cuddled close, recently. If only it meant that everything got better. Hugs make everything better. If only that were true. Nothing ever gets better.

“What’s wrong?”

Where does she start with that? A shorter conversation would cover what’s right. That wouldn’t take five minutes. Or five seconds. Nothing’s right. Well. One thing is right: the big frame around her and the broad hand swooping up and down her spine and the whole of him enveloping her and protecting her. She leans into him and lets him hold her up.

“What’s wrong?” he asks again, soft deep tones swirling around her, as supportive as his arms.

“Everything,” she mutters defeatedly. “Everything except you.” His grip tightens on her, then releases somewhat. “Can’t work, can’t face my dad, can’t face families.”

Castle notices that she doesn’t mention friends, presumably because the last she’d seen of Lanie was yesterday morning’s argument.
“And I need to find a shrink” – she might have said torturer – “and rake it all up again.” She sniffs, and then blows her nose. “And at some point I’m going to have to tell Dad that everything he’s thought about me is wrong.”

“Like what?” Beckett doesn’t answer. She’s still silently crying. Castle only needs a moment to work it out. “You think he’s going to be upset with you. You think he’ll think you’ve let him down. It doesn’t work like that. It really doesn’t.”

“You mean that you don’t work like that. You wouldn’t know what he might do, because you’d never do that to your family. He did. He…” she dissolves, and can’t say it again. He ruined ours echoes in Castle’s mind. “Why should he, anyway. I couldn’t get over myself, could I? Couldn’t forgive him.” Her body is tightening unpleasantly. “Probably he never really forgave me for walking away. This’ll just prove he was right. Didn’t matter how hard I pretended, I’m not enough for him.” He can see the next words rising in her throat and seizes her mouth before she can articulate I’m not enough for anyone. He won’t let her say that. It’s not true. She’s enough for her dad. She’s enough for her job and the victims and her team.

She’s enough for him.

He stops kissing her. “You’re mine. You’re enough for me. I told you I knew what I was doing and what – who – I want. Stop disbelieving me.” He smirks evilly. “It’s bad for me. Upsetting. You wouldn’t want to upset me.” The smirk falls away. “Your father doesn’t think that. He said so, when he called me yesterday.”

“That was then. He doesn’t know this.”

“Stop it.” Castle’s voice is hard, to cut through her idiocy. “Stop talking yourself down. That is not true and if you stopped to think you’d know it.” He shakes her, very gently. “Your dad loves you and he’s worried about you and you need to start believing he means it.” He tugs her back in.

“It’s… I did everything I thought would be right. And none of it was. He manages to be normal and accepted and forgiven and play happy families and fit into yours and it doesn’t worry him at all because he doesn’t remember any of it.” She’s nearly shouting. “And I – can’t,” she drops her voice and tries to turn away. Castle doesn’t know if can’t means can’t fit in or can’t play happy families or can’t forget – or can’t be forgiven. Still, all of them are just plain wrong.

“You’re going round the same loop you were yesterday. Stop. You decided what to do. Stop thinking about this. It won’t help till you get help, and doing this to yourself isn’t helping.” He forces her chin up till she’s looking at him. “Stop. Find someone who’s going to help you or do something to take your mind off it” – he leers cheerfully – “but stop. Anyway, you have to have a plan before tomorrow morning or you’ll be kept out the precinct for longer, and since Manhattan’s homicide victims want you to be back at work, Detective Beckett, that isn’t really a good option.” She winces. “Yes, they do. You catch killers and get justice for them better than anyone else. It’s that which really makes you happy – even happier than being with me, which is really quite unflattering if you think about it because I can make you really, really happy and if you just stop and be Kat once in a way and purr at me you’ll be even happier…” – oh, shit. His mouth has just run approximately a light-year ahead of his brain. He is about to die. He’s sure she knows fifteen different ways to kill him with her bare hands and without leaving a mark and anyway the boys will cover up for her.

“Kat?”
“You told me about Kat when you were halfway down the vodka bottle,” Castle says, which stops her in her tracks, since it’s so very likely to be true. She hasn’t managed to recover from that particular shock when he carries on.

It’s not a lie, Castle thinks. Of course, it’s not precisely the whole truth either. “You said that no-one wanted Kat. Well, I do. Along with Detective Badass Beckett. Everyone needs someone to catch them occasionally.” He closes his arms around her again, more forcefully. “I’ve caught you,” he says, provocatively and distractingly. “You should fall right into my clutches.” He dips her back over his arm and bends over her, wagging his eyebrows lasciviously and leering.

“If I wanted a pantomime villain I’d go to Disneyland,” Beckett says tartly, distracted just as he’d intended. He doesn’t want her exploring that statement right now. It’s too early – in the morning, and in their rekindled relationship.

“I’m no pantomime. I’m right here.” He kisses her hard. “So are you.” Dipping her has caused her robe to fall away and expose the full length of those excellent legs. He strokes a hand over one of them, and then straightens her up again. “I’m starving. Is there anything to eat or shall we go out for breakfast?” Beckett gapes at the switch in conversational direction. “Out, then.” He walks her back towards her bathroom. “Why do you never have any food? It’s not good for you. Or me, if I’m here.”

“Because I buy fresh food, cook and eat it immediately. Which is good for me.”

“You do? When?”

“When I’m home.”

Ah. So that would be the one evening in – oohhh, five? – that she actually gets home at a reasonable hour and isn’t running round Manhattan chasing killers or alcoholics or after her father, then. Castle is not quite stupid enough to say that.

“In that case,” he says provocatively, “you ought to cook me dinner.”

“What?”

“Well, okay you didn’t exactly have much fun, but I’ve made you dinner several times and you’ve never cooked for me. That’s not fair. It’s inequitable. I feel so used,” he says soulfully. “Ow! That was my stomach you just punched. Which is completely empty because you didn’t want lunch and then we missed dinner” – the leer reappears – “because we were busy, but now it’s definitely breakfast time. Or brunch.”

“It’s eight o’clock. That’s breakfast.”

“So you agree we should have breakfast then? Real food? Bacon, waffles, eggs, maple syrup, pancakes, fruit?”

“I don’t need the menu to be recited, thanks. I can read.”

“Good. Let’s go read menus.”

“I need to shower.”
“We can” –

“I can. Then you can.” Castle pouts. “Showers. Separately. Then food. Otherwise there will be no food.”

This may be true. More likely, the food would merely be delayed. It would be a very pleasurable delay, though. Unfortunately Beckett has detached herself, whipped through the bathroom door and locked it before he could protest. So unfair. On the other hand, she’s not arguing about Kat.

Breakfast is delicious, substantial, and eaten with gusto on both sides of the table. Beckett puts away almost as much as Castle does, which he finds to be a great relief. Beckett’s got enough issues in her personal library without adding not eating to the mix.

Finally they’re comfortably sipping a final cup of coffee, with a few last scraps of waffle which can’t possibly be fitted into either stomach lying plaintively on the plate.

“I need to get some clean clothes.”

“Okay.” There’s a lot of unspoken commentary behind that okay.

“I’ll come round a bit later. After lunch.”

“Okay.”

“You can make me dinner.”

“Okay – what? Make you dinner?”

“Yes.” He grins. “You said you could cook. Prove it.”

Suddenly, and very worryingly, she smiles sharply. “Okay. I’ll cook dinner. Don’t bring wine. Don’t arrive before six.”

Castle acquires the feeling that he’s about to be on the wrong end of some very Beckett-flavoured revenge. On the other hand, it’s closer to how she used to be than at any time since early December, so he’ll sacrifice his stomach lining to a good cause.

“Oh,” he agrees. “No wine, no appearing before six. Unless you ask me to.” She rolls her eyes at him. He retaliates by paying the bill and refusing to let her contribute, which causes an irritated hrrmph, compounds his sins by taking her hand on the way out and not letting go, and then completes his likely descent into the circles of hell as invented by Beckett by, as soon as they’re out the doorway, tugging her in and kissing her searchingly.

“See you later,” he says happily, and scuttles into a passing cab before she can do anything about him. Or, more likely, to him. He’s sure he heard a growl as the door shut.

Beckett diverts her footsteps to the subway and takes herself off to a specialist store, the owner of which is the daughter of an immigrant from Tblisi, with whom Beckett practices her Russian and sometimes exchanges recipes. She knows exactly what she needs. Good lean lamb, some more spices, a little fiery; mushrooms, green beans, eggplant and walnuts; a khachapuri bread. Actually, two khachapuris. One and a half for her, and half for Castle. He can have more of the rest of the food. Oh – and a bottle of heavy, slightly sweet Georgian red. He’ll never have had that. She doesn’t know quite what she’ll do if he doesn’t like it, because she’ll only want a single glass. Pour it away, she supposes.
Beckett turns firmly away from that thought and its accompanying baggage. She’ll get the rest of the ingredients at any grocery store, and given that it’s still only nine-thirty if she gets a move on the meat will be marinating before eleven. Mmmm, delicious.

And then she’ll find a shrink. Not delicious. Not at all. But she can’t bear this whole situation any longer and if she isn’t allowed to work – Montgomery has made perfectly clear without actually saying anything out loud that he will enforce her absence if she doesn’t have a plan – she’ll implode in a week. As if she hasn’t already. She turns firmly away from that thought too, and instead turns for a grocery store, and then for home.

Once the lamb is cubed and safely marinating, her gaze falls to her laptop and the unhappy and unwanted necessity to seek out a therapist. Again. No point putting it off any more – and anyway, there’s no time. Not if she’s to look her Captain in the eye and tell him she has a plan. Work is the one place she’s always been enough – till she was benched, anyway. So if she’s got a plan she won’t be benched and that’ll help. It will.

She tries very hard not to think that Castle will help just as much. She knows he can. She even knows that he’s said and shown that he will. But… she has to save herself. He can’t do it for her.

*Only you can save yourself.*

She opens the laptop, and begins.

Castle goes home via an extremely expensive and excellent chocolatier from which he purchases an oversize box of specifically non-alcoholic truffles to take to Beckett’s later on. He likes chocolate, and he’s pretty sure Beckett really likes chocolate, from the contents of her desk, and he’s not going to take wine when he’s been told clearly that he shouldn’t. He’s not inclined to screw this up again.

Once home, he considers another coffee, rejects it on the grounds of having had three already and jittering hasn’t been a good look since, well, forever; and pours himself a glass of water instead. He wants, very badly, to go back to Beckett’s apartment and simply be there for her while she searches out a shrink, but this time he thinks it might be sensible to give her the space she’s told him she wants.

He’s just settling down to his laptop to write, procrastinate or review his sales figures (smugly) when his phone sounds. He regards the device with mild irritation and then severe horror when he realises that it’s Jim Beckett. (after last time, he’d programmed him in, so at least he had some warning) This is not fair. He’s not a college boy, to be harassed by his girlfriend’s father. Especially since she’s barely his girlfriend.

“Castle,” he says briskly.

“Rick, it’s Jim Beckett. Is Katie okay?”

“Yes,” Castle says, without the slightest twinge of conscience that he’s probably outright lying. “Why are you calling me, though? Why not call her?” *We had this conversation three days ago. I told you then I wasn’t telling tales out of school.*

“You might tell me the truth about how she is.” *You mean you’ve worked out that she won’t tell you.*

“Just like you weren’t her story to tell, she’s not mine.”
“You’re writing a whole damn book based on my daughter and you’re telling me she’s *not* your story to tell?”

“My character isn’t your daughter. My character is *inspired* by your daughter and that’s a whole different ball game. Ask her yourself.” He fails to stop the next, irritated, sentence emerging. “If you two actually spoke to each other about anything that mattered” – he cuts that off before he can slit his own throat any further. These damn Becketts have destroyed all his self-preserving instincts and filters.

There is a short, painful silence.

“Er...” Jim sounds deeply uncertain, and Castle’s fellow-feeling for another father kicks in despite the sure and certain knowledge that he will only get himself into more trouble the more he listens.

“Yes?” he says less combatively.

“I’m not sure... I don’t know what to say to her any more. I don’t know what she’s thinking. She’s my daughter” – Castle recognises the pained emphasis on the noun – “and I don’t know what to do to help her. It was all so much easier when all I needed was Disney Band-aids and a kiss better to fix everything.”

“Yes,” Castle says feelingly. “It sure was.” He runs through his options at near light-speed, and finds only one: the same as yesterday. “Jim, don’t worry about it now. Don’t try and push it today. Take some time. Wait till she calls you. Let me take care of it for now.” He swallows nervously. “She’ll be safe with me.” That’s a lot closer to a declaration of intent than he’d like to make right now – not because he doesn’t want to declare his intent, nor because he isn’t sure of what it is (he *so* is), but because he has a somewhat old-fashioned idea that one’s – er – girlfriend ought to be at least vaguely on board with the plan before telling anyone else.

Jim is silent. Thankfully, it only sounds thoughtful, not threatening. “Okay,” he eventually says. “Okay, son.” And somehow that *son* seems to mean more than simply an older man’s casual term for a twenty-year younger one.

Castle returns to his laptop and forces himself to the discipline of planning his next few chapters, putting in odd pieces of narrative as they occur to him during the planning process. This occupies him perfectly contentedly for the rest of the morning and, after a break for a light lunch, the afternoon; until he showers, shaves and generally expends considerable time and effort on looking (and smelling) exceptionally good. He doesn’t neglect to pick up the chocolates on the way out.

When Castle raps on the door, box in hand, Beckett opens it looking perfectly made up, without a hint of what may come – or what she has been doing – on her face. Castle is instantly suspicious of both possibilities, because there are tiny traces around her careful eye make-up that indicate that this afternoon hasn’t been a bunch of roses, but the smirk playing in the corners of her mouth indicates that the dinner she has planned will be... interesting.

He doesn’t comment. Time enough to die later. If, of course, dinner itself isn’t liberally laced with some obscure poison to which Beckett is naturally immune, or to which she has made herself immune through repeated tiny doses, or painted his plate or cutlery with ipecac, or… He becomes aware that Beckett is regarding him with sardonic-edged mild confusion, since he is still standing in the doorway.

“Come in,” she says, and breaks into his morbid imaginings. He does. His first act is to present her with the chocolates, at which her eyes light up delightedly. His second, as soon as she’s put them
down safely, is to draw her in and kiss her thoroughly. His third is to notice, belatedly, that she’s not wearing formal pants and button-down or sweater, but a mid-calf, bias cut, dark green wool skirt which drapes and flows softly around her, with a heavy cream silky top. Both the skirt and the top resemble nothing he has ever seen Beckett wear. Not ever. They positively plead with him to pet them. He doesn’t resist their pleadings in the slightest.

In the background of his rather blown mind, it dimly occurs to him that this might well be Kat from the get-go, rather than Beckett who only becomes Kat much later in proceedings. He parks that thought for later in favour of petting probably-Kat, who is soft and cuddlesome and curved into him, where he can tuck her in and hold her and protect her and cherish her. And kiss her, of course. And kiss her, and kiss her, and pet her, and kiss her, and stroke her, and kiss her, and… and he does. Extensively. And she melts against him and then she purrs. Extensively.

Beckett had spent the morning looking up therapists and the afternoon reducing the extensive and unpleasant list to those who specialise in alcohol-related trauma and who are on the NYPD approved list. Every time it becomes too intense, she prepares another part of her well-planned dinner; even if that’s as simple as flipping the lamb chunks in their marinade. By four, however, that’s all there is left to do, though her list of potential shrinks has – er – shrunk – to two. She quailingly rings both and discovers that only one will offer appointments in the evening, after her shifts normally – or ought to - finish. She doesn’t feel that early morning appointments followed by having to go to work are the best idea she could have. Therapy will be quite bad enough without having to put on a brave face immediately afterward.

Decision made.

Yet more fearfully, she also books an initial appointment for the next day – no point in putting it off – and having done so puts the whole thing out of her mind. Well, she tries to. It keeps sneaking back in and poking at her eyes. That’s the only reason they’re watering. No other reason at all.

She goes to shower, and spends a little time afterwards ensuring that all her make-up is waterproof. Then she considers her wardrobe, considers Castle’s words of much earlier this morning, and dresses to please herself. She doesn’t need to be anyone in particular, and if she’s at home, cooking, and waiting for the one person who doesn’t seem to need her support, she’ll be her quiet homebody self: Kat who doesn’t hold anybody up and is peaceful and content and for a brief space unburdened. She hides her total lack of certainty about anything in setting the table and lighting an aromatically pleasing candle to scent the air, in just the way her mother had shown her when she was much smaller. She looks at the table with some satisfaction. She hasn’t set it out formally for… for eight years. Since she walked away.

She blinks hard, and rams that thought down. This is not then, and her father is not here. She sips a glass of water, and calms herself back down. Castle will be arriving shortly, and she is not going to be a weeping mess when he does. That wouldn’t improve dinner. His reactions to Georgian food, however, probably will. She goes and checks all her dishes again to ensure that they haven’t run away, turned pink or mixed themselves up with each other. They haven’t. She returns to sitting on the couch and tries to read. She is only too relieved when the door sounds.

Castle’s unique style of greeting her momentarily paused, Beckett manages to turn her head sufficiently that her mouth is available for speaking.

“Don’t you want dinner?” This was not good phrasing. His eyes sparkle.

“I do. But I want you too. I can’t decide which to do first. Eat dinner, or eat” –
“Shut up, Castle.” She is positive that she’s blushing luridly.

Castle tucks her in a little more tightly and strokes smoothly and seductively over her back and her rear. His intentions are unmistakable. However, she hasn’t gone to all the trouble of cooking for it to be ruined by indigestion from eating too late, and Castle’s obvious intentions would make dinner very late indeed. She wriggles a little to free herself. The relaxation of Castle’s grip is rather slower than good manners would dictate.

“Dinner,” she says decisively.

A number of side-dishes appear on the table. Following that, Beckett—who-is-almost-certainly-Kat produces a deep dish full of cubes of meat, and a smaller dish full of pieces of green and red peppers, and onion. She also produces four skewers. Castle waits to see what might happen next, though he thinks he knows the synopsis, at least.

Sure enough, the skewers become full of meat divided by peppers or onion. So far, so not surprising. What is surprising is how fast Beckett does it, and how precisely. The second surprise is the production of a griddle pan on which to achieve a fair imitation of an open fire grill. The third, and biggest, surprise, is Beckett handing him a bottle – he presumes it’s wine: at least it’s red and fluid, and as far as he knows Beckett doesn’t drink blood and isn’t a vampire – and a corkscrew and instructing him to open it. It’s labelled in – oh. That must be Cyrillic lettering, which he doesn’t understand at all.

“What does this say, Beckett?”

“Kindzmarauli,” she says without a single stutter.

“What is it?”

“Red wine, from Georgia. Goes with the food.” She smiles, with an edge. “You’ve never tasted anything like it before. Food or wine.”

The lamb sizzles on the griddle, and Beckett turns it expertly. Castle is astonished, but manages to preserve life and limb by hiding it.

“So that’s kebabs…” Beckett makes an absolutely disgusted noise at his description of the food.

“Kebabs?” she says indignantly. “This is not kebabs” –

“These are” –

“Uh?”

“These are. Not “this is”. Your kebabs are plural.” Castle smirks nastily. He’s been waiting for a chance to wreak his revenge for Beckett’s previous correction of his grammar, and now he’s got it. Beckett splutters crossly at him and glares.

“These are not kebabs.” Castle looks very smug. “This dish is” – he looks less smug – “called shashlik.”

“So what are the rest of the dishes?” He’s wandered over to the table and is surveying all the items on it, which look interesting. He stretches out a finger, and Beckett growls warningly.

“Paws off, Castle. Wait till the shashlik is ready.” She doesn’t mention the khachapuris warming gently in the oven. If she doesn’t mention them, he might not want to eat any of them.
“But I wanna know what everything is,” he whines. “I might not like it.”

“You’ve been at the Twelfth for nearly six months. You eat everything, including salmonella bacteria. Stop whining. I’ll tell you after dinner.”

Castle subsides. “Can I pour this, then?”

“Please. Half a glass for me.” She flips the shashlik again as Castle brings the wine over and sets her glass at a safe distance. He then spoils this careful consideration by standing very close to her and exuding *I-am-going-to-cuddle-you.* “A little space, please. I don’t want to get burnt. It’s almost ready.”

A couple of minutes later the shashlik sizzles its way on to a serving dish and the khachapuris ooze cheesily on to a plate, neatly quartered. Castle politely carries one unnamed dish and then even more politely seats Beckett before sitting himself. It’s pretty obvious that she’s gone to some effort tonight, and he appreciates it deeply. Later, he intends to appreciate Beckett, equally deeply but in a rather different manner.

He takes a little bit of everything – following Beckett’s example – but at the first mouthful of something vaguely purple of which he had been considerably suspicious his eyes go wide. “This is gorgeous! What is it?”

“Baklazhan’i s’ orekhami.”

“Uh?” She repeats it. “Okay, what is it made of – in English this time?”

“Eggplant, walnuts, spices, garlic, some other bits and pieces.”

He follows up by trying a green dish, which is equally delicious, and equally unknown to him; the mushrooms (at least it’s obvious what they are), which are somewhat spicy; and the cheese-infused bread, for which he instantly decides he would happily pay its weight in gold. Beckett is regarding him with a slightly disgruntled expression.

“What’s wrong?”

She mutters something which he can’t quite decode.

“Sorry?”

“You like my” – the name is a strangled noise which sounds like she’s breaking rocks in her larynx. He doesn’t ask her to repeat it, because that won’t help him. His throat doesn’t make that sound.


“‘S mine,” she mutters. Ah. Clearly Beckett had rather hoped she wouldn’t have to share. Too bad. It’s far too good to miss out on. He takes another blissful bite and dissolves into a cloud of cheese-flavoured marvelousness.

His sip of the wine before dinner had been – interesting. Used to top quality wine, from the US, Europe and occasionally the Antipodes, the slightly sweet, heavy red hadn’t delighted his palate at all. In fact, he’d disliked it. With the food, however, it works surprisingly well, and he’s developing an appreciation for it more with every mouthful of the shashlik and the spicy mushrooms.
“You really can cook,” he says. “This is great. Can I have the recipe?”


“I’ll persuade you. Somehow. You’re not immune to all my wiles.” He smiles lazily, and the air suddenly sizzles as the shashlik had.
Dinner proceeds extremely successfully, apart from a minor fight over the last piece of khachapuri, which is technically Castle’s but upon which Beckett essays a forceful raid and almost succeeds in capturing it. “You’ll pay for that, Beckett,” he threatens direfully. She smirks, and at that point he notices that she’s been sufficiently happy and relaxed to drink not only the half glass she started with but most of another glass on top. This, though, isn’t the desperate downing – or drowning – of vodka: it’s the normal, sociable sharing of a good meal and good wine.

After dinner Beckett produces not coffee, but milkless, aromatic tea in glass cups in metal holders, and, with the addition of the chocolates and occasional happy noises through their truffled unctuousness, condescends to explain what everything was.

“Okay, I told you about shashlik and the baklazhan’i. The bread is” – it’s still a noise of crashing rocks – “which is the best food I ever had. The green dish was zelenaya fasol’i – mostly green beans – and then the mushrooms – greeb’i. You recognised them. The rest was pickled vegetables.”

Castle snuggles her in at an opportune moment but contents himself with that while the tea is still being drunk. No point tipping tea over them both, and he doesn’t want either of them to be scalded. He has a much better idea, and it does not involve any of scalding, asking about her day or in any way ruining this amazing appearance of Kat-not-Kate-and-definitely-not-Beckett. It does, however, involve taking advantage, in the old-fashioned parlance, of her. With her complete consent, of course. He somehow doesn’t think that that will be an issue.

The tea is finally finished, the dishes have been put in the dishwasher, but there isn’t a scrap of food left to be eaten tomorrow. Castle looks at Beckett, replete, relaxed and resting in the crook of his arm, and smiles lazily down.

“That was delicious, thank you.” His smile acquires a wolfish edge. “So now that we’ve had dinner, I should thank you in the traditional way.”

She doesn’t have a chance to query the statement. Castle leans over and invades her mouth without so much as a by-your-leave: completely possessive and thoroughly sure of himself, nipping gently on her lower lip and then sucking lightly to soothe it, bringing her up on to his lap to have her close and in the perfect position to plunder. Once more, she’s relaxed into him and beautifully responsive and her shirt is infinitely strokable, so he does, and the curves under it are infinitely seductive, so since they’ve seduced him he seduces them right back, and the wool of her skirt is soft under his fingers and it’s really not his fault at all that it seems to have slid right up to expose her satin-skinned legs which are equally soft under his hands. His hand drifts down over her hip and then thigh as hers comes up around his shoulder and neck to turn herself into him and open to his kisses and press against him.

He slides a hand around her back, untucking the silk top and pressing fingers to flesh, and suddenly it all gets hot and messy in a hurry as she opens his own button-down and he flicks her top over her head and flips her to straddle him so that his hard arousal is pressed into her and she must know what she does to him, she must know how she affects him, just as he knows what he does for her. Sitting astride him, rocking fractionally as he smooths over her back, arching as his mouth moves down over her throat, her clavicles, and then on to her silk-and-lace covered breast; she’s hot and beautiful and aroused and all his: just as he’s all hers. He shifts the fabric over proud nipples and firm, neat mounds, and she sighs and leans back against his arm to give him better access to her.
He holds her there, supporting her easily against his strength, standing her down by winding her up and up and up: touching and tasting and teasing until all she sees and feels and knows is him – and then he stands and her legs lock around him, and he takes her to bed.

Her skirt is undone before he lays her down, slipped from her before she’s fully noticed that she’s lying in only her pretty underwear; but before she can protest the disparity his shirt and pants have hit the floor and he’s beside her: large and predatory, eyes gleaming, and intent in every inch of his posture. She smiles up, no uncertainty, no misery – and as fast as a striking rattlesnake reaches up and pulls him over her.

“Something you want, Beckett?” he smirks. Smirk is removed when an elegantly evil hand performs elegantly evil deeds somewhere below his waist. The smirk is replaced by hot focus and shortly by hot mouth on hers, venturing downward to return to her sensitive breasts; her hands are tangling in his hair and tugging. He doesn’t want tugged. He takes her hands away, linking their fingers by her head and effectively stopping her stopping him playing with them as he wishes. It doesn’t stop her making her views clear by pushing up into him and emitting encouraging noises, which, in turn, doesn’t stop him ignoring her views and passing on down the flat planes of her stomach to settle himself comfortably to a second feast. She writhes frantically against his demanding mouth before he’s even touching her skin: sliding the fabric to and fro against her before he accedes to her commands and strips them from her and she’s trying to move and he’s holding her in place and she’s crying out and he’s smiling ferally against her as he works her higher with tongue and fingers and then she explodes.

Castle collects up his bundle of blissed-out Beckett and amuses himself with some non-specific petting while she recovers. How nice that what he likes doing, she likes receiving. Win-win. She rubs against him like a cat and increases the similarity by purring contentedly. He’s not at all sure she knows she’s doing it.

She knows she’s doing that, though. Back to her evil, elegant hands doing evil, elegant deeds. She seems to know just exactly where to touch him to best effect. And then she slithers down his body, trailing kisses as she goes which leave little darts of heat piercing his skin, and adds her evil, beautiful, wicked mouth to the mix and his hands are in her hair and no matter how he tries he can’t stop himself thrusting into her hot mouth and then she does something with tongue that’s matched by her fingers and he’s lost.

When he’s recovered he finds that Beckett is peaceably curled against him, facing the other way but snuggled into his arm. He runs a delicate fingertip down her flank, and she shivers slightly and tucks in tighter. A minor alteration in position, so that he’s on his side, later and she’s been spooned in and totally enveloped.

“He certainly doesn’t.”

He shifts a little behind her, and glides a broad palm down her front to cup her so that she wriggles some more, and opens for him, and he slides slowly into the exposed wet heat: forward and back, over but not in. She tries to move, and his arms clamp her close, keeping her still for exquisite teasing, leading to (he hopes) infinite pleasure. She begins to purr long before he expects it, stretching and rubbing over his body in an effort to convince him to let her have her way, but he keeps her there until he’s finally ready to push into her instead, and then has freedom to move within her and simultaneously circle the nub of nerves and it’s so good, so incredibly good and she
clenches and he’s still holding her and moving in her and together they ignite.

“Don’t you have to go?” she breathes, around a century later.

“No need. Mother will be home. Staying right here.”

“Work tomorrow. You have to go sometime.”

“Yes, but not now.” Later. He just wants to hold her, now. Just for a little while. She needs to be held: she needs to know that cossetting and cherishing and care for her are as readily available as her coffee.

Her eyelids drop. Shortly, Castle’s eyelids follow Beckett’s down. He wakes briefly in the night, finds her still against him, and sleeps again, reassured. No more second-best. She’s shown him Kat.

When she wakes in the middle of the night, Beckett finds that she’s still close, though no longer wrapped in. She appears to be clinging to Castle’s hand. This is surprising. Nice, but surprising. She luxuriates in the sensation for a moment as she falls back to sleep.

Castle wakes again, before dawn, and this time realises he really does have to leave, since he should have done so hours ago. Reluctantly, he dresses and slips out, leaving a neat note explaining his reasons anchored very firmly to Beckett’s nightstand. There will be no miscommunications or abandonment issues here.

Beckett drags herself into wakefulness with an odd feeling that something – someone – is missing. Then her eyes snap open as the alarm goes off. She sits bolt upright and slams into work mode, falling out of bed and into the bathroom in one movement, the practiced efficiency that has her washed, made-up and dressed in half an hour. Breakfast – well, coffee – from the café, at her desk with said coffee in hand in good order in the shortest possible time. She grabs the note, flicks her eyes down it, acquires a lovely warm feeling in her chest, and whisks herself off to work in the most positive state she’s been in since November.

It lasts right up until she sees Montgomery’s not-happy, not-smiling face, at which point she remembers about the other matter.

“Reporting, sir.”

“My office,” he snaps. Ryan and Esposito acquire expressions of sympathy. Their Monday visit to Montgomery’s office is not far from their minds.

The door shuts behind the Captain with an ominous crack.

“Report, Beckett.”

“I have an appointment with a therapist tonight,” she says baldly, and takes considerable satisfaction from Montgomery’s flabbergasted face. It almost draws the sting from the need to say it. Almost.

But not quite.

“Dismissed,” Montgomery says weakly. He watches her leave, too surprised to work out – until she’s out of sight – that he’s completely failed to require her to report on her plan. On the other hand, it’s a start. He will be monitoring this development. In fact, although he can’t and won’t ask what she covers in therapy – and the chances of Beckett telling him are marginally slimmer than
the chances of him becoming President – this will go through the NYPD health plan and he will be able to monitor whether this is a one-off to appease him (and pretend to obey orders while actually not doing so at all) or a proper attempt to sort herself out. Still, he might well spend a moment or two working out what to do with Beckett – and what to ask her. He’s not going to let a Detective out-interrogate her Captain. No sirree.

However, he still mentally curses the Berowitzes and then, on an instant’s thought, blesses his decision to allow Castle in. That had been looking pretty shaky a couple of weeks ago, but based on Monday it’s looking pretty sound right now.

Beckett retreats in apparent good order, and not until she’s fully out of sight of the Captain’s office does she flee to the restrooms, to lean her head on the cool tiles once more, and try to calm her roiling stomach. All her history, to be dragged up and examined, interrogated and evidenced until its truth or falsity should prove her guilt. The warmth in her chest has been replaced by a cold, coiling ache.

She exits, makes herself a scalding coffee, and returns to her desk. It’s barely eight-thirty, and the day is already chilled. Worse, she can’t hope for a new case to distract herself. If a new case arrives, she’ll have to break off to attend her appointment, and that will raise the very questions that she is hoping to avoid by scheduling it for after shift. Not only that, but she can’t postpone or cancel. Montgomery may have been rocked back on his Captain’s heels, but she certainly won’t count on him dropping the subject. She can see another summons to his office arriving in the near future, when he realises that she hasn’t given him a plan.

She pulls a cold case and her hot coffee towards her, puts her head down, and starts.

It takes approximately four minutes – that is, as soon as they think she’s finished the coffee – for Ryan and Esposito to disturb her. They are, after all, her team, and they are definitely not happy at the way things have been happening for the last week and a half. Ever since Beckett went rushing off and brushing them all off last Monday, in fact. And then Montgomery benched her this Monday. Time for some – um, help. Thanks to Montgomery, neither of them had a chance to investigate before she was out the door. At least Castle had gone after her, though since they haven’t seen him since he may be dead. On the other hand, that would have made the news, so maybe not.

“Yo, Beckett.”

“Hey.” She manages a smile. It slithers from her face as she absorbs Esposito’s expression. He’s aiming for his big brother mode, and finding it.

“What’s goin’ on?”

“Huh?”

“What’s up? You got sent home Monday and you were weird with Lanie the week before. You were ill on Tuesday” – Beckett conceals any reaction to that – “and Montgomery made you take leave Thursday and Friday. So what’s goin’ on, Beckett?”

“Stomach upset,” she says blandly. “Thought I was over it, but I wasn’t. Montgomery didn’t like my overtime. Guess there isn’t room to pay it in the budget, so he made me take time in lieu.”

It’s all terribly plausible. Espo doesn’t buy it for a second. He also doesn’t buy the conversation-ending way that Beckett’s picked up her pen and flipped over a page in the case file.
“Okay,” he says, surprisingly mildly. “That’s the case, you’ll have some time to come sparring with me.” Mildness disappears. “Now. Ryan’ll come and make sure your bug don’t join us.”

“I’m working.”

“So’m I. I’m workin’ on getting you fit again. You’re not running, ‘cause it’s been too slippery, an’ yoga just don’t cut it. You haven’t been in the gym in weeks, have you? So c’mon. Now, or lunchtime?”

“Lunchtime.”

“Deal. An’ no goin’ an’ callin’ Lanie to get outta sparring.”

*That’s not going to happen, Espo. No way am I calling Lanie. No way.*

Espo struts off, radiating satisfaction. Ryan doesn’t.

“What’s really up, Beckett?” he asks quietly. “We all know that was so much bullshit. I don’t think it’s Castle that’s upsetting you – but if it is,” he says steelily, “then we’ll be having a little chat with him.”

“Not required.”

“ ‘Kay. ‘S not your dad, ‘cause you’d have done the usual.” Ryan watches Beckett’s eyes shut down. “Or… is it?”

“No,” she says tightly. “Everything’s fine.”

Ryan regards her unusually cynically. “Sure it is. Suddenly you’re ill just when you’re brushing off us and your best friend? Sure you’re fine. We’re not buying your bullshit, Beckett. If it isn’t Castle – an’ that I do believe – it’s something else.”

“Ryan, leave it.”

“Nah. Like it or not, we’re a team. Means you got to play as a team. So tell me what’s up.”

“Nothing to do with work. Nothing to do with my dad. Nothing to do with Castle.” She looks up, eyes cold and dead. “Nothing to do with you boys.”

Ryan glares back at her. “You don’t get to pull that crap with us. You don’t put us off that easily. We know there’s something up, an’ if you don’t tell us we’ll work it out ourselves.” He lowers his rising voice. “We’ll help. Whether you want us to or not. So you can spill the beans now or later but we’re not leaving you to fuck yourself up on your own. We don’t work like that.”

She can’t bear the disappointment in his tone, but she won’t show it and can’t talk about it. “Nothing’s wrong. I’m not going to mess up the team.” Dismissal edges her next words. “I’ll see you in the gym at lunchtime.”

Ryan doesn’t look satisfied with that, but at that point a coffee cup arrives in front of her, followed by Castle arriving beside her, and the conversation drops as Ryan moves away.

It’s possibly very fortunate that Beckett didn’t spot the fulminating scowl Castle directed at Ryan in order to shift him away. He could see the stress in her shoulders from the moment he stepped out the elevator, and though right now he can think of a dozen reasons for that, starting with Montgomery and finishing with murder, the expression Ryan’s wearing and Esposito’s interested
attention from his own desk make him think that the first reason is Ryan. (And it really isn’t a little revenge for Ryan calling him out a couple of weeks ago. Really not. Much.) So when he gets closer he fixes Ryan with a truly filthy look and a jerk of the head which is completely unmistakable.

Any man would recognise it as leave her alone. Any man would also recognise that the gesture carries a number of connotations which are not normally common between co-workers, however. Chief among them is a definite layer of you hurt my girl and I’ll hurt you. Ryan is a man who’s had a few girlfriends of his own about whom he’d cared and is a veteran of a number of emotional scenes, and he recognises that a few harsh words between Castle, Espo and himself are approaching.

“Hey,” Castle says softly. Beckett glances up and achieves a smile of moderate sincerity. It doesn’t wholly disguise the small stresses around her eyes.

“Hey, Castle. Thanks for the coffee.”

“Can’t have you suffering caffeine withdrawal. That would be dangerous.” He waits a beat. “You might shoot Espo.”

“More likely Ryan,” Beckett mutters darkly. “When I need a mother hen I’ll go to a farm.”

“Oh?”

“Never mind. It’s not important. Now, what’s brought you here when there’s no new body to investigate?”

Castle makes sure his back is to the boys and then casts her a look that curls her toes. “This and that. Soaking up the atmosphere. Making sure the story runs smoothly.” If it weren’t for the look, it would be trivial. “Checking my understanding. Confirming I’m on the right track. Every story needs a supporting framework.”

“Good to know,” Beckett says dryly. “My apartment windows need to be cleaned. You can lend me the scaffolding.”

“You wound me,” Castle declaims, pressing his hands to his heart dramatically. Beckett quirks an eyebrow.

“I think you’ll live.”

Castle humphs sulkily. “Just for that, Detective, I shall repair to the break room to suture my psychological wounds. I’m sure someone will be sympathetic.”

“Only if you fix the coffee for them.”

Castle retires to the break room, punctured.
The break room contains the coffee machine, clean mugs, and, approximately ten milliseconds after it contains Castle, also contains Ryan and Esposito. Both of them are now in Big Brother mode. It would be extremely effective, except that Castle retaliates by looming over them by some three or four inches and giving back a similarly intimidating attitude.

“What’s up with Beckett?”

“You tell me.”

“C’mon. Montgomery don’t bench any of us for nothin’. Somethin’s up.”

“She won’t tell me,” Ryan says morosely. “We’re her team, and we’ve made it all work round her…issue… for years. And now she won’t say squat.”

“She ain’t talking. I ain’t surprised. But she’s ours.” There is a note of definite warning in Esposito’s tone. Castle raises his eyebrows.

“Young? Didn’t think she belonged to anyone.”

“Our team. You gonna mess that up?”

“No.”

“So what gives?”

“Nothing that’ll mess up the team.” It’s flat, not inviting further comment. Ryan and Esposito exchange quick, flicked glances which say everything to each other, and drop the idea of interrogation 101.

“You got this, Castle?”

“I got this.”

The tone doesn’t permit disagreement. The boys are not inclined to disagree. They’ve got what they wanted: an answer; though they’re not entirely sure Castle knew that they were asking a question. The answer is the right answer. The man’s part of the team. More to the point, he’s got Beckett’s back. And finally, whatever he just said, it looks like he’s got Beckett as well. About time, too. They exchange brief looks of satisfaction, collect their coffees and leave.

Castle is also well satisfied with that conversation. The boys will back off Beckett, which is likely what she needs today, from her earlier tells, and they won’t get in his way, which he needs. This is all – Beckett is all – very fragile, and Ryan and Esposito blundering around trying to interrogate her will not help at all. God knows, he’s done enough blundering around and getting that wrong to recognise the problems that might bring. Later, though – later, but not very much later, Ryan and Espo will be vital. They’ve been her support for years, even if she never let them into her private life: they made it possible for her to work as she does and support her father. They know the history. As, he suddenly thinks, might the resident mountain of Central Park Precinct, O’Leary.

Mm. Yes. O’Leary. Castle’s done his research, but there’s not a lot of emotion in research. He’s talked to Jim, which had a lot of emotion, but that hasn’t shown him Beckett’s experiences, it’s shown him Jim’s. It’s only shown him Beckett, or Katie, as reflected by Jim, which is very partial
and very fractured. Beckett may have spilled out the truth about her feelings with her tears, but
she’s stayed a long, long way away from what actually happened. In mystery writing, he
remembers from a book he read years ago, when you know how, you know who. So if he finds
out how it went down, he’ll know more about Beckett. Maybe then he’ll be able to support her
better, or at least avoid obvious mistakes. O’Leary. Yes. Just as well he, Castle, is a
multimillionaire, though. O’Leary’s likely beer consumption would put a noticeable dent in the
output of Coors, Budweiser and Miller, without putting a dent in O’Leary’s sobriety.

He crafts an extra-careful coffee for Beckett, another for himself, and wanders back out to see
what’s going on. Nothing much is. He finds it difficult to believe that it’s another cold case day:
after all, this is Manhattan, where the city never sleeps and the murders never stop. The other
teams seem to be reasonably busy… Oh. Oh wow. Montgomery really is on top of his precinct,
isn’t he? This team’s been overloaded for a month, and Beckett, who in some strange way holds it
in together by force of personality, is broken…so Montgomery is very subtly giving them a break.
Clever. Very, very clever. Castle’s respect for Montgomery’s sneakiness takes an upward leap.
The downtime can’t and won’t last, but Montgomery’s seen an opportunity and he’s taken it.

“Can I have a case?” he says hopefully.

“You want a cold case?”

“Yes. I’m bored. It’ll amuse me. And I came up with a good solution on the last one.”

“Oh, have the next one up. But no way-out theories. We do not need aliens, invisible men, or
unknown poisons. We do need facts and evidence.”

“That’s no fun.”

“That’s cop work.”

The morning passes without incident and without a new murder to play with. Castle pesters
Beckett, who has become distressingly quiet and unsnarky, until she agrees to come out of the
precinct for lunch, squares it with Esposito, who reschedules the gym for the next day, and stuffs
her with burger and milkshake – he has Coke: he finds milkshakes to be neither close enough to
ice-cream to be satisfying nor liquid enough to be thirst quenching – until she looks a little less
strained.

“Do you want me to come over tonight?” he asks. Asks, because she’s stressed and she might want
space. That thought doesn’t stop him sneaking his fingers over hers, which are cold, and staying
there, to warm them up. He wishes they were in a booth, where he could hug her.

“Not tonight, Castle, thanks. I’ve got a health check straight after shift.” She manages to quirk an
eyebrow in a way that strongly implies that the appointment will include areas to which she
wouldn’t refer for fear of embarrassing Castle and/or the boys. “Takes a while.” Which is only a
little bit untrue. The therapy session is certainly going to take a while, and is going to be bad
enough without letting anyone know about it beforehand. She doesn’t need people stressing her
out even further by worrying about her. She’ll see how she feels afterwards, though appalling is
the first word that springs to mind. Peace, quiet and most likely Kleenex are the most likely
companions she’ll want around her.

Castle sneaks a surreptitious glance at Beckett, notes the strain lines around her eyes, and
concludes that whatever the appointment is, she’s not looking forward to it. It only takes him half a
second to wonder if this is not a medical doctor she’s seeing, but a therapist, despite the impression
she’s giving off. She hasn’t lied, but her truth could be very misleading. He wishes she’d told
him, but the middle of a busy diner, with no doubt, plenty of cops dashing in and out, isn’t exactly the time or place and, he works out an instant before he opens his mouth, she may not want anyone metaphorically peeking over her shoulder. Still, he would have supported her… oh. Only you can save yourself. Hm. Support doesn’t necessarily mean talking about it to him. It might just mean that he should be there afterwards. Without mentioning why he’s there, and without asking her anything. But not today. Not this soon. He’ll stalk her pattern, and then be there for her – support for her, for which she won’t need to ask.

“Okay. Ice-cream?”

Beckett looks at her watch and makes a disappointed face. “No time. We have to get back.” She draws in a breath as Castle’s fingers close over her hand and cover it: his thumb stroking slowly over it, trying to infuse warmth and comfort into her chilly flesh.

“Pity. I wanted ice-cream.” He smiles slowly. “Something sweet on my tongue.”

“Can’t help that.”

“You could, you know.” His voice has turned molten and seductive. “But maybe not right now.” He runs the tip of his tongue over his own lips, and grins as Beckett blushes. “Salt,” he says. She glares. “C’mon. Time to get back.” He stands, and pulls her with him, only just managing not to pull her into his arms. That wouldn’t exactly be discreet, or sensible. Holding her hand isn’t, either, but she’s not objecting to that and while she’s not objecting he’s not letting go. In fact, once they’re out of the door he tucks both their hands into his coat pocket and carries on the soft stroking of his thumb. She sighs quietly and walks just a little closer to him, so that their shoulders rub and occasionally their hips slide together. Inside his fleecy pocket, her fingers twine into his.

Of course, ten yards from the precinct door her hand removes itself and a narrow quarantine zone springs up between them, but he can cope with that.

The afternoon progresses slowly and with immense tedium. Castle can’t find a single theory on his file that won’t get him shot, has drunk enough coffee for his hands to start to shake, and has almost bitten through his tongue in order not to start either an entirely inappropriate conversation, which would be amusing for the few seconds it took Beckett to despatch him to the morgue – as a subject – or a much more serious conversation, which would be neither amusing nor allow him to escape the morgue.

He contemplates the empty evening ahead of him and recalls that he’d meant to have a drink or few with Detective O’Leary. Today seems good. He claims utter boredom, to an equally utter lack of anyone’s surprise, wanders off home, digs up the number of the Central Park Precinct, and asks for O’Leary. He’s actually there, somewhat to Castle’s surprise.

“Detective O’Leary.”

“O’Leary, it’s Castle.” He leaves off the Rick. This is a cop to whom he’s speaking, after all.

“Mr Castle? Castle?” There’s a silence which is full of enthusiasm. Then it dulls. “Why’re you calling, Castle? Have you lost Beckett again? She’s not here.”

“No, I know where she is. I called to see if you wanted to go for a few beers. You know I said I was writing about the NYPD and you said you had some stories…”

“You wanna talk to me? Sure. I got lots of stories.” Castle can hear the wide smile on the Mississippi delta of O’Leary’s mouth. “Guess you’ll want the earlier ones. When d’you wanna
meet? There’s a so-called Southwestern restaurant – Cilantro – on Columbus: does good beer and
good food. I don’t usually go there, prefer the Irish bars, but it’s nice to have a change. I finish
around six.”

“I’ll be there around six then, unless you call to say you’ve caught a body.”

“See you there, Castle. Are you bringing Beckett?”

“Not this time. I want the stories, not the bullets.”

There’s a bass rumble which sounds like a volcano considering its options and which is probably
shuddering the walls of the Central Park precinct. “You got me there. I don’t want her shooting me
either. She’s scary when she gets mad.” The subwoofer stops pumping out bass vibrations.

“Yeah,” Castle agrees fervently. “She sure can be.” She can be anything she likes, but she doesn’t
scare me. No. What she’s done to herself, and what she’s done to me, terrifies me.

He finishes the call, and settles down to write for a little while. A character much like O’Leary is nibbling at his
neurons.

Beckett uses complete concentration on her cold cases to try to forget about her early evening
appointment, and mostly succeeds. It doesn’t do much for her temper, though, and by the second
time she’s been a little sharper than she needs to be with Ryan the boys are leaving her a wide
berth, though Esposito produces a warning scowl which wards her off. She rams her nervousness
back down, prays devoutly that Montgomery doesn’t try another run at her today, and focuses
firmly on the cases. She’d really love a new body to drop now. Right now. Any time before shift
ends, in fact. A headache starts to gather behind her temples.

No body drops. Beckett tidies her desk as slowly as she can and still no body drops. As she files
her papers in her desk she notices Esposito and Ryan observing her with some confusion.

“Going home. See you tomorrow.” Neither of them say anything. She trudges to the elevator and
out.

“She don’t look too good.”

“You gonna call her on it? After today?”

“Nah. But if she don’t look better tomorrow I’ll set Castle on it.” Esposito smiles sharply. “Safer
for both of us, bro.” Ryan sniggers.

“Yeah.” He turns serious. “You trust him to make it right?”

“More chance than we got,” shrugs Espo.

Beckett stands outside a clean, unmarked building, headache – surely it’s the headache, or the chill
wind – pricking at her eyelids and watering her eyes. She doesn’t want to go in. But she has to.
Only you can save yourself. She has to do this.

She walks in.

Come six o’clock, Castle bounces into Cilantro on Columbus, orders himself a beer and one for
O’Leary, who is very evidently not there – there are no mobile mountains on view – and acquires a
table. He watches the early evening crowd come and go, taking mental notes of anything
particularly interesting or suitable for inspiring him as he does, and occasionally scribbling in a
small notebook. It doesn’t stop him noticing when O’Leary strides in. It is, after all, difficult to miss anything that size, such as – say – Amtrak engines, or a 747, rolling up beside you.

“Hey, O’Leary. Want a beer?”

“Sure.”

Castle companionably pushes the bottle across the table, indicates that the bartender should bring some more, and grins.

“So,” he says. “How’d you meet Beckett?”

O’Leary smiles, iceberg-sized teeth gleaming.

“You really wanna know?” he grins back.

“Yeah.” Castle scents a story.

“Well…” O’Leary almost blushes. “I was a uniform, only a little bit past bein’ a rookie… and I arrested her,” he rushes out. Castle chokes on his beer.


O’Leary’s blush manifests itself, but his laugh rumbles out. “You know Beckett’s pretty hot – wasted on me, but she sure is pretty, so there you go” – Castle shifts, a little uncomfortable – “so they picked her up for Vice ops any time there was a need, right from the beginning.”

Castle begins to smirk. He can see this story unfolding.

“Anyway, I was with the Sixth then, been there a year or so. Tended to get sent out when they thought there might be trouble. When you’re a uniform, you do what you’re told.” He shifts uncomfortably in his turn, causing a small gale to flap the napkins. “So we got told to pick up all the hookers down in the Meatpacking District to support some bigger operation.”

Castle’s eyes sparkle.

“No,” he breathes, on a ripple of laughter. “You didn’t.”

O’Leary droops a little. “Yeah. We did. Brass forgot to tell us that the tip came in from Vice and they had some eyes on the ground. I go in to haul in this Russian brunette who’d got a little feisty…”

“Feisty?”

“She’d taken down a couple of guys already. Lieutenant reckoned I was big enough that she couldn’t take me down.” Castle looks at him.

“I’d say your Lieutenant got that right,” he says dryly. “So what’d you do?” He can’t repress his ever-widening grin. O’Leary’s grinning, too.

“You have to get that she looked like any other hooker. Tight tube top, ton of make-up, skirt that barely covered her ass, six inch heels… I thought the two guys had… got distracted. I wasn’t out then, so I didn’t say anything ‘bout that.” He squirms a little. “You won’t get upset, Mr Castle? She’s your girlfriend.”

“Castle, O’Leary. And no, I won’t be upset.” He’s far too involved in the story, and in trying not to
die of laughter. “What did you do?”

“Um… she tried to kick me in the balls – only just missed” – Castle winces in considerable male sympathy – “how anyone can kick like that in a tight miniskirt I still dunno even though she showed me it later, sparring – an’ while I was still – er – protecting myself she landed a real haymaker in my chest. Only thing was, she hadn’t quite allowed for my size, so it din’t do much ‘cept hurt her hand.”

“She missed?”

“Nah. She didn’t know how much I worked out. She’d have needed to be Mike Tyson to hurt me.”

“And?” Castle asks, completely fascinated.

“She had another go” – that doesn’t surprise Castle: Beckett never seems to give up – “so I caught her arm, an’ then” – he blushes – “I picked her up, put her over my shoulder” – he stops dead, and blush turns to searing red – “Are you sure you won’t be upset?”

“I won’t be,” Castle reassures, chortling outright at the thought of Beckett over anyone’s shoulder – and then having some thoroughly lustful thoughts at the thought of Beckett over his. O’Leary looks a little uncertain: the tectonics of his face pulling his smile sideways.

“Anyways, she kept tryin’ to punch me in the kidneys, an’ though it wasn’t getting her anywhere it got a bit annoyin’ after the sixth time, an’ I needed both hands to stop her kicking me, an’ all the time she was cussing me in English and Russian… anyways, I got a bit fed up of it all.”

Castle suddenly realises exactly where this is going and utterly fails to control his face, laughter or imagination.


“Yeah,” he says, embarrassed. “I swatted her ass an’ told her to quit it or I’d do it again.”

“And you’re alive? How are you still alive?”

“I put the cuffs on her, got her into my cruiser, took a few more bruises doin’ it – Beckett fights dirty, an’ she just wouldn’t stop – but soon as I got into the car she dropped the accent an’ came clean. Man, I was so embarrassed.”

“Not as embarrassed as the two she took down, I bet.”

“Nah. They got ragged round the whole of the Sixth for months. Serve ‘em right.”

“What’d she say to you?”

“Said sorry for beating on me, said she didn’t know what to do, so she thought she had to keep cover till she was outta sight of everyone. Told me it was a Vice op, but she’d only been around a coupla months. Lot more of a rookie than me. She’d thought she really had to make it convincing, and boy, did she try – I had bruises an’ scratches for a week – and she hoped she hadn’t hurt me. So I stopped soon as we were round a few corners, an’ took the cuffs off, an’ she slipped into the passenger side, an’, well, I said I was sorry for swatting her, an’ we got chatting. She got a way about her, makes you wanna tell her the truth.”

Castle signals for another round. “Want some food, O’Leary? Soak up the beer? On me. Anyone who lives after doing that deserves a medal, but all I can do is buy you dinner and beer.”
“Sure.” A few minutes are spent in pleasant contemplation of the menu and then ordering a container-load of nachos and quesadillas, plus enough tacos to feed the Marines; with several more beers. Saves time, the men agree.

“She pegged me for gay soon as we got talking, before we got back to the Sixth.” Castle gapes.

“How? I thought I was pretty switched on, what with all the book conventions, but I didn’t notice a thing till you and Beckett let on.”

O’Leary rumbles happily, which two octaves higher might have been a laugh.

“You were too busy giving me the stink-eye for flirting with your girlfriend.” It’s Castle’s turn to colour up. “She said she knew I was gay from moment one.”

“Yeah, but how? It’s not the first thing you think of.”

“Didn’t try to cop a feel,” O’Leary mutters. “Everyone else did.”

“Oh,” Castle says blackly. “Did they?”

“Cool it. They were the two she put on the floor. I heard tell,” he says conspiratorially, “that she went looking for them, when she was outta Vice and into Homicide, and suggested some sparring. I did hear as how she said she needed some practice.” He smirks as nastily as Esposito might, across a face as wide as Alaska. “Set it up on the phone. Invited me along to see fair play. Or somethin’ like that. That was a fun evening. They looked a little blue when she showed up with a badge. They looked a little black and blue when playtime was over.”

“You wouldn’t have had a little to do with that, would you?” Castle remembers that O’Leary’s first comment to Beckett had been when’re you coming to spar with me again?

“Mebbe,” O’Leary mutters. “Might have been her sparring partner for a while.” Castle considers relative sizes, and decides not to ask about it. He also decides that he’s very glad O’Leary is gay.

“So you said you got chatting, and I guess you got to be pals pretty fast?”

“Yeah,” the mountain rumbles happily. “Like I said, she’s easy to talk to. An’ she don’t blab, either. An’...”

“And she was a good disguise, wasn’t she?”

“Yeah. For a while. Then she met that Fed. I didn’t like him much, but she seemed fine with him, till one day it was all over. She didn’t say why.”

Castle contains his interest in that Fed, whoever he was, with consummate ease. He’s not interested in past boyfriends: all he cares about is that there aren’t any future boyfriends except him. O’Leary disposes of another bottle of beer and a shovelful of nachos without appearing to open his mouth beyond a small amount.
“So you were pals, you said.” Everest nods. “Bet you got into a bit of trouble together. Beckett said you ate the flowers she gave you?”

There’s a snigger. It reverberates through the wood of the table.

“I was gettin’ on her case about her diet. Never saw her eat anything but takeout or burgers.” He looks dreamy for a moment. “Those burgers at that Remy’s place she found, though…” Castle didn’t think that Remy’s served up elephant burgers. Not that he’s looked. “She got a bit riled with me. I bet her twenty that she couldn’t cook a decent meal.” Remembered embarrassment flicks across his face, making him look like an oversize little boy. “She suckered me,” he says indignantly. “She cooked a great meal, and at the end she gave me this bunch of crystallised pink rose petals and dared me to eat them.”

Castle sniggers.

“So I did. But I got my own back. I made her eat my chili. My mom’s recipe. It’s pretty fiery. Thought her head would fall off.” He shakes his own head wonderingly. A small quake rattles the table. “But she did it, an’ took another twenty off me. It wasn’t fair.” The Ross ice-shelf appears, in the protruding persona of his lower lip. “Mind, she put down a bucket of soda straight after.”

Castle is entranced by this enormous cop’s relationship with Beckett. Suddenly he sees a side of her that he’s never seen: a little frivolous, a lot humorous. But surely even then she was dealing with her father?

“So she was someone you could talk to?”

“Yeah. Now she mostly interrogates, but when she’s listening to you” – Castle thinks about how Beckett had listened to Julia, and to the Godleys – “it’s like you’re the only thing that matters. But…” he stops, and looks guiltily as if he had been about to say too much. “She never gossips. Didn’t say squat about me. Times were a bit different then: wouldn’t have wanted it goin’ around.”

The oil tanker turns to a different tack, of considerably less sensitivity but still of much interest.

“So anyways, we did a bit of sparring, when she needed a real work-out – this was mostly before she got paired up with Detective Esposito when he got moved out the 54th – an’ we went out occasionally – did wonders for my street cred, that – but after a while I noticed that I told her a bit about my family, or what I was doin’ for Thanksgiving or Christmas, but she never said anything much. Still, didn’t matter to me. Leastways she wasn’t askin’ me to go shopping with her or anything like that.” He pauses, and rumbles happily. “I hate shopping. All those tiny little aisles with fragile little bits and pieces just waitin’ to fall over and break.”

“I think they’re called ordinary size people,” Castle says with a smirk.

“I try to be careful,” O’Leary says faux-aggrievedly. “ ‘S just without my telescope I can’t see my feet.”

Castle roars with laughter.

“Beckett’s not much for shopping,” he says when he recovers breath.
“Naw. She might be a bit uptown, but she ain’t much for things. ‘Cept coats and shoes. I used to rag on her about the shoes. Told her she was only getting them so she could reach my shoulder. She offered to buy me a pair.”

“Can you get high heels in size fifteen?”

“ ‘Parently so. Said she thought I’d look cute in purple sparkles, with a matching vest.” Castle’s beer exits his mouth via his nose, which he feels is probably not a flattering look. “I didn’t think so. So I patted her on the head” – ”

“You what? You patted her head and lived to tell? You just get better and better. You’re heading for legendary.”

“ – and told her I was sure her mom would get her a pair from the dress-up shop if that’s what she liked.” O’Leary’s face droops. “She went a bit pale, and just walked off to the restroom. Came back a bit later, said her mom had passed. Gave her a hug, an’ she never mentioned it again.”

This doesn’t surprise Castle at all. Except the hug, which he would have expected to get O’Leary shot.

“Sounds like you guys had a lot of fun. Did you ever work cases together?”

“For a few months, when we were both uniforms. She made Detective faster than I did – faster than anyone did – and she’d been taken up by the Twelfth before that. Captain Montgomery took a shine to her, an’ though there was a bit of grumbling about it, everyone who was fair knew she was just that good. I moved from the Sixth to Central Park. We still hung around a bit, but it got harder. An’…” he trails off.

“Mmmm?” Castle pricks up his ears, and very consciously engages his own ability to create the atmosphere where the only thing that matters is the story and the person telling it.

“We pulled in a wino one night, just after I got there. Bit of a mess. Sergeant Hardon – he was on the desk the first time you came by – booked him, shoved him in a cell, gave him a bucket, the usual. Couldn’t understand anything he said. Kept asking for some KT guy, an’ a bucket even though he’d got one, but he was so drunk likely he couldn’t see the bucket he’d been given. So that didn’t mean nothin’ to anyone.”

The spare description is more evocative than a thesaurus of adjectives would have been. O’Leary’s sunny disposition has clouded over.

“Couple of hours later he got coherent enough to speak clearly. Started asking for Katie. It didn’t click. I sorta knew she was Kate, but we ain’t much on first names. You know we don’t roll that way in the NYPD. Sergeant got his name, an’ got a number off him. Wasn’t me who called her, didn’t hear the name. If it had been, mighta been a bit different. I’d have recognised the number back then. Didn’t mean nothing to the Sergeant.”

Castle is pretty sure where this is going, after he’d insisted on shadowing Beckett right into the Central Park Precinct. He doesn’t let on by so much as a twitch of an eyelash that he’s rapidly drawing conclusions. He’s not smiling any more, either.

“So she came in, an’ like an idiot I called out to her. Thought she’d come in to see me, even though she was in uniform. She looked round. She – I thought she was gonna shoot me. Or herself. ‘Stead, she turned away. Only talked to the Sergeant. Sounded like she knew the drill. Got him out. Never looked at me, the whole time, ‘s if I wasn’t there.” Even now, Castle can see the pain
of the memory. Beckett blocking out anything that might indicate that someone knew about her. Even O'Leary, who was evidently a pretty close friend. Then. “Coupla days later we’d got a drink scheduled, an” –

“She bailed?”

“Naw. She showed, but she never mentioned it. Like it never happened. I tried to work the talk around, but she wasn’t having it.” Again, totally unsurprising. “She got a bit busier for a while after that; didn’t see as much of her off duty for a few weeks. She was shooting for Detective, an’ racking up the hours.” And blocking out the pain, too, by racking up the hours. “But he got brought in again, and she came to get him. I think he’d maybe been brought in a couple of times in between, ’cause Sergeant Hardon seemed to know her pretty well by then, like he was used to seeing her. This time I pretended not to notice. We were still pals, an’ I wasn’t gonna hurt her. We still went for drinks, and swapped stories, and I still went out with her any time either of us needed a plus-one, you know?”

“Yeah,” Castle says softly, not wanting to break the now-confidential mood.

“And then less than a month after that he was in again. So the Sergeant called her. She wouldn’t come. Sergeant Hardon musta tried everything to make her come. She just… he couldn’t do anything to change her mind.”

The mass of muscle droops miserably. “I called her, when my shift was done. She was in a bar down in the East Village. I went over to join her – she didn’t ask me to, I just went. Figured that she couldn’t push me out.”

Castle recognises the shape of that long-ago evening. Beckett alone with alcohol…

“She didn’t even try to. I guess she wanted someone to keep the barflies off, ’cause when I got there a few guys were eyein’ her up.” This is not at all a surprise: any red-blooded male would be eyeing up a solo Kate Beckett. “I got the drinks in and she poured them down. She never said why, but I knew. So I helped her blot it out. It was the only thing I could do for her. When she couldn’t sit up straight I got her home – helps that she’s little” – Castle blinks: he still has some problems with anyone considering Beckett little – “put her to bed” – he scowls: O’Leary may be gay but the only person that isn’t Castle that he wants to know has put Kate Beckett to bed is Jim Beckett. Twenty five years ago – “an’ stayed on her couch. Man, that was uncomfortable.” Castle believes that. He’d be uncomfortable on Beckett’s couch, at eight inches shorter. “Called her in sick the next morning, left her a note, Advil and a gallon of water. She called me later, said thank you.”

Castle thinks that the next bit is going to be bitterly familiar, too.

“Week later, she called me, suggested a bar. Course I went. I’d half-wondered if I’d ever see her again. She drank soda all night. Talked about cases, what she needed to do to make Detective, asked about my cases. Never mentioned her dad once. Even then, it already wasn’t like it was. She didn’t say anythin’, and I didn’t know how to ask. It wasn’t like she gave me the opening.” Memory rises in his face, a high tide of hurt. “We stayed pals. But she got busy, and made Detective faster’n anyone, and got busier. Didn’t see her as much. Drifted. She told me when her dad got dry. She was really pleased about it. But she still never talked about any of it. She met that Fed. I met Pete. I made Detective, and she bought me so much beer I nearly drowned in it. It was just like it used to be. So I reckoned we were good. She even came sparring again, especially after she ditched the Fed.”

O’Leary grins mischievously. “I think she was a bit pissed at him. She beat hell out the bag and
tried to beat hell outta me. If I was him, I wouldn’t come back to Manhattan in a hurry. Anyways, we were good. Then she calls up looking for this Berowitz guy, first time in a coupla months I’d heard from her, and you came in with her, and then you stopped her givin’ me the flu, an’ here we are.”

He lifts his bottle in a toast. Castle automatically responds, his busy brain processing this already-familiar story. Seems like he’s not the only one who has been blocked out. O’Leary, of course, didn’t want the option he, Castle, had taken. He supposes he should be glad that Beckett had O’Leary as a friend, because it sure sounds like she’d needed one. He really shouldn’t be jealous of their history and O’Leary’s close friendship with Beckett at all. It’s ridiculous and stupid and he’d better get his head out his ass, because eight years ago he was married, for Christ’s sake, and he’s never cheated on anyone; and O’Leary is gay, and in a long-term relationship. He shakes his idiot ideas out his brain, swigs his beer, and grins widely at the hugely (in so many ways) impressive O’Leary.

“So what other stories have you got?”

“Well, there was this time when I was a uniform we got a report of a wild animal in the Park, terrorising little kids… turned out to be a Newfoundland dog the size of a horse, and by the time we got there all the toddlers were bein’ given rides on its back. Some idiot who couldn’t tell the difference between a dog an’ a bear, so we gave ‘em a scare for wasting our time and told ‘em to visit the zoo till they knew what a real wild animal looked like…”

The rest of the evening passes with O’Leary, who is a man who can turn a tale, keeping Castle in stitches while Castle keeps O’Leary in beer. Castle wavers notably on exit as a result of the beer he has consumed. O’Leary is approximately as wavery as the mountain he resembles. They part the best of friends.

“We should do this again,” O’Leary rumbles. “Bring Beckett with you next time.” He squirrms a little, which doesn’t appear to come naturally and could probably cause a small tsunami. “But…”

“But let’s not tell her that you told me all about how you arrested her?” Because that would go down so well.

“Yeah. Don’t think she’d like that.”

“No. I don’t think she would either.” Castle returns to the main point. “But yeah, let’s do it again. With Beckett.”

“One last thing, Castle.”

“Huh?” That had sounded a touch more ominous than he’d like from a man who has eight inches and likely fifty, sixty pounds of muscle on him.

“She’s still my pal. ‘Kay?” In other words, Castle, O’Leary will not be a happy giant bunny if Beckett gets hurt.

“Yep.” But since Castle is not a coward and not susceptible to intimidation even when it arrives in oil-tanker sized containers, he doesn’t leave it there. “But she’s my girlfriend. ‘Kay?” In other words, O’Leary, Castle will not be a happy smaller bunny if O’Leary interferes in their sort-of-if-you-squint romance.

Honour is satisfied, and they bump fists and go their separate ways.

Castle consults his phone and finds no missed calls, no messages, and nothing to indicate whether
Beckett is okay or not. He ponders over whether to text her for the whole of the cab ride home: neither wanting to appear to push her into talking through what she may well take as unwarranted interference, nor wanting her to think he doesn’t care. In the end he decides not to. Anything else would be claustrophobic, or worse, come across as vaguely parental monitoring. Not a good plan.

Beckett hadn’t had to wait for long before seeing the therapist, which was perhaps fortunate. Even in the short period of delay, she could feel the weight of her history burdening her shoulders.

The session had hurt, even though she’d barely got past the basics. *My father is an alcoholic.* When? How long? Have you had therapy before? The shrink had taken a history. It had all been very sympathetic. Very gentle. A short introductory session. He’d been calm, and formal: a little pedantic in his speech. He hadn’t gone near any *sensitive* areas. And even though they hadn’t even *begun* to start on the real story, it had sent her right back to being that scared nineteen year-old, watching her father collapse and drown in the bottle. She’d only just held back her tears, but she’s sure the therapist, Dr Burke, had seen the strain. A half-hour later, the whole dreadful timeline established, she re-emerges and returns home as quickly as is possible. That… had not been fun. And she will have to do it all again, twice weekly for now, till she’s fixed. It’s not the way she’d planned to spend this Friday night, that’s for sure.

*Only you can save yourself.* But why does it have to hurt so?

She preserves her countenance until she’s inside her door, and then, white and exhausted, stands under the hottest shower she can bear until she thinks that she might finally be warm again. She can’t be bothered to eat, or watch TV. She’s utterly drained. She huddles into her bed with an undemanding book, her thick towelling robe swathed around her shoulders but still not keeping her wholly warm, and is obscurely comforted by the faint remaining scent of Castle’s cologne on the pillows.

When she tries to sleep, it’s with the most clearly scented pillow under her cheek, and another clutched in her grasp. It’s not precisely effective, but it’s more comforting than anything else she might do. She hadn’t even said anything… difficult. Hadn’t been asked anything difficult. And therefore it is utterly ridiculous that she’s still on the verge of tears three hours later and chilled to her core despite the scalding shower, thick robe, and thick comforter. She can’t bear to see anyone, or talk to anyone: not even Castle. She’s glad that she hadn’t mentioned this, because the thought of having to explain or talk or do *anything*, even sit with him and be hugged, is one thing too many in her overstressed state. She can’t even cope with that non-burden, let alone any hint of a silent expectation that she might talk.

She packs the pillows more closely around her and finally finds a fractured, unrefreshing sleep from which she wakes too early, pursued by the nightmare vision of her father perching parasitically on her shoulder, hearing every word of her therapy sessions, swigging from a bottle as he does.

It takes another scalding shower to chase that horror away, and all the way through her morning routine she has the uncomfortable, nagging sense that she ought to call her father. She doesn’t want to. But… it would reassure him. She could tell him that Castle came to dinner, which would make him happy.

She tries not to think the phrase *keep him off my back.*

Beckett can’t call her father at this hour. Far too early. She’ll simply go to work, collect some nice coffee and a pastry on the way, and get started on the day. Especially as Esposito’s insisting on a gym workout at lunchtime. Actually, that’s likely not such a bad idea. Punch her frustrations and
tension out on the bag, and then do a bruising round or three of sparring with Espo, where she
won’t need to hold back. Violence may not be the answer to most things, but it’s looking like a
damn good answer to her stress.

As she leaves her building, Beckett notices that the sidewalks are largely clear of any snow. It
occurs to her that she could start running again, without risking breaking a leg. That would help,
too. That would help a lot. She chides herself mildly for failing to realise yesterday about the
improvement in the weather, and then thinks with less mild chiding that she could have soothed
herself somewhat by indulging in an hour’s worth of complex yoga forms last night, followed by a
hot bath containing relaxing lotions and potions.

Right. That’s her plan for tonight. Running or yoga, followed by a lovely long, hot bath. She nods
firmly and strides to her cruiser. Shortly, she is at the precinct with coffee and pastry in hand.

Straighten up and fly right, Kate. You can get through this, too. And she doesn’t mean the cold
case file that she’s pulling towards her in the grey early light skulking through the grimy bullpen
windows. She can get through this. She can, and she need never, ever, mention it to her father
ever at all. Never, ever mention any of it. She buries her head in the file and buries her nightmares
under the case.
She has a perfectly peaceful hour in the perfectly quiet bullpen, right up until Montgomery saunters in with a smug smirk – clearly they’re top of the stats again – notices her lurking behind her desk, and stops smirking very abruptly. Then he acquires a rather dangerously *I’m-in-charge-here* smile – at least, his teeth are showing, so it must be a smile.

“Ah, Detective Beckett,” he says smoothly. “Just the person I wanted to see.”

It *had* been a good day. Mostly. Now it certainly isn’t.

“Come into my office, so that you can brief me.”

“Sir,” she says resignedly, and stands to follow him.

“Now, Beckett,” Montgomery says, once they are behind the closed door of his office. “You reported yesterday that you had an appointment booked with a therapist last night.”

“Sir.”

“I have no intention of asking about it.” Montgomery notes the sag of relief, swiftly followed by the return to parade rest. “Ease down, Beckett. In fact, *sit* down.” She does. There is more than a hint of collapse about it. “However, I told you to provide me with your plan for dealing with this situation. So, Detective, report.”

Beckett grits her teeth, stiffens her spine, and begins.

“Twice weekly therapy sessions. Sir. Until the therapist is happy that we’re done.”

“Okay. I expect you to attend every one, whether or not you have a new case. I assume you are scheduling them out of working hours, so that should be no problem.” He pauses. “How is your dad?”

“My dad is fine. This won’t affect my work, sir.” Loud on the air is *don’t bench me again*.

Montgomery considers, briefly. “Okay, Beckett. But I’m adding a stipulation to that. You don’t do anything more to assist Mrs Berowitz – or Mr Berowitz.”

“But sir, my dad is” – she scrabbles to find an appropriate word, without success – “helping Mrs and Mr Berowitz.”

Montgomery is, yet again, blindsided. “*What?* Whose idea was that?”

Beckett looks around for some source of inspiration that doesn’t involve the word *Castle*, and fails to find it.

“Castle, and Dad.”

“O-kay,” says Montgomery, weakly. It’s by no means assent to the position. “Okay,” he says more briskly. “You don’t do anything more with the Berowitzes than listen to your Dad. No searching round Manhattan to find him, no liaison with other precincts so they find him for you. No meeting up with them if your Dad doesn’t ask you to go with him – and no sneaking round so you get him to ask you. You need to step back from all this. If there are cases involving alcohol abuse, you will recuse yourself from them. There are plenty of other homicides for you to take.”
He stops. Beckett’s looking fairly white and miserable. “At this time, I won’t mention this to your team or to Castle. It’s up to you if you do. You will keep Castle as your unofficial partner, though.” He doesn’t say because he’ll keep you out of trouble. “At the first hint that you’re not obeying orders, though, that will change. If you can’t stick to this, you’ll be benched till you can, unpaid, and your record will reflect why. Neither of us want that.”

He peels at her again, and drops the Captain. “Beckett, you’re still the best detective I’ve got. I want you to stay that way. You have to work with me on this, or you’ll burn out. That won’t help anyone at all.” He returns to brisk command. “So that’s settled. Dismissed, Detective.”

Beckett trails gloomily out of the Captain’s office and back to her desk, then changes her mind and trails gloomily to the break room where the construction of an extremely large mug of coffee does not lift the gloom by any noticeable margin. At least now there will be a target face on the punch bag. Several, in fact. Everybody, she decides. Absolutely everybody. She trails gloomily back to her desk again and picks up the case file. Gloomily.

Her mood is marginally improved when Ryan doesn’t start getting on her case again. It improves a little further when Esposito merely reminds her that he’s going to kick her ass on the sparring mat at lunchtime, and therefore absolutely no-one is pitying her or treating her differently or trying to talk about it. Now, if she can only manage to speak to her father and keep clear of Montgomery, everything will be okay.

When Castle wanders in, later, he’s oddly pale and shaky. However, since he’s also brandishing coffees for both of them, she’s not inclined to question him. (Besides which, if she asks him anything he might ask her something. Not desirable. Not now. Not yet.)

Castle notices that Beckett is pallid under her make-up, and she’s exuding a kind of miserable irritation, undoubtedly enhanced by her lack of sleep. He’s certain that she didn’t sleep well, and he’s equally certain that it’s all down to her having had a therapy session. His general idea that he shouldn’t ask, but should quietly find out and then magically appear – hey presto! – at her door at approximately the point she finishes a session and gets home, solidifies. Now, yesterday she’d gone at the end of shift, so she’d said, so that’s around six, so say an hour, and then half an hour to get home, that’s seven-thirty… okay, eightish is about right. So all (all?) he has to do is work out when she’s going.

But for now, he’d far rather soothe his hangover with coffee and have a very, very quiet morning, or what’s left of it. He sits down very gently and tries not to wince every time Beckett turns a page or taps her pen.

At lunchtime, instead of going out for food – Castle doesn’t want any food that isn’t a nice bland starch based recipe, such as, say, plain toast – the four of them traipe upstairs to the gym. Espo and Beckett disappear to change, Ryan loosens his tie, and Castle plumps down on the nearest cleanish piece of floor and tries to decide if his head is sufficiently securely attached to his body to attempt to turn it. It proves possible, but painful.

He forgets about his head when Beckett reappears in a close-fitting sports tank and shorts, hair tied back. In fact, he forgets about absolutely anything and everything. She’s limber, lithe – and lethal. Gorgeous, sexy – and deadly. He hadn’t put together the potential for her to wreak havoc on unsuspecting suspects with the comments O’Leary had made about sparring. It must have been the fuzzing effect of the beer. Esposito’s ripped body is a lot less interesting. Ryan flops down beside Castle and metaphorically offers him the popcorn.

“This should be good,” Ryan notes idly. “Beckett needs a workout.”
For the first while, it’s interesting, if you’re into the technicalities of punching and kicking a bag. Sure, the speed and only marginally controlled venom is impressive – and terrifying – but it doesn’t really tell Castle anything, though it’s all grist to his writer’s mill. He does pick up, after a bit, that Espo is exerting some effort to hold the bag, and concludes that Beckett packs a punch.

Beckett and Espo take a brief break, tip down some water over on the other side of the gym, and have a discussion which involves low but forceful tones, quite a number of evocative gestures, and finally, on Beckett’s “No, Espo. No holding back,” a gesture of resignation on Espo’s part and some satisfaction on Beckett’s. They put out the mats in the empty space in the middle of the gym in a well-practiced fashion, and begin.

Now this is interesting. Fascinating. He can’t take his eyes off it – not least because if he so much as thinks about blinking he will miss something crucial. It’s fast, focused – and certainly on Beckett’s part, furious. She’s going for broke: ramming in hard strikes and breath-stealing kicks; but somehow Espo’s never quite where they would really hurt him. Espo’s playing defence: putting out hits of his own, but mostly allowing Beckett to vent all her stress and frustration out there on the mat. Castle watches in sheer admiration of Espo’s skill and courage, because he is damn sure he wouldn’t want to be sparring with Beckett in this mood. He can see why she spars with O’Leary occasionally, too.

“Espo,” Beckett snaps, “I thought I said no holding back?”

“Have it your way, then. Don’t blame me if you ache later.”

“My problem. I need a workout, not a game of pat-a-cake.”

Castle doesn’t follow what happens after that. It’s a blinding whirl of flying fists and feet and hard cracks and harder falls. Mostly, it’s Beckett falling, though somewhere she’s learned how; but Espo hits the mat a couple of times. Finally, she taps out.

“Okay, I’m done.”

Espo pulls her up to sitting, and she drops her head on to her knees and breathes hard. He hands her the water-bottle, and she drains it: sweat running down between her scapulae, sweat dripping on her face, her complexion now red, beginning to fade down back to her normal tones at the edges. She scrubs an arm over her face and flops back to lie on the mat, exhausted but smiling.

“That’s better,” she says. “Needed that.”

“Shoulda done it when I first said, Beckett. It ain’t good for you to get outta condition. You’re slow.”

Slow? That was slow? Castle looks at Ryan.

“Yeah,” Ryan whispers. “When she’s with it, Espo goes down a bit more often. He still wins, though. He doesn’t give her concessions – she’d not like that. He’s been holding back a little today, because she’s been sick, an’ because she hasn’t been in the gym for weeks.”

Castle looks back at Beckett, who is slowly standing up to go through a series of warm-down stretches, wincing slightly already.

“Yeah, yeah, Espo. I know.” She finishes her set of exercises by touching her toes and then stretching right the way up from tiptoes to fingertips. “Okay, I’ll be down when I’m cleaned up. I need some lunch after that match.” She disappears in the direction of the showers.
Castle heaves himself up, carefully not wobbling his head, and leans on the wall.

“Not coming downstairs?” Ryan asks from the doorway.

“Waiting for Beckett. Least I can do is buy lunch in return for the entertainment. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Fun, isn’t it,” Ryan says happily. “I don’t do that. Sparring, sure, but not like that.”

“I prefer the endurance machines and weights. Rowing’s good. I don’t really spar. I need my hands working. I can’t write with no functional fingers.”

“If you change your mind, let us know,” Espo says on the way to his own clean-up. “We’ll be happy to teach you. Never know when you might need it.”

When they all spill down the stairs, none of them notice Montgomery observing from his office, nor his satisfied smirk. That’s a step closer to normal. He’ll pretend he hasn’t seen them sneaking off for lunch – huh? Ryan and Esposito pulling out sandwiches? What’s that all about? Montgomery shifts a few behavioural calculations through his man-management filters and comes to the rapid and entirely correct conclusion that Ryan and Espo approve of Castle sweeping Beckett out to lunch without them to play lemons. Hm. That reassures him enormously.

Castle ushers Beckett into the elevator and simply says “Remy’s.”

“Okay. I’m starving.”

The booth at Remy’s is cool and quiet, which is good for Castle. He orders the largest soda available, and adds a very small, totally unadorned burger with a very small salad. Beckett orders a middle-sized milkshake and a middle-sized burger with lots of extras and fries. Castle tries not to look at it. Not looking at it isn’t actually too difficult. One moment it’s there, the next Beckett is delicately wiping her mouth and her plate is scraped clean. It’s amazing. He forces his own food down, and finds that he feels a lot better, after the first uncomfortable moment when the burger hits his stomach.

“Better?” they say in tandem, and both look a little surprised.

“Fine,” Beckett says, and flexes her shoulders carefully to make sure.

“Me too.”

“You sure you’re not coming down with something? You’ve been a bit white all morning. If you’ve got flu, go home. We don’t want your germs.” But she’s grinning, and there might even be an undertone of affection there.

“You wouldn’t mop my fevered brow?”

“Nope. I don’t want the flu.”

Castle pouts, and gives her huge, pathetic, puppy-dog eyes. “Really?”

“Nope.” She smiles evilly. “I’ll send Espo round instead.”

Castle cringes theatrically and retreats into his soda. Beckett drains the last dregs of milkshake. “Time to get back.” She stands up, winces, and stretches from top to toes, cautiously. “Ow,” she says. “I’m out of practice.”
“I could give you a massage,” Castle leers. “Smooth out all those sore points.”

Beckett makes an unappreciative noise and precedes him to the door. Clearly that’s going to be ignored. He tucks the thought away for later – if she’s wincing now, she’ll be really sore by the evening – and follows.

Back in the bullpen, Beckett gazes morosely at the cold cases pile, and then remembers that she was going to call her father. She thinks about that for a while. It’s the middle of the working day, and he’s undoubtedly busy. Not a good idea. Not… normal. He’ll think that there is something wrong, which is a consummation decidedly not to be wished. He’s suspicious enough already. It can wait till the end of the day. Yes. She’ll leave at shift end, and call then, once she’s home.

It nags at her all afternoon: the knowledge that she’ll have to field some undoubtedly difficult questions. She’s not spoken to him since Monday, and this is Thursday already, and he’ll be expecting her to come for dinner on Sunday as usual, because she said she would, and she doesn’t want to go, not that this is entirely new, and…and…and. So many ands, but only one Kate. She sighs. Castle looks over at her from his file. She avoids his glance, and so the afternoon passes.

Case files packed up, computer off, coat on – all consequent upon Montgomery’s piercing stare and clear implication that she should be gone already – Beckett departs the precinct trailed by Castle, who doesn’t seem inclined to let her be.

“When I get home,” she says casually, “I’m going to go out running. Stretch out the kinks.”

“I could help you with your kinks,” he says suggestively, just as Beckett had hoped.

“Maybe a bit later. I’ll call you if I need you, okay?”

“Sure. Always up for some kink-removal.”

“I’m sure you can get an app for that,” Beckett says very dryly, “or possibly therapy.”

Castle snickers, and departs. As soon as he’s out of sight, Beckett lets her shoulders slump, emits the deep sigh she’s been repressing for some time, winces at the bruises she knows she’ll have from hitting the mat as often as she did, and betakes herself home to have another hot shower. After either a run, which is not looking astoundingly attractive on a gloomy, dank February evening, or her yoga, which has the benefit of being in her nice cosy apartment and close to her nice cosy bed, she’ll have the hot bath full of lotions and potions that she’d promised herself last night.

But first, she needs to call her father.

She puts it off till after her shower, justifying it by reasoning that if she draws too sharp a breath – her ribs hurt where she didn’t fall right, and she knows there will be bruises splashed across her skin tomorrow, but if it shows the boys that everything’s fine she’ll take that – her father might notice and worry that she’s been injured in the line of duty, and then she’ll need to explain. Explaining is a complication that it would be better to avoid.

She soothes herself under the jets of the shower, bundles her hair in a towel and her moisturised self in a robe, and then slowly combs out the shortish locks, not bothering with a hairdryer. When it’s tucked back into a handy scrunchie, and she’s put on a t-shirt and shorts, she reluctantly picks up her phone.

“Hi, Dad,” she says brightly.
“Katie? I didn’t expect you to call.”

“Just catching up. What have you been doing?”

Jim produces a few sentences about work, new clients, and anti-trust law. “What about you, Katie?”

“Castle came for dinner Tuesday night.” It’s a distraction, though given her father’s clear approval of Castle she thinks that it’ll work nicely to convince him everything’s fine.

“That’s nice. You’re seeing a lot of him, suddenly.”

“He’s shadowing us. Of course I see a lot of him.”

“Anything you want to tell me, Katie? After Monday? That sounded like he’s been seeing a lot of you.” Humour dances in his words.

“Dad!” Maybe that wasn’t such a good distraction after all. She doesn’t need her Dad (ugh) making insinuations.

“Well, if you don’t want to talk about Castle, how about telling me how you are?” Oh God. Stop worrying, Dad. I don’t want to talk about this. Ever. She can’t upset him. She just needs to work it through with the therapist and deal with it later. If ever. Maybe there’s a way to deal with it without ever letting on to her dad. Dr Burke will know.

“I’m fine, Dad. Everything’s good. I could do with some more interesting work: all we’ve got are cold cases. It’s not like I want anyone murdered,” she says lightly, “but it’s all a bit boring.”

“You didn’t sound fine on Sunday or Monday. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes. I had a bit of a stomach upset Monday. It must have been that making me tetchy on Sunday, too. I’m fine now.”

On the other end of the call, Jim’s face has the same expression as if he’d bitten a lemon. Castle, had he been there, would have recognised the expression instantly as the same one Beckett uses when she’s trying to think through the best way to break a recalcitrant witness. He is dead sure Katie is lying to him, but he can’t force the issue down the phone. He needs to see her, to be able to call her out on it. She’d never backed down easily, even as a child. If he could see her, he’d know which bit of her statement was a lie. And he can’t go into the rest of the conversation he wants to have on the phone at any stage. Tetchy his ass.

“Glad to hear it. You take care of yourself, Katie. A bit more healthy eating and a bit less takeout or food trucks, if you’re not busy.”

“Yes, Dad,” Beckett says with mock attitude.

“You listen to your dad, now. I’m still your dad and I still have nagging rights.”

“I’ll buy you a magnet for your fridge that says that, if you don’t stop it.”

Jim laughs, which Beckett hears with considerable relief. She’s got away with it.

“Okay, Katie. But you take care, you hear?”

“Stop fretting, Dad. I’m fine. No need to worry.”
“I’m your dad. It’s part of the job description.” It’s just as well that’s humorous. She really doesn’t need that sort of statement. One more reason to get fixed. “So I’ll see you Sunday, then?”

“Yep. Looking forward to it – but only if you get another Fairway tart.”

“Cupboard love?”


“Night, Katie.”

Phew. Done. Another disaster averted.
You're my best friend

Beckett bends herself into another simple asana on her mat and hisses as her muscles stretch out. Maybe it hadn’t been such a bright idea to take on Espo at full force. Still, she does feel better for it, even if she aches. She holds the posture for a slow count of ten, glances at the clock, and notes that she’s spent over half an hour doing yoga. That’s enough. She’ll stop there, and draw herself a lovely hot, scented bath. Mmmmm.

Her lovely hot, scented bath is delightful, for all of five minutes. After that, she starts to worry about the remarkable lack of contact since Monday from Lanie, who is not normally backwards in coming forwards; Sunday’s impending dinner of doom; and therapy generally and tomorrow in particular. Her relatively contented mood cools with the bathwater, and when she steps out to wrap herself in a very large and fluffy bath sheet, although her body is soothed and peaceful (tomorrow might be different) her mind is roiling.

Naturally, that’s when her phone rings.

“Beckett.”

“Kate, it’s me.”

There is a short silence. She shouldn’t even have thought about Lanie. Like some evil telepathic connection from a schlock-horror story, it’s brought Lanie’s not-so-dulcet tones right to her ear.

“Yes?” she says calmly. She is really not in the mood for Lanie’s efforts at psychiatry. The real thing is quite enough. She doesn’t need cheap imitations. Irritation is already growing from her generally unhappy state. Beckett rams it down. “What do you want, Lanie?” She just about manages cordiality.

“I wanna see you, seeing as our Friday night was interrupted. Thought you might want to go out this Friday?”

“Sorry, I’m busy already. Maybe another day?” Maybe therapy has a single, solitary advantage after all. A ready-made excuse to avoid Lanie in inquisitorial mode. Still, she’s trying to be nice. She doesn’t want to, though. Lanie’s words and the bitter sting they had brought have definitely not faded, and Lanie’s actions of Monday morning and her attempt to open matters up in front of Beckett’s team hadn’t exactly improved their relationship. She would have thought that a doctor would understand confidentiality. She would certainly have expected it from her friend.

“I wanna talk to you.” Lanie sounds just as determined and annoyed as she had on Monday. “You didn’t call me so here I am calling you.”

Beckett knew it. She couldn’t catch a break in a bucket, could she? “Yeah, well, I’m sorry, but like I said, I’m busy Friday. Another time. When’re you around?”

“Busy? Really?” Lanie’s disbelief is patent. “Like you’ve been busy all the time already? I wanna talk to you, face to face, like friends do. You need to talk to someone.”

Beckett wasn’t aware that friends used terms such as you are fucked right up. “Oh? Like you talked on Friday and Monday? If that’s what you want, no, thank you. You made your point, and I don’t want to hear it again. I’ll see you at work.”

“Kate, you need to listen” – And that just does it. Beckett doesn’t even try to stop her loss of
temper.

“No, I don’t need to listen to you. I don’t need you trying your half-assed analysis on me and I don’t need your half-assed judgements either. Save them for your corpses and your friends. I’ll see you when you’re next assigned to one of my cases, when we can both forget any of this ever happened.”

Click.

Beckett throws her phone at the couch and wishes it was at Lanie’s head. Any last traces of content have vanished. She pulls on sweats, yanks out her iPod, sets it to the heaviest bass beat rock she can find, grabs her abused phone and exits her apartment before she starts breaking things. Pounding the streets is a less expensive pastime than pounding plates into the floor.

Some way across town Lanie stares at her phone, considers the words save it for your friends and wonders just when Kate had decided to give up on ten years of friendship. She’d been there for her in NYU, and since. Surely she’s earned the right to tell Kate the truth without her blowing up like that? It’s not as if they haven’t had some pretty direct conversations before.

It doesn’t occur to Lanie that Kate might no longer have been in a place to listen to truth put as bluntly as Lanie had, it certainly doesn’t occur to her that Kate is now firmly of the opinion that Lanie has judged her and found her wanting, and still less does it occur to her that Kate might think that Lanie’s the one who’s dropped the friendship.

Now in a very much less than pleasant mood, Lanie considers Kate’s behaviour and remembers that she had been going to have a detailed conversation with Castle, who is undoubtedly mixed up in this mess. Kate is not getting away with tossing their friendship in the trash like she just tried to. No way, sister. At least, not before Lanie’s put her side of the story. Kate never used to behave like this, and it’s all started since just before Christmas. It somehow doesn’t seem co-incidental. Secure in her conviction that she’s doing the right thing for Kate, Lanie dials Castle.

“Rick Castle,” slides smoothly from the phone.

“Castle, it’s Lanie.”

“Hey, Lanie. New body? It’s usually Beckett who calls.”

“No, I wanna talk to you.”

There’s a surprised, and suspicious, silence.

“Really?” Castle asks, not precisely receptively. “Why?”

“Because Kate told me what she said to you but somehow you’re still around, so that means you know why Kate’s done her best to shove you out.”

“And?”

“And you might just be the only person on the whole damn East Coast who’s managed to change her mind about anything. So what’s going on? Why’s Kate shoving everyone away now?”

Castle doesn’t feel shoved away, as it happens, but he’s not discussing that with Lanie. “You’re her friend. Why aren’t you talking to her?” He manages not to put any inflection on that. Inside, he wants to shout why the hell are you all asking me and not speaking to her?
“She won’t talk to me. I called up to invite her out tomorrow and she simply said she was busy. I don’t believe her. She’s found an excuse every time for a fortnight. So what’s up with her?”

Castle is not having this. Nor is he having cosy confidential chats with Lanie. He goes on the offensive.

“What’s up with you?” There’s a strangled noise down the phone. “You’re the one who had lunch with her Monday last, and then you were pissed with her Monday night. You’re the one who was trying to make something of it in the morgue on Wednesday. You’re the one who was complaining Friday when she got called away from your girls’ night. You’re the one who was leaning over telling her off on Monday morning in the middle of the bullpen. So what’s up with you, because from where I’m standing it looks like you’ve shown her you don’t want to play nice, not the other way round.”

Lanie gibbers and gobbles and fails utterly to find any coherent speech or thought in the face of this unexpected attack. Castle waits, and says nothing more for a moment, until it becomes blatantly obvious that Lanie isn’t able to say anything.

“What did you say to Beckett on Friday night, Lanie?” Castle asks coolly. There is more silence. “Look, I know you said a lot. I know you told her she needed help. What exactly did you say?”

“That’s between her and me.”

“But it’s okay for you to try and get me to tell you what’s private between her and me? Double standards, Lanie.”

An infuriated growl emanates from the phone. “You’ve been around ten minutes. I’ve been her friend for ten years. Don’t you guilt me.”

“Doesn’t sound like you’re very good friends right now,” he says with no small degree of malice. Lanie loses her temper, just as Castle had hoped. Lanie’s filters aren’t great when she’s angry, and she is certainly very, very angry right now. “You arrogant asshole, I just want Kate to get back to normal. She’s all f*cked up and she needs help to fix her life.”

“So that’s what you said to her?”

“Sure I did,” Lanie yells at him. “Someone had to tell her! You think I was going to let my best friend keep killing herself without trying to help? She wasn’t listening to anything else I said. She spilled for a whole half hour Monday last and then she ran off and hasn’t said three useful words since. What do you do for your friends?”

Castle is silenced in his turn – but not for long. “I don’t push them further under the surface just because I think I know best.”

“Yeah? Who d’you think you’re kidding? You’re the one who started all this off.”

Castle loses his own temper. “Think what you like. I’m not getting in between you and Beckett. You two screwed it up, you two fix it. Bye.”

Click.

Lanie stares at her phone and then indulges herself in what would, were she still three, be described as a screaming tantrum. She’s been cut off by first Kate and then Castle and she hasn’t learned a damn thing that would help. Well, she is not fucking having it. Kate Beckett is going to listen to
her. She needs help and Lanie Parrish is damned well going to make sure she gets it. She doesn’t stop swearing for some time, and after that she spends some high-quality time planning painful and complete revenge on Castle and everything up to committal for Kate. It doesn’t soothe her temper in the slightest.

Beckett, having run for some distance, is marginally calmer. Or doesn’t have breath under which to continue swearing, more like. The further she runs, the more anger is squeezed sludgily out of her, and the calmer she gets. After a mile or three, she’s almost back to normal.

She stops to stretch a little, and realises that she’s reached Spring Street subway station and beginning to creak where she’d hit the mats earlier. At that point she also realises that she didn’t bring her wallet. She turns the air blue around her, and is fortunate that nobody takes offence. Still. She growls viciously under her breath. Then she has a thought. She has her phone. She is only five minutes’ run from Castle’s loft, and there is a good coffee bar between there and here. (She knows every good coffee bar on Manhattan. She could answer quiz questions on them.) She could call him, he would lend her the subway fare, and she could get home easily. She dials.

“Beckett?” he answers.

“Yes, it’s me.”

“What can I do for you this fine February evening?”

That’s a little odd. He sounds marginally stressed.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, sure. I wasn’t expecting you to call this late.”

“It’s only – oh. Sorry. I didn’t realise it was nearly ten.”

“So what would you like? Bedtime stories? A different style of coffee in the morning? Some de-kinking? My wish is your command.”

“Isn’t that your wish is my command?”

“Well, we could talk about my wishes if that’s what you want.”

Beckett groans, and then remembers she wants a favour.

“Castle,” she stutters slightly, “I need your help.”

“Sure. Anything.” He sounds surprised – and sincere.

“I’m at Spring Street subway, and I forgot to bring my wallet out.” She forestalls the question. “I was running. Can you meet me at the Cupping Room Café on West Broadway, and lend me enough to get me home?”

“That’s disappointingly simple, but okay. I’ll be about ten minutes.”

Beckett breathes a very audible sigh of relief. “Thanks. See you there.” She picks up her feet and keeps running. Standing around even for those few moments had chilled her.

Castle looks rather blankly at his phone and wonders how normally sensible, (except where alcohol and her father are concerned) safety-conscious Beckett managed to land up down this end
of town without a wallet. It seems unusually stupid, which is not an adjective he normally associates with her. Still, since no-one else is in tonight: Alexis staying at a friend’s to study and his mother God-knows-where, there’s no problem about going out. There will also be no problem about driving Beckett home. She won’t – undoubtedly won’t – come into the loft, and he’s not even going to ask her, but she won’t have to. He bounces out happily, without forgetting his wallet, keys, or coat. She’s actually asked him to help fix a problem.

When he reaches the café Beckett is tucked into – or, given that it’s February and technically still winter, has fought her way into – a corner by an old-fashioned iron stove. She looks very cold and very cross. Neither surprises Castle, who manoeuvres himself between the tables towards her, unwraps his scarf, and announces his presence by snuggling it round Beckett’s neck and then compounding his mischief by kissing the top of her head.

“Hey,” he says, superfluously. “Want a coffee?”

Beckett looks a little uncertain, and then shivers. “Something hot, please. Really hot.”

“Hot chocolate. You look really chilled. Come here.” He sits beside her instead of opposite and tucks her in. “How far did you run?”

“From home.”

Castle gapes. “Why?” He stops. “Actually, never mind why for a moment while we get hot chocolate. They have white hot chocolate too, if you like it. I do. They’ll even put cream on it if you want – do you? Whipped cream? Nothing succeeds like excess, Beckett.”

“Please.”

Castle orders rapidly and then returns to tucking Beckett in and keeping her warm. “What is this, Iron Man training? You were sparring with Espo all lunchtime, and you’re out running this evening” – his hand skates over her back – “and I deduce from the tank top that you were stretching through your yoga forms earlier.” Beckett wriggles as his hand slides more seductively down her spine. His deduction is right, but for entirely the wrong reason. However, that’s going to be a pretty pointless discussion.

“What was up with you?” she asks, as an alternative to answering.

“Me? Nothing’s up with me.”

Beckett fixes him with a piercing glare. “Something was.”

“And something was or is up with you. I won’t share if you don’t. That wouldn’t be fair.”

“What is this, kindergarten?”

“Fair’s fair.” He pouts. Under the pout is some suspicion of Beckett’s motive for both running and forgetting her wallet. The motive has a distinctively Dr Lanie Parrish induced loss of temper feel about it. He can surely sympathise with that.

The hot chocolate arrives, and Beckett dives in. This is deeply unfortunate. The last thing Castle needed with Beckett curled into his arm as if she belonged there (but she does) was the tip of her pink tongue protruding from her lips and delicately lapping the cream from the edge of her mug. It’s bringing back some very, very pleasurable memories of Kat. He retaliates in kind. Purely in self-defence, of course. Well. Impurely in self-defence. His arm tightens around her until she’s squished against him in a very pleasing fashion and not going anywhere at all. Not that she’s
trying. She’s wriggling very slightly to snuggle in. She’s still wearing his scarf, too.

“That’s good,” she murmurs.

“You need to warm up. Hot chocolate is the best, especially with cream.” He grins wolfishly. “I like cream.”

“I’ll buy you a Jersey cow. You could call it Clarabelle, like the cartoon.” Her eyes glint warningly.

“Or not. I don’t think there’s room in the loft for a cow. Even if I managed to evict Mother, I don’t think cows can climb stairs and I don’t think Clarabelle would fit in the elevator.” He pauses, and smirks wickedly. “And I wouldn’t want to upset Horace or Goofy.”

Beckett splutters. Castle removes the hot chocolate to safety and pats her on the back till she stops. “No, Castle. I’m sure you wouldn’t. For all I know they’re your best friends.”

Castle acquires an entirely evil expression. “Espo and Ryan are my friends,” he says slowly. “Surely, Detective Beckett, you aren’t accusing your own team of being a horse and a dog of limited intelligence?” She turns purple and starts to splutter again. “I wonder what they’d think of that?”

“You know perfectly well that’s rubbish,” Beckett squawk-stutters (squatters? Castle wonders unhelpfully) indignantly. “You’re just being annoying.”

Castle looks saintly. “It’s cheered you up, though. You’re all nice and warm now, aren’t you? Even if it is hot temper.”

“I was never hot-tempered till you muscled in on my life,” Beckett grumps.

Castle considers telling her that he knows that’s simply not true, and then decides that bringing Jim into this discussion is not going to improve the evening in any way at all. He changes tack.

“So how come you forgot your wallet? That’s not like you.”

“I was…” Beckett starts, and then stops. “Snap decision.”

Castle raises a rather quizzically sceptical eyebrow. “That wouldn’t be” – he takes his life in his hands – “the snap of Lanie Parrish, hm?”

Beckett regards him beadily. “Now, why would you think that?” Realisation dawns across her face. “Could it be because that’s the reason you sounded stressed too? Lanie’s been calling you, hasn’t she?”

“She tried. Probably as soon as she’d finished calling you. If she was as bull-headed as she tried on me, why haven’t you shot her yet?”

“Because if I do shoot someone, I need an ME to help me dispose of the body.”

Castle snickers. “Anyway, yes, Lanie called me. I don’t think she loves me any more.”

“Newsflash, Castle: I don’t think she ever did.”

He pouts. “Everybody loves me. I’m adorable.”

“And conceited.”
“You’re not denying the adorable part, though.” He turns huge pathetic eyes on her. “So what did Lanie say to you?”

“Same as before. Talk to her. Like I’m going to do that when all she does is tell me what she thinks I should do.” Beckett sounds distinctly annoyed.

“Did you actually tell her you were going to start therapy?”

“No. It’s private. And since she can’t keep her mouth shut and tried to call me out in front of the team in the middle of the goddamn bullpen, I’m not telling her anything that I don’t want on the front page of the New York Times.” There’s a nasty silence, and Beckett tenses against him. “You…didn’t tell her anything, did you?”

“No. So she yelled at me too.”

Beckett relaxes against his arm. “Didn’t think you would.” She retrieves her hot chocolate and buries herself in it, emerging with a small smudge of cream on the tip of her nose. Her hand is already moving to clean it off when Castle dips his head and kisses it away instead. Her eyes flare wide. “What was that?”

“You were all messy. All over cream. So I couldn’t resist licking” –

“Shut up, Castle.”

“But” –

“Shut up.”

“You’re no fun,” he sulks. “And after I came out to save you, too.”

Beckett smirks. “Anyway. What did Lanie say to you?”

“She wanted to know what was with you. Then she started yelling when I wouldn’t tell her. Then I told her I wasn’t getting in between you and put the phone down on her.”

“Funny that,” Beckett says nastily. “I put the phone down on her too. Oh dear,” she says insincerely.

“She did say one thing though. She’s really worried about you.”

“Yeah, right. If she was that worried she’d stop yelling at me.”

Castle declines the bait. He thinks Lanie’s intentions are good. Her execution, on the other hand, is horrible.

“Okay, Beckett. Let’s get you home. C’mon.” He tugs her up and pulls her out, then tucks her back into his encircling arm and starts off towards Broome Street.
This isn’t the way home.”

“Yes, it is. My home. Where my car is.”

“What? I thought you’d lend me the subway fare till tomorrow.”

“It’s cold, late, and you don’t have a proper coat, so I’ll drive you home.”

“But…”

“No buts, Beckett. You don’t have to come up to the loft, just as far as the garage.” He’s mildly assertive. “No-one’s home, so it doesn’t matter if I go out.”

“Oh,” she says, confused. “Okay. Thanks.”

She has to admit that being taken home in a nice cosy car in nice cosy comfort – heated seats, mmmm – is a huge improvement on the subway and the late-evening – er – personalities. It doesn’t take long before Castle is pulling up at her door.

“Thanks, Castle. Um…do you want a coffee?”

Castle blinks a couple of times. “Sure,” he says amiably, and follows Beckett to her apartment.

Inside, the yoga mat is still on the floor, there is no evidence of dinner, and Beckett’s wallet is in the middle of the table. Beckett hangs Castle’s scarf up and then disappears to put the kettle on, Castle extracts himself from his coat while she does, and then prowls after her to the kitchen.

When Beckett has finished fussing with coffee, kettles and cups, he takes the path of non-resistance to his urges, leans on the counter edge and pulls her back against him, where he can cuddle her in. And since she’s comfortably cuddled in, it’s but the work of an instant to kiss the top of her head, conveniently at a perfectly kissable height. He’s about to embark on kisses down the edge of her face, when inconveniently – the kettle boils. This is unfair. From the tiny little noise she’s just made, Beckett may very well think so too.

“Coffee or kisses?” he says provocatively. “Coffee with kisses? Coffee then kisses?”

“Coffee.” She pauses for just long enough for Castle’s face to drop. “Then kisses.” He grins, and as soon as they’re seated drops his arm round her shoulders. She snuggles in without a pause. The contrast between Castle’s lack of any questions, quarrelling, or attempts to psycho-analyse her and Lanie’s commentary is very obvious. Still… hang on a moment.

“Castle?”

“Uh?”

“Why is everyone suddenly calling you when they want to know where I’m at?”

“Uh?” Castle says articulately.

“Lanie rang you, Lanie tried to ask you in the morgue, too. You said my dad had called you. Montgomery – didn’t ask you, but I bet he thought about it. The boys probably asked you. What is going on?”
“I haven’t said anything to anyone.”

“I know that,” Beckett says exasperatedly. “If I didn’t know that you wouldn’t be here. You’d be in a pine box. That’s not the point. Why does everyone suddenly think that you’re the one to ask? I’m not invisible.”

Castle can see the oncoming disaster. Oh well. Evasion is only going to prolong the agony.

“No, but you are silent.”

“Huh?”

“They know something’s not right, they ask you, and you don’t tell them anything.”

“Yeah, so they should stop asking.”

“Yes, but actually what they do is worry, and then they start asking other people because they’re worried.”

“And how is asking you going to help anything? You’re not telling them anything either.”

Castle shrugs. Since he’d asked himself almost precisely that question when Lanie called him, he doesn’t have a good answer that won’t get him into hot – boiling – water. Saying they think I’m keeping you sane is unlikely to be well received. “No idea.” He tips her chin up. “Why are you worrying about this now?”

It’s Beckett’s turn to shrug.

“Ah,” Castle suddenly realises. “It’s not just Lanie, is it? It’s because you’ll be seeing your dad on Sunday.” Beckett humphs unhappily. “It is. Why don’t you just tell him the truth? That dealing with Mrs Berowitz dragged up old memories and it hit you a bit harder than you expected.”

“Dad is an attorney. Saying that will only lead to more questions, and more questions, and then I’ll say something he doesn’t need to hear.” She’s tightened up, and her eyes are bleak again. “I suppose I’ll get through it. Just like usual.”

Castle doesn’t say anything. He can see the catastrophe already looming, but he’s not going to insert himself into that situation without a very specific and clear invitation. Instead he smooths over Beckett’s hair and pets a little. She shifts under the caress, in a very inviting fashion.

“I’ve finished my coffee,” she purrs.

“Yes?”

“You promised me kisses,” she says seductively, and wiggles into a conveniently kissable alignment.

“You’re avoiding the issue,” he points out. Beckett abruptly stops wiggling, and glares.

“So? I don’t want to discuss it any more.”

Tell me something I don’t know, Castle thinks. “So say so.” His tone alters. “Stop suborning me with sensuality,” he murmurs. He doesn’t sound very sincere.

“Stop channelling Dolly Levi. ‘Why, Mr. Sullivan, whatever put such a preposterous’ –

“idea into my head – your head!’” Beckett caps the quote.

Castle sniggers, and then breaks into song in an orotund baritone at an impressive volume and with absolutely no embarrassment. “Out there, there’s a world outside of Yonkers; way out there beyond this hick town, Barnaby” – he pauses – “this hick town, Beckettccccceee” – she groans – “there’s a slick town, Beckettcccccccc. Out there, full of shine and full of sparkle; close your eyes and see it glisten, Beckettcccccccc; listen, Beckettcccccccc…”

Beckett gives in to temptation and comes in, in her full mezzo – not slurred, this time, and Castle raises his brows in some appreciation – to join him.

“Put on your Sunday clothes, there’s lots of world out there…”

They finish on a full-throated flourish.

“You didn’t sing last time. You implied you didn’t sing. Or couldn’t.” He manufactures a semblance of offence. “You lied to me. By omission, but you still lied. That wasn’t fair.”

“Don’t sing. Not can’t sing. I don’t do performances.” She stops, and her face twists. “I took a class in Musical Theatre, at Stanford. Then I didn’t carry on, here. I couldn’t commit,” she bites out. No, she couldn’t. She realised it after the third time she had to bail at short notice, and quit. “You can’t let people down if you’re doing a show.”

“Just – never, ever mention this to Mother.”

“Huh? Why?”

“You’ll be centre stage – well, actually, downstage left so you’re not upstaging Mother – before you’ve blinked twice. Mezzo and you know lots of musical songs” –

“How’d you get to that?”

“You were singing Chess.”

“I was singing Hello Dolly, not Chess.”

“No, the other night. When you were – er…”

“Drunk,” she says flatly.

“Anyway. Chess wasn’t exactly a global 20-year extravaganza, and yet, Detective Beckett, you know the words. My mother would love it. You’d be in one of her productions in no time, like it or not.” He pauses. “On the other hand, we’d be a stunning leading lady and her charming, ruggedly handsome leading man, so…”

“No. I am not getting on any stage, anywhere, ever.”

“Okay, you can save the singing for the shower. Bathroom duets.”

“Duets? Duets? You think you’ll be sharing my shower?”

Castle smiles very slowly and rakishly and slips one finger under Beckett’s sweatshirt and on to her skin. “Frankly, my dear, I’m surprised you’re not in it already. Yoga, running… you must be really… dirty.” The twist on the final word would seduce a seraph.
Beckett peeps up from under her eyelashes, which nearly incinerates Castle’s self-control. “Really? I’d better go wash myself clean.”

“I seem to recall promising to massage you to take all the kinks out,” Castle husks, leaning over her and slowly descending.

“But you’re complaining about my personal hygiene. I thought masseurs liked clean clients.”

“How do you know that?”

Beckett smirks knowingly, which is a remarkable achievement considering that she is generalising from a single spa day after which she had threatened her friends with cattle branding, racks and the tortures of the damned if they ever forced her on one of those ever again. Castle growls in a very satisfying, sexy fashion. This is all so much nicer than the thought of therapy or her father or Lanie. Or spa days, for that matter.

“That’s for me to know, and you not to find out.”

“I’ll weasel it out of you.”

“Hm,” says Beckett sceptically, and tries to stand up. It doesn’t seem to be working. Very shortly, it’s not working because her sweatshirt is being removed. A thick finger traces a line from neck to sternum, and carries on down to hook into the waist of her sweatpants. Then it stops for a moment, to consider. Beckett finds herself to be standing in front of Castle without actually having done anything to achieve this. The finger takes a circuit around her waist. She wriggles. A finger from the other hand joins the first. With a similar lack of any input from Beckett, the sweatpants meet the sweatshirt on the floor. Castle’s lips meet her now-bare clavicles, and then travel downwards to investigate her stomach. His tongue swirls lasciviously around her navel, draws a hot, wet line back up between her breasts without doing anything useful, and kisses her hard and possessively as he stands up.

And then he sweeps her up, carries her through to her bathroom, deposits her in the shower, and is only stopped from switching it on by Beckett’s taloned grip on his wrist and a threat of death if he does. So he undoes her bra instead, with his free hand, and then his shirt, and his belt and pants, a little awkwardly, and returns to his earlier possession of her soft, full mouth: open and receptive under his, until she’s lax against him and her hands are round his neck and he slips off her panties and then his boxers, presses her against the shower wall and then turns on the shower.

“Aaaargghhhhh!!!” he yells, rather louder than Beckett’s appalled squeak since he’s in the direct line of fire and she is largely shielded by him. It’s cold. “What the hell?” His – er – interest in proceedings has abruptly deflated. He did not need frostbite. Especially not there.

“Ah. Um. I must have used up all the hot water earlier.”

Beckett nips out of the shower with alacrity and basely leaves Castle to freeze. No doubt because the freezing water has frozen his brain, it takes him a moment to follow. By the time he does, she’s flipping a switch.

“Immersion heater. Give it a few minutes.”

Castle stalks towards her. “I’m freezing.” She runs a long, slow, glance up and down him.

“I can see that.” She sniggers as her gaze passes through halfway down, and halfway up again. “You’re blue.”
Beckett is already wrapped in an enormous fluffy towel. Castle feels this to be entirely unfair. He looks about, and fails to spot anything other than a hand towel, which will be no more use than a handkerchief. Drastic measures are clearly required.

He grabs Beckett, who is still sniggering, untucks the towel from her, wraps it round both of them, (maybe it’s a misplaced comforter, he thinks. It’s the size of a bed sheet) and smiles ferally. His interest in proceedings makes itself re-apparent.

“I guess we’ll just have to find a way to pass the time,” he rumbles in a deep, furry baritone that could heat the entire building’s water supply all on its own. He easily hoists her up and presses her against him with a firm hand on her rear. Her arms slide back round his neck, her legs twine around his waist. She essays a small wiggle and Castle groans. “Wait, Beckett. It’ll be worth it.”

“Promise?” She wiggles again. The hard weight against her feels good. If she only manoeuvres just a tiny little bit, it won’t be against her. More… inside. She tries to move in an appropriate direction.

“Uh-uh,” he chides, “no cheating. Wait.” He forestalls complaint by kissing her again, and while she’s still trying to fight back and take possession of his mouth bends down and lays her out, stark naked, across the bed. “That’s better. Now, I promised you kisses, after coffee.” He lies down beside her, idly tracing a hand over her flat stomach, and then props himself up on an elbow to survey her lithe body, turning her over.

“Wow,” he says, concerned. “You really took some hits earlier. Don’t they hurt? How didn’t I notice?”

“Well,” she smirks, “your eyes didn’t really seem to be on my back. I’ve had a lot worse.”

Castle rolls her towards him again, cautiously. “At least your front’s okay. Though…”

“Mmmm?”

“Bruises should be kissed better.” The words are childish. The tone and expression are certainly not. He turns her over again, and drops little, delicate kisses on every bruise, as well as quite a number of places where she is fairly sure there are no bruises. She melts into the mattress, and enjoys it. Eventually, Castle has covered every inch of her back, and quite a lot of her legs, and gently flips her again.

“I guess now we’ll just have to make sure that any potential bruises are kissed better.” He slips an arm under her neck. “But first…”

He falls on her mouth and takes complete, immediate and searching possession. His hands roam freely: gently forceful, asserting his right to touch and stroke, to tease and wind her up; she responds in kind and it turns hotter, wilder. She’s not paying any attention to her aches and bruises now, only to his mouth and hands, the hard thigh between hers pressing against her and demanding she open to him; her leg curling round his hip in reply. His lips slither down over her throat, and her back arches to present her breasts to best advantage. Castle doesn’t hesitate to enjoy the advantage presented. He takes one pink tip into his mouth and she twists under the delicate suction and teasing nips; then he repeats on the other side and he has to take her hands into his and hold them beside her head to stop her clawing at his shoulders.

She falls into the blowtorch blue of his hot eyes as he takes her in one smooth, powerful thrust and captures her mouth once more; moving in her as she moves around him and then he slides fingers between them and flicks over her and she shatters an eye blink ahead of him.
He rolls over and off, holding her to him so that Beckett remains firmly in his arms and spread across him, right where she belongs: together with him. She squirms into a more comfortable position, and settles peaceably, arm around his chest, head tucked into his neck.

A while later, she tries to escape. This is not the plan.

“Don’t move, Beckett. Stay here.”

“I want a shower.”

“Do you?” He smiles, sleepy and sexy. “I guess you might need some help to wash your back.”

“I can wash myself,” she says, not particularly emphatically. The invitation is obvious.

“You can, but why would you want to?” The sleepy smile is still much in evidence. “Much nicer if I do it.” Suddenly his eyes grow wide. “But only if there’s hot water.”

“There should be now.”

There is. There is hot water, and then there is hot, wet, slippery Beckett, and then there is them. And finally there is slipping into bed with Beckett, and cuddling up, and falling asleep with the best bedtime companion ever.

Castle wakes slowly with the extremely pleasant addition of a curled-in Beckett to his general morning happiness. Since she is sound asleep, and a brief glance at the clock tells him that he is a few moments ahead of the alarm, he indulges in some focused viewing of her relaxed face, so that he knows what it looks like. It’s not something he normally sees. Then he snuggles back down and simply enjoys having her there. This time, she hasn’t detached herself.

His blissful state is shattered by Beckett’s nuclear-attack-warning volume alarm, which jerks him to sitting up and sheer terror. Beckett emits a semi-groan, pulls a pillow over her ear, tries to hide under the comforter, and eventually, after a full twenty seconds of the horrible earsplitting noise, forces her eyes open.

“Ugh,” she says, hits the alarm, and flops back. The eyes droop, and are eased open. Castle mischievously improves the moment by tracing fingers over a sensitive area. Beckett squawks and is instantly fully awake. “Ugh,” she says generally to the world at large.

“Good morning,” Castle says happily.


She staggers out of bed before Castle can make any of the considerable number of better suggestions playing in his hindbrain, and aims approximately for the bathroom. He runs hands over his face, grimaces at the stubble (it might be good for his PR but it itches), and sets out to discover where his clothes might be so that he can go home, shower, shave, and clean his teeth – and thereby not be trailing Beckett into the precinct at far-too-early-o’clock in the morning and letting everyone know that there’s more than merely shadowing going on.

His clothes turn out to be in the bathroom, where they’d been – ahem – forgotten. He reluctantly dresses, spending far more time watching Beckett do her make-up – it’s a lot faster than stage make-up – than getting dressed, then watches her get dressed, which will provide him with daydreaming material all day regardless of what else happens, manages to stop her morning autopilot for long enough to kiss her very thoroughly, get his ass swatted for ruining her lip gloss,
kiss her again with considerable seduction and technique (if he’s going to be uncomfortable, so is she) and the precaution of hanging on to her hands since the lip gloss will need redone anyway, and leaves just before she shoots him for delaying her. Though Castle thinks that early-morning Beckett couldn’t hit a barn door before the first gallon of coffee, whatever Esposito says about her ability when she’s fully engaged with the day.

He goes home, reasonably content with the way in which matters seem to be progressing. Beckett at least believes that he’s firmly in her camp. Something will evidently need to be done about Lanie, but that is emphatically not Castle’s problem unless invited; something will need to give between Jim and Beckett, ditto. Both of those are issues for another day. He pulls himself together, undertakes his own morning routine which, once the absence of make-up is accounted for, is surprisingly similar to Beckett’s (men should be groomed, after all), and has his first cup of coffee while pondering Beckett’s likely therapy schedule. More research is clearly required.

Coffee done, he bounces off to the precinct to see what the day might hold. When the answer turns out to be cold cases (come on, Roy, surely it’s time to let Beckett have a nice new homicide) he bounces out the precinct again, pregnant with the information that Beckett is busy this evening. Her words and tone had been entirely bland and uninformative. The tiny, acid twist to her mouth as she told him, and the small creases around her expressionless eyes, had told him everything. Therapy tonight, Beckett. Followed by some considerable provision of comfort.
Beckett gets through the day only by relying on immense quantities of coffee, even more candy, and a vicious, laser-concentrated focus on the cold cases. She’s now fairly certain that Montgomery is giving the team a brief break – he’s been known to do so in the past – but she’s bored rigid by it. Still, it’s Friday. She has the weekend off. She only has to get through tonight’s session.

Tonight rolls around all too soon. Funny how each individual minute took an hour, but collectively her eight-hour shift (plus the overtime before it began) took a total of five minutes. Where’s relativity theory, and in particular time distortion, when you need it? At least the boys have been normal. Normal for when they’re bored, anyway. They’ve been playing pickup basketball hoops with scrunched up paper balls. Espo is currently one hundred points ahead, which according to him translates to ten beers. Ryan is objecting to the ratio, and to the likely cost. Beckett had hit the makeshift basket five out of five times and then declined to play any more, to Ryan’s rather too obvious relief. Just as well he didn’t know it was sheer luck.

She clears her desk and decamps without ado but with depression at the thought of the hour-long session ahead. It is perhaps very lucky that she is gone fifteen minutes before Lanie arrives in search of her, exhibiting the tenacious aspect of a determined and annoyed Rottweiler on the scent of its prey.

“Where’s Kate?” she asks. Well, it’s more of a demand. The boys exchange looks.

“Hey, Lanie,” Ryan says dryly. “How are you? Nice to see you too.”

Lanie growls. “I was looking for Kate. Where is she?”

“Gone already.” The boys are not inclined to be helpful.

“Oh.” Lanie deflates, and scowls blackly at Beckett’s empty desk and chair. Unsurprisingly, the furniture does not react. “Where’d she go?”

“Dunno.” Though they had speculated wildly, and come down on going out with Castle. “Didn’t say.” Espo has a good idea. “Thought she might be meeting you.”

“Not tonight.” Lanie manages not to say that’s why I’m hunting her down. She won’t come out with me. The boys look identically uninformed. Lanie sighs in frustration.

“Seein’ as you’re here,” Espo says, in a further, and potentially pleasant if Lanie gets the stick out her ass, effort to distract her from Beckett-hunting. “wanna go for a beer?”

“Might as well,” Lanie grumps.

“Don’t trip over in your hurry,” Ryan snips. “You don’t have to come.”

Lanie doesn’t reply, another thought having hit her mind. “Castle been in?”

“Not since before lunch. No new body, he’s not interested. I think he was a ghoul in a past life.”

“I think you spend too much time with him. Past lives? Get real, bro. No such thing.”

They all depart in a cloud of muttering in search of some clarifying beer, which search is
Beckett halts outside Dr Burke’s office, gathers herself, and enters. It’s no easier today than on Wednesday. It’s the same half-smiling, blonde, groomed receptionist, pulling up the details of her appointment with neatly painted hot-pink nails matching her lipstick, and pouting pleasantries to fill the silence; calm and collected behind her screen. There is no delay in which to fret further or calm down.

Dr Burke’s room is painted in a carefully chosen shade of delicately serene pale blue. He’s not behind his desk, but in an armchair in a slightly darker toning blue, opposite another matching armchair and couch. The general effect is undoubtedly intended to be soothing. Beckett would rather have walked naked into the fiery furnace in place of Daniel with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego than walk in here. She is not soothed at all, and has the squirmingly unpleasant feeling that Dr Burke knows it.

“Good evening, Detective Beckett,” he says: formal and precise.

“Hello.”

Dr Burke pushes his glasses up his nose in a habitual gesture which he knows to appear slightly fussy. “The last session was, as you know, simply an introductory meeting, so that I could understand your history and the issue which you wish to resolve.” He pauses, expecting Detective Beckett to make some comment. She does not. He continues, without emphasis. “You provided me with permission to speak to your previous therapist, and to obtain copies of their records. I have been able to do both, prior to this meeting.” He waits again, in case his patient should make a comment on this occasion. Again, she does not. “The discussion and the review of your notes which I have conducted were helpful, to a degree.”

Dr Burke’s discernment of matters which might be helpful to him in this course of treatment had not arisen from the quality of the therapy which Detective Beckett had received. He considers that to have been mediocre, at best. No, the assistance he had acquired had been from the insight into the personality of Detective Beckett with which his conversation with the therapist had provided him. He is already inclined to describe it as complex. The previous practitioner had not, it is clear, fully appreciated the difficulties associated with treatment of an uber-alpha personality; which is used to and expects success, and is consequently highly motivated to believe that they have achieved it in all circumstances.

Even had the previous therapist appreciated that issue, it seems extremely unlikely from the quality of the notes, treatment and indeed discussion, that they had possessed the experience or strength of character to treat Detective Beckett successfully, and indeed it is already Dr Burke’s view that they had not done so. Dr Burke had, albeit with some difficulty, refrained from pointing out his professional colleague’s misconceptions concerning the speed of Detective Beckett’s apparent resolution of her issues. Such rapidity should have been a warning signal, not a matter for self-congratulation, and had the therapist taken the time to become familiar with current practice, as detailed in Dr Burke’s own ground-breaking, regularly cited, paper, they would have known that the position was by no means resolved.

“So. Let us begin, Detective Beckett, with you telling me about the precipitating event: your mother’s murder.”

Detective Beckett relates the tale. Dr Burke notices almost immediately that she is reporting it as if she were reporting to her superior officer. Her rendition is wholly factual: almost evidential, and contains no emotion whatsoever. He does not consider this a good sign. Repressed grief is very considerably more successful than Lanie’s search for Beckett.
unhealthy, and frequently, he has found, is productive only of resentment. Yet Detective Beckett believes – or has *said* that she believes, which Dr Burke does not consider to be at all the same – that she has wholly forgiven her father. Dr Burke is wholeheartedly sceptical about this conclusion.

He steeples his fingers beneath his chin and surveys Detective Beckett. “And now, please tell me again what happened following your mother’s death.”

Again, the story is related in emotionless, factual terms.

“You underwent grief counselling at the time, and then therapy several years ago, whilst you were not in contact with your father.”

“That’s right.”

“Your father has since undergone treatment and has become, and remained, sober for a full five years.”

“Yes.”

“I see. Detective Beckett, what has prompted you to seek counselling at this juncture?” Dr Burke does not quite understand the factors which have precipitated the current need. Five years of sobriety is substantial progress. Detective Beckett has yet to mention any immediate trigger for this appointment.

There is a silence. Dr Burke detests hyperbole, but Detective Beckett’s face is deathly pale and it is clear to Dr Burke that he has already asked the critical question. He would have preferred to lead up to that more gradually, but in his experience it is unusual for the precipitating factor also to be the key question. Normally his patients are quite content to relate their ostensible reasons for attending therapy. This patient, however, is not. His professional instincts are aroused.

The silence continues. Detective Beckett appears to be upon the verge of emotional upheaval. Dr Burke waits, without breaking the silence. He has found this to be a technique which normally results in his patient becoming obliged to fill the emptiness. Strangely, it does not appear to be working in this session. He delays for a further period, until it appears that an answer is unlikely to be forthcoming in the near future. Shortly before he determines to change the direction of his enquiries, however, Detective Beckett speaks.

“I caught a case before Christmas.”

There is an accent on *Christmas* which does not go unnoticed by Dr Burke. He will consider that later. He makes a minor note, and attends once more to Detective Beckett.

“Young man, killed in a drive-by shooting. His father was an alcoholic. It brought back memories. His mother wanted to cling to me. So I tried to tell her where to get help, but she wasn’t listening.”

Detective Beckett’s eyes and voice are quite lacking in expression.

“I… got irritated with her. She wouldn’t help herself at all.”

“I see. Quite understandable,” Dr Burke says sympathetically.

“She wouldn’t accept that she couldn’t do anything and she’d kill herself trying. She wasn’t listening to anything we said.”
“We?”

There is another lengthy pause. We is clearly a part of this issue. The woman who could not be helped is also a part of the issue. Both are undoubtedly small, and less significant than the real triggers. However, it is a start.

“Dad and I.”

That is something of a surprise. Dr Burke allows a small tinge of that surprise to reach his face.

“Why was your father involved? I had thought you said that this was a homicide case?” He couches his question in delicately inquiring tones. It seems to him most unusual that a detective’s father would be involved in a case. He is entirely unsurprised, already, by the silence that results.

“The case was closed. But she kept ringing me for help. Her husband went missing and I had to find him. After that we asked Dad to talk to her.”

Hm. A different we. “Who was with you when you asked your father?”

“Castle.”

“Who is ‘Castle’?”

“Richard Castle. Author.”

Ah, yes. Dr Burke is aware of the celebrity author. He has never read one of his books, as he dislikes both murder mysteries and thrillers. Neither, he has found, are normally written with sufficient care or indeed intelligence to deal with the complex psychology which would usually be found to underlie the protagonists. In any event, he prefers non-fiction, and when not pleasurably engaged with the latest research in his field, is most partial to history.

“And Mr Castle’s involvement?” Really, had he known that homicides were being followed up by completely unqualified people he might have objected more strongly to his tax bill.

“Castle shadows me. Research for his next book. So he follows me around to see how a real Homicide team works.”

“But you have just said that the case was closed. Please would you explain Mr Castle’s involvement in a closed case?” This time the silence is expected. The very slight colouration of Detective Beckett’s cheeks is not. Hm. Mr Castle’s involvement is, obviously, not solely confined to homicides. Dr Burke decides not to pursue that avenue until it should become obvious that it is necessary.

“I went out to find the husband. Castle insisted on shadowing me when I went to pick him up and take him back to his wife.”

As yet Detective Beckett has not provided any clarity to Dr Burke as to Mr Castle’s involvement in her father’s discussions with the bereaved woman.

“After that” – Dr Burke detects that there has been a considerable evasion in that term of timing – “Castle suggested that since she wasn’t listening to me she might listen to Dad. Seeing as Dad is an alcoholic.”

Detective Beckett’s verb tense is very revealing. Most relatives of alcoholics who have controlled their addiction refer to it in the past tense. Detective Beckett has used the present tense. Hm. How
exceedingly interesting. The broad outlines of at least one of Detective Beckett’s issues become partially clearer. Detective Beckett is not wholly convinced of her father’s sobriety. Dr Burke makes no mention of that deduction. It is not likely to be helpful at this early stage. A little more information, however, would be.

“Let me be sure that I have understood. The wife of an alcoholic, whom you had encountered on a case which you have solved, later contacted you for advice and assistance in dealing with her husband. You provided her with appropriate advice on the potential sources of assistance, did you not?” Beckett nods. “She continued to seek emotional and practical support from you, which you continued to provide, including searching out her husband when he went missing. How often did she ask you?”

“Three times.”

Dr Burke decides that the risk of upsetting Detective Beckett by probing a little more deeply is justified. “How often did you search for him?”

There is a silence which Dr Burke accurately identifies as containing guilt, pain and embarrassment.

“Twice.”

Dr Burke awaits expansion and thereby enlightenment.

“The middle time he was already safe at a precinct. She could go get him herself. She didn’t need me to.”

“How did she take this refusal?”

“She went and got him.” Dr Burke is perfectly certain that this is not the whole story. “Then she called me looking for more help.” Interestingly, Detective Beckett’s voice is beginning to show some emotion. He considers that it is irritation, rather than any fellow-feeling. “I couldn’t tell her anything more than I had, but she just kept looking for a better answer. There wasn’t a better answer. There’s never a better answer. She couldn’t save him because he didn’t want to save himself.”

“Did you say that to her?”

“No.” Detective Beckett’s tight-pinched lips indicate that there is more to that, too. Dr Burke makes another note.

“And when did your father talk to this woman? Was it before you searched for her husband the second time?”

“After.”

“Who was present?”

“It was supposed to be her and her husband, but he wasn’t there. He’d have been in a bar somewhere. She tried to lie about it. Anyway. She was there, me, Dad and Castle.” How particularly peculiar. This is really a very unusual situation.

“Dad told her what it was like for him. I…” she stops. Dr Burke observes her effort to maintain control of her face and voice with some interest. Detective Beckett had clearly found the experience to be painful. The question is, why? If her father has been sober for five years, then it
should follow that he has made amends to her, and explained his actions. Detective Beckett, therefore, should not have found the repetition of his history to be as uncomfortable as it is evident that it had been. Another issue is emerging from her commentary, which is very much more complex and deep rooted. Dr Burke suspects that all is not well between Detective Beckett and her father, and further suspects that Detective Beckett is either not fully aware of this disconnect, or, more troublingly, that she is aware and is trying to deny it.

However, there is not time now to pursue that path. He will let Detective Beckett finish, and then the session will draw to a close. He has, already, much about which to think.

“Mmm?” he emits, to encourage her to continue.

“It was ridiculous. She wasn’t listening at all. It was all pointless. I went home.”

Dr Burke wonders very privately in what state and with whom, if anyone, Detective Beckett had left. It seems entirely possible that she had left alone, and in a state of some perturbation. He considers that this will be an effective place to begin at their next session.

“I see,” he says, steepling and unsteepling his fingers. “Thank you. That is very helpful. Please make your next appointment with my assistant. I think that it would be best if it were Tuesday, not Wednesday, to provide a sufficient time gap until Friday.”

“Okay. Thanks. Goodnight.”

Were Dr Burke prone to similes, which he is not, or to exaggeration, which he is also not, he might have thought that Detective Beckett had run like a rabbit as soon as she were able.

Beckett removes herself from Dr Burke’s room, then office, then building as fast as courtesy and the necessity to make her next appointment allows. She makes it for Tuesday, and wishes she could find some way to avoid it. She might have resolved that she needs to fix this – but she devoutly wishes that she could quit already. But then Montgomery would know, and she’d be benched again, and…oh hell.

She goes home and rolls out her yoga mat, changes and returns to it. Maybe that’ll clear her head. The alternative might be the liquor shelves at the all-night store, and she is – she has to be – better than that. Still, she doesn’t begin yet: standing at the window, staring at the city lights against the night, the stars blotted out by the grimy yellow-orange of the street lights. Her stone bird is in her hands, nestled between her palms, held as gently as a real bird would be: she’s mindlessly stroking its head, between its wings, over its tail. Memory is not her friend, tonight. She sets the small sculpture down on the table, just as a knock rattles the door.

“Castle?”

“Hey.”

Next thing she knows, she’s in his arms, head pillowed on his shoulder; inhaling large, muscular male. She simply stands still; slowly dissolving into his strength, letting him hold her up; too tired to move or care as long as he’ll be there with her.

Castle had timed his arrival extremely carefully to ensure that it was safely after Beckett got home. Leaning on her door awaiting her might just give her the wrong impression and/or get him arrested. Instead, he’d planted himself in a café and forced himself to be patient.

When she’d opened the door she’d looked utterly miserable, and Castle’s hardwired reaction to
misery is to try to make it go away by whatever method works: wine, chocolate or physical presence. This misery doesn’t need a choice. Physical comfort is the correct, instant and instinctive choice. He doesn’t ask her anything, he doesn’t say anything. He holds her close, and strokes over her back; and then, after a moment in which she softens and sighs, brings her up and half-lifts her to the couch and firmly into him. He stays like that for a time: her face hidden and her breath shallow against his neck.

“Still sore from Espo’s workout yesterday?” he asks eventually: a neutral subject that they can both pretend is a good reason to be tired and upset.

“Mhm.”

“Come here, then, and I’ll make it better.” His tone involves suave seduction and absolutely no soothing at all. He points up his intentions by feathering across her back, and then slowly beginning to massage her shoulders, carefully avoiding the worst of the bruises.

She sighs again, and eases into the pressure.
Take me away

Castle’s strong fingers are very comforting as they work the stress out of Beckett’s muscles without hurting at all. It’s hypnotic, and he is not doing anything to pull her out of the cloud of cossetting which is surrounding her. It dimly dawns on her that the surrounding atmosphere of large, powerful and slightly dangerously sexual masculinity is extremely soothing. Just what she needs, in fact: someone to keep her safe from the shoals and rocks over which she’s sailing, with the tide going out and no charts or rutters to guide her home. She’s so tired, and it’s not even late evening: it’s barely after eight. She should eat, but she’s not hungry; she should probably go to bed, but she’s unable to muster the energy to move. Truth to tell, she doesn’t want to. Sitting cuddled into Castle’s broad frame is more reassuring than anything else she might do, and is providing her with some ability to pull herself together. Therapy, she thinks acidly, is about as soothing and easy as having one’s skin removed with a cheese-grater.

“That’s better. Stand down for a while. You’ve got the weekend off, haven’t you?”

“Mhm,” she assents.

“Let’s go do something tomorrow.”

“Like what?” she mutters, unwilling to do anything that requires more effort than opening her eyes.

“Something fun. Coney Island?”

“In February?”

“Okay, not Coney Island. How about a trip?”

“Where?” she asks, unenthused.

“Well, anywhere, really, but I suppose you want to be back by Sunday night for work. Niagara? DC? Boston?”

Beckett’s lack of enthusiasm is palpable.

“Newport?” There is a small spark of interest, swiftly doused.

“Bit far for a day.”

“A day? How about the Hamptons? That’s not too far.”

“The Hamptons?”

“Sure. I’ve got a house there, and if we left early we’d have most of the day. We could walk along the beach” –

“It’s February. It’ll be freezing.”

“– wrapped up warmly – you look really cute in those berets you like – and then we could sit round the fire and have hot chocolate and toast marshmallows and there’s this really good seafood restaurant that I think you’d love so we could stay and have dinner – we could even stay overnight: Mother will stay with Alexis: she’s always complaining they get no girl time with me around though I think what she really means is that they don’t get to go shopping on my platinum card which is just not true, so it wouldn’t be a problem if we left again reasonably early and all I’d have
to do is call the caretaker and get him to set it up for tomorrow morning and it would be really great.”

He runs out of breath. Beckett is quiet against him. “What do you think?”

“I think I’m exhausted just listening to you.” He droops. “I’d need to be back by mid-afternoon Sunday,” she says slowly, thinking aloud. He doesn’t quite understand the shiver as she mentions Sunday, but he definitely likes the direction of her thinking.

“We can manage that. If we leave after brunch we’ll be here in time, easily.” He pauses. “So shall we do that? Pleeeaaassee? Please play hooky with me, Beckett?”

“Okay.”

“Yessss!” He hug her tightly. He’d never expected assent.

“Ow,” Beckett says.

“Sorry, sorry,” Castle says distractedly. “You need to pack. We ought to leave around seven.” Beckett makes a deeply unhappy noise. “Okay, eight.” The noise becomes less unhappy. “You’re in before it’s even sun-up most days. Why are you objecting to getting up to do something fun?”

“S my days off,” emerges in a disgruntled mutter.

“You don’t take days off.”

“Do too.”

“Only when you’re ordered to.” Beckett humphs. “You can sleep in the car. It’s really comfy. I’ll wake you up when we get there.”

And just maybe, Castle thinks, just maybe being out of Manhattan and completely away from here will clear her head and cheer her up and maybe even relax her enough that she talks a little. That thought is swiftly chased away. It’s too early for that. She hasn’t even admitted to having the therapy sessions yet, and he has to wait for her to say that she’s doing it. He can’t push, and he won’t push, because she is attending, and that is really and truly all that he needs to know. Unless and until she asks him for something or tells him something, all he can do is be here and be strong enough for her. Right now, he’s here, and he’s enough. She’s curled bonelessly into him, slightly sleepy, certainly soft, but still disturbingly pale and devoid of spark.

“Do I need anything except a change of clothes and my washbag?”

“You might want a nice outfit for dinner.” He leers happily at the top of her head, which is pointless since she can’t see it. “I’ve not seen you in a dress.”

“Really?”

“Really do you need one? No. Really have I not seen you in a dress? No, I have never seen you in a dress.” He grins lazily at her. “I’ve seen you in undress, though.” She growls. He pets her, in the hope that she’ll stop growling, and maybe purr a little. “Anyway. Washbag, change of clothes, something pretty for dinner. That’s all you need.”

“ ‘Kay.” She curls in closer. Castle pets a little more, until she seems happier.

“Are you cold now?”
“No. I wasn’t cold.”

“Oh. You were shivering. I thought you might be cold.”

“No.” She doesn’t explain the shiver, simply nestles in. “But you’re nice and warm anyway.” She tugs on his hands till his arms have become wrapped around her in an evidently more satisfactory fashion, and drops her head back on his shoulder. “There,” she decides. “That’s better.”

Castle thinks it’s better, too, but then he currently thinks that almost any situation in which Beckett decides by herself that she should be snuggled up to him (with, or preferably without, clothes) is an improvement on a situation where she is not. His fingers stroke very gently at her waist, encouraging her to stay close, and he discovers that her cheek is in a very kissable location. Naturally, he kisses it. What else should he do? She hums. So he kisses her again, knowing that hums are likely to turn into purrs and her head is likely to turn up so that he can kiss her full lips and investigate her beautiful mouth and then she’ll purr and be Kat and be eased. He falls into a blissful reverie during which his kissing Kat gently produces something that moves closer and closer to a purr and moves her inexorably into his lap, where she is much more pettable and much more kissable and very much easier to hold close and protect.

Eventually he has to leave. He was out all night last night, and he can’t do it again tonight. Alexis deserves his attention too: he can’t neglect one adored responsibility for a new one. That’s not fair and won’t help. It also won’t help anything when (please let it be when) Beckett feels able to come back to the loft. Family is still very, very important to Castle, and he won’t damage that for anything or anyone. Beckett doesn’t question, quibble or argue about it: and he realises that it’s never been about his love for Alexis, it’s always been about her father’s feelings for her, and how seeing how he is with Alexis shows her what she doesn’t have with Jim. It’s a fine distinction, and a difficult one to spot, but it makes an enormous difference.

Oh. Jim. Oh. Beckett goes to see her dad for dinner every Sunday she can. So… oh, he knows this: she’ll be going this Sunday, which is why she needs to be back by mid-afternoon. Ah. The shiver is explained. Beckett hasn’t seen her dad since – oh shit – since she walked out of Julia Berowitz’s apartment. In between, there’s been at least one very emotional phone call which left Jim scared silly for his daughter, three calls from Jim to him, and one call about which he knows between Beckett and Jim in which Beckett lied through her teeth all the way, covered or buried every hint of truth about how she felt, and said that she’d go over on Sunday. There might have been another, he guesses, in which Beckett would have confirmed going over on Sunday, and he would bet his next month’s royalties that she lied through her teeth throughout all of that call, if it happened, too.

If Beckett weren’t at least going to therapy, he thinks bleakly, he’d be on the phone to Jim right now. Since she is, he won’t.

His mother is, as predicted, delighted to have a weekend with both Alexis and free run of the better boutiques, on Castle’s dime.

Beckett feels a lot better for Castle having shown up, cuddled her, cosseted her and generally provided her with a most unusual and very reassuring sense that someone’s looking out for her. She hadn’t felt able to ring anyone on her way home, but he’d turned up at just the right moment and held her in just the right way and then made a really good suggestion (even if she will have to get up on a day-off morning). She performs her bedtime routine, packs swiftly and includes a rather pretty soft crimson cashmere-mix dress which is both extremely flattering and – vitally – warm, and sets her alarm. She snuggles up to her pillow, which still retains a very faint scent of Castle,
and is asleep far more swiftly and deeply than she had expected to be.

She wakes unexpectedly well-rested, and with the view that a trip away would be really very nice, even if it does start a little too early. It’ll give her something else to think about. She puts on jeans, flat boots and, over a t-shirt, the green angora jumper that Castle had definitely liked, digs her warmest coat out of the closet and adds a dark emerald wool scarf and matching beret and gloves. Just before eight (ugh, ugh) Castle arrives and declines coffee, at which she humphs unhappily, having had none herself.

“She wakes unexpectedly well-rested, and with the view that a trip away would be really very nice, even if it does start a little too early. It’ll give her something else to think about. She puts on jeans, flat boots and, over a t-shirt, the green angora jumper that Castle had definitely liked, digs her warmest coat out of the closet and adds a dark emerald wool scarf and matching beret and gloves. Just before eight (ugh, ugh) Castle arrives and declines coffee, at which she humphs unhappily, having had none herself.

“We’ll get some on the way, Beckett. If you’re awake.” She harrumphs, being one decibelic (he is sure this is not a word but he likes it) step beyond a humph. “C’mon. You won’t need your coat in the car. It’s lovely and warm. If we go now we’ll be there in less than two hours.”

“I am not bailing you out if the traffic cops stop you,” she grumps.

“You won’t have to. I’m a very careful driver.”

“Hmph.” Beckett rolls her eyes.

Castle grins at her, unintimidated, and hugs her. “I really like this jumper,” he says. “C’mon, let’s go! The Hamptons await us. Walks on the beach, toasted marshmallows, roaring fire, fur rug” –

“You wear a wig?”

He splutters disgustedly. “No! Fur rug in front of the fire, perfect for lying on na” –

“Shut up, Castle.”

“Let’s go. Time is fleeting.”

“Madness has clearly taken control,” Beckett says dryly, but consents to take his hand and be tugged enthusiastically along to the elevator, out the door, and into a very luxurious Mercedes.

Shortly after that, they’re rolling smoothly out to the Williamsburg Bridge and then on to the I-495 eastbound. There are no traffic cops. This is fortunate. Castle’s definition of I’m a very careful driver stopped at the start of the I-495, after which he’d opened up the engine and the car had moved. Beckett, no respecter of interstate speed limits herself, simply snuggles into the exceedingly comfortable seat and starts to plot the best way to ensure that she gets to drive back. They are slowing down at the Hamptons in considerably less than the time that the journey should have taken, and Castle returns to being careful. He is grinning like a loon, however.

The reason for the mile-wide grin becomes apparent as the big car pulls round and Castle’s – quote – house is… is… hell, it’s a mansion. Beckett is speechless.

“Here we are,” Castle bounces; and further bounces out of the car, round to the passenger side, and tugs Beckett out. “C’mon. It’s sunny.”

“And cold.”

“Bring your coat. The beach is the other side of the house. Let’s get your stuff out.” He’s rootling in the trunk to get the bags out. Beckett manages to overcome her amazement for long enough to close the car door (and her mouth) and then simply stares for a while. Castle finally puts his bag down, pokes her in the ribs, and starts her moving to the door. He puts the bags down again, unlocks the door, swings it wide – and swings Beckett up into his arms and inside.
“What was that?”

“Fun.” He smirks. “I’ve convinced you to come to my isolated abode, where I shall have my wicked way with you and” –

“I thought you wrote thrillers and murder mysteries, not bodice-rippers? And if there are no marshmallows there won’t be any wicked ways, either. You promised me marshmallows.” She peeps up flirtatiously.

Castle smirks some more. “So as long as there are marshmallows I can have my wicked way? Good to know.” He is not disappointed in the eye roll he receives.

He whisks the bags out of the way, whisks into his own coat, scarf and hat, checks his pocket for gloves and then turns, intending to induct Beckett into her own coat. He’s unreasonably disappointed that she’s standing like a stump in the middle of the hallway. “C’mon, let’s go to the beach.”

“Yeah,” she says slowly. “Okay…”

“You need a coat.”

“Oh. Yeah. Right.”

“Beckett, what’s up with you? You’re acting like someone hit you over the head with a pry bar.”

Suddenly enlightenment hits. “You’re not overwhelmed by the house, are you? It’s just a house.”

“Castle, it’s a freaking mansion. Practically a castle.”

Castle splutters with laughter. “Castle’s castle?” Beckett humphs, and seems to shrink a little. He pulls her back to him, firmly, and kisses the top of her head. “It’s just my house, Beckett. Nothing to worry about.” (It might be our house, a little voice tells him. Sometime.) “Let’s go. I’ll show you round later. Prove there are no monsters under the bed.”

“Only in it?” Her usual snark has suddenly returned, but she’s still a little uncertain in his clasp.

“Grrr,” he ripostes, and makes a dreadful face. She sniggers, and appears to return to normal.

It’s – enormous. Gigantic. She could lose the Twelfth’s entire Homicide squad in here. Hell, she could lose the entire Twelfth in here. Of course she’d known Castle was wealthy, but this is… this is well past wealthy and heading for super-rich. It’s too much. It’s – scary. He can have anything he wants, up to and possibly including buying medium-sized Caribbean islands. And he wants her? Walks on the beach and marshmallows? Shouldn’t he want supermodels and Nobu and the high life? Not someone who’s in therapy and just a cop and who can’t even be honest with her family – what family? An alcoholic father in remission and she, that’s all: duty visits on a Sunday when she’s not on shift; duty phone calls where they don’t talk about anything. At that point Castle interrupts and she answers without thinking. Castle? That has to be the worst word choice ever, and sure enough Castle seizes on it. At least it lets her get herself back together.

Castle holds her coat for her in a very gentlemanly fashion and she slips into it, wraps her scarf round her neck, and makes sure she has her beret and gloves. They embark on what seems to Beckett to be a half-hour trek through an ever-more intimidating series of beautiful rooms: perfectly decorated but still somehow warm and welcoming. There are no fur rugs in evidence, which rather than reassuring her only convinces her that there are yet more rooms that she hasn’t seen. She preserves a bravely cheerful countenance and marches on. Eventually they exit the rear of the house almost directly on to the beach.
“Here we are. A beach all to ourselves.”

“It’s a bit cold for paddling.” She shivers. The wind coming off the Atlantic is biting. Castle automatically slings an arm around her. “Even if there’s no-one else around.” There is a rather embarrassed silence. “This is yours too, isn’t it?”

“Er… yes.”

“Oh.”

“It’s still me, though. The one who brings you coffee and hugs you and lets you stand down. Don’t make this a problem. It’s only stuff. It’s… it’s like you having a shoe collection that would restock Saks. It’s not you. It’s just stuff. This is just my stuff.”

“Yeah, but you could fit the Saks building into your stuff.”

“Now you’re being silly.” It’s affectionate. He turns her round and into him, tips her face up to his and brings his head down to kiss her possessively. “Still me, Beckett. Still you. Stand down and stop worrying. How many times do I have to say that I know what I want and it’s you? All your little foibles included.”

He kisses her some more, till she’s breathless beneath it: nipping her lip and then soothing, taking possessively and keeping her tightly against him, shielding her from the chill wind blowing off the sea, and the chill wind blowing through her soul. Gradually she eases. He thinks idly that were there a watcher, in some small boat out in the whipping white waves, they’d see a big man protecting a slim woman from the wind, and never guess that actually she’s the one who normally does the protecting: the hard-ass cop with the gun and the shield. Here and now, it’s reversed, but it’s still them. Cop and writer, writer and cop; protector and protected both ways round.

“Shall we go on, or are you cold?” he asks. She curls closer, cheeks whipped rose-red by the raw wind, scarf an emerald contrast, the green blazing against her dark coat and dark hair.

“A little further,” she replies, and stays within his arm as they begin to move, falling into step as easily as if they did this every day, sliding her arm around his waist. The flat boots make the height difference apparent: fitting her neatly into the firm grasp around her.

They walk along for maybe a quarter-mile, up to a smart little boundary post for the next oversize property; turn around, and walk back. The tide is rising, and the wind has not dropped. Storms ahead, Beckett thinks, and doesn’t necessarily mean either the weather or indeed Castle.

“Let’s get inside. It’s chilly, and we can always come out again after lunch, if you want. We could go shell hunting, or skim stones.”

“Okay. Coffee?” she asks hopefully. There hasn’t been any coffee, and she’s feeling the lack.

“Oh my golly gosh!” Castle says theatrically and ridiculously, making her laugh. “How could I forget to caffeinate you? Are you okay? Do you need the ER? Will you faint, or fibrillate, or otherwise flatline? More to the point, will you explode and kill me along the way?”

“No,” Beckett says firmly, to stem the tide of silliness. “None of the above. But coffee would be really nice, please.”

Castle rustles up excellent coffee, pokes around for a moment, and also produces with a congratulatory ha! some Danishes. “I knew Joe would come through,” he says happily. He leads Beckett to an as-yet undiscovered family room with a fireplace which is sized to roast rhinoceroses
(definitely plural) and in which the fire is already laid. There is a fur rug, on which Texas would fit quite nicely with room to spare for a pretty border to surround it. There is a plump couch, on which four giants would sit comfortably, some large armchairs, perfect for reading, and a coffee table. Castle puts the tray of coffee down on the table, wanders to the fire and competently lights it. A few moments later, it’s blazing cheerfully, and Castle and Beckett are comfortably ensconced on the couch.

“This is nice.”

“So my stuff has some advantages?”

“Mmm, suppose so,” Beckett murmurs. Her socked feet are curled up on the couch with the rest of her, blissfully comfortable and warm. The fire warms her more deeply than she’d expected, and the house – or at least this room – carries the same faint aroma of cologne that Castle’s loft does. She drains her mug, and shifts to snuggle into Castle’s broad body. It’s all beautifully cosy.

“This was a really good idea of yours.”

Castle smiles affectionately at her, and in his warm blue eyes, here where there are no memories of any sort, she thinks she sees more than she has before: nothing distorting her view.

“I’m full of good ideas.” And this, he thinks, was definitely a good idea. After that initial shock – maybe he should have prepared her, but he’d (childishly) wanted to surprise her – she’s all snuggly and soft and definitely Kat-ish. He loves this peaceful togetherness, casual conversation about what to have for lunch, maybe another walk before dinner, the discussion opening out into books and movies and simply finding out about each other. He doesn’t ask about anything triggering, and the remains of the morning pass by in undemanding, unassuming closeness.
Safe and warm

Lunch is a thick soup, grilled cheese, and – of course – ice cream. Castle banks the fire very carefully, before Beckett is persuaded into another walk along the beach, and, during their perambulation, is also persuaded to accept the small, perfect piece of dark red quartz, eroded smooth by the sea, that Castle spots and picks up before Beckett’s even noticed it’s there.

“You could get it set into a bracelet, or a ring, or something,” he says happily. He doesn’t suggest a necklace. She wears one already, and unlike his mother, Beckett doesn’t appear to believe in the more is more principle of jewellery.

“I could.” She’s turning it in her fingers, stroking over it, looking at it as if no-one has ever given her a present before. He thinks that if he’d given her rubies, she’d have given them back, but a beach stone that cost nothing but a keen eye and a swoop to pick it up: not even a malicious Atlantic wave to defeat in order to collect it (Just as well. His toes would be frostbitten before he ever got home to take off his soaking socks.) has delighted her.

“Shall we go back?”

“You promised me hot chocolate.” She smiles happily. “And marshmallows.” The smile acquires a tinge of mischief. “And wicked ways.” She laughs. “But you’ll have to catch me first.”

And she takes off running, back towards the house. Castle hesitates for only a millisecond before going after her, but doesn’t catch her until she’s only feet away from the door, laughing at him. He grabs her, swings her up in his arms and round and round till he’s laughing too, and then he can’t help but kiss her, and then he puts her back on her feet and the kiss becomes hard, and deep, and passionate: pinning her between his hard body and the door, pressing into her and taking her with him, her hands in his hair, the buttons of her coat open and reaches inside and under the angora jumper and t-shirt below to the heated silk of her bare skin and she squeaks as his cold fingers touch her but he swallows the squeak and contains her wriggle and runs hands firmly up and down her back till one stops at the base of her skull and one over her ass and she’s trapped between him and the door again, on the inside.

His wide hand span lets him pull the coat down by its collar and, when she drops her hands, the coat falls from her to the floor. She undoes Castle’s coat, skimming elegant hands over his pecs; down and then up to push it, too, away. Her hands move back down to his firm ass, bringing him in to give her strength and force and pressure where she wants it. Somehow here, with nothing to remind her of anything, she’s free of her own memories: free to act as she pleases, free to be confident and happy and able to give back, not just take from his strength.

She slides one hand round to his front and undoes his belt, the button of his jeans, slips that same hand up under his t-shirt and detaches it so that her fingers are free to roam his skin and that lights him up: her own jeans suddenly around her ankles, his hand cupping her and she can’t think, she can’t speak: she can only feel and react and he’s sliding thick fingers into her and a thumb over her and she knows she’s soaked, knows she’s so close and he’s stopping just before she can explode: heat building in her core and she yanks his mouth down over hers and lets him drive her up and up even while she has just enough mind left to bring her own hand back round and down and inside to
find him hard and she touches him and grips and slides and rubs her thumb over the damp tip and that’s it: he loses all control and her panties are gone and he’s so big inside her and Castle don’t stop Castle! and he takes her scream as she takes all of him and he flicks his thumb across her and she clenches and throbs around his thrusts and they’re gone, lost together.

He holds her close and keeps her warm, opens his eyes and suddenly laughs.

“Uh?” she says.

“You’ve still got your beret on,” he grins. “Sexy.”

She reaches up. She does. “Ooops,” she – giggles? She doesn’t giggle. She really doesn’t – but that was absolutely a giggle. Castle’s smiling down, still merged with her, and his eyes are warm and affectionate and she simply snuggles against him for a moment.

She’s not expecting simply to be hoisted up and conveyed to the – the? There will be more than one. A – bathroom, swiftly stripped, and then pushed into a double size shower where Castle displays unusual focus on the correct way to wash. To wash her, that would be. He smooths shower gel – so that’s where his slightly spicy scent comes from – over her shoulders, tutting slightly at the still-lurid bruising, down her arms and up again, and massages it into her firm breasts with considerably more attention to detail and the correct angle of fingers and thumbs than she might use, leaving her panting and arching into his naughty, addictive hands.

He moves those hands away to rub shower gel into her legs from the feet up, kneeling at her feet and reaching higher and higher. Then he smiles like a cherub and moves his hands like an incubus – she hadn’t even noticed him rinse the remains of the gel off them – and she opens for his fingers slipping through slickness that doesn’t come from soap and then he leans forward and licks and has to hold her hips and then push her back against the shower wall and carry on and on and on. She’s writhing under the water as his tongue moves over and over and in and out and his fingers join in: she hadn’t even noticed him rinse the remains of the gel off them – and she opens for his fingers slipping through slickness that doesn’t come from soap and then he leans forward and licks and has to hold her hips and then push her back against the shower wall and carry on and on and on. She’s writhing under the water as his tongue moves over and over and in and out and his fingers join in: she’s screaming for more and just before it’s all too much he stands up and lifts her slightly and moves within her and that’s all it takes.

Castle props Beckett up against the wall until her eyes open again, sleepy, hazy and fogged with sex. She reaches up and pulls his head down to kiss him as possessively as ever he’s kissed her, wraps her long fingers around him and begins to play. He’s instantly regenerated. She slithers down his neck, throat, chest, folds elegantly to descend past his sternum, navel, and ends on her knees with her mouth around him and he could almost explode right there but controls himself until she does something that’s so filthy co-ordinated between her fingers and her mouth and tongue and Christ teeth Beckett fuck Beckett! that he’s utterly mind blown. Or just blown.

He sinks down beside her and lets the hot water beat on his head till his brain works again, holding her hand like two school kids in the playground, with her head on his shoulder.

When they’re dry, and dressed again, Beckett peeps up at him through thick lashes. “I didn’t get my marshmallows,” she pouts, playfully sulky in a way he’s never seen.

“I got my wicked way,” Castle smirks, “so I suppose it’s only fair that you should get hot chocolate and toast your marshmallows in the fire.”

Beckett flicks a quick, insinuating glance over him, stopping midway. “I could toast your… marshmallows,” she murmurs.

“Maybe later,” Castle purrs lazily, as he presents Beckett with a toasting fork and the largest
packet of marshmallows she’s ever seen. “Now, do you want marshmallows in your hot chocolate?”

“Mmm, yes please. It wouldn’t be hot chocolate without marshmallows.”

Rich, luxurious hot chocolate duly appears, rife with marshmallows and – Beckett thinks – possibly flavoured with a tiny dash of orange syrup. It’s delicious. Almost as delicious as being snuggled into Castle’s sweater and warm embrace in a place with no memories whatsoever: in which she has, unexpectedly, found a little piece of Kate-before-it-all-went-wrong. Here, she thinks, she can be a combination of that much younger, happy Kate and her well-hidden Kat persona: softly sensual and strangely feminine, able to relax and rely on the man beside her and stand down. While she’s here. Time out from her normal burdens. She finishes the truly excellent hot chocolate and nestles as closely as she can manage, which turns out to be very close indeed. By the time she’s finished nestling she’s on his lap with her head on one shoulder (such a usefully wide shoulder) and her hand draped over the other. Conveniently, that lets Castle wrap his arms around her and stroke very gently over her fluffy jumper.

Castle surveys his lapful of Beckett with considerable delight and not a little bemusement. He is delighted that Beckett arrived in his lap without his input – every other time, he’s either put or encouraged her there – but he is rather bemused by this happy, flirtatious, fluffy Beckett. Half Kate, half Kat, and not Beckett at all. Katwoman? He rapidly decides that saying that would not be a good plan, and compromises with stroking that oh-so-pettable jumper. It dawns on him that she chose it quite deliberately to appeal to his instincts, and allows said instincts freedom to stroke. With an unusual exertion of moderation, he decides that too much stroking at this juncture of the day would mean that they were late for the dinner reservation he has made at the Plaza Café, and he really, really thinks that Beckett will like it. The fur rug can wait till later. Petting will have to do right now. He might not pout at the constraints of time – but he thinks about pouting.

When Beckett sashays out of a – not his, which is unfair – bedroom dressed in a clinging crimson dress that shows off every curve and is cut beautifully to swirl around and emphasise her incredible legs, Castle nearly swallows his tongue. He manages to conceal his visceral reaction, which involves two fast steps followed by crushing Beckett into his chest and then sweeping her into his bed and damn the dinner, and produces his best suave tones.

“You look lovely, Beckett.”

“Thank you. Where are we going?”

“It’s a surprise. You’ll see when we get there. But I’m sure you’ll like it.”

“Mm,” she murmurs seductively. “How were you going to make sure it’s a surprise? Blindfold me?”

She can’t say things like that and bite her lip like that and peep seductively through her lashes like that if she wants him to eat dinner with her. It’s unfair and unkind. On the other hand, later, he will be as assertively masculine as she wants him to be. Two can play this game. Two will play this game. He holds her coat for her and as she slips into it smooths it down over her back, lingering on her rear; offers his arm for her to take and escorts her to the car service.

Dinner is, as expected, fabulous. It’s the most normal meal they’ve ever had together – just like a real date should be. Conversation is light, witty and charming; the food is incredible; the wine well-chosen and excellent. Beckett is so amazingly relaxed that she even consents to a second
glass. They share tastes of each other’s dishes, though Beckett, regarding her dessert with predatory delight, ensures that Castle’s taste would barely suffice as a bite for an anorexic mouse. By the time dessert is done and coffee on the table, Castle’s large hand is lying over Beckett’s, and much to his surprise (but maybe it’s not so surprising from this – well, *romantic*, relaxed Kat-Kate-definitely-not-Beckett) she turns her hand upward under his so that they’re palm to palm and fingers wrapped around the heel of each hand.

“That was great,” Beckett says happily, licking coffee off her lips. Castle’s sure that gesture wasn’t meant to be as openly provocative as it actually was. “Really delicious.” Her eyes are dreamy. “This was a really good idea.” She smiles wholly openly, in a contentedly satisfied fashion.

He’s never seen her like this – he didn’t realise she could *be* like this. It dawns on him that this is how Kat-Kate might have been if she’d never been ripped apart by her father’s alcoholism, and for a moment he wishes that Jim could see the damage he’s done. He pulls his anger back. Jim has seen the damage he’s done, and it’s Castle who told him to let Beckett have a few days, to let Beckett come to Jim. He refocuses on beautifully relaxed Beckett, and idly wonders whether the dress is as gorgeous to touch as to look at. He intends to find out, once they’re home.

He doesn’t manage (again) to touch the enticingly crimson dress when he holds her coat for her, but sitting in the luxurious car from the service he does what he hadn’t done earlier (because if he had they’d never have made it out the house to dinner) and slides a broad hand on to her knee. The dress is delectably soft. Almost as soft and strokable as Beckett when she’s Kat. Tonight – today – she’s not quite been Kat, but she’s definitely not Beckett, and bringing her out here was equally definitely the best idea he’s had in months. Removing her from her normal habitat has completely changed the game. He could – he *will* – take her right out of the USA on to some deserted tropical island where they can spend a *lot* of time together. Naked. He doesn’t just mean in flesh, either. Somewhere he can see her mind, without her barriers, just like today; somewhere they can talk about nothing, and everything; about now, and forever; about them, and love.

For now, he’ll take her home, and make love to her, and when she’s fixed herself, there will be time to talk of all the rest. Maybe not even when she’s fixed, maybe as soon as when she’s able to tell him she *is* fixing herself.

“You awake, Castle?”

“Sure,” he says lazily, coming out of his reverie and realising that his hand is still on her knee, and that her dress is definitely strokable, and that her hand has slipped over his. The short journey home seems very, very long.

“We’re home,” he says with some relief, and hands her out of the car.

“Home?”

“Home. Where I live, in the summer, and some weekends.”

Her hand stays twined in his, which makes opening the door a little troublesome but is far too pleasant to break off. He has to let go to take his, and her, coat off, but then he’s free to run curious hands up and down the dress, to wrap his arm around her waist and steer her gently to the same family room as earlier, to draw her smoothly into his embrace and kiss her delicately, insinuatingly: the kiss in counterpoint to the controlled force in his clasp. He teases the seam of her lips, pressing a little, sensing that she’s slipped into the strange space of femininity where she’s happy for him to take the lead, to assert his potency and passion and for her to respond: to be soft to his hard.
He pulls them both gently down on to the rug, in front of the banked fire, the only light in the room; kneeling with his hands cupping her face, then further down, till they’re lying together, still clothed, in the flickering light and the dancing shadows. For a while, they simply kiss, learning once more each other’s mouths and faces, then Castle becomes more forceful, little nips on her lip, a more possessive thrust of tongue, bringing her tighter against him and one hand over her ass, rucking up the skirt of her dress so that soon he’s spanning bare skin and silky panties; his other hand cradling her skull so that she’s wholly open to his inexorably questing mouth. She feels so right in his grasp, so perfectly fitted to him. He doesn’t believe that he could ever have enough of her against him.

He moves his fingers from her deliciously curved backside up over the rucked up skirt to the fastening at the top of the dress, undoes it and slowly unzips, the susurration of the metal interspersed with the quiet hiss of the fire and occasional sparks, and with their slightly deeper breathing. Desire hangs heavily in the air, sensuality surrounds them, the promise of passion potent and portending pleasure. The tips of his fingers dance down the point of each vertebra, leave the catch of her bra untouched as the dress falls to each side of his touch. She rubs herself against him, a little restless, a little demanding, and he takes her mouth again and slides the dress away from her lithe form.

She retaliates by undoing his button-down, leaving them skin-to-skin, heat building where they touch; but Castle rolls her off and pushes himself up on an elbow and then to sitting, gazing at his Kat stretched out on the fur rug in the firelight, intriguing shadows in the contours of her body and the glow of the fire reflected in her eyes and streaking her hair. She’s wearing deep coloured silk, almost-revealing and sexier for it, designed to please the eye and, he has no doubt, chosen with extreme care. He traces around its edges and she purrs contentedly as she arches a fraction into his firm touch, searching for his petting and finding it.

Petting soon changes up to be stroking, then palming and rolling, then his mouth gets to play and she’s mewling now, wanting more, her leg curled around his middle and keeping him pressed to her body – he has no intention of leaving – her nails in his neck and the more he nips and suckles and soothes the more she wants and the harder she holds him to her. He could, he knows, take her right up and over the edge like this, right here and now – and why should he not? They’ve all night, here, and in his enormous bed, and he loves being able to do this, knowing he can undo her so easily, as she can and no doubt will with him. So he continues to play with her breasts and the mewls turn to moans turn to more turn to a long soft sigh of release and she’s lax in his arms, cuddling him.
Cuddles in front of the fire or not, his Kat is beginning to shiver. In addition, fur or no fur rug burn is a serious possibility and would be really quite uncomfortable. By contrast, his bed is just through that doorway right there and is soft, comfortable and will not induce burns of any sort. He sits up, keeping his cuddled up Kat on his lap – she’s still wearing her bra, now somewhat disarranged and noticeably damp, and her panties, which are also noticeably damp – and then brings them both to standing without letting go. Kat letting go is, it seems, almost as likely as a magnet letting go of iron.

“Bedtime,” he rumbles into her ear, and adds a wet lick along the nerve. She stays still, so he simply picks her up, sweeping her into his arms, and aims for his bedroom. She doesn’t fight it in the slightest, only nestles into him with her own arms round his neck and a sated smile on her face. He drops her in the middle of the bed, shucks his shirt and pants before she’s worked out where she is, and leans over her in a dangerously predatory fashion.

“My Kat,” he says definitively, sure that here she both is, and will accept being called, Kat. “Let’s see if you purr.”

“Miaow,” she giggles. Really, truly giggles, and then scrapes nails down his chest. “Let’s see if you purr.”

“I don’t purr,” Castle growls. “I make you purr. And then I’m going to make you scream.”

“You think?” definitely-Kat, who didn’t even try to kill him for calling her so, smirks. “I think you’ll be shouting my name.”

“You first, Kat. You’ll be first.”

This is not fair. He’s using all his size and weight to make sure she can’t find freedom to play. She can’t even move her astonishingly flexible legs to tickle him with her toes – her hands are currently firmly held at her sides by his, and his mischievously mobile mouth is nibbling its way southward from her sternum and she knows what he’s going to do and just for once maybe she doesn’t care that she’s losing a game and oh oh oh he’s drawn a warm wet circle in her navel and it tickles and teases and tantalises and she’s squeaking and squirming and soaking and he’s still moving south and whiffling the neat curls and he is so close to where she wants him and so close to what he should be doing and it’s not fair that he isn’t.

And then he does. His tongue circles firmly and she doesn’t even try to stop the high-pitched cry. Okay. Scream. But he’s not satisfied with just the one scream, or with just the one lick. His tongue is wickedly talented and he’s using all that talent on her: tracing through the folds, flicking lightly over nerves and then sliding in a little way but not far enough more Castle! and he’s still holding her hands in his so she can’t direct his head and his shoulders are holding her apart and oh god oh god oh fuck his mouth and teeth and Castle now Castle! but he stops and grins.

“You screamed,” he says smugly. She can’t say anything at all. “I liked it.” He leans back down, and starts again. This time, when she cries out, he doesn’t stop, and she shatters on his name.

Castle is cuddling her in a very smug fashion. Okay, so he won, but so did she, she supposes rather blurrily. Still, in a moment she’ll prove that this Kat has claws. Metaphorically speaking. She rearranges herself to be suitably draped across his lovely warm chest, and is not disappointed in the lovely warm cuddle that follows her. She snuggles in, and luxuriates in the strength and comfort
surrounding her in her post-orgasmic glow.

After a while, Beckett’s brain and unfamiliar sense of happy mischievousness reassert themselves. Castle has been idly petting her, twisting little locks of hair and playing with her fingers while she lies across him, but now it’s time to wreak a little good-natured and pleasurable revenge. Payback can be so sweet… She wiggles downward, ignoring the mild complaint this provokes, and spends some quality time applying both her lips and her fingernails to Castle’s flat nipples and broad pecs. He wriggles very pleasingly, and his breathing is already faster, heavier. She squirms downward, twining her legs over a solidly muscular thigh, listening to his breaths come harder and acquire a tinge of groan; tracing her tongue over the line of dark hair below his navel, and then moving to the side. There is a disappointed noise.

Beckett tuts. How unfortunate that to do so she has to turn her head back towards the – er – central column, and even more so that the tip of her tongue flicks out and touches it. There is an extremely pleasing jerk and noise. It sounds very like tease. Damn right she is. She tuts again at his comment, with the same effect. Then she drops a couple of carefully placed kisses just out of range of anywhere interesting, and then moves back to amuse herself some more.

By the time she’s finished unfulfilling flicks and tiny touches of her fingers, Castle’s commentary has reached an interestingly falsetto pitch and his hands are clamped round her head – but he’s just managing not to move her where he wants her. It’s pretty clear where he wants her. She’ll get there in her own good time. Anticipation will improve matters, and besides which, he teased her excessively and with relish. Sauce for the Castle goose, and all that. She curves her fingers around his base and flickers the tips of her nails over the sensitive skin. He groans. She slides firmly up and down. More groans, interspersed, as she continues, with some very naughty words.

Finally she does what she’s been hinting at for some time, and dips her head to take him in her mouth and that’s what drags her name from him, over and over and over again until he’s devoid of words and explodes.

Castle pulls his Kat up over him again and tucks her in. Later, they can play some more. Later. He loves this – yes, playful Kat. He drifts off with her curled into him, on a cloud of happiness and affection.

Beckett wakes with a slight feeling of unreality as a result of the completely unfamiliar room. Sometime in the night she’s rolled out of Castle’s arms, but there’s a hand on her hip which is anchoring her to the one familiar presence here: Castle’s wide body and spicy male scent. She feels great. She’s slept like a stone, for the first time in a long time, not worried by anything, not fretting about anyone. She turns over and finds that she’s being observed by a pair of warm blue eyes.

“You’re awake,” he says superfluously.

“Mmm.”

“It’s nine o’clock.”

“What?”

“I’ve been awake for a while.” Beckett peers out of still-sleepy eyes and notices a mug on Castle’s nightstand. “You didn’t even twitch when I got out of bed. You must really have needed the break.”

She flops back. Castle leans over her. “But we’ve still got plenty of time before we need to leave.”
His smile turns lazy. “I can think of at least one way to pass the time.”

Beckett smiles back up at him. “Give me a minute, and then let’s see what your … pastimes … might be.” She slips out of bed, naked as Eve, and shortly returns with no embarrassment and a slinky sashay for good measure, as confident in her own skin as a Persian cat. Castle, sitting on the bed waiting for her, clearly appreciates her. She slides on to the bed and then on to his lap.

“God, you feel good,” he rumbles, and moves slightly to slide through her. She hums, and nips at his neck. He turns her head, and kisses her hard and deeply, and when she’s clinging to his shoulders and wholly responsive lifts her to bring her down around him, slowly, and she’s perfect and tight and hot and wet and she’s gripping him and he slides her up and down on him, and then they’re moving in rhythm and then they’re gone.

“I need a shower,” Beckett says, “and then we’ll need to go. I have to be home for later.” She doesn’t look happy about it.

“Shower, then. I’ll follow you.” He’d like to join her, but she’s right: they do have to leave, and if he joins her they’ll not be out of the shower till the hot water runs out. With the size of his hot water tank, that would be tomorrow.

“Thanks, Castle,” Beckett says as he pulls up at her block. “That was” – she pauses – “just what I needed.” But now it’s over.

“Any time, Beckett. Any time.”

“See you tomorrow.” She even drops a light-hearted kiss on him, and swiftly pulls away before it turns into more.

“Till tomorrow.” He’s grinning happily at her.

She watches him pull away into the traffic, and goes up to her apartment, the weight of seeing her father in a few hours re-descending on her shoulders. She spends that time attending to her chores and definitely not second-guessing what her dad’s going to say. She reinstates her bright, sociable, loving shell and pushes down the worry and terror that he’s going to start down a line that she doesn’t want to talk about. Whenever it tries to pop back up, she picks up the stone Castle had given her on the beach and turns it over and over between her fingers, forcing herself to think only of how much she’d enjoyed the weekend, how much it had provided ease and respite. How much he had provided ease and respite.

But this evening she’ll have to do it on her own. She couldn’t ask Castle to come with her, just like she couldn’t ask him to be there when the therapy session was over. Only she can save herself, and she has to save herself. Somehow, she has to keep her dad saved while she saves herself. And on that thought it’s time to go.

The little red stone is in her pocket as she leaves; her hand in her pocket, turning it and turning it. She’s turning it again when she’s going up to her father’s apartment.

“Hi, Dad,” she says.

“Katie. Good to see you.” He hugs her. She manages to hug him back. “I got a pie from Fairway, like you wanted.”

“Yum,” she says, with a well-counterfeited semblance of happiness.
Dinner, and especially the pie, is delicious: the pie warmed and slathered with whipped cream. Beckett demolishes her portion in short order. Dinner has been accompanied by light conversation in which her dad hasn’t asked anything difficult, and Beckett is consequently less tense and rather less guarded.

“Let’s play Sorry, Dad.”

“Okay.”

They set it up and begin.

“So, I guess you’re over your stomach bug?” Jim asks.

“Yeah. It was nasty,” she says, with emphasis. “Had to take a couple of days off.”

“Really? That sounds pretty serious, if you had to take time off. Why didn’t you tell me?” The question is silk-smooth, stiletto-sharp.

“It was just an upset stomach, Dad. Couple of days at home sorted it out. It’s not like you can do anything except wait it out.”

“You sounded pretty upset Monday morning. If you weren’t feeling good, why’d you go to work?”

She shrugs, and moves a piece.

“Katie.” She flicks a glance at him. “You didn’t have a stomach upset. You had a temper upset. Why were you so upset at Julia Berowitz?” He is determined to get to the bottom of this. He might not have been much of a parent for ten years, but something’s wrong with Katie and he’s going to find out what.

“I must’ve already been sick. She wasn’t listening to you and she should’ve. Normally it wouldn’t bother me, but I guess I just wasn’t on my game.”

Jim raises a very disbelieving eyebrow. “You didn’t look sick to me, and you didn’t sound sick on Monday morning. You lost your temper, both times. You haven’t done that in years. Why were you so upset, Katie? You’ve heard the story before. I told you it, when I got dry, when I asked for forgiveness, when I made amends. Why did you get so angry last Sunday?”

Beckett says nothing.

“I’m your dad, Katie. I just want you to be okay. But you weren’t okay, and I don’t think you’re really okay now. Tell me what’s wrong, Bug.” He’s almost pleading.

“Nothing’s wrong, Dad.”

Jim looks exasperatedly at his daughter, who is as downright infuriating and obdurate as she was aged fifteen and all teen attitude and negativity. “Do I have to remind you of what you said on Monday? You said you were still trying. What are you still trying to do? You saved me. There’s nothing more you need to do.”

She’s still silent. Then she speaks. “There’s nothing wrong, Dad. Stop worrying.”

“You’re worrying me, Katie. You lose your temper, you don’t take my call, and now you’re telling me there’s nothing wrong when it’s clear that there is. It all started because of the Berowitzes, didn’t it? Why’d you get so involved with them?”
“They needed help. Their son was murdered, and I caught it.”

“That’s not what I mean. Why did you search Manhattan for her husband? That wasn’t your job.”

“She called me. Protect and serve, Dad. That’s the job.”

Jim barely restrains a sharp answer. Katie is evading everything he asks and he is becoming quite seriously annoyed with her. He is also quite certain that there is something much more important that she isn’t telling him.

“Yes,” Beckett says, with some relief. This subject, she feels she can handle. “He’d never had Georgian cooking or wine before.” She expounds happily on her dishes and the dinner for a few minutes.

“Sounds lovely,” Jim says, and smiles. He’s just had a really good idea. “Now that we’ve been for dinner at theirs, they should all come for dinner at one of our places. Reciprocity. That would be really nice. I had a great time with them all – even if Martha Rodgers’s dress colours would stop the traffic in Times Square. Do you think I should get sunglasses?”

“I think that might be a little obvious, Dad,” Beckett says, utterly without thought. “Invite them all back? She barely made it through the first dinner, what with both Castle’s happy family setup and her own dad being so comfortable with the Castle family.

“Maybe. So, what do you think? Invite them all round? I’ll help you cook.” He looks at his daughter. She’s turned a little white. His concern that she had been off at Rick’s reasserts itself. He is going to push this, though. “Next Saturday, if they’re all free?” Katie’s face has tightened up. “After all, you said there was nothing wrong and you’ve clearly fixed things with Rick, so there should be no problem. I’ll be delighted to see them again. It was great, the way they welcomed me in. Martha’s clearly had an interesting life, and I’d love to hear more about the theatre from a backstage perspective. Alexis was really cute, as well. Totally different from you, though.”

“Yeah. Not exactly a rebel type,” Beckett manages to force out in a relatively cheerful tone.

“Not if she wants to know about being a lawyer before age eighteen. Anyway, I’d really like to have them over. They’re so easy to get on with. It’s great being around them. It’s just like being part of a family again,” he says thoughtlessly.

“Is it?” Beckett can’t stop the hurt snap.

“What do you mean?” She almost stops breathing, stone-still. “What do you mean, Katie?” Jim hesitates, suddenly realising that he’s fallen over something serious.

“Nothing. It’s really nice you got on with them so well.”

“That implies that you don’t get on with them,” Jim says, legal ability to analyse the slightest textual nuance to the fore. “Don’t you like Rick’s family?”

There’s an unpleasant pause. Beckett can see the void opening under her feet. Say no, and her father will question. Say yes – because she does like them, it’s just the easy, happy relationships that catch her on the raw and make her feel guilty and unhappy and not good enough – and her father will force her into this dinner. She is not hosting the dinner. She just can’t. She just can’t
bear seeing her father being part of their family when he’s just said that they’re a better family than she is. She barely made it through the dinner at Castle’s, where she could leave. She can’t do it at hers, where she couldn’t leave.

And then the void swallows her anyway.

“Why don’t you like being there? They’re a nice family, and it was great to be part of that again. They were nothing but nice to you, and you’re involved with Rick, so what’s up, Katie? We taught you better than that.”

It’s all too much: the implied telling-off, the accusatory tone. Her father shouldn’t force her like this. He’s been picking and pushing and forcing the issue for a week and she’s been hiding the truth from him for years to keep him safe and all she gets in return is told off because she’s not behaving properly and the chance to watch him fit right into someone else’s family when he’d ruined it all for her and doesn’t even remember that he did. And now he’s outright told her that being with her isn’t being a family. All her previously unacknowledged pain, all the hurt she’s never dealt with, comes to the fore.

“Yeah, you did. When you were still able to set an example. When Mom was still here. Before you got drunk for five years and I had to walk away because I wasn’t enough for you to want to live.”

Jim goes white. “Katie…” But she runs right over him.

“I don’t want them in my apartment and if you invite them here I won’t come. You can play happy families with a happy family all you want, Dad, if I’m not enough of one for you. I wasn’t enough to save you and it looks like I’m still not enough now. It doesn’t matter what I’ve done to try and keep you safe because it’s only you who keeps yourself sober. Nothing to do with me. I’m done trying. I’m done.”

She’s crying as she stands up and walks out, Jim static, frozen and white behind her, calling Katie, Katie come back too late as the door shuts. He’s dialling her phone frantically, over and over, but she doesn’t pick up. He’s her father, and she won’t even take his calls – just like years ago. She won’t take his calls: it just rings straight through to voicemail, over and over.

He dials another number.

“Ed? Ed, can I talk to you awhile? I think I’ve really screwed up. Katie… I knew there was something wrong and I wanted her to tell me about it. I thought… I thought… I’m her dad, and I just wanted to help. But she lost it and she said… she said she wasn’t enough and she’s done trying. I really thought she understood that she was everything that saved me, but she’s just walked out on me and she thinks she doesn’t matter to me. Ed, what do I do now?”
Beckett can barely see the road through blurred eyes, and wipes her nose at every cross-street. She’s finally smashed her last taboo in temper and hurt, because her father wants a happier family than she can ever be. She wants, very badly, to stop at a store and buy booze, but she doesn’t. She won’t go down like he did. Pride keeps her driving till she gets to her alcohol free home; pride keeps her upright as she closes her door; pride moves her through her night-time routine and into bed.

Pride is all she’s got to keep her going. And if her father’s finally broken her, she who had never broken in these ten years of saving him and now having it all thrown away because he wants to be part of a family, then she’ll cling to her pride to glue herself back together. Clearly she doesn’t count as family. Clearly he’s never really forgiven her for walking away, and all his talk that she saved him was a lie. A lie for a lie. All the last five years, all a lie. She’d sacrificed everything to make them a family for five whole years, and it had all been for nothing. She’d done it all because she’d thought that he wanted a family again, that he needed her. But she’s not enough family for him and he didn’t need her. She’s wasted her life on him: spent all this time protecting him from her feelings – feelings she’d kept rammed down and hidden away so well she hadn’t realised she had them – and it’s all been utterly pointless because he never wanted or needed her anyway. She should have known. Only he could save himself.

She hasn’t answered her phone once. She’s stayed as resolutely uncontactable as the first time, at the same immense cost. But she can’t do it. She can’t pretend any more, if her father doesn’t think they’re a family. She can only try to save herself from the wreckage.

She cries herself to sleep, no matter how much pride tries to stop the tears, and in the morning is extra-careful with her make-up. Emergency eye-drops take most of the red puffiness away, and blending covers the shadows beneath. Work has always been her solace and salvation, and today is no exception. It’s the one place she’s safe. Ryan and Esposito don’t ask questions, and it’s only paperwork unless a new body drops so likely Castle won’t come in.

She’s dealing with yet another cold case file, pretending to be placid, when the next body drops. While she is desperate for the distraction: work in which she can lose herself and simply be the best, be enough, she really doesn’t want to see Castle while she’s still scraped raw on her father’s decision that Castle’s family is where he’d rather be. It reminds her far too much of how her father has just abandoned her. However much she appreciates the peace Castle can bring her, she’d rather have had a day to cover it all over. She’s not going to get it, though. She takes a deep breath, and dials.

“Beckett,” Castle says happily. “We got a new body? Please tell me we’ve got a new body.”

“We’ve got a new body. Meet me at East River Bikeway opposite East 6th. All I know is it’s female, so far. See you there.”

“Be there in a few moments.” He sounds utterly enthusiastic as the call ends.

Beckett gets to the bikeway to find Ryan and Esposito standing by a corpse in the tree-spattered verge outside the fencing of the East River Park Track. Naturally, Lanie is the attending ME. Just what she didn’t need. At least she knows that Perlmutter wouldn’t pry.

“What do we got?” she says, and takes some pleasure in the ungrammatical construction.
“Female. Delaine Roberts, age 29, from her licence.”

“Blunt force trauma to the head and chest,” Lanie says, very professionally and very coolly. “Might have been a baseball bat, but there’s a lot of blood. I need to get her back to the morgue to see if there’s more to it. Time of death looks like around three, four hours ago.”

There is indeed a lot of blood. And brains, and mess. Beckett pulls on gloves and delicately checks the inside of the woman’s purse, lying beside her body. “No wallet, no cash. No phone.”

“Phone was in her pocket, Beckett,” Espo says. “I got it already.”

“Good.” She extends a hand, and the bag containing the phone passes between them. “Looks like a standard mugging, at first glance.”

“But you think it wasn’t,” comes Castle’s voice from behind her. Beckett jumps, and nearly plants her ass in the earth.

“I’m sure it wasn’t. Too much violence for a mugging, and why kill her? Look at her. She’s tiny. If she’s 5’2” I’ll eat my hat – and they’ve left a rather pretty necklace, bracelet and rings – so she’s married – and her phone. If they were muggers they’d have taken the lot.” She straightens up.

“Okay. Dr Parrish, you can take her away. Can I have a better time of death as soon as you know it, please?” She turns away from Lanie, whose expression indicates that she’s not impressed by Beckett’s formality and dismissal of her as just another part of the scene-of-crime team. “Get the sweepers to see if they can pick up blood trail or footprints or anything. Any cameras round here?”

“No,” Ryan says, with some annoyance. “Nearest are on 8th and 9th, other side of FDR Drive.”

“Get them anyway. Maybe there’ll be something on them. Let’s get back and start running her – Espo!”

“Yo?”

“Get uniforms to start canvassing, see if anyone saw anything, even if it’s street people. ‘Kay?”

“On it.” He disappears to start handing out orders.

“Ryan, see you back at the precinct with any footage, okay?”

“On it,” he also says, and disappears.

“Castle, c’mon. We’ll start finding out who she is.”

“Okay.” He pauses, and looks closely at her. She thinks he’s about to say something, when he obviously decides against it. “Let’s go.”

Castle could tell from the moment he arrived at the scene that something is very wrong with Beckett, and it’s not only Lanie’s presence. The stress fractures are back in her voice, lurking under her normal on-the-job command tones, and her shoulders are tight. When she stands up, packs off the rest of the gang to an assortment of necessary actions and finally turns so he can see her face, it’s clear to him that her make-up is hiding a distressed night about which she didn’t call him. He almost says so, but shuts his mouth in time. Saying did you have a row with your dad isn’t a conversation to be had over a new corpse. Nor is why didn’t you call me. Anyway, he knows exactly why she didn’t call: it’s the same reason she wouldn’t let him in after last Sunday’s fiasco. She feels that she’s let herself down, or she can’t bear the contrast with her own father, and she can’t stand anyone else seeing either matter.
Still, in her cruiser, before she moves off, he skates fingers softly over her hand and then grips it, just once. *I’m here, I’m here for you.* He doesn’t expect a response, and is therefore not surprised when she doesn’t press in return.

“Not now. Please,” she says, and the rest of the journey proceeds in silence, during which time Castle worries more and more. He is already plotting how to call Jim, and when – as soon as he can plead a need for a break, he thinks.

Back at her murder board Beckett is absolutely her normal precinct self, terrifyingly focused on Delaine Roberts. She hands the phone off to a tech to extract the number and contacts, and starts to draw her timeline.

“Okay,” she says, “she’s married, and she was beaten to death – probably – between seven and noon this morning.”

“That’s a bit wider than Lanie thought?”

“When Dr Parrish” – Castle winces at the evidence of the damage to Beckett and Lanie’s friendship, though fortunately she can’t see it – “firms up, we’ll narrow it down. Weather’s been so variable, we need to be careful. Let’s start running her.”

Mrs Roberts turns out to live in Stuyvesant Town. Shortly after that, they’re knocking on her door. It’s opened by a dishevelled-looking man, yawning widely. He looks as if he’s hurriedly got out of bed and thrown on jeans and a t-shirt, run his hands through his light brown hair. He’s wearing a wedding ring which matches the one on Mrs Roberts’ finger.

“Mr Roberts?”

“That’s me.” His expression is confused. “Dr Trey Roberts. What d’you want?”

“Detective Kate Beckett, NYPD. I’m sorry to tell you that your wife has been killed.”

“No!”

He falls apart in front of them. Beckett walks in, followed by Castle, who shuts the door. Beckett’s hands are fully occupied steering Dr Roberts to a chair and sitting him down in it. Fat, ugly tears are on his chiselled cheeks. Castle looks around and spots a box of Kleenex, passes it to Beckett, who hands it to Mr Roberts.

“Dr Roberts, I know this is hard for you. Could you tell me about your wife?”

Through tears and sniffing, he does. “Della was a physiotherapist. Had a good practice. Doing really well.”

“What do you do?”

“I’m a doctor. A resident at Bellevue. Trauma – I was on nights this week, so I only got in early afternoon, maybe at two, when I got done with my surgery list. Della usually went out around seven, so I didn’t see her.”

“Did you see her last night?”

“Yeah. We had dinner, chicken and salad, nothing fussy, then I had to go to work.”

“Why would Della be down at the East River Park this morning?”
His mouth drops open. “What? Della? She wouldn’t.”

“I’m afraid she did. She was found on the East River Bikeway.” Beckett spares him the details. It’s going to be bad enough later, and his whereabouts will be easy to check. She needn’t say that now.

“Dr Roberts, is there someone who can come and be with you?”

He starts to well up again. “No. My family’s in Wisconsin. Della was from Indiana. We met at NYU. I just wanna be on my own.”

“I’ll need to talk to you again, Dr Roberts, but not today. I’m sorry for your loss.”

Castle has stayed completely quiet, unusually. He’s thought that the best thing for this morning is to let Beckett do what she does best, empathise with the grieving husband and do her job. She needs her work. (She needs him, too, but not now.)

“We’ll check with Bellevue, but I don’t think it’s him.” She scrunches up her nose and chews her lip thoughtfully. “Who’d want to beat a physiotherapist to death?”

“Anyone who didn’t like the pain,” Castle says. “Physio hurts.”

She turns to look at Castle. “Yeah, I know. But murder is a bit extreme. What’s the story here?”

“If I were writing it,” Castle muses, “I’d make it look like professional jealousy. She sounds quite successful, and she’s still quite young. Bit like you, really. But it could be a patient.”

“If it was a patient, though, how are they going to be strong enough to beat her to death? Physio is usually about people who aren’t physically fit. That took muscle, and fury.”

The conversation has taken them back to the Twelfth. Beckett scribbles on her board until the boys show up. There is no useful camera footage, which is annoying. On the other hand, the phone has been persuaded to spill its guts out to the techs, and there is a list of contacts and a list of numbers which Della called, together with numbers who’d called her, already. Beckett smiles with feral satisfaction.

“Ryan?”

“Yo?”

“Get these numbers identified. And this time if you find something good leave it on the top of the pile, not the bottom.” Colour taints his cheeks.

Before she can set Espo off on checking out Mr Roberts, her phone rings.

“Beckett.”

“Kate, I got your lab results.”

“Thank you, Dr Parrish. I’ll send Detective Esposito to see you.”

“You what?”

“You heard. Detective Esposito will be over shortly. Thanks.” She cuts the call. “Espo, you’re on morgue duty.”
“Uh? You don’t wanna hear it first hand?”

“No. I wanna try and get the patient list, and check out Dr Roberts’ alibi. So Bellevue for me, and then her wellness centre. You go to the morgue.”

Espo looks as if he’s about to argue, then does as he’s told. Beckett is fairly certain that he’ll be wanting a chat later, but she won’t be there. She doesn’t need Dr Parrish’s patent brand of intrusiveness today. She doesn’t need it any day. She doesn’t, in fact, need Dr Parrish outside the job at all. Not if she can’t be a friend rather than a pseudo-psychiatrist. And since twice she’s shown that she can’t, there’s no point. Beckett’s done trying with her too.

The thought twists her face and her gut, and she excuses herself to the restrooms, missing Espo’s piercing stare after her, missing Castle’s concerned look.

“What’s goin’ on?” Espo asks. “Beckett never hands off seein’ the corpse and the lab results.”

“I don’t know,” Castle lies. He knows perfectly well. Beckett doesn’t want to see Lanie, but it’s not just that. If it had only been Lanie’s fight with Beckett, she’d have done it, just like previous times. It’s the cumulative effect of Lanie’s – as Beckett sees it – calling her out and not being her friend at all and whatever has gone down with her father. In fact, now might be a good time to call Jim.

“Better get to the morgue,” Espo decides, which will certainly save him a world of hurt if he’s still in the bullpen when Beckett reappears.

Castle gives Espo a few minutes’ clearance and then slips out of the bullpen. He wanders around the corner into Beckett’s favourite coffee bar (he’ll bring her back one), orders, seats himself in a quiet table and stares at Jim’s number in the list on his phone. With a sense of considerable trepidation, he taps it and listens to it ring.

“Jim Beckett.” It’s the professional voice, and it’s sober. Even though Jim must know it’s Castle who’s calling, he’s answered as if it were work. He probably is at work, Castle thinks, and relief descends over him.

“Jim, it’s Rick.”

“Rick? Rick, how’s Katie?” Castle hears a door close, and the frantic note rising in Jim’s words. “Is she okay?” He can’t say that she is, because it’s clear Jim already knows she isn’t.

“She’s… not so good, but she’s at work and doing okay.” Castle evades, without any compunction. He won’t be the one who breaks Jim by telling him that Beckett’s broken, though it sounds as if that may already have happened. “She’s off her game, though, and I wondered if you knew what was wrong?”

There’s a silence, which stretches into pain. “Jim?”

“She walked out. She won’t take my calls. She” – there’s a gulp – “she said she was done trying to be enough. She just left.”


“I wanted to know what was wrong. I thought maybe if I invited all of you over to dinner but she said she wouldn’t have it…” Jim stops talking. Castle thinks that probably Jim can’t force any more words out. But Jim has made exactly the same mistake that he, Castle, did, weeks ago; trying to force Beckett into a mould she isn’t ready to fit.
Castle has no idea what to say to Jim. He tries to imagine how he’d feel if it were Alexis, what he’d want to do, and the thought sears his heart. Finally he finds some inadequate words.

“Jim. Don’t give up. You’re her only family” –

Jim makes an agonised noise. “She said I could play happy families with all of you, if she wasn’t enough.”

Oh fuck, fuck, fuck. Jim had slipped right into their happy family. Beckett had said it: he wanted to be a family again, so I couldn’t have what I wanted. But if Jim’s given her the impression that Castle’s family was more of a family than he and his Katie are, however wrong that impression is… oh, fuck.

“Jim, are you okay? Are you talking to Ed?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Keep talking to Ed. Will you trust me to keep Beckett safe? I can’t tell you what she tells me, but will you trust me?”

“Got no choice, have I? If she won’t take my calls. I can’t bear her walking away again. She’s everything. She’s my daughter, Rick. She’s my daughter.” The phone goes dead.

Castle studies the table with intense focus until the unnecessary blurring of his eyes has cleared. The pain in Jim’s voice had been overwhelming – and yet the man was sober. His strength is extraordinary – so like his daughter. Both of them utterly broken by the other, and both of them putting it aside, burying it, ignoring it.

He buys two coffees, and some pastries each for good measure, and goes back up to the bullpen. Beckett is sitting scowling at the murder board.

“Where’ve you been?”

“Getting coffee and pastries. I thought you might need some food.”

She smiles wearily. “Guess so. We missed lunch. What did you get?”

“Muffins and bear claws. I thought about doughnuts, but everyone else would try and steal them and I didn’t want to be responsible for you shooting your co-workers because your blood sugar is low.”

She manages a slightly less weary smile. “Guess Bedford Hills wouldn’t suit me?”

“I’d visit you. I’d even try to break you out.”

“How? Disguise me as an alien or make up something about me being an undercover agent?”

Castle humphs. “I’d think of something. Anyway, eat up. I brought all these lovely pastries and I can’t eat them all myself.”

She takes a bear claw and then a bite, and discovers that she really is hungry. It’s gone, and the other following it, in no time. The coffee washes them down, and she sighs tiredly. “That’s better. I needed that.”

He props himself against the desk next to where she’s swinging her feet and no longer – quite – scowling at the board, unobtrusively and briefly covering her hand with his.
“So now what?”

“The centre she worked at won’t give me names without a warrant, and I can’t get a warrant without cause, and I don’t have cause unless one of those phone numbers pops, which will be hours. I can go to Bellevue and check out Dr Roberts’ alibi next, but after that there’s not a lot more to do till the phone records or canvassing give us a lead. Guess I’ll go home, get an early night, start again in the morning.”

“Good plan, Beckett,” Montgomery says from where he’s sneaked up behind her. She jumps.

“Sir?”

“Get an early night and then start fresh. Good plan.” He smiles as toothily as an alligator. “Saves me having to tell you to do it.”

“Sir,” she says. “C’mon, Castle. Let’s go check out this alibi.” She packs up her desk, conscious that Montgomery is watching, and powers down her computer.

The staff at Bellevue confirm Dr Roberts’ presence at all times. It must have been a pretty busy night, because he didn’t seem to be out of anyone’s sight for a moment, still less long enough to get down to East River Bikeway and beat his wife to death. Beckett crosses him off her list as a suspect, and determines to go to see him again tomorrow afternoon to discuss who might have hated his wife.

She drives smoothly round to drop Castle off at Broome Street.

“Do you want anything, Beckett?” Castle asks, far more in his voice than the words alone say. “I’ll come back with you, if you like.”

“Not tonight, thanks. Night.”

“Till tomorrow,” he says, leans over and swiftly kisses her. He’s out the car before she can react. When he looks through the windshield, though, she’s almost smiling as she waves. He’d believe in the smile more if he hadn’t seen her eyes brimming when he kissed her.
Beckett realises that she hadn’t switched her phone back on when she left the hospital, and does so. Her father has called twice. She deletes both messages, unheard. Lanie has called. She listens briefly, grimmaces, and deletes that, too. Espe has called. She listens carefully to that one.

_Yo, Beckett. Got the TOD, around ten thirty. Punched, and probably beaten with a branch, which I reckon is in the river. Someone took a helluva risk. Uniforms’l have another go about that time tomorrow_. So far, so good. _Lanie’s not happy you didn’t come down yourself._ Too bad, Beckett thinks. Lanie Parrish can go swivel. The vulgarity doesn’t help her mood, and nor does her phone ringing. Since it’s Lanie again, Beckett ignores it. She doesn’t even swipe it to reject. That’s only going to let Lanie know that she’s noticed. She makes her coffee and picks up a book and tries not to think about her father or the therapy session. When her phone rings again, she switches it to vibrate and continues to ignore it. She doesn’t need to be told that she’s not enough, either by Lanie or by her father. She just wants to be left alone.

She does yoga till her muscles scream, fails to bother with dinner, takes a long hot bath and goes to bed with her eyes completely dry. Crying won’t help. Crying never helps. Never had helped. She just needs to put it behind her, and she can do that by throwing herself into work, and when work’s done, maybe there will still be Castle.

As long as she doesn’t have to be with his family. She really can’t deal right now with knowing that his family is so much more, so much better, than she is. Not that it’s too surprising. They welcomed her father in as if he was already one of them, no hesitation, no reservations, no history to get hung up on. Nothing to be forgiven. No wonder he likes them better. _She_ would, if she were him.

She’d considered cancelling therapy, but Montgomery will know. So she’ll go often enough for it to appear she’s done it right and then quit. No point. No one to fix herself for, and no need to protect her father. She needn’t ever have bothered. He was either strong enough by himself, or he wasn’t. Either way, she couldn’t change it. She wonders if she can confine it to fixing her issues with Castle’s family, and then she wonders what the point of that is if she doesn’t have a family of her own. Still, it might mean that Castle stayed around a little longer. It might cure this feeling of inadequacy, and the petty nastiness she hates in herself. Though he’d said she didn’t need to fix herself for him… but did he really mean that?

She tries to sort out her confused, confusing thoughts, and then to fall asleep, and finally succeeds in finding sleep, at least.

When she gets in the next day, the phone list is taped to her screen, with a note saying _This way you can’t miss it_. She smirks, briefly. There’s going to be a lot more canvassing today, once they’ve wiped out calls to Dr Roberts, and out of state calls. That’s what God invented uniforms for, and she’d done her share of it when she was in uniform. She starts sliming the list of numbers. It keeps her mind off everything else. Her father hasn’t rung again, yet, and that’s been eating at her since she woke up. But it wasn’t she who saved him, it was he himself. It’s always been he, himself. So he’ll do it, or he won’t do it, but she isn’t the reason or the cause.

But telling herself that doesn’t help, and all the time the guilt claws at her, and just like the last time she simply throws herself into work for the whole day to blot it out, knowing that at the end of the day it’s her second full therapy session and now she has no reason to make it work. The day is not improved by a series of messages from Lanie, none of which pertain to the case. She ignores their increasingly aggravated tone and demands for answers. She also manages to avoid Esposito’s
beady-eyed stare by ensuring that he has enough to do with the canvass that he can’t corner her. She knows that’s simply deferring Nemesis, but that’s a better outcome than anything else. And she ignores her father.

She and Castle make another visit to Dr Roberts, but he can’t think of anyone who really disliked his wife: no professional jealousy, no disgruntled patients of whom he knows, no relatives who are named on her life insurance. Sure, he’ll be better off by the amount of her life insurance, but he’s totally devastated. He promises to tell them if anything at all occurs to him, offers them anything they need, searches, details, finances, anything at all that will find her killer, and then they leave him to his grief.

The day ends without any concrete results from the canvass, but the list is narrowing down. She leaves Ryan to the phone numbers and Espo to the canvass results, and departs. Castle had left some time ago, claiming that his eyes were bleeding and he was no good at fine detail anyway. He’s a big picture man, he had said. Espo had pointed out that Castle’s big picture is normally full of crazy stories, and Castle had retreated in some disarray.

And so she wends her weary way to Dr Burke’s office and therapy, in no mood to speak or explain or try. It’s the same perfectly groomed receptionist, the same blue painted room, as unsoothing as the last time.

“Good evening.”

“Hello.”

Dr Burke is sitting in his armchair, again, as dapper and as fussily formal as before; the same sharp intelligence sparking in his eyes. Beckett raises her defences further.

“In our previous session, Detective Beckett, you said that Mrs Berowitz was not listening to your father, and so you left.” She nods once, sharply. “But you, presumably, had heard his story before? It cannot have come as a surprise to you, given that you have informed me that he has undertaken the twelve-step program and that he has remained sober for slightly over five years. He must have told you his thoughts, and apologised to you for the hurt he caused you?”

“Yes. Of course he did.”

“And what did you do?”

“I forgave him.”

Her answer is, to Dr Burke’s well-practised ear, too quick, and too definite. Ah. “Naturally you did,” he says smoothly. There is no point in beginning that argument now. “But you were displeased with Mrs Berowitz.”

“Yeah. Dad was there to help her and she wouldn’t be helped.”

“Do you know what happened after you left?”

“Dad stayed for a while. Castle stayed with him.” Dr Burke forces himself not to react. He would have expected Mr Castle to leave with Detective Beckett but, as he had surmised in the previous session, she had left alone. “I suppose Dad told her a bit more.”

“Why did Mr Castle stay?”

Detective Beckett shrugs. “He’d managed to calm Julia down a couple of times. He probably
stayed to make sure she wasn’t getting hysterical on Dad.”

“Did you see either of them following this intervention?”

“No. I was tired. Castle texted me, and I told him I wanted a quiet evening. He said Dad was fine, so I didn’t worry.”

Detective Beckett is quite clearly skirting the edges of the truth. Dr Burke is sure that she has not told a direct lie, but she has skated over something quite crucial. He makes a small note.

“So I went to work the next day, but I’d picked up a stomach bug and kept throwing up, and I had to go home till it was cleared.”

“How unfortunate.” Dr Burke does not believe that Detective Beckett had any form of physical illness at all. He believes, in fact, that she has just told him a lie. “You are very devoted to your career, are you not? You have been highly successful.”

Detective Beckett seizes upon the diversion.

“I enjoy my job.” That is clearly wholly sincere.

“Tell me again how you reached your current role.”

“When I had to come back here because of Dad, I finished at NYU and went to the Academy. It was a goal I could achieve. I couldn’t make Dad sober, but I could do that. Then, when I wasn’t trying to help him, I always had work. I found I really enjoyed it, and then I got put on a case and somehow I impressed Captain Montgomery, so I was transferred to the Twelfth and made detective. There’s always plenty to do when you’re working Homicide.”

“So when you were not at home, you always had your job to do?”

“Yes.”

Dr Burke is not at all satisfied by that answer. Detective Beckett should have had more to her life than her father and her job.

“Was there anyone in whom you could confide?”

“I…” Detective Beckett stops, for a second. “Dr Parrish knew.” Dr Burke cocks his head, indicating that she should continue. “But I didn’t need everyone knowing and thinking it was an excuse or feeling sorry for me. I didn’t need special treatment.”

“Who is Dr Parrish?”

“Lanie Parrish. She’s one of the MEs that I work with. I met her at NYU. We were friends.”

“Were?”

“We’ve grown apart.”

“Who is aware now?”

“My team, and my boss. Castle.”

“Mm. Do they treat it as an excuse?”
“No. We work around it. We sort the shifts out so it works out fairly.”

“They know the history, of course.” Detective Beckett nods again. “So I presume that they are sympathetic when you need to discuss it.” There is silence. Dr Burke leaves the silence unbroken.

“We work around it,” Detective Beckett eventually repeats. Dr Burke translates that to mean that she does not discuss it with her co-workers.

“How much working around is necessary?”

“Only when Dad is away. He’s been away once since Christmas.” A flash of unpleasant memory passes over Detective Beckett’s face. “Since Christmas he’d been more interested in what I’ve been doing.” An interesting choice of verb tense.

“More fatherly?”

“Yeah.”

“Was that pleasant?”

“Yes.”

“Would you characterise your relationship with your father as improving?” Dr Burke is exceedingly careful not to state a starting point for that improvement.

“Yes.”

“When did this improvement begin?”

“About six months after he got dry. We started having dinner every week, as long as I didn’t catch a new case.” Ah. That is not at all consistent with Detective Beckett’s statement about Christmas.

“I see. And when did you last see him?”

“Sunday.” That is clipped off. Dr Burke deduces that the meeting had not gone well.

“Thank you. Please make your next appointment for Friday.”

“Okay. Good night.”

Dr Burke would be prepared to swear in any courtroom that he had heard a sigh of relief as Detective Beckett left. He would also be prepared to give his professional opinion that her relief is at having evaded any matter that might have been relevant to her issues or might have given rise to Dr Burke learning anything of use. He is highly dissatisfied with the session, and with Detective Beckett. It had achieved almost nothing.

Beckett reaches home and starts to make herself coffee. She can’t think of anything else to do except go back to the precinct, and she can’t do that because someone will tattle to Montgomery and she’ll be deep in the shit straight away. She can’t face being benched again, for no reason at all. Her work is top class. She only needs to be left to get on with it. She looks at her phone, deletes the calls from Lanie unheard, deletes the messages from her father likewise – she doesn’t need to hear his lies and promises that he didn’t mean it; that he needs her, that she saved him. He did, and he doesn’t, and she didn’t. No point listening. They always lie. He’d said it himself: I always lied. Lying can become a habit, if it gives you an easy life. She can only save herself, and for her own sanity she can’t get sucked back into believing the lies. Better to accept reality, deal
with the pain, and walk away from it. Save yourself. Protect yourself.

She sips her coffee and picks up a book, decides she can’t be bothered to read and switches on the TV, doesn’t like the choice of shows and switches it off, thinks about going out to run and doesn’t want to make that effort either. Nothing appeals to her at all. She looks at the little red beach stone, smooth in her white-edged grip, and wonders why she can’t just have some happiness.

She twists and turns the small crystal, thinking about the weekend just gone and how good it had been; contrasting that with the fiasco of Sunday evening, the stress of trying to get through Monday without simply collapsing and the unpleasantness of therapy. She resolutely does not sniff. It’s too late to call Castle and drag him out just because she’s miserable. She could call him, but then he’ll hear the upset in her voice no matter how she tries to hide it – he always does, even when no-one else can – and he’ll come round anyway, and it’s after eight and that’s not fair. He’s got a family to look after. She sniffs, and forces her eyes to dryness, and keeps forcing the tears back. She won’t cry. She never has and won’t now.

Naturally, there is a loud rap on the door just at the point she’s desperately trying not to dissolve into a puddle of unhappiness. She pads over quietly, so that if it’s anyone she doesn’t want to see – such as Lanie, or her father – she can pretend she’s not at home.

It’s Castle.

He’s the one and only person in the whole wide world that she might be able to cope with seeing. She opens the door – and buries her face in his coat as he enters. He toes the door shut and simply holds on to her.

Castle had gone home from the precinct early, firstly because he couldn’t help while everyone was following up police and other databases to which he has no access, and after they’d seen Dr Roberts there were no interesting things happening such as further interviews with witnesses or (more happily) suspects; and secondly because watching Beckett ignoring her phone, her father, and Lanie and pretending nothing at all is wrong, all the while expecting that she’ll be at therapy tonight, (it’s a guess, but the way she’s pushing for everything to be with her before five-thirty is quite a clue) is leaving him with a deep desire to remove her from the bullpen by any means available up to and including picking her up and carrying her. Since doing so will entail being shot, being shot is likely to be painful if not fatal, and he dislikes the thought of both pain and death, he takes the path of discretion and quietly departs.

He writes, somewhat less productively than he’d like, for a while, hoping that the distraction will clarify his thoughts as to what to do. No question but that he’ll turn up on Beckett’s doorstep shortly after eight, but whether beforehand he should talk to Lanie (a dangerous prospect) or to Jim (a worrying one) is vexing him substantially.

He thinks for a little longer. Lanie, Castle considers, is quite capable of looking after herself and is about as fragile as an allosaurus. Lanie needs to sort her own issues with Beckett: he is not getting into the middle of the clash of those titans. (He might sell tickets, though.) Jim… is very fragile indeed. He grits his teeth and prepares to lie through them for the next – however long he needs to.

“Jim, it’s Rick. Are you okay?” Are you sober? Please be sober, even though you’re being ripped apart.

“Yes. No.” A sucked-in breath, but sobriety. “Katie still won’t answer my calls.”

Castle thinks extremely quickly. Jim trusts him, and has done – God knows why: he wouldn’t trust
any boy going out with Alexis, but presumably Jim is used to sizing people up immediately – from the get-go. Time to use it.

“Jim, what exactly did you say to Beck – Kate? There must have been something. This is just plain weird. She was perfectly happy with you right up to” – he coughs horribly to avoid saying Sunday afternoon and thereby having to explain their weekend to Jim. Somehow explaining to her father that he’d taken Beckett to the Hamptons for what could undoubtedly – but very wrongly – be characterised as a dirty weekend is all sorts of wrong. Very fortunately Jim is too upset to notice. “She’s spent years not walking away from you, making sure she’s there when you need her. She loves you, Jim. I’d have bet my loft she wouldn’t do this. So what did you say, and maybe we can fix it?”

Castle has no idea why Jim merely suggesting that he and his family should come for dinner would explode Beckett like it has done. They’d all got through the dinner the other night, after all, and Beckett hadn’t blown up there or after. Much. Not with her father, anyway. It had been Julia who’d triggered that, and even then she’d covered it all up in short order – at least with her father. He concludes that Jim has, surely inadvertently, said something that hit Beckett’s manifold insecurities head on, but for the life of him he can’t see how.

“I don’t know,” Jim says, as exasperated as his daughter might be. “Don’t you think I haven’t tried to work it out? I don’t get it.”

“Sure you’ve tried, but let’s work it out together. Tell me what you said – the exact words. It’s got to be in the words.”

“You think you know my daughter better than me?” Castle doesn’t answer that. After a few seconds, Jim sighs, defeated, weary and old. “Maybe you do, at that. Seems like I don’t know her at all.”

Jim pauses, and thinks back. “I was asking about you being round to dinner on Tuesday last, and she told me what she’d cooked. Sounded nice” –

“It was.”

“ – and then I suggested you should all come round, and said I’d help her cook. Said I wanted to hear a bit more about the theatre, said Alexis was cute but not like Katie, and she was fine with all that.” Castle rather doubts that, but it’s not that which has triggered a complete cluster bomb.

“Then I said you were all really easy to get on with, and it was great, just like being part of a family again.” Uh-oh no. The full horror is still hitting Castle as Jim carries on. “And then she lost it.”

Oh shit oh shit oh shit. Oh God. Everything dawns on Castle. He’d guessed right. Jim couldn’t have phrased that worse if the city’s low lives had paid the Devil to whisper the right words in his ear to break Beckett. It’s frighteningly clear. Beckett heard that as you’re not enough of a family for me. She’d spent five years doing everything to keep her dad together, she’d said that if she’d done what she wanted then she wouldn’t have had to be family for him but he’d wanted to be a family and needed her – oh God - and one ill-considered sentence has blown that whole belief apart. The whole of the last five years, everything she’s sacrificed – and all she’s heard is that she isn’t enough of a family for Jim. Her whole life, wasted – for nothing.

“She just lost it and said she didn’t want you all in her apartment and she wouldn’t come if I invited you and I could play happy families all I wanted if she wasn’t enough. And then she said she was done.” Castle can hear Jim’s heart break all over again. “She left. She was crying. I haven’t seen her cry for years. She won’t take my calls and I don’t dare go see her in case she won’t open the door. What’ll I do without her? She’s my only family. She walked away before and it saved me,
and she knows it. I don’t understand why she’s done it now, Rick. All I meant was that it looked like we were being part of your family. I thought… well, I thought you…” He dries up.

Oh, fuck. Oh, Jim. What have you done? Castle has absolutely no idea what Jim will do, but he certainly knows what Beckett is doing. She’s walking away from her father, who loves something else – so she thinks – far more than he loves her.

Again.
“Jim, I think I know what’s wrong.” Castle is about to tap dance his way across a very narrow safe path of misdirection and, if necessary, downright lies, through a minefield. “Beck- Kate’s been off her game because of Julia, who was so downright dumb about wanting Kate to help her that she really stressed her out. Then Julia wouldn’t listen to you or Kate and Kate was upset by it. She thought Julia should have listened. Kate can’t help Julia – orders – but Julia didn’t get that either. So Kate just saw Julia not even trying to help herself and trying to guilt-trip her. I think she’s been succeeding in that, too,” he says meditatively. Jim hisses. “So I think she – Kate – isn’t actually hearing what you were really saying. She just needs time.”

And an ocean of therapy, but let’s not mention that. “She’ll come round when she realises that whatever she thinks she heard, it wasn’t what you said. You’re her family, and she knows it. She just needs time to clear her head.” He summons up a grin for his voice. “She’s pig-stubborn, your Katie. But she’ll get there.”

He just wishes he believes that she will. Pig-stubborn is the understatement of the last two millennia.

“You think so?” Jim sounds as if he’s seen the only oasis in a thousand miles of Sahara desert.

“I do,” Castle says with utter confidence. If his mother had seen him, she’d have known he’d inherited her talent. He can’t let Jim fall, so he’ll lie as much as he needs to in order to keep him on the right side of the line.

“You take care of her, Rick. She won’t let me, so you have to.”

“Okay,” Castle agrees, and manages not to say any of well you sure can’t, or what the hell do you think I’m doing or I intend to be taking care of Beckett for the rest of our lives.

After he’s finished talking – lying – to Jim, he frets his way through the time until he can expect Beckett to have returned home from the therapy session. He has a strong suspicion, amounting almost to certainty, that she didn’t bother co-operating. She was, whatever she said, only doing it because she thought it was the only way to save her father from knowing the truth. And now that’s not an issue.

Oh, fuck, what a mess.

He taps on Beckett’s door shortly after eight. Once it’s opened, an utterly beleaguered Beckett takes one look at him, falls into his arms (and not in the good way) and positively clings to him: her spar in a stormy sea. He kicks the door gently in order to shut it and closes his arms around her.

“Beckett, what’s up?” No answer. He thinks she might be crying, but since he can’t actually prise her off his chest to find out he couldn’t guarantee it. Eventually she looks up, eyes dry and blazingly, furiously, agonised.

“What’s been the point? What’s ever been the fucking point? He wants a different family. A better family. I gave up all my chance of having a family because I had to be his family and it was all wasted.”

Will was that serious? No wonder after they broke up Beckett punched hell out the bag and O’Leary. O’Leary got that reasoning wrong. But she hasn’t lost her chance of a family. He’ll see to that: but now is not the time to open that discussion.
“He never wanted it. I’m done. He’s never needed me. He saved himself – once I left. Couldn’t bear to see me. Drowned it in cheap booze. Stopped once I was gone. What’s been the point?” She breathes deeply. “I should have stayed away from him.”

She rips herself out of Castle’s arms. “Well, he can have his wish. He can have some substitute family. Just don’t expect me to be a part of it.” Oh fuck. As if getting her to be comfortable in his loft, never mind with his family, wasn’t difficult enough already. “He ruined everything else and now he’s spoilt this too.”

“No. If I have to choose – there is no choice. I’ll stand with you. You, not him.”

“Me?” she says bleakly. “Yeah, right. Like I’m such a prize. Even my father likes another family better.”

“I like you better.” He rises to catch her in her tempestuous pacing, forcing her to halt. “Stand down, Beckett. Stop. Come here, and lean on me. I’m not letting you go.”

“You should.” She tries to tug away. Castle doesn’t let go.

“I won’t. You’re mine. Stay right here. Whatever’s wrong, I’ll be here.”

She collapses back into his strong embrace.

“I can’t do this. There’s no point. I can’t deal with it.”

“Kate.” She stops, shocked into silence by his use of her first name. “Kate. It’s up to you. It’s always up to you. But you’re really unhappy and I hate it when you’re this upset. Come and sit down.” There’s a slight resistance, which he ignores. “C’mon.” He pretty much sits her down by main force and then keeps a very heavy arm round her so that she can’t stand up again. After a second she eases under it and tucks closer. He pets, and doesn’t ask her any questions, and pets some more.

“No decisions. Not now. Stay here.” He wants to say he didn’t mean it; what you think you heard isn’t what he thinks he said. That’s going to be pointless. She’s too hurt and angry to listen or care, and trying to mend matters is going to fail, spectacularly. This is not the time to try. It’s also not the time to let on that she’s at therapy, nor is it a good time to suggest that she should open this subject with the unfortunate therapist. This is a good time to keep his mouth firmly shut, his ears and heart open, and to stick to affection and – if indicated and accepted – physical comfort. Anything else will simply lead to arguments and then he’ll be as locked out as Lanie and Jim.

He has a thought. He parks it for a while, continuing to cosset Beckett close and let her recover herself. He doesn’t leave it too long, though. Beckett drowning in her own unshed tears should not be allowed to continue for any great length of time, so after a few moments he gently kisses the top of her head.

“C’mon, snuggle in. No thoughts, no decisions. There’s nothing you have to do about your father now. It’s all up to you what you do and when you do it, but don’t worry about it now. I’ve got a better idea.”

“What?” she mutters. There isn’t even a hint of snark in that, still less a sharp retort shutting down – or starting up – innuendo.

“O’Leary complained that you never go see him any more, and he said we should all go for a beer together.”
“He did?”

“Yeah. You were still in the break room.”

“Oh.” Beckett doesn’t exactly sound enthusiastic.

“So why don’t we see if he’s free for a drink tomorrow? Do something different. Cheer you up.” He grins mischievously, which is entirely wasted on Beckett, who isn’t looking up at his face. “He can tell me all about Officer Beckett and the trouble you got into as a rookie.”


“Why not? Did you bribe him to keep them quiet?” Castle says teasingly.

“There are none,” she replies quellingly.

“I don’t believe you,” Castle singsongs, childishly.

“I don’t care,” Beckett replies equally childishly, and glares. This involves her turning her face up so that Castle is treated to the full benefit of her pitch-black scowl. He is also, therefore, treated to the ability to kiss her, and does, assertively. She’s momentarily receptive, but then, unhappily, retreats. Another glare evidences itself.

“You’re trying to make me forget that you’re going to try to winkle information out of O’Leary, aren’t you?”

Well, no, actually. Castle is trying to make Beckett forget that she is absolutely distraught over her father. But if she’s jumping to that conclusion… it’s not so bad.

“Caught me,” he says penitently. And falsely. “But I think it would be nice to go for a beer with O’Leary, even if you won’t tell me any stories of Uniformed Officer Beckett.” His mind butterflies away. “Do you still have a uniform?” he asks very hopefully. “I’d really like to see you in uniform.”

“Dress uniform. And I’m not wearing it just for you to leer at.”

Castle arranges his face into an expression of extreme disappointment. “How unkind,” he pouts.

“It means something, that uniform; it means something when you put it on. It’s not there so you can ogle.”

Castle doesn’t tease further. “Okay, no uniform. Drinks with O’Leary, though.”

“Why are you so keen on O’Leary? Trying to replace Pete? You haven’t a hope in hell,” Beckett says peevishly.

“I liked him. He’s a fabulous beast, like a gryphon or a Sphinx.”

“The Sphinx was female, Castle.”

“Okay, not a Sphinx, a… a Minotaur. A good-tempered one, though. He was funny.”

“And he was a fan,” she says smirkily. “That was really why you liked him.”

Phew. Some return to normality. “That certainly helps. Maybe he’d like to be a character. I’m always looking for minor characters. Shall I ask him?” Castle bounces. “Think he’d like it?” He’d
better like it. He’s been written in for a week already.

“Up to him,” Beckett shrugs. “If he doesn’t like what you write he’ll be able to turn you into pulp and juice you.”

“He won’t.”

Beckett quirks an eyebrow, and shifts a little to nestle closer. She still looks pallid, her muscles are still knotted and her hands tight-twined and white-knuckled – but it’s better than the arid agony of half an hour ago.

“It’ll be a very sympathetic character.”

“Huh.” Beckett stiffens abruptly. “What about the one you’re basing on me? What’s she like?”

This is probably not a good moment to make jokes about it.

“Beautiful, brilliant, sexy and driven,” he says truthfully.

There’s silence. Her head is dipped so that he can’t see her face. Castle tips Beckett’s chin up against dogged, but futile, resistance and finds her blinking desperately to clear her brimming eyes.

“Hey, hey. None of that. It’s an insult to my deathless prose.” She’s still quiet. “Okay, enough. False modesty is very unbecoming. You know just how sexy you are.” He leans down and kisses her in a way that’s designed to prove it, hard and searching, his free hand roaming down to pull her round and swing her legs up across his. The best way he can think of to distract Beckett from her misery is to drown her in desire: smooth and strong and forceful in the way she needs. It’s only temporary, but for now it’s a way to ease her, to give her a break.

His voice drops into the velvety baritone that coats her nerves and strokes her skin and leaves her – without a single second of resistance – turning to Kat who is hopelessly addicted to this strong man and enjoys it. Him. Her Castle who keeps her petted and protected and cherished, even when her whole world, everything she’s done and everything she’s stood for in the last five years, has broken around her. She knows she’s clenching to him, and that she can’t let herself make the same mistake as she had with Royce, but she recognises the possibility and she’s trying really hard not to think of Castle as the only way out. He’s not. He’s not responsible for her. She is.

It’s all up to you, he had said. It’s always up to you. He’s making sure she knows he won’t try and force her any more. She needs to make sure that – while he’ll be there for her – she decides what’s right for her. Maybe that’s the point. Making sure that she’s not inadvertently making Castle her only hope. That’s a burden she’d suffered herself. That she thought she’d suffered, anyway, she thinks bitterly. But she hasn’t, yet. She hasn’t tried to second-guess her therapy with him – she hasn’t even told him she’s already attending. She isn’t involving him in her fight with Dr Parrish or expecting him to intervene or asking him to talk to her father – hell, no.

Only you can save yourself. Other people can’t save you. But she’s not asking him to. And it’s not like she’s going to be in therapy for long, now. If her father doesn’t need her and doesn’t want her then she doesn’t need to worry about how he might feel because she won’t be seeing him.

Here and now Castle’s offering her what she wants, needs and likes (and maybe far more than likes) and she only needs to say yes to that. She falls into his grasp and his kiss and finds that both are more than enough to stop her thinking about anything else.

Annoyingly, he stops kissing her, and doesn’t let her carry on kissing him. Not the idea. She emits a pettish little noise.
“So,” Castle says happily, “I’ll give O’Leary a call and we can see if he’s free tomorrow or Thursday.” He is very sneakily trying to find out if Beckett is at therapy on either day. Tomorrow seems unlikely, and in fact he expects it to be Friday to allow some downtime in between, but confirmation wouldn’t hurt.

“Okay,” Beckett says, less unenthusiastically than he might have expected. A moment’s thought tells him that if she’s out with O’Leary she has a good excuse to avoid Lanie, who has left him a couple of blisteringly expressed messages which he has entirely ignored. “When?”

“Let’s call him now.” He stops. “Oh. I don’t have a number. Have you got it?”

Beckett scrolls through her contact list and finds the number to dial.

“Hey, O’Leary.”

“Beckett!”

“O’Leary, you wanna go for a beer with me” – Castle squawks – “and Castle tomorrow? Or Thursday, if not tomorrow?”

“Sure,” he rumbles delightedly. “Great. When are you off-shift tomorrow?”

“Sixish. You?”

“Same. Let’s go to Hell’s Kitchen. Lots of bars.”

“You trying to find your Irish roots again?”

“Sure. Molloys.”


“You like their burgers just as much as I do, Beckett. C’mon.”

“Okay,” she says in a falsely put-upon tone. “Molloys, after shift-end. Mine’s a soda, if you get there first. Castle can fend for himself.”

“Coors for me, if you beat me there. See you tomorrow.”

“Bye.”

“So?” Castle asks hopefully.

“We’ll meet him tomorrow, after work.” Castle grins broadly. Beckett rolls her eyes. “No stories. None.” The grin does not diminish. She sighs.

“And now that you’ve done that,” Castle murmurs, “where were we?”

“Here,” Beckett says definitively, and tugs his head back down to hers. Castle’s reaction is itself pleasingly definite, and she slides away into his sure touch and possessive, assertive desire.

Afterwards, though, he has to go. She knows he has to go; he knows he has to go, and neither fact stops them holding each other for just one more moment, and another, and another, until Castle pulls himself away much more slowly than he ought to and, as he dresses, watches Beckett curl herself around the pillow on which he’d been lying, burying her face in it. He steps back to the bed, and strokes over her hair, leans down to drop a kiss on the back of her head.
And then he leaves.

When she gets in, burying the fact that she has no family left in a focus on solving her case as soon as possible, there’s another list of numbers taped to her screen, with highlighting, and a Post-It note saying Beckett, got a hit. This one x-ref with patients and canvass. Mrs Donbass. There’s an address, too. However, homicide or no homicide, and no matter how much she wants to get going and get it solved, calling on a witness or suspect at seven-thirty a.m. is extremely unlikely to receive a co-operative or indeed pleasant response. She will just have to wait. She doesn’t like waiting.

To distract herself until it’s a reasonable hour at which she can expect this prospective witness (or suspect) to be finished with the morning chaos of, most likely, breakfast and chores or possibly school runs, she reads through the rest of the phone list to see if anything pops out, cross-referencing with Espo’s canvass.

At least, that’s what she intended to do. Only eight numbers in, Espo has slipped in unnoticed – clearly she didn’t notice, because his jacket is off and his desk as lived-in as normal once he gets going – and is looming over her desk, scowling at her.

“Yo,” he says.

“Hey.”

“Want a word.”

Here we go. “Okay.” She leads off to a handily empty conference room, though Espo looks as if he’s contemplating one of the interrogation rooms instead. She has a sinking feeling – as if her feelings weren’t sunk enough already for external reasons – that this is the chat she was hoping that she’d avoided. She turns to him, no expression other than the norm. “What is it?”

“What’s up with you? You don’t go to the morgue, you don’t return Lanie’s calls, you look like shit. Again.”

“Best use of resources,” Beckett says briskly. “It shouldn’t always be me who goes to the morgue, you and Ryan need to go too. Broaden your experience – and stop Ryan fainting at the sight of a Y-cut.” Espo snickers. “Dr Parrish hasn’t called me about anything to do with the case.” She manufactures a really nasty grin. “And if your best chat-up line is you look like shit, it’s no wonder you haven’t had a date in months.”

“I had a date Saturday,” Espo growls indignantly.

Beckett raises both eyebrows. “What with, an M-16?” He splutters in a very satisfying way.

“No! She was a hot” – he notices Beckett’s interested expression and stumbles to a halt, which is also very satisfying. She starts to move to the door. Espo leans on it with no subtlety at all to hold it shut. “You’re weaselling out. What’s up?”

“Nothing. I’ve got work to do. Excuse me.”

“Nah. You still cross with Lanie for Monday?”

“No. If she wants to fight with you three that’s not my problem. Just don’t do it over my desk. There’s a perfectly good gym upstairs.”
“She was fighting with you.”

“She came lookin’ for you Friday.”

“Takes two to fight. I wasn’t fighting. Dr Parrish can do as she pleases.”

“Bit stupid. I told her I was busy. Offered her another night and she didn’t want to know. So butt out, Espo, because it’s not me who’s causing a problem here.” She looks at him. “Move away from the door. I’m going back to work.”

Espo does. Beckett’s voice and posture don’t incline him to believe that he’ll get any answers at all. Maybe Lanie will be a bit more talkative.

“You wanna hit the mats at lunchtime?” he says, extending an olive branch.

“Let’s see where I get to. I want to interview this Mrs Donbass that popped on the phone list and the canvass. What’s she like?”

“Mid-height, maybe five-five, blonde, got a kid – baby. Baby was crying all the time I was tryin’ to talk to her. Gave up after five minutes. Thought my head would explode.”

Beckett can sympathise with that. Not necessarily the reason, but certainly the exploding head. She can already feel the beginnings of tension in her temples. She might have put Espo back in his box, but she doesn’t really think that she’s managed to get Lanie – Dr Parrish, dammit – off her case. Still, the longer she ignores her the more likely it is that she won’t try again. She goes back to the list.

At eight-thirty she calls Castle to meet her at 12-18 East 1st Street. She’ll walk: it’s only a couple of hundred yards and the fresh late-February air will clear her head of its irritation with Esposito. Baby, huh? That doesn’t exactly indicate a likely candidate for her killer, but she’ll keep an open mind.
Beckett is unreasonably comforted to see Castle striding across the sidewalk to the building. A considerable part of it is because she has absolutely no desire or idea how to deal with a parent with a constantly crying baby, but at least if there are both of them there is some hope that Castle can talk the same language as the mother. He’d said that Alexis had gone through a period of crying all the time. The thought of Castle-being-father bites nastily at her gut, but she pushes it off and covers it with the thought that she needs this for a case. Nothing to do with anything else. Nothing at all.

The Donbasses clearly have cash. This is an expensive apartment and even Castle looks as if it’s better than he’d expected, though it doesn’t compare to his loft.

“Mrs Donbass, we’d like to talk to you about Delaine Roberts.”

Mrs Donbass is, as Esposito had said, around five-five or a little less, naturally blonde (or she has an excellent hairdresser and goes weekly) and what Beckett would describe rather unkindly as chocolate-box pretty: big light blue eyes, a cute slightly snub nose, curvy. She also has black rings under her eyes that her makeup does not disguise, and looks tired, harried and very stressed. The reason is obvious: in a swinging cot arrangement in the smart living room is a crying baby. Well, crying is an understatement. Screaming. Loudly and very unhappily. Beckett wanders over and finds that the baby is red-faced, with its tiny fists clenched. She has an unexpected wave of fellow-feeling for it. Since it’s dressed in a pink onesie, she assumes that it’s a girl.

Mrs Donbass casts a hopeless glance at the cot. “She just doesn’t stop crying. I’ve no idea what to do. My husband doesn’t know what to do, and now he’s staying at work all hours and it’s because I can’t settle her.”

Castle comes over and looks at the noisy scrap. “She’s cute,” he says softly, and extends a broad finger to touch the tiny hand. “How old is she?”

“Four months.”

Castle gently taps at the clenched fist. The baby looks up at him and emits another shriek. “There, there,” he rumbles. “That’s not nice.” She looks hugely unimpressed. He takes the little fist in two fingers and wobbles it delicately. The shriek changes to a squawk.

“That’s the quietest she’s been for a week.” Beckett wonders how anyone within a mile has survived. Earplugs? Valium? Moving out?

“Can I cuddle her? My daughter’s fifteen, and I haven’t cuddled a baby in forever. Please?”

Castle looks massively hopeful. Beckett is open-mouthed. It’s only a case. It’s only a case and she can cope with this. Besides which, it’s a baby. She has no problems with a baby. It’s when they’re much bigger she gets edgy and the memories bite. Babies are just fine. Just so long as she doesn’t have to cuddle it. Her.

“Well…”

“I’ll be really careful.” Beckett suddenly recognises the Castle technique of calming stressed women. He’s very good at it: the big, pleading eyes, the air of come-on-it’ll-be-fine, the intense focus on the one thing sure to make them comfortable. But as with Mrs Berowitz, this isn’t personal. He looks at Beckett, where it is personal, completely differently.
“I suppose so.”

Castle reaches into the cot-contraption and lifts the baby out: one broad hand cradling her head, one under her chubby, diapered bottom. It – she – is still squawking, but the noise has changed from tempestuous unhappiness at brass-band volume to confusion at a lesser volume. It is almost possible to hear oneself think, now. Mrs Donbass glances at Castle, is clearly content that he is not breaking her precious baby, and acquires an expression of enormous relief as the decibel count continues to drop. Castle jiggles the child gently, crooning nonsense in a soothing baritone and cuddling the baby against his wide chest. “There we are, poppet. Shhh, shhhhh, pretty girl. Let mommy have a minute…”

Beckett tunes it out, along with the astonishingly disconcerting sight of Castle with a tiny baby against him. Castle’s amazing ability to soothe upset females clearly begins at their birth. She can let him cope with that, since it’s given her an open run at Mrs Donbass.

“So, Mrs Donbass, how did you know Mrs Roberts?”

“Mrs Roberts?”

“Delaine Roberts. She was a physiotherapist at the clinic on East Fourteenth.”

“Della? Della Roberts?”

“Yes. How did you know her?”

“She treated me for a while. Before I had Callie.”

“You called her six or seven times in the last week. What was that all about?” Beckett is soothingly sympathetic.

“I wanted her to see Callie. One of my friends at baby group said I should try cranial osteopathy.” Beckett looks entirely blank. Castle turns round from where he’s been talking non-stop to the baby: pointing out all sorts of things out the window, like clouds, and buildings, and pigeons; all of which have two huge advantages over said baby, being silent and elsewhere. However, he has kept it – her – quietish for at least the last few minutes, and in fact the baby has now been muted to a general level of gurgle with occasional happy – and loud – squeaks.

“Like skull massage?” he says. Somehow it’s not a surprise that Castle’s heard the term.

“Yes. It was recommended by my friend and I wanted to ask Della if she would do it.” Her face turns annoyed. “She wouldn’t. She said it had no basis in science and could actually harm my baby.” Her voice rises indignantly. “I’d never harm my Callie.” Callie starts to whimper, and Castle returns to jiggling and crooning.

“Of course not,” Beckett soothes.

“I just wanted her to stop crying and be happy. But Della wouldn’t help me. She said I should be making sure my husband gave me more support. That was all she ever said. Get Cal to help out more. It’s his baby too. But when I asked him he got cross and said he had to work to support us both and I had to deal with the baby while he made the money.”

“You last called her on Monday morning.”

“Callie cried all night. I called her to make her listen to the noise so she understood. She said I could come to the clinic.”
“Did that help?”

“Sure. I went at nine-thirty.” Beckett doesn’t react to the timing. “She saw Callie but she still wouldn’t stop crying. Sometimes taking Callie for a walk helps, so that’s what I said I was going to do. Then I went to Cal’s office. And Callie was still crying so it didn’t work.”

Callie is not, in fact, crying at the moment. Callie is staring at Castle, who is pulling faces at her and tickling her tummy. Beckett wouldn’t like to speculate as to which of them is more mature, though she’s betting on the baby.

“Okay. Thank you, Mrs Donbass. That’s been very helpful.” She turns round. Castle is blowing raspberries against Callie’s cheek. Honestly, what age is he?

“She’s gorgeous,” he says sincerely. “So cute.” Slightly reluctantly, he gives the baby back to Mrs Donbass. Callie doesn’t, rather surprisingly, protest. In fact, she – now she’s not red-faced and screaming – is really quite nice. As long as she’s with someone else.

“You coming, Castle?”

“Yeah. Thanks, Mrs Donbass.” He looks a little wistful as they go back down to the street.

“You okay there, Castle?” She won’t get wound up about him petting babies. It let her interview Mrs Donbass, and her instincts are twitching.

“Yes.” More wistfulness. “Babies are so cute.” She’s about to sigh at his sappiness. “As long as you can give them back. It’s really hard when they’re always crying. Torture.” Ah, that’s better. If he’d been sappy for any longer she’d have been forced to shoot him.

“Let’s get back,” she says briskly. “I want to check that out. Something’s off, but I don’t know what yet.”

They’re just coming up to the Twelfth when Beckett’s phone rings. She looks at it, tuts, and with no hesitation declines the call. Castle’s glance asks the question. “Dr Parrish. If it’s important or to do with the case she’ll leave a message.”

“You… don’t think it might be easier just to speak to her?”

“If I want my head bitten off I’ll jump into the grizzly bear enclosure at the Zoo.”

That does not sound to Castle as if anything’s likely to get better between Beckett and Lanie in the immediate future.

“You could simply have the fight she’s spoiling for, and then it would be done.”

Beckett sags. “No,” she says, and it sounds defeated. Castle looks down at her, and doesn’t press. Strangely, she starts again. “Not now. She’s one thing too many. Anyway, she’s not important.” It sounds as if she’s trying to convince herself. Castle manages a quick half-hug before the elevator doors open and the momentary sag has gone. It has not, however, been forgotten.

Ryan has, without needing to be prompted, obtained the CCTV footage from the clinic entrance, and, sure enough, Della Roberts had walked out with Mrs Donbass and the perpetually screaming Callie. What is rather strange, however, is that there is no footage of her walking back in. None. And the time of walking out is strangely coincident with the likely time of death. Which is not proof, but is certainly very suspicious.
“I don’t see how or why she could have done it,” Beckett says crossly, “but I’m sure she had something to do with it.”

“Bit difficult, with a screaming baby. More likely to snap at home and go for her husband… or the baby.”

“Uh?”

“Well, her husband isn’t helping her with the baby, and she’s exhausted, and trust me, Beckett, when your baby cries all the time you’ll do anything to make it stop.”

“You’re the one who’d know,” she says neutrally.

“I would. That was Alexis, for two weeks. Only two weeks. It was hell.”

Somehow, that almost makes this case bearable: to know that even to the most devoted father children aren’t always perfect, or perfectly loved. Just so long as she doesn’t think about the point that most fathers still love their children even after they have grown up.

“Huh,” she says again, as more of a conversation-ending punctuation point.

A few more interesting elements are added to the timeline, but Beckett’s glare and Castle’s commentary don’t pull anything into sharp focus.

“Hold on,” Castle suddenly says. “What about the husband?”

“Dr Roberts?”

“No, Donbass. How’s he play into this?” He starts to speak faster. “It’s old-fashioned. Maybe he’s old-fashioned. Maybe he’s just an ass. Dumbass – hey, that nearly rhymes: Donbass dumbass” –

“Focus, Castle!”

“Yeah, right, okay. So he’s got his wife at home – he must be really pulling it down – and she’s pregnant and he’s going to have a family, be the patriarch, head of the house: pretty wife, beautiful baby, everything just the way his dad had it, just the way life should be. It’s gonna be great.”

“So?”

“So the baby arrives, and it’s not like he thinks. His wife’s exhausted. Really exhausted – you saw. Not so pretty, and too tired to care. Too tired for him, too. Only thing she’s focused on is the baby, little Callie. And little Callie’s not what he expected, either. Babies are a lot of work even if they’re sleeping well, and little Callie isn’t sleeping well, and she’s crying all the time. He’s not going home, not helping out, it’s all her fault, all her responsibility. After all, he’s the daddy.”

“Yeah, but why would he kill Della? He’s got no reason. He’s doing just fine.”

“I think he did.”

“What? How?”

“I think we’ll find that Mrs Donbass called Cal to say she was going to the clinic, and begged him to meet her there. I think Cal said no. I think Mrs Donbass asked Della to talk to Cal, and Della said she would, and Cal feels like just the sort of idiot not to take it well and lash out.”
“But…” she stops. “Okay. If your theory” – she doesn’t say crazy, but it’s there on the air – “has any validity at all, we need to dig into Cal. Still, it seems a serious over-reaction to being told you’re a jerk.”

“Never underestimate the size of the male ego.”

“How can I? You’re here.”

Castle fakes a wound to the heart, Beckett rolls her eyes, and Esposito and Ryan, who have slunk up to see what’s going on, snigger.

“ ‘S lunchtime, Beckett.”

“And?”

“And,” says Espo menacingly, “you were too slow on Thursday, and it’s Wednesday now and you haven’t been in the gym since, so time for another round.”

“Okay. Give me five minutes.”

Fifty minutes later another brutal round of sparring is over, and Beckett is, again, tapped out on the mat. Espo hadn’t gone down noticeably more, but Beckett had gone down noticeably less. Amazingly, Castle thinks it was even faster than last time. He waits for her as Ryan waits for Espo, and the four of them go downstairs.

Shift end comes, and Cal Donbass is being taken apart, metaphorically. Everything they can find out about him is splattered on the murder board like blood round the corpse. He’s a good looking man, bulky in a weight-trained way; another Wall Street winner. Beckett takes an instant dislike to his smug, I’m-in-charge face. Or maybe that’s just because he couldn’t lower himself to help his wife. He’s pulling down megabucks from a Midtown-based hedge fund, which also doesn’t endear him to Beckett.

“Right. We need footage from his building, and we need to haul him in.”

“Not tonight, Detectives.” Montgomery has sidled up behind them all. “Enough for today. You don’t have enough to bring him in yet, and you certainly won’t get a warrant on Castle’s theories.” He smiles benevolently on them all. “Home time, Detectives. Scoot.”

All three detectives, and their pet writer, look at him as if he’s crazy.

“Scoot. We’re so far out of sight at the top of the stats we can afford you four to go home at shift end today. You can close the case tomorrow.”

“Beer?” says Ryan hopefully.

“You betcha.” Espo’s on it at near-light speed.


“Mountain-man?”

“Yeah. O’Leary.”

“Huh. Castle?”

“I’m going with Beckett. I want to see this mountain.”
“We’ll come too.”

“No, you won’t,” Beckett states flatly. “This isn’t a party. I’m seeing an old pal. I don’t need you glaring at him.”

“We wouldn’t.”

“You so would, Espo. You can’t stand that he could take you down sparring. Last time you sulked for a week. I’m not having you spoiling my evening.”

“I could take him.”

“Guys, no. My evening. You are not invited. Shoo.”

“How’s Castle going?”


“You sayin’ you’re bored with us?”

“Never,” he says hurriedly. “But I need some minor characters.”

“We’re major characters?” Ryan asks.

“Sure you are.”

“Okaaayyy. But he’d better not be a big character. That’s us, bro.”

Beckett snickers. “He couldn’t be little,” she says, and exits before anyone has stopped groaning at the descriptor. Castle ambles after her, not hurrying at all. Ryan exchanges a glance with Espo.

“You let that go easy, man.”

“Not planning to get into it. Just wanted to rag a bit. She ‘n’ O’Leary go way back. Like, way back. Before she was ever a detective, or in the Twelfth. Not buttin’ in on that.”

“So how’s Castle got in?”

Esposito casts Ryan a pained glance. “Bro, when’s Castle not trailed after Beckett? She don’t even bother tellin’ him to quit. Waste of breath.”

“Specially when they’re together.”

“Yeah.”

Castle summons a cab, rather than fighting it out in the rush hour subway. It also has the huge advantage that he can sling an arm round Beckett, who, now that the rush of work-induced adrenaline has stopped, is again a little tired and pale. She needs a hug, and he is very good at delivering hugs. She wriggles closer. Far too soon – whatever happened to rush-hour traffic? – they’re at Molloys.

“What was that about O’Leary trying to find his Irish roots?”

“Oh, he’s always going on about his great-grandmother coming from Ireland. He’s never been nearer Ireland than East Harlem. Don’t think he’s ever been out of state.”
“I been outta state, Beckett. I went to the Bronx once.”

Beckett laughs at the joke. “Hey, O’Leary,” she grins, and turns into his bear hug. Castle watches her disappear into his massive form and is hard put to it not to snatch her back out again. He’s the one who hugs her. Not Kodiak bears. O’Leary puts her back down on her feet and extends a hand to Castle.

“Hey, Castle. Nice to see you again. You still hanging around the Twelfth? You should come see us at Central Park. Much more fun.” He grins widely. “An’ I’m much prettier than Beckett here.” She splutters.

Castle laughs. “There’s certainly more of you to observe.” There is a low-toned growl behind him. It might contain there’d better be.

They find a table with enough space for O’Leary to stretch his legs without tripping everyone up. Castle manoeuvres matters so that Beckett ends up in between the two men – and notes without too much surprise not only O’Leary’s approving glance but his unobtrusive co-operation. Seems like he’s noticed Beckett’s off-duty fragility too. Beers for the men and soda for Beckett appear, and everyone more or less relaxes. Conversation swiftly turns to case-work. O’Leary is deeply unimpressed by Cal Donbass.

“Asshole like that shouldn’t get to have a wife, never mind a cute little baby.”

“Yeah,” Castle agrees. “Can’t wait to see you rip into him in Interrogation, Beckett.”

“You still the terror you used to be?”

“Uh?” Castle queries.

“Used to be” –

“O’Leary,” Beckett says waringly, which has no effect on the mountainous hulk next to her or on his mischievous smile.

“Used to be, that if we got a witness who might be a suspect – this was when she was in uniform with me, we were in the Sixth together for a bit – they’d send us in for a little time. Mix things up some. So this one time, we picked up a lowlife” –

“He was a pimp, O’Leary.”

“Yeah – an’ the detective thought he needed a little bit of – er – warming up. So – wasn’t exactly procedure, but… I got told to look scary” –

“They meant stop smiling that sappy grin you’d always got on,” Beckett interjects, grinning herself.

“ – an’ Beckett here got told to look cute.” Castle snickers at the thought. “So we did. But the lowlife didn’t have much in the way of smarts,” he digresses for a moment, “so how he was running girls I don’t know – an’ he took a look at Beckett an’ decided he’d hit on her.” Castle’s eyes fly open wide. Beckett nods, and lets O’Leary carry on. “So he – er – made a few comments” –

“He suggested I’d quadruple my take-home if I was turning tricks for him,” Beckett puts in dryly.

“Yep – but he hadn’t banked on Beckett an’ me payin’ attention to the Detectives and their work.
So Beckett started playin’ along a bit, an’ I stood there behind her like I’d heard it all before an’ I
was inclined to go with it for some of the take” –

“You pair pretended you were both corrupt and would go along with the arrangement? And this
guy had seen you and believed that? In a recorded interrogation room?”

“I said he was dumb.”

“You got that right. It sounds like if he were any dumber he’d have forgotten how to breathe if
someone didn’t remind him.”

O’Leary carries on. “So anyways, we played along for a bit, an’ I thought that we were being left
with him for a pretty long time but it’s not uniforms’ place to argue with the detective’s strategy, so
we carried on, an’ suddenly the detective came in with this shit-eating grin an’ says ‘Palermo,
you’re under arrest for the murder of Cara O’Flynn and for compelling and promoting
prostitution.’ Takes him away, an’ we dunno what to do so we go back to the bullpen. Ten
minutes later the detective’s back an’ thanking us for getting the story outta him.” He stops for a
second, and the iceberg range of his teeth appears. “First time she brought someone down.”

“She is sitting right here,” Beckett says indignantly. O’Leary ignores her.

“Not the last. We had a lotta fun, didn’t we?”

“Yeah. Then I got posted to the Twelfth and you went to Central Park and we couldn’t do it any
more.” She smiles a little wistfully. “Good times. Everyone used to expect that O’Leary would be
the scary cop and I’d be all sweet and nice. When they found it was the other way round they were
usually so surprised that they admitted things before they’d even realised they’d opened their
mouths. Of course, the detectives never let us loose on anyone important, but it was good fun and
good practice.”

“Sounds like it. I’ll get another round in. Same again?”

Everyone agrees, and Castle goes to get more drinks.
“So you didn’t meet at the Academy?” Castle asks.

“No. O’Leary was a class or two ahead of me. I heard about him, though.”

“You did?” O’Leary says, clearly surprised.

“Oh, yes. Everyone was still talking about the Bigfoot who barely fitted through the doors and had to get his uniform made specially.” She pauses, but Castle can tell there’s more to it, not least because O’Leary is trying to prove that a tectonic plate can cower.

“Don’t, Beckett. That’s not fair.”

“They were talking more about the night someone challenged you to lift weights.” That doesn’t sound terribly interesting, but O’Leary is quite definitely cringing.

“Please, Beckett. Just stop now.”

“Weights?”

“That would have been fine. It was just that some bright spark suggested that some of the other rookies would do as weights.”

Castle snorts with laughter. “Are there pictures? Please tell me there are pictures.”

“No pictures.” O’Leary is trying to hide behind a very inadequate bottle of beer. “But his name is legend.”

O’Leary acquires an evil glint in his eye. “Beckett, how about I tell Castle here about how we met?” She squawks and threatens, but between O’Leary’s desire for revenge and Castle’s enthusiasm for hearing the tale (again) – and between the two men exchanging a mischievous glance of complete agreement and then making sure that she can’t maim, vivisect or shoot either of them by holding her hands (Castle approves of O’Leary doing that, when it saves him a world of pain) – the whole tale comes out. It’s just as hilarious the second time around, which is possibly fortunate as it disguises the fact that Castle’s already heard it.

“I’ll get you for this, O’Leary,” Beckett threatens.

“Aww, sure you’ll try. I can still out spar you.” Beckett descends into a grumpy cloud of blackly ominous mutterings. O’Leary, whose bravery clearly knows no bounds, pats her on the head. “Fair’s fair. You’re so cute when you’re sulking.” She punches him in the ribs, which appears to have the same effect on O’Leary as punching the chair cushion would have. None. The ominous mutterings reappear, not noticeably diminished even when Castle finally stops laughing.

Some dinner restores moderate harmony – or at least Beckett has stopped scowling. O’Leary and Beckett trade stories and shared memories, and Castle understands that though they may have “drifted”, as O’Leary put it, they were very close. Not close enough, though, for Beckett to confide in O’Leary. Another round is collected, and conversation restarts.

“You’re looking a bit better,” O’Leary says, peering at Beckett much in the manner – and size – that one of the faces from Mount Rushmore might do. “You looked sick when I got here. Something wrong, Beckett? If you give me a bug I’ll be pissed at you.”
“I’m fine. No bugs.”

“Hm,” O’Leary says sceptically. Castle admires his courage but not his discretion, and starts trying to come up with a way to change the direction of the impending conversation. “So if you don’t have a sick bug, what’s the bug up your ass?” O’Leary’s innate intelligence and investigative nous is clearly heading to the surface faster than Jaws when killing Quint. “Something bothering you at work?”


“Okay, so not work.” With Beckett carefully placed in between them, Castle can’t nudge him to divert the oil-tanker. “Is your dad okay?”

“Fine.”

“Not fine, then,” O’Leary says equably. “C’mon, this is me you’re talkin’ to.”

“Nothing’s wrong, O’Leary. Leave it.”

Castle manages to meet O’Leary’s eyes over the top of Beckett’s head, and is surprised by the resolve in them.

“You never could lie to me,” he says. “Don’t try now. You looked sick fed up when you were dealin’ with Mr Berowitz a couple of weeks back, an’ I still don’t know what you were doin’ playing Missing Persons. You sounded shook up when I called you about him, even if you were tryin’ to hide it. An’ then you turned up searchin’ for him again to hang out with us rather than your own bullpen, which was weird, looking like hell, and you weren’t too keen on leaving with Castle here either. Didn’t call you on it then, but you still look sick now.”

O’Leary puts a meaty arm around Beckett, which looks like more of an arrest than a provision of comfort. “I never asked you about it before, years ago. Might’ve been a mistake, that. But you’ve looked off every time I’ve seen you in three weeks and if it’s not work it must be home.” He looks at her. “So since it’s not Castle here – seein’ as he’s alive and with you – must be your dad. An’ I know what fine means when it’s you sayin’ it. It means it’s not fine at all.”

Castle stays extremely quiet. It is faintly possible that O’Leary might achieve the generally impossible, and get out of the next five minutes alive.

“Not your problem, O’Leary. Let’s stick to the beer and stories.”

“If you don’t wanna talk, we won’t.” This sounds familiar. “Just don’t not talk till you make yourself sick, ‘kay?” Bit late for that one. “An’ whatever’s wrong with you and your dad, try’n sort it out.” Oh shit. Not the best thing to say. Beckett says precisely nothing, for an instant.

“Since my father just made it pretty clear I’m not enough family for him, I won’t be trying to sort anything out.” Her tone would cut glass. Her face is by no means as smooth.

“Oh, Beckett,” O’Leary says gently. “What’s he done this time?” He’s still got an arm round her. His eyes meet Castle’s again. Castle takes the message entirely accurately and places a very tentative hand on Beckett’s knee. She doesn’t react.

“It doesn’t matter.” She takes a drink of her soda, and says nothing more.

“ ‘Kay,” O’Leary says. “If you wanna come out, lemme know. Let’s have another drink and talk
about something else.”

She briefly turns into him, turns away again as his arm lifts. It’s instantly replaced by Castle’s arm. He notes with some interest that Beckett doesn’t hesitate to lean into him much more than she had with her pet mountain, and notes further the stress in her shoulders. He’s learned an awful lot in the last couple of hours, mostly in the last twenty minutes. O’Leary was obviously the best friend Beckett had, maybe outside Lanie, but unlike Lanie knows when to back off. A good enough friend to be able to touch Beckett without being brushed off or shot – and indeed for her to take some swift reassurance from it. But – she still hadn’t confided in him.

“Excuse me a moment,” Beckett says. Castle shifts slightly to let her out and is relieved to note that she doesn’t pick up anything that might indicate her leaving without farewells.

“She’s not right, is she?” O’Leary asks, or states.

“Not really. But she’s doing something about it. Least, she was till her dad screwed up.”


“As much as I can.”

Conversation turns as Beckett approaches the table. Shortly, it’s a lively three-way discussion about baseball, which continues until the end of the evening. Beckett collects herself into her coat, picks up her purse and automatically checks her phone. She makes a noise of considerable displeasure and deletes a number of messages without even listening to them. This is followed by another noise of displeasure as she looks at the remains, and she puts the phone to her ear. By the time she’s finished listening she has acquired an expression that would clear forests without a single woodchip being left to tell the tale. She swipes at the screen to delete all remaining messages and doesn’t say a single word about why.

O’Leary glances over her unsuspecting head and scowl at her phone to meet Castle’s eyes. “Who?” he mouths.

Castle shrugs, likewise unseen by Beckett. “Her dad, or Lanie, or both,” he mouths back. O’Leary lifts his squirrel-tail sized eyebrows. He looks almost pensive.

“Up to you, Castle,” he says silently.


“G’night,” O’Leary rumbles. The door vibrates a tad in sympathetic resonance.

Castle maintains a friendly (or something like that) arm round Beckett all the way back to her apartment, interspersed with undemanding commentary on O’Leary’s massive size and how the two of them (O’Leckett?) must have terrified lowlifes all over the Sixth’s patch. He goes up with her, without asking and without complaints about it, and wanders through her apartment as she concocts coffee. Her phone is still making occasional whining noises as new messages arrive. He’s counted three since they left the bar.

“Someone’s keen to talk to you.”

“It’s Dr Parrish, and I don’t want to talk to her. She hasn’t any new evidence for me and I don’t need her telling me off.”
“Fair enough.” He pads towards the kitchen, the coffee, and Beckett, who has shucked her shoes and coat and is fussing with a French press and grounds. He waits till the hot water is poured, and then wraps an arm round her waist. “Got you,” he says happily. “Turn round?”

“Why?”

“I want you to.” When she doesn’t, though he can see the smile flirting with the corners of her mouth, he places big hands round her middle and turns her bodily. She squawks.

“What are you doing?”

“Turning you round. I like you this way round.” He bends down and kisses her before she can protest his manhandling, and she softens and cedes to him as he does, opening to his searching tongue and over a hard thigh, curving into him as he exerts a drop of force, a smidgeon of strength and asserts firm masculinity as she melts. He explores and seeks and finally conquers, heat building between them as his hands roam her back and hers slide round his neck to hold him to her. He untucks her shirt to allow him to stroke smooth skin –

And the door sounds.

This is unexpected, and very unwelcome. Beckett looks as confused as Castle does.

“Who’s that?” they say together. Beckett detaches herself, with an expression that suggests that whoever that is, they are not Beckett’s best friend right now, and tiptoes to the door. She looks through the peephole, emits a muffled noise of absolute fury, and turns on her heel to return to Castle.

“It’s Lanie, isn’t it?” he says.

“Yep. She can stay standing in the hall till kingdom come, for all I care.” The knock sounds again. “We’re not here.” Beckett repatriates herself to Castle’s very willing arms. Then his phone rings, shatteringly loud in the quiet apartment and – Beckett knows this because he had caught her out like that weeks ago – shatteringly audible through the front door.


“Why do you think my phone’s on vibrate? After you sandbagged me” –

“And aren’t you glad I did?” Castle murmurs –

“I’ve kept it on vibrate.” Castle considers saying I’d like to keep you on vibrate and rejects it as inviting fatality. His. “Now what?” she says crossly.

“Well, she knows I’m here” – he frantically tries to smooth his hair down. Beckett tucks her shirt in – “so she’s going to keep knocking till you open.” Suddenly he acquires a truly evil expression. “Or…” he says insinuatingly.

“Or?”

“Or we could really give her a show.”

“What?”

“If I opened my shirt, and you looked a bit ruffled and seriously kissed and untucked, then” –

“No.”
There’s another forceful, angry rap on the door.

“It would put her off.”

“No, it wouldn’t. All it would do is raise more questions, as if she doesn’t pry enough. I don’t need Dr Parrish prying any more.”

Castle looks just a little disappointed that she won’t play along with his idea, but eventually nods, in time with another fusillade on the door. Beckett’s patience snaps on the sound, and she stalks to the door.

“You’re disturbing the peace,” she says coldly. “Isn’t it obvious I don’t want to see you tonight? I’m busy.”

Castle has never actually seen someone explode with fury before. It’s quite fascinating. Lanie’s face is suffused with blood and she can’t form coherent words. Unfortunately, it hasn’t stopped her jamming a foot in the door so that Beckett can’t close it in her face.

“Go home. I didn’t invite you here, and I don’t want you here.”

Lanie finds her voice.

“You need an intervention. I’m not leaving till you listen to me and agree to get help – and I don’t mean Writer-Boy there. Proper help, not some amateur.”

Beckett has suddenly drawn on a more frightening aspect than Castle has ever seen on her. She is icily, glacially furious. Lanie abruptly appears to realise that she has truly fucked up.

“Kate? Kate… I didn’t…”

“Remind me of your psychiatric qualifications, Dr Parrish?” There’s a half-beat pause. “Ah yes. You don’t have any. And your authority over me?” Another half-beat. “Ah yes. None. Likewise your right to storm into my building, disturb my neighbours, insult my invited guest” – Castle startles at the defence – “and ruin my evening. Give me one reason why I shouldn’t arrest you right now and take you to the nearest holding cell for breach of the peace? Or should that be drunk and disorderly, since clearly you are not in your senses?”

Castle holds his breath and stays very silent and still, out of Beckett’s view. In this mood, she could as easily turn on him as on Lanie.

“Kate, we’ve been friends” –

“My friends don’t tell me I’m a fuck-up. My friends don’t broadcast my affairs across the entire bullpen and try to weasel information out of my other friends. My friends don’t make judgemental assumptions about situations they don’t understand. And my friends don’t come round making demands and shoving their way into my apartment to tell me how much of a fuck-up they think I am all over again. So explain to me exactly how you think you’re my friend, because I don’t see it any more.”

There is a very unpleasant silence. Lanie is shocked silent.

“I see. You can’t. Shut the door as you leave, please. And don’t bother coming back here. You’re not welcome.”

Castle watches, astounded, as Lanie retreats in disorder. The door slams as Beckett shoves it shut.
behind her.

“Who the hell does she think she is?” Beckett yells. “Coming here and disturbing the whole block and trying to tell me what to do like she’s my mother and I’m fifteen again? My mom was never that stupid. Even my dad wasn’t that stupid. She can fuck right off and never come back.”

“Now who’s waking the neighbours?” Castle asks calmly.

Beckett whirls round to turn on him and finds herself wrapped in against him. She draws in breath to rend him limb from limb and he forestalls all of it by bending to kiss her hard with complete possessiveness. She fights back, though, possibly the first time she’s not yielded to him; invading his mouth and he can taste the hot anger sparking from her tongue, the fury in her lips and the grip of her hands. She’s wresting herself away from him to free her hands and rips his shirt open, tears her mouth from his and bites down on his shoulder, licks hotly over the nerve in his neck and nips again, fire blazing in every move and it lights him up; he hauls her against him and forces her head back to his so he can take her mouth again and then march her backwards to the bedroom: she fights for dominance all the way but each time she finds it Castle fights back, drinking down her anger till he can drop her on the bed and land over her, pinning her down and still devouring her mouth: her struggle to take command pushing him to conquer her.

He fights to find room to strip her shirt and pants: she pulls one hand from his grip above her head and opens his zip and belt, dives inside to grip him and slide hard and hotly from base to tip, aggressively working him as he divests her of bra and then panties and there’s nothing soft or gentle about her, she’s fuelled on fury and primed with sheer rage and in this mood there’s no stopping her. All he can do is match her, and she’s opened his after-burners. He drags her hand away and surges into her in one hard, fast movement so she cries out loud and he’s pinned her hands beside her head again: it’s rougher than they’ve ever been together as he grips and she claws and he takes her in total possession and she writhes beneath him and cries out again and goes limp as he comes in a hot rush.

Another facet of Kate Beckett. That’s the incendiary temper she’s never shown him before: the virago of fury after Lanie left. The icy rage – that, he’s seen, though not quite in such depth: directed at him a month ago, but not that explosive fury. That’s the temper that she’s been locking down ever since her dad got sober, ever since she found it didn’t help.

There’s a huge amount of locked down Kate Beckett that’s only now rising to the surface. Castle is sure that this is not the end of the fallout from her five years of self-imprisonment. Everything’s shifting, like the plates that stick below the San Andreas Fault, and suddenly unlock and shift, leaving chaos and disaster behind them. He hopes, suddenly chilled, that whoever her therapist is can guide her through a more controlled release of pressure. Lanie can cope. An explosion like that with Jim… might just be fatal.

She’s trying to move, and Castle realises that he’s still lying over Beckett, caging her against the sheets and probably too heavy for her. He rolls off, the sheets soothing on his lacerated shoulders – she’ll have finger-marks where he’d held her wrists – but keeps hold so that she has to roll with him and ends up lying on top. She is not at all relaxed or eased by a bout of angry sex, and all he can do is be there with her and provide stability.

She is still muttering imprecations blackly into his chest, the exact nature of which he thinks it much better not to know. When she slides off, he lets her go: unsure how to deal with the aftermath of her blazing rage, where he’d have known what to do with the chill anger which he’s always seen before.

“Who does she think she is?” cuts the air. *Your best friend,* Castle thinks, and reflects that for her
best friend, Lanie’s Beckett-reading skills are sorely lacking. There’s a short pause, which may or may not be Beckett chewing the pillow in still-flaming fury. Oh. It’s not. “I needed a friend, and all she did was make me feel like shit.” That’s not fury any more. It’s misery.

“I think she might have realised,” Castle notes dryly. “That wasn’t exactly subtle.”

Beckett doesn’t answer. Castle props himself up so he can see her and finds only her back.

“She used to be my friend,” Beckett says unhappily. It sounds like a disturbingly permanent change in her view. “Guess she isn’t now.”

Castle considers the likely result of saying you shut her out too and decides that death is also a disturbingly permanent change. It’s true, though. He thinks a little more.

“She said – when she called me after she called you – that she wasn’t going to let her best friend kill herself without trying to help. She wants to help.”

“She isn’t helping, though. She just makes it worse.” Beckett buries herself in the pillows. “I don’t need her making it worse. I don’t wanna see her. All she does is make me feel even more of a fucked-up failure than I already did. I tried to play nice on Thursday and she wouldn’t, and ever since she’s been on my case.”

So. Despite the fury and the hard words and the ignoring of calls, Beckett is actually really, truly hurt by Lanie’s behaviour, and – as usual – hiding it as hard as she can manage. Seems to be the Beckett way. Get hurt, lock down, lock out, carry on minus the hurtful influence. She’s not very good at giving second chances – except her father, where the only outcome of second chances was more hurt. Another learned response.

He wraps her into his arms, and makes a nondescript noise which Beckett could take as agreement.

“Sleep on it, Beckett. Everything will be better in the morning. I have to go home, but I’ll see you in the bullpen tomorrow.”

He has to go, eventually, when he thinks that she’s asleep, and in his wrong assumption he’s necessarily gone when Beckett’s later tears fall. No family, one fewer friend, one more fuck-up.
Thursday passes in some more tearing apart of the Donbass’s lives, with the addition of the CCTV footage of the hedge fund where Cal-the-chauvinist (as Castle none-too-harshly dubs him, though the boys are hardly behind in using the term) works. Esposito insists on another round of luncheon sparring, to keep Beckett in shape. So he says in public. In the break room, with Ryan and Castle, it’s a little more pointed.

“She’s off her game. What’s going on?”

“She had a run-in with Lanie,” Castle says laconically, and leaves it at that. Everyone understands, and cop-like, no-one says anything more about it.

The sparring match is as brutal as before, but Espo hits the floor a little more often and rises with a satisfied, dangerous smile.

“Range tomorrow, Beckett. We’ll even let Castle have a turn.”

“You’re on.”

And so Thursday evening rolls around. The boys leave, and Beckett insists that Castle leaves too. She wants some time alone, to consider the case and consider how to exit therapy with some dignity. Her father has stopped calling as often. Dr Parrish (not, not, Lanie) has largely left her in peace. Time to rebuild. And the best way to rebuild is to focus on the positive.

Positive one: her job. She’s still the best in the business.

Positive two: her team. Ryan and Esposito. They’re there. A little pushy about her best interests, but not – usually – intrusive.

Positive three: Castle. Which would be positive one if only she could get past the whole family bit. Of course, since she can pretty much write off any chance of her having any family of her own there’s nothing to compare it to. So if she simply harnesses the power of positive thinking she’ll manage to reset her expectations so that Castle’s relationship with Alexis is no skin off Beckett’s nose, because she has nothing with which to compare it. It’s a beautiful thing, and one which she never had and never will have. This is no reason to be upset, envious, or stressed, just like she’s not upset, envious, or stressed that some photographed celebrity owns a five-million dollar diamond pendant. It simply doesn’t affect Beckett’s life, and the sooner she internalises that the better.

Right. Done. Settled. She might wish that she had a relationship like that with her father, but she doesn’t and she isn’t ever going to, because he doesn’t want one. So, time to grow up. Accept that Castle’s relationship with his daughter is a good thing, and move on. Accept that her own father doesn’t want to be a family, and move on.

Blow her nose, dry her eyes, and move on.

“All right. Sort of,” Castle replies. “But I think we need to go over some things. castle came out his hedge fund, you traced him through Midtown from cameras and a cash withdrawal, and he was last picked up on a street cam heading down East Houston between Avenue A and B. I think
we’ve got enough to bring him in.” She smiles very nastily. “Let’s see how much of a big shot he thinks he is.”

“Like Cardon?”

“Just like Cardon.” She stops for a moment. “No. Not just like Cardon. This time, I want Castle in there too.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s been a single parent, been there and done it, on his own, and managed to write best-sellers and make millions while he did. If I need it, I’m going to use that to piss Donbass off big-time.” The smile becomes – hard as this is to believe – even nastier. “Faced with someone who actually did it, all his poor-little-me won’t wash.” She picks up her phone. “Better get Castle in here. I need to warn him. It wouldn’t do for this to be messed up because I forgot to prep the other player.”

Ryan wanders off to tidy up the timeline and tie up the canvassing results down on the Bikeway. While he’s at it, he works out to his mild consternation that Beckett must have been through several hours of footage, and even on fast-forward that’s a long time after shift-end. However, she’s done it in the past and she looks pretty fired up, so they’d all better roll with it. He finishes off and produces the results to general approval.

“Okay. Thanks, Ryan. Espo?”

“Yo?”

“Canvass results? Anyone see this guy around?"

“Yeah, but it’s not exactly reliable. Couple of hobos, couple of joggers think they might have seen him but none of them are sure. If it is him, he got really lucky.”

“Every murderer needs a little luck,” Beckett says mordantly, on which note Castle arrives.

“You wanted me, Beckett? Finally my rugged handsomeness has prevailed to sweep you off your feet.” A trademark eye roll appears.

“I want you to do something useful in interrogation. We’re bringing Donbass in shortly, and I want you to show him what a good father is supposed to be like, if it goes that way. I want him to get really angry that he can’t do it and you can – and make a fortune into the bargain. I’m guessing he’s all about the money and appearances.”

“Oh,” Castle says. He is – well, surprised really doesn’t cut it. Utterly flabbergasted, dumbfounded, and amazed might just about cover the ground. He looks more closely at Beckett. Hmm. Less sleep and more stress. Just what was she doing last night after she sent them all home?

“Ryan, Esposito, get Cal Donbass in here. Politely, like he’s a witness. I want him to be all fat and happy right up till we start hitting him with the facts.”

Cal Donbass has a certain similarity of outlook to James Cardon. This does not endear him to Beckett in the slightest, but at least Cardon hadn’t looked her up and down like she was street meat.

“Cal Donbass,” she says coolly. “Your wife was the last person to see Della Roberts alive.”
“Petra? Last to see her? You think Petra had anything to do with this? Dumb cop. Petra couldn’t.”

“Petra went to see Della at nine-thirty that morning. Della walked out with Petra. That’s the last time she was seen alive. Now, did you have any contact with your wife that morning?”

“What’s that gotta do with anything?”

“Answer the question.”

“She might have called. I don’t remember. Wouldn’t have been important.”

Castle comes in right on cue. “Wouldn’t have been important? With a tiny baby? I’d have thought you’d have assumed every call was important.”

“Callie’s Petra’s problem.”

“Problem?” Castle says. “Your child is a problem?”

“What the fuck do you know about it? Who are you anyway?”

“This is Richard Castle. You likely read his books.”

Donbass’s jaw drops. “Richard Castle? Derrick Storm?” Castle nods. “There was a man. No-one got in his way. No wailing babies, and women just fell open for him. Boy, was he something.”

“Yeah, I’m that Richard Castle.” Castle’s tone doesn’t change.

“You’ll get it, then. Man needs peace to bring home the mammoth” – it’s just as well Donbass can’t see Beckett’s expression of disgust – “and wants his home nice when he does. So I brought the money home and Petra was supposed to deal with the baby. Every time I came home the damn baby was screaming.”

“What did you do?”

“Went out again. Couldn’t think with that noise. No use talking to Petra, either. All she could think about was Callie Callie Callie. No time for me. She just bitched that I didn’t do anything. That wasn’t the deal.” He’s talking exclusively to Castle, who is managing to preserve an interested and even sympathetic expression. Beckett can just see the line of a tightly clenched fist under the table. “So I got fed up of it and told her to get it sorted. Even looked up ideas for her.” He looks like this should have won him Father of the Year award. “Found out about this cranial osteopathy. Petra rang Della and Della told her it was nonsense. Bitch. Could at least have tried it. I told Petra to keep trying. Put some effort in.”

“Is that why Petra went to see Della?”

“Course it is. If you had brains to match your looks you might be clever.” He looks back to Castle. “I can see why you’re down here. Need a man to add some intelligence.”

“But Petra called you,” Beckett says very coldly. “Phone records show you answered. Nine-fifty. All your calls are recorded. I have the recording of that call. Let’s just listen to it, shall we?”

_Cal, she wouldn’t see us. I really tried, Cal._

_Try harder. Make the bitch listen._
Cal, she wants to talk to both of us. She’ll come over and explain. Cal, please. Maybe she’ll listen to you.

For Chrissake, Petra, what use are you? Can’t keep the baby happy, can’t make this woman do the right thing.

[crying]

Okay, I’ll come down. I gotta do everything myself.

“Camera footage shows you leaving your fund at ten. Where did you go to meet them?” Beckett carries on. She doesn’t think that Castle has much more tolerance left for Cal Donbass.

“Met them at East Houston. Had to walk from Essex Street subway.”

“Then?”

“Baby was screaming. Petra said walking would make it better. It didn’t. You’d have thought she’d have known that.”

“You ever spend any time with your own child?” Castle enquires dangerously softly.

“That’s Petra’s job. I earn, she looks after the baby.”

Beckett kicks Castle gently before he explodes.

“So you walked down to East River Bikeway. That’s where we found Della’s body.” She shoves the pictures across. “Messy, isn’t it? What’d she say to you?”

“Stupid bitch didn’t know how it works. She said I should be doing more. Changing diapers and feeding. No freaking way. That’s a woman’s job.”

“Do I look like a woman?” Castle says, frigidly furious and projecting a substantial amount of infuriated large masculinity.

“What?”

“I changed my daughter’s diapers and fed her. I managed to do that and still make a shedload of money. None of it made me less of a man.” He surveys Donbass with a completely unfaked look of absolute contempt. “You’re not a man, you’re a waste of space.”

Completely as hoped and planned, Donbass loses his temper at Castle’s disgust with him.

“You just write about it. I did it. I got rid of that whining bitch, making Petra think I was useless.”

“Did you indeed?” Beckett interjects. Realisation dawns. “Cal Donbass, you are under arrest for the murder of Delaine Roberts.”

Donbass is removed by two big uniforms. Beckett still appears to have swallowed something particularly nasty-tasting. “What a jerk,” she says.

“Yeah. They’ll be better off without him. If you can’t be a good father, be involved, you shouldn’t do it.”

“Right,” Beckett says tightly, and controls the reflexive wince by walking into the bullpen. She’d wanted to play it this way, and it had worked. No point in getting upset by the inevitable
memories. No point at all.

“So now what?”

“We write it up, just like always, and then we go home.”

“First, Beckett, you’re coming to the range. Remember?” Esposito looks cheerfully competitive.

“I’m coming too,” Castle puts in happily. “You said I could shoot with both of you.”

“Have you ever shot?”

“A bit. Learned when I was trailing round the theatres of the Midwest behind Mother.”

Espo casts a disbelieving glance at Beckett, who simply shrugs. She is not prepared to bet that Castle won’t pull some ridiculous ability out of his back pocket, but she’s also not prepared to believe that he’s up to their standard. Anyway, going and shooting targets will clear her mind so that she’s upped her game for therapy tonight. Total concentration on something outside of her woes.

She certainly has total concentration. And total amazement. Castle can shoot. Not as well as Esposito – she’d be really worried if he were as good as an ex-Special Forces sniper – but she’s having to put effort in to stay ahead. Truth be told, she’s having to put effort in to stay level, and from Castle’s wide grin, he knows it. When Espo calls time and the scores are tallied up she’s scraped ahead, but not by much at all. Castle simply smiles cheerily and says next time, Beckett.

On the other hand she feels a lot better simply for putting bullets through targets, and it’s not as if she needs to mention that she’s been working off her angry misery at her father and Lanie. She feels that she can make it through the therapy session, now, and when shift end comes, departs towards Dr Burke’s office with less of a feeling of impending doom than on Tuesday. If nothing else, she remembers, she’d initially thought about therapy as a way to spill out her feelings to a non-judgemental listener. She should have remembered that on Tuesday.

Dr Burke is not content with the way in which the sessions with Detective Beckett have progressed. The third substantive session will be this evening, and he has not in any previous session induced Detective Beckett to reveal the true reason she is attending. She has admitted to the stress caused by the Berowitzes and in particular Mrs Berowitz’s refusal to believe Detective Beckett’s own experience, and also to the emotional upset that her father’s story had produced. He has, therefore, set aside an hour in which, with the aid of a full pot of his preferred Orange Pekoe tea, he intends to consider the conclusions and deductions which he has drawn in the previous sessions and to evolve a path down which, he expects, Detective Beckett will then be taken forward. It is pointless to continue an unproductive method of therapy, and he has no need to do so.

He draws a pen and paper towards him. He has always found that the act of writing by hand allows him to see clearly the matters which he needs to consider. He has also found that, unlike typescript, it is entirely illegible to any patient, many of whom have a well-developed facility for reading typescript upside down. He is certain that Detective Beckett is skilled in the art of reading upside down, and that this is likely to extend to neat handwriting.

From the first substantive session, he knows that Detective Beckett is uncomfortable with Christmas. This is unsurprising, given the timing of her mother’s murder and her father’s alcoholism. Dr Burke expects that Christmas whilst her father was suffering with alcoholism was an extremely unpleasant experience, and quite opposite to the expectations of society. He will ask
Detective Beckett about Christmas.

He also knows that Detective Beckett is not convinced of her father’s continued sobriety. He will probe that further. She had not assisted Mrs Berowitz – in Detective Beckett’s own mind – twice. Her feelings around that have remained unclear and consequently unexpressed, although Dr Burke considers that they include guilt and self-reproach. Neither is unexpected, though both are unjustified.

From the first half of the second session, very little more had become apparent. It was really a most unproductive session, by Dr Burke’s standards. Detective Beckett had revealed that she had thrown herself into work to deal with her father’s troubles; which Dr Burke would characterise not as dealing but as concealing their effect on her, and provided Dr Burke thereby with considerable insight into her personality. Motherless at nineteen, and effectively abandoned by her father by twenty. Detective Beckett, instead of grieving or retreating into any of the myriad methods by which young people conceal hurt, simply set her mind and soul on succeeding as a police officer, and, being both highly motivated and highly capable, did so. Dr Burke strongly suspects that she has found that her success, while bringing her substantial professional satisfaction, does not bring her satisfaction in her personal life. He has also formed the impression that, although Detective Beckett’s co-workers and superiors have been thoroughly supportive of her need to be available for her father, they are largely unaware of the strain she is under at all other times. Dr Burke had had the unpleasant feeling that Detective Beckett was concealing a major matter which had occurred after their previous session, but she had been sufficiently guarded not to give him the slightest opportunity to probe. Quite why she is coming to therapy if she is unwilling to talk escapes Dr Burke. That is not how he treats his patients, and he is not inclined to continue in that mode.

The second half of that session had been slightly more enlightening. Dr Burke had asked about the support on which Detective Beckett can rely. The answer had been disappointingly sparse. Her co-workers, which Dr Burke considers an inadequate form of support, owing entirely to Detective Beckett’s own inability or lack of desire to confide in them; her friend Dr Parrish, with whom there appears to have been a complete breach of trust and of communication; and Mr Castle, with whom Detective Beckett appears to be in a romantic relationship. Detective Beckett’s father had not figured in the list, which is unsurprising, although Detective Beckett had stated that her father had been more interested in her daily life and more parental since Christmas-time. There had been some hints of very substantial stress in that disclosure, which on reflection Dr Burke considers may be connected to the concealment of her emotions in the earlier part of the session.

Dr Burke considers his notes and uncaps his fountain pen to begin on an orderly, bullet point list of matters to explore. For now, he will simply make the points as they occur to him. He will consider the appropriate order in which to raise them after that is done. He begins by sketching a timeline of the critical events.

Half an hour later he is done. As he had expected, the mere act of taking time to consider the information which he has, evaluating it in a logical and orderly fashion, and writing out his deductions and the points which it will be necessary to cover, has provided him with an appropriate course to follow. He caps his pen and puts away the paper with a sense of considerable professional satisfaction.

Castle, Ryan and Esposito find themselves – no-one admits to knowing how – in a comfortably shabby bar with a decent volume of beer and basketball on the screen. Perfect for a Friday night to celebrate closing the case and the weekend to come. It’s all beautifully comfortable.

Right up until Lanie appears, that is.
“Who told her where we are?” Castle hisses.

“I did,” Ryan admits.

“Why?”

“Stop her trying to find Beckett. You’ll just have to take your licks.”

Castle considers a sharp exit, but then considers that this will only ensure that Lanie hunts him down like a fugitive. Besides which, she’s already arrived at their little group.

“Is Kate here?” she says, without pausing for breath or indeed greeting.

“No,” the three men chorus.

Lanie droops. “Where is she? I wanna talk to her.”

“No idea,” they chorus again. Well, Castle has a very good idea where she is, judging from the time she left and her expression as she did, but he has no idea where her therapist might have their practice and so he is not lying.

“Okay. See you.”

Lanie turns to depart.

“Don’t you want a drink?” Ryan asks. She turns back, briefly.

“Nah. Not if Kate isn’t here. Too much testosterone.”

Castle looks at Lanie. She’s a lot less combative than she has been. In fact, she looks almost unhappy. Hmm. Seems like she might have realised that she’s overstepped, albeit with the best possible motives.

“C’mon, Lanie,” he says, “stay for one. You can sit between Ryan and me. We’ll protect you from the testosterone overload from Espo here.”

Espo preens. Ryan mutters blackly into his beer bottle. Castle stands and pulls out a chair for Lanie, who – rather surprisingly – sits down. While Ryan and Esposito are discussing technical issues arising from the basketball referee’s decisions – otherwise known as disagreeing vehemently and questioning his eyesight and parentage – Lanie says quietly, “Is Kate okay?”

“Yes,” Castle lies outright.

“I wanna see her. Talk to her properly.”

Oh God here we go again, Castle thinks. “That’s between you and her. I keep telling you this. I’m not getting between you. You two broke it, you two fix it.”

“She won’t take my calls, she won’t talk to me when I go round. How’m I supposed to fix it?”

“I don’t know,” Castle says. “I really don’t know, Lanie.”
“Good evening, Detective Beckett.”

“Hello.”

Detective Beckett appears perfectly calm. This does not improve Dr Burke’s view of the coming session. At this early stage, Detective Beckett should be evincing some signs of upset, tension, or unhappiness. None is apparent. Dr Burke is concerned. There are two possible reasons for this lack of tension. The first is that Detective Beckett has not thought about the situation at all. This seems vanishingly unlikely. The second is that she does not intend to participate fully, or at all, in any of these sessions. That is entirely possible, and quite intolerable. Dr Burke has no intention of being used to validate an entirely incorrect worldview, nor will he confirm Detective Beckett’s release from therapy until he is satisfied that she has addressed her issues. He cannot, of course, force her to seek or accept treatment. He can, however, ensure that his views on the efficacy of that treatment are recorded.

It would be wholly incorrect to suggest that Dr Burke’s professional pride is pricked. His professional pride is engaged. Detective Beckett requires assistance, and he will provide it. He determines upon a course of action which is much more direct than he would normally employ. It is, he knows, a highly risky strategy. However, he does not believe that subtlety is likely to succeed.

“Detective Beckett,” he begins, steepling his fingers beneath his chin, “on Tuesday you informed me that your relationship with your father had steadily improved since he became sober, and that since Christmas he had been more paternal, is that not so?”

“Yes.” Detective Beckett says nothing more. The silence that follows is not at all inviting. Dr Burke, however, is impervious to the lack of invitation.

“You mentioned that you saw him every week, on Sundays. Did you see him last Sunday?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me how your evening went, please.”

“It was fine. We had dinner, we talked, I went home.”

“What did you discuss?”

“He was making sure I was okay after the stomach bug, and asking about the dinner I had with Castle.”

“Did you discuss anything else? In particular, do you ever talk about the past?”

“No.”

“Why not?” He contrives to sound interested, rather than accusing.

“We’re through all that. It’s not relevant now.”

“If the past is not relevant, why are you here? What do you hope to achieve?”

Beckett is finding, despite her intentions to use this session to relieve her feelings, that it’s far
harder than she had thought actually to begin doing so. She doesn’t know where to start, and into
the bargain she now has no idea at all what therapy might achieve. And, of course, therapist or not
she is deeply uncertain that anyone could listen to her bitterness and unpleasant feelings without
judging her, and finding her wanting. Everyone else has, after all. Well. Everyone except Castle.

Detective Beckett appears to be lost in thought. Dr Burke cannot believe that such an intelligent
woman did not have an outcome in mind. It is, of course, possible that she had previously had an
outcome in mind which has now become irrelevant. He changes tack, slightly.

“While you are considering that, let us also explore a different matter. You have unstintingly
supported your father.” How very interesting. Detective Beckett quite plainly winced. “However,
it does not appear that you have required support yourself. It must have been very difficult for you,
especially at Christmas time.” He is genuinely sympathetic. “How did you cope?”

“I worked.” Dr Burke raises his eyebrows in an inquiring fashion. “Took the Christmas Day shift.”

“Do you still do that?”

“Yes. Other people have children and family commitments.” Dr Burke does not react to that
inadvertent admission. Why should Detective Beckett not consider that she has family
commitments, given her weekly visits to her father?

“This year, you said that you had encountered a case before Christmas which had involved an
alcoholic. Did that not cause you some difficult moments?”

“No.” On Dr Burke’s look, another few words emerge. “No. She needed justice, and I found it.”

“And afterward? She continued to lean on you, looking for support, but she would not accept that
the support she sought was not the correct solution.”

Ah. That has touched a nerve, too. How very interesting, again. Her father, lack of family
commitments, and the wrong answer. Dr Burke is beginning to perceive a pattern here.

“My father told her the truth. She didn’t like it.”

Dr Burke draws his bow at a venture, so to speak. “How did you feel about what your father told
her?”

“I…” Detective Beckett’s control of her expression has faltered. Her face has contorted. It is
difficult to tell whether that is disgust or distress, as she has ducked her head, presumably to hide
her visage.

“Detective Beckett?” She looks up for a brief instant. It is enough for Dr Burke to observe that
Detective Beckett is exhibiting a considerable level of distress. “What did your father say that
distressed you?” He infuses concern and understanding into his voice. Clearly there is a genuine
issue here, and Detective Beckett is not deliberately evading him, as she had done on Tuesday, but
is unable to overcome her reticence immediately. He waits patiently, until she should be ready to
say more. While he waits, he considers that he had been too hasty in considering that Detective
Beckett was not approaching therapy in the correct spirit. He should have considered that on
Tuesday she was simply unready to speak. He will need to ensure that he curbs this tendency to
draw conclusions too quickly.

“He said I walked away. He says that saved him.” Dr Burke cannot see why this should be so
upsetting. “That he had to realise that he wanted his daughter more than he wanted to drink.” The
growing note of hard, contemptuous anger in Detective Beckett’s voice is most concerning. “It’s
why I did everything the first time. Why I kept seeing him.” Dr Burke will need to return to that, but not at this juncture. “But he lied. Lied when he was drunk and lied when he wasn’t.” Dr Burke is extremely surprised by that. Extremely surprised.

“In what way has he lied?”

Detective Beckett’s reticence dissolves. From the spate of words flooding out on a tide of barely coherent anger, it appears that her father has – or Detective Beckett believes he has, which for present purposes amounts to the same issue – informed her that he no longer regards her as family. It is quite unsurprising that she is very badly upset.

“He said walking away saved him. Sure it did. He didn’t have to look at me any more. I was too like her. He said he needed me, needed to be a family again, but it’s not true. Never was true, likely. He’d rather have a different family. I’m not enough.” Detective Beckett’s voice has returned to being cold, hard and completely controlled throughout the last few sentences. “I might as well never have bothered. I didn’t cause it, couldn’t control it and couldn’t cure it. I thought being family for him, being there if he needed me, kept him safe. It had nothing to do with me. He ruined my life for five years, two when I was there and three when I wasn’t, and I tried so hard to show him I’d forgiven him, and I was there for five years more but it’s all been a complete waste. He’s ruined the last five years too, and he’s spoiling my life now.”

“Now?”

“He wants to be part of Castle’s family. They’re more fun than me. More like a real family.”

Dr Burke absorbs this information. The situation is certainly complicated. He starts with the most obvious question.

“Mr Castle has a family?”

“Mother. Daughter. They just loved Dad.” The bitterness with which Detective Beckett infuses that statement is really quite extraordinary. Dr Burke extracts the key fact.

“Mr Castle has a daughter?” Much has become clear.

“Yeah.”

“You have met her?”


“How often?”

“Twice before Christmas. Then once after, and then a couple of weeks ago.”

“I see. How did your father meet Mr Castle’s family?”

“Dad and Castle forced me into a dinner at Castle’s. I had to go, so as not to upset Dad. Wish I hadn’t bothered.”

“Why is that?” Dr Burke asks softly.

“Because if I hadn’t gone I wouldn’t have had to watch Castle being the sort of dad I don’t have, and I wouldn’t have had to watch my dad being everyone’s new best pal. I can’t bear seeing either. I used to have a dad like that and now I don’t and I can’t stand seeing how it should have been.”
Detective Beckett is close to weeping. Dr Burke ensures that a box of Kleenex is in close proximity to her chair, and finds, to his mild surprise, that his much earlier irritation has been completely replaced by sympathy.

“He used to be like that. Then Mom died. Then he found Jack Daniels because I wasn’t enough for him. And then I did everything right and I still can’t be enough for him.” Her voice drops. “Still can’t really forgive him. He did everything he was supposed to do and I can’t be good enough to forgive him. So he found people that he likes better. People who didn’t walk away from him. Maybe he never forgave me.”

Dr Burke perceives the entire picture. Detective Beckett has blamed herself for being insufficient to save her father from his descent into alcoholism. She has then proceeded to blame herself for walking away. She has laboured under the misconception, undoubtedly, although possibly inadvertently, about which he will keep an open mind, assisted by her father, that her presence is necessary for his continued sobriety. Then, telling herself that she has done it all for love of her father, rather than out of misplaced guilt, Detective Beckett has endeavoured to assuage that guilt by being, effectively, constantly at her father’s beck and call.

When Mr Castle had appeared on the scene, his relationship with his own daughter has provided Detective Beckett with the stark contrast that she had, Dr Burke expects, avoided. To add biting insult to already crippling injury, her father, untrammelled by guilt or any understanding that his relationship with his daughter was damaged and fragile, has been able to spend time in the company of Mr Castle and his family without the slightest qualm or feeling of discomfort.

“Not that it’s surprising,” Detective Beckett continues. “I can’t deal with any family. I’m pathetically jealous of them and I can’t forgive my dad. He probably realised it long ago.” She halts. “I originally came to therapy so I could deal with Castle’s family and sort my feelings out and not upset Dad by letting him know I hadn’t managed to forgive him. Now it doesn’t matter. He doesn’t need me so there’s no point in any of it. He’s going to fit right into the Castles’ happy little family. I’m not sitting through it again. So all I need to do now is make sure I’m not going to be fazed if I run into some alcoholic on the job.”

Dr Burke is not at all content with that idea. Firstly, Detective Beckett is settling for a severely restricted existence; secondly, Dr Burke already considers that Mr Castle may have strong views on Detective Beckett’s mode of existence based merely upon his presence at the discussion with Mrs Berowitz, which is hardly the action of a man who is only mildly attracted; and thirdly Detective Beckett’s ideas are wholly misconceived. Dr Burke does not consider it to be consistent with his professional ethics to allow Detective Beckett to continue to suffer under such misapprehensions, when he is perfectly confident that, with time, he can assist her to overcome them.

It is, however, entirely consistent with his professional ethics to allow Detective Beckett to think that he will assist her with her stated desire, as long as he does not say so. He would have preferred to continue this session for longer, but Detective Beckett appears quite exhausted, and it is unlikely that she will be able to focus correctly.

“Oh Detective Beckett,” he says gently, “our session has ended. Would you prefer that someone came to collect you?”

Detective Beckett shakes her head. “I’ve got my car. I just want to go home.”

“Please make your appointment for Tuesday, when we can talk about what you have said you hope to achieve.”
When Detective Beckett has left, Dr Burke considers for a while, meditating on the correct way to use Detective Beckett’s desire not to be perturbed by any subsequent encounter with an alcoholic in order to guide her gently to resolution of her issues with her father. Were those issues to be resolved, then it is very likely that there will be little to no remaining difficulty with Mr Castle’s family, and in particular with his daughter. He would greatly appreciate a confidential discussion with Mr Castle, but the time is by no means right to ask Detective Beckett’s permission for that.

Beckett sits in her car for a moment, thinking about whether to call Castle, before inserting the keys and starting the engine. She’ll just calm down on the way home. When she’s parked, then she’ll call him without dissolving into pathetic tears all over him and second-guessing the whole of the therapy session on him. That’s not a good plan. Not good at all. Best to use the journey time to advantage.

She drives very carefully, conscious that her mind is not wholly on the road or indeed wholly together, and that her normally twenty-twenty vision is somewhat blurred. She squeezes into a space, breathes slowly for a few seconds, until she can steady her voice, and pulls out her phone. She ignores the messages on it, and brings up Castle’s number. Another two breaths, and she dials.

“Rick Castle.”

“Hey, Castle.”

“Beckett,” he says happily. “Have we got a nice new body?”

“No, no dead bodies.”

“Oh,” he says disappointedly. “How about I come by and introduce you to a nice live body instead?”

It’s exactly what she needs to keep her composure. “Whose body would that be, then?”

“Mine, Beckett.” The deep tones trickle over her, suave seduction slinking over her. “Mine.” Somehow it sounds as if he’s claiming something other than his own body.

“Mm,” she hums, non-committally. “I suppose that would be an acceptable substitute. I’ll put the kettle on.”

“See you shortly.”

Beckett swipes off, breathes very deeply, and attains the safety of her couch before she allows herself to release the hold she’s maintaining on her fragmented, fragile control. Castle will be here in a few moments, and he’ll cuddle her into that big, warm body, and it will all be okay. It will all be okay.

Castle had been perfectly well aware that the call was from Beckett: that’s what caller ID is for. He was merely extremely surprised that she had called, and therefore assumed a body. Maybe he’d been wrong about her attending a therapy session tonight? When she says no dead bodies, though, his heart leaps. (Clearly his heart deals in clichés.) Attuned as he now is to her voice, he’s fairly certain that she’s stressed, which implies therapy – and she’s called him afterwards? That is new. However, he can’t ask till she tells, so he makes a quick decision and falls into the familiar flirting that will mean that she doesn’t need to decide whether or not to tell him anything, but needs only to say yes or no. Simple, easy choices.

When he reaches her apartment one look confirms his theory. She looks utterly miserable, and, as
before, the cure for misery is to cuddle her in and not ask questions.

“That was awful,” she mumbles into his shoulder. He’s not entirely sure he was supposed to hear that. He’s also not entirely sure she meant to say that out loud. Common sense tells him not to say anything until she says more. “Thanks for coming over. Do you want coffee?” Not the more he had been hoping for.

“Sure. Thanks.” He pats her gently and drops a kiss on the dark hair before he lets go to amble after her to the kitchen and the coffee.

Coffee made and repatriated to the table in front of the couch, Beckett further amazes Castle by quite definitively nestling into his side and clearly expecting his arm to surround her. He’s quite happy with that idea, and complies, even though she’s now buried her unhappy nose in her coffee and isn’t exactly communicative. His fingers tap out tiny rhythms on her shoulder as she drinks. The coffee disappears in short order, but when she’s done she sits back into his clasp and leans on him. She looks, observing her, exhausted.

“Are you okay?” he asks carefully.

“Tired.” There is a pause. “I…” she stops again.

“What’s wrong?”

Oh, what the hell. He knows she was going to go, so why she’s backing off telling him escapes her completely.

“I hate therapy,” she says bitterly. Castle draws her in and hugs her tightly.

“Don’t blame you,” he rumbles softly. “That why you’re upset? C’mere and just let me hold you. Nothing else.” He gathers her yet closer, pulling her on to his lap and encouraging her head to lie on his shoulder. Her harsh breaths scratch along his neck. “You don’t need to do anything, just stay here and snuggle in.” His voice changes from soothing rumble to joyful mischief. “You know that it’s the universe’s plan that you sit on my knee, don’t you? It must be. You fit just perfectly. You’re exactly the right height to sit there and plop your head on my shoulder and stay all neatly tucked in.” He continues burbling blissfully, soothing her with an incessant flow of nonsense and silliness, giving her something to listen to which isn’t her roiling, miserable thoughts or Dr Burke’s focused formality. “So you should sit here all the time. Apart from anything else, it’s convenient.”

She musters up a glare: a poor feeble thing compared to normal, but still, it’s a glare. “Convenient?” she says, in the same tone in which Lady Bracknell disapproved of handbags.

“Sure,” says Castle, unfazed. “Convenient for hugs, conveniently keeping me warm, and possibly convenient for you.”

“How is it convenient for me? Beckett growls.

“Well, you like being hugged – at least you’re not killing me so I guess you do – and you like being able to stand down and lean on my shoulder, and when you’re in the right mood you like this.” He drops a tiny little kiss on the end of her nose, and smiles happily at her. She growls again, but there’s no force behind it, so he kisses her nose again, and she turns her face up, still tired and strained, but her eyes are darker and he knows what she wants. Knowing is assisted by her hand gripping his neck and pulling his head down. It’s not terribly subtle, that.

Nor, of course, is kissing him.
Hold me

The more than hint of desperation in her mouth is a little worrying. Okay, so she called him, and she’s told him she’s going to therapy, but this isn’t affection, it’s closer to fear. He accepts the kiss, but envelops her in comforting affection even as he takes back the lead. As she softens into him, he begins to assert his position, gently owning her soft lips, the cavern of her mouth, claiming with small nips and forceful tongue; with firm hands and enclosing arms.

Slowly, the unexpected terror in her body abates, and she relaxes, eased. He keeps kissing, less possessive now, slow and deep and sure, showing her that he’s enough, he’s everything she needs; that she’s enough, and everything he needs. She makes a soft, half-snuffly little noise, and curls in close again, still under his stroking. He kisses her hair once again, and lays his cheek on her head, her breathing slowed, her limbs lax.

“‘S okay,” he mumbles. “‘S all okay.”

The reply sounds like ‘slong as you’re here.

“I’m here.” I’ll always be here for you. “You’re here. It’s all okay.” He kisses some more, softly, not demanding anything.

“I hate it,” she says, a little later. “Dragging up everything I don’t want to remember. But I have to. I can’t do my job if I freak out every time I meet an alcoholic.”

Castle very consciously conceals his stunned reaction to that statement. That… does not sound at all good. That does not sound like Beckett addressing her issues with her father. That, in fact, sounds like she’s just written her father off, and out of her life. And if she doesn’t deal with her issues with her father, is she ever going to be able to deal, really, honestly deal, with the fact that he is a father too? This is really not at all good.

“No,” he says slowly. “You can’t.” Behind his speech he’s frantically trying to think of what he might want to say, and more frantically biting back the words he doesn’t want to say, such as but if you can’t deal with fathers will you be able to deal with me?

“I have to be able to deal with that. And somewhere…” she trails off, and then restarts, “somehow I need to cope with…” another trailing off, and she bites down nervously on her lip, tense again, her hands knotted in her lap, white-knuckled, “with your family.” She drops her head and gaze.

Castle stares at the top of her head, being all he can see. Of all the things she might have said, that was the last thing he expected to hear. Absolutely the last. “Uh?” he manages. Nothing more arrives. It belatedly dawns on him that she thinks he’ll be upset that she needs help to be able to cope with his family. “Beckett?” No response. “Kate? Kate, look at me.” He turns her face up to his. Hers is white, and tired, and expecting hurt. “Kate, it’s okay. I said I wouldn’t push you to do anything you weren’t ready for. You’re not ready for the loft, let alone my family. Though most of the world isn’t ready for my mother.” There’s a very tiny hint of a smile. “Don’t push yourself into it. We’ve got plenty of time. It’s all up to you.”

She doesn’t say anything at all, merely snuggles back into him and leans once more upon his shoulder, closing her eyes. This only gives Castle a perfect view of the dark rings that have developed under her eyes despite the early hour, and the way in which her skin is thin and transparent, pale under the remnants of her make-up. He doesn’t try to kiss her again, simply continues to hold her safely in the strength that gives her surcease.
She doesn’t need to try, with him, he thinks. She doesn’t need to try because she is trying, or at least she recognises that she needs to solve her issues with his family. And that means that she recognises that she’ll see them, which implies that she will come to his loft. It’ll just take time, and he has plenty of that if she’s safe in his arms. If she knows she’s safe in his arms. He smiles beautifully, unseen, and contents himself with cuddling for now.

The peaceful atmosphere is abruptly broken by a distinct rumble from Castle’s stomach. Hardly conducive to romance, or indeed comfort, that. Beckett starts and comes out of her semi-conscious state.

“I’m hungry. Can we get some takeout?”

“If you want,” she says, “menus are on the counter there.”

“What do you like?”

“Pretty much anything, but pizza’s easy and they’re quick. Pepperoni and mushroom, please.”

Castle attends to the key business of pizza ordering and, when he surfaces, finds that Beckett has changed into soft sweats and removed her make-up. He feels this is likely a good thing, and when she curls up next to him again and lets him sneak his hand round her waist and under the sweatshirt and tee to the soft skin beneath, is convinced of it. She yawns, widely.

“If you wanna talk,” Castle murmurs, “you can. If you don’t wanna, you don’t have to. Up to you.”

Beckett lets that soak into her mind, without any real effort to think through what he means. She’s too tired for that, and too tired to talk: her emotional outpourings at the shrink having been quite enough for one day, or indeed enough for an eternity. But… she needs to fix herself, and that means being able to do her job properly without worrying about needing to recuse herself, or being forcibly recused by Montgomery; and it means being able to cope with the loft and Castle’s family. Only his family, though. They’re innocent in all this.

By the time the pizza has arrived, been eaten, the detritus cleared up and sodas finished, Beckett’s yawns are almost continual and it is possible that the only thing keeping her eyes open are invisible matchsticks. Castle runs an assessing gaze over her when she isn’t paying attention (even an exhausted Beckett is likely to complain or take strong measures if she sees him sizing her up like that) and then throws caution and common sense to the wind by simply picking her up and carrying her through to her bedroom.

“Bedtime, Beckett. You need your beauty sleep.”

“Not as much as you,” she snarks.

Castle grins down at her. “I’m not the one who’s narcolepsing” – she glares – “so I don’t think so. C’mon. Bedtime.” She pulls a pair of soft pyjamas from under her pillow, which are surprisingly demure, and disappears to the bathroom. Shortly there are noises of teeth being brushed. Castle wanders off to leave her privacy and to consider his options. There are two, basically, go home or stay. He could stay. Arrangements have been made for Alexis’s company tonight – which do not involve his mother, who has been entirely too interested in how often he’s seeing Beckett and staying out late or all night.

He wanders back into the bedroom and finds Beckett tucked up in her bed, upon which discovery he sits down on its edge and traces the delineation of her cheekbones, and then her lips.
“I could stay,” he says, “if you wanted.” There’s a sleepy mutter, followed by the extreme effort of opening an eye no more than halfway.

“You can?” she slurs, sounding as if she didn’t expect that. “Thought you’d need to go home.”

“Not tonight.”

“Stay, then. Please?”

He’ll never need that invitation to be issued twice. He hustles through the bathroom, strips in short order, and arrives beside her in bed in a few instants. Less than a few instants after that, she’s spooned into his broad, bare chest and, from the tenor of her breathing, only an inch from sleep. He’ll go find a book when she’s deeply asleep, and read for a while. He’s not sleepy. Some parts of him are far less sleepy than others. One part is very definitely wide awake, and it’s not his brain.

In the morning Beckett winches her eyelids open, stretches extensively, and is greeted by a loud ouch as she inadvertently thumps Castle in the solar plexus. She feels much better, probably aided by the solid night’s sleep that she’d had. Castle for real is a lot more useful for sound sleep than remnants of his cologne on her pillows. Of course, Castle for real has some other advantages. She turns over and finds bright blue eyes regarding her happily.

“Awake at last?” It’s not that late, surely? “It’s after eight.” That’s not at last. That’s about – oohhh – an hour too early for Saturday off-shift.

“Too early,” she humphs, and curls into the crook of his arm, intending to close her eyes again.

“No it’s not. I’m going to have to go soon, and I want to” –

“Yes?” she says dangerously.

“ – say hello before I go.”

“Hello,” Beckett says, and shut her eyes. Castle pokes her in the ribs, and they fly open again, with a suspicious squeak and wriggle. He scents an advantage.

“Stoppit!” she squeals. “Stop it stop it stop it.”

“You’re ticklish,” Castle smirks. “You’re really, really ticklish. Detective Beckett has a secret weakness. How have I not discovered this before?” He tickles her some more, until she’s ruffled and breathless and squeaking crossly and incapable of killing him, and then leans down and kisses her slowly. “There. That’s my Kat.”

Beckett draws her fingernails dangerously delicately over his shoulder, not – quite – scratching. “Kat?” she says ominously.

“In private. Independent, walk-alone, and when you want to be, soft, purring and affectionate. Kat.” He doesn’t mention the apartment empty of any reminders, or her belief that she has no family. “Kat who likes being stroked,” he murmurs, dripping insinuation down her, and does. She arches her back and pushes into his fingertips and if he wanted to die right now he could simply point out just how much that resembles a cat enjoying their human’s stroking. A cat, or a Kat, is not a pet. It’s an independently-minded companion. He’d better not take that comparison too far. He might not like it.
“Kat?” she says again, with less of an ominous note. Pet names aren’t really her thing, but while Castle’s stroking her like this it adds a certain frisson to affairs. She’s never let anyone else call her Kat. Too close to too many things, too like opening up. But somehow it feels right, as it had in the Hamptons.

“Kat,” he says definitively. “Between us, though. Not anywhere else.” His flexible fingers stroke very acceptably down her spine and then wander further. There seems no reason not to curve into them and to purr. Castle turns her over and strokes in a way that definitely keeps her purring, and then takes her mouth assertively and rises over her and smoothly possesses her. He feels so good: all his bulk and weight and strength surrounding her and within her and over her immensely reassuring; protection from the harsh reality of the world outside her door. She moves in rhythm with him, climbing together and then soaring into the void.

A while of peaceful snuggling later, Castle detaches himself gently. “I have to go home,” he says. “Do you want to do something later?”

Beckett gazes at him sleepily. “That’s sweet, Castle, but I think I need some time on my own. I need to think.” He raises a brow. “Therapy,” she says, with an edge. He should probably have realised that.

“Okay. But if there’s anything you need – food, drink, stories, my scorching hot body” – she snorts – “anything, Beckett – just call.”

She turns to him, now dressed and perched on the bed beside her, sits up and hugs him hard. She doesn’t say anything, but everything she might have said is in her clasp around him. He kisses her swiftly yet deeply, and then tears himself away. He just knows that she’s going to spend the rest of the day – the rest of the weekend – brooding. He holds on very hard to the fact that she actually called him last night because she was upset and wanted his particular brand of comfort, and manages to leave without saying anything inflammatory. He’d deeply love to have a confidential chat with the therapist, but that’s not a conversation he wishes to open at this stage and nor is it a matter that could ever be progressed without Beckett’s explicit consent. But, but but, she called him, because she needed him and wanted him and she told him she was going to therapy.

Progress. Serious, serious progress.

He bounces home very happily, and even manages to deal with his mother’s later prurient enquiries without exploding.

Beckett resurfaces quite a lot later, and rather later than she would have preferred. There are a certain number of household chores to get through, and some food shopping wouldn’t hurt either. Before she starts, though, she buries her face in a Castle-scented pillow and luxuriates.

She throws her washing into the machine and sets it off, tidies and vacuums while it’s running, and then starts the dryer before she goes shopping. None of this requires any thought, so rather than thinking about therapy she thinks about lunch and dinner. She’s not going to go through the elaborate recipes of last week, but she could have chicken shashlik with rice, and there’s no reason she couldn’t get herself a nice dessert either. Her shopping conforms to her thinking, in sufficient quantity to have some left over for tomorrow’s dinner too.

In a further effort to avoid any prospect of having time to think about therapy, or Lanie, or her father; she spends some quality time considering her extensive shoe collection and selecting out those which are old and damaged, or which – that would be a whole one pair – she never wears. Then she goes and buys some new ones to replace them. Retail therapy. Much better than
psychotherapy. Much. That occupies the whole of the afternoon very pleasantly. Her wallet is
complaining, but she’s not listening.

At the end of the afternoon, with the dusk falling, she’s successfully managed not to think about
anything serious at all. She hasn’t answered the call from her father, she hasn’t answered the call
from Lanie. She hasn’t listened to either message. Maybe later. Maybe not at all. She doesn’t
need her father’s lies and she doesn’t need Lanie’s criticism. What she does need is a run, so she
does that. It occupies another hour, by which time she can make her dinner, which occupies
another half hour, and then she eats it, slowly.

And then it’s seven o’clock and she has nothing to help her procrastinate any longer. She makes
coffee – a large pot of best Javan blend, with creamer and cinnamon on the tray – and takes it over
to the couch, and realises that she can’t put anything off any longer. She starts with her phone.

*Katie, it’s your dad. I need to talk to you. I didn’t mean to upset you.* Just like he hadn’t meant it
when he’d said *go away, I can’t bear to see you, or you’re so like her, I can’t stand it, or why
aren’t you her.* Just like he hadn’t meant it when he’d said *Katie I need you, you’re what saved
me, or if you hadn’t walked away, I’d never have got dry.* They always lie. Always. It’s the one
constant in her relationship with her father: he always lied. She deletes the message, and stares dry-
eyed out of the window, seeing nothing.

After a while she drinks her coffee, and forces the message and the hurt in her father’s voice away.
He’d always sounded like that: drunk or sober. Always sounded hurt and saddened that she
wouldn’t come to him, that she wouldn’t pick up the pieces for him, that she wasn’t her mother.
Nothing has changed.

She didn’t cause it. She can’t – couldn’t – control it. And she couldn’t cure it. But then he’d cured
himself – stabilised, sobered up, saved himself – and he’d said he’d needed her. But, she thinks,
that had simply been her thinking she could control it. Thinking that being there for him would
stop him relapsing, that being a family would keep him safe, that his sobriety depended on her
forgiveness. He’d said it, after all: *the only way I’d ever see Katie again was if I got dry. I needed
her, but she wouldn’t come if I wasn’t sober.* Of course she’d thought that she was a necessary part
of his sobriety and his recovery. He’d said so. But he’d lied, and she’d believed him, so relieved
to have her father sober and alive that she’d have done anything, and did; said she’d forgiven him
as he told his story and made amends, and believed it. Up till now, believed it, until all her
repressed hurt and jealousy and resentments started to appear under the harsh light of Castle’s
family, and showed her that her relationship with her father was all sorts of wrong.

She should have walked away and stayed away: lived her life not subsumed herself in her father.

She has some more coffee, breathes deeply and slowly, folds up her washing and puts it away:
numb domesticity swaddling her brain.

She might as well listen to Lanie’s message now. It can’t get worse.

*Kate, please call me. I wanna help.* Not, notably, anything that might translate to *I’m sorry for
making you feel like shit.* The tone is mildly apologetic: as if Lanie had been late for dinner, or had
to bail out on meeting her for work. Clearly Lanie doesn’t feel that she has done anything majorly
wrong. Fine.

She deletes both messages, and has a third cup of coffee. It’s probably one too many, but she
doesn’t really care. She puts her i-Pod earbuds in and finds a book of no literary merit whatsoever,
involving kick-ass women and paranormal men. No brain required, but it passes the time perfectly
pleasantly. Then again, it’s not meant to appeal to the brain. Rather lower down, she thinks.
When she gets bored with the story, she has a long hot bath and pays particular attention to her moisturiser afterwards. It’s ten o’clock, and she can legitimately go to bed.

She’s avoided, evaded and procrastinated all day to avoid doing the thinking she really ought to do, but as she curls into the clean, fresh pillows, devoid of the comfort that Castle’s cologne’s lingering scent would have provided, Dr Burke’s face comes back into her mind. It’s not conducive to sleep. She’d had the clear impression – Dr Burke’s professional poker face is no match for a top-notch detective’s skills – that at the start of the session he’d been, if not annoyed, certainly close to irritated. That had changed, though. He’d become patient and almost sympathetic quite soon. He doesn’t care, though. He isn’t affected and it doesn’t matter and he won’t care how she feels – which is just what she wants. She just needs to work out what she needs to talk about (she cringes) to sort out being back to full force at work. And, of course, how to get over her petty pathetic envy of Castle’s family. She doesn’t like feeling petty, pathetic or envious.

Tomorrow, she won’t procrastinate. Tomorrow, she’ll think it through.

As if her mind were waiting for her to make the decision, as soon as she has, she drops into sleep.
Is it me you're looking for?

She really tries to think it through: in the shower, through her morning coffee, through a long run, through a convoluted set of yoga forms, and through lunch. All she achieves is a mind as twisted as her most complex asana. Eventually, she shrugs, goes out for the afternoon to an exhibition that proves to be considerably more interesting than she’d thought, and tries to ignore the unhappy thoughts nibbling at the corners of her brain. They’re still munching on her mind as she falls into bed, and gnawing on her neurons when she wakes in the morning. She has no idea where to start.

Monday comes and goes: a new body drops but since it was a simple shooting over a cheating husband and a cheating wife, it takes them approximately three hours with the aggrieved spouses of the husband and wife respectively to have the charges signed, sealed, delivered and the DA’s problem. It might have occupied more time if either spouse had had the brains to hide the gun, or even wipe the prints off it. Honestly, no class and no brains either. They can’t even watch cop shows, or they’d know how to do it.

Castle is volubly bored by mundane murder, and makes up for it by all sorts of ridiculous theories and, where the boys can’t see, scorching flirting and stolen touches. The new case hasn’t seemed to make Beckett any happier, and if she chews her lip any harder it’ll bleed. It’s already swollen and almost bruised, which is not good. He tries to show support in more practical ways: buying her lunch, making her coffee, making her more coffee, producing some candies, making her more coffee, and eventually simply producing a constant supply of coffee which appears to have less effect than pure filtered water would have. If he’d drunk that much coffee he’d be dancing on the ceiling. Beckett doesn’t even twitch, and at the end of the day simply says to him that she needs time to think about tomorrow’s therapy session on her own, with a pained, forced smile that he doesn’t believe in for one instant.

He’s shrugging his own coat on when Ryan and Esposito skulk up to him and suggest, rather forcefully, that they would like a little chat. Not this again? He thought that they were all past that. Still…

“Sure. Where shall we go?”

They settle on yet another sports bar.

“Ryan,” Espo says, with a smile that has too many teeth in it for friendliness.

“Yeah?”

“If you tell Lanie where we are I’ll have you hitting the mats for the next month, okay?”

Ryan squirms guiltily and puts his phone away. Castle watches with some interest. Clearly Ryan thinks that Beckett and Lanie should patch things up, and is prepared to interfere. Espo’s game, however, is entirely unclear.

“What’s up with Beckett this time?” Esposito opens, as soon as they’re seated in the bar. “Leaving at shift end twice a week for the last two weeks, looks like she got run over by a truck, an’ every time her phone rings she acts like someone slugged her. Thought you said you’d got this?”

“I have,” Castle says mildly. “If I didn’t she’d likely still be benched.”

Esposito’s jaw drops. “What the fuck is goin’ on here, Castle?”
Castle finds himself somewhat between a rock and a hard place, or the devil – in the form of Esposito – and the deep blue sea, the bottom of which is where his relationship with Beckett will be if he isn’t very careful. On the other hand, Beckett needs her team. The best she’d been in days had been at the end of sparring with Espo, and whilst he absolutely hates seeing her taking the hits and the bruises afterwards he has to admit that it had worked. He’d thought last week that the boys would be vital to holding all this together for long enough for Beckett to fix herself, and he’s seen nothing to change that thought. However, he can’t give away private information. Hm. Tricky. Very tricky. He takes a long pull at his beer, and hopes for inspiration. It doesn’t really arrive.

“Look, guys, is Beckett screwing up the team?” Two heads shake. “Is she messing up on the job?” Definitive shakes, again. “Is she pulling sick days when she isn’t sick, or messing you around?” More shakes. “Okay then. She needs to know you have her back, just like you always do.” Equally definitive nods. “She needs to be part of the team. She doesn’t need picked over and hassled.”

“Told you so, Ryan,” Espo says firmly. Castle ignores the interjection.

“She’s having a rough time but she’s not gonna thank any of us for pushing her when she doesn’t wanna talk – not that she ever wants to talk, but you get my drift. She’s got to work it out herself.” He makes a face. “Lanie tried pushing, and look where that’s got her. Beckett needs you just like she always did.”

“Yeah, but what’s wrong?” Ryan asks, and then emits an “Ow!” as Espo punches him in the shoulder in a less than brotherly fashion.

“Shut up, bro. Don’t you get it? It’s not our business till she tells us. Stop flapping your nose. It don’t help. If it’s her dad she won’t wanna talk about it, an’ if it’s not she still won’t wanna talk about it.”

“Okay, man. I won’t. But…”

“Yeah?”

“But will she be okay?”

There is a short, pointed, silence.

“If we let her get on with it, and just make sure we’re there if she needs us, then yeah,” Espo says. Castle nods, and hopes that it will be that simple. Espo smiles evilly. “But it won’t let her off sparring.” He clearly has a thought. “What’re we gonna do about Lanie? She’s been harassing us like a panhandler on speed.”

Castle shrugs. “Dunno,” he says bluntly. “I’m not getting in between those two. I like living, with all my arms and legs.”

“Why won’t she talk to Lanie?”

“Ask Lanie. I don’t know.”

Castle firmly turns the conversation away from the problem of Lanie and away from Beckett and fortunately everybody follows the hint.

Beckett waves the boys off, notices Montgomery’s interested look, and takes herself off before he can make it an order or, worse, ask questions. More running, more yoga, more not-listening to her
Tuesday passes with equally mundane murder. Come six p.m., Beckett departs in the direction of Dr Burke’s office, without explaining to anyone where she’s going. She has noticed a reduction in the quotient of concerned looks from Ryan, which is a relief, though there has been no reduction in the number of times Espo’s put her on the mat at lunchtime. Lanie has mostly stopped ringing her. Her father has not, but it’s just the same thing over and over again, and she simply doesn’t believe him.

Dr Burke has undertaken some focused contemplation of the correct way in which to encourage Detective Beckett to talk, which is a necessary precursor to being able to consider the correct way to assist her in overcoming her issues. He has arrived at the slightly unexpected conclusion that the blunter style of questioning which he had employed, granted that he had done so out of mild irritation, had been surprisingly effective. He considers further, in order to be sure that he has understood his proposed strategy from all viewpoints, and then nods his head positively. He has determined that when Detective Beckett has been questioned previously, it is most likely to have been in a court room. It is therefore also probable that, being accustomed to and comfortable with a judicial and direct mode of questioning, she will continue to respond more effectively to such a form. He sets his strategy accordingly, and awaits Detective Beckett.

“Good evening, Detective Beckett.”

“Hello.”

“You said on Friday that you wanted to be able to deal with encountering alcoholics at work. Is there anything you wish to add to that statement?” Strangely, Beckett finds that Dr Burke’s quasi-judicial, cool style is very helpful. She’s used to this. It’s oddly… well, comforting.

“I don’t want to get drawn into their problems again. It’s not helpful.” Dr Burke nods, approvingly. It would indeed not be helpful. “And…”

“Mm?”

“I want to be able to get through seeing Castle’s family. Without being upset.”

Dr Burke allows himself to raise his eyebrows. This is not an addition that he had expected. He had expected to have to lead Detective Beckett to that issue. Of course, it does not assist with her father, unlike the opposite direction, where resolving the issue of her father would have resolved the issue with Castle’s family. However, the issue of her father can be pursued at a later time. He rapidly reorganises his thinking, and smiles professionally at Detective Beckett.

“Where would you like to begin?”

“My job.”

This is no surprise to Dr Burke. The vast majority of his patients start with the easiest – or apparently easiest – area. It is quite possibly also the case that, if this is not the most important outcome for Detective Beckett, it is only secondary by a very small margin. He continues on in the judicial style upon which he has determined.

“Please tell me the circumstances in which you met the Berowitzes, in more detail than at our previous sessions.”

Detective Beckett describes the meetings in rather more detail, with a wealth of completely professional commentary on the case. However, she is unusually reticent about the evidence which
had led her to the conclusion that Mr Berowitz was an alcoholic.

“Mm.” Dr Burke regards Detective Beckett somewhat beadily. “You say that you recognised Mr Berowitz as an alcoholic immediately you attended their apartment to advise them of their son’s murder. On what grounds did you conclude that?”

“His eyes were a little unfocused and bloodshot. He had hand tremors. There were marks on the table where a glass would be placed. The whiskey bottle was in very easy reach. He’d been sucking breath mints, at ten a.m.” Detective Beckett stops there.

“Was there anything else, perhaps in Mrs Berowitz’s behaviour?” Dr Burke is endeavouring to work his way towards Detective Beckett’s own experiences by investigating the symbols and symptoms which she had recognised.

“She… the way his wife was watching him. He didn’t get it, first off – not like the relatives usually do, but more than that, like it took time for the words to soak in.” She winces at her own phrase, much to Dr Burke’s interest. “And…” there is a significant silence during which Dr Burke makes no sound or movement, “I recognised the look on the wife’s face. She was worried, and scared we’d know, and sorry for him, and trying to cover it all up. Just like I used to,” Detective Beckett finishes bitterly. “Just like I did.”

“How did that affect you?”

“I was okay. It brought back memories, sure, but I was fine. I could deal with them.”

“Please describe the memories which this meeting occasioned.”

Detective Beckett shrinks into herself. Clearly this is an area she would prefer not to have to explore, which tends to indicate, in Dr Burke’s experience, that it is an area which is important. He waits.

“It started very small. Before I went back to college, he’d have a drink at night. Maybe a couple, but he never got drunk. Maudlin, maybe.” That is a very interesting word choice. “Like it helped him grieve. So I went back to Stanford. At first he was sober when I called – I called a lot. But then it got more, and it started not to sound right. So I saved up and came back.” Her voice and face constrict. “He was drunk when I got there. I wanted to surprise him.” She looks guilty. “And I wanted to see how he was when I wasn’t there and he didn’t know I was coming.”

She stops, face furrowed in recollected pain, lost behind her eyes in the suffering of ten years past. Dr Burke thinks, a little fancifully, that she is now that shattered nineteen-year old.

“He was a mess. But he looked so happy to see me – and then he said Johanna!”

Even Dr Burke’s professional calm is dented by that statement.

“He thought I was Mom. The whisky was right there in front of him. Spilt. There was a puddle on the table. Not on the floor. That came later, when he’d drunk so much he couldn’t control his body.” Dr Burke manages to control his revulsion at the thought. Detective Beckett stops again, for longer. The corner of her mouth is twisted. Silence stretches out between them. Detective Beckett’s eyes are blindly staring back into the past. “Then he worked out it was me.” The sentence is ejected from Detective Beckett’s mouth.

Dr Burke, not a man given to the use of overly descriptive language, thinks that each word has fallen between them as did the bombs on Pearl Harbour, or the nuclear devices on Hiroshima and Nagasaki; all to the same devastating effect. Here, he realises, is the beginning of all Detective
Beckett’s issues; the initial trauma.

“He said I thought you were her. I wanted her. Go away. I don’t want you, I want Johanna. And he downed the glass and started to cry.”

Detective Beckett looks, momentarily, as if she might cry. However, she does not. This concerns Dr Burke.

“What did you do?” he asks. First, he will explore Detective Beckett’s actions. Only then will he progress to her emotions. They still have some time in this session, though he is not at all sure that he will not have to overrun for a few moments.

“I went upstairs. Unpacked.” There is a small hitch apparent in her speech. “Came back down,” she says tightly. “Took the bottle and poured it all away.” Another hitch. “He wasn’t happy. I told him to go to bed and pushed him in the direction of his room.”

Dr Burke resists, with considerable difficulty, his temptation to ask how Detective Beckett had felt through this sequence of events.

“He went. He still hadn’t said he was glad to see me or used my name. He just staggered off to bed. He was wasted.” And yet another pause. “Then I went through everywhere I could think of and poured every drop of alcohol down the sink. Everything I could find.” Detective Beckett breathes in, slowly. “I didn’t know then that they always hide it. Always lie that there’s no more. Just lie. I thought if I poured it away he wouldn’t be tempted and we could fix it.” She draws another breath. “I didn’t know I couldn’t fix it.” Her voice hardens and becomes bitter again. “I only found that out a week ago, really. Water under the bridge now.”

Dr Burke allows Detective Beckett to gather herself. He is treading very carefully. She is not, he had immediately discerned, a person who enjoys discussing emotions, nor, he thinks, is she a person who is swift to reveal them. Gaining her trust is crucial, and he is certain that he does not possess it yet.

“After you had cleared your home of alcohol, what did you do next?”

“Went to bed myself.”

“Mm?”

“When I woke up” – Ah. Detective Beckett has avoided any description of her actions after going to bed, presumably because that would involve revealing her feelings – “I had breakfast, and Dad woke up. He was sober. Hung over, but sober. I think he was sober. Then he was – seemed – pleased to see me. He said he’d been lonely, and it was a one-off, and he was sorry and wouldn’t do it again. He said he needed me, I was the only thing he had left. So I said I’d call more often, and we were good. So I thought. I didn’t know then that they always lie. Always. I went back to college and I phoned more often and for a while he seemed better.” Detective Beckett pauses again. “He was just hiding it.”

A very strange expression passes over Detective Beckett’s face, and she stops speaking for a moment. “I never talked about it. I couldn’t talk about Mom with him. It upset him so and I couldn’t deal with that. If he started it he just got upset. I never started it.”

“Yes possible,” Dr Burke asks cautiously, “that you wished to talk about your mother’s death with him?” He is certain that Detective Beckett had so wished, but had already started to avoid subjects which she thought might trigger an unpleasant outcome. In some ways, this is a response that he
has seen in cases of domestic abuse. Avoid the triggers. Detective Beckett appears to have developed it remarkably quickly. Then again, Dr Burke considers, she had received an utterly devastating blow.

“I…” Detective Beckett trails off. She does not appear to have an answer to that question. Instead, she looks at her watch. “Time’s up,” she says.

“Only if you wish it to be. We can continue for a few moments.” Detective Beckett shakes her head. “In that case, I will see you on Friday. Before we meet again, however, I should like you to try to consider whether you would have wished to talk about your mother with your father, and why. I should also like you to start to consider how you felt about these events.” He watches irritated confusion bloom in her face. “In order to ensure that you can deal with encountering alcoholics in the course of your work, you need to understand your own feelings, which stem from these early experiences.” The irritation dies away.

“Okay. I get that. Thank you.” She leaves. Dr Burke considers that his statement had been entirely true, if partial. He is relatively content with the manner in which that session had progressed. Friday’s session, however, may be considerably more difficult. He puts it out of his mind and turns to the relatively simpler matter of shooting-related PTSD.

Beckett removes herself to home at some speed, unconsciously hoping that distance from Dr Burke’s office will provide some distance from the absolute horror with which his suggestion has filled her. Intellectually, she can see, understand and even agree with his reasoning. Emotionally, it’s appalling. The slightest thought of going through it all again is terrifying. She hates the very idea of it. But Dr Burke had hit the one point that could have made her consider it. To be able to do her job right. And he hadn’t said it…but maybe working out her feelings will make her pathetic, petty envy of families (Castle’s family) go away.

She’s dealt with plenty of things she didn’t want to do in the past. At least this one might have a positive outcome. God knows the others generally haven’t.

Lost in her own head, she doesn’t realise that someone is knocking on her door for some time. She pads across, and is less surprised than she should be when she recognises Castle through the peephole. She opens the door with immense relief.

“Hey, I brought dinner,” he says. Beckett just looks at him, apparently too tired to comprehend the concept of food. He puts the takeout bag down and hugs her, which seems like a good start.

“C’mon. I’m starving. Well, not literally, obviously, but I’m really hungry and you look like you need a meal but I didn’t think you’d want to go out so I brought your favourite Thai and ice cream which will melt if you don’t put it in the freezer so let’s do that.”

“Did you actually breathe at any point in that sentence?” Beckett snarks, as he moves them toward the kitchen and freezer. Then she catches sight of the ice cream. “How did you know that was my favourite?”

“This?” He waves the Ben & Jerry’s carton of Coffee Coffee BuzzBuzzBuzz around. “I didn’t—but now I do. Besides, it was coffee. It was bound to be one you liked.”

“What do you like?

“New York Super Fudge Chunk.” He pulls a carton of that out too. “I don’t mainline caffeine.” Both ice cream cartons arrive in the freezer.

“You’re quite hyper enough without that,” Beckett mutters. Castle pouts for the sake of it, and
mentally cheers that Beckett has managed an attempt at normality.

“You should take advantage of my energy, not complain,” he smirks, and smiles suavely. His arm stays firmly around her, hand on her hip, even while the takeout migrates into the oven to heat up.
Dinner happens. Hugs happen. Speech does not happen. Beckett hiding in Castle’s large shoulder happens, and still no informative conversation happens. Castle is more than a little concerned that Beckett didn’t call, but he’s not sure if he’s worried because she’s not that upset or because she is that upset. He can’t actually tell how upset she is over the session, but whichever it is, she needs his company whether she asks or not.

“You know you can talk if you want to,” Castle tries.

“Yeah,” says Beckett, which finishes that line of discussion before it’s even begun. He continues to cuddle, and wonders (she’s right there in his arms, which always goes straight to his hindbrain) if assertiveness is what she’d like, right now. No decisions, no thinking, just yes or no.

His arm around her strokes smoothly down her back, and finishes up over the curve of her ass. She presses into his hand. It’s almost like a week ago, thankfully not the angry, furious, scalding sex of Wednesday, nor the complete exhaustion of Friday. He moves a little more firmly, intent in the pressure and placement of his fingers, seduction in his strokes. He still hasn’t come up with a better way to ease her after therapy, though he wishes he could, because he’s fairly certain that sex – or even lovemaking – isn’t a complete solution. On the other hand, it seems to work for Beckett, and it’s damn sure that it works for him. Well. Beckett works for him. Messed up or not messed up. She’s so deep under his skin she’s never going to come out.

He lifts her face to lean in slowly and descend on her mouth, taking his time, exploring, stroking and then retreating to suck her lower lip in, a gentle nip to convince her of his authority, and she murmurs yes and softens into contented compliance to his lead, responds and opens and cedes and eases for him; turns into him and swings her legs up to be tucked in his lap so that he can take more, and while taking, give.

He kisses round her sharp jaw: a fraction finer, a tad tighter than last week; nibbles on the nerve in her neck to make her squirm and when she does moves downward as her head drops back to expose her neck and clavicles. Thick fingers delicately undo her buttons and whisper across her cleavage, lips follow as he lays her back and leans down over her; her hands slide into his hair to hold his head to her chest to tease and taste, sliding thin fabric and narrow lace over hard peaks and softer curves, twining his tongue till she’s breathing harder and arching up into him. He undoes her bra, slides her shirt from her shoulders and off to who cares where, runs fingertips under the rim and over the malleable flesh to cause her to shiver, not with cold, and sigh, not sadly.

Castle considers, with the very tiny portion of brain which is not utterly lust-fuzzed and concentrating on making his Beckett-Kat feel very, very good, whether he should carry on here, or pick her up and carry her to bed. Carrying her to bed has the huge advantage that it reinforces the assertive masculinity that always turns her on and that she seems to need to relax her more often than not. It suddenly occurs to him that the people she’s normally most comfortable with are big, or tough, men. There’s Lanie, or there was, and there’s Ryan – but it’s O’Leary, and Espo, and now him, who seem to help her most, in very different ways. He parks that thought for later digestion: now not being the time for stopping to think, and decides to split the sexual difference.

His hand wanders from breast downward to the button and zip of her dark dress pants, opens both, and slides over the smooth cotton, cupping briefly and then carrying on down to take the pants away. It’s enormously erotic to have her half-naked, only in her underwear, responsive to his touch and caught in his clasp; and when he returns a hard palm to cup her again she writhes against him and he can feel dampness through the fabric. He puts his mouth back to her breasts and leaves his
hand where it is, pressing, moving very slightly above the cotton, stimulating sensitive nerves and bringing a whimper from her. It only winds him higher, harder: knowing that he, only he, elicits these desperate noises, that only he sees this side to her; his hands and mouth become possessive, predatory as he takes her full lips again and slips fingers beneath her panties and slides his thumb across her: owning her reactions and now the whimper is a moan and she wants him, wants more, emitting his name on a high breath and lost in him. All thoughts of waiting to reach her bed flee. She’s here and she’s his and so wet and hot and tight around his fingers and there will be time later for more but right now he needs her to shatter just where she’s caught against him because she’s his, only his, and only he can give her this, only he will give her this; forever. He moves his fingers in her and his thumb on her and she’s crying out and writhing and he sends her flying and breaking and spent.

When she opens her eyes, dark, hazy and sleepy, still lax and limp across him; he smiles lazily, consciously projecting comfortingly forceful maleness. “That’s better, isn’t it?” he growls dangerously. “Let’s make it better still.” He stands, sweeps her up into his arms, looks down at her hotly and pulls her tightly into his chest, carries her to the bedroom and places her on the bed, peels her bra from her and returns to laying long, leisurely strokes over her curves.

How does he always know what she needs? He’s surrounded her and enfolded her and let her cede control and the lead and it’s exactly, perfectly, the antidote to therapy. No need to decide, barely a need to ask. Only to say yes, to accede, and then to allow Castle to take her away, to let her be Kat in whatever way she wants: now, as so often, to be lost under his big frame and the bulk and hard strength of his body, to feel his muscle holding her safe. She stretches and arches into his slow, intent petting; not troubling even to try to prevent herself emitting the soft, contented purring that will show him that Kat’s come out to play.

She’d been scared, she vaguely remembers, way back before Christmas, that being Kat with Castle would be going too far, sharing things she didn’t want to share: simply letting him get his own way like he always seemed to. Now, that seems ridiculous: she’d been so wrong about that. Being Kat with Castle is… everything she didn’t know she needed.

“You’re purring,” he says, in the velvet-smooth baritone that promises sin and delightful wickedness. “I like making you purr.” His hand slips from her hip to her thigh, fingers lying as still as a stalking leopard. She mews quietly, and tries to move so that his seductive hand slides to her soft centre. “Here you are,” he says into her ear, “wearing nothing but your panties, soaking wet, tousled and sexy and spread out; thinking about undoing my shirt and pants” – how did he know that?, although she supposes it’s not exactly a difficult deduction – “wondering what I’ll do with you next” – she is wondering, but not about whether she’ll enjoy it – “and watching me watching you.” The voice slithers into her ears and down her nerves and slinks into her core, where it swirls sensuously.

“What should I do with you? I could do lots of things” – his fingers draw a little pattern – “that you’d like. Question is, what would you like most tonight?” Beckett doesn’t think that’s anything other than a rhetorical question, especially when Castle leans down and kisses her before she can open her mouth on an answer. On the other hand, it does allow her to open his button-down and run her hands under it to reach warm skin over firm muscle and grip his broad back, and then to tug him down to cover her, flesh to flesh. Well. She tries to tug. Castle declines to be tuggable.

“Naughty, naughty,” he husks. “Just wait. We’ll get to that. Just let me lead.” He acquires the expression of a well-fed lion, who nevertheless could still manage dessert. “But you can certainly undress me, if it makes you happier?” Stupid man. Of course it will improve her mood. Castle is a very nice thing to look at. Nice and large (in so many ways), well-defined without being too body-builder. Mmmm. She eases his shirt off and essays some focused stroking of her own,
ending up at his waist, where her practised fingers find his belt buckle and then no resistance at all
to her fingers opening it, his fly, and sliding his pants from his extremely pattable ass (she pats it,
mischievously, as she’s passing it) to leave him in silk boxers (really, does he have any other
kind?) and – er – assertively present, so to speak. She purrs happily, all her troubles put away for
now, and curves up against Castle. He kisses her hard, conquering without resistance, and then
starts to travel southward, pinning her hands with his until he’s reached his goal and is looking up
at her with a hungry, wolfish expression that leaves her soaked and mewling without a touch.

And then he holds her wide and settles down and her hands hit his head and she can’t get breath to
make a noise as he feasts. He is so good at it. She dissolves into the sea of sheer sexual
satisfaction and lets the deep waters close over her head, drowning as his mouth and tongue work
her deeper and deeper and take her there all over again.

When she recovers, Castle is lying beside her with an arm under her neck. She rolls towards him,
and before he’s fully registered that she’s awake she’s astride him, wriggling into a placement that
slides over his undiminished erection. He pulls her down to his mouth, shifts on his own account
and then thrusts once to be fully and very satisfyingly within her. It hadn’t quite been the idea, but
she’s not going to complain. And then he rolls them over and covers her and it’s only the man and
the motion and magnificence.

“How do you know?” she says, curled into him, half sprawled over him.

“Know what?” Castle asks lazily, playing with little wisps of her hair where they’re floating over
his shoulder.

She blushes. “What I…” – there’s a pause, which Castle doesn’t fill – “…need.” He stiffens under
her in surprise, and then clearly has to think about it.

“Observation?” he says hopefully. “I know when you’re unhappy.” She cuddles down against
him. “You just need someone to lean on occasionally. That’s what” – there’s a very odd hitch in
his voice – “friends are for.”

Beckett notices the hitch, and its placement in the sentence, and doesn’t press the immediate point.
She isn’t entirely sure that friends is the word he’d first thought of. Still, it’s not wholly right.

“Partners, Castle. Partners.” That’s not wholly right either, but she’s not – yet – in a place where
she can go further and be able to make good on the word.

His arms tighten round her. “Partners?” he repeats, almost sounding shocked. “Really?”

“Yes.” She has a sudden horrible thought. “But you don’t get a badge or a gun and you still can’t
be a cop.” She knows Castle is pouting without even having to look.

“But what if the bad guys come?” he says, humorously plaintive. “How am I going to defend you?”

“Uh-uh. I defend you if the bad guys come.” She stops abruptly, and continues in a very different,
much more serious tone. “You… do this for me. It’s… more than enough. You’re more than
enough.” She buries her face in his chest and refuses to look at him.

Castle stares open-mouthed at the ceiling, and then when he’s recovered from that stunning
statement enough to move his head stares open-mouthed at the top of Beckett’s dark head, which is
all he can see. For possibly the first time in his adult life, he has absolutely no idea at all what to
say. All his armies of words have flown out of his head.

“Me?” he eventually squeaks. He doesn’t sound like himself at all. Beckett tries to worm her way
into some form of hiding. No no no. She doesn’t get to say that and hide. No hiding. He gently, but inexorably, pulls her up till he can see her face – blushing crimson and she won’t look him in the eye – and then kisses her, equally gently and inexorably. If he’s what she needs – if he’s her partner, and it’s just occurred to him that she has never named him so before: he’s said it, but she has not – if he is more than enough, then…then that’s huge. Life-changing. Because if she can say that, with that expression, then there is more. Much more.

But right now, what she needs is him to hold her close, and kiss her, and take the lead and let her be Kat, and show her that he’s hers, in every possible way; that he’ll take care of her when she needs it and have her back when she needs that. He’ll be her rock, her stability, her firm ground. And she… well, she’s already everything to him. She’s fixing herself, and that is more than enough for him.

And so he cossets her close, and pulls her in, and makes love to her in the smoothly assertive fashion that she enjoys most, and she responds with the soft openness that he loves best, and finally they fall wrapped together into sleep.

Life is frantic next day in the precinct. The first bloomings of spring have brought out the crazy in people, and the workload has spiked. None of it is tricky, or clever, or Beckett-flavoured, but all of it needs dealt with. The team hunkers down to hard work, with Castle providing fewer insane theories and more coffee. As so often happens, they work their collective asses off for twenty-four hours, and then they have to wait. Lab results, camera footage, phone records, bank records, all seem to be on a go-slow. Beckett fusses and frets and threatens, but nothing gets her any information any faster, and at five p.m. on Thursday they are stuck. Nothing will arrive before tomorrow.

At that point Beckett’s phone rings. She looks at it with considerable irritation, expecting that it will be – in no particular order of annoying/infuriating/upsetting-ness – Dr Parrish or her father, who have each taken to attempting to call her once a day. She’s not interested in speaking to either of them. Really not.

It’s not either of them. Her irritation drops away as soon as she recognises – it takes a moment – the number.

“Hey, O’Leary, what’s up?”

“Beckett,” he says cheerfully, “I hear that you’re all waiting for data. I beat you Twelfths to the punch, but the lab an’ everyone tells me that the guys in the Thirty-Second take so long to solve their cases that they have to get the results a second time cause they’ve died of old age, so I can’t get mine either.”

Beckett laughs. The entire bullpen flips round to look at this lately unusual sight.

“So I thought you and Castle might have time for a beer?”

“Sure I do,” she says, “let me just ask him.” She lowers the phone for a second. “Want a beer with O’Leary, Castle?”

“Sure.”

“Yeah, that’s all good. Where – not Molloy’s again, huh? I’m tired of green. How about Esperanto, Avenue C? ‘S near here.”

“You’re gonna make me come all that way down there, Beckett?”
“Yep,” she says briskly. “Anything to avoid the Irish bar again. See you around seven.”

Esposito wanders over. “Out with O’Leary again, Beckett? Don’tcha love us any more?” He attempts to bat his eyelashes, and looks entirely ridiculous.

“Never did,” Beckett sniggers unkindly.

“C’mon. We wanna come too.”

“Nope,” Beckett says firmly. “Had lunch with you.”

“We were all in the bullpen for lunch, Beckett,” Ryan pipes up. “I wanna meet your mountain. C’mon.”

“Nope,” she says more firmly. “Not happening. Not today.” Espo scowls, and Ryan pouts. Clearly he’s been taking lessons from Castle on the side. Unfortunately Beckett is immune. Castle’s pout doesn’t work on her, so Ryan’s certainly won’t.

The boys are still muttering blackly under their breaths when Beckett starts to pack up, though they also take it as their signal to leave and find their own bar. Castle, having only to put on his coat and ensure he doesn’t forget his phone, is perfectly ready in seconds.

O’Leary hasn’t made it to Esperanto before they do.

“Drink, Beckett?”

“Yeah. Can I get a beer, please? Breckenridge.” Castle conceals any hint of surprise and instead tells himself that if Beckett’s having a beer, she must be in a rather more relaxed mood than earlier in the week.

Standing at the bar, he also recollects the errant and escaped thought that he’d had on Tuesday: that Beckett is surrounded by big or tough men. Or both, of course. O’Leary is both. He, Castle, doesn’t pretend to be tough in the way that the cops around her are tough, but he’s not little, and he’s not a wimp either. And Espo is seriously tough. Even Ryan is pretty tough, though he hides it well. He looks around, soaking up the atmosphere and the large butterfly decorated screen above the bar, and for a moment wishes that he hadn’t placed Nikki’s fictional precinct up near West 75th.

“Hey, Castle,” rumbles behind him. How does a man that size sneak like that? “Mine’s a Mexicali.” Castle adds it to the order. O’Leary’s looking at the butterfly screen with a sneaky smile.

“Food? I was going to get us some snacks, or we can get real food in a minute.”

“Let’s get some chips and guacamole. And salsa.”

“Oh, and pico de gallo.”

A container-load of chips is ordered along with the beers, and the two men return to flank Beckett, who’s beginning to look as if they might have had to brew the beer rather than buy it. The quizzical semi-glare diminishes when she finds that there will shortly be chips, and then casts her vote for dinner too.

“So why are you all so busy?” Castle asks, by way of conversation opener. Beckett looks at O’Leary, O’Leary looks at Beckett, and they grin happily at each other. Beckett makes a you-go
gesture at O'Leary.

“Spring is sprung,” he says, and Castle is infected by the joint grin to grin too at the familiar words, “the grass is riz.”

“I wonder where the killers is,” Beckett chimes in, and Castle snorts.

“We never did find a good next line, did we?”

“No. But I’m quite keen on them being in jail.”

“Sure you are, butterfly.”

“Butterfly?” Castle squawks.
Love is like a butterfly

“Butterfly,” O’Leary says, grinning as widely as the Rio Grande delta and simultaneously defending himself from Beckett’s outraged screech and attempts to silence him.

“O’Leary, I will kill you!”

“Nah, you love me really. Besides which, that’s what we called you. When we weren’t calling you hard-ass, or ball-breaker, or” –

“Shut up, O’Leary. This is not fair.”

“You told Castle about the weightlifting,” he says. Castle watches happily as they fall into the cop-flavoured banter of old friends.

“You told him how we met.”

“I’m bigger than you.”

“You’re bigger than a Bigfoot. Still not fair.”

“Might makes right, Beckett,” O’Leary says provocatively. She squawks crossly, but under it all there’s a smile quirking at the corners of her eyes and lips.

“You wouldn’t. You can’t tell Castle that. It’s not fair,” she pouts, looking around five.

“You’re so cute when you’re cross,” O’Leary smirks – and then grabs her hands to prevent mayhem and possibly murder.

“Butterfly?” Castle says. “How did Beckett get to be called butterfly? Aren’t butterflies beautiful and fragile? I’ll give you the beautiful – oof! Don’t do that, Beckett! It hurts – but I really don’t get the fragile piece. Even compared to Mount Rushmore here.”


“I hate you,” Beckett grumbles into her beer bottle. “That’s entirely unfair.”

Castle chortles happily into his own beer, and makes sure he’s guarding himself against Beckett’s likely revenge on both of them. He toasts O’Leary when Beckett can’t see, and they trade a whole world of understanding in that single exchanged glance.

Which is undoubtedly why, after they’ve ordered some dinner, O’Leary takes point again.

“You look a lot better today, Beckett. Things clearing up?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. You call me if you need a pal and Castle’s not around, ‘kay?”

“Okay.”

O’Leary drops a quick hug round Beckett’s shoulders, lasting no more than half an instant, and
that, it seems, is that. No more apparently needs to be said, but Castle feels that a lot more was said than was vocalised.

Dinner arrives, and Castle watches with interest the familiar ability of cops of all shapes and sizes to dispose of their dinners in double-quick time. Since conversation is not possible – these two cops having evidently absorbed table manners at their parents’ knees in the form of never speaking with their mouths full – he returns to tugging on the mental thread that he’d caught earlier: to wit, Beckett’s penchant for being surrounded by big, tough men. In fact, with the sole exception of Lanie, currently cast into the outer darkness, he’s never noticed or heard about a female friend. It’s not Castle’s previous experience of women. He’s generally found that women have lots of women friends and very few true male friends. Whether, of course, that’s because sex gets in the way is an open question but not the present point. Beckett is unusually devoid of female friends, and unusually well supplied with male ones.

He finds that very odd. Women, again in his fairly wide experience, (he doesn’t just mean as an adult, nor yet his playboy encounters, but everything he had seen while trailing round the country to a hundred repertory theatres) have women friends with whom they socialise, shop and – oh. With whom they talk. Beckett does not talk. She is quite famous – or more accurately notorious – for not talking. And if she’s not comfortable talking, then it’s perfectly logical that all her friends are male. It’s her circle of protection, from so many things, but first of all it’s her protection from ever being forced to talk. Men, in general, are not big on talking about feelings or emotions, and Beckett’s boys still less so – Ryan’s clumsy attempts notwithstanding. So she needn’t ever talk, and needn’t ever deal – and he’s just watched O’Leary play along with that, again. Gave her the nod that he’s there for her if she needs it, but didn’t push. Same for Esposito: made her go sparring and bounced her all over the mats – but didn’t push, and she looked far better for it.

Conversely, when Ryan did try to ask her anything he got precisely nowhere, and she’s been just a little reserved with him since; nothing unpleasant, nothing to shut him out, but there’s a tiny touch of coolness there, as if she’s expecting something and preparing to close it off.

Still, he can’t imagine that being totally female-friendless is a good thing. Surely there are matters about which she wants to talk to another woman? A small niggle starts to form in his mind: that really Beckett does need to patch things up with Lanie. Somehow. She’d been upset that Lanie hadn’t behaved the way she, Beckett, needed – though he’ll bet the farm that she never asked Lanie to back off, simply shut her out, so Lanie kept shouting till it all blew up – and she was really miserable that night. She hasn’t mentioned Lanie since, except in a work context as Dr Parrish, and she hasn’t seen her either.

Castle acquires the extremely uncomfortable feeling that he ought to talk to Lanie. Not about Beckett, though. That’s a short, excruciating route to death: his own. He’s no martyr. No, about her own behaviour. Why does he suddenly feel like the only adult in a world of squabbling children? Fortunately, before he verbalises that thought, which will certainly lead to a whole universe of commentary about his own maturity and general disposition, he realises that conversation is restarting, and that Beckett and O’Leary are bitching companionably about 1PP’s latest insanity and ass-backwards idiocy, which is a conversation to which he has nothing to contribute but more drinks – he checks, and to his surprise Beckett accepts a second beer – and the dessert menu.

Shortly, three lots of churros appear, and the level of bitching drops to nil. It’s supposed to be one portion each. Castle clocks the predatory look in Beckett’s eye and mentally resigns himself to losing out. He remembers, a little too late, how she’d dealt with the doughnuts and her possessive grip on them – and her grip on her Glock. O’Leary has no such scruples.
“Beckett, you remember what happened the last time you stole my dessert?”

She blushes. Actually, positively blushes, and cringes, and pouts. “Yes,” she sulks. “But you should’ve shared.”

“You eat your dessert and I’ll eat mine and don’t you dare lay a finger on my churros. Or I’ll do the same again.”

“What did you do?” asks Castle, fascinated by the big-brotherly tone that – amazing! – seems to work on Beckett. Beckett growls threateningly.


“What about my dessert?” Castle says plaintively.

“Your dessert, your problem.” He rumbles, which would be a laugh if it weren’t wobbling the table. “I’d hold her hands, if I was you.” Beckett grumps her way through her churros and then spends the next few minutes glaring impartially at both of them. Castle takes O’Leary’s advice and hangs on to her hands while he finishes. Her fingers are twitching in a very ready-to-be-thieving fashion.

“I’m not bringing you next time,” she grumbles. “Teaming up like that. You’re supposed to be my pal, O’Leary.”

“I am. I just like my desserts in my belly, not yours.”

Beckett hrrumphs, and subsides.

The dinner concludes with everybody happy and nobody dead. This is good, and reassuring. As earlier, O’Leary gives Beckett a brief, enveloping hug, then clasps hands with Castle in a not-quite-threateningly muscular way. Farewells are said, and then Castle steers Beckett off in one direction with an arm round her, pursued by O’Leary’s amused grin. “Night, Butterfly,” follows them down the street.

“Still can’t see you as a butterfly,” Castle says incautiously. “Ow! Stop that.”

“Don’t call me a butterfly, then.”

“I didn’t. It’s totally incongruous. I mean” – he makes sure he has hold of her hands – “falcon, or leopard, or some other sort of sleekly gorgeous deadly predator. Not a butterfly.” He muses for a moment. “Maybe a steel butterfly. With razor-edged wings and laser eyes. A prettier version of the spy insects in Transformers.”

Beckett emits a strangled squeal at a pitch Castle would have thought only a castrato could achieve. He belatedly shuts his mouth before he can commit suicide-by-speech.

“Shut up. No more animal comparisons. None. And if anyone ever calls me butterfly in anyone’s hearing ever I will remove their balls with a rusty razor blade.” Castle reflexively winces and covers his groin, hoping that she only means O’Leary. As a consequence he barely hears her next words. “I’m not fragile.”

Oh. Ah. Okay, then. He gets it. “No, you surely aren’t. Not the way Espo threw you round the mat.” He smiles very slightly downward at his Beckett-butterfly. (ha! She can’t read his mind –
can she?) “Shall I come and massage your bruises?”

Beckett considers for a minute. She would very much like Castle to massage her bruises. And then her not-bruised areas. She might even massage his. It would be a delightful way to distract herself from the homework she hasn’t managed to do for Dr Burke.

And wrong.

She has to do the work. She has to sort this out. If she wants Castle… if she cares about him (and she does)… then she has to be able to cope with the loft, and his family. So she needs to do the homework. Maybe he’ll be her reward after.

“Not tonight.” But she can’t quite say why; can’t force the explanation out. Even if he knows about the therapy, she can’t say why. “Maybe tomorrow? Come round about eight. I’ll be done with the session” – she can say that, even if she winces – “by then.”

Castle listens very carefully to the intonations and hitches in her voice, closes his arm around her and hugs tightly. “Okay. But I’ll walk you to the subway first.”

“I’d like that,” she says, almost shyly, and glances up through her lashes and away.

Beckett really does not want to try and excavate her feelings about her original grief. She went through it for real, and she went through it in counselling, and it hurt just as much every time. It never stopped hurting, and it’s going to hurt again now. She forces herself to think back. No. That’s wrong. She simply allows herself finally, eight years after she first started trying to shut it out, to open the floodgates to the memories and let them take her away. No force required. The force has only ever been required to keep the floodgates shut.

The funeral. That’s where this all began.

The memory is pinpoint sharp, the snow lying white on the ground around the grave, the black she wore, the black her father wore: the raven shades around them of friends and family – little enough of that – the polished oak and the brown earth, the grey clouds lowering overhead, heavy with more snow. Every detail is etched into the mirror-glass of her memory. Her father, tears icy on his white, drawn face; the minister in his cassock. O death, where is thy sting, O grave, where is thy victory? And then, a little further on, the ghastly sound of the first clods of earth falling on the lowered coffin: earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. She supposes she must have wept, but all she remembers is her father’s cold white deathly face, and the tears rolling down his cheeks, falling from his chin. He’d stood straight, until it was all over. He’d reached out to her as she blindly sought to take his hand. It might have been the last time he’d done so, for five long years.

His misery had ripped into her. Her father, her parent, the person who should be strong so that she could lean on him, was devastated: incapable of taking any decisions, incapable of listening to her. So she tried to make it better for him: dealt with practicalities, and told herself that she was working out her grief by dealing with the administrative matters. She couldn’t bear to see her father so upset, and it didn’t take a genius to work out that mentioning her mother upset him more, so she didn’t mention it. Not after the first time, when his face crumpled like a child’s and the tears fell and he got up from the table and walked away: and then the sound of the bottle clinking on the glass.

She’d gone to the counsellor, once she was back at college: the sun bright on the campus, flowers blooming. She’d talked about it. But the counsellor couldn’t provide the shared memories and connections, the remembrance of family trips or in-jokes, do-you-remember-when? No-one could,
except her father: there wasn’t much else in the way of family and she disliked Aunt Theresa with a passion. And her father couldn’t, or wouldn’t, talk.

She remembers the growing queasiness before each call home: the discomfort as she realised that she had to censor each sentence to avoid upsetting her father, the growing panic that each time she called he sounded a little more disconnected, a little less sober. So she talked about neutral subjects and generalities and tried to quash her terror. She’d felt that if she could go home and see him, then she’d prove to herself that her fears were groundless. Everything would be fine, if she went home.

She had ignored the twisting in her gut, the ever-present nervousness; bought a cheap flight on a budget airline for speed and not told her father she was coming. She’d told herself that it would be a lovely surprise for him, and almost been convinced, until she stepped on the plane and fastened her seatbelt and realised that one way or another, this was it.

It had been now, in fact. Exactly today, ten years past.

With every mile on the train and every stop on the subway, as she neared her father’s Upper East Side apartment, her fear had writhed and grown; expanding until she could barely breathe with terror. But when she opened the door and he turned round and his face lit up with dazzling joy, all her fears and worries vanished. She didn’t even notice the bottle and glass as she stepped towards him. Everything was fine. Everything was just fine.

And then he cried joyfully “Johanna!” and she realised that it wasn’t her, would never be her, who put joy on his face. She could have sworn that she felt her heart snap when he realised that it was his daughter, not his wife. I thought you were her. I wanted her, he had said, and the utter disappointment in his voice and face had broken her again. He’d downed the half full glass in one gulp and started to cry; the glass had fallen from his hand, rolling through the spilt amber whiskey, and clinked to a halt against the bottle. He’d turned away from her. You’re not her, he’d wept. You aren’t her. Why aren’t you her? Go away. I don’t want you.

She’d gone to her room and unpacked, weeping all the way. She’d brought him a small, silly present; but she’d put it back in her carry-on bag. Then she’d dried her eyes and blown her nose and done what she did best: take action. Stalked back to the main room, wrapping herself in her own anger that he could degrade himself so, so degraded that he didn’t know his own daughter; and taken the already-refilled glass from his shaking, fumbling hands; poured that and the bottle down the sink. He’d cursed her. Her own father, and he had cursed her as foully as a stevedore on the docks. She hadn’t, till then, realised the full extent of his drunkenness.

She couldn’t bear to see him at the table any more, where they had used to be a family: hauled him up, his pitiful, wasted flailings at her no match for fury and fitness. She couldn’t bear to see his slack, shocked face: everything she’d lost – she’d lost it all too, but he didn’t seem to care about that – reflected in his eyes. He wanted her mother, and she was a poor substitute.

She shoved him along to his bedroom, not gently: (but not rough, she couldn’t do that to him. Then, or ever. She wanted to, sometimes: wanted to lash out and hurt him as he hurt her, over and over again. She never had. She’d given up on bitter, tempestuous words too, after a while. Losing her temper wouldn’t help, didn’t help.) furious with him and more so with herself for coming home unannounced when she had, did she but admit it, known all along that it would mean disaster.

She’d thought, then, that she could make it all better by removing temptation. Surely if there were no alcohol, when her father sobered up and realised what he’d said and done he’d be sorry? Surely? And so she’d slipped through every public room of the apartment and emptied every last bottle – and there had been many – down the sink. She’d thought, with a sigh of relief, that she’d
solved the problem. How naïve could she get? Still, she had only been nineteen.

Finally, she’d gone back to her own bedroom. This time, not blinded by tears, she’d looked around. Every memento and photo that might have reminded her of her mother was gone. She had a moment of blinding anger, and then relief that she’d taken her little stone bird to college with her.

She had cried herself dry, that night. Not for the first time, nor yet the last. That had come later, when she’d eventually worked out that rage, or grief, or tears solved nothing. It was the first time, but not the last, that she thought her father had broken her.

The first time, but not the last, that she’d clung to faint hope in the darkness, only to be betrayed.

In the morning he’d been pleased to see her. In the morning, it had become clear that he remembered nothing of the previous evening. In the morning, he’d excused himself somehow, and promised it was just a one-time error: he’d not do it again. In the morning, she’d booked an appointment and had her hair cut and coloured that same day, so that she didn’t resemble her mother.

She had believed him, then. Wanted so much to believe him that she’d convinced herself in no time that it would all be fine.

But it wasn’t fine, and it wouldn’t be fine, and it has never been fine again.
Beckett finds that her cheeks are soaking and there is a damp trail on her shirt. She blows her nose, but can’t stop the tears and consequent sniffing at all, no matter how hard she tries. Once she’s started crying, she simply cannot stop at all. She’s still crying as she cleans off her ruined make-up, still crying under a scalding shower that doesn’t warm her up in the slightest, still crying as she slides into bed, still crying as she shivers with the weight of her memories, and still crying as she sleeps.

Her sleep is heavy and unrefreshing, and for once she makes generous use of the snooze button on the alarm, only rising when she has to. She isn’t sick, and she won’t call in sick when she isn’t, but she doesn’t want to go in. She dresses to shore up her fragile emotions, and reaches her desk only minutes ahead of start of shift. Ryan and Espo are already there, but don’t seem to notice her sneaking in. She gets everything running, and goes to make herself an extra strong coffee. She needs the caffeine hit.

While she’s waiting for it to brew, breathing in the familiar, consoling aroma, the thought worms its way into her head that she would have loved to have been able to talk about her mother, without every possibility and every memory being tainted by a covering of whisky, grief and alcoholism.

Behind her, Esposito considers his phone and considers Castle’s number, sitting there just waiting to be dialled. Beckett arriving after him is unusual. Beckett arriving after Ryan is almost unheard of. Beckett leaving it till two minutes to shift start to arrive at her desk is a surprise comparable only to having no new bodies for a month, or him, Special Forces Sniper Esposito, missing the bulls-eye more than once a year. She looks ill, and without a new body or some developments in the cases Castle isn’t going to turn up. This is a problem. He watches Beckett emerge with a steaming coffee mug and decides to leave the problem to fester for a while. Self-preservation has a lot to do with that choice. He does notice that the coffee improves her, and puts off the decision for longer.

A trickle of results from the footage requests enlivens the morning. Ryan is set running through them – if he has square eyes already he might as well use them – and then phone records arrive. Beckett takes those herself, and details Espo to harass the lab. Phone records don’t require her to interact with anyone else for a while, and she has a headache which two Tylenol with her shower this morning have failed to cure.

Esposito is not hugely impressed at being left with harassing the lab. He’d rather be out bringing in suspects and then interrogating them with a main course of intimidation and a side order of scary. On the other hand, it would get him out the bullpen, which is winding him up right now, what with Ryan sucking air through his teeth every five minutes as he stares at the footage and Beckett looking like someone broke her favourite doll. On the downside, he’ll have to deal with Lanie Parrish, and dealing with Lanie Parrish is not currently at the pleasant end of his to-do list. He weighs up the options, and decides that being out the bullpen is the best of a bad lot.

The morgue and the labs are cool and quiet. Espo finds them deeply tedious and (though he understands all the words and technical terms just fine) long-winded. Although, he thinks with a small amount of relief, at least it’s not Perlmutter. Perlmutter doesn’t even have the advantage of being in any way good to look at. Lanie certainly does. Twice over, between neck and waist.

“Espo?” arrives from behind him, just as he’s considering Lanie’s looks. “What’re you doing down here?”
“Hopin’ for some results, an’ avoiding staring at camera footage. You got anythin’ for us?”

“No. Still dealing with all the corpses that came in before yours. We’re pushing them through as fast as we can but there’s only so much we can do.”

“How long?”

“Another day, anyway.” Lanie looks at Espo slightly sidelong.

“Okay. I gotta get back.”

“Not so fast, Espo.” Esposito’s heart sinks into his boots. He’s faced war, dammit, and terrorists, out in the desert – and Lanie Parrish is more terrifying than both, and more pertinently she’s right in his face. “What’s up with Kate?”

“No idea,” Espo blanks the question.

“Don’t give me that. You’re there in the bullpen seeing her every day. Is she okay?” Fatally, Espo hesitates. “She’s not okay. Why didn’t someone tell me?” Lanie’s voice is rising. “I’d have helped.”

Espo really doesn’t want to be here. This is about to become a complete clusterfuck and he’s the one standing on the cluster bomb.

“If Beckett wanted to tell you she would’ve,” he equivocates.

“Kate’s not telling me anything,” Lanie says bitterly. “Nor are any of you. What am I, chopped liver?”

“She’s your pal,” Espo points out bluntly. “Maybe you shouldn’t’ve yelled at her in the bullpen. Bet she didn’t like it.”

Lanie glares at him. “You tell Kate that she can’t keep hiding from me. I wanna help. Just because she’s running round with Writer-Boy doesn’t mean she needs to drop all her friends.”

“You want me to tell her that? You really think that’s gonna make things better? You’re outta your mind. You want to tell her anything, do it yourself. I ain’t your messenger boy.”

He turns to leave, and then turns back for a parting shot. “Maybe if you wanna be pals you oughta stop acting like a flat track bully an’ try listenin’ to her, not yellin’. An’ maybe think why Castle’s her best pal now an’ not you.”

He leaves Lanie gobbling like a Thanksgiving turkey as the chopper approaches its neck, and thinks that he’s just screwed any chance of getting friendly with Lanie himself. He shrugs. Plenty of other fish in the sea, and he’s never had a problem with catching them.

When he gets back he says absolutely nothing about Lanie’s comments on Beckett, listens while Beckett casts vile imprecations on every other precinct’s queue-jumping corpses until she dissolves into a mud swamp of grumbles, and notes with some discomfort that she still doesn’t look good at all. On the other hand…

“C’mon, Beckett, sparring time.”

“Okay.”

She’s not really on her game, though. It’s all too easy for him to drop her every other move, and he
quits trying after twenty minutes.

“You ain’t got your head in the game, Beckett. Not throwin’ you round the mats if you’re not with it. ‘S not a fair fight.”

“It’s never a fair fight with you, Espo.”

“I’m just that good,” he preens. “Anyway, I’m not sparrin’ with you when you’re not up to it. Time to tap out ‘n’ get some lunch.”

He struts to the showers and considers, again, whether to tag Castle. In the end he doesn’t, being quite keen on living his current life with a full set of limbs and other items. If Castle hasn’t turned up it’s because Beckett hasn’t called him, so if he does turn up Beckett will clock that one of them has called him, and while shoving all the blame on to Ryan would be funny, and suitable revenge for Ryan having given Lanie the nod the other night, he’d be found out pretty sharply and then he’ll be dead. And that’s not necessarily a figure of speech. Still, by the end of shift he’s wondering if he’s made the right call.

His conscience gets the better of him as Beckett leaves, and he’s calling Castle as she’s going down in the elevator.

“Castle, you seein’ Beckett later?”

“Maybe.”

“Think you should make that definitely. She ain’t been right all day.”

“Okay.”

And that’s that. His twinging conscience fully appeased, Esposito takes himself off to his own gym and spends a pleasant evening working out, capped when he beats his personal best with the weightlifting bar.

Castle is not happy to receive Espo’s call. Mostly, this is because he’d wanted to go to the Twelfth and forced himself not to, because he really needs to get some writing done before the wrath of Gina (which is worse than the wrath of God) descends upon his head. However, he wasn’t exactly happy about doing so, and he’s worried about the gaps and hitches in Beckett’s non-explanation of why she hadn’t wanted him to come with her last night because he is absolutely, totally certain it was to do some thinking prior to therapy, which he knows is going to have upset her because every single therapy session has upset her. He stops his brain running on in that ill-disciplined fashion, and looks at his watch. It’s shift end. He has already been invited round tonight, and he has no intention of missing that, but she’s got therapy first so she’ll already be packing up, if not leaving.

Still, he’s deeply unhappy that Beckett’s been miserable all day and not got in touch. Then again, how was she going to deal with an undoubtedly emotion-provoking call in the bullpen? Answer, naturally, she wasn’t – certainly not under Espo’s beady eye. But he wishes that she had, even though she’s seeing him (at her request) later.

Beckett had thought about calling Castle more or less from the moment she’d finished her first coffee. Then she’d remembered that he was coming tonight, which is one big ask, she now thinks, because it’s going to be a rough session and she is hardly going to be fluffy and fun after it. (How often is she ever fluffy and fun anyway? It’s not her nature to be anything other than hard shelled and brushing off the important things with snark and snippiness. Deep feelings get you hurt.) And
there’s the second reason. She couldn’t stop crying last night and she is not, emphatically not, going to get into that in the bullpen. If she calls, she’ll have to say what’s wrong, and while being wrapped up in Castle’s broad bulk is very comforting, it’s not possible in the precinct and into the bargain it’ll take him half an hour to get here. She can’t spend that long in the restroom without Montgomery asking some very awkward questions all over again. She can’t bear to be benched, all over again.

So she grits it out. She sends Espo to the lab, and Dr Parrish, praying that he’ll be impervious to Dr Parrish’s probing and prying. He looks pretty ruffled when he gets back, and not a little cross, but there’s an undertone of told-her-so into which Beckett does not enquire. She does, however, notice his sideways glances and his fingers fidgeting and tapping at his phone. Since he doesn’t appear to dial, and Castle doesn’t appear, she doesn’t make anything of it, even when she epically fails to spar properly. She just can’t get into it. Every time she tries to get her head focused on anything, she sees Dr Burke’s door, and has to force back the tide of memories. She’s almost glad when it’s time to go. Anticipation of the guillotine is so much worse than facing the reality.

Dr Burke’s door is almost overwhelmingly terrifying. She does not want to do this. She really doesn’t want to do this.

She plasters on a poker face and does it.

“Good evening, Detective Beckett.”

“Hello.”

Dr Burke surveys Detective Beckett. She appears to have had significantly less sleep than required. The signs of stress and upset are evident to his experienced eye. He concludes, quite correctly, that she has undertaken at least a proportion of the work that he had requested that she do, and had been profoundly distressed by her thoughts.

“Detective Beckett, where would you like to begin?” The flash of expression across her face suggests that her first response to that question might well be nowhere.

“I would have liked to talk about Mom,” she says flatly, and snaps her mouth shut. Dr Burke allows the silence to extend for a few seconds.

“Why did you not?”

There is a much more extended silence.

“He cried,” comes harshly from her throat. “I couldn’t stand to see him cry. I couldn’t make him cry more. So I just left it.”

“Your father was overwhelmed by his grief?”

“Yes.” Another bitten off word.

“To whom did you talk, at the time?”

“The counsellor, back at college.”

“Not to family?”

“There wasn’t any other family to talk to.”
“None?” Detective Beckett is completely devoid of other family? Had she no other relatives? That is very unusual, even in these days of smaller families.

“The only one was Aunt Theresa. We…didn’t get on. And my cousin Sophia, but we’re not close. She’s much younger.”

“So you could only talk to the counsellor. Mm.” That is profoundly unsatisfactory. “Did you talk about your mother to anyone at a later time?” He is not hopeful of a positive answer.

“No.” How disappointingly predictable.

“Why not?”

Detective Beckett fails to answer. Her mouth opens, but then closes. It appears, for a moment, that she had not thought further than the simple concept that she would have liked to be able to talk about her mother with her father.

“Everything was spoiled,” she says bleakly. “No-one would have understood anyway: it was all family jokes and memories. No-one would have got them.” Her voice is frighteningly controlled. “No point. It wouldn’t have been the same.”

Dr Burke considers this response. “Mm,” he says non-committally. “Did no-one ask?” He acquires the very strange impression that the first answer that should have been given was not more than once.

“Not really.”

There is a slight pause, in which Detective Beckett’s normal extreme reticence is on full display. Dr Burke deduces without the slightest difficulty that her reticence is linked to the fact that she had been unable to talk about her mother without her father reacting badly, and that Detective Beckett had dealt with this simply by taking the lesson that to discuss anything which might be painful should be avoided. This is not a helpful trait.

Dr Burke remembers something.

“Detective Beckett, you have just said that everything was spoiled. In a previous session, you have said that you take the Christmas Day shifts each year. In what way was Christmas spoiled for you?”

“My mother was murdered,” Detective Beckett bites out. “What more do you need to know? It’s hardly a happy memory.”

Dr Burke simply gazes at her until she drops her eyes. “How did your father behave at Christmas after your mother died?” Ah. He has uncovered a point of conflict. Detective Beckett has flinched. Really, this would be so much easier if Detective Beckett were not so rigidly controlled and so incapable of voicing her thoughts. He supposes that this is yet another symptom of her particular issues.

“He got drunk. Every year. Got drunk and stayed drunk until it was all over.” She hesitates, stands up sharply and paces, not looking at Dr Burke. “The first year, he drank Christmas lunch, starting Christmas morning. I cleaned up and put him to bed. Then we did it again, the next year. He vomited in the presents. I stopped bringing them before the day. Then we did it again, the next year. He vomited in the presents. I stopped bringing them before the day. All he could talk about was Mom, and how much he missed her. Couldn’t decide if he wanted me to leave ‘cause he couldn’t bear to see me, or stay because I looked like her.” She looks ready to snap, or weep. “You want a short description? Badly.” She picks up a Kleenex and blows her nose.
“And has he made amends for any of those Christmas Days?”

“He apologised. Once he got dry.”

Dr Burke raises an eyebrow. “That is not quite the same thing. Have you ever told him how he behaved.” There is yet another silence. “Detective Beckett?”

“No. There was no point. He didn’t remember and I didn’t want to hurt him. Don’t know why I bothered,” she adds bitterly. “He didn’t care about hurting me.”

Detective Beckett begins, finally, to weep. Almost immediately upon the first tear, she turns away to the window of Dr Burke’s consultation room. It takes less time than he would have preferred for her to turn back, dry eyed once more. It is unhealthy for her to repress her emotions in this way and to this extent, and whilst he has no doubt that this has stemmed from a learned response to her father’s alcoholism, he also has no doubt that Detective Beckett prefers never to show weakness and that therefore this response was partly driven by her own reserved personality.

“So when you said your father had made amends,” Dr Burke asks, “had you at any time told him for what he needed to make amends?”

“I didn’t tell him the details. What would have been the point? He was so fragile and so hurt and how could I push him back to the bottle? He’s only ever one drink away. He barely managed to stop himself after Julia Berowitz. He went straight to his sponsor because he thought he was going to fall. How could I do that to him?”

Dr Burke is appalled. Detective Beckett’s previous therapy has been utterly pointless. He is severely unimpressed with the previous practitioner, who has failed in their duty to their patient on, it would appear, every possible count. Detective Beckett should have been told clearly that, for both her and her father’s recovery, she must tell the whole truth. That omission has led to this result: a serious breach between Detective Beckett and her father; five years of repression of her quite natural and justifiable feelings of hurt and resentment; and all of those issues becoming buried under a perceived – and wholly wrongly perceived – obligation to protect her father and keep him sober.

“Detective Beckett. You are fully aware of, and indeed you quoted to me, the so-called Three Cs of dealing with alcoholic family members. You did not cause it; you cannot control it; and you cannot cure it.” She nods, once. Her face is stony. “I should like you to consider, please, the second of these Cs.” Dr Burke may as well take advantage of Detective Beckett’s painful silences in order to achieve a point at which the session can end on a positive note. The end of the session is approaching, and whilst Dr Burke has scope to extend it, he is certain that Detective Beckett will, again, refuse. It will not prevent him asking if she wishes to prolong the session, should that appear necessary.

Detective Beckett considers briefly.

“And?” she says.

“Please now consider whether your behaviour towards your father both whilst he was drinking and since he became sober is consistent with the second C.”

Detective Beckett considers, this time, for some moments. Dr Burke observes her expressions as she does.

She acquires a look of bitter – how odd, that is not realisation, but familiarity – which Dr Burke
notes with an uncomfortable mixture of concern and satisfaction. She does not, naturally, say anything.

“Now, before we meet again, I should like you to reflect upon, in the light of those considerations, why you reacted as you did to Mr and Mrs Berowitz.” Dr Burke is quite clear that Detective Beckett had gone out of her way to help Mrs Berowitz in order to assuage her guilt at walking away from her father. Detective Beckett has not realised this. She must do so, in order to move past it.

“Okay.”

“Unless you would like to continue?”

“No. Thank you.”

Detective Beckett leaves at some speed. Dr Burke smiles in a satisfied manner. His last request to her should allow her to believe that the point of this evening’s session was to allow her to explore her responses to meeting an alcoholic in the course of her work.

Of course, that was one of the points. However, it was not by any means the main point.
Beckett is sitting staring into space when her door is firmly rapped by Castle. She manages to stand up, open the door, and meet his eyes. After that she doesn’t need to do anything but let him take care of her. He simply soothes her by being there.

“Wanna talk about it?” he says softly after a minute. She can’t answer, and Castle doesn’t – thank God – press. He wanders off, and shortly the kettle is boiling and coffee appears, including creamer, nutmeg and cinnamon on the tray.

“Thanks,” she says dully. She hasn’t even asked how he knows, or why he remembers, how she takes her coffee at home. She should have thought harder about can’t control. She’d known it, and forgotten it as soon as he got dry, till now.

Castle watches her doctor her coffee with the spices and creamer and privately wonders if a couple of Valium, or sleeping tablets, wouldn’t be a better idea. She wraps her hands around the mug and he realises that she’s changed into a heavy roll-necked sweater and sweatpants. She looks weighed down, somehow: tired (no surprise there), strained (nor there) and dull; her alpha personality gone out, and not replaced by feminine Kat. Simply squeezed out, and replaced by nothing. She’s cold, he realises, and drops a warm arm around her.

“You can’t control it,” she mumbles.

“Huh?” Castle says. “Can’t control what?”

“Them,” she mumbles further. This makes no sense to Castle.

“Who, Beckett? Who can’t you control?”

“Don’t cause, can’t control, can’t cure.”

He’s heard that somewhere, quite recently, but not recently enough to be at the front of his mind. He’s trying to recover it, but as ever, the more he tries to catch it, the faster it runs away. He lets it run, in the hope that it will run all the way round the fractals of his frontal lobes and reappear, exhausted, so that he can identify it. In the meantime, he’ll cuddle Beckett and finish his coffee and let her mumble as miserably as she needs to until she says something that she actually wants him to answer.

“I really hate therapy,” she says very unhappily. “Dragging up the past. I don’t wanna think about the past. It’s past. Gone. It doesn’t matter any more.”

That’s not true, Beckett. We’re all products of our past, and you are definitely a product of yours. He doesn’t say that. “C’mere,” he murmurs suavely, and pulls her in to be properly tucked into his side; his arm closing tightly around her. “You don’t need to think about it.”

“Yeah, I do,” she spits out. “As if therapy wasn’t bad enough, I get homework.”

“Homework? That seems a bit unfair.”

“Damn straight,” she says, in a phrase that would suit Esposito better but at least shows a sudden flash of spirit. Unfortunately it doesn’t last beyond the full stop. “At least this time it’s not about the past.”
“Mmm?” Castle hums encouragingly, hoping she’ll say more and talk out her pain.

“I had to” – she stops, takes a breath, and another – “remember,” she forces out. “Before tonight’s session.”

Well, that explains Espo’s cryptic call. He strokes smoothly down her arm and doesn’t ask what she had to remember. He knows. She’ll tell him in her own good time, but he’s not going to precipitate tears when she’s only just recovered some game.

“This time’s a bit better. I only have to work out why I was so irritated with Julia in the context of the can’t control piece. I can do that.”

Castle suddenly remembers where he’d heard that phrase. It had been all over the alcoholism support groups. Ah. Sounds like Beckett’s been realising that she’s been thinking all this time that she’d been helping her father but that actually she’d fallen into the trap of thinking she could control it by constantly being there for him. That’s going to hurt.

“And?” he says encouragingly.

“And she was just denying that there was any problem at all. She thought she could control it by ignoring it and letting me deal with him every time he did something she couldn’t cope with. She was pushing her problem on to me.”

“No wonder you got cross with her,” Castle says, though he doesn’t think that’s the whole reason by any means. He wonders if Beckett’s going to continue her line of thought out loud, if he can simply manage to make noises that indicate agreement and if he resists any temptation to lead the witness.

“Yeah.” She nestles in, in a rather more satisfied way. “Still…” she mutters.

“Mmmm?”

“That seems too easy.”

“Uhh?” Castle says, in default of saying yes, Beckett, it is too easy, you’re missing the point of therapy. He is pretty certain that the therapist wants Beckett to recognise that she was irritated by Julia not taking any responsibility, where Beckett had taken far too much. In addition, he wonders whether Beckett was, subconsciously, angry that Julia could get help from her, but she couldn’t get help from anyone.

He’s pretty certain that Beckett hasn’t made the second step yet, but he doesn’t say anything. It’s not for him to second-guess Beckett’s therapist or Beckett’s thinking. And, of course, he likes being alive. He likes snuggly Beckett too, and neither will continue if he opens his big mouth. On the other hand, snuggly Beckett has just kissed his neck, which he really hopes makes her feel far better and happier than thinking about therapy. He leans down a little and kisses her in return.

Unfortunately, that’s where it stops. She emits a tiny, dissatisfied hrmph, and relapses into thought. Castle takes the opportunity to play with her hair, until Beckett realises that he’s winding it into tiny braids and starts to object.

“Stop fidgeting, Castle, please? I don’t want braids. They don’t suit me.”

Castle obligingly untwists each tiny tail. “You’re thinking, though. Very quietly so I can’t hear what you’re thinking.”
Beckett makes a face at him. “The point of thinking, rather than talking, is that you can’t hear it.” Castle makes a face right back. “Anyway, me thinking isn’t helping. I don’t want to think about it any more right now.”

“Don’t you?” Castle, who recognises a hint when he’s hit in the face with it, purrs darkly, dropping into the deep seductive baritone that he knows will seep under her skin and leave her… relaxing, let’s say. Relaxing right into his lap. On which thought, he puts her there. Assertively. And then he slips his hands under the heavy sweater, also assertively; and then slides them smoothly up and down, assertively, which asserts the sweater upwards and the sweatpants downwards and leaves an expanse of beautiful satin skin for him to play with. Assertively, naturally. And equally naturally, it works.

Beckett hums contentedly and curls into his chest and then curves into his hands, and very soon she’s purring. Once she’s started to purr she should be induced to stay that way, which is becoming easier and easier as she opens to him – not only her body, but her mind. Right now, she wants distraction, but he thinks that maybe after that she’ll want to think some more, and she might just emit some words. That she’s emitted any words at all about what she has to do in therapy is quite a step. He concentrates on distracting her, which is very distracting for him, and very pleasurable for both of them together (she is wickedly naughty) and they end up wrapped up together in her bed.

He thinks she’s more-or-less asleep, utterly lax and spooned against him. He thinks back, unexpectedly, to the very first time, when it had been spectacular – but superficial – sex, and she’d rolled away and been just a little resistant to being cuddled in afterwards. Not like now, when it’s no longer simply sex, but making love, and she makes it very clear that cuddling is desired, and desirable.

“You could have,” Castle thinks bleakly, if you’d ever asked. O’Leary, Lanie, Espo or Ryan would have been there. But maybe by then it was already too late.

“There wasn’t any family and there wasn’t anyone at Stanford. And Dad was no help. He just cried every time I mentioned it. So I didn’t.” There’s a suspicious sniff. “Julia just unloaded all over me.”

Castle strokes her arm with the one that’s draped around her.

“How can I be angry about that?” she says despairingly. “She needed help, but it annoyed me.”

“Maybe that’s what your therapist wants you to work out?” says Castle, rather than saying because you’re only human, Beckett. There’s an unhappy mutter in response, and she tries to burrow deeper into his clasp.

“It’s all past. I’ve moved on.”

Like hell you have.

“The only reason I’m doing this at all is to be okay if I see your family and get Montgomery off my back.”

At least that’s in the right order. But what about your Dad?

“I don’t need to go over all that past to do that. I just need to get my head round your family not being like mine. Like” – she considers for a second – “like I’m a cop so I can appreciate a movie star but I don’t need to be one.”
You’re trying to convince yourself, Beckett. Don’t you see the trap you’re falling into? Castle clenches his teeth closed. He’s happy that she’s wanting to do something that will enable her to spend time at his, with his family. He’s entirely unhappy because this is the wrong route to achieve that. She’s got to sort out her issues with her own father. But she hasn’t mentioned him for over a week in any context at all and as far as Castle knows she’s decided he simply doesn’t exist. It’s faintly surprising that Jim hasn’t called him, Castle. After all, Lanie keeps trying. Almost immediately he has a pang of guilt that he hasn’t at least told Jim that his Katie is okay. For a given value of okay: mainly meaning not okay at all but leaning on me when she can’t stand straight any more.

He cuddles her in as closely as she evidently wants, nuzzling her hair and surrounding her with warmth and comfort. She’s not ready to hear the rest, and he’s not really ready to say it out loud. But it’s there, either way, and he thinks that she pretty much is too.

Castle wakes up, regrettably, alone, mainly because he’s in his own bedroom in his own loft. Noises off indicate that Alexis is up. Non-noises off indicate that his mother is not, or not here. Either is perfectly acceptable.

He ambles out to discover Alexis on her way out in search of spring wear and her friends, and then discovers the coffee machine is in perfect working order. He makes himself a large mugful and sits down to survey his immediate future, which is, curate’s eggily, mixed. Kat-Kate-Beckett wants, needs and probably loves him, which is excellent. She is going to therapy to deal with (among other matters) being able to see his family, also excellent. She’s re-established relations with O’Leary, mostly excellent as long as O’Leary doesn’t manage to trip some past problem, which he – mostly – hasn’t yet. On the other hand, she has cut Lanie out and is thoroughly upset about Lanie’s overbearing efforts to help: not good. She isn’t – yet, it has to be yet – using therapy to deal with the real issues; also not good. And, of course, there’s the whole situation with her father, which is on the bad side of appalling.

Castle still considers very strongly that he should be pointing out to Lanie how she isn’t helping Beckett; but far more importantly he is becoming more and more squirmingly unpleasantly aware that he needs to give Jim something. Just in case. Just in case of what, he really doesn’t want to think about. He looks at a clock and discovers that it’s barely nine a.m. Time to pull himself together and then do all the things he really doesn’t want to do. He’d rather experiment with home-grown colonic self-irrigation, using sulphuric acid.

“Jim?”

“Rick? Rick, what’s been going on? I keep trying to ring Katie and all I get is voicemail.”

“Jim, she’s okay. That’s what I called to tell you. She’s fine. I said I’d look after her and I am.”

There’s a silence that radiates unhappiness.

“If she’s so fine,” Jim says, unsurprisingly bitterly, “then why won’t she take my calls?”

Castle had known that this would arrive almost immediately.

“Because she’s as pigheaded as you are,” he says bluntly, to a shocked gasp. “She’s upset and angry and she’s not in a place to see past it, so she’s simply not talking to you. You want to apologise, but Jim, she is not ready to hear it and the more you try the more pigheaded she’ll get. Just trust me to take care of her for now. She’ll come round.” Probably.
“And what am I supposed to do? Leave her to it?”

“Up to you. What’s Ed suggest?”

“Leave her to it,” Jim says quietly. “Wait till she’s ready.”

Castle says nothing, very loudly. Eventually, he opens his mouth again. “You take care of yourself, Jim. Kate’ll come round.”

“Last time it took her three years,” Jim spits out. “You going to keep her away from me that long?”

“I’m not a fool and don’t you dare suggest I’m some sort of Svengali. I’m not stopping her seeing you or talking to you or to anyone else. But if I say a single solitary word to her that makes her think I’m taking your side in this – and I’m not, be really clear on that – she won’t be speaking to me either and if that happens then there’s no way on God’s earth that anyone will get through to her. If you really wanna mess this up, then that’s the way to do it.”

More silence.

“All I wanted was to be her Dad,” Jim mumbles. *I think you’re long past being able to do that, Jim. I think you might have lost that ten years ago.* “Now I can’t even get to talk to her.”

“Did pushing at her ever work when… before? When she was younger?”

There is the inaudible sound of mental cogs whirring.

“No-o.”

“Well, then.” Castle lets that sink in.

“I don’t like it. There’s more going on than you’re saying but you wouldn’t tell me anything last time and I don’t guess you’re going to change that now. You better know what you’re doing.”


“You better.” The bravery bleeds out of Jim’s voice. “I should say thanks for telling me Katie’s okay, but…”

“I get it. Take care, Jim.”

“Yeah. Bye.”

“Bye.”

Phew. That was just as unpleasant as he’d thought it might be. He’s lying to Jim. By implication, he’s potentially deceiving Beckett, and that grips his guts. But… lesser of two evils. Jim absolutely has to stay sober, because the only route out of this labyrinth is that Beckett sees that Jim can do it himself, and stops trying to do it all for him.

Buoyed up by having managed one difficult-tending-to-ghastly call, he ponders how best to approach the allosaurus formerly known as Dr Lanie Parrish, ME. Let’s see now, the last time Beckett saw Lanie, Beckett metaphorically ripped her to bloody, salted shreds with Castle as witness; and the last time he saw Lanie off duty was a week ago, when she wasn’t happy. So what can he say to her that isn’t a betrayal of Beckett?

He’s not got any further down that line of thinking when his mother crashes in, full of the joys –
and champagne – of after-show parties. Maybe this show will last a little longer than most? He retreats to his study, being keen neither on being cross-examined about Beckett nor about when Jim and Beckett might next be invited over. Since the current answer to that is a cold day in hell and he doesn’t want to explain that either, it’s best to be out the way.

He messes around with fragments and shards of possible stories, not to any great effect, for a while; puts in an online shopping order for food for the week, messes around some more, and eventually puts his feet up on the desk and thinks very hard about Lanie. It gets him nowhere, because he keeps falling over the point that to get through to Lanie he would have to explain about Beckett’s dad, and that’s a non-starter for a million different reasons.

Which point, absolutely naturally because his luck is so far out this morning that he’d need the Hubble Telescope to find it, is interrupted by his phone, which turns out not to be anything interesting or attractive (such as Beckett) but Lanie, in full hunting cry, no doubt.

“Castle?”


“Is Kate there?”

“No,” he says, and waits to see what will happen next.

“Good. I wanna talk to you about her.”

Castle’s heart falls out through his toes.

“Lanie, I told you I’m not getting into this. You gotta sort it out yourselves.”

“I want you to get her someplace I can talk to her.”

“You have got to be joking. Tell me you’re joking, Lanie?”

“No. You’re the only one she’s listening to.”

“How long’s that going to last if I sucker her into turning up somewhere just so you can yell at her again? No.”

“I wanna talk to her.”

“Sure you do. Like every other time?”

“If she wasn’t so freaking pig-ass stubborn…”

“If you didn’t yell maybe she wouldn’t be so freaking pig-ass stubborn, did you think of that?”

“You ‘n’ Espo are about as much freaking use as a” –

“Espo?”

“He said the same. Neither of you know Kate like I do so how the hell would you know what works.”

Castle, who has been getting steadily more irritated, decides that he’s really had quite enough of pig-ass stubborn Lanie (he likes the descriptor, though).
“Better than you, since she’s still fine with us. If everyone’s got a problem with you maybe it’s you who’s the problem?”

Lanie cuts the call on him. If she’d been on a landline, his eardrums would have burst from the slam. Still, *Espo*? What’s that been all about?

Castle, for whom curiosity is not so much a besetting sin but a hitherto undiscovered by science component of his DNA, takes no more than a second or so to dial Esposito’s number.

“Castle? What you doin’ callin’ me? Beckett okay?”

“Yeah, she’s fine.” Esposito makes a very rude noise which Castle ignores. “No, Lanie just called trying to bully me into siccing her on Beckett – which I didn’t, before you get started on that,” he says quickly, “and she said that you said that she shouldn’t yell. So…” he lets that trail off enticingly.

“Lanie wanted me to tell Beckett to listen to her. Told her to do it herself. An’ then I told her if she stopped yellin’ she might have better luck.” Castle hesitates for a moment. “You there, bro?”

“Yeah. Espo, I’ve got an idea.” Esposito’s sigh is audible and would destroy houses. “No, really. If we can get Ryan to play along. And play patsy, but we don’t need to tell him that.”

Esposito sniggers. “Okay, so what’s this crazy idea?”

“How about you and Ryan get Lanie out, and tell her to wind her neck in and do something to patch it all up, and I’ll take Beckett somewhere else, and tell her Lanie’s wanting to patch it up; and then we can try and put them in the same place without them blowing up?”

“Not so crazy. Thought you were gonna suggest us all goin’ somewhere together, with that mountain O’Leary to keep the peace.”

“That’s a good idea,” Castle enthuses. “He’s big enough to keep them apart. I’ll get him with us, and bring him along if it all works out. But you still have to get Lanie on side. I’m not going to be the target in a firing range.”

“Me neither, bro. Me neither.” Espo pauses. “So how’s Ryan gonna be the patsy?” He sounds deeply satisfied with that idea.

“Well, it’s pretty clear he’s wanting to get Beckett and Lanie in the same place, which is what we want, so it shouldn’t be too hard to make him think that Beckett, O’Leary and I are going to be where you’re going, and then he’ll tell Lanie, and we’ll be done.”


“See you,” Castle says, more cheerfully.
Afraid of losing my way

Beckett, some way refreshed by Castle’s patent blend of comfort, care and excellent sex, wakes up in a better mood and certainly better rested than she had expected; even if Castle isn’t there beside her. (Where he ought to be, nags a little voice in her head. She knows that, but she can’t have it till she’s fixed. Or closer to fixed. So maybe she should put some serious effort into fixing herself just now, while she’s on her own and no-one’s there to see if she cries. Or when she does.)

She makes herself a pot of coffee, grimaces at the thought of the necessity for any thinking on a Saturday morning if she doesn’t have a new body to deal with, and settles down to apply her ferocious intelligence to herself. Dr Burke had made two points: one, has she remembered that she can’t control it, apropos of her father; and two, how did that play into her reactions to Julia Berowitz.

Okay. What had she thought yesterday. Start there, and then, with a distancing night (and a comforting Castle) to take the edge off, detect, Detective. Follow the evidence and investigate. Sure, it’s going to hurt like hell. But it’s time to rip the scabs off the wounds, lance the poison and clean it all out. The alternative is letting this gangrene fester and spread, until the only option left would be amputation.

She sits alone, lost in her thoughts, as the hands of her watch move round, unnoticed. Unfortunately, the more she thinks, the less effective is the distance that her night’s sleep and her Castle had provided. It doesn’t take long before both are entirely ineffective. Still, she forces herself to remember all the things she had done, after he (she very consciously doesn’t think her father, or Dad) got dry. All the ways she’d acted; all the things she’d lost, or given up. Time sweeps on, and her thinking continues, centring around, and starting from, her view that her father had never needed her to do it anyway. So why had she ever thought he did?

Point one. She can’t control it. She never could control it. She’d realised that when he was drunk. But then he’d got sober, and…and. Oh fuck. She suddenly sees something she’d never noticed before. When he got sober, he’d looked at her as if she was the only thing that mattered in the world. Every time he’d seen her, he’d seemed to be delighted. And…and she’d needed it, because it almost made up for the way he’d written her off because she wasn’t her mother, whenever he was drunk. And…and when he was happy, he wasn’t crying, and when he wasn’t crying, he wasn’t reaching for a bottle; wasn’t tempted to be reaching for a bottle. And seeing her seemed to make him happy.

Oh God. And so she’d been there for him. And then…and then he’d been quite explicit that he’d only got dry because she walked away. But she’d thought that if she didn’t walk away again, he’d stay dry. Mistake number one. It should have been the other way round. He would stay dry, and therefore she wouldn’t walk away.

Then he’d said he needed her. Hit her squarely with the blade of her guilt that she’d left him to drown. He’d said that he needed her before he drowned himself in whiskey; don’t leave me. But then he’d told her to go; he couldn’t stand to see her, for two years before she went. Then he’d called her and cried for her to come home, not to leave him – and she had left him to it. Left him. It had almost destroyed her. Then he’d got sober and said he needed her – and she’d believed it because she had to believe it because otherwise everything would have fallen in on her: everything she’d done would have been for no reason. She’d walked away to save him – but she walked back because he said he needed her, needed a family, and she had to believe that he wanted to be a family again. Mistake number two. It was she who needed a family. She’d thought that it would
fill the void.

Mistake number three. Nothing had really filled the abyss of her guilt. So, just like she’d worked herself into the ground to be the best in the business at work, she’d worked herself into the ground to be there for her father, jumped when he called, always, always been there for him, no matter what; put her whole life on hold so that she never, ever had to see him drunk again. It hadn’t helped, ultimately. But she’d never wanted to be that devastated nineteen-year old again, the one whose own father had looked at her and simply said *you’re not her*.

She doesn’t realise she’s crying: slow, heavy tears.

And finally, mistake number four. She’d believed that he loved her enough to save himself. It had been the only thing that had covered her bitter resentment that he’d abandoned her in the first place. For five years she’s believed it.

But now she knows it isn’t true.

It should have been lunchtime, hours ago. Time has slipped past her, and now the light is fading. Despite that, she can see clearly now. She’d thought, wrongly, that her presence held her dad to sobriety. Thought that what she was doing could keep things right. Thought that she could control his behaviour. All wrong.

She’d thought that he loved her. That was wrong too.

Drained dry, and completely incapable of moving her thoughts on to where they need to go: to wit sorting out why Castle’s family disturbs her so, she goes to curl up in her bed, taking her phone with her: the warmest place she can manage, clad in heavy pyjamas and buried in extra blankets. She reads, for a while, thinks vaguely that she should have eaten and rejects the idea when her stomach tries to invert at the thought, looks at her phone again. She’s done that every five minutes or two pages, for the last hour. She’s managed not to dial, every five minutes or two pages, for the last hour. Every time it’s taken longer to stop herself.

This time, she’s wondering why she’s bothering. Pathetically, she’s been hugging a pillow that smells of his cologne and him for the last hour, when all she’d have to do is call. And paradoxically, that’s what’s been stopping her. It’s feeling all too close to how she used to jump whenever her father called, and she can’t stand the feeling that she might be doing to Castle what her father did to her.

*Only you can save yourself.*

It’s not Castle’s job to save her. That’s unhealthy. But she could ask for support, which isn’t. Her problem is that she has no idea where healthy stops and dependency begins.

And then there’s the next problem. She’d thought her father loved her. Except he doesn’t. She’d been more than beginning to think that Castle might – but what if she’s misinterpreting that too? What if it’s just the incredible physical connection, covering up everything that won’t work? How long’s he going to wait for someone who’s this broken; why should he wait for someone who’s so unlovable that her own father would prefer the company of strangers?

She dissolves into tears again, and doesn’t dial. Her thoughts cycle round and round inside her head. Call, don’t call; ask, don’t ask. Where does help transmute into dependency?

Eventually, she stops sniffling and tries to think. She has to think. Thinking’s the only way out. What has she asked for? He’s always seemed to be there, but how often has she actually asked, and
how often has he simply chosen to show up uninvited? Not that she has any objection to him showing up, invited or not. Invited once, with merely a look, which he could have ignored. Twice, because she’d left her wallet behind. Three times, after a Friday therapy session, although even then he’d offered before she’d asked. But she’d meant to ask, so that counts. And four, being asking him to come around after last Friday’s session.

Four times, in a month. Maybe this is not excessive, if Castle’s inviting himself around pretty close to every two days. But still she doesn’t dial, because Castle’s not asking her to prop him up: he’s not this close to clinging to her like some parasitic plant, bleeding her strength and feeding from her vitality. She’s been there before, and it didn’t end well. Then again, she’s been on the other side too, and that didn’t end well either. Problem is, she doesn’t know where right is, because everything’s always been wrong, and it’s wrong now. She doesn’t know what right looks like, because in the previous ten years she’s never had it.

She looks at her phone again, stares at the contacts list. He can always say no. He keeps saying that he knows what he’s doing. He can always say no. And if it’s all going to crash and burn, she might as well know now.

She dials, and as soon as it starts to ring wishes she hadn’t. Castle picks up far too quickly, too, before she can ring off.

“Hey, Beckett.”

“Castle, hey.” She manages a reasonable facsimile of her everyday voice.

“What can I do for you, Detective?” Castle says suavely. She hits the buffers.

“I’m sorry… I didn’t mean to call. This was a stupid mistake. Night, Castle. I’ll see you Monday.”

“Don’t hang up!”

But she’s already cut the call. She just couldn’t go through with it. Asking in plain words without having been given some sort of half-invitation first is too far. She can’t bear to hear no. She’d heard no so often before. Whenever she’d asked – begged – her father to stop. So many nos. After Royce, she’d stopped asking anyone else. Even O’Leary, even Lanie. Asking didn’t get her anywhere, saying she needed help didn’t get her anywhere. Only being strong kept her afloat. If people came of their own volition, that was fine. Their choice, then, to help. But she couldn’t ask, because every time she asked the answer was, inevitably, no.

So very many nos.

Her phone rings, but she doesn’t answer it. She doesn’t even hear it, buried face down in her pillows and not crying. She’s been here before, and crying has never been the answer.

Nor, of course, has cowardice. She needs to ask. She needs to know if this has all been one more huge mistake, before she can’t get herself out.

She takes a very deep breath, calms herself, and redials.

“Beckett. Beckett! Kate, are you okay?”

“I don’t think so,” she says. “Can you come over?” and as if that’s the switch, starts to cry again, desperately keeping the tears out of her voice.

“Sure. There in a few minutes.”
Castle’s afternoon had been more peaceful than his morning, though he’d spent quite a lot of it deliberately allowing Beckett the space he thought she might need and fretting about the need not to call her. He can’t suffocate her, and she has to do her thinking, and she’s perfectly capable of not thinking as soon as something nicer (such as him) appears instead. Funny that: it’s he who is a champion procrastinator and yet it’s Beckett who is putting off the unpleasant necessity of serious thinking. So although his fingers frequently wander in the direction of his phone, he forcibly redirects them to his keyboard.

He has some dinner and goes back to his laptop, sketching out a plan for the casework which Nikki will solve. He’s just getting into it when his phone rings, and he growls with irritation that it’s disturbed him. Irritation dissolves in microseconds when he sees that it’s Beckett. Just what – who – he wanted.

She sounds a little stressed when she greets him, but then it turns into all sorts of wrong when she starts to apologise for calling and says it was a mistake – calling him is never going to be a mistake – and hangs up. And then she doesn’t pick up when he rings her straight back. Something’s spooked her and he has no idea what. He’s already halfway out the door when his phone rings again and – thank God – it’s Beckett, but he’s sure that she’s crying and that’s not right and then she admits she’s not okay and he’s frantically bribing the cab driver to get him to her address in no time flat, chewing his nails to the elbows at every stop light and only just not hammering on her door.

He doesn’t pause for thought when the door opens, simply sweeps her up off her feet and into his arms, kicking the door shut behind him, hoping that he can talk her down off the ledge.

“Kate, what’s wrong?” he says, dropping them both on the couch and never letting go of her. “I’m here now. Come here.”

“You came,” she almost whimpers. Of course he came. What part of I’ll be there for you hasn’t she understood?

“Partners, remember? You said it.” He really didn’t expect her to burst into hopeless, devastated tears. If there are any words in her flooding misery, they’re completely unintelligible. He holds on while the storm pours down, and waits.

“Asking too much,” emerges relatively clearly.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Castle says, shocked into exasperation. “How’s asking me to come over because you’re upset asking too much? That’s insane.”

“Was before.”

“What? Who said that?”

“Doesn’t matter. What’s the point in asking? Doesn’t get you anything.”

Castle gapes at the top of her bent head. “You can ask me. Anything, Kate. Partners. Means you get to ask. In fact, it means you have to ask. That’s the rules. You want me to come over, you just need to say so. No hiding because you’re scared to ask.” He hugs her in tightly. “Now, do you want to tell me what’s got you upset, or do you just want to cuddle?” He expects no answer, or at least not one in words. He expects her to cuddle in more tightly: where she can take comfort, where he’ll keep her safe.

He does not expect the sudden stream of sobbed-out words. All her past, spilling out in full spate.
The bare, bitter facts of her father’s disease; the disaster of her training officer, skipped over but he can read the story; the equal but opposite disaster of her Fed, again, skipped over. It’s hard for him to hear, but it’s clearly much harder for her to remember. The dam has broken, though, and however she might want to stop, it doesn’t seem like she can.

By the time she finally runs down, Castle is ready to weep too. First she was let down by her father, then by her first therapist (though he doesn’t think she’s worked that one out), then by her training officer, who should have directed her to someone who could help. By the time she had met O’Leary, it was already too late for her to be able to open up. He remembers O’Leary saying *she didn’t ask me to, I just went.*

She’s still sobbing, exhausted tears crawling down her face, all her control washed away: just like the night three weeks ago when she’d first admitted out loud that her father had ruined her life and agreed to go to therapy. Looks like therapy’s uncovering a whole bunch of memories that are tearing her apart.

“All I ever did was just to make myself feel better. None of it had any effect on him. I never realised. I thought I mattered to him. Nothing mattered to him but the whiskey when he was drinking, and nothing mattered to him but staying dry when he got dry.”

Castle winces, unseen. Clearly Beckett isn’t in a mood to forgive her father right now. In fact, it sounds like she’s talking – has talked? – herself into believing that her father has lied to her right down the line.

“I should’ve known. They always lie. It’s nothing to do with family. It’s because he’s an alcoholic. I thought I was helping him. All I was doing was trying to stop feeling guilty and make myself feel better. I needn’t have felt guilty at all. Needn’t have protected him. He only ever wanted Mom. She was his family. I was just… an adjunct.”

She runs out of words, and is still. Castle simply holds her close; disturbingly limp at his side. He wants to say *you could be part of my family,* but that’s not going to help right now.

“Why don’t you talk that through with the therapist? If that’s the issue, then there’ll be ways of getting past it so it doesn’t affect you so much. If you didn’t feel guilty about your dad any more, then you couldn’t be guilted by people like Julia.”

No point, Castle thinks, in talking about her dad. She won’t listen when she’s this overwrought. Better to tie it to something he knows she really cares about: doing her job. He suspects, very strongly, that Beckett is, once again, one very short step away from quitting therapy altogether.

“That’s a good idea,” she says, unexpectedly. Oh. Maybe she’s not?

Beckett doesn’t exactly feel happy about it, but she’s not giving up on fixing herself. She’s got this far, and she will not be held hostage by her own past. Her work means too much to her. *Castle* means too much to her.

“Thanks for coming,” she murmurs, and nestles in further. “ ‘M sorry.”

“Sorry for what?”

“Dragging you out. Dripping all over you.”

“Partners, Beckett. I’m sure you’ll return the favour.” Oddly, she shifts away from him, retreating into herself again. “What’s up?”
“I don’t think you’ll be begging me to come over and mop your eyes,” she says bitterly. “You’re not the one with the fucked-up head here. Everyone loves you. Sure, you don’t have a dad and that’s really got to hurt, but you’ve got the rest of your family and it works. They love you. I’ve got a dried-out drunk who couldn’t care less and a corpse rotting in Cypress Hills; and I still can’t even look at your family without hurting.”

Everyone loves you? Does that mean Beckett too? But then the rest of what she’s just said hits his brain and romantic thoughts fly out of the window.

“I thought you said that you were going to therapy to sort out both the job and being able to see my family?” Castle says neutrally.

“Yes, but…”

“But what? You’ve been going for what? Three weeks? Not even that long. You’ve barely begun and you’re beating yourself up because it hasn’t worked yet? The whole reason it didn’t work the first time round is because you thought you had to do it faster than anyone.” He hauls his rising voice back under some sort of control. “It takes time. I said you didn’t have to come until you were ready and anyway I’m not going to invite you till I think you’re ready because I’m not watching you pretend that everything’s okay when it isn’t. You can’t do this in three weeks, Beckett. You can’t do it without being able to ask for help either.”

“That’s why I’m going to therapy. He’s paid to listen and help.” If you ever manage to talk to him like you just have to me, Castle thinks. “Who else is going to?” Me, but you should know that. “Everyone else didn’t. He didn’t. I wanted to talk about Mom and all he did was cry and get drunk again. So I couldn’t. No-one else would’ve been interested.” I’m interested, but if I say that you’ll think it’s all about the books again. It’s not. “I hate it,” she says, again, familiar cascara-bitter mantra.

“It’s up to you,” Castle soothes. “You can give it up any time you like.”

“Can’t.”

“Why not?”
Keep you safe

Beckett opens her mouth and sharply closes it again; jerks to standing and stalks to the window by her small table with the little stone bird. She picks up something – not her bird, but Castle can’t see what it is – and plays with it: her fingers twisting around it. There’s a small glint of blood-red; crimson spilling through her long digits, and for a moment he thinks that she’s cut herself, till he realises it’s light, not fluid. It dawns on him that it’s the small red quartz crystal he’d picked up on the beach and given to her; it must have been sitting next to the bird. She’s still turning it as he comes to her, looms up behind her and gathers her into his broad frame, crosses his arms over her torso and leaves hers free so that her fingers aren’t stayed from their incessant twisting.

“Why not, Kate?” he asks again, softly, but he’s beginning to think that he knows, because after all, she asked him for help.

Suddenly she drops the stone on the table, spins in his grasp, drags his head down to hers and kisses him: hot and ravaging, passionate and demanding; by reflex his right hand knots in her hair, his left spanning her back, together holding her for his avid mouth and touch; and she fires up and blazes with him: two pyromaniacs in a firework factory.

“Because…” but she doesn’t say, maybe can’t say; takes his mouth again. He lifts off, before he – they – can be lost again.

“You asked me to come. You can always ask me. Asking me to come over isn’t asking too much.” She looks hopelessly confused at the statement, as if it doesn’t make sense. “Kate. Just stop thinking. Sit down and stop.”

She acquiesces to being moved back to the couch and to sitting down.

“That’s better,” Castle says. “Now, why can’t you stop going to therapy?”

“I can’t live like this any more. If I don’t fix it I’ll be benched again and…” she stops again.

“And?” Castle asks gently. If she could only articulate this point – and he is sure of what she’s going to say but she has to say it – then probably everything will follow from it.

There is a very long silence.

“And you’ll go,” eventually dribbles into the air. Beckett’s head is in her hands, her shoulders hunched over. “I don’t want you to go.”

Castle’s first, fortunately unarticulated, thought is Yes! He manages to alter that to, “I’m not going anywhere,” before he can get himself into serious trouble.

Beckett’s words have expired again. This is okay. The important ones are out there. I don’t want you to go. He tightens his arm round her to pull her closer and nuzzles the top of her bent head. It doesn’t seem to make much difference.

“Beckett – Kate, come here. It’s okay. I’ll be here if you need me. It’s okay to ask.”

“No, it’s not. Every time my father asked, I went. I thought I could fix him and I’m not making the mistakes he did. It wouldn’t help. It’s not your job to fix me. It’s up to me.”

Castle forces her chin up so she has to look at him. “Yeah, it’s up to you. But you don’t have to do
it all on your own again. Asking isn’t forcing, and you are not your dad. You thought you had to keep him safe, and you did whatever you thought you had to so you could. I’ve no intention of trying to keep you safe. Bit pointless, when you’re the cop and you’ve got the gun – and there is no way I’m getting on a sparring mat with Esposito. You can do that if you like. I like myself unbruised.” He returns to the main point that she needs to understand. “I don’t feel any need to fix you” – well, not if she’s doing it herself, and she is – “and I’m not scared to say no to you.”

When there’s no comprehension in her dazed eyes, he shakes her shoulders, not quite hard. “Listen to me, Kate. Only you can save yourself. But you can yell to me to throw the lifebelt if you’re too tired to swim.”

“He would have drowned me with him, if I hadn’t walked away.”

“I can swim quite well,” Castle says, not quite inconsequentially.

“And then he drowned me anyway. Killed myself with kindness. I should have stayed away.” Her eyes flare, then go dull. “I used to be able to swim.”

“I’ve got the floaties, if you need them.” Beckett doesn’t appear to appreciate the comment. Nor, however, is she killing him. This is actually very worrying. He drops the attempts at humour: it really isn’t working, and brings her in closer until she’s tight against his side. “Listen to me,” he says again. “Asking isn’t too much. You’re so desperate not to lean on anyone like your father leaned on you that you don’t ask at all. Too little’s as bad as too much.” He looks down at her, sympathy liquid in his eyes. “I won’t let you be your father, Kate. I don’t think you would ever be like that, but you’ve got to lean on me sometimes. I’ll let you stand down. I” – his breath hitches – “I’ll take care of you, when you need it.”

No-one’s offered that since Will. And deep down she hadn’t believed him, because he couldn’t understand about her father, and never went near him. Not that she’d encouraged him to, or indeed done anything at all to suggest it. Castle, somehow, has shoved himself into her father’s orbit. He gets the picture, but he isn’t telling her to forgive because it’s family, or forgive just because she ought to and that’s what good people do, or to ignore her dad, or to do anything at all. He doesn’t push, and right now that’s what she needs. She’s trying to fix herself, and pushing is not helpful. She needs to do her thinking in her own good time... oh. That’s what Castle meant. Take the time she needs, not hurry through it to be done. She made that mistake last time round. She tucks herself more closely in.

“But you keep coming round.”

“Yeah, so? It’s not because you ask me. I could count those times on my thumbs. If I waited for you to ask me round I’d never see you.” His fingers draw a little squiggle on her arm. “I like seeing you,” he murmurs in an insinuating baritone, and draws another squiggle. He goes back to briskness. “So here’s the deal. You promise to ask when you need me – or even if you think you might – and I’ll promise that I’ll only come if I want to and can. If I think it’s too much, I’ll tell you. You only have to decide yes or no. Deal?”

Back to simple decisions. Yes or no. Rely on Castle to tell her the truth. He has so far. But... ask? He seems to think she’s got a right to ask him – then again, he’s also just pointed out that he’s got the right to say no.

“You’ll say if it’s too much?”

Of course I will. Because there are going to be times when Alexis needs me, and she comes first. No matter what, while she’s living with me. After that... by then it’ll all be different. Permanent. I
“Yes,” he says simply.

“’Kay.”

“Deal,” he says, and tips her chin up to kiss her lightly to seal it. “Now,” he says mischievously, “what shall we do?”

He perceives from her unfocused look that she hadn’t expected him to want to stay now. She’s exhausted, and therefore indecisive. Therefore, he should be decisive. And decisive in his book involves doing what he wants to do, which is take that emptiness out of her eyes, and the way to do that is to kiss her. So he does. Strong hands curve around her face, then one arm drops behind her and encourages her to turn a fraction into him, not pulling her up on to his lap, not now, not yet. Here, he can capture her lush mouth and take away her ability to think too much; or indeed take away her ability to think at all. He’ll stand her down, and the fastest, easiest way to do that is still to work her up. Afterwards, they can talk some more, when she’s eased.

Upon the thought, his arm behind her curves itself around her middle and the fingers at its end insert themselves between her waistband and her top, tugging gently. Magically, this results in the top ruffling up far enough for his fingers to loiter on bare skin, sketching seductive symbols; enough pressure to show what he wants. Just as always, she responds, just as always, it ignites. This time, though, she’s not soft and receptive and giving: she’s demanding, hot and feral and it’s changing to hard and fast; his hands gripping and hers digging in; his mouth fighting for dominance and hers fighting back; her top off and his shirt open.

He stands up, hauls her up with him, swings her up into his arms and carries her to the bedroom, showing off his strength and ability to take the lead; drops her on her bed and strips the pyjama pants from her, leaving her naked to his hot gaze and hard hands; falls over her and takes her mouth all over again. He licks a scalding line over the nerve in her neck, inducing the movement that that touch brings to open the curve of her throat so he can carry on downward and nip sharply in the join of her shoulder to neck, carefully placed so the mark it will leave won’t be visible to anyone. She squirms, and her hands open his pants and shove them and his boxers away, stripping him with desperate rapidity so that he’s as naked as she, swelling and rigid under her questing fingers and grip.

She emits a high-pitched noise as he moves to her breasts: a little forceful, a little rough as she’s been just a little rougher with him, tugging and pulling, sucking to soothe the erect nipples; but she drags him up again and flips them so she’s on top. He’s not having that, she needs him to be assertive and tonight she’s looking for a fight, so he continues the flip till she’s under him again and pins her hands by her head and parts her legs to settle his hips between them, hard against her slick softness, poised to enter her, but he makes her wait for that, kissing her hard till she lets him conquer her mouth and then he conquers her body, wholly within her and bringing one hand down between them to tease and press and stroke and she cries out, he groans and they’re locked together as close as lovers can be, soaring together and falling into each other’s ecstasy.

He holds her close, blanketed over him, and keeps his fidgety fingers still. He likes to touch, and pet, and play: his fingers are never still, but now he forces them to peace. Only in peace will she relax and maybe, maybe talk. She didn’t exactly talk, earlier. More… offloaded. Now, if she would only do that in therapy where the poor benighted bastard she landed on as therapist would sort it into its constituent strands, she might get somewhere. Castle doesn’t envy the unlucky shrink.

“Anyway,” she says, out of nowhere at all, “I have to go to therapy.”
“Okay,” Castle rumbles.

Beckett pillows her head on his chest, where she can hear his heart beat, now at resting rate, slow and calming.

“So what are you doing to do?” he asks.

“Use it,” she says warily. “Sort out how I feel. Work through it, move on.” She lifts her head and peeps up at him, nervousness on her face. “Be able to deal with your family like they deserve.” Her head drops back down. “Twice a week, Tuesday and Friday.” She sighs. “Montgomery’s monitoring that I go.”

“Seriously? He gets reports?”

“Just whether I show up or not. Nothing else.”

“Huh. So what do you want, then?”

“Not to go to therapy would be a good start.” Ouch. “Since I’ve got to, I want not to freak out if I run up against another drunk on the job. Montgomery ordered me not to work on any cases involving alcoholics, and banned me from seeing the Berowitzes. And I want to not be pathetically envious about your family.”

There are a couple of very large crevasses in that landscape, Castle thinks. Her dad, and Lanie Parrish, for a start.

“‘Kay,” he rumbles again. Now is not the time for either crevasse to be investigated. He’s got a better plan, being the one which he discussed with Esposito. He cuddles and strokes for a while, until she’s soft and relaxed and just a little aroused. “I wanna see O’Leary again. Let’s get him out for another beer.”

“You’re thinking about O’Leary now?” Beckett growls.

Castle’s hand on her back slips smoothly southward. “No,” he murmurs, and glides his fingers teasingly to some advantage. “Not right now.” A grin becomes apparent in his voice. “Why? Are you?”

“Might be – ohhh. I could easily be distracted, though.”

“Could you? Maybe if I did this” – big fingers explore and slide – “that might distract you?” A well-placed stroke makes her gasp. Another causes a wriggle. Castle rolls them and props himself up on his elbow to give himself freedom to play, which allows Beckett freedom to play too, which fairly swiftly results in the playpen being very untidy indeed. Sharing playtime with Beckett is definitely far more fun than with any other playmate.

“So shall we go out with O’Leary, then?” Castle says, as he’s reluctantly getting dressed.

“Who?” Beckett says with a sleepy, naughty smile, tucked under a pile of coverings and smothered in her pillows.


“Oh, him. If you like.”

“I’d like to explore Beckett – Rookie or not – a bit further,” he leers. His face falls. “But I’ve got
to go home.” He plops himself down on the edge of the bed and puts a warm hand on the approximate location of Beckett’s shoulder. “I meant it. You think you might need me, you call me. If I think you’re asking too much, I’ll tell you straight. Trust me to know what’s best for me, Beckett, and we can make it work.” He pauses, pats, decides that it’s probably worth laying out one very important point. “But me coming round Tuesday and Friday isn’t up for discussion. That’s going to happen anyway, whether you call me or not. The only difference is if you want me to come get you from therapy, you call, otherwise I’ll be here.”

Beckett acquires an expression remarkably and unattractively reminiscent of the wide-mouthed frog about to croak. Castle kisses her swiftly to remove the undoubtedly arriving imprecations and makes a dash for the door before objections – in the form of flying pillows, or possibly bullets – can be raised.

“Night, Beckett.”

“See you Monday,” she manages, in a what-did-you-just-say? voice. Just before he’s made his escape from her likely wrath and her bedroom her tones scorch across the space. “Castle!”

“Uh… yeah?”

“Thanks,” she says with a soft smile.

“Partners,” he replies, and leaves.

Left alone, much comforted by Castle’s visit, Beckett slowly turns out the lights and drifts towards slumber. On Tuesday, her sleepy mind decides, on Tuesday she will talk to Dr Burke about fixing her issues with Castle’s family. Sort out that mess. Start to sort it out, anyway.

If she can do that, then she won’t feel nearly as bad that she doesn’t have any real family of her own to love her. She’ll get past that, move on. Plenty of people have no family left, and they manage to cope. So will she. She’ll work through her issues, and then she’ll have saved herself from the mess her life has been till now.

Only you can save yourself. True. And the truth will set her free. Once she’s free of her past, then she can move forward. Forward, she hopes, with Castle.

She falls asleep surrounded by his smell and the warmth he’s left behind him.

On Sunday, she unearths her slow cooker, throws in a healthy quantity of vegetables and joints of chicken, adds enough stock for the putative stew to be perfect; and then goes out for a long, muscle stretching run. For a change, there’s a little warmth in the air, and a feeling of spring.

On her return, she showers and changes into a soft, favourite skirt and top, curls up on her couch with her toes tucked under her and begins to consider Castle’s family, as if she were assessing them as witnesses. It provides her with a certain degree of necessary distance. She’s good at witness assessment. She’s good at her job. And she is absolutely good at sussing out motivations and relationships when it comes to murders. So she can do it now. Treat it like a case.

First, her protagonists. Castle. He can be a suspect. He’d love that, as long as it wasn’t really he who’d done the murder. Witness one, his theatrically over-exuberant, centre stage mother. Witness two, his studious, sensible, but still enthusiastic, daughter. Beckett wonders where she got that from. The sensible bit, that is. She’s never doubted Castle’s intelligence.
Right. Stop procrastinating, Kate. She has to do this. She didn’t do it yesterday because she never got that far. Today, she is going to face it. If nothing else, look at the mess and be ready to confess to Dr Burke. It’s the only way. But still she cringes internally.

So. Alexis. Fourteen? – no, fifteen? Castle adores her. Beckett supposes that’s because they’ve always been all in all to each other. She, quite deliberately, recalls how he had been with little Callie Donbass. Not his child, but he’d been amazingly, disconcertingly careful and gentle with the baby. How much more so, with his own baby? He’d have been awash with love for Alexis, bathed her in it. Still managed to bring her up right, even though he must have been able to give her absolutely anything she would have wanted. And Castle still adores her, and is still proud of her, and would still do anything to protect her. If you want to get to Castle, she thinks, threaten Alexis, or their bond. It had almost worked for her…

Oh. She’d always been able to go to her dad. Right up until she couldn’t. She hadn’t wanted to look at the photos because half of them are Katie and her dad doing things together. Whistles, or hiking, or fishing; up in the Catskills. Moments of pride and triumph. Moments of disagreement, too. There’s a photo of her glaring up at her dad… she must have been four or five.

So, point one. Alexis can lean on her father and she, Kate, can’t.

And oh, again. Castle adores Alexis. Absolutely nothing gets in the way of that. But her dad has stopped loving her. She’d walked away to save him and he clearly never forgave her. Well, she thinks harshly, plenty of people have never forgiven her for plenty of things. Usually, putting them in jail. She’s got past that.

Point two, then. If she can’t be a family with her father, it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t stop her wincing.

And from that, point three. She was uncomfortable with Martha getting on so well with her dad because it reminded her of the family chat over the dinner table, before. But she’s not had that for ten years, and she doesn’t have a family to have it with, and she can deal with that.

Right. Three things to discuss with Dr Burke. She can handle that. It’s really all quite simple, now she’s thought about it sensibly. Quite simple and logical. So there is no reason at all to be sad. No reason at all.
“Espo,” Castle hisses at an appropriate moment on Monday, being one when neither Ryan nor Beckett are around, “Espo, when d’you think you can get Ryan and Lanie in a bar?”

“Any time, bro. Not like either of them have anything to be doing, ‘s far ‘s I know.”

“Okay. I’m going to try for O’Leary. Soon as I’ve got that nailed, I’ll tell you, and you can tell Ryan, and sucker him into letting on to Lanie.”

Castle raids Beckett’s phone – she really should change her passcode because he’s watched her tap it in often enough that he knows it – for O’Leary’s number, stores it in his own list of contacts as a far better alternative to calling O’Leary’s precinct, and then wanders off before Beckett can return and catch him. Wandering off also allows him to call O’Leary, who is flatteringly pleased to hear from him, even more pleased to hear about drinks, and positively ecstatic to hear about Castle and Esposito’s machinations to get Beckett and Lanie in the same place at the same time.

“So why’d you want me?” he rumbles cheerfully. The phone resonates.

“Because between you and me we can stop Beckett killing everyone? Esposito and Ryan can deal with Lanie, but Beckett can fight.”

O’Leary snickers evilly. Then he turns serious. “Castle, I get that she needs friends, but are you sure about this?”

“No,” Castle says honestly. “But Lanie’s bugging her – and me, which is a pain, and Beckett’s not happy about the situation, and this way they can either have a big fight or they can kiss and make up. Besides which, we’ll tell her first that Lanie wants to apologise. And if it’s a fight, well, I’m sure the city can find another ME, and we’ll all just have to help Beckett hide the body.”

“IT’s not as if Perlmutter’ll help find it, is it?” sniggers O’Leary. “Useless, he is.”

“Ryan told me about the six-six suspect who turned out to be five-five…” Castle trails in front of O’Leary. “Have you got more stories like that?”

“Sure I do. But you’ll have to wait till tonight. Okay, where are we meeting?”

“Back at Esperanto? It was quite good, and Espo won’t want to go far from here.”

“Detective Esposito,” O’Leary says pontifically, “has no imagination.”

“Says the man who allegedly never leaves Molloy’s.”

“Oh, that’s just to wind up Beckett. I go lots of places, though they’re mostly Irish bars, but I let her think it’s only that one. It’s near enough to her apartment that I didn’t worry about her getting home okay.”


“My mom would kill me if I didn’t mind my manners,” the mountain rumbles embarrassedly, and then perks up. “Don’t tell me you don’t worry ‘bout her too.”

Castle is reasonably glad he’s on the phone. He knows he’s blushing. Of course he worries. But he’s entitled to worry. Beckett is his girlfriend – and O’Leary’s long ago partner in mischief.
O’Leary was entitled to worry then. He simply doesn’t need to worry now. Castle will do that.

“So anyway,” he says quickly, “Esperanto, tonight, soon as you finish your shift? Will that be six, six thirty again?”

“Yeah. See you later. Mine’s a Mexicali, if you’re there first.”

“Okay. Bye.”

So that’s one side of the game sorted. He tips Espo the wink in another moment when Ryan’s missing, and returns to his chair at Beckett’s desk.

“I got O’Leary,” he says happily. “We’ll meet him at Esperanto at six or so.”

“If there’s no body.”

“Yeah, okay. Don’t jinx it. I liked their food. At least when you weren’t trying to steal my churros.”

“I didn’t steal any of them.”

“You thought about it.”

“I did not. I don’t steal.”

“Yes, you do.”

“I don’t. Name one thing I’ve stolen.”

“My heart, Beckett,” Castle says in a theatrical tone designed to be wholly irritating and insincere. Except he’s totally sincere, she just doesn’t quite know it yet. Beckett makes a disgusted noise and returns to her paperwork. Castle smirks, even more irritatingly, and decamps to a safe distance.

Esposito is setting up Ryan.

“So, we’re all going to Croxleys.” Ryan raises his brows. “Castle said he wanted craft beer. I’d go to Ace, but he nixed it. Anyway, drinks on him. They’re bringing that oversize pal of Beckett’s too. You in?”

“Sure.”

“Beckett’s a bit down ‘bout Lanie, Castle said.” Esposito delivers the lie without a wince or flicker of an eyelid. “Still, a night with us’ll sort that.” He watches deviousness slide through Ryan’s eyes and away again. “Now, what’cha got on that camera footage?”

Some time later, Esposito watches with considerable hidden satisfaction as Ryan wanders casually off with his phone, and returns shortly afterwards with a rather guilty air.

End of day, end of shift, and, Beckett thinks, time for a nice drink with the very comforting mass of Castle and the bulk of O’Leary. Castle barely waits for them to be out of the precinct before he’s wrapped an arm round her shoulders with a happy smile and tucked her in to his side.

“There,” he bounces. “Nice and cosy.”

Beckett wriggles into a more comfortable arrangement, thinks about snarking, and can’t find a
snark to activate. “C’mon, then. Let’s go get this drink.”

Tonight, she wants soda. Not beer. She finds a table, Castle finds the drinks, and shortly O’Leary finds all of them. Some gentle chit-chat, occupying quite a while during which Castle surreptitiously reads a text and keeps conversation flowing, over the inadequacies of ME Perlmutter later, O’Leary grins happily. Beckett has totally missed Castle’s nod to him.

“Just as well we’ve got ME Parrish, isn’t it? You two’ve been friends for years.”

“Yeah. She’s a really good ME.”

“And your friend. I haven’t seen her in ages, outside the morgue. It’d be good to see her again.”

“So give her a call. I’m sure she’d be happy to see you.”

“I’m sure she would. Everyone always is. Anyways, I hear she wants to see you. Heard you two had an argument, and I heard she wants to apologise.”

Beckett casts Castle a fulminating and completely comprehending glare. You tattle-tale, possibly with some other pungent adjectives interspersed, is written all over her face.

“She does,” Castle says.

“I don’t want to see her,” Beckett says flatly.

“Beckett, she wants to make it right.”

“I don’t care. When I needed a friend she wasn’t one. I don’t need her making me feel shit. She hasn’t bothered apologising for butting in the other night, either.” For some strange reason Castle hears or insulting you in that statement, and presses just a little closer.

“Beckett,” O’Leary’s bass reverberates around the table. “Beckett, Lanie was your friend way back when, you told me. She was there then. Just like I was – before I was. Ten years, Beckett. Don’t write her off for one screw-up. She’s tryin’ to do what she thought was right. So it wasn’t right, but so what? She meant well. Now if she’s gonna apologise and try to square things off, don’t you go throwing it back at her, ‘kay? You’re better than that.”

“She doesn’t get it,” Beckett says. “She made it pretty clear that she thought I was a complete fuck-up. She even said so. That’s not one screw-up, that’s a month’s worth of commentary. According to her, everything I’ve done since Christmas is wrong and I should go see a shrink or she’ll get me committed. That how your friends talk to you, O’Leary? ‘Cause it’s not how my friends talk to me. It’s her who doesn’t want to be friends, not me. I tried. She didn’t.”

Castle stays quiet. He wasn’t there ten years ago, and he can’t help now. He’s in enough trouble already. O’Leary, immovable massive object that he is, might just be able to pull off enough big-brotherliness that he can coax, cozen or carry Beckett into seeing Lanie again. He wouldn’t bet against the last, though he thinks that O’Leary had better make sure that Beckett’s Glock is somewhere else before he tries it.

“If I dumped every friend I’d had a fight with, I’d have none left. C’mon, Beckett. I can see that you’re miserable. You don’t really wanna be on the outs with her.” If Castle had said that, he’d be searching for his testicles in the gutter. “Give it a go. Say you’re sorry. I can see you wanna make up, so stop trying to pretend you don’t. We’ll both come with you. Moral support.” O’Leary strikes a muscular pose. “If she’s still nasty to you I’ll remove her. Pick her up and carry her outside. At least I know she won’t be punching me in the kidneys.”
“Low blow, O’Leary. What did you expect me to do?”

“Respect the badge, Beckett. Respect the badge.”

She laughs, though it’s horribly brittle. “Didn’t notice you respecting my badge.”

“Couldn’t see it. You never did tell me where you hid it.”

“No. I didn’t.” Castle’s eyes are wide. “I’m not telling you, either.” He pulls on a dramatically disappointed expression.

“C’mon, Beckett. Time to kiss and make up. It’s one meeting, less than an hour, an’ I promise if it don’t go well we’ll go. We can leave Castle to deal with the fallout.”

“Hey!” Castle squawks. “That’s not fair.”

“Your plan. You take the rap if it fails.”

Castle mutters and grumps, all of it for effect and none of it sincere. It looks to him as if O’Leary’s worked some magic, and while he, Castle, may have all the words it’s O’Leary who’s kissed tonight’s Blarney Stone. Maybe there’s some truth in the Irish lineage after all.

“Finish your soda, Beckett, and let’s go,” O’Leary says, and fixes her with a stare until she drinks up. Castle wonders if he could achieve that, and then realises, rather slowly, that in an odd way this is a non-sexual counterpart of his technique (that sounds too studied, too manipulative, but he can’t currently think of any better word) of simply applying assertive masculinity and finding that she falls into it. He reckons that it wouldn’t work for a second if they were in work. Any of them.

The thought nibbles at his neurons, though. In work, alpha-Beckett is absolutely, definitively, totally on top. Once they get out, she isn’t, necessarily. And either way, Beckett is either surrounded by men who are as tough as she, or on her own, more or less. Something’s there, but he can’t quite catch it –

“You coming, Castle?” breaks into his thoughts. He scrambles after Beckett and the rolling hill that she’s reluctantly following. Even in her heels, when he catches up and moves to one side of her, it looks a little like she’s under arrest. He slides a hand into hers and is vastly reassured when she curls fingers round his, though her fingers are chill and her grip only a whisper away from limp. He curls his own fingers more tightly so that she doesn’t slip away.

“You ready for a beer, Espo?”

“Hell, yeah. All this paperwork makes my eyes bleed. Let’s get outta here.”

Shortly, they’re sitting in Croxleys with some beer. Espo watches Ryan looking around for Castle and Beckett and evilly wonders when he’s going to tell him what’s going on. Not just yet, he decides. He’ll wait till Lanie shows up. He’s got some words for Ryan and Lanie. And… here she is.

“Hey, Lanie,” Ryan says, not really managing to make it sound as if he wasn’t expecting her.


“Least Ryan here still lets me know what’s going on. Seeing as the rest of you shut me out.”
“Wind your neck in, Lanie. What’d you expect, yellin’ at Beckett like that? She’s not one of your rookie interns who’s screwing up.” Esposito fixes Lanie with a hard stare. “Thought you were her friend?”

“I am,” Lanie says, combatively. Ryan shifts a little away from the looming fight. “You haven’t done anything to help her.”

Ryan moves a lot further away.

“I’ve done more than you have. All you did was yell. Least I know how to treat my friends.”

“You didn’t do anything. Bet you just let her get away with saying nothing.”

“Worked better than your yellin’. All you got was your ass handed to you an’ now she won’t talk to you ’cause you couldn’t keep your tongue between your teeth. Way to go, best friend. You wanna sort your shit out. You been yellin’ at Beckett, an’ you been yellin’ at Castle ‘cause he’s there for her an’ you ain’t. Jealousy ain’t attractive, Lanie.”

“I wouldn’t want Writer-Boy if you paid me in gold,” Lanie snaps. “He’s not my type. I’ve known Kate for years and I know what’s wrong with her a lot better than some smart-ass blow-in with a big mouth and a cute ass.”

“Don’t look like you do to me,” Esposito says bluntly. Ryan is nearly at the other end of the bar by now. “Looks to me like he’s got Beckett down cold. It’s you who’s messing up here. So stop yellin’ at me an’ talking shit about Castle, ‘cause you’re only doin’ it because you know you screwed up. Why’d you come here tonight?”

“Because Ryan told me you’d all be here. Kate’s been avoiding me and she can’t run away like she has been. I wanna talk to her.” Light dawns. “She’s not here, is she?” Ryan groans, as light dawns on him too.

“Nah. I knew Ryan would spill to you, an’ you’d show up. Di’n’t think it would be so’s you could do some more yellin’, though. Thought you wanted to patch things up, but it don’t sound like it to me, so I ain’t gonna put money on it bein’ all happy when Castle does bring Beckett round here. If he does, ‘cause she prob’ly don’t wanna see you, an’ he prob’ly can’t make her come. Fact, I prob’ly oughta call him and tell them not to bother, it ain’t gonna work.”

Lanie opens and closes her mouth a few times, without anything coherent emerging. Esposito continues his cool stare at her.

“Don’t do that,” she eventually manages.

“You gonna keep your cool?” He taps out a text. “I’m tellin’ Castle to hold off.”

“Who died and made you king? You don’t have the right to do that.”

“Yeah, I do. Me ‘n’ Castle thought this up to try an’ fix you two, but we ain’t doin’ that if all you’re gonna do is bitch and start a fight.”

“I didn’t start this. Kate did. She’s the one shut me out.”

“An’ you’re the one getting’ in her face about it as often as you can. I don’t care which of you started it. This ain’t kindergarten, though the way you’re both behavin’ it might as well be. But if you want this fixed, you gotta change the attitude. Beatin’ up on her ain’t gonna work. Telling her she’s screwin’ up ain’t gonna work. An’ tryin’ to get between her an’ Castle really ain’t gonna...”
work, because you couldn’t get a piece of paper between them right now.” He pauses. “You oughta be grateful for that, if you’re really her friend. He’s the only thing between Beckett an’ a medical suspension.”

“What? Why didn’t someone tell me?”

“Because you were so busy yelling you weren’t listening,” Ryan says quietly. “Beckett got sent home an hour after you were pitching a fit over her desk and Montgomery ordered you out. I thought you and Beckett ought to be patched up, so I called you ‘bout tonight, but right now I’m thinking that might have been a mistake.” Lanie looks ill. “She was out for two days. She’s not been really right since ‘cept when we’ve had a new body. An’ all you’ve done is shouted at all of us and left nasty voicemails when we don’t answer. If you’ve been doing that with Beckett too” – Lanie colours up – “So you have? You dumbass – then I don’t think there’s much reason to patch you two up.”

Esposito nods. It’s always good to watch Ryan laying down the law. Doesn’t happen often – Esposito can’t play good cop, his face doesn’t bend that way – but when Ryan decides where the bright side of the line lies, he’s as good as anyone at standing his ground. He lets Ryan take point for a while and sees that Castle’s sent him a reply. Let me know if you get to a good place. We’re good here for a long time yet.

“She needs fixed,” Lanie says with a fair amount of defiance. “She needs fixed and you weren’t sorting that out.”

“Not up to us to sort Beckett. She’s grown up, she knows what she needs to do. Pushing her never works, an’ trying to force her to do what you think she needs to do was never going to work either.” Ryan looks very straight at Lanie. “Weaselling round trying to get all of us to tattle on her wasn’t your best plan. Trying it on Castle was downright dumb. No-one’s going to roll on her.”

Esposito manages to keep a straight face. He strongly suspects that Castle and Beckett have been spending quite a lot of time rolling. It’s in their eyes. Sniggering will not improve this clusterfuck, though. Aren’t doctors supposed to have a bedside manner? Lanie doesn’t.

“She still needs fixed, and she’s not doing it. She’s running round with Writer-Boy rather than sorting herself out.”

“Castle,” Ryan says with some emphasis, “has been keeping Beckett grounded. Unlike you.”

Where did Ryan get the shrink-speak from? Night school?

“So wind your neck in, Lanie, because we’re not watching you try’n bully Beckett any more. Either sort your shit out an’ apologise, or go home. Don’t really care which.”

Espo nods firmly. “Shit or get off the pot, Lanie. Make up or don’t, but stop messin’ with us.”

“I have to apologise and Kate just sits there?” Lanie doesn’t sound co-operative.

“Naw. She’s gotta do her share. But that ain’t your problem or mine,” Espo returns to the conversation. “If she’s gonna try, she’ll turn up. If she ain’t, she won’t. Guess we’ll all find out.”

“Okay,” Lanie says. She doesn’t sound exactly full of sweetness and light, but it’s agreement.

Espo taps out a text to Castle. Lanie’ll play nice. Probably.
With a little help from my friends

Beckett’s steps slow as Croxley’s approaches. All that this results in is Castle and O’Leary flanking her in a posture that strongly suggests to her that if she stops moving forward of her own volition she will be moved forward through theirs. This is not fair. Pair of big bullies. Accent firmly on the big part of that. Either of them is, regrettably, quite capable of lifting her up and moving her on. Together, she’s got no chance. And while she doesn’t know how fast Castle can run on sidewalks, (he only just caught her over sand) she does know that O’Leary’s reaction time and arm length is very likely to stop her before she’s really had a chance to escape.

She has no desire to see Lanie’s condemnatory, accusatory face at all. She isn’t even sure how she got talked into this, because Lanie’s many messages haven’t given her the idea that Lanie wants to play nice. But something about O’Leary’s wide face and sincere eyes – and the years she’s known and trusted him – has walked her right over here. She grips Castle’s hand, large and warm around hers, and tries to find her calm surface. It’s only Lanie, and it’s only as long as she wants to. She doesn’t have to stay. She doesn’t have to take any crap. Castle will stand with her – he’s said so, though he was talking about her father – and O’Leary’s promised that if it doesn’t go well they’ll all leave. She’s got her friends beside her. She can get through this.

She tosses back her hair, lets go of Castle’s hand, and strides out; hits the bar door without hesitation and steps in. The two men behind her exchange glances but not words, and stay half a pace behind.

“Hey,” Beckett says coolly to the three in the bar. Castle and O’Leary come to a stop behind her. It looks, to Espo’s well-trained and suspicious eyes, like they’re the flanking guard. He acquires a feeling of some nervousness. Beckett doesn’t look precisely receptive. Lanie’s hackles are already rising. He raises eyebrows at Ryan, who taps Lanie’s foot. Strangely, Lanie looks more nervous, not to say downright scared, than pissed. She eases down.

Beckett sits down with a swish, Castle and O’Leary still flanking her. There is a remarkable lack of space around the table, suddenly. Castle has the rather uncomfortable feeling that the lack of space is not only physical. The atmosphere has become close-confined and stuffy.

“Beer, Beckett?”

“Coke, thanks.”

“There’s a tab running,” Esposito says. “It’s in Castle’s name.”

Castle shrugs. “I expected that.”


“Is this where you demonstrate how to carry five beer bottles and a soda at one go?” Beckett snarks at him.

“Yep. It’s a good party trick.”

“Show me?” says Castle happily. “Maybe I can do it. That would be good at my parties. Everyone would be really impressed. Patterson can’t do that.”

“S’easy. All you need are long enough fingers. Put your hand out.” Castle does. “Hm. Small hands. Maybe you couldn’t do it.” O’Leary puts his immense hand flat on the table.
“Small? My hands are not small.” Castle looks around, horrified. “All of you put your hands on the table too. Ryan, Espo, put your hands out.” Everyone does. “See, not small.”

It’s true. Castle’s hands are certainly bigger than Ryan and Espo’s. Beckett manages not to wriggle or blush at the thought of his hands. They’re amazingly skilled. But next to O’Leary’s frying pans masquerading as hands, they are small.

Castle goes up to the bar with O’Leary and comes back with five beer bottles, but not the Coke. He smiles a little sheepishly. “Couldn’t manage the glass too.” Beckett quirks a cynical eyebrow. Castle waits a half-beat, till the beers are deposited, then favours her with a scorching glance that should have curled her toes. He drops back into his seat next to her and presses a knee against hers, where it’s not obvious. Shortly O’Leary descends back into his, somewhat in the manner of an iceberg calving, and deposits the Coke.

“Isn’t this cosy,” he rumbles cheerfully. “All pals together.” Esposito shoots him a glare. “Hear you’re good at sparring. Beckett said it. Wanna try a few rounds sometime? I could use a tough workout.”

“Bring it on, mountain-man.” But Espo manages a comradely grin, reflected in Ryan and Castle’s faces. It’s just as well that the men are all so content with each other, because Beckett and Lanie are as tense as a Siamese cat facing a terrier. Castle knows which is which, but is not yet either beered-up enough or stupid enough to say so. Gradually a silence descends on the whole table. Nobody seems inclined to break it. Each of the men are looking between the women, who are watching each other and not saying anything at all. It’s all about to go horribly wrong.

“So when does the naked mud-wrestling start?” Castle asks. There’s an instant of shocked silence.

“You sex-crazed jackass,” Beckett and Lanie yell in unison – and then look at each other, astonished. Beckett’s lips quirk. Lanie produces a half-smile.

“Give us some space, boys,” Beckett says. “Lanie and I need to talk.” When they don’t instantly move, the snap of day-to-day command enters her voice. “Leave. Now. Find another table.” She thinks for a second. “Out of earshot.”

The men depart. Quickly.

“That worked,” Castle says happily. “Beers on me? Just in case we need to break up the mud-wrestling?”

The other three can agree on that.

Back at the now-vacated table, Beckett and Lanie have fallen back into uncomfortable silence. Beckett’s swirling the straw in her soda. Lanie’s picking at her beer mat. Both of them are sneaking sidelong peeks at the other. Beckett swallows. Lanie gulps.

“You made me feel like shit,” Beckett says bluntly. “I don’t need that.”

“You were diving straight down the rabbit hole. You don’t need that, either,” Lanie says, equally harshly.

“Wasn’t up to you to tell me I’m a fuckup.”

“I’m your friend. If I don’t, who would?”

Voices are beginning to acquire annoyance. Tempers have risen, rapidly.
“Are you saying I’m fucked up?”

“I’m saying” –

“Is there a problem?” O’Leary rumbles from over Beckett’s shoulder. Lanie stops talking.

“ Butt out, O’Leary,” Beckett snaps. “This isn’t your business.” Lanie follows it up with a glare that promises scalpels, without anaesthetic.

“I’m saying that I wanted to make sure you were getting help,” Lanie says more temperately, as O’Leary departs.

“What you said was that I was fucked right up. What you did was try to start a fight in the bullpen, in public, in front of my team. What you’ve done is try and make me do what you think I should do and tried to drag in pretty much everyone who knows me. You don’t know anything about my situation now and you only made it worse.” Beckett is not temperate. Nor is she quiet.

“You girls okay?”


“Jackass,” Lanie says bitterly.

“Too right,” Beckett agrees. There’s a short pause. Beckett twiddles her straw and sips the soda. Lanie swigs at her beer and shreds the beer mat some more.

“I didn’t mean to make you feel like shit.”

Beckett, already opening her mouth on a further grievance, closes it. “I… okay.”

There is another pause. The straw snaps. The beer mat is a small pile of scraps. Castle approaches and is greeted by a twin-track, vicious glare. He retreats before he gets within five feet.

“ ‘M” – they each start.

“You go.”

“No, you.”

“ ‘M sorry,” Beckett mutters.

“Me too,” Lanie mumbles.

They peek at each other through their respective eyelashes.

“Didn’t mean to yell at you. I just wanted to help.”

“Should’ve known that. I… just wasn’t in the right place.”

“ ‘M sorry,” Lanie mutters.

“Me too,” Beckett mumbles.

Banished to the other side of the bar, the four men squeeze themselves around a table that isn’t quite out of earshot. They don’t at all believe that Beckett and Lanie are going to kiss and make up that easily.
“So who’s gonna break up the fight?” Espo asks cynically.

“Take it in turns. O’Leary first.”

“Hey!” O’Leary protests.

“Beckett’s not your boss, neither of them are your girlfriend, and you’re the only one who can get both of them out of here in one go,” Ryan points out smugly. “All you have to do is pick them both up by the scruff of the neck and take ‘em out.”

“And then run like hell,” Castle points out. “Beckett’s still got her Glock.”

“Does Lanie know that?” Esposito asks. “Shouldn’t someone have told her?”

“Didn’t you?” Castle and O’Leary ask in unison.

“Ooops,” Espo says unrepentantly. “Musta forgotten that.”

“Like you forgot to tell me that Beckett wasn’t gonna be here?” Ryan mutters blackly. “You set me up.”

“Yep. An’ you deserved it, tattling to Lanie like you did. So stop bitchin’.”

“Looks like someone needs to interfere,” Castle says. “Voices rising, posture spoiling for a fight – this is all about to go wrong. O’Leary, you’re up.”

O’Leary casts him a volcanically fiery glance. Clearly, Mauna Loa sized or not, breaking up the fight isn’t in his game plan for the evening. “You owe me, Castle. This is not what I signed up for. I thought we were friends,” he says pathetically, and then sniggers. “I’m the one person who isn’t looking for the naked mud-wrestling. Not from those two, anyway.” He runs a deliberately mischievous look over Ryan and Esposito.

“Not cool, bro. Not cool at all.”

O’Leary rises to full skyscraper height and grins down. “Couple of pretty boys like you? Very cool.” He’s distracted by Castle’s sharp whistle and gesture to the other table, where tempers have risen dramatically. He ambles over, rumbles inaudibly – then suddenly winces and retreats in a way that in a less enormous man would be described as a fast scuttle.

“What, big guy? Scared off by two girls?” Espo is very nearly taunting.

“Your turn next.” O’Leary looks across. “’Bout now, I’d say.”

Espo returns much faster than O’Leary had.

“Now who’s scared by two girls?”

Espo glares, bitterly.

“Just for that, it’s you next, Castle.” Castle winces. “Like right now. They’ve stopped talking again.”

Castle gets to within ten feet, takes one look at Beckett’s face, takes another two steps with quailing courage but in the hope that he’ll get away with it if he makes her very happy later, sees the promise of pain, suffering and evisceration in Lanie’s expression, and abruptly decides that his happiness will be more likely if he is not in the ER. He reverses direction, rapidly.
“Not so brave now, are you?”

“Never claimed to be. You three are cops. I’m not.”

“What’s going on?”

“Huh?”

Beckett and Lanie are standing up, putting on coats, and clearly preparing to leave. The four men look at them, worriedly.

“Where’re you goin’?” Espo blocks their exit.

“Somewhere civilised.”

“Women only,” Lanie states.

“But… but…” Castle stutters.

“Butt out. Lanie and I need time without you lot butting in.”

“We know what you’re doing. We don’t need you doing it.”

“What?”

But Beckett and Lanie are out the door.

The men look at each other and shrug.

“Guess it worked,” O’Leary rumbles.

“Suppose so,” Castle agrees, a little miffed that Beckett’s disappeared rather than snuggling up to him. He’d wanted to take her home, after. Still, he’d thought that she needed to be pals with Lanie again, and it seems like they’ve sorted it out. Probably.

Another round of beers appears, and they settle in for the evening.

Beckett and Lanie don’t say much on the way to Matilda’s. Some harmony might have been restored, but it’s still not entirely comfortable. Both of them feel they’ve behaved rather… well, childishly.

They find a table, order polenta crostini with mushrooms so they’ve got something to nibble, Beckett has another soda and Lanie a glass of white wine.

“That’s better,” Beckett says with some satisfaction, looking round. “Lost them.”

Lanie nods in vigorous agreement.

“So,” she says, “you wanna talk, or you wanna eat and have the civilised evening we were gonna have a month ago?”

Beckett appreciates the way Lanie’s put that. “Let’s start with food and civilised. It’s not… I don’t wanna talk much.”

“Okay. But…” – Lanie looks like a mischievous sprite – “you gotta share one thing, Kate.”

“What?”

Beckett splutters out her soda. “Lanie!”

“Lanie!”

“So you are.”

“Not your business.”

Lanie smirks evilly. “Well, that evening a month ago I was going to tell you that you should find someone who’d keep you warm – or keep your sheets hot” – Beckett nearly chokes – “but since you’ve done it all yourself how about we talk about something else?”

“Yeah. Something else.” Lanie looks questioningly at her. “Movies. Or make-up. Or…”

“Or men.”

“Not men. Weren’t the Banana Splits that we left behind enough for you?”

Lanie chokes on her wine and goes purple as she tries to stop laughing.

“O’Leary’s still cute.”

“Yeah, and still with Pete. Stick to the attainable. You could try Espo. He’s single.”

“When I want someone whose only conversation is guns I’ll try Espo.”

“So the next week after never, then?”

“Yup. And don’t suggest Ryan either. If I want pathetic blue eyes I’ll get a puppy.”

Beckett snickers. “Wasn’t going to. You’d walk right over him. If you want that, go down the ten-cent store and buy a doormat.”

“You didn’t get a doormat,” Lanie says with a slight edge. “Wouldn’t tell me a damn thing.”


“Anyone. What’d you do, sew their lips shut?” Beckett smirks. “Or threaten them?”

“Nothing you wouldn’t have done, Doctor Moreau.”

Lanie splutters, and pours herself some more wine. “Mean, Kate. Very mean.”

Beckett sips her soda. There is a pause.

“Are we good, Kate?”

“Yeah. We’re good.”

“Okay. Shall we get some more food?”

“Yeah. I’m hungry.”

Nobody says anything in the bullpen the next day, apart from a few comments about the
unkindness of Beckett and Lanie going off without the others. The team is easier than it has been in quite a while. To Ryan and Espo, Beckett seems some way calmer. To Castle, ambling in at lunchtime to see if there is anything interesting happening and disappointed to find that there is nothing, she is certainly calmer, but nothing like as peaceful as she should be. He doesn’t say anything, though, simply ambles off again, knowing that he’ll be round at her apartment later on tonight.

Beckett simply makes it through the day. She’d not slept particularly well, despite sorting things out with Lanie. Every time she’d dropped off, she’d been woken by unsubtle nightmares involving stripping naked in public. She doesn’t need Freud to explain those to her. She’d resolved to talk to Dr Burke, but that doesn’t mean she has to like it. She drags off to his office at the end of the day.

“Good evening.”

“Hey.”

“In the previous session, I asked you to reflect upon your reactions to the Berowitzes. Have you had an opportunity so to do?”

“Yeah. But…”

“Mm?”

“Can we talk about something else?”

Dr Burke is surprised. Mainly, he is surprised that Detective Beckett wishes to talk about any matter, unprompted. This should, however, be encouraged. “Certainly.”

“I want” – Detective Beckett hesitates, and Dr Burke emits an encouraging noise – “to-talk-about-Castle’s-family,” she blurts out in one breath.

Dr Burke’s surprise is only indicated by a slight raising of his brows. He is quite astonished by that statement.

“Certainly,” he says again, in default of being able to find any other words. “Please begin.”

“Uhm…” Detective Beckett does not appear to know where to begin. Dr Burke rapidly assembles his own thoughts.

“Please start by explaining Mr Castle.”

Detective Beckett manages a skewed smile. “Explaining Castle? That would take a while. He showed up as a person of interest on a case, round about September last. He tried to chat me up” – this does not, in fact, surprise Dr Burke – “and when I wouldn’t play he weaselled his way into the precinct by leaning on the Mayor. The Mayor – and my boss – play poker with him. He claimed that I’d inspired his latest character. So after that they let him shadow me.”

“And he has a family, I believe you have mentioned?”

“A daughter. And his mother lives with them. Martha Rogers – she’s an actress.”

Martha Rogers? Dr Burke recognises the name. Off-Broadway theatre is not his preference, but he has been forced to sit through it with friends on occasion. He calls up a very vague memory of an overly-flamboyant redhead.
“So Mr Castle has a daughter of – how old?”

“Fifteen, I think.”

“And you have met his family, you informed me. You told me that you and your father had attended a dinner at Mr Castle’s home.”

“Yeah. But I’ve been there before. And…”

“And?”

“And I’m really unhappy seeing him and his family because it reminds me of how my family used to be and I hate that I can’t just get over myself. So I wanna sort that.”

Detective Beckett looks thoroughly unhappy and ashamed. Dr Burke finds this unsurprising, but also unwarranted. It is, in his experience, normal to be envious and unhappy of people who are enjoying a happy existence which a patient has previously experienced, but which the patient has lost through no fault of their own.

“I see.”

Dr Burke is, paradoxically, extremely satisfied that Detective Beckett has raised this issue, even though normally he would not permit a patient to divert from his carefully structured course of treatment. He is a firm believer in the efficacy of his methods, and is disinclined to depart from them without a very good reason. However, Detective Beckett has been ill-served by her previous therapist, and is proving a very complex patient indeed. Therefore, it is wise to allow a certain degree of deviation, if it will encourage her to talk freely. As well, her introduction of this subject means that he does not need to do so. He recalls their previous discussion of this point, which had been triggered by Detective Beckett’s father’s ill-considered words. Detective Beckett had, at that point, not mentioned any desire to be able to see Mr Castle’s family. Dr Burke deduces without difficulty that his earlier conclusion that Detective Beckett is enjoying a romantic relationship with Mr Castle had been entirely correct.

“Please tell me, chronologically, about your meetings with Mr Castle’s family. It would be preferable, and more efficient,” Dr Burke notes, a little acerbically, “if you were to include your feelings during each meeting as you describe them.” He has little hope that this will occur without some further, detailed, questioning. It is really a great pity that the use of scopolamine is both unethical and, for psychiatry at least, ineffective.
“A couple of weeks before Christmas, Castle insisted I go Christmas shopping with him, and invited me round beforehand. His daughter was there. Alexis. She wasn’t coming with us. It was nothing, really. Just normal family stuff.”

“Such as?” Dr Burke is somewhat confused as to why Mr Castle would invite Detective Beckett Christmas shopping, but he is unwilling to reopen the subject of Christmas at this juncture when he is sure from previous sessions that it will divert this session into areas which will, presently, be unhelpful.

Detective Beckett winces. “School stuff, reminders to take care. The usual.”

“You have said the usual. Why do you think that that was usual?”

“Doesn’t every decent parent do that?” Dr Burke regards her with a beady gaze. “My parents were like that.”

Dr Burke wonders if he should have become a dentist, instead of a psychiatrist. Pulling teeth must surely be easier than extracting feelings from Detective Beckett.

“Detective Beckett, please include how you felt at the time in your descriptions,” he says, only just succeeding in preventing irritation from colouring his tone. Even though he is aware of how difficult it is for Detective Beckett to reveal her emotions, her inability to do so is quite hard for him to manage. He supposes that a truly testing patient is an excellent challenge for his professional skills.

“I… didn’t want to see it. Too many memories. It… upset me.”

“Alexis upset you?”

“The memories upset me. Not Alexis.”

“But if you had not seen Mr Castle with his daughter, you would not have been upset, would you? So would you not say that it was her fault that you were upset?”

“No, I wouldn’t. It’s not her fault.”

“Really?” Dr Burke is deliberately pressing on an evident sore spot. Detective Beckett refuses to take his bait, which is mildly surprising. In most cases, his patients are only too eager to place the blame elsewhere. Detective Beckett appears to have resisted that temptation.

“Let us move on, then, to the next occasion.”

“Just before Christmas. Castle invited me for dinner. I didn’t want to go, but I couldn’t get out it without upsetting him. I should just have said no. I spent all evening trying to be nice and hiding how I felt.”

Dr Burke waits, watching her with sharp intelligent eyes.

“I was jealous,” she spits bitterly. “Happy now? Pathetically jealous. I didn’t need to come here to work that out. I knew that.” So too did Dr Burke. Detective Beckett had mentioned that previously.
“Why do you think you should not be upset by watching Mr Castle with his daughter?”

“It’s pathetic. Jealous of a normal family? It’s stupid and childish.”

“It is also wholly understandable. You had previously had such a relationship with both your parents, did you not?”

“Yeah…”

“Which was taken away from you. Did you previously consider that point?”

“No…”

“You have not, in fact, grieved for either the loss of your father or the loss of your previously stable family. Tell me, Detective Beckett, have you any acquaintances, except for Mr Castle, who have teenage children?”

“No.”

“Do you have any other acquaintances who have children of any age?”

“No.”

Dr Burke pauses for a second. “Would you say that you avoid children?”

Detective Beckett simply stares at him, transfixed. “What?”

“Would you say that you avoid children?”

“No.” Dr Burke continues to regard her calmly.

“But you will not go to Mr Castle’s apartment, will you? If you are not avoiding his daughter, why is that?”

Dr Burke notes with satisfaction that he has given Detective Beckett considerable pause for thought. Of course she is avoiding children and adolescents. Or, more precisely, she is avoiding the memories which they induce in her.

“This isn’t what I wanted to talk about,” Detective Beckett suddenly emits. “I did some thinking. Three points that I need to get over. Castle’s always there for his daughter, and my dad isn’t for me. They’re a family, and I don’t have one. And I didn’t like watching the dinner a few weeks ago because it was just like we used to be. I just want to sort that out and be fixed.”

Dr Burke perceives another avoidance strategy. Detective Beckett appears to have a substantial quantity of those, but she will need to face her issues at some stage. On the other hand, compared to the session in which she had managed to avoid discussing any matter at all, this could be considered to be progress. A crab, he recalls, also progresses by moving sideways.

“Mm,” he emits, in order to acknowledge that he has heard her. He thinks for a moment or two, and considers that taking a risk is justified. “Detective Beckett, your three points appear to be linked to your avoidance of situations where you might be forced to watch a normal family relationship occur.”

Detective Beckett simply looks at Dr Burke, without comment.

“It is entirely reasonable, as I have already noted, that you should be uncomfortable in such
Detective Beckett appears to be about to comment. Dr Burke forestalls her. “I do not consider that you should necessarily seek out a family situation now. That would be unhelpful and counterproductive. However, you need to consider the entirety of your situation. None of the issues you have raised exist in isolation, and you will not be able to overcome them without considering them both individually and in the overall context.”

He pauses, and considers the risks inherent in his next statement, if he makes it. He decides, with no qualms, that the blunt truth will be better for Detective Beckett than any softening. If only her previous therapist had taken a similar approach. “The matters you have raised are quite inextricably linked to your father’s alcoholism and his behaviour whilst drinking. If you wish to address these issues, you will also have to address the earlier issues.” He steeples his fingers under his chin, and considers Detective Beckett, who has lost most of her colour. “I should like to start with your father’s actions, and your reactions to them. Allow me to summarise these, so that you may point out areas with which you disagree as we proceed.”

Detective Beckett’s hands are entwined in her lap, and her mouth is pinched closed. It is self-evident that she does not wish to proceed in this way. However, she has not to date wished to proceed in any other more effective way, and so Dr Burke considers that his strategy will be no less efficacious than any other.

“You have told me that your father became an alcoholic consequent upon your mother’s death. Almost immediately after you returned to college, and during a surprise visit home, he was sufficiently drunk that he mistook you for your mother and, on discovering his error, made it clear that you were an inadequate replacement.” Dr Burke pauses. “Detective Beckett, did this happen again?”

“Yes,” she says very shortly, without explaining which point had occurred again.

“Frequently?”

“Often enough.”

“How did you deal with it?” Dr Burke returns to hard facts and actions, for the time being.

“Got my hair cut. Got it coloured. Made sure I didn’t look like Mom.” Her voice spikes. “It worked.”

“In what way did it work?”

“He stopped mistaking me for Mom.”

“Did that help him to accept your presence?” Dr Burke is determined to force Detective Beckett to confront the root cause of all her issues. He had hoped that she would be able to open the necessary discussions herself, but he has come to the conclusion in the course of this session that she is quite unable to open up to him without being forced to. It is really quite antithetical to his usual principles, in which he encourages his patients to talk freely. Normally, of course, his patients wish to talk, and indeed are quite frequently difficult to prevent from talking. Detective Beckett may or may not wish to talk, and indeed he believes that she does wish to talk, but she does not do so. He surmises that she does not wholly trust him. This is normal. He recalls that he had concluded that she did not confide in her friends or speak to her co-workers.

“No.”
“No? What happened?”

“All that happened was that every time he got drunk he told me I wasn’t her and I should go because he couldn’t bear to see me. All he wanted was Mom. He didn’t… I wasn’t enough for him.” She stops.

“So, your father consistently rejected you, when drunk, because you were not your mother. You changed your appearance and behaviour from that which you would have otherwise preferred, in the hope that he would thereby accept you.” Dr Burke allows that statement to lie unadorned, and moves on. “How did he react to you when he was sober?”

“Then he said he couldn’t do without me. Begged me to stay, begged me to be strong for him. Told me how like Mom I was. Told me he loved me and he’d stop, do better. He lied. He never did. Not then. Not for years.”

“How did you initially deal with your father?”

“Cleaned him up. Hauled him out of the tank when he was arrested. Picked him up when he was in public, when he was close to passed out drunk in the Park. Even when he was telling me I wasn’t her.” Detective Beckett’s tone is hard. Her bitterness is not reassuring.

“For how long did you continue to do this?”

“Two years.”

“And then?”

“I stopped.” Dr Burke remembers that. It had been a major part of the first session in which Detective Beckett had actually talked. A memorable moment. “Walked away and left him to it.”

Dr Burke waits.

“Didn’t answer his calls. Didn’t go get him from the cells. Left him to die, or not. Every time someone knocked on the door it could have been another cop. At least then it would have been over.” Dr Burke does not wince. He has heard that before. “He called and called but I wouldn’t go. No matter how much he cried.”

Detective Beckett had listened to her father? That is unusual, and very disturbing.

“Finally he stopped calling. No-one told me he’d been picked up dead” – the flat tone is really quite horrible to hear – “so I guessed he’d given up.” She stops, and the jaws of the ensuing silence gape. “It was a relief,” she says, and buries her face in a Kleenex. “It was a relief.”

It is wholly evident that Detective Beckett is weeping.

“I didn’t hear from him for nearly a year. Then he got the rehab centre to call me, and his sponsor. They said he’d been there nine months, wholly dry for three. He’d wanted to prove he could do it before he called. He knew I wouldn’t take his call. He wanted someone else to prove it. Something to believe in, after all the lies. They had to do a lot of talking to convince me.” She blows her nose, dully dabs at her eyes. “So I went, eventually.”

Dr Burke consciously exudes an air of intelligent sympathy, and, despite the advancing clock, waits for Detective Beckett to continue. He will not end this session until Detective Beckett herself does.
“He was so pleased to see me. It was great. He was my Dad again. I knew he’d have to do the Twelve Steps, and make amends, but he was back. Every time he looked at me he lit up.”

Detective Beckett looks straight at Dr Burke, her eyes flooded. “I didn’t realise then. Only when I was thinking it through after last time I saw you. I needed him to look at me as if he loved me.”

Dr Burke’s own heart sinks. He can predict the next words with considerable accuracy.

“I wanted him to be my Dad again. I just wanted it to be like it used to be. When he was pleased to see me. Before… if something was wrong, after Mom passed, he’d cry, and then he’d drink, and tell me to go. So if he was happy, he wouldn’t be crying, and then he wouldn’t be drinking, and I thought he loved me. And I needed him to want to see me. So I did everything to keep him happy. I wanted our family back. I thought we had our family back.”

Detective Beckett stops, hard. “But we don’t. I spent all that time trying to keep him happy and trying to be a family and hoping he still loved me. I did everything to try and make him love me. What a waste of time.”

She looks at her watch. “I’m sorry. I’ve overrun. Thank you.” She stands up.

“Detective Beckett, you do not have to leave now. There is no other patient after you. You may continue.” He continues, swiftly, before she can open the door to which she is moving. “I should like to summarise your actions once more. You changed your appearance when your father reacted badly to your similarity to your mother. When that failed to return him to sobriety, and he continued to express his desire for your mother to return and for you to leave, you tried to protect him, and prevent that discussion, by never opening any topic of conversation which might upset him. When that also failed, you tried to save him from the consequences of his behaviour by doing everything in your power to ensure that you were there whenever he called for you. And yet, in the end, none of it stopped him hurting you.”

Detective Beckett stares at him, colour draining from her face as appalled knowledge begins to inhabit her eyes. Her hand drops from the door. “No…” she says, but Dr Burke is certain that she is not denying that she has now seen the truth. She is, after all, a very intelligent woman. “No…” She turns blindly back to the chair and collapses into it. “It wasn’t like that. It wasn’t like that.”

There is another gaping silence. Detective Beckett is bloodless and seemingly incapable of speech, thought or movement. It is entirely apparent that this thought has never before occurred to her. Dr Burke resolves to ensure that her previous therapist is censured. Surely that should have been explored?

“Has it not previously occurred to you that the way you have behaved with your father exhibits similarities with the way in which victims of emotional abuse react to their abuser?”

“My father never abused me,” Detective Beckett spits out. “Never.”

“And yet you have avoided provoking any situations in which he would potentially hurt you, emotionally.” This is far blunter than Dr Burke would wish to be, but the truth must come out. “Can you honestly say that you have not observed that phenomenon in others, in the course of your work?”

There is another ghastly silence.
“I want to go home,” she finally says. She sounds like a shocked, injured high-schooler, and Dr Burke is reminded that the original trauma took place when she was only nineteen.

“You may leave at any time, Detective Beckett, but I counsel that you only do so once you are a little calmer.”

“Now. I want to go home.” Detective Beckett murmurs something almost inaudible, following that. Dr Burke has no idea what she might have said. He is, however, concerned.

“Detective Beckett, you might find this evening less… difficult if you were to spend it with a friend.”

“I’m going home. I need to go home.”

She fumbles with the door before she can manage to open it.

“Detective Beckett, if there is no-one who will be with you then at least allow me to contact someone to collect you.”

“There will be someone. I just want to go home.”

She leaves Dr Burke contemplating his empty office with considerable concern. The next session is unlikely to be any more pleasant, for either Detective Beckett or Dr Burke.

It takes Beckett fifteen minutes before she can even start the car. It’s not true. It wasn’t like that. It wasn’t. It was the disease, it wasn’t her father. It’s not true.

Castle wanders round to Beckett’s apartment at his nearly-usual post therapy time, knocks, waits, knocks again, waits some more, and then following a third, not hopeful, knock moves straight from mild concern as to what he might find to full-scale worry as to why she isn’t there. He dials her cell, and gets voicemail. This doesn’t appease his twisting stomach, even as he leaves a message. He contemplates whether to wait here, or to go and get a coffee and return in a short while. Deciding on the latter, he tears a page out his notebook and scrawls on it, tucks it into the doorframe and starts to leave.

The elevator arrives to take him down and, lost in fearful worries, he’s practically stepping into it before he realises that Beckett is stepping out. To be fair, it’s not as if she’s realised he’s there either. She has exactly the same empty, exhausted, pallid look as when Montgomery benched her. Castle puts a gentle, careful arm around her shoulders, detects immediately that she is shivering, and doesn’t let go until they are safely inside. Even then, it’s only for as long as it takes for Beckett to shed her coat, after which he returns her to the crook of his arm and the warmth in his body. She hasn’t yet said a single word.

“Kate, what’s wrong?”

“It’s not true,” she whispers, which makes no sense at all, and then buries her face in his chest and flings her arms round him, gripping painfully hard.

“What’s not true?” Castle asks, scrambling to try to make sense of anything at all that isn’t the single very obvious truth that therapy tonight has not gone well, to put it mildly.

“He didn’t.”

Which is no help at all. Who didn’t? Didn’t what?
“It wasn’t him. It was the alcohol.”

Okay, so one part becomes clearer. Whatever it was, it’s to do with her father. He sits them down, which is a little awkward since Beckett is absolutely not letting go of him and is trying to burrow through his sweater.

“Kate, stop trying to do anything,” he says softly. “Just stop. Stay here.” Her grip eases slightly, and the burrowing ceases. He finds himself with a bundle of beleaguered Beckett, which happens immediately after therapy sessions far, far too often. Therapy, it appears, is one of those necessary evils which turns out to be the right thing in retrospect but is devastatingly hard to get through at the time.
“He’s wrong,” is the next thing Castle hears. It has disturbingly forceful overtones. “He’s wrong and it’s not true.” Anger is beginning to replace misery in her voice.

“Who’s wrong?”

“Dr Burke. He’s talking absolute crap.”

“About what?” Castle is, and sounds, wholly confused. Not so confused, however, that he hasn’t noted the name of the therapist. It can’t be anyone else.

“It wasn’t like that. Dad wasn’t like that. He’s talking crap,” she says again.

“Beckett, what are you talking about?” Castle shakes her very gently to try and restore her normal organisation and lucidity, neither of which is in any way in evidence.

“He said that Dad was an abuser and it’s just not true. Dad never did.”

Castle freezes around her. This adds a whole new layer of complications. His sharp mind begins to work, while he stops talking and simply cossets her close to keep her warm. He very much doubts that Jim Beckett actually hit his daughter, simply because he is sure that if that had happened she would accept that he had abused her. So, emotional abuse? He doesn’t know anything much about that. It’s not figured in any of his research, since macabre mysteries and thrillers tend to focus on rather more tangible matters. He might need to do some researching, in the near future.

“Do you want to tell me about it, or do you just want some dinner and to talk about movies, or books, or something else?” Tell me something, Beckett. Sometime, tell me something, for Chrissake.

There’s an unhappy silence before words start to arrive.

“All I wanted was to fix the job and fix seeing your family. He made me go right back to the beginning. I didn’t want to go back to the beginning. Past’s past.”

Ah. Dr Burke has decided to rip open all Beckett’s unhealed wounds, clean them out thoroughly and stitch them together properly. Oh, hell. As therapy, Castle is sure that this is the right thing to do. It’s just that he hates seeing the effect it has on his badass Beckett, who’s broken by it. Then again, way back a few weeks ago he’d been preparing himself effectively to break Beckett, in the hope that she’d heal straight, and only her acceptance that it was all wrong had stopped him. So wanting to punch the daylights out of this Dr Burke, then encase his feet in concrete and drop him in the Hudson, is really a bit of an overreaction. Except that he’s made Castle’s Beckett cry, so he deserves it. This is not exactly helpful thinking. Helpful thinking might involve thinking about cuddling Beckett close to him, letting her calm herself down, and then finding out what she wants to do, whether that’s talking or not.

“He made me tell him about the time I went home from college to see him.”

Beckett’s normally precise pronouns have mixed themselves up, but Castle thinks he follows. He doesn’t remember Beckett ever telling him that she’d come home from college – she must mean Stanford – to see her father. All he remembers is Ryan telling him that she’d transferred. He makes a carry-on noise.
She does. Oh God. Oh God oh God oh God. He hadn’t realised this on Saturday. Her father had told her to go away, he didn’t want her because she wasn’t her mother. Oh God oh God oh fuck. And she’d said… oh fuck… he doesn’t remember… he said don’t leave then he couldn’t stand to see me – but she hadn’t said this: she hadn’t included this critical information. She’d said I wouldn’t remind him, how could I reopen it? So… oh fuck, Kate, oh Kate… Jim doesn’t know what he said. Jim doesn’t know why his Katie absolutely freaked out when he said just like being part of a family again because Jim doesn’t know that he told his Katie to get out because she wasn’t her mother.

Oh, fuck. There really isn’t any other phrase. He holds Beckett tighter, and strokes her back soothingly. Annoyance taking over from misery or not, she’s still shivering convulsively.

“He said that because I avoided anything that might start him off that it was abuse but it’s not true. He didn’t. It was all the disease. It wasn’t him. He couldn’t stop himself.”

Still denying, minimising – still trying to protect her father from the truth that should have been told in therapy the first time, that should have been repeated in his twelve step program. Someone should have told her back then that she had to tell the whole, horrible truth, and let the chips fall where they might. And now they’ll have to lance this suppurating wound five years too late.

Now what?

What, first, is that Beckett, whatever she’s been doing and saying for the last two and a half weeks about never wanting to bother with her father again, is still trying to hide from the ghastly truth, and still trying to believe the best of her father. She’s still pretending she doesn’t care, but she’s still pretending she can protect him - and she’s still wrong on both counts.

What, second, is don’t for God’s sake open your big mouth, Rick. This is absolutely not the time for him to spill his thoughts. This is a really good time for him to exercise some self-control and sew his lips together.

And what, third, is don’t let go of Beckett, because she’s relying on him. Well. She should be. Whether she is or not is a more difficult question, because her commentary on how it’s not his job to fix her, while true, and while she’d agreed she would ask if she thought she needed him, may mean that her definition of when she might need him could be a very long way from his.

He can’t baby her. He won’t (ugh) treat her as if she needs guidance. He can’t help unless she talks to him. Maybe, though, he can ask one, very careful, question.

“Why did he think that?” he says confusedly. The confusion is not entirely sincere.

“I don’t know,” Beckett says. That sounds entirely false. Castle deduces that she knows perfectly well, and more, that she likely agrees with it and doesn’t want to admit it, or can’t admit it. He also thinks that she’s exhibiting most of the symptoms of being in shock. He supposes that being told in plain language that you were being abused would be a horrible shock.

After a moment, though, she carries on. “He said that because I changed my hair and avoided talking about it and went and collected him but it didn’t stop him telling me he didn’t want me and telling me to leave it was the same as if it was abuse.”

Castle replays that particularly incoherent piece of explanation at half-speed and just about manages to extract the key point. “Oh,” he says, pointlessly. Tumblers fall into place. He may not know about emotional abuse but he’s beginning to see the outline of the therapist’s thinking. Basically, Beckett avoided anything that might trigger her father and did everything to try and
regain her father’s love and stop him hurting her. Oh, God.

Castle mechanically pets Beckett, who’s gone back to her burrowing, and slots that idea into the way Beckett behaves. Avoided talking about it – well, that’s easy. Kept trying to save him in the hope he’d love her – and then walked away, having failed. Now, she never tolerates failure – neither in the precinct, nor the risk that a failure to do everything her father wanted would cause another failure. And from before, doesn’t lose her temper (didn’t lose her temper) because he only ever drank more when she did.

What a horrible, horrible mess, and it all goes back to Beckett never telling her father the truth, because she couldn’t bear to let him fall – because she couldn’t bear that he might not love her, when she was trying so hard to believe that he really did. The truth then might have set her free: the truth now is imprisoning her.

“I’m here, Beckett. Just relax and let me hold on to you. You don’t need to think for now. Stand down for a little while, and worry about it later.”

Standing down sounds good. Dr Burke is wrong. Just plain downright wrong. She’s not an abuse victim. She’s not. She’s not a victim at all. She just wanted her father to love her… oh God. She’s seen it before. She has seen it, over again in uniform, in Vice. Mostly women, and some men, doing anything they thought would stop their spouse or partner or parent or child hurting them, refusing to accept dysfunctional reality, refusing to accept it would never stop till they left.

But she had left. She’d walked away and not put up with it. She hadn’t been a victim. She’d left him to sort himself out and she’d only gone back when he was dry – and others had verified it. She’d had evidence that he was dry. She made herself more, stopped being a victim.

She shivers, and Castle’s arms close around her: the heat in his body not quite sufficient to warm her.

She wasn’t a victim, and she wasn’t abused, and Dr Burke is just plain wrong. And yet her gut is twisting in the way that it does when she’s on the wrong path at work, when she knows that the evidence is starting to point her down a route that’s different from the one she had believed was right, when she’s trying to convince herself that the suspect is the right suspect, but she knows that there’s something wrong in her logic.

She doesn’t like where logic is taking her. She’d denied it outright in the therapist’s office, denied it all the way home, denied it now – but she can’t stop her brain working. She tries to curl deeper into Castle’s wide frame, but short of surgery she can’t get closer.

She might have behaved like a victim before she walked away, but she didn’t do so after she returned. She didn’t.

Except that she still never told him anything that might upset him: told herself she couldn’t let him fall, and never realised till now that actually she was trying to make sure she was behaving in a way that would give her the family she wanted back.

She was still fighting the same battle, just that after he got dry she did it to keep her resurrected family and keep her guilt at bay. Just the same behaviour pattern, pretending it’s for a different reason, pretending it’s to keep him safe and dry. But all she’d ever wanted was the love of her remaining family, and she’d used the same methods to keep it when – she had thought – it returned as she had to try to win it back when it had gone.

“He didn’t,” she says desolately. “But it was the same pattern.”
Nothing shows in her voice, but Castle knows that the silent tears are trailing down her cheeks.

“Stay here, Kate. Whatever it is, whatever you decide, it’s up to you. You don’t have to talk. Just… don’t shut me out, okay? I know you’re crying, you don’t have to hide it. Stop hiding what you feel.”

“I thought I’d done it right. I thought we were good. But I never realised I was avoiding all the triggers so we never had to talk about it. I never told him what he’d said, because he might have told me he meant it.” Her voice changes, hard and bitter as bile. “After all, he did.”

Castle knows that Beckett is wrong about that. He just doesn’t know how to open that conversation. She’s had dozens of messages from her father and she hasn’t believed a single one of them. She’s walked away from him, again. One hurt too many, one ill-chosen sentence that’s taken her right back to all the reasons they’re in this mess in the first place. One last push, just like there must have been one final breaking point the first time. Just like last time, it’s breaking her heart, and she’s hiding it. Just like she did with Lanie, though they’ve fixed that breach, he thinks.

It’s all an appalling repetition of the past, he recognises. Just as eight, seven, six years ago; the countdown of grief and pain; she’s listened to his anguish and refused to answer it. He’d cried for her to come then, and she’d refused to go: stayed clear to save herself from drowning with him. One hurt too many, and she’d walked away to save herself. Now, it’s the same: Jim’s crying for her to come, but it’s one hurt too many and she’s walked away to save herself from the same acid heartbreak as he inflicted on her the first time. The first time he’d told her he didn’t want her, she wasn’t enough family for him. This time – he hadn’t meant it, but he’d said the same thing. You’re not enough family for me. Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it – but Jim doesn’t even know the history from which he needed to have learned.

Castle knows how to solve this. Get Jim and Beckett in the same place, moderated by Dr Burke. Dr Burke’s methods, however painful, appear to be working. There is only one major problem, which is that he has no idea how to get them in the same place.

While he’s been thinking, Beckett has curled herself into a defensive position in which he can’t see her face, and the rest of her is sufficiently closely tucked into him that he can’t tell anything from that either.

“Want some coffee, Beckett?” he says mundanely, trying to bring this back to some sort of normality, trying to bring her back to some sort of normality. There’s something that might be a nod of the head: at least, the ends of her hair bob up and down. Castle untangles himself and pads over to her kitchen counter to assemble coffee and additives.

When he returns Beckett absorbs the aroma of coffee, and acquires a small amount of colour. She’s still horribly pale, but some of the dull horror has left her eyes. “Thanks,” she says. Castle wriggles himself back into a comfortable alignment and wraps his free arm back round Beckett’s shoulders.

“There. That’s better. Coffee and hugs make everything better. Well, and chocolate. It’s endorphins, you know. Feel good hormones. Apparently the same ones as you get from good sex.” Beckett manages a quirk of an eyebrow. “Not that I was suggesting sex right now but it’s always an option if you want it.” He forcibly shuts his mouth before he really screws this up.

“I don’t think I’m quite in the mood,” Beckett says, tiredly.

“Whatever you decide. It’s up to you. I’d quite like to keep cuddling you, though. Are you in the mood for cuddles?”
“Yes,” she yawns, and leans in.

“Sounds like you need sleep,” he soothes.

“No. I don’t want to sleep. I need to think. I need to work this out.” Her face is pale again. “I don’t want him to be right. I need to prove him wrong.”

Castle spots an opportunity.

“Why?”

“What?”

“Why? You’ve cut ties with your dad, so why should this matter? You don’t need to go through this. You can just leave it and work through what you wanted to with the therapist.”

He’s deliberately trailing a bait that he doesn’t think she can resist. If she’d really truly given up on her father, she wouldn’t have been so utterly furious and disbelieving, or so angry with the therapist. Somewhere very deep inside her, there is still a small hope that it can all be made right. He hadn’t been at all sure, before tonight, that Beckett could ever be convinced to make any move towards her father. Now, he thinks, it’s possible.

Beckett is not answering.

“Just leave it, Beckett. It’s not your problem. Come here.” He drops a kiss on the top of her head, and closes his arm round her. She was happy with cuddles, so cuddles are what she shall have.

“It is my problem. It’s my dad. He’s not like that. It was the alcohol.”

Castle clamps his lips shut so that he doesn’t say *if it was the alcohol how come you think he’s still telling you he doesn’t want you as a family now?* Pointing out Beckett’s massive inconsistency in this regard is not going to help. He kisses her hair again. It’s soft and shiny and it smells nice. Kissing it is a good thing to do. Simple pleasures, to keep him from simply screwing up. He nuzzles in and keeps her tucked close. She’s all tensed up again, and the only thing he can do is provide strength and quiet to allow her space in which to think.

Beckett is rocked back on her mental heels by the question. What does Castle mean *why*? Isn’t it obvious? It’s not true. Not the way Dr Burke put it. She’s going to prove Dr Burke wrong. And then Castle carries on. *Why bother? You’ve cut ties.* So she should just ignore it? Let Dr Burke tell lies? But her gut twists at that thought too. Dr Burke isn’t lying. She’s lying. But it’s still not true. Not as Dr Burke meant it. If he’s going to try to point out hard truth it should be the truth.

So she’s going to think it through properly and then she’s going to show Dr Burke that he’s just plain downright totally absolutely wrong. She’s going to find the right truth.

Beckett straightens in a very badass-Beckett way in Castle’s embrace, with a very badass-Beckett-beating-up-bad-guys look on her face, just as if she was on the trail in the precinct. Castle is not reassured.

“I’m going to prove he’s wrong. And then I’m going to rub his clever-clever shrink nose in it. And you’re going to help.”
“Me? How? Why?”

What is Beckett doing? On the other hand, this might just be the way to get her and her dad back on the same page.

“You are going to convince my dad to see Dr Burke and then he’ll see he was wrong. I bet Dad’s tried to talk to you” – Castle looks guilty – “and I know you won’t have told him anything so you can stop trying to hide behind the couch cushions, so now you’re going to use it. Okay?”

“Okay,” Castle squeaks, utterly intimidated. Juggernaut-Beckett is clearly on a mission, and has reverted to Detective Beckett, terror of Manhattan’s murderers. He still doesn’t understand why she’s seized on this as her crusade, if she’s still pretending she doesn’t care, but actually why doesn’t matter because with a little bit of effort this is all going to come out right. “But Beckett, to do that I’m going to need to talk to your dad openly, and I might need to speak to Dr Burke.”

“Fine. Do whatever you need to.” Yes! “He thinks he’s so clever, dragging up everything and putting his spin on it. Well, he’s wrong, and I’m going to prove it.”

“I thought he was helping you?”

“He is.”

Castle leaves it there. Beckett has obviously channelled the Red Queen, and is believing six contradictory things at once. He’s not going to go there. He’s got a free hand to try to help fix Jim and his Katie, and he’s got permission to talk to Dr Burke, which he thinks will be extremely helpful, for both of them. He could use the chance to offload his thoughts to somewhere that talking won’t invite disaster. He also needs to be able to talk to someone who isn’t Beckett about Beckett, and at this point there are precious few of those around. On balance, this is working out just as he’d like. Beckett is back to being Beckett, rather than the shocked ghost of earlier, and he’s got the freedom to act which he’s been hoping to have for some time.

“Okay,” he says, positively. “I’ll help. It’ll be just like solving a case.”


She turns in his grasp. Her eyes are brightly burning with the same thrill as when she has a mystery to chase down. She’s ablaze, and it’s beautiful. She downs the remains of her coffee in one gulp and smiles with the gleam of a cut-throat razor. Then her eyes flare and she swoops and conquers in one swift movement.

She’s invaded his mouth before he’s really caught up with her intent, plundering as she pleases and overwhelming all his unprepared defences. He surrenders his mouth without even starting to fight her but turns her again and hoists her so that she’s in his lap, trapped in his grip, and while she may have won the battle for his mouth he’s definitely winning the battle for her body. Her shirt falls open and his hard hands raid and ravage her breasts, plucking through the silky bra, commanding her nipples to stand to attention so that each time he palms across them she gasps and shifts; the enfilading strokes sweeping away the line of her control and allowing him to regain command of the front she’d thought she’d won. He takes rapid advantage of the position and sweeps into her mouth, gaining ground with every thrust of his tongue, each small nip on her lower lip, holding the position with the hand in her hair that keeps her open to his attack on her warm, willing mouth.
He completely misses the guerrilla attack on his own button-down until he realises that there’s smooth skin sliding against his stomach. He’s been ambushed, and it feels so good that he almost doesn’t care, until he works out that he could use her own tactics on her by simply sapping under the zip of her pants. As his fingers reach hot, damp fabric over flesh, she sighs and concedes to his conquest and brings one hand to curl around his neck and one to continue her stroking over his pecs: now soft and enticing rather than raiding. Clearly not in the mood has been burnt off in the blaze of a course to follow.

Their kiss deepens and slows, Castle’s clever fingers gliding and sliding, pressing delicately and pushing the fabric to slither over her and rub oh-so-gently on stimulated nerves, never enough to satisfy as her nails bite against hard muscle. She’s in the wrong position to be able to return the favour, quite deliberately. Castle appreciates Beckett in any incarnation: badass, or Kate, or Kat; but he’s every intention of ensuring that whichever she is tonight, pretty shortly the only incarnation that will be present is the one which is screaming out her pleasure under his hands and mouth and body.

He stops teasing, but keeps kissing, braces himself and stands with her in his arms, carries her to the bedroom and stops before the bed. “Is this what you want?” he growls. “You said you weren’t in the mood.”

“I changed my mind.” She smiles sensually. “You didn’t seem to object.” She peeps up through her lashes with smoky, sleepy eyes. “But if you do…”

“Mmm?” Castle hums, playing along with her game.

“I guess I’ll just put on my pyjamas and go to sleep,” she purrs.

“Really? How boring. I’m sure I could overcome any objections.”

“Objections?”

“Yeah. Like I object to you still having your shirt on.” He plops Beckett down on the bed, and strips her shirt in one movement.

“That was only one objection. You implied you had more of them.” Her tone drips sultry sexuality into his ears and straight to his groin.

“I object to you having pants on,” and they’re gone in a flash. “I object to you not kissing me,” and his lips cover hers for a moment. “I object to you not undressing me.” On balance that may have been one objection too many. Beckett sits up, produces a variant on a judo throw which he might last have seen Espo evading on the mats and which leaves him face down on the bed, whips off his shirt, pants and boxers almost before he’s drawn breath, and then stretches out and smirks.

“Any more objections?” she husks.

Castle smiles lazily as he turns over. “Yeah,” he drawls dangerously. “You’re not screaming my name yet.”

He doesn’t take her bra off. He doesn’t take her panties off. Instead he leans down, at his own pace rather than allowing her tugging to pull him down, and slowly teases his tongue along the seam of her lips. When they open in wanton invitation, he doesn’t accept it, simply licks slowly over them again, and nips gently. Her breathing elevates, and her hands grip on his shoulders. He acquires a slow, feral smile, and does it all again, and again, till she’s panting. Only then does he remove bra and panties.
“Castle,” she half-whines. “Kiss me properly.”

He kisses her once, hard and sure, and then peppers little dabs and nips down her throat and across her collarbones until he’s landed in the valley between her small, tight breasts. “Now, let’s see what you like today,” he rasps, and sucks her nipple into his mouth. She gasps as the suction bites along every nerve between her nipple and her core. When he repeats on the other side, her nails start to dig into his back. He continues, switching from side to side, until gasps have become a high keening and she’s twisting under his talented mouth. He sucks and rolls, presses and palms, small bites and swift soothing strokes, winding her up and up and up. She can’t think through the sea of sensation, drowning in him, desperate for more and so searingly hot she’d be surprised she isn’t burning him if she had room in her brain for anything other than the feel of his mouth on her skin and the electricity sparking down her veins.

He stops, takes her mouth again, searchingly possessive with his bulk above her, pressing her down into the mattress and one hard thigh between her legs, holding her still and rubbing through scalding liquid heat. She tries to arch and curve against him, wanting his mass above her and around her, but he stays just that fraction above her to leave her needy.

“Not yet. I haven’t finished.” She whimpers, a little crossly. “It’s all about what you like.” He kisses his way back down her body and stops at her navel. “I know what you like.” The soft-as-sin baritone tickles erotically across her stomach. Impossibly, she thinks she’s wetter. She does like it. She loves it. His tongue circles her navel and she wriggles frantically, trying to manoeuvre him further down, opening for him and making wanting, desperate noises that are becoming closer and closer to his name as he trails firm fingers through the soft folds, not quite touching where she wants him, and then he leans in and licks one broad, firm stroke right through her centre and she cries out his name; he does it again and twists his tongue around her and this time she screams for him.

“No objections now, Kat. None at all.” He licks some more, his tongue twining at one end, entering her at the other, of each strong stroke. Her noise is continuous, her hips bucking against his hands, hers in his hair and she’s right on the edge, frantic for more, and then he thrusts two hard fingers into her and it’s just what she needed and she screams again and shatters and slumps.


“Mmm,” she agrees. “What about what you like?”

“I like you,” he drawls. “I like you over me, and around me, but best of all I like you right here under me.” He rolls to be over her: happily predatory and looming assertively large, settling into the welcoming cradle of her hips. “Mm. Yes. Perfect.” She wiggles a little, trying to align him properly. “Don’t wriggle. I’ll get there. When I’m ready.”

“You’re not ready?” Beckett’s syrupy, sexy tone and quirked eyebrow – plus the sudden movement of her hand to close around him – indicates that she thinks he might be.

“Anticipation, Beckett. Anticipation makes everything so much more intense.” Hot blue eyes bore into hers. “Don’t you think? Isn’t that first taste of chocolate sooo much better if you’ve been thinking about it all day? Or that delicious steak?” She squirms, arching up to rub against him. He smiles, and detaches her questing hand, returning it to lie around his neck. “Or the touch of my tongue when I taste you? The scrape of five-o’clock shadow on your thighs? My fingers on you, or in you?” His face is intent, his eyes dark. “Isn’t it better when you’ve imagined it for a while?”

His voice is deep and dark and seductive; falling down the octave and resonating through her body;
drawing her into his picture, into his desire and the cage of his frame over her; the hard weight poised between her legs but not yet filling her; she’s soaked again and mewls as he doesn’t simply move, take her and fill her and possess her. “Is that something you like?” He focuses only on her. “Because I can make sure that you… anticipate… beforehand.” She quite definitely whimpers. This is unfair.

“Castle, stop teasing.” He slides a little back and forward. She whimpers again. “Stop that. I’ve had enough anticipation. How about reality?”

“Reality? If you wish.”

He shifts very slightly, and then moves very slowly, regardless of her fingers digging into his ass to try to speed him up. “This much reality?”

“More.”

He moves a little further. “This much?”

She hisses, and digs nails and heels in.

“More,” she gasps out.

By the time he’s sunk fully into her she’s teetering right on the edge and all she can do is moan more. He slides slowly back, forward; in, out: savouring the tight heat around him, the slight edge of the scratch of her nails, the noises she makes when she’s ready to fall. Some assertion, plenty of strength, and keeping her safe with, and within, him. But for now, it’s time to give her what she wants. He brings a hand between them, takes her mouth with complete ownership, thrusts once, twice, thrice in time with his fingers over the tight cluster of nerves and she releases his name into his mouth as her body shudders around him and releases his.

After, she curls into him, soft and satiated, happy to be held and petted as he’s very happy indeed to hold her close and pet her. She’s so rarely soft and pettable: only with him, only trusts him to see this side of her, and so it means more than just the after-sex cuddles.

Beckett nestles herself into Castle, as close as she can manage without actually sliding under his skin. He’s so good for her. He makes her whole: has held her up when she couldn’t stand. He’s had her back, and now they’ll solve this one last problem and she’ll find her way through. Then, anything will be possible. Everything will be possible.

Castle contemplates his study, his desk, his laptop and his phone on Wednesday morning, none too early, without any great enthusiasm or indeed intelligence. His extremely enjoyable evening had been followed by the extremely unenjoyable need to get a cab home slightly after midnight, after which a sudden burst of inspiration (case-related, for a wonder) had left him typing frantically until dawn. He’d managed breakfast with Alexis, who had regarded him with a sardonic mix of pity and I-know-where-you-were-last-night-dad which was rather disconcerting, but less than four hours’ sleep since then hasn’t exactly left him on top of his game. He considers another dose of concentrated caffeine and decides that it would be simpler to inject it than drink more coffee. Since he doesn’t have a little vial of extracted caffeine, that’s not going to happen, and besides which needle-marks in one’s arms give entirely the wrong impression.

He leans back to review his likely day. He intends – if he can force his brain into gear – to think about how to talk to Jim and how to talk to Dr Burke. Dr Burke is probably easier, but they’ve missed something last night. Beckett will have to tell Dr Burke that Castle will call and – much
more importantly – that she has consented to Dr Burke talking to Castle. He persuades his poor tired fingers and brain to send Beckett a text setting that out. Ten minutes later he receives a reply: \textit{I thought of that too. Already done. Good to go.} Beckett’s investigative efficiency is clearly in full spate. Castle wonders vaguely if Dr Burke has any idea what’s about to happen to him, fails to find much in the way of sympathy for him since it’s Castle who ends up with a miserable Beckett whom Dr Burke has caused rather than a sexy, happy Kat, and finally succeeds in getting his brain into first gear.

Dr Burke first. At least that has no emotional overtones.

Castle’s decision is initially thwarted by his complete ignorance of Dr Burke’s phone number. His neuron-deficient brain eventually prods him into a Google search which remedies the lack of a phone number. It does not remedy Castle’s strong suspicion that he is completely unprepared for the impending conversation. He tries to remedy that by researching emotional abuse for a while, and concludes that it is – one – very complicated and – two – potentially correct.

In his soothingly decorated Midtown office, early on Wednesday morning, Dr Burke sips his tea, savouring the delicate flavours, and regards the e-mail which has arrived only a moment ago with an expression which in a lesser man would best be described as consternation. Since he is not such a man, he would describe his view of the e-mail as mildly surprised. He re-reads the short, brusque text. \textit{Dr Burke. I authorise you to discuss any matter and aspect of my treatment with Richard Castle. Detective Kate Beckett.}

Dr Burke does not understand this development at all, but he is quite certain that it may readily be turned to advantage. He had wished to speak with Mr Castle, and now it appears that he will be able so to do. He hopes, however, that Mr Castle does not prove to be a typical celebrity: brash and overly convinced of his own worth. He sips his tea slowly, and ponders how best to extract information from Mr Castle. He has a free session in today’s appointment list, at three. It will probably be most productive if Mr Castle attends at that time.

He steeps his fingers beneath his chin in his habitual gesture, and considers whether Detective Beckett had intended him to attempt to contact Mr Castle, or whether Mr Castle is to contact him. Since Dr Burke does not have Mr Castle’s telephone number, and has no intention of wasting his, or his excellent receptionist’s, time searching for it when it is sure to be unlisted, and since Detective Beckett has not provided it, he assumes that Mr Castle will call him. This seems entirely appropriate. Dr Burke is a busy man, and in fact his first patient will be arriving shortly.

At noon, just as Dr Burke is contemplating with pleasure a refreshing pot of fresh tea and a few moments’ peace in which to restore his equilibrium from a trying patient who is prone to – Dr Burke winces at his own phrase – verbal vomiting without the slightest interest in applying the knowledge thus revealed to improving their life, his receptionist puts through a call. Dr Burke sighs, before picking up.

“Dr Burke, I have a Mr Richard Castle who wishes to speak to you.”

Dr Burke’s irritation at being disturbed is curbed. He is interested in hearing from Mr Castle, and he is a little impressed that Mr Castle has contacted him within a short time of Detective Beckett forewarning him that such would be the case.

“Please put him through.” There is a short click.

“Dr Burke?”
“Indeed. Good afternoon, Mr Castle.”

“Hey. Thanks for speaking to me.” This is a good start. Celebrity or not, the man appears to have at least basic good manners, even if his use of slang is regrettable. That is a step better than Dr Burke had expected.

“Certainly. Detective Beckett has informed me that you might call, and given me permission to speak to you.”

“She said I could talk to you, too. I wouldn’t have called if she hadn’t.”

“I think it would be best if you attended here, so that we may have a conversation without external distractions.” Dr Burke can hear female tones in the background. From the repetition of _Darling, where is my script_, he surmises that the voice belongs to Mr Castle’s mother. Dr Burke cannot imagine that this distraction will assist with any discussion.

“Sure. When? Today? What’s your address?”

“I have a session available at three, if that will suit.”

“Yeah. That would be great. Where?”

Dr Burke gives the address, and Mr Castle rings off. This afternoon, Dr Burke thinks, will be interesting.
Castle is well satisfied with an appointment with Dr Burke at three today. It’s rather earlier than he had expected. He is a little bemused by Dr Burke, however. Even on the phone his fussy, slightly pompous formality had come through, and Castle finds it very difficult to see how that meshes well with brisk, badass Beckett, for whom brusqueness is natural. Still, Dr Burke obviously has a great deal of intelligence and has, in a pretty short time, acquired a good deal of insight into Beckett. Castle resolves not to underestimate him. Dr Burke is very unlikely to be a fool, or indeed to be fooled. He makes himself a nice lunch and writes quite steadily until it’s time to go.

Dr Burke, unusually, is not entirely certain of the path he wishes to follow. He is not convinced that starting with inquiring into why Detective Beckett wishes him to talk to Mr Castle is appropriate, although he would very much appreciate some explanation. This is all highly irregular, as is practically everything to do with Detective Beckett’s therapy. It is quite disconcerting. However, he refuses to allow such minor difficulties as her inability to talk and the presence of celebrities to prevent him treating her effectively. If talking to Mr Castle will assist, then talk to Mr Castle he will, as often as required.

Mr Castle is on time. Dr Burke is relieved. Casual rudeness is one of his bêtes noires.

“Good afternoon,” he says formally.

“Hey,” Mr Castle responds.

Castle looks at Dr Burke, and his consulting room, with considerable and not at all concealed interest. Beckett’s shrink is a man of around Castle’s own height, coffee-skinned and with sharp, intelligent eyes. His expression is cool and calm. The room is soothingly blue and designed to relax the mind; Dr Burke’s voice is even, cool and calming. It’s all exactly how Castle would have written a psychiatrist, although he wouldn’t have included the formality or, necessarily, the reasonably impressive physique.

His surroundings and demeanour are far too much like a psychiatrist ought to be, in fact.

Castle fixes Dr Burke with a much more speculative, sardonic gaze. He can’t imagine that Beckett would stick with a standard shrink for more than ten minutes. Clearly Dr Burke has much more to him than is apparent at first glance. Dr Burke meets his gaze and raises it by a few degrees. Ah. Whether Beckett knew it or not, (Castle strongly suspects not, because he also strongly suspects that Dr Burke is as clever as Beckett and furthermore that Beckett didn’t want a shrink who might well be as clever as she) Dr Burke falls foursquare into the category of big/tough. Mentally tough.

“Mr Castle,” Dr Burke says, taking a deep blue armchair and gesturing Castle to do the same, “please explain your involvement in this situation, from the beginning of your acquaintance with Detective Beckett.”

“She arrested me,” Castle says happily. “Of course I’d been arrested before” – he looks sheepish – “for – er – youthful misdemeanours” – Dr Burke raises his eyebrows, but declines to ask further – “but not by someone like that. She was inspiring. She hauled me into the Twelfth Precinct, interrogated me, and then decided it wasn’t me after all.” He takes a breath. “Anyway. I needed a new character and she was it. So I got myself into the Twelfth to shadow her, about September.”

So far, so congruent with Detective Beckett’s story. Mr Castle has paused. Some encouragement is required. “You appear to me to be in a romantic relationship with Detective Beckett. How did this
Castle wriggles. “Um…” Dr Burke pins him in his chair with a focused look. “Around about mid-November, I finally convinced her to come out for a drink. Then I found out it was her birthday. And she wasn’t doing anything at all. No cake, no celebration, no nothing. It didn’t seem right.”

Dr Burke adds this piece of information to his general impression of Detective Beckett’s life, arriving at the conclusion that she had entirely opted out of anything that might normally have been an opportunity for celebration.

“Anyway. We – er – got together.” Mr Castle sits back in the chair and stops. Dr Burke deduces that a considerable volume of explanation has been omitted.

“Mm. I see. And how did you find out about her father’s alcoholism?” How odd. Mr Castle has quite definitely winced. “In detail, please. I cannot help Detective Beckett effectively if I do not understand the whole story.” Ah. The suggestion that this is necessary to Detective Beckett’s welfare has produced a reaction. That is clearly the driving force behind Mr Castle’s presence.

“She was a bit weird about Christmas. No tree, no celebration, no joy. I – er – interrupted her talking to Julia Berowitz.” Dr Burke, unlike Mr Castle, conceals his reaction. That cannot have gone well. “And then she was weird about Alexis, and wouldn’t come to my place, and Alexis didn’t notice anything but I did. We argued about it. So I did some research and found out about her mother. And then her dad rang her about going to Miami and I… I thought she was just brushing him off. She wasn’t. I worked out it was her dad who was the alcoholic and we – er – had another argument, and right in the middle of it he walked in.”

Dr Burke cannot conceal his reaction. “That must have been a difficult moment?” is all he says, however.

“You bet. It – er – wasn’t exactly my finest hour.” Dr Burke makes a small note, in order to return to this topic. Detective Beckett’s reactions might be extremely interesting. “He… he made it pretty clear that Beckett supported him all the time, all the way. Said she saved him. I didn’t exactly feel good after that. I went to apologise” – Dr Burke considers Detective Beckett and then concludes that Mr Castle is both very brave and very stupid – “and she told me that she couldn’t deal with my family. My daughter. So I left. I wasn’t going to carry on seeing someone who can’t cope with my family.”

“Your family is important to you.”

“Yes. Very. Mother brought me up on her own, Alexis’s mother left.”

Dr Burke sees why Detective Beckett wishes to be able to cope with Mr Castle’s family. Part of her reasoning is undoubtedly concerned with her own relationship with her father. Until now, however, it had not been entirely clear that Mr Castle and his family come as a unit. If she cannot deal with Mr Castle’s daughter, her relationship with Mr Castle will fail.

“Anyway. She meant it to push me away. It didn’t work. I wanted to go round and talk to her about it but Julia Berowitz rang Beckett to find her husband. So we picked him up from Central Park Precinct and then Beckett and I had another argument because I told her she needed to talk about it and she told me to get out or she’d put me in jail.”

“Did you?” Another evasion of a very important nexus. Another note is made.

“Yes. But then I went round later because I thought she really needed help and she was totally
wasted. It meant she actually talked. About everyone leaning on her and there was no-one for her to lean on. She said she wanted to disappear, which was pretty worrying. She was crying because she didn’t take her dad’s calls, back when.”

That is interesting. Dr Burke would not have expected Detective Beckett to drink to excess. On the other hand, he is far more interested in her desire to disappear and the fact that very recently she was still exhibiting substantial guilt and unhappiness over leaving her father to solve his alcoholism himself. Much of his earlier thinking is confirmed. Detective Beckett has failed to deal with her feelings at any previous time. He further considers that Detective Beckett’s emotions around her father are unlikely to have been converted into disinterest following the events of three weeks ago. She is merely repressing them, once more.

“We managed to straighten things out.” Another evasion of the details of a discussion which ought to have been extremely difficult. Mr Castle is clearly not simply the happy-go-lucky playboy which Dr Burke had uncovered by means of a swift internet search. Detective Beckett is not precisely easy to persuade or manipulate. Not that Dr Burke would recommend the latter course. Still, it appears that Mr Castle has persuaded her to accept him as a romantic partner. Slightly frivolously, Dr Burke wonders whether he had hypnotised her. However, this is entirely irrelevant. Dr Burke is certainly not practising in the field of relationship counselling and is only interested in Mr Castle as he can provide information pertaining to Detective Beckett’s relationships with her father, Julia Berowitz, and potentially with Mr Castle’s family.

“Mr Castle, please describe your impressions of Julia Berowitz.”

“Thirties, blonde, quite pretty. She was tense. She wouldn’t listen to Beckett. Beckett tried to tell her that she needed help, and that she – Julia – couldn’t save her husband. Beckett was quite forceful about it, but Julia had that sort of stubbornness that weak people sometimes have: where they make a stand on exactly the wrong point. Anyway, she called Beckett again, but her husband was already in lock-up so Beckett wouldn’t go. She told me about it. Said Julia cried, like her dad used to cry. So I suggested that maybe her dad should talk to Julia. Julia might listen to him. We all agreed it was a good plan, so we all went along.”

Detective Beckett had, Dr Burke recalls, rather evaded any discussion of this particular event. Mr Castle has also avoided a substantial proportion of the detail.

“Julia was pretty stressed out. Her husband had gone walkabout – he was supposed to be there – and she had been cleaning. When she was making us coffee I noticed her nail polish was chipped, and she wasn’t the sort of woman to have chipped nails. It all smelt a little of cleaner: lemony.”

Detective Beckett must also have noticed that aroma, and the small signs. It would, Dr Burke deduces, have increased her discomfort from the point at which she entered the Berowitz apartment. Of course, Detective Beckett might not have realised the full effect of the situation in which she had placed herself.

“So Jim” – Dr Burke raises eyebrows in query – “Jim Beckett. Beckett’s father.” Mr Castle refers to him as Jim? That argues that they have more than minimal acquaintance. Another complication. Really, he should have allowed far longer for this discussion. Unlike Detective Beckett, Mr Castle appears to be prepared to talk, and, if correctly prompted, is likely to expand in detail on areas which Dr Burke considers important. For now, however, Dr Burke requires the broad outlines of the whole story.

“Jim introduced himself as an alcoholic. He told his story. Beckett wasn’t doing so well with it – though Julia wouldn’t have noticed – actually, I didn’t really think about it then, but that was weird too. She should have heard it all before, but it was as if she hadn’t. Or as if it hadn’t sunk in, the
previous times. Then Jim suggested that Julia must have gone to pick her husband up from the tank, and Julia said that Beckett had got him for her. Jim wasn’t that happy with that, and Beckett was so wired I could have lit a lamp from her. And then Jim said that he only got dry because he wanted his daughter – Beckett – more than drink; and then Julia tried to say that her husband’s drinking was just a blip, and then Beckett lost it and told her that she couldn’t save him. And then she walked out.”

That rendition was certainly far more informative than Detective Beckett’s version. However, it is still materially incomplete.

“You said that Detective Beckett lost it. Do you mean that Detective Beckett lost her temper?”

“Not exactly. Not like she did” – Mr Castle stops.

“Mm?”

“Not like she did with Lanie. Dr Parrish, the ME. They’re friends. Were. Are. It’s a bit fragile but I think they’re fixed.”

Ah. Another point for later. Dr Burke allows that to pass, for now, merely making another small note. He observes, this time, that Mr Castle has noted his action.

“In what way did Detective Beckett lose her temper, then?”

“She told Julia some pretty harsh truth. It’s the angriest I’d seen her, up till then. Well, no, that’s not true. When we argued she was probably much angrier, but she was cold about it. This time she was more emotional. I thought she might cry, but Beckett doesn’t do that much.”

Or indeed at all, thinks Dr Burke rather cynically.

“Julia started to cry, and Jim was absolutely shocked that Beckett had gone, and I couldn’t leave Jim. I think it might have been the first time he’d seen Beckett upset since he got dry. Every other time I’d seen them together or she’d been talking to him she was really upbeat, whether it was true or not. This time she – well, like I said, I thought she was about to cry.”

“But you did not follow her?”

Mr Castle bridles. “I didn’t have a good choice,” he snaps. “If I went after Beckett then I was leaving Jim, who was already pretty upset, and God knows what he’d have done. When we did finally get out of there he went straight to his sponsor. I could see him cracking. I couldn’t let him fall. Beckett would never have recovered. She’d have blamed herself even more and never come out of the guilt. She’s carrying far too much guilt as it is. More would have killed her. I wanted to go after her, but I couldn’t leave Jim, and by the time I got him to his sponsor and got round to Beckett’s apartment she wouldn’t answer the door and wouldn’t answer the phone. She sent me one text to ask for space, and another asking about her dad. When I asked if she was okay she didn’t answer.”

“Hm. Mr Castle” – Dr Burke steeples his fingers beneath his chin, and begins to utilise Detective Beckett’s permission to speak freely with Mr Castle – “if I were to inform you that Detective Beckett described that same evening as being one where she was tired, she informed you that she wished for a quiet evening, and that since you had told her that her father was” – Castle can hear the quotes – “fine, she was unworried and did not see you, what would you say?”

“Bullshit. Complete and utter bullshit,” Mr Castle ejects from behind his teeth. He looks extremely annoyed. “She wasn’t fine at all. She was so not fine that she was ill the next morning
and got sent home from the precinct; and she had a row with her father.”

At last, someone who will tell Dr Burke the unvarnished truth. Dr Burke sighs in considerable, and entirely unfeigned, relief. Mr Castle’s annoyance has dissipated, to be replaced by a look of resignation, without any surprise.

“When did Beckett tell you that?” he asks.

“Just over three weeks ago.”

Enlightenment descends over Mr Castle’s features.

“Is the timing significant, Mr Castle?”

“Yeah. Beckett didn’t tell me, but Jim called me, absolutely broken up. He’d told Beckett that seeing us for dinner – they came to dinner at my loft, though I still don’t know how Jim managed that because I’m sure I never actually invited him but somehow it was arranged” – Mr Castle stops, and appears to take time to reorder his thoughts, which are somewhat chaotically emerging – “anyway, Jim told Beckett that being at mine was just like being part of a family again. And that happened Sunday three weeks ago, so I guess she saw you on Tuesday afterwards and it was all completely locked down and pointless, yeah?”

Dr Burke regards Mr Castle with a certain degree of admiration. It appears that Mr Castle might have a functioning brain, which is not something that Dr Burke has previously associated with the concept of celebrity thriller writers.

“Yes. Exactly so.”

“He couldn’t really have said anything worse. He really couldn’t. But he doesn’t know why it went so wrong, because Beckett’s never actually told him what he was like, and now she isn’t taking his calls and he’s devastated. If that were Alexis… I’m not sure I’d be sober, but he still is.”

Mr Castle pauses, and draws breath, slowly. “Beckett only came to therapy at all because her Captain benched her and she wanted not to upset her father by telling him that their relationship was all sorts of wrong because she hadn’t sorted herself out and didn’t think she’d forgiven him. She didn’t want to come. She felt she’d done it all before. So she found you” – he blinks – “and just before the third session her dad pulled the rug from under her. She was really upset after it. And since then all she’s said is that she wants to carry on so she can do the job and – er – cope with my family. She hadn’t mentioned her dad at all until yesterday.”

“Detective Beckett had not? And she has not spoken to him since? She was, naturally and understandably, very upset.”

“She hasn’t spoken to him. He keeps calling her.” Mr Castle looks mildly embarrassed. “I’ve spoken to him. He called me, a couple of times, and then I told him she’s okay. I lied to him, flat out. He needs to stay sober so I lied so he would. It’s not ideal, but there didn’t seem to be any good choices at all.”

“Mm.” Dr Burke flicks a glance at his watch. They are running out of time. “Mr Castle, I have a patient at four. I consider that it would be extremely valuable to continue this conversation.” He brings up his schedule. “Are you free at six? If not, are you free tomorrow, between ten and eleven? I have no patients at either time.”

“Whenever. I don’t really have a fixed schedule. I can come back at six.”
“That would be helpful.” Dr Burke smiles at Mr Castle for the first time. “I consider that your input will be most helpful in assisting Detective Beckett.”

“She wants me to talk to her dad, you know.”

“Really? Let us discuss that, too.” Dr Burke’s smile turns almost mischievous. “You have chosen a difficult path, Mr Castle. Let us see if we can make it somewhat easier.”

Castle departs, considerably comforted by Dr Burke. Fussy and formal he may be, but Castle is completely convinced that he is the right shrink for Beckett. He won’t let her get away with evasions, avoidance and downright lies. He doesn’t want to go all the way back to the loft, so he finds a coffee bar, orders a small barrel of coffee and some cake, and then amuses himself in observing the people around him and concocting backstories for them.
This is the story so far

Dr Burke had managed to escort Mr Castle out in good time before his next patient arrives. This efficiency allows him a few moments to contemplate what he has learned. He starts with Mr Castle himself. He is not what Dr Burke had expected. It is possible that he is quite intelligent. Not, of course, as intelligent as Dr Burke, whose doctoral thesis is still a reference work. However, he appears to be both intelligent and wholly devoted to ensuring that Detective Beckett is made better. Or, more succinctly, devoted to Detective Beckett.

Also surprisingly for a completely untrained person, (so Dr Burke assumes) Mr Castle has so far been remarkably accurate in his deductions as to Detective Beckett’s state of mind. Much more importantly, he is prepared to tell the truth, and is in a position to fill in the areas which have been subject to Detective Beckett’s evasions. Finally, there will be some progress in this matter.

Dr Burke considers his notes and Mr Castle’s words. One: what has caused Detective Beckett to allow Mr Castle to speak to him, and he to speak to Mr Castle, completely openly. Two: the argument about Detective Beckett’s father’s alcoholism and Mr Castle’s views of Detective Beckett’s reactions. Three: how, and far more importantly why, Mr Castle had decided that Detective Beckett was not to be permitted to evade him, and what his views of her reasoning were. Four: Detective Beckett’s commentary whilst under the influence of alcohol. Five: Dr Lanie Parrish. Six: (he looks at the list almost despairingly) Detective Beckett’s relentlessly upbeat behaviour with her father. Seven: Detective Beckett’s request that Mr Castle speaks with her father. And eight, purely for his own information, why did Mr Castle believe that he, Dr Burke, is not what he would have expected?

Dr Burke sighs heavily, and turns to the much simpler matter of his present patient, who exhibits signs of paranoia and agoraphobia.

Castle finishes his cake, and discovers that he would far rather consider Dr Burke, including in the light of a potential character, than the mass of regular Manhattanites around him. Dr Burke is a very interesting character, now that Castle’s out of his territory and not having to focus on the discussion. He absolutely was not what Castle expected. He’s also hiding considerable intelligence, albeit with a slightly peppery temper and a monumental dose of self-satisfaction, under the fussy formality and the treatment room which is just what the patient would expect to see. Dr Burke, in fact, is running the psychiatrist’s equivalent of a con. He is providing a persona and situation that lulls the poor patient into thinking they’ve walked into a classic psych session, as seen on a hundred TV shows. By the time that they’ve walked out, undoubtedly cured, they’re too turned inside out to realise what happened.

On the other hand, Beckett’s clearly had a good go at snowing Dr Burke, and while he’s realised it, it’s not entirely clear which of them is winning. Castle will put a dollar on Dr Burke, but only because Beckett has decided that she wants fixed. On the other hand, he’ll put his other dollar on Beckett proving Dr Burke wrong about Jim, because that’s coming straight from her excellent detective instincts. Hmmm. He can’t lose.

He starts to scribble in his notebook. Yet another character is forming in his head. He orders more coffee and loses himself till his phone pings with the reminder that he needs to return to Dr Burke’s office. (He sets those whenever he needs to be somewhere and is about to waste some time. If not, it can get embarrassing if he gets lost in his head while writing. He’s been late for more than a few appointments like that.)
When he returns to Dr Burke’s office the pretty receptionist asks him to wait in a side room. Castle thinks nothing of it, fails to appreciate the receptionist’s once-over of his appearance because he doesn’t actually realise she’s doing it, and happily returns to his scribbling without the slightest resentment.

“I apologise for the delay, Mr Castle. My prior patient required a little extra time.”

“No problem. Did you want to start where we left off?”

“No, I think not. I have assembled some questions arising from our earlier conversation, and I should like to address some of these.” Dr Burke steeps his fingers, and Castle has a hard time not copying him. “I would like to start in the middle, as it were. I am sure that Detective Beckett has told you about her initial experiences with her father, whilst he was inebriated, but although I will be seeking your views of that I would prefer to start with a little more detail on your discovery of her father’s alcoholism and how Detective Beckett reacted to that discovery, as well as your thoughts as to the manner of her reactions at the time during which she was reacting. I appreciate that you have said that this was not” – again the quotation marks are tangible – “your finest hour, however, if you can bring yourself to discuss it I should be very grateful.”

Castle winces. “Why?” he asks, a little irritably. “I thought we were discussing Beckett, not me.”

“We are. However, you have observed her reactions with clarity, and so I wish to know how she reacted both to your discovery and to your impressions at the time, albeit that you are aware that these were mistaken. In such a way I may analyse her coping mechanisms and her concealment strategies.”

“Okay. That makes sense.” Castle gathers breath and logical thought, without hurrying. “So first, it was the Berowitzes. Beckett nailed him as an alcoholic right off the bat, but when I asked why she said that when she was in uniform she’d seen lots of it, which was pretty plausible. But then she practically vomited when I took her mince pies with brandy butter. Now, I guess that she must have had them one Christmas with her father when he was still drinking, but then she blamed it on a stomach bug. She was lying. She said so, later, and said sorry. She said she hadn’t wanted to upset me.”

“Mm,” Dr Burke interjects. “She did not want to upset you? Did Detective Beckett take some action that she would have preferred not to take in order not to upset you on any other occasion?”

“She came to dinner. Three times, actually. The first time I thought something was wrong, but she said she was tired – and she likely was, because there had been so many cases and she works far too many hours – and Alexis didn’t think there was anything wrong so I just let it go. But I was sure she hadn’t wanted to come to the loft, but she did. Then the second time it was clear that she was off. I was annoyed with her because she wouldn’t come to mine. Everything was at hers, and it felt like she was avoiding the loft, like she didn’t want to be part of anything. But she really, really didn’t want to be there, and though Alexis still didn’t notice anything I certainly did.” He stops. He doesn’t like the memory of the few moments following that. “We argued, and she walked out, but she didn’t explain anything about why she wasn’t happy about coming to the loft. And then the third time was when Jim finagled me into a family dinner at mine. But Beckett came because she didn’t want to upset…her…dad – oh. That’s what you mean, isn’t it? A pattern of doing things she might not want to in order not to show that she’s upset.”

“Or in order not to upset those she might care for. It is quite likely that it might be for both reasons. Please carry on.”

“It all added up, eventually, to her knowing about it personally, but I can’t – oh, I forgot. The way
she was talking to Julia Berowitz.”

“What happened?”

“I think that when we went to see them to tell them we’d caught the killer, or maybe even when we went to tell them their son had been murdered, Beckett gave Julia her card. Anyway. Julia called Beckett just after Christmas” –

“Do you remember the date?”

“Um… oh yes. The 10th of January, because Beckett was off the day before. I found out later that was the day her mother had been killed. The 9th. So Beckett went out to meet Julia. She wouldn’t tell me why, and I was annoyed because she wouldn’t let me shadow her, so I – er – followed her and – er – butted in. She was really angry, which was fair enough, but the point is that she was telling Julia that it would bring her down too. I didn’t work it out for a while, but she – Beckett – meant that she’d been there.”

“Tell me about the interactions with Julia.”

“I think” – Castle looks a little guilty and embarrassed - “that Julia battened off Beckett. Fed off her strength. Beckett saw her the time I just mentioned, but after that she did it again, and then Julia called her because her husband had gone missing, and Beckett just went. Spent – I think – half the evening searching, because I called her and she thought I was her takeout pizza arriving, and then went to Central Park Precinct to get him – I went too – and take him home. It was…” he searches for a word “…difficult. The desk sergeant knew her and her dad, but she wasn’t talking about her father. So they brought Mr Berowitz up and he was a mess. Beckett never turned a hair, but the cops treated her like she was a primed grenade. She didn’t let a thing show. No emotion, nothing. Then we took him home. I think Beckett forgot I was there, when she got him in. She kept telling Julia that she needed help. Then she said you can only save yourself. And then she got really furious with me when I said that it was just like she used to have to do. She said I’d use it in my books, but I wouldn’t, by then. She was desperate to protect him. Make sure nobody knew. She spends – spent – all her time protecting him.”

“Let us leave Julia for a moment. Is it your impression that Detective Beckett’s father needs her protection?”

Castle pauses. “No. Not nearly as much as she thinks he does, anyway. He’s a lot tougher than she realises, and a lot braver and stronger. He told me his story, briefly.”

“But Detective Beckett has never told him the truth of what he did or said when intoxicated.”

“No. But I don’t think she can face the truth of what she did either. She can’t get over walking away.”

“That was also my impression. Detective Beckett still appears to feel guilt over her actions.”

Castle laughs, shortly and without any humour at all. “That would be a slight understatement. She’s drowning in guilt.”

“And that, of course, is why she was helping Julia, and why she has been so over-protective of her father.” Dr Burke regards Castle with a sharp-edged glance. “Was her father aware of her reasons?”

“No. He was absolutely horrified when he started to realise. He didn’t realise anything was wrong
until after Beckett walked out of Julia’s, but then I think he got on Beckett’s case a bit, which he should have known was a really bad idea, and then he went and told her he wanted to be part of my family.”

“Yes. Detective Beckett mentioned that. How did her father actually mean that sentence to be interpreted?”

Castle blushes. “Er-um… I think he was hoping that we’d be – um-er – permanent.”

“I see.”

Castle blushes some more.

“To summarise, then, Detective Beckett still feels unhappy and guilty about leaving her father, was trying to deal with it by protecting him from any worry or danger, was unwilling to upset him by showing him that she might be upset or uncomfortable, and has informed you that she was tired of having to bear the weight of everyone around her.” Dr Burke pauses. “And she applied the same reluctance to upset her father to you.”

“Yes… but…”

“Mm?”

“But then when she lost her temper she did her absolute best to hurt me as much as possible and to make sure I never came near her again.”

“Which she has now done with her father.”

“Oh,” Castle says weakly. A thought occurs to him. “She did it to Lanie, too.”

“Mm?”

“Yes. Lanie got on Beckett’s case big-time and wouldn’t step back. Though Lanie was pretty blunt and rude. She told Beckett she was – er – all fucked-up” –

“In those words?”

“Yeah. Word for word. Beckett didn’t like it and when Lanie turned up at the door Beckett lost her temper spectacularly. Lanie scuttled off as fast as her feet would carry her and Beckett didn’t say a word to her until we intervened. Even that was pretty fraught, though I think they’re okay now.”

“Do you see the pattern here, Mr Castle?”

Castle nods. “She lets it all build up till it’s too much and then it explodes. And then she does her best to make sure that whoever’s hurt her never gets the chance ever again.”

“Indeed. Which makes me wonder, Mr Castle, why she made an exception for you.” Dr Burke regards Mr Castle carefully. “And why you have continued to associate with Detective Beckett. After all, she seems to have treated you with considerable cruelty. She would not go to your apartment, she did not wish to be a part of your family, and she informed you flatly that she could not cope with your family. You, conversely. treated her with equivalent cruelty. You did not believe that she was supporting her father, and I strongly suspect that you said so in the course of the argument which her father interrupted. That misconception must have hurt her as much as she hurt you. I surmise that you have had a number of arguments, although I also expect that both of you are equally responsible.” Castle winces. “Yet you appear to be together, you appear to care
deeply for Detective Beckett, and she has made it transparently clear that she wishes to be able to deal with your family, which implies very strongly that she has similar feelings.”

Castle squirms uncomfortably. The idea that Beckett cares is very pleasant. The scalpel-sharp dissection of their failings is not.

“So, Mr Castle, would you like to explain why you did not simply cease to associate with Detective Beckett?”

Castle feels unpleasantly as if he is being interrogated.

“What has that got to do with anything? I didn’t come here for relationship counselling.”

“How fortunate,” Dr Burke says dryly. “I am not offering it. I am, however, interested in how you managed to persuade Detective Beckett to change her mind. It might enable me to do the same.” He smiles. “I do not imagine it was, or will be, easy.”

Castle grins back at him. “Not exactly,” he says, equally dryly. “After she was so uncomfortable at the loft, we argued, she misunderstood me, though I get why, now, and she walked out. Well, I wasn’t going to go running after her. But she didn’t call, and I didn’t call her. Until a new body dropped and she had to call me. So I went. I needed to see how it all worked so I had it right for the story.”

“Mm?” Dr Burke hums, questioningly.

“I always do the detailed research. Follow someone who actually does it. That way I get the details right.”

“I see.” How very… dedicated. Maybe he should try one of Mr Castle’s books.

“Beckett wasn’t particularly pleased. But she just stayed neutral. She stopped ME Perlmutter being his usual snide self. Ryan said she’d been a bit miserable, though. And then I worked out that her dad was the alcoholic, but I knew she’d taken the Christmas Day shift, so I thought that she didn’t care about him, which wound me up because – I worked out later – my family’s everything to me and we do proper family Christmas. Beckett doesn’t do Christmas, because of her dad. Jim doesn’t know that, either. So I was pretty unimpressed by the whole thing, and I was only staying around because she was supposed to let me shadow her properly and I had to know for the book. So I went round to tell her so.”

Dr Burke revises his view of Mr Castle from brave but stupid to suicidal.

“We had a really bad row. She said I was only following her because of the books and I lost my temper” –

“But you were, were you not?” Mr Castle looks blankly at him. “You have just said so.”

“Er…”

“Or that is what you told yourself, at the time. So you lost your temper.”

“Yes. She said I’d ditched her, and wouldn’t let me explain, and I said she couldn’t bear my family, and then” – he winces – “I said she didn’t look after hers. And then she was about to throw me out and Jim walked into the middle of it. He thought we were friends. He said enough that I realised that I’d got it all wrong. Not that Beckett had told me the truth.”
“In the same way, in fact, as she has not told her father the truth about the manner in which he hurt her. This is profoundly interesting.”

Castle stops dead. “What?”

“Mr Castle, I have learned more about Detective Beckett in the hour and a half in which you have been here than in her three weeks of therapy. Everything I have heard about her reactions to you, and to Dr Parrish, has mirrored the way in which she has reacted to her father. It confirms me in my view that she must deal with her father before she will be able to deal with anything else.” He stops, and steeples his fingers. “I am still very interested in how you persuaded her to reassociate with you. Please continue.”

“Well, after Jim had finished I was shell-shocked, and I just went home. Even though I was there in the precinct, I hardly saw her. She paired up with Espo” – Dr Burke raises an eyebrow – “Detective Esposito – and Detective Ryan stuck with me. No-one explained. I couldn’t get a chance to apologise, and it just got worse and worse. So at the end of the week I got Ryan to talk and he explained.”

“But Detective Beckett did not?”

“She wasn’t there. Ryan told me her dad was away, and her history, and that if her dad was away the Captain teamed her up with Esposito. Normally it’s Ryan and Espo together.”

“Why would that be necessary?”

“Ryan said that Espo was tough enough to make her stop. March her home.”

Dr Burke imagines this Detective Esposito must be constructed of tungsten steel, and has an errant vision of a RoboCop. Not, of course, that he has ever watched or read such a frivolous mass-appeal idea, but one does notice the advertising around oneself, however distasteful.

“She’s surrounded by tough guys. None of them except you make her talk.”

Dr Burke blinks. “Excuse me?”

“Well, I’m sure you weren’t what she wanted in a therapist, but you fit the pattern.”

“Please explain?”
“Who are you?”

“Beckett’s surrounded by big and/or tough men. The only girlfriend she’s got is Lanie, and that’s a bit shaky, like I said. I think it’s because that way she never gets asked to talk about anything.”

“Does she ever try to talk about any subject?”

“She sometimes talks to me. But that’s only when she’s really upset. Even then, she doesn’t say much. She only started doing that when I stopped asking questions. Any questions. Any time anyone does, she shuts down.”

Dr Burke nods, slowly. “However, she is talking to me.”

“Because she’s really upset and because she’s decided to fix this. Even if she isn’t deciding to fix all of it.”

Dr Burke decides, in the few minutes which remain, to ask the question which is perturbing him rather than return to the question of how Mr Castle persuaded Detective Beckett to interact with him. “Mr Castle, given Detective Beckett’s discomfort with talking about her issues with anyone, which I must presume extends to anyone else discussing them, or her, especially given her reaction to the concept that you might have used her father in one of your books; please would you explain to me why Detective Beckett has instructed me to be open with you, and why you are here?”

How strange. Mr Castle does not like that question at all. He is quite clearly trying to find a way to avoid answering it. Dr Burke waits.

“You asked,” Mr Castle eventually says, resignedly. “You told Beckett that her father had been abusing her. I guess you must mean emotionally, since if someone physically abused Beckett – even at nineteen or twenty – I reckon she’d have ground them up like raw beef. She didn’t exactly take well to that idea. Actually, she was downright mad. So” – he hesitates – “she’s decided to prove you wrong.”

Dr Burke’s eyes widen. “Hm,” is all he emits, however. Detective Beckett has missed the subtlety that he had not, in fact, said that. He had said that her behaviour exhibited similarities. However, that is not relevant to Mr Castle at this time.

“And she’s enlisted me. But that worked out really well because she’s said I can talk to you and to her dad. I can do anything I need to. What I actually want to do is get Jim and Beckett in the same place, with you” – Dr Burke feels that his eye sockets may shortly fracture, if his eyes become any wider – “so that someone can clear this whole mess up properly. I can’t do it, but after today I’m pretty sure you can.”

“Oh,” Dr Burke mumbles. This is really wholly irregular. Most peculiar. On the other hand, he is not aware of any case where a psychiatrist has successfully treated alcohol induced trauma in this way. It would be a considerable feather in his professional cap. He collects himself. “And what might your honest view be?”

Mr Castle is again very uncomfortable. “I don’t know anything about it, except what I looked up earlier, which wasn’t really very coherent. But it’s possible. A lot of it sounded like Beckett, except she’s anything but a victim.”

“So. What do you intend to do?”
“Fix Beckett and Jim. Well. Try to.” Mr Castle looks directly at Dr Burke. “Are you going to help?”

“Of course. As I have already said, the only way in which Detective Beckett will recover is by resolving her issues with her father. I presume that you intend to speak to Mr Beckett in the near future?”

“Yeah. That’s not going to be any fun.”

“I strongly suggest that after you do that, you ensure that he speaks with his sponsor, preferably face to face.” Mr Castle acquires an air of _I-had-already-thought-of that_ which Dr Burke appreciates. “I shall be at your disposal should you wish to discuss any part of this situation. The authority Detective Beckett has given will continue until she revokes it.”

“Thanks. I expect we’ll be talking soon.”

“We will be. I still wish to know how you and Detective Beckett reassociated, but I have an appointment this evening. We will reconvene in the near future, although I suggest that you make an appointment for a time after you have met with Mr Beckett. Your help is welcome, Mr Castle. I wish you good fortune with Mr Beckett.”

Mr Castle takes his leave, and Dr Burke sighs. To cut the Gordian Knot may be the only way forward, but it is quite likely, and indeed almost certain, that there will be a number of highly emotional scenes in the course of resolution.

Castle exits Dr Burke’s office with a feeling of some satisfaction that at last there might be a way through this mess that doesn’t involve him getting shot, mutilated or having a full-scale nervous breakdown. It’s faintly possible that he might get Beckett through this mess without her having a full-scale breakdown too, now. Dr Burke seems to have her number, and more importantly had struck Castle as emphatically _not_ being the sort of person who will let her slide through this without actually opening up.

Unfortunately his satisfaction is short-lived. He will have to talk to Jim. He doesn’t actually want to talk to Jim right now, because he wants to digest his meetings with Dr Burke and the conclusions that Dr Burke had rapidly drawn. He turns towards home, at which point his phone rings.

“Rick Castle,” he says relatively cheerfully.

“Castle?”


“You.”

It occurs to Castle that Beckett is not bouncing happily. “What’s up?”

“I just want to find out how you got on with everything today,” she says, in a good facsimile of normal briskness. Castle is not deceived.

“Okay,” he says. “I’m not far away. Will you put the kettle on?” he entices. “I’ve not had any coffee for hours. If I don’t get some soon, I might fall asleep on you.”

“I’m not a pillow.”
“Oh, I don’t know. Some bits of you are very pillowy” –

“Stop that thought right there.”

“Really? I thought you liked it when I plumped up your pi” –

“Shut up. Now.”

Castle smiles widely to himself, startling a passing panhandler, as he cuts the call. Back to Beckett-normal snark, at least until he gets there and discovers what’s really going on. He’s sure that she will want to know every last detail of his discussion with Dr Burke, but he intends to censor that slightly. It’s not going to be good for his health for Beckett to discover that Dr Burke knows her game plan. Anyway, since something unspecified isn’t entirely right, it’s quite possible that Beckett can be distracted from her pursuit of Dr Burke’s head on a stick into being Kat. In fact… mmmm. Yes. Indeed. Distraction. In a very particular fashion, which he spends the short cab journey developing. How lucky that it is a short journey.

When Beckett opens the door, Castle doesn’t bother with pleasantries. He shoves it shut behind him, catches Beckett before she can take more than a half-step towards the kitchen, and smoothly draws her into him to bend and kiss her with considerable authority and only a modicum of softness: owning her mouth and taking everything he wants. She softens and curves under the demands of his hands that she be closer, pressed into him and knowing how much he wants her; under the demands of his mouth that she simply give up and give in to him. And she does. His hands are untucking her shirt, sliding up over smooth skin: forceful pressure to keep her against his body, caged in his clasp. She flows into the mould of his frame, melting under his possession, and finally mews softly into his kiss.

When he hears the soft noise that means she’s definitely Kat-not-fretful-Beckett Castle relaxes his grip just enough to hoist her up and walk them over to the couch where he can sit her down and stroke her into soft compliance with his assertive, possessive touch. Gradually he shifts his movements to delve into the knots in her back and untwist the stress nodules in her muscles: she pushes back into his strong fingers and eases down, left lax in his lap. In all this time neither of them has said a word. Castle kisses Beckett-now-destressed-Kat again, still assertive, but no longer the controlled possessive passion of moments ago, now gentler.

“Hello,” he says suavely.

“Hey.” She wriggles into a comfortably snuggled-in position and rests her head on his shoulder.

“That better?”

“Mm,” she assents, and a hand creeps up round his neck.

“Wanna talk now?”

“Mm,” but she doesn’t say anything more, for a moment. “I just can’t get past it. Every time I tried to think about something else it crept back in. He’s wrong.”

And yet it’s eating at her mind, Castle notes. If she were that sure Dr Burke was wrong she’d have dismissed it without a thought. Even Beckett secretly thinks Dr Burke is right, or at least partially right.

“You need a nice new messy murder.”

“You shouldn’t wish people dead, Castle,” she chides gently.
“It would still take your mind off it.”

“Yeah…” she sighs.

“I could take your mind off it,” he murmurs deeply, and traces small circles at her waist, under her untucked shirt. Very unkindly, she bats at his fingers.

“What did you manage today?”

“I wrote two whole chapters,” Castle says provokingly.

“You know what I mean. Did you persuade Dad to see Dr Burke?”

“No yet. But I went to see Dr Burke. He wasn’t what I expected.”

“And?”

“He’ll see Jim.” Castle doesn’t mention that Dr Burke will see Jim with Beckett. That might be part of a second or third meeting. Since Beckett isn’t grilling him about the meeting, he’s not going to spill the beans, either. He has no confidence that this will last.

“Great. Thanks. Does Dad know?”

“No. I’ll call him tomorrow. I’ll see if I can meet him after work.”

“Will you come round after?”

“Only if it’s not too late. Otherwise I’ll call, and I’ll be round on Friday anyway.”

Castle thinks that, strangely, it might be good for Beckett if he says he won’t come round tomorrow. That way, she might realise that he’s perfectly able to say no if he wants to, or needs to. She needs him, he realises, to be clear about his boundaries… oh. Because she never set any with her father, and never set any with Julia till Montgomery set them for her backed up with threats of suspension… and she doesn’t believe that she isn’t asking too much and he’ll resent it silently rather than simply say a breezy no, not today, Beckett. Okay. And, helpfully, she’s not tensed up. She’s snuggled back into his shoulder and is nicely wrapped around him. He wonders idly if a Beckett-scarf would suit him. Unfortunately that leads him rapidly to thinking of several parts of Beckett which could be wrapped around his neck — in a very good way — which leads her to realise that he’s — er — springing into life, and then she wiggles against him in a come-hither fashion and shortly after that he’s devouring her mouth.

Beckett’s couch, however comfortable, is probably not the place for this. Which thought is possibly a bit late when his mouth is otherwise occupied and his hands are busily undoing her buttons so that his mouth can be occupied all over her, as her hands are wickedly occupied all over him oh fuck don’t do that Beckett!

Enough. He executes a manoeuvre that only his thrice weekly gym sessions and his overwhelming desire to have Beckett somewhere he can ravish her thoroughly allow him to manage, and drops her flat on her back on her bed. She is not co-operating. She’s supposed to let him retain enough brain function and physical control to make her feel very, very good; and she isn’t. She’s evil. If he doesn’t hang on to her hands this will end shortly, messily and not well. He’s supposed to be smooth, suave and sophisticated, and she likes him assertive, possessive and forceful — and she’s destroying him stop that Beckett!

She’s giggling. Giggling! No. He will not be giggled at. He wrenches her button-down up her
arms and traps them together in the sleeves, over her head. This reveals a rather pretty cream bra and, now that she is not driving him insane and he can remove her pants, matching very brief panties, their centre somewhat darker than the bra. The giggle mutates to a smirking purr as she tugs against his grip.

“Got you,” he growls. “Think you can pull that trick? No way. You’ve done enough mischief for one evening.” She flexes, and the wordless purr drips desire. “Let’s find out what you like today.”

“I like you,” she drawls, and flexes again, not really trying to break his grip, more to test his hold.

“That’s good. I like you too. Today, I like you all stretched out and purring when I stroke you.” He runs a finger lightly straight down her centre from neck to just above her core. “I like this pretty bra, too. Especially the lacy bits.” He slides the very tip of his finger over the lace. The lace is about an inch above where his fingers ought to be playing. Her noise could only loosely be described as a purr. More of a slightly irritated growl. She tugs harder against the encircling hand. Castle tugs back. Since he’s bigger and in a position to exert rather more leverage, he wins. He rubs over the lace again, straying slightly. The purr returns, only slightly edged with that’s better in a very do-as-you’re-told intonation, somehow managed without a single word. Castle has no intention of doing as he’s told. He’s also pretty damn certain from Beckett’s darkened eyes that she knows this, and is perfectly happy with it. Of course, the note of satisfaction in her purring helps, too.

“I like the contents, too.” He occupies his mouth with the contents, nudging the fabric out of the way. The satisfaction quotient in her noises increases. Unfortunately, Castle has made the rookie mistake of letting go of her hands. Beckett-nearly-Kat has wriggled out of the shirt sleeves which were keeping her from wreaking havoc and is endeavouring to prove that ears can be used for steering. “Stop that, Beckett.”

“Make me,” she snickers.

She wants to play that game? Okay then. He stops suckling, which is unpopular, and very swiftly detaches her far-too-clever hands from his ears, only making pained noises once. Having caught her hands, though, he now has a problem: he can’t do what he wants, either with hands or mouth, if he lets go, because she’s made it very clear that she’s going to be mischievously playful in any way she sees fit in order to try to tease him into pleading for her to stop. But if she wants him to make her stop… this is a step further than smooth assertion. He pauses.

“You sure?”

She looks up at him, still mostly clothed, looming over her – and trust blooms in her eyes. “I’m sure,” she says softly.

And then she takes unfair and instant advantage of his stunned shock and wrestles him flat on his back on the bed as if she were sparring on the mats and while he’s still trying to recover breath strips his shirt and then t-shirt and leaves his arms tangled in both garments. While he’s trying to extricate himself, she finishes denuding him and acquires a ferally predatory expression as she regards the picture before her.

“Mmm,” she emits. “Verrry prrrrrrrrrrretty.” She drags the words over her tongue, rolling the Rs lasciviously. Castle redoubles his efforts to escape, before she traps him again. He hasn’t quite succeeded when she starts to amuse herself. Fortunately, she doesn’t head straight southward. She starts with his pecs, and draws some sensual squiggles with her nails and then with her tongue. Then she nips a little: sharp stings followed by a soothing slip of her mouth. Castle makes a noise of mingled delight, desire and displeasure, and tries much harder to untangle his wrists before
Beckett can reduce him to an incoherent, incapable puddle on the pillows. He has no intention of being her plaything, delightful as it might be, nor of being exhausted and emptied. It’s been an interesting, but difficult, day, and he needs Beckett as much as she needs him. He needs, rather badly, to be allowed to take her beautiful body, to be allowed to soothe her and ease her and so doing, soothe and ease himself. And she’s told him where tonight’s limits lie.

On that thought, he finally frees his hands. He hauls her up from her wicked trail southward and flips her on to her back, stretching her out again, returning her hands to above her head and holding them there, propped up on his elbow to peruse the long, lithe lines of her legs, the hills and valleys of her hips, her chest, the plains of her stomach. His gaze is hot, hard; and she flexes in his grip again, displaying the effects without the slightest embarrassment.

“Like what you see?”

“Mmm. Yes. Very pretty. Even prettier if I do this,” and he peels away her bra, slowly and with firm strokes over the naked skin revealed. “But you stopped me, earlier.” She smirks. He pins her with that same hot hard gaze. “So now I’ll stop you.”

She smirks more wickedly. “You can try. Catch me if you can.” She bends and snaps her wrists from his grip – and then discovers that while she’s been doing that, Castle – who is not that stupid and had been expecting her to try that any time in the previous five minutes – has trapped her with his other arm around her waist and has just slid one thick thigh between hers.

“Try? No, no. I don’t try. I succeed.” He takes full advantage of the size difference and some sixty pounds in weight, and transfers all his bulk to be above her. “Now what?” He takes one slim hand in each of his far bigger ones, brings them together and catches them into one firm clasp. She lifts her head and licks a wet line over his chest where it’s above her mouth. Castle groans deeply, but is not deterred. “I’ve caught you. So that means I can stop you stopping me.” His free hand threads his shirt through the spindles of the headboard: he leans down and kisses her deeply till he’s eliciting little moans and she’s not paying any attention to the cotton wrapping round her wrists until he tugs it tight enough to hold her for – oh, no more than a second or two if she wanted to escape. It’s an illusion of assertion, a daydream of desire, a smokescreen for seduction.

And in her eyes all he sees is heat and trust and something more than partners, and he hopes she sees the same in his.

He kisses her again, and starts to move downward.
Castle kisses gently across Beckett’s gorgeously naked torso and pays slow and detailed attention to the proud nipples. She fits easily in his hands, neat and perfect and designed by some deity to match him exactly. She pushes up and he draws her into his mouth, gentle teeth and hard suction and she starts to breathe harder, brings one leg up around tight him to encourage him to press against her, but without arms she can’t quite exert the same directional control she was trying earlier. Castle’s ears are very glad of it, even though the cotton of his shirt is loosely tied and wouldn’t stop her doing anything. It’s all in her head. He has no objection to a little bondage play if that’s what Beckett wants, but he doesn’t need it.

He plays for longer with those beautiful, edible breasts, eliciting happy, sexy noises, gasps and occasional pants of Castle, again! Gradually he slides down her body, hearing the change in the cadence of her breathing as he approaches the jut of her hips, sketching a careful path which promises much… and then bypasses her soaked core to kiss and nibble down her leg to her ankle and then kiss and nibble back up the other leg. This results, very smoothly, in Castle being perfectly settled in the vee of her legs and Beckett devoid of words that aren’t approximating to stop teasing please.

“I caught you,” he drawls lazily. “So I get to do what I like.” He traces the veins through the translucent skin, and she shivers. “I like teasing you. I like making you anticipate what I might do. I like you naked and wet because I’ve slowly peeled your clothes away and touched and kissed you all the time I did. I like you badass at work; or soft and purring under my hands; or when you’re lithe and sexy and making me groan. But I like you very best,” he purrs darkly from his vantage point between her legs, “when you’re writhing and desperate and so high up you’ll feel that you’ll never come down.”

He licks a wet stroke through her folds and she bucks against his firm hands on her hips, holding her for the attack of his mouth. Two more strokes and she’s trying to twist, moaning; a featherlight twining of his tongue over the knot of nerves and she’s whimpering because she’s got no breath left to make any louder noise; a furl of the tongue and a slow entry, then another twist and she’s desperate, just like he’d promised; sky-high and right on the edge and he holds her there, keeping her higher than she’s ever been and finally he can’t hold her any longer and she brings him up and into her and cries his name and comes hard around him, and he can too.

“I like you like this, too,” he murmurs in her ear. “Totally loved-up and cuddled up to me and in my arms, all soft and sleepy.” She makes an indeterminately happy little noise and nestles in more closely.

“Like it too,” she mumbles. “Safe.”

Castle nuzzles into her hair. “Got your back.”

“I know.” Her eyes are shut, her limbs lax. She’s on the verge of sleep.

“I gotta go.”

“I know.” He’s starting to detach himself when he realises she’s still speaking. “When ’m fixed, I can come to the loft. You won’t go then.”

“No. I won’t go then,” he says softly, and kisses her.
All the way home he thinks about Beckett being there all night, and when he wakes in the morning. All the way home he’s exhibiting a sloppy, sappy smile, warmth settled around his heart. He’s still wearing the same smile as he drops into sleep.

When he wakes, though, he remembers that he needs to talk to Jim. This rather deflates his sunny mood. However, Alexis is bright and happy at breakfast, and a little gentle probing reassures him that she is not feeling abandoned, neglected or otherwise ignored. All is well in his domestic world.

Over another cup of coffee, with no nice or interesting or gruesome (or any or all of the foregoing) murders to distract him, Castle tries to work out what he’s going to say to Jim. Somehow Beckett asked (well, told, but that certainly isn’t a good start) me to talk to you doesn’t seem to be the right beginning. He also doesn’t feel that it’s his place to say anything of the order of did you know what you actually did and said when you were drunk? That’s a discussion Beckett has to have.

I’m going to marry your daughter is extremely premature. As is as soon as she’s ready I want her to move in with me. It would probably be a really, really good idea to discuss those with Beckett first. He daydreams about them for a while, though, until he tries to turn his mind to Jim again.

After far too much unproductive time Castle bites the bullet and simply calls.

“Jim Beckett.”

“Jim, it’s Rick. Beck-Kate’s okay,” he adds hurriedly. “Can I come see you after work?”

“Sure,” Jim says, and then, much more suspiciously, “why?”

“Beck-Kate wants me to talk to you.”

“Really?” Jim says, hope dancing in his voice. “But she won’t talk to me herself,” he says flatly, all hope draining.

“No. But if you’ll talk to me I think there’s a way to fix all this. Up to you.”

“Okay. Seven. My apartment. I’ll call you if I’m running late.”

“See you then.”

Castle breathes a sigh of relief that he’s got this underway and considers his options. He doesn’t much like any of them, but no-one else is trying to fix this so he needs to. He needs to have a coherent strategy for Jim. He needs to have another session with Dr Burke, after he’s seen Jim. He needs to show Beckett that he’s perfectly capable of setting any boundaries he needs to, so that however wrongly and dumbly she might think it, she’s clear that he isn’t saying how high when she says jump. She doesn’t ask for half enough, emotionally, and he can’t even give her that today: he has to show her that he can say no to her. At least he doesn’t have to talk to Lanie. Small mercies.

He sends Beckett a quick text: Seeing your dad tonight. Will be too late to come by after. I’ll call.

The bullpen is boring. The paperwork is boring. The cold cases are stone cold and boring. Espo and Ryan are thoroughly – well, bored. Montgomery is in his office, being Captainly, so they can’t get up to much mischief, and there are no new homicides. Beckett is paying no attention to anything outside a bubble about a foot around her desk, and they’re not sure she’s paying much attention to anything outside her skull. She’d been out of it yesterday too. Hadn’t even noticed them playing Hangman on her murder board. Well, not till they were four games in, anyway.
Funny thing is, she looks as if she’s working on a case. Same inward turned gaze, same wrinkle of concentration between her brows. Every so often she scrawls something down. Every so often she makes a face as if she’s tasted something disgusting.

Ryan and Esposito exchange glances and simultaneously stand up and wander to Beckett’s tidy desk, flanking her. They look down, and try to decipher the ink-track roamings of the drunken spider which Beckett’s writing most resembles. Unfortunately, she realises they are there, and without any subtlety at all pulls a blank sheet over the writing.

“Private.”

“We’re bored,” they whine in tandem.

“How is this my problem?”

“You’re supposed to produce weird cases. We haven’t had one for weeks. Dumbass didn’t count. So tell us what you’re working on that’s keeping you so busy the last two days. You gotta share, Beckett.”

“I told you, it’s private. None of your business.” Her voice is harsh. The boys look at each other over her head. “Leave me to it.” She appears to take a breath and reset her attitude. “Give me till lunchtime. I could use some sparring practice, Espo.” He nods.

The boys, thankfully, disappear. Beckett is also thankful that her writing is, quite deliberately, completely illegible to anyone but herself. She can’t get Dr Burke’s words out of her head. Victims of emotional abuse. She is not a victim. She’s made herself a success. Her father might not love her – her face twists – but he didn’t abuse her. Dr Burke is wrong.

And yet. Since there are only cold cases to look at, there is nothing to stop her brain stewing over the session, and stew it does.

She’d only done what any normally sympathetic person had done. You don’t push on the sore points when you can see it’s hurting. No-one does. That’s not avoiding triggers, it’s basic courtesy. But, a nagging little voice says, but they don’t all get their hair cut and coloured, do they? She had loved having longer hair, had loved being able to style it when and how she wanted, had loved the way her boyfriends could stroke through it. And she’d cut it. She’d cut it because her mother had had a style that hadn’t been too different, if more controlled, more professional, more appropriate to a lawyer. She’d cut it because… because it set her father off. Because it set her father off down the path of why aren’t you her, I don’t want you, I want Johanna. Like a toddler crying for his mother, she thinks bitterly and cruelly, and instantly regrets it. She too cried for her mother, as passionately as a child. But she’d cut her hair. It’s still short now.

So maybe she’d over-reacted. She didn’t have to cut her hair. Her father would have stopped crying for her mom. Except he didn’t, did he? Stop shirking the truth. He didn’t, and he wouldn’t. It just stopped him thinking you were she. So why had she cut her hair? That same nagging little voice says so you didn’t set him off. She rams it down, and tries to focus on the cold case file, and for an hour or so she manages it. Then the voice returns.

What would you say to a woman who changed her appearance so she didn’t annoy her boyfriend, the little voice niggles. You know what you’d say, don’t you? It’s a warning sign. She tries to squash that, too. The cold case only works for half an hour, this time, and then the voice squiggles back to the front of her mind. You didn’t talk about anything that upset him. That’s another red flag.
He didn’t do it deliberately. He never meant to do it. And that’s the difference. That’s why Dr Burke is wrong. But he still did it. You still need to deal with it. Whether he meant it or not. She can’t deal with the nagging niggle any more. She shoves it away, notices the boys looking at her chicken-scratch scrawl, quite deliberately hides it and decides that a hard round of sparring at lunchtime is just what she needs to shake her brain up. She claws back her temper and suggests it.

By lunchtime Beckett is suffering from severe frustration at the cold case and severely irritated frustration at the naggings of the voice in the back of her head. She changes and stalks out on to the mats with the sole intention of taking Esposito apart. She doesn’t even contemplate a warm up round with Ryan: he’s no match for her at his best, and she wants to lose herself in the harsh physical exertion and total concentration that trying to beat Espo will provide.

Espo looks at the way Beckett has arrived on the mats and the posture she’s adopted and prepares for mayhem. He’s still perfectly confident that she won’t beat him – she never has – but she’s clearly out for blood. He wishes that Castle had been around this morning to take some of the edge off, because Beckett in this mood is a recipe for disaster. He doesn’t want anything broken because he can’t pull it back fast enough. It happened once before, a few years back, when Beckett was in this same mood, and he ended up with a sprained wrist and Beckett with a dislocated shoulder. Montgomery had wiped the floor with the pair of them. She’d never said why she’d been so pissed, but he’d assumed a bad break-up. The odd thing was, she’d been bruised already, as if she’d been sparring the day before, but it hadn’t been with him. He supposes it could have been with that mountain O’Leary. Still, she hasn’t been doing that this week. No bruises. If he gets out of this mostly alive he’ll get O’Leary over for a round or two. He could use a sparring partner he’s not sure he’ll beat.

Ryan looks at the pair on the mats and considers running for the MTs now. He also considers calling Castle. Then he remembers what the gang had done to him the last time he tried interfering for their own good, and decides not to call anyone. It doesn’t stop him having his phone close at hand.

For the first few minutes Ryan’s fears are not realised. It’s rough stuff, but Espo’s well in control and playing defensively. Beckett is a tornado of offence, but it’s nothing that Espo can’t manage. Then Beckett manages to connect, clearly much harder than she or Espo expected, with a kick, and Espo starts to go on the offensive himself. After that it’s not exactly clear what’s going on, except that it’s brutal. Ryan is only too glad he’s not on the mat: he likes all his limbs and head attached and undamaged, and the way these two are flinging each other about it’s not guaranteed that either will be in one piece in five minutes’ time. He winces as Beckett hits the floor hard, rolls and takes Esposito down equally hard. It’s all getting a little hardcore for him, and both of them are going all out.

“What the hell is going on here?” Oh, shit. Coming right now to a fan near Ryan. “Stand down!” There is a truly terrifying silence as everything stops. Beckett’s flat on her back, struggling for breath; Espo’s got his head on his knees.

“What is this?” Montgomery snaps. No-one answers. “Detective Ryan!”

“Sir?”

“Explain.”

“Beckett and Esposito were having a workout, sir,” Ryan stammers. How’s this his fault suddenly? He was only watching.

“A workout?” Montgomery would have sounded less disbeliefing if he’d been told he was to be
taken to Area 51 to meet an alien. “That’s what you” – Ryan is sure the word idiots was meant to be inserted here – “call a workout? Are all three of you crazy? Get cleaned up and be in my office in less than ten minutes.”

Montgomery marches off, stiff-spined and clearly very annoyed. Esposito stretches painfully.

“What the fuck, Beckett? You trying to kill me ‘cause we got no corpses?”

Beckett slides an eyelid open from her tapped-out position. “Ow,” she says, as she tries to stretch her arm. “Needed the exercise.”

“Yeah, and now we all need a good story. Captain ain’t looking too pleased.”

“Any ideas?” Beckett tries another stretch, more slowly, and winces before she’s moved her arm more than an inch. “Ow,” she says again.

“You okay?”

Beckett rolls on to her stomach, and tries a stretch from there. “Ow, ow. Give me a minute.”

Espo stands up and looks down at her. “What’ve you done?”

“Hurt my arm,” she says through gritted teeth.

“Shit. If you’ve dislocated it again Montgomery’ll have our asses in a sling.”

“No. I know what that feels like. Just give me a hand to get up.” Espo reaches out and Beckett lurches to her feet, wincing. “I think I landed on it.” She rotates her wrist – or starts to. “Ow!”

“Can you manage?” Ryan asks. “’Cause it’s not like we’re gonna help you clean up.”

Beckett glares at him. “I’ll manage just fine. Cover for me if I take an extra minute, huh?” She lurches off in the direction of the women’s showers. Espo dashes in the direction of the men’s. Ryan sits on a handy bench and, not for the first time, wonders how he’s always in the firing line when everyone else is responsible for the trouble.

With a minute to spare, Ryan and Esposito present themselves to Captain Montgomery. With half a second to spare, Beckett joins them, not exactly looking her normal polished self. Not at all, in fact. Montgomery looks the three of them up and down, slowly and disapprovingly. It’s unpleasantly reminiscent, to Ryan, of being inspected by the nuns at the end of recess in grade school. Espo is reminded of a particularly strict drill sergeant.

Beckett is not reminded of anything, being too busy trying to deal with the really quite severe pain in her wrist without letting on to anyone else just how much it hurts. Even brushing her hair had proved impossible. Make up – well, she didn’t even try. She’s sure it’s not broken. She is entirely unsure that it’s not sprained or badly twisted.

“So, Detectives. Would you care to explain just why it was that I discover two of you apparently trying to murder each other and the third spectating rather than stopping your idiocy?”

Er, no. They would not care to explain. There is a silence, in which Montgomery’s dark face turns darker.

“I needed the sparring practice,” Beckett says, as it becomes clear that no-one else will. And she is the senior detective, so she gets to take the licks. “So I asked Esposito to give me a match. He’s
the only one who’ll really make me work hard.”

“Work hard? You call that working hard? Sparring practice is not supposed to be about injuring each other. That was not a practice. That was a full on fight. If I catch any of you doing that again in working time I’ll ensure that you regret it. Understood?”

“Yessir,” comes bedraggled from all three miscreants.

“Now go and do some real work.”

“Yessir.”

“And at the next inter-precinct championship I want to see you two tag-teaming up so we can turn the others into ground beef.”

“Yessir – What?”

“You two are as dumb as they come fighting like that, but you sure can spar,” Montgomery grins. “This year, I’m gonna win big.”

His best team trails out of his office muttering darkly, which their Captain chooses to ignore for the sake of his wallet. He notices Beckett’s relatively ungroomed state and concludes that she’d spent too long in the shower to get properly tidied up.

Espo and Ryan notice Beckett’s relatively ungroomed state too.

“Yo, Beckett?”

“Uh?”

“Forget your lipstick?”

“And your comb?”

“Since when did you pair become the fashion police? Montgomery gave us ten minutes. It took me that long to shower and get dressed again.” She sits down.

“Not using your right hand there, Beckett.”

“I said I landed on it. It’ll be fine later. I’ll get it checked out after shift. Lanie’ll take a look.” The boys look rather too obviously relieved. “If I need a babysitter I’ll let you know.”

“‘S not that. ‘S that you’re goin’ to see Lanie. You all patched up?”


By five p.m. it is entirely obvious that Beckett will not be getting to the morgue by driving. She can’t bend her wrist at all and she’s had as many Aleve as she can take without poisoning herself. She departs immediately shift is over, and hails a cab. She could walk it, but every movement sends claws through her wrist. She’s beginning to think she’s done more damage than she knew. Still, Lanie will sort her out.
Lanie is pleased to see her, if a little twitchy. Then again, so is Beckett. Not everything is entirely fixed, though it will be in time. Both of them are a touch wary.

“Hey, Kate.”

Three months ago, that would have been Hey, girl, what’cha doing here when there’s no corpse for me?

“Hey, Lanie. Got a minute?”

“Yeah, what’s up? Bored of the boys?”

“Bored of cold cases. But that’s not why I’m here.”

“You want to borrow my lip gloss?”

“No.”

“Oh.”

Beckett regards Lanie suspiciously. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You have no make up on. You never wear no make up. You probably got born wearing eyeliner. You got no lip gloss on. Now, not that you aren’t far too hot without it, but what’s up?”

“I was sparring at lunchtime, and I’ve hurt my wrist.” Beckett holds it up so Lanie can see.

“Hurt bad enough not to brush your hair? Ouch. Okay, let’s take a look.”

Lanie delicately presses on Beckett’s wrist.

“Ow! Shit, Lanie, that hurt.”

“I think we need to take a better look. C’mon, girl. I think we need an X-ray.”

“Really? It’s just a sprain.”

“Who’s the doctor here?”

“You are,” Beckett grumps.

“I am. Now, is there any reason you shouldn’t have an X-ray?”

“What?”

Lanie glints extremely mischievously. “Is there any chance you could be” –

“No!”

“Don’t scowl at me. You know I’ve gotta ask.”

Beckett hates X-ray machines. And they hate her. They never give her good news. She’s sure, somewhere in the back of her mind, that they tell the doctors that bones are broken when they
aren’t, just to annoy her. She knows this is ridiculous, but so is the way her wrist hurts.

Lanie arranges her to Lanie’s satisfaction, retreats behind the plexiglass screen and takes her X-rays.

“Well?” Beckett asks impatiently.

“Well, girlfriend, you won’t be pleased to know” – Beckett groans – “that I think you’ll have to wear a compression bandage for a bit.” She sighs in relief. “For once, you haven’t broken it. So come back to my office and I’ll find you a temporary one, and then you go see your own doctor to get properly checked out, something a bit better and a physio schedule.” She rummages in a drawer and finds one. “What were you doing to get hurt like this anyway?”

“Sparring with Esposito.”

“You don’t normally do that much damage with Espo. Thought he was quite careful – thought you were careful – not to go full on.”

“I was a bit irritated.”

Lanie quirks an eyebrow. “Have you taken too many painkillers to go for a drink? Good cure for irritation.”

“I’ll stick to sodas, but yeah.”

Beckett thinks that a drink with Lanie – even if it’s soda – would be good. Try and repair them a bit more. She hasn’t missed – pain or not – that Lanie hasn’t asked why she’s irritated. So she’s trying, and Lanie’s trying, and she’ll try some more. She’s missed Lanie, she realises. Even if she was trying to pretend she didn’t.

“Oh, let’s go.”

They settle at a nice, relatively quiet bar suitable for a conversation, and order drinks and, after some discussion, food which can be eaten without needing two hands.

“I landed on my wrist,” Beckett says, out of nowhere. “Caught Espo but good, though. He’ll ache tomorrow too.”

“Work the irritation out?”

“Helped. Wish it had been the shrink I was hitting.”

“Mmm?”

“I don’t like him,” Beckett says crossly. “He thinks he’s so clever.”

“Mmmm?” emerges sympathetically from Lanie.

“He keeps asking me questions. Wants me to talk about the past. I didn’t go see him to deal with the freaking past, I went to deal with now.” She drinks her soda defiantly.

“Now?”

“Sorting out things.”

Lanie does not jump up from her chair and dance around the restaurant cheering loudly. She
manages to confine her delight at Kate’s admission to a high-pitched squeak, and then manages not to ask three dozen questions in one breath. She is not Motor-mouth-Writer-Boy, after all. She manages not to say that, too.

“Dealing with families. Dealing with alcoholics. Captain benched me. I’m not having that again.”

Lanie makes some sympathetically encouraging noises, and makes sure her wine and Kate’s soda are replenished. Kate emits more words, Lanie makes more sympathetic noises, and so the evening progresses, until it’s time to go home, not late. Just like how it was.

Castle makes his way to Jim’s apartment with a combination of trepidation and sympathy. Jim opens the door almost before he’s finished knocking, a ghastly desperation in his eyes. He looks old and tired: the lines around his eyes etched deeply. But on the table is an open can of Coke, not an open bottle of whisky; a folder of notes with his law firm’s logo on the cover; the room tidy, the same photos still there. Jim is coping, though also on the table is a very creased AA booklet: obviously much read, splayed open.

“Drink?” Jim asks.

“Coke, if you’ve got one.” Jim finds a can in his fridge and hands it over. “Thanks.”

“Why’re you here?”

“Because Beckett needs you.”

Jim makes a hurt, angry noise. “Don’t lie to me, Rick. If she needed me she’d take my calls.”

“Don’t be as pigheaded as your daughter,” Castle fires straight back, blowing any chance of sticking to his vague plan to be tactful and gentle. “Honestly, the pair of you are two dumb peas in a stupid pod. First she won’t talk to you because she’s hurt and now you’re doing just the same.”

“What the hell? Did you just come here to rub salt in?”

“No, I came here because I’ve got a way to sort this out. If you’ll climb down off your high horse long enough to listen. If you actually want Kate ever to see you again. If not, just say. I’ll leave. She’ll be safe with me.”

“You bastard,” Jim says bitterly. “You’ve got a daughter. How’d you feel if she didn’t take your calls? Of course I want to see her. She’s the only reason I ever crawled back out the whiskey bottle. Now she won’t even speak to me. Walked away, just like the last time. I haven’t fallen off the wagon and she’s still walked away. I thought we were a family again. I thought….” his voice cracks. Castle realises that Jim’s eyes are red and slightly sheened. “I thought she still loved me,” he says brokenly.

It’s all so frighteningly reminiscent of what Beckett herself had said. Castle stays silent, and pulls his normally ebullient personality inward, letting Jim talk.

“I thought I’d done everything to make amends. Told her the story, begged her forgiveness for all the hurt I caused her. And I thought she gave me it. She listened, and we cried, and I thought it was all better, because she was always there if I needed her. It was… we were just like family again. And now Katie doesn’t want to be a family any more.”

“She never talked about it?”
“She let me spill out everything, and I asked if there was more, and she said no, that it was enough.” Jim pauses. “You can’t imagine what it felt like when she came to rehab. I didn’t call her till I’d been there nine months. First six I dried out. Fell off, but I kept trying: a minute, an hour, a day at a time. Every day, it’s one day at a time. I promised myself if I could stay dry more than three months I’d call her. I had a picture of her… Finally I made it. When I saw her come in, it was like God switched the world back on. She was so bright, so real. I haven’t had a drink since, either. I couldn’t let her down again.”

Castle blinks to clear his eyes.

“She looked so happy to see me.” He stops, tears bright in his eyes. “And now she’s gone.”

“I think I can fix this,” Castle says, very gently. “I think I can help you and Kate fix this.”

“Why should I believe you?” Castle shrugs. “Up to you. Trust me, or don’t trust me.”

“Do I got a choice?” Jim says, with that same revolting misbegotten grammatical construct that his daughter uses.

“Yeah. Trust me and we can try and fix it. Don’t trust me and it won’t get fixed.”

“Hobson’s choice, then.” He sounds more defeated than hopeful. “What do I need to do?”

“I want you to come see a shrink with me. He’s treating Kate” –

“Katie’s seeing a shrink? Why? What’s wrong with her?”

“She’s got some stuff to work through. Anyway, the shrink wants to talk to you – he’s already talked to me – to help Kate.” Castle looks straight at Jim. “Will you?” he asks simply.

“Yes. But…”

“Right.” Castle really does not want Jim enquiring into what’s wrong with Beckett. He doesn’t think that he’s in any way equipped to explain, and anyway that’s what Dr Burke is paid for. And if there’s a very well-hidden sense that Dr Burke deserves the pain of explanation in payment for hurting Castle’s Beckett, it’s not making itself known to Castle’s conscious mind. “I’ll arrange for you to see Dr Burke – I’ll come if you want me to, but I expect you’d prefer Ed? – and let you know. He does out-of-hours sessions.” Castle manages a rather pained smile. “It’s not much fun, but if it’s going to sort things out…” he leaves the bait trailing.

“It’ll help Katie?”

“Yeah. You’ll help Kate.”

“Do it,” Jim says, decisively. “She did everything to save me.” How can I do less hangs between them in the air.

Castle drains his Coke can. “Thanks,” he says. “I’d better be going.”

“Rick… how is Katie?”

“She’s doing all the right things,” Castle says carefully. “She’s got her friends, and if we get this right, she’s got you.”
“And you.”

“That too.” Castle shies away from that discussion, as well. “Will you be okay?”

“Yes. I’ll call Ed. I’ve been doing a lot of that.”

Castle makes to leave. Just before he does, Jim’s voice comes once more. “Will this work, Rick?”

“Yes,” Castle says confidently. “It’ll work.”

As he shuts the door, he hopes he hasn’t made a promise that he can’t keep.

He doesn’t call Beckett till later. It takes some time for the phone to be answered.

“You okay, Beckett?”

“Yeah. Went for a drink with Lanie. I was just having a shower,” she says provocatively. Castle draws in breath.

“Tease,” he says. He can hear the wicked smile down the phone. “I saw your dad.”

“Oh.”

Just as well he wasn’t going over tonight. That’s killed any chance of a mood stone dead. “He’ll see Dr Burke.”

“Okay.” There’s a silence. “Thanks, Castle. You didn’t have to get involved in all this.”

“I told you, partners.”

“Partners?” There’s another pause. “You’re the best partner I’ve ever had. Night, Castle. See you tomorrow.”

“Till tomorrow,” he says automatically, and stares at the phone as the call ends. A better partner than Espo, or O’Leary? Did she really mean that? But Beckett would never say that if she didn’t mean it. He sits with a coffee and contemplates that statement for some time, perfectly happy.

Beckett wakes up next morning with her wrist somewhat swollen, Lanie’s ministrations notwithstanding, and very sore. She pops a couple more Aleve, which helps, and hies herself to the bullpen well in advance of Montgomery, so that she can – and she does – call her doctor to make an appointment for her lunch break without interested ears.

“Detective Beckett!”

Oh, shit. Just what she doesn’t need. She’s been carefully hunt-and-pecking at her keyboard to fill in yet another of 1PP’s ridiculous forms, and Montgomery has sneaked up behind her – they should bell him, like a pet cat – and spotted the bandage where her sleeve has slipped back.

“What is that?”

“I tripped, and landed on my wrist.” It’s entirely true. The fact that she’d tripped over Espo’s outstretched leg as he was trying for a sweep-kick is a minor detail. “I’m going to see my doctor at lunchtime.”

Montgomery looks at Beckett, glares at her wrist, scowls on generally disbelieving principles and,
being unwilling to call her on a lie when he is sure she wasn’t lying, departs. Captains do not
ostomp. That’s the only reason his gait couldn’t be described as stomping off. Beckett breathes a
little sigh of relief, unheard, and goes back to pecking at her keyboard. She wishes Castle would
show up, but he’d said he’d see her tonight, and she’ll respect that. But she’s sure he would have
taken her mind off her wrist.

The pain in her wrist doesn’t stop her thinking about Dr Burke’s – mistaken, they are definitely
mistaken – ideas, unfortunately. So she’d changed her hair. So she’d avoided certain topics. So
she’d evaded the truth so he’d love her. It doesn’t mean she’d been abused.

It does. But Dr Burke is still wrong. He’s wrong, because it wasn’t deliberate. She has to hold on
to that, because otherwise everything is a lie. Abuse is deliberate. She saw enough of it on the
beat to know that. And that’s the difference. Her father hurt her, but it wasn’t deliberate.

And having decided that, she puts it all out of her mind and concentrates on the cases till she has to
see her doctor, who prescribes a slightly different bandage, suggests a sling and is firmly told it’s
not required, informs Beckett that the sling was not an optional piece of decoration but necessary
for two days to stop her using the hand and stressing the wrist further so that she has to wear it for a
week instead, writes her a prescription for some stronger painkillers for night time, and provides
her with an exercise schedule that she can start as soon as her wrist doesn’t hurt. Beckett grumps all
the way back to her desk, and is not notably impressed by the boys’ unsympathetic teasing.

“Is that so you get out the paperwork?”

“Nah, it’s so she’s got an excuse for when I outshoot her.”

“It’s gonna cramp your style, Beckett.”

“What?”

“Cramp your style. No wheels, no shooting, no sparring, no take-downs.”

Beckett scowls at the innocent paperwork, desk, and keyboard, none of which burst into flame.

“Castle won’t be too impressed either.”

“What? What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Don’t think books about paperwork will sell.”

“He’s got an imagination. He can use that. And when this comes off you boys are dead meat. But” –
she acquires a truly evil smile – “since I can’t do anything with this arm, you’ll have to do more
of it.” She picks up a pile of files with her left hand and drops them between them. “Enjoy,” she
snarks.

Ryan and Espo look at her edged smile and admit defeat. Beckett’s satisfaction carries her through
the afternoon, albeit floating on the next dose of Aleve.

The combination of satisfaction and Aleve (and Montgomery not appearing from his office to look
disapprovingly at her more than twice) lasts all the way until she sits down in Dr Burke’s
consulting room and meets his inquiring gaze.

“Good evening, Detective Beckett.”

“Hey.”
“What happened?” He gestures to the sling.

“I sprained my wrist sparring.”

“Does this happen often?”

“No.” Dr Burke waits. “We were working out harder than usual.”

“Why was that?”

Detective Beckett regards him with an air of irritation. “I was frustrated with the cold cases.” She pauses. “And with what you said about Dad. It’s not true.”

Dr Burke declines both the bait and Detective Beckett’s evident desire to provoke an argument. He does not argue with his patients. Once they have listened to his indubitably correct conclusions, they do not need to argue. They only need some time to process, and to come to terms with them.

“We will not pursue that further, then. Let us return to your issues with Mr Castle’s family.” He does not miss Detective Beckett’s air of relief. “They are all linked. In short, Mr Castle behaves as a father to his daughter, and has strong, stable family relationships and behaviours with both his daughter and mother. Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“You simply want to be able to deal with this without being – as you put it – pathetically jealous.”

“Yes.”

“Why?” Detective Beckett gapes at him. “It appears, from what you have said, that Mr Castle is perfectly prepared to have a romantic relationship with you without you meeting his family. So why do you think you need to resolve any of these issues?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Detective Beckett snaps. “Castle doesn’t come without his family. If I can’t deal with them there won’t be a proper relationship.”

“Define proper, then, please.”

“Give and take. One where I’m not just leaning on him all the time. Where if he wanted to talk about his family – Alexis is a teen girl – I might actually be able to listen and say what I did, or felt, or what Mom and Dad did. Up till it all went wrong. One where I could actually go to his place.”

“So you would like to be able to be involved with his family.”

There is a noticeably embarrassed pause. “Suppose so.”

“But – forgive me for stating the obvious, Detective Beckett – why do you feel you cannot be?”

“We went through this. How many times do I need to say it? Every time I see them I’m pathetically jealous and upset.”

“Upset?”

“Yes, upset.”

“So why did you go more than once?”
“Because I didn’t want to upset Castle. And then I didn’t want to upset Dad.”

“Why not? Presumably both of them would have understood if you had explained.”

“What? Hurt someone else because I can’t get over myself?”

“Why do you feel the potential that someone else may be upset outweighs your upset?”

“Because they’d have a reason. I don’t.”

“You have a valid reason,” he says. “It is perfectly normal to be upset and unhappy in these circumstances.”

“Ten years later?” Detective Beckett replies bitterly.

“Five. Your father has only been dry for five years. Why do you persist in minimising the issue, Detective Beckett?” Dr Burke’s tone is intended to sting a modicum of truth from her.

“Because it’s a pathetic little teenage reaction that I should grow up and get over. It didn’t need a therapist, it just needed me to behave like an adult. And now that we’ve established that that’s my problem, I think we’re done. It was all that the therapist told me was wrong last time and clearly it’s all that’s wrong now. I don’t need to see you, I just need to grow the fuck up. This is a waste of your time and mine.”

Detective Beckett stands up, clearly intending to leave and not return.

“Sit down, Detective Beckett. Whatever your previous therapist may have told you, they were wrong. This is not a pathetic little teenage reaction, and it is not something that you can simply grow up and get over.” This had certainly not been apparent from his conversations with the previous practitioner. Dr Burke thinks bitterly that he will not just have the therapist sanctioned, he will have them struck off. By the time he is done with them, they will be unable to find a post on the checkouts at a mom-and-pop store in the back woods of Montana. This is appalling. How can Detective Beckett have been allowed to believe that her perfectly valid feelings of unhappiness are of no importance? Worse, how could she possibly have been told that all that was required was to grow up and get over it?

Detective Beckett is looking at him completely blankly.

“Detective Beckett, you have been ill-served. Your upset has equal value to that of your father, or Mr Castle, or any other person. But because you have been led to believe that it does not, you have consistently lied either by word or actions in order to continue minimising your own feelings in order to protect those of others. When, understandably, the pressure of repressing your feelings has become too much, you have done your utmost to ensure that the source of that pressure has been permanently removed from your life. Is that not so?”

Detective Beckett does not answer. Detective Beckett is, in fact, apparently incapable of speech or thought.

“Let us start again, Detective Beckett.”
Cry me a river

“No. I can’t deal with this. I can’t deal with any of it. I’m going home. I don’t want to talk about this any more. I only came because I was ordered to.”

“You are free to leave whenever you wish. I suggest that you take the time you need and return when you are able. I will keep the sessions on Tuesday and Friday open, whether you attend or not. Treatment must always be your choice, Detective Beckett.”

“First you tell me I’ve been abused and then you tell me all the therapy I put myself through was not just pointless but completely wrong? Why should I believe you? Why should I come back? Every other choice I’ve made has been wrong, so it’s just as likely that you are too. Therapy is completely pointless and you’re no better than the last guy.”

“And there is the reaction to which I have just referred. By questioning my professional competence, you are endeavouring to remove a source of pressure permanently. No doubt you expect that I will remove you from my list of patients. I shall not do so.”

Detective Beckett looks at him, utterly horrified, and collapses back into the chair from which she had risen, which then results in her stifling a cry of pain and cradling her maltreated wrist. She is quite clearly swearing sulphurously under her breath and in some considerable discomfort.

“How have you hurt yourself further?” Dr Burke inquires anxiously. He is really most concerned about Detective Beckett. For a moment she doesn’t answer him. She looks surprisingly small and piteous, pain scratched across her face, holding her wrist tightly through its sling. She breathes out, very slowly, a long exhale of suffering.

“I can’t do this,” she says, exhaustion leaching the words from her mouth. “Ten years of disappointment. Ten years of it being wrong. I should just cut my losses. Accept I’ve got no family. Accept I can’t deal with other people’s families. And get on with my life.”

“That would be cowardice, Detective Beckett, and I do not believe you to be a coward. You have come this far. You have said, repeatedly, that you wish to be able to deal with Mr Castle’s family. You have not said, but I have surmised, that you care very deeply for Mr Castle. And yet, having taken all the right steps, you are now scared to follow through?”

“The only thing in my life that I haven’t screwed up is my job. Everyone around me gets hurt. Mom died. Dad got drunk. Royce shoved me away because I needed too much. Will left because I couldn’t give him anything. I can’t do people. I can only catch killers. So why should I screw up Castle’s life too? He’d be better off out of it. I told him so.”

“How very arrogant of you, Detective Beckett.” Dr Burke has resolved on brutal honesty. Subtext will not work with Detective Beckett. “You are the reason why others around you are destroyed? That is a ridiculous assumption. You are not to blame for others’ actions. You are only responsible for your own. I recall to you the second C. You cannot control it. Nor can you control others. You can only control yourself.” He stops, and regards her closely. “For ten years you have failed utterly to deal with your own grief, because you have wrongly considered that you should deal with that of others before your own. You have put your father before yourself” –

“For two years you altered your behaviour and suppressed your grief to try to appease your father. In the following three years, when you maintain that you had walked away, you let his behaviour, for example in calling you, affect your emotions. Had you truly walked away, you would have blocked his number or changed your own. You did neither. You did not save yourself, and you could not and did not fully walk away.”

He pauses again. Detective Beckett is now completely white.

“Nothing you did could save your father. He had to save himself, and decide what he cared most about. It is time for you to save yourself.” He looks at Detective Beckett again. “Your feelings are as valid as those of any other person. You had, and have, the right to be unhappy. You have, and had, the right to grieve. It is time for you to grieve for your mother as you should have done ten years ago, and it is time for you to release your unjustified guilt that your father descended into alcoholism. You did not cause any of this pain, you cannot control the pain of others, and you can only cure yourself. You will only be able to do that once you talk openly with your father and tell him about his actions.”

“I can’t. He’ll go back to the bottle.”

“That will be his choice. However, prior to you deciding whether such a discussion is to take place, I will be happy to interview your father and provide my professional opinion on his state of mind, if he will permit me so to do. I may need to advise him of some of your feelings.”

Detective Beckett nods. “Whatever. It won’t make any difference.”

Dr Burke is relieved. That consent removes his last concern over seeing Mr Beckett.

He continues. “Detective Beckett, if you do not tell your father the whole truth, your relationship with him will never be healthy.” He realises his error almost instantly.

“Since he doesn’t want a relationship with me, that’s not a problem.”

“Has your father contacted you since your quarrel?”

“Oh, yes. More lies. He didn’t mean it. I misunderstood him. He needs me. I’m his only family. I heard it all the last time, and it was all lies then too. There’s nothing to salvage here.”

“And yet you will not accept that his treatment of you produced the same results as emotional abuse. Can you not see the discontinuity here? If there were nothing to salvage, you would have no reason to try to deny that. If there were nothing to salvage, why are you concerned that telling your father the truth will send him back to alcoholism? You may lie to yourself that you no longer care, but that is patently not the truth.”

Detective Beckett bursts into tears. Dr Burke waits for her to re-establish her so-far terrifying control, and is completely astonished when she fails to do so. When she is still crying some moments later, seemingly without any sign of stopping, he speaks once more.

“Detective Beckett, do you wish to continue?” She shakes her head. “Do you wish for someone to collect you? I will have them contacted. You cannot go home alone like this.”

“Castle,” she sobs, and fumbles to unlock her phone. She holds it out to Dr Burke.

Dr Burke takes the phone and leaves his treatment room. Detective Beckett will not notice his momentary absence.
“Beckett?”

“Dr Burke, Mr Castle.”

“What are you doing with Beckett’s phone? What’s wrong with her?”

“I think you should come to my office, Mr Castle. Detective Beckett is in need of assistance.”

“What have you done?”

“I would prefer that you were here, Mr Castle, rather than pursuing an argument. Can I expect you to arrive shortly?”

“Yes.”

Mr Castle sounds somewhat irritated with Dr Burke. This is not unexpected. Dr Burke confidently expects that Mr Castle will be considerably more irritated, not to say angered, when he finds Detective Beckett to be so upset. Dr Burke returns to his room, taking the precaution of collecting a further box of Kleenex as he goes. He considers that the extra may be required, and finds himself, as ever, to be quite correct in his conclusions.

Mr Castle arrives extremely swiftly. Dr Burke’s excellent receptionist escorts him in directly, but as instructed has indicated his arrival. Dr Burke is extremely interested to observe his behaviour, and wishes for a few seconds’ warning before Mr Castle enters, so that he may take full cognisance from the beginning. He is not disappointed in events.

Mr Castle enters, absently thanks the receptionist as he shuts the door, and then observes Detective Beckett’s condition. She is still crying quietly but unstoppably, and has not noticed Mr Castle’s arrival. Mr Castle takes precisely two long strides to reach her, positively plucks her out the chair, and collects Detective Beckett against him, murmuring inaudibly to her. Having attained his immediate goal, in a wholly protective manner which confirms every deduction Dr Burke had made about Mr Castle’s depth of feeling for Detective Beckett, he turns around to face Dr Burke, Detective Beckett still cradled in his grasp.

“What the hell did you do to her?” he inquires, ice-cold rage in every syllable. Dr Burke raises his eyebrows.

“I have done nothing except show Detective Beckett the truth.” Really, Mr Castle would be quite frightening when he is in full protective mode, if it were not for the fact that he, Dr Burke, is perfectly certain that he has taken the correct course of action. “Would you prefer that I mismanaged her therapy in the way that the previous practitioner had done?”

Mr Castle closes his lips tightly on a riposte that would undoubtedly contain distressingly vulgar language. “No,” he eventually grits out, still with Detective Beckett cradled against him. “But this session is over. I’m taking Beckett home.” He fixes Dr Burke with a vicious glare. “We’ll be discussing this.”

As the door closes behind Mr Castle and Detective Beckett, Dr Burke smiles gently to himself. He expects that Mr Castle and Detective Beckett will indeed be discussing this, precisely as they should do. Detective Beckett will need Mr Castle’s support, and Mr Castle needs to understand the full extent of the commitment which he, and indeed she, is making. None of this is likely to be easy, for either of them. He will make that clear, when Mr Castle opens the discussion with him which Dr Burke is sure that he also wishes to have.
Castle walks Beckett out of the door and out of the building and into his own car without at any stage letting go of her. She’s stopped crying, but there’s nothing there; and he is severely tempted to go back into the building and take Dr Burke apart. The only thing stopping him is the way in which Beckett is leaning on him. Right now, she needs him – and she must have asked Dr Burke to call him – more than he needs to hit something. Or, more accurately, someone.

And why is her arm in a sling? He’ll have answers to that, too.

He drives her home, parks tidily, and walks her into the elevator, out of the elevator, and then removes her keys from her purse, unlocks her door, and walks her into her apartment, closes the door without looking and walks her straight over to the couch, where he can finally, finally put her on his lap and cosset her into his warmth and simply make it all better for her.

Except he can’t.

He can’t make it all better for her. She has to do that. Only she can save herself, he thinks bitterly. He just wishes that it didn’t have to hurt her so much. Salvation always comes at a high price. Jim’s salvation has come at the price of Beckett’s whole adult life, it seems. He wonders, chilled, whether the price of Beckett’s salvation might be Jim’s sobriety, and, shivering, whether that’s a price that Beckett would accept might have to be paid.

He starts with the easy question. “What happened here, Beckett?” he asks, running his hand cautiously across the sling. She lifts from off his shoulder, and meets his eyes for the first time since he’d taken hold of her in the therapist’s office.

“Sparring got a little rough. I fell on it.”

“So I don’t have to risk life and limb trying to beat up Espo for breaking you?”

“Not today. Lanie took a look at it yesterday, and I got it properly seen to today.” She achieves a very watery smile. “Montgomery is not happy with the three of us.”

“Yesterday? You didn’t say.”

“No. I did what Lanie told me, had a drink with her after, and took the painkillers. It didn’t hurt that much till this morning.”

“You could have said.”

“I… yeah. Um… yeah.” Which is a concession Castle wouldn’t have expected.

“I would have come by and put your hair in its night time braids,” he says, in lieu of anything sympathetic.

“No braids, Castle.” She tucks her head back on to his shoulder. Something registers.

“You had a drink with Lanie?” Voluntarily?

“Yeah. It was nice.” Looks like that’s back to normal, then. Or as normal as it’s going to get in the near future. “We had a chat.” Good grief. It worked. “Thanks.”

Castle is returned to reality from the comfortable knowledge that he’s fixed at least one problem when Beckett shifts unwarily and emits a noise indicating some pain.

“Seeing as you’re temporarily one-armed, and if I can’t kill Espo for you, can I slay Dr Burke
instead?” There’s rather more annoyance in that than Castle had intended. Beckett hides more deeply in the crook of his neck, and doesn’t say anything. He becomes aware that she is shuddering. “Beckett?”

“Why can’t I just walk away from him? He’s ruined everything and I still keep hoping it’ll all be better again. I still keep hoping that he’ll be there no matter how often he proves he isn’t.”

Ah. Dr Burke has pointed out that Beckett is still hoping for her father to be a family again, whatever she says and does. Castle lets her cry into his wide, now damp, shoulder for a while. The few words that do emerge largely consist of *why can’t I give him up?*

“Beckett,” Castle says gently, and pats her back, “Beckett, let me tell you a story.”

“Uh?” she says, but she doesn’t say *no.*

“You know I don’t know who my dad was.”

“Yeah?”

“Well, when we were… when I was growing up, we were touring the small towns in the Mid-West. It was just Mother and I. And the rest of the cast, obviously, but that’s not important. I started to notice that the other little boys in the schools I went to had two parents, not one. I kept pestering Mother about it, and she kept deflecting and distracting. Eventually I gave up asking. By the time I got to high school, though, I really resented it. Not knowing, and not having a father. It wasn’t helpful. So I decided to try to do some investigating of my own.” He smiles ruefully. “Always looking for the answer to the mystery: the story behind the actions. Of course I didn’t get anywhere. But…”

Beckett hums expectantly, and much less damply. Her hand slips up around his neck, out of the sling.

“I didn’t exactly give up. Once I’d made some money, and made it big, I tried again.” There’s an intake of breath against him. “That’s how my first advance disappeared. The PR said I spent it on wine, women and song, but actually it was PIs, false leads and false hope. Eventually, I gave up looking. But I’ve always wanted to know, to meet him, to ask why.”

Castle turns Beckett so that he’s looking down into her wide, beautiful eyes. All he sees in them is sympathy, and complete understanding.

“I guess what I’m saying is no matter how much they hurt you by being there or not being there, you always want to have a family. A father.”

Her eyes spill over again, but she hugs him hard. “Thanks,” she breathes. “You telling me that… that means a lot. You’ve never said anything much about your past before.”

“I don’t much like thinking about it,” Castle confesses. “It seems a bit dumb, when I’m a father myself.” Beckett hugs him again, and nestles in to achieve a better angle to do so. She is, he realises, trying to comfort him.

“You’ve been a really good father, though. The exact opposite of yours. And it’s not dumb. Normal.”

She stops there, and sniffs. “Dad was like that, you know. Up till…” she sniffs again, and reverts to silence. “‘S why it was too much. But it could have been so much worse. He might never have been there at all.” She hugs Castle again, strangely lopsided as only one hand is gripping.
Castle doesn’t pursue that line of conversation. Castle intends to pursue a line of conversation with Dr Burke that involves – after some discussion of the reasons for using any form of therapy which leaves Beckett in the state she had been – Jim appearing at Dr Burke’s office in very short order. Tomorrow, for preference, even if it is Saturday. If not, then Monday. They remain cuddled together, peacefully, for a little time.

“Dr Burke said I had to tell Dad the truth,” Beckett emits. “Before anything else would go right. He said I should do that and not care about whether Dad went back to the bottle. He said that was up to Dad.” She stops for a beat, remembers something. “He said he’d see Dad first. Assess him.”

How very clever of Dr Burke, Castle thinks, with only a minor dose of acid.

“You know, Beckett,” Castle says, not at all lightly or inconsequentially, “if I’d been your Dad and you’d been Alexis, I’d have crawled back into the bottle the moment I realised I’d said something to push you away like that. Your Dad hasn’t. I think he’s stronger than you think. Let Dr Burke see him. Then decide. Up to you. Always up to you.”

There’s another long pause, while Beckett considers that. She’s still cuddling him. That may, of course, be because she’s unwilling to move her hand and tweak her injured wrist. She shouldn’t be cuddling him like that with an injured wrist, either. She should have it in the sling and be resting it… oh. Except that when has Beckett ever let anything stop her doing what she considers important… and right now hugging him is more important than her wrist. He very gently repatriates her arm to its sling, and replaces the hug that Beckett was providing to him with an encirclement of his own. Her head is back on his shoulder, her chest against his.

“Okay,” she finally says. “Let Dr Burke deal with it. I can’t.”
Much as Castle would like to take Beckett to bed and make love to her for some time, the problem of her wrist prevents it. He compromises by snuggling her in and then kissing her smoothly and searchingly until she’s relaxed into him and is nicely responsive. Which would have been fine if she hadn’t retaliated in kind, which leaves him very ready to be responsive and definitely not relaxed at all. For someone who can’t really employ their arm, she’s doing a lot of damage. He was sure she wasn’t ambidextrous. He may have been wrong.

He stops her by tugging her usable arm out of dangerously intimate places and putting it where he can see it. Beckett pouts at him, clearly unimpressed.

“You’re no fun,” she grumps.

“I’m plenty of fun,” he contradicts her, “but I’m not damaging you further. Cuddle in and be content with some gentle making out. Like this,” and he kisses her teasingly, and then harder, and then she kisses him back and presses in. He holds her tightly. “Are you going to be okay tonight?”

“Yeah,” she drags out. “I’ll be fine, now you’ve been here. Makes it all better.” Her gaze drops away. “I couldn’t do this without you.”

Castle embraces her more tightly still. “Any time, Beckett. Every time. Promise.”

“Me too.” He raises eyebrows in question. “If you want to talk. Or search. Any time. I… have resources.”

“You would use NYPD resources?” He’s astonished.

“Better use than for finding Mr Berowitz.”

“Yeah…” He shouldn’t really say the next bit. Technically – well, not so technically – it’s a breach of his undertaking. “When I was writing Storm, I shadowed someone in the CIA. They poked about for me.” He holds his breath.

“The NYPD can’t compete with that,” Beckett says, disappointedly, and leaves it there. She doesn’t seem to be interested in whom he shadowed. “But if you want me to take another look…”

“Maybe. But the NYPD has other advantages,” Castle drawls lazily.

“Oh?”

“This one right here.” He tucks her firmly back against him and runs a big hand over her back. “You’re a definite advantage.”

Beckett curls into him. “I am?” she husks, clearly very ready to take any opportunity to move away from her earlier unhappiness. “Are you trying to take advantage?”

Castle kisses her in response. “I thought I already had. If you hadn’t hurt yourself, I might let you take advantage of me. Seeing as you can’t, you’ll just have to settle for this.” He invades again, finding not the slightest resistance, and when he’s had his fill of making out, Beckett is tidily settled back on his shoulder and very soft and Kat-ish. His hand runs up and down her back without any intelligent input from his brain. Her eyes are half-closed, her breathing gentle, and all in all she seems to have become calm.
“Castle?” arrives sleepily at his ear.

“Mm?” He was perfectly happy nestled warmly together. Thinking is an effort that isn’t required.

“Castle,” Beckett says again, very uncertainly, “could we…”

“Mm?”

“…could we maybe go back to the Hamptons?”

Castle jerks into life, which was a mistake, because he’s jarred Beckett’s sore wrist and she is muttering vile words at it. Not at him, though that clause may be missing the word yet.

“The Hamptons?”

Beckett instantly retreats into herself. “Not if you don’t want to.” He gapes at her. “Okay, it was a dumb idea. Never mind.”

“I think it’s a good idea.”

“You do?” She sounds surprised.

“But we can’t go this weekend. Next weekend. I’ve got to make arrangements.” He peers down at the scarlet tip of her ear which is all he can see. “Why?” The embarrassment level of the atmosphere increases markedly. “Why, Beckett?” An indistinct murmur rises. “Didn’t get that.”

“Everything was easier there,” she rushes out. “Nothing to worry about. Just…”

“Mmm?”

“Just you and me.”

Castle has a sudden rush of blood to the head as he considers the implications of that statement. It sounds very like Beckett hoping for a reprise of that extremely pleasurable and very successful weekend almost three weeks ago. It also sounds like Beckett hoping for a little bubble in which she need not think about anything but them.

Castle is only a little bit wrong. Beckett is hoping for a space of peace in which she can try to admit just how much she feels. She can’t do it in Manhattan. There are too many upsets; too much therapy; too many cases and people and everything pressing at her mind; too many of her problems getting in the way. Out in the Hamptons, the first time, none of that had been there. It had been – well, happy. Easeful and happy. Nothing in the way. Maybe if there were nothing in the way again, she’d be able to say something more than partners. She squirms closer, and curses her sprained wrist, and the advanced hour.

Sure enough, a couple of minutes later, Castle realises the time.

“I have to go.”

“Yeah.” She really wishes he didn’t, but he can’t stay. Not without planning. She closes her throat firmly on a pathetic plea of will I see you tomorrow?

“I’ve got stuff to do tomorrow, but…um…” Castle sounds almost as hopelessly uncertain as she had a moment ago, “…um, would you like to go for brunch somewhere on Sunday, but… oh, you might not want to because Mother and Alexis would be there too” – he droops – “so it would be too much. I get it. You don’t have to because it wouldn’t be just us. My family would be there
“Uh? Sunday brunch?”

“Er… yeah?”

“Uh?” Beckett emits again, completely flabbergasted. “Brunch?”

“A meal between breakfast and lunch.”

“I know what it is, Castle.” And more to the point, she had already thought through, at the beginning of this week, the three reasons Castle’s family make her uncomfortable, and she’d decided that she really ought to be able to deal with all of them, so maybe she should try to cope? If they’re not in the loft… And besides which, she will prove Dr Burke wrong about something else. She can cope with Castle’s family without having to deal with her issues with her father. They’re not connected. “Where?”

“How about Balthazar?” Castle says, clearly surprised that she said yes even after finding out that his mother and daughter would be there.

“Okay. When?”

“Ten. I’ll make a reservation.”

“Okay. See you then.” She turns slightly in his clasp and kisses his neck, being the only reachable part of him. “But…” – she has to force the words out – “but you won’t be upset if it’s all too much and I need to…”

“It’ll be okay. I get it. Nothing more than you can deal with. It’s always up to you to decide.” He smiles happily. “I can always hold your hand to infuse you with courage.”

“Infuse? Am I a tea bag?”

Castle regards Beckett with admiration. “So hot,” he murmurs. “That deserves a kiss. To prove you’re not a tea bag.” Which leads to another round of making out which does nothing at all to induce Castle to leave. Finally he manages to tear himself away, put on his coat, and exit, not without considerable regrets from both parties.

Left to herself, Beckett makes herself not coffee, but a very soothing cup of camomile tea, and tries not to think that she’s made a really big mistake in accepting the invitation to brunch. She can do it. She can. And she will show Dr Burke that she can handle a family situation now, not on his timetable. On hers. She will do this and it will work.

And on that note she finishes her tea and puts herself to bed, where she doesn’t dream at all.

Castle barely makes it past nine o’clock before phoning Dr Burke’s office. If he’d thought that there would be anyone there, he’d have done so at eight. Or seven. Or as soon as he woke up. The necessity to wait has not improved his mood, even if on reflection Dr Burke had only pointed out what Castle himself had been thinking. Fortunately, there is an answer. If Dr Burke’s practice had been shut across the whole weekend Castle might have used some rather less respectable methods to find him.

“Dr Burke, please,” Castle says, coolly. The receptionist is entirely guiltless, and deserves courtesy.
“Certainly. Who shall I say is calling?”

“Mr Castle.”

There are a few beeps as he is put on hold.

“Ah, good morning, Mr Castle. I have been expecting your call. Do you wish to start by venting your understandable emotions relating to Detective Beckett, or by discussing your progress with Mr Beckett?”

Castle is left speechless and gulping. It takes him a moment to recover from Dr Burke’s cool commentary.

“We can start with me telling you that if you upset Beckett like that again I will have your head.”

“Mr Castle, you do not wholly understand the position.” Castle makes a noise reminiscent of an angry eagle. “Detective Beckett’s previous therapist appears to have been utterly incompetent, and indeed harmful. With the assistance of your comments, I have been able to uncover this fact. However, that incompetence has left Detective Beckett with the ingrained behaviours which we discussed, which she is only now understanding: her reluctance to upset those for whom she might care, followed by, when the repressed anger becomes unbearable, a permanent breach which she has herself initiated. She has followed this route with you, with Dr Parrish, and with her father, and no doubt with others beforehand. It is of some note, as I had discussed with you, that the breach with you was not permanent. It may be equally important that Detective Beckett appears to have mended relations with Dr Parrish.” Dr Burke pauses. Castle allows the pause to extend.

“However, Detective Beckett will not be able to overcome her patterns until she confronts her past. To do so, she needs to face her own misapprehensions. This is unlikely to be painless. It appears to me that Detective Beckett does not like to own her weaknesses, nor is it easy for her to admit that she may have been wrong.”

“For sure,” Castle agrees before his brain can stop him.

“Therefore, it is extremely likely that Detective Beckett will be upset, possibly greatly upset, again. Having my head, as you so colourfully put it, will not prevent that. It would be more productive if you merely made yourself available should she need you, as was the case yesterday.”

Castle growls in frustration. Dr Burke has just cut his argument off at the knees. He had been looking forward to tearing him apart, metaphorically, and now he can’t.

“If it is any consolation to you, Detective Beckett did not hesitate to ask for you to be contacted.”

“Oh.”

“Now, Mr Castle, do I infer correctly that you have spoken to Mr Beckett?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“He’ll see you. I expect he’ll want his sponsor about. I think it would be a good plan if you saw him very soon. He’s breaking up. He has no idea why Beckett won’t speak to him. But he’s still dry.”

“I see.” There is a soft tapping sound. “Please let Mr Beckett know that I could see him on
Monday, at six.”

“Okay.”

“Before you go, Mr Castle, I would be remiss if I did not point out that resolving Detective Beckett’s issues is likely to be painful for you. She will need your support, but although I hope that her evident feelings for you will prevent major conflict between you both, I certainly cannot guarantee that. She may well be very angry with the situation, and it is not unknown for such anger to be displaced on to an innocent party, or indeed to a party for whom the subject of therapy has deep feelings. Are you prepared for that? If not, please take some time to think through how best you might deal with it.” Castle swallows. He had not thought of that. “I would also still like to understand the way in which you and Detective Beckett reassociated. I have an earlier session free on Monday, if you are available at eleven?”

“Yeah.”

“Thank you. Your assistance is quite invaluable. Good morning, Mr Castle.”

Castle is left staring at the phone, wondering just how he’d been so effectively neutralised when he’d intended to turn Dr Burke into a small pile of ash and scraps.

Then he realises that he’d better tell Jim that he’s seeing Dr Burke at six on Monday. Another unpleasant call. Still, no point in putting it off. It won’t improve with keeping. Not that it’s going to be pleasant at any time. Castle makes a very unhappy face, which worsens as soon as he realises that he can’t call Beckett immediately afterwards and take the bitter taste away by seeing her, picks up his phone, and dials.

“Jim Beckett.”

“Jim, it’s Rick. Dr Burke – Kate’s psychiatrist – well, he’ll see you at six Monday if you can make it?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.” Castle reels off the number for Jim to confirm the appointment. “He’s pretty…er…thorough. It’s a bit rough. You might want Ed somewhere close by.”

“Thanks.” Jim doesn’t sound particularly thankful. It sounds more like he’s resigned.

There is a short silence which doesn’t sound as if the call is finished. It sounds very much as if there are dammed up words behind Jim’s certainly-gritted teeth.

“Rick,” Jim says, with an undertone of resolution, “why are you doing this?”

“Doing what?” Castle says in an attempt to buy time.

“Getting involved. Pushing me to therapy. Fixing Katie. Every time I ask you something you just say trust you. Why should I?”

“You don’t have to.”

“Stop evading. What’s your interest in all of this – and don’t say it’s the writing. I don’t believe you.”

“Are you asking me my intentions?”
“If that’s what it takes to get a straight answer from you, yes, I am.”

“How is that your business?”

“Whether she talks to me or not I’m Katie’s father.”

“Beckett is twenty-nine years old and it’s up to her what she does with whom.” Castle is sufficiently riled to revert to referring to her as Beckett. “You don’t have any right to ask me my intentions. The only person who can ask me that is Beckett. We don’t need you or anyone else interfering.”

“But you’re quite happy to interfere between me and Katie? How’d you square that circle?” The implication of hypocrisy does nothing to improve Castle’s rapidly worsening mood.

“Believe me, I’d rather not. If it wasn’t something Beckett needed I’d never have spoken to you. She might need you. I don’t. So stop pushing me to tell you stuff. It’s not gonna happen. Are you going to go see Dr Burke or not?”

“Yes. Seeing as there’s nothing else I can do,” Jim adds acidly.

“You could try remembering that I’ve told you Beckett’s okay a couple of times now. That’s a hell of a lot better than you’d have got from her.” Jim’s wince is palpable down the phone. “I can stop that too, if you’d rather not hear from me.”

“You really know how to play dirty, don’t you? Got me right over a barrel. Well, I sure hope you know what you’re doing, because if you don’t I’ll come after you with a gun. You said this would work, so you’d better make it work.”

“All I can do is put the pieces in play. It’s up to you and Beckett to make it work. I’ve got further in getting you back in than you could. I can’t do any more. Enjoy Dr Burke. I don’t.”

Castle cuts the call, irritated and worried in equal measure. Jim’s temper is varying from desperate clinging to Castle-as-last-hope to regarding Castle as the enemy. Although Castle is sympathetic to Jim’s plight, he’s not keen on being used as a punching bag and he is especially not keen on being grilled as to his intentions when he hasn’t discussed them with the object of said intentions. Maybe in the Hamptons…

And on that note he starts to make arrangements so that he can be out of town from Friday night till Sunday evening next weekend without Alexis being worried or unaccompanied. It takes a little time, and involves calling in a few favours to achieve a double sleepover. Alexis is, however, enthusiastic about the prospect of sleepovers, and more enthusiastic about the prospect of seeing Beckett at brunch on Sunday. Castle rapidly makes the reservations, before there are no tables left.

Alexis skips off, perfectly happy with life, to be replaced by Castle’s mother.

“Did I hear mention of brunch, darling?” she carols.

“Yes, Mother. Ten, at Balthazar. I’m sure their hangover drinks will suit you.”

“Pfft! I have never required a hangover cure.”

Castle makes a very disbelieving noise. “Should I remind you that I learned to make Bloody Marys before I left elementary school?”

“Don’t exaggerate, kiddo. You were almost finished junior high.”
“Before that I couldn’t reach the vodka.”

“That growth spurt of yours was certainly well-timed.”

“Mother…”

“Oh, whatever, Richard. Anyway, brunch? To what do we owe this unusual pleasure?”

“Beckett’s coming.”

“Oh?” his mother says, very inquisitively. “I must say, I’d been wondering when she’d be invited back. Is that nice father of hers coming too?”

“No. And I don’t want you to mention him. Beckett and her father had a bit of a disagreement and it’s a sore point. So don’t do anything to poke it.”

“As if I would be so rude,” Martha says, offended.

“I’m sure I can count on you never to be rude. Can’t I?”

“Of course. I’m offended you even asked.”

Castle raises an eyebrow. “In that case I’m sure we’ll all have a really good time. Without questions.”

“Whatever, darling,” floats back to him as Martha exits with a flourish. This makes Castle very nervous. His mother has a nasty tendency to try and “improve” matters. Improvement is rarely the result of her efforts. This has all the hallmarks of a potential disaster, but he can’t head it off. He can’t tell Beckett he doesn’t think she can do it, because that’ll destroy any chance of her having any confidence in her own reactions – or in his – for weeks. He can’t tell his mother anything more without breaking Beckett’s privacy. This is going to be horrible. Even if it goes well, it’s going to be horrible. And just to add to the general quantity of horror, he’s got to see Dr Burke on Monday.

In an effort to avoid all this horror, he turns to his laptop. Unfortunately, all he manages to think of are scenes of utter disaster in which Nikki shoots Rook, Rook’s mother, Rook’s editor, and then goes off on an Uzi-fuelled rampage through the streets of New York ending on the top of the Empire State building with biplanes surrounding her…

He jerks awake. His laptop is complaining that it has no power. He has a sudden fellow-feeling for it. He also feels entirely powerless. He puts it on to charge and then calls Joe, in the Hamptons, to arrange matters for next weekend. At least that’s under some sort of control.
Beckett wakes up on Sunday with a sensation of visceral dread and wondering why on earth she had thought that this was any sort of a good idea. However, she can’t cancel now. She can do this. All she has to do is be Detective Beckett of the Twelfth Precinct. That’s how she’d realised that she can cope with Castle’s family: think of them as witnesses. She dresses accordingly: pristine make-up, formal white button down, navy dress pants, a tailored navy blazer under her coat. When she looks in the mirror she is outwardly perfectly composed. She ignores the sling. It’s been two days, so she can leave it off. Detective Beckett does not wear a sling.

When she arrives at Balthazar, a carefully calculated five minutes after ten, Castle and family are already seated. She can see Alexis laughing at Castle, and Castle’s look and posture of absolute parental adoration towards Alexis. She nearly turns and runs out the door.

She can do this, she tells herself again, and tries to calm the gnarly twist of envy in her gut. She is Detective Beckett, scourge of criminals and murderers, top cop, and she can do this. The thought of proving Dr Burke wrong helps enormously. Getting one over on that far-too-clever shrink would be immensely satisfying. She walks over to their table without a hitch.

“Hey,” she says generally. Castle notices her style of dress instantly, and adjusts his mental assessment of her tension level to suit. That would be high.

“Beckett.”

“Detective Beckett, hi!”

“Hello, Katherine darling,” all come simultaneously. The last causes Beckett to elevate her eyebrows and Castle to stare dropped-jaw at his mother. Darling? His stomach drops to his toes. Oh God. His mother has a plan. Oh, God.

“It’s so nice to see you. Richard barely mentions you.” Good. She does not want to think about being picked over and discussed by the collective Castles.

“I expect it’s all going into his writing,” Beckett says, apparently completely unflustered. She looks at Castle, and grins. Only he would notice the tension below it. “I hope I get to see an advance copy. After all, as your inspiration I think I should be able to edit any parts that are inappropriate.”

“What? No, no, no. No spoilers for you. It would ruin the surprise.”

Beckett slips into the seat next to Castle, carefully left vacant for her.

“Hm,” she emits sceptically. “Is that just a way of ensuring that I can’t object?”

“Oh, Dad’s always like this with his books. No-one gets to see them in full beforehand. He won’t show me any of this one,” Alexis says aggrievedly. “Says it’s not ready.”

Beckett catches Martha’s interestingly inquiring glance at Castle, and internally cringes at her flash of envy that Alexis has clearly been privy to Castle’s previous efforts. Just like family ought to be: involved in each other’s lives. But – it’s okay. It’s how families should be. Treat it like a case, Kate. Watch the interactions and don’t get involved. She breathes slowly and lets the feeling wash through her. She’s got this. Plenty of people don’t have families, and they cope. She can too.
“I never reveal my genius,” Castle says pompously, to noises of disgust. “Unlike the menu, which is a work of revealed genius. Shall we order?” Much to his amazement, the deflection works. Everyone turns to the menu and pretty soon orders have been given, orange juice and coffee have arrived, and small satisfied noises are heard around the table as caffeine – and in his mother’s case, champagne – have done their work. Castle manages to press a reassuring knee against Beckett without anyone being able to detect it, and is much comforted when she presses back. Everything is proceeding nicely.

“Dad said he was going up to the Hamptons at the weekend,” Alexis says happily. “He must need to concentrate. He only ever goes on his own when he’s got a deadline. Well, when he’s past a deadline and Gina’s threatening to shoot him.”

“You must have missed a lot of deadlines, kiddo,” Martha sardonically. “You were up there three weeks ago, claiming you needed to write.”

“You know Gina,” Castle points out acerbically.

“You should see Richard’s beach house, Katherine. Far be it from me to brag”–

“Really?” Castle interjects, and receives a glare.

“– but it’s quite impressive. Of course it doesn’t compare to really successful writers” – Castle winces – “but it’s not bad.”

“Thank you, Mother, for that contribution.”

“Oh, no trouble, darling. I think you should show Katherine the house and the beach. After all, she’s already seen the loft” – Castle has a premonition of her next words just too late – “and Katherine, it would be just lovely if you came back. It was so nice having you for dinner. We should make it a regular occurrence.”

Beckett takes a mouthful of French toast before she answers. Her voice is surprisingly – to Castle – serene. “I’m afraid I really can’t predict when I’m free. We’re so busy that the shift patterns and on-call rota is very heavy right now. Maybe when it’s all calmed down again?”

Martha looks a tad thwarted. It dawns on Beckett that she is trying to matchmake. Bit late. “But surely you have some time off?” It further dawns on Beckett that Martha is trying to press her into coming to the loft. Soon. She’s not ready for that. This morning’s brunch is about as far as she thinks she can go, and she’s rapidly revising that opinion as Martha keeps pressing her point.

“It would be great if you came again,” Alexis chimes in. “You can tell me all about what you do as a cop.” She smiles mischievously. “And about all the trouble Dad gets into.” Beckett hears Castle choke on his eggs. Maybe not all the trouble. Only the printable trouble. But she can’t face the loft, and she certainly has no intention of attempting to watch Alexis with Castle in their home in the near future. She’s already stressed, just from this meeting. The thought of seeing Alexis’s reactions and the way in which she’ll undoubtedly tease her father does nothing for Beckett’s composure or stress levels.

“The next time you have time off, even if you’re on call, you really should come by,” Martha says, rather more forcefully than Beckett appreciates.

“I’m afraid that the job comes first,” she says flatly. “I have to do my share of the work. If I’m on call I have to be ready.”

“But” –
“But no.” Beckett just about manages not to snap. “It’s not possible till we’re not so busy.” Castle’s hand finds her knee under the table. It doesn’t really help. She doesn’t need pushed.

Martha harrumphs. “Well, really” –

“Mother, enough. Beckett has a job to do. Unlike you, she doesn’t rely on someone else to provide her with a home. She’ll come when she’s able to, and you nagging her isn’t going to change that.”

“I do not nag, Richard.” Martha pronounces. “I do wonder why, if there are so many murders suddenly, they haven’t made the news and you haven’t been called to the precinct to shadow Katherine.” She regards them both beadily. It’s clear that she’s still planning to push the point.

Castle fixes his mother with an ominous stare. Before matters – that is to say, her temper – deteriorate further, Beckett puts her cutlery neatly together on her empty plate, drains her coffee, folds her napkin and manages something that bears a vague resemblance to a contented smile.

“Thank you very much for brunch,” she says politely. “It’s been really nice seeing you all, but I have to get home and get ready to go on-shift.” Castle’s hand clenches on her knee. He knows that she isn’t on shift today – but that’s not what Beckett said. She hasn’t, technically, lied, but she’s given a very misleading impression. He also knows that Beckett has reached her limit, and is sensibly leaving before it all goes wrong.


“Ridiculous,” she mutters. “Can’t the city afford more police? Oh, if you have to go I suppose you have to go. It’s a crying shame.”

“Bye, Beckett,” Castle says.

Beckett escapes without – quite – fleeing. As soon as she’s outside she takes a series of very deep breaths, and then goes straight home. When she gets there she collapses on her couch and tries very hard not to scream. That… had been far more difficult than she expected.

But she did it. Take that, Dr Burke. She did it. Mostly. She still found it very difficult to look at their happy family. She definitely felt envious of that. But Dr Burke had said she’s allowed to feel like that. It’s okay to be upset by it. Just as well. She is. She really is. She grabs a handful of Kleenex just in time.

Some time later, the tear-smudged remains of her makeup removed, changed into shorts and a tank top, she unrolls her yoga mat and goes through her forms, still sniffing occasionally. The forms help. Yoga has always helped, if not cured. She bends and flexes, ensuring that she only works through asanas in which she doesn’t place any weight on her right wrist, and when she’s done she’s calmer.

She does not want to think about Martha’s extremely unsubtle efforts to convince her to come to the loft. She does not need matchmade or interfered with: the state of her probably-relationship with Castle is far too fragile to be poked and prodded at – and until she’s able to say the words and make good on the implied promise it’ll remain that way. But, she thinks, but that’s why she wants to go to the Hamptons again: somewhere that she might be free of her demons long enough to say I love you.

Castle is not best pleased with his mother’s meddling. He manages not to say anything that might really let the cat out of the bag, but it’s quite difficult. Fortunately, Alexis chatters happily about
school, her friends, her sleepovers, her extra-curriculars and life in general without requiring much input other than an occasional question and hums of encouragement. His mother reposes herself in a second glass of champagne, which keeps her content. At least, so he’d thought.

“So, kiddo, why won’t Katherine come to dinner? Have you upset her?”

“No, she’s busy.”

“You don’t expect me to believe that, do you? What have you done?”

“I never expect anything of you, Mother, and am rarely disappointed. This time, though, I expect you to believe the truth. Unless you want to call Beckett a liar to her face. That’ll be sure to keep her away from the loft.”

“I still don’t believe it,” Martha mutters. “Something’s up.”

“I stopped telling you anything when I discovered you were using it in your off-off-Broadway improv works, at around age fourteen. Why would I change that now?”

“Dad, I wanna see Detective Beckett’s dad again. He was really interesting.”

“Yes, kiddo. He was. Cultured and mature. So different from most of the people I spend my time with.” Castle glares at his mother. “What? If the cap fits, darling…”

“If you’ve finished insulting me, I think brunch is done.”

“But Dad, can’t you invite Mr Beckett back again?” That’s a discussion Castle has no intention of having with Alexis.

“Not till he and Beckett have time, pumpkin. Have patience. They’ve got lives of their own, and Mr Beckett is a senior attorney, so he’s pretty busy.”

Alexis makes a face and then sticks the tip of her tongue out as Castle retaliates with an equally ridiculous grimace. At that inopportune moment the server comes with the check and is not quite able to conceal her amusement at the byplay. Castle settles the bill with a minimum of embarrassment at being caught mid-moue, and the family depart before – from Castle’s point of view – the day can go any further downhill.

Alexis disappears as soon as they’ve reached the loft, but unfortunately Castle’s mother does not. Two glasses of champagne before noon appear to have loosened her tongue and emboldened her. She’s already far too bold for Castle’s liking.

“So, darling” – she’s back to darling? Oh, God. This is not going to go well. “I understand that you might not want to talk in front of Alexis, but what is going on with you and dear Katherine?”

“Nothing is going on that you need to know about, Mother. Leave Beckett alone.”

“So there is something going on. I knew it.” Castle barely restrains a groan, and considers the benefits of matricide. “Why won’t she come to the loft?”

“Probably because you’d grill her as if she were a burger, Mother.”

Martha tosses her head. “I would not,” she says indignantly. “But it’s clear something is wrong with her and if she’d only come here I’m sure I could give her some maternal advice.”

Castle loses his patience.
“Mother, Beckett’s mother was murdered. The last thing she likely wants is you trying to be maternal. It’s not your natural demeanour. And Beckett certainly doesn’t need your advice.”

“I’m sure I could help. Every girl needs a mother.”

“Mother, no. Just for once, leave it.”

“Well, kiddo, in that case I’ll give you some maternal advice.”

“Yeah?” Castle says cynically.

“Don’t blow it.”

Beckett’s phone beeps some time later.

You okay?

Fine, she sends back, and thinks no more of it. She’s not weeping any more. She got through this morning. She can do this. She should be very pleased with herself. Small steps forward – but the important word there is forward.

About half an hour after that, her door sounds. On opening it, she’s mildly surprised to find Castle on the other side.

“Hey.”

“You didn’t have much brunch, so I thought I’d bring you some more,” Castle says, producing a box.

“What’s that?”

“You’ll see,” Castle says mischievously. Beckett makes a grab for the box, fails to reach it as Castle raises it above his head, and realises slightly too late that the net effect is that she’s less than an inch from Castle’s chest and she is still in shorts and a tank.

Castle, it is clear, did realise. Something about the way his other arm has snaked around her waist tells Beckett that she’s been suckered.

“There,” he says, happily smug. “Didn’t think you’d fall for that, Beckett.”

“Didn’t think you were still using high school tricks to try to get the girl.”

“Try? Succeeded, Beckett.” She tugs hopefully, and doesn’t move either herself or Castle’s encircling arm. “See? Got you. Right where I want you,” he leers, “and I must say I like this style of nearly dressed.”

“Did that line work in high school too?”

“No,” Castle says, “but this did,” and he leans down and kisses her. It’s all very satisfactory… until Beckett swipes the box and disappears with it to put the couch between them. “Hey!”

“Gotcha,” Beckett says, and opens the box with alacrity. Her face falls. “What the hell is this?”

“You didn’t have any fruit or vegetables this morning. Not good for you, Beckett. So I brought you a kale smoothie. Home made by my own fair hand.”
“Kale smoothie?”

“Yeah. All the vitamins you could possibly need.”

“You’re kidding me, right?”

“Yeah. Look properly. Lift the lid on the other side of the box.”

Beckett’s face changes instantly. “Cupcakes!”

“Is that better?”

“Yep. You can have the smoothie and I’ll eat the cupcakes.”

“What? No. No, no, no. Neither of us drink the smoothie and we both eat the cupcakes.”

“Okay.” Beckett turns to find plates, not letting go of the box. Castle prowls up behind her and takes it away. “Hey! My cupcakes.”

“Our cupcakes.” He emphasises the point by swiping his finger across the top of one cake’s tower of frosting.

He does not expect Beckett to turn with the speed of a preying panther, grab his hand and lick the frosting from his finger with a wicked, sensual swirl of her tongue, then meet his eyes with a challenge which almost covers the shadow of pain. The box is put down, rapidly. Beckett is pulled away from it, very rapidly. And Castle descends upon her mouth, hauls her hard against him and keeps her there with a firm hand spread over her ass where she can feel just what her action has done. Beckett doesn’t seem to be objecting to any of it at all. In fact, she’s melted into him and has brought one long leg up around his middle and is moving over him in a very seductive fashion indeed. Challenge accepted, Beckett.

His tongue takes possession of her lush lips, keeping her head to his; his hand on her rear pressing her tightly against hard hot weight and not letting her escape him. She’s soft and giving and receptive and his, and he will take that hint of pain away.

“You’re very provoking, Beckett,” he growls darkly into her ear, and nips the lobe. “And very provocative.” His fingers skate across the bare skin at her midriff, then dip fractionally below the waistband of her shorts. She wriggles.

“Is this what you do when you’re provoked?” she husks. “Maybe I should provoke you more often.” She runs a naughty hand down his stomach and somehow manages to insinuate it between them, where it curls over the thick outline. Ohhhh. More… around it.

“If you provoke me, I’ll have to respond appropriately. Like this.” He detaches her fingers and keeps close hold of both hands, behind her back, dipping her so that he can trace down her throat and into the valley between her breasts, nudging her tank out of the way. Just before he takes her nipple into his mouth, he stops. “Or like this.” His other hand runs down over her spine, past the hand imprisoning hers, over her ass and cups between her legs, not quite pressing on her. She emits a thin noise of need and desire, and tries to force the touch. “Not yet,” Castle rasps. “You provoked me. You’re going to get what your provocation deserves.”

“What?” she half-gasps.

“Me.” His fingers find the edge of her shorts and slither underneath, dancing along the edge of her folds, slicking through damp heat. Wriggle turns to writhe under his touch. “Provoking you.” It’s
turned to a deep, velvety whisper, straight from her ears to her core. Just his words hold the promise of heat and hardness, waiting to fill her. She curves into his frame, and lets his strength envelop her: her hands free to bite into his shoulders, her mouth hot against his. With his arms around her and his hands on her, she’s safe from everything but him. It’s far too late for her to be safe from him.

Castle’s fingers tempt and tease and entice her body to surrender to him, to let him take her anywhere he wants to go – everywhere she wants to go. She gives in and allows him to play her as he chooses, owning her mouth and then sliding fingers over her until he’s breathing in her soft moans; slipping thick digits in and out till she’s repeating his name, over and over because he’s all that there is.
“Cupcakes.”

“Uh?”

“I want cupcakes. And coffee. And then you can tell me how you felt about my mother pushing you this morning.”

“I don’t wanna.”

“No talk, no cupcakes. You’ll get kale smoothie instead.” Beckett tries to show her displeasure at that idea, and realises that she’s currently stuck, nestled tightly against him on the couch. “Not much talking. Just why you did it at all.”

“To show Dr Burke that he’s not half as clever as he thinks he is. He said I couldn’t do it. But I did.”

Castle isn’t actually convinced of that. He thinks that Dr Burke might be even more clever than he thinks he is. Castle thinks that Dr Burke might have trailed a challenge in front of Beckett by telling her that she wasn’t ready to be put in a family situation.

“You did,” he says happily. He has a sudden thought. “Your wrist? I didn’t hurt it, did I?” Beckett tentatively flexes it. “No. It’s fine.”

“Be careful of it. I don’t like my Beckett being hurt.”

“I noticed,” she murmurs. “I thought you were going to save me the trouble of shooting Dr Burke.” The shading of painful emotion is back in her voice. Suddenly she stops. “My Beckett?” she says ominously.

“Yes,” Castle replies, very definitively. “Mine.”

“Says who?”

“Me. You’re my Beckett. My Kate. And when I pet you and you purr, sometimes you’re even my Kat. Right now, you’re just mine, though.” He smooths over her hair and down her back. She curves into the stroke.

“Your mother” –

“is trying to get you to the loft. I know,” he says ruefully. “Stopping her is like standing in front of an eighteen-wheeler.”

“I’ll get there,” Beckett says. It sounds like a vow.

“When you’re ready. Anyway, I haven’t invited you.” Beckett splutters. “You have to wait for an invitation,” Castle says primly, intending to replace pain with snark.

“Like you do?”

“That’s totally different.”
“How?”

“If I waited for an invitation I wouldn’t be able to do this,” and he kisses her, “or this,” and his hand slides over her waist and palms her breast, “or this,” and his other hand traces intimate patterns on her shorts.

“If you waited for an invitation, I might do this,” and Beckett slips the buttons of his shirt apart and inserts a delicate hand to play with his nipples, “or this,” and the hand glides down and opens his pants, “or this,” and it curls around him again to leave him instantly hard in her grip. She slides down, and up. “But you didn’t wait,” and her hand disappears. She looks up at his hot blue gaze and smirks. “So I guess I won’t do that.” She skips a beat. “Cupcakes and coffee?” She tries to stand up, and finds it impossible.

“I don’t want coffee or cupcakes any more. I want you,” Castle growls. He stands with Beckett still tucked against him, picks her up bodily, and carries her to her bedroom. “You’re provoking me again. And you know what happens if you provoke me.”

Beckett smirks. “Do I? Show me again. I think I’ve forgotten.” Saying that may have been a small mistake. Seconds later she finds herself naked and pinned down by a very aroused and equally naked Castle. He reaches down to stroke through her, circling the nerves and not quite pressing. “Castle…”

“Yes?”

“Castle… ohhhh… that’s not fair.”

“Provoking me wasn’t fair,” he says lazily, and circles a little harder. She gasps. “Something you want, Beckett?” She reaches for him, and is forestalled. He slides down a little, and rubs hard flesh against wetness. “Uh-uh. Just let me. Stop making decisions, and leave it to me. You know you’ll like it.” His voice has dropped to sinful seductiveness, stroking her synapses from the inside out, hypnotic. She lets him take the lead and dissolves into the sensation of him sliding slowly into her: filling her full and wholly possessive as he takes her higher, takes her further, and then simply takes her over with him.

Castle wraps his Beckett into his arms and snuggles her in. The stress and hint of pain in her eyes have left her once more, and she’s comfortable – or comforted – beside him. Next weekend, he thinks, out of Manhattan, away from all her cares and troubles: next weekend, they’ll have time to be themselves.

“Cupcakes,” Beckett mumbles, some little time later.

“Coffee,” Castle mumbles in return.

“‘Kay.” Beckett stumbles out of her bed and into the bathroom. Castle watches her, and silently whistles at the bruising which he hadn’t earlier noticed. Shortly there is the sound of cleaning up. She emerges damp and tousled around the edges, to don a soft t-shirt and skirt. By the time Castle has tidied himself and dressed, there is coffee and the cupcakes are neatly divided into halves.

“Your father will see Dr Burke,” Castle says awkwardly.

“Okay. Thanks.” Beckett says nothing more about that, but her knuckles are white on the coffee mug. Castle declines to mention his own appointment, or her bruising. Nothing further of any importance is said, and Castle leaves, reluctantly, accompanied by a soft kiss and hug which does nothing to decrease his reluctance.
At five to eleven Castle presents himself at Dr Burke’s office. This time the receptionist doesn’t bother with an appreciative up-and-down. No point, if there’s no reaction, and it was pretty clear on Friday that she wasn’t going to get one.

“Mr Castle.” Dr Burke greets him with a professional smile.

“Hello,” Castle replies rather coldly and certainly warily.

“How is Detective Beckett?”

“Okay.” Dr Burke waits. Castle falls into the silence. “She came out to brunch at Balthazar with us yesterday.”

“Us?”

“My family.”

“Ah.”

“You planned that, didn’t you? You told her she shouldn’t try knowing that she would.”

“It seemed a reasonable conclusion to draw.” Dr Burke is sporting a very satisfied expression. “If she did not, there was no harm done. If she did, either it would be successful or you would be there to assist.”

“Has anyone told you that you’re a manipulative bastard?” Castle says with considerable fury.

“Frequently. I consider it to be a compliment,” Dr Burke says dryly. “How did your brunch progress?”

“She was stressed, but she got through. My mother pushed her pretty hard, but she dealt.”

“And did she stay long?”

Castle is trapped into truth. “Not as long as I’d have liked. She left not long after Mother started pushing.”

“Would she have agreed to brunch at your home?”

Castle sighs. “No.”

“I see. Some progress, but not as much as we might have hoped. However, that is not the main reason why you are here. I wish to understand how you convinced Detective Beckett to re-associate with you, and why. After all, she could not have made herself less attractive to you than she did by telling you that she could not bear your family. So why did you continue to associate with her?”

“She did it to protect her father. I worked it out, after I got home. I’d never have got it if Jim hadn’t walked into the middle of it, though. She was doing it deliberately to make me think it was all totally pointless. She wanted me to think the worst of her and if I hadn’t heard Jim’s version I’d have believed it. She was very convincing.”

“Because it was true. Detective Beckett could not bear to see you with your family.”

“Yeah. I know.” Dr Burke is, again, surprised. Mr Castle’s intelligence is quite substantial. “So I decided I wasn’t going to let her get away with it. Misleading me.”
“Why not?”

“Because” – Mr Castle stops. “The story wasn’t right. It didn’t fit the character.”

“That is not the only reason. The whole truth, please.”

“Because there was a different person. Not just Beckett, but someone who was softer and who just needed affection and to stand down. I didn’t think she let anyone see that side of her. But she let me. So I reckoned there was something more there.”

“Mm. Very astute.”

“So then Mrs Berowitz called Beckett and she just went. But I called her later and she was at the precinct so I showed up. She didn’t want me to. But I wasn’t letting her walk away without listening to me, so she just had to suck it up.”

“You said that she threatened to arrest you, but that you went to her apartment and found her intoxicated. Why did she threaten to arrest you?”

“I told her the story of what she was doing. She didn’t like being called on the truth.”

“I see. Please continue.”

“She was sodden drunk. Kept saying that she had to support everyone, that everyone needed her. She didn’t want anyone wanting anything any more.”

“Ah.”

“So anyway, it was clear that she was still drowning in guilt for walking away from her father, and over-compensating by trying to help everyone else – Mrs Berowitz. I showed up the next day, and then evening, and didn’t ask any questions at all. And…er…”

“Physical consolation proved effective,” Dr Burke states, based on his observations from Friday. How irritating. That is not a method that would be effective for any other person besides Mr Castle.

“Yeah.”

Hmm. Dr Burke considers for a moment, rapidly reorganising a number of data points: Mr Castle’s behaviour on Friday evening, Mr Beckett’s prolonged – in Detective Beckett’s eyes – weakness, Detective Beckett’s desire that no-one should need her or want anything from her, Mr Castle’s comment on Thursday evening that Detective Beckett is surrounded by tough guys, and finally the mention of “intervention” to solve the issue of Dr Parrish.

“Mr Castle, please would you explain how the intervention to which you referred, in order to resolve Detective Beckett’s quarrel with Dr Parrish, took place?”

“Lanie kept ringing everyone and yelling. Eventually we got a bit fed up, so Espo and I cooked up a plan to get Lanie in one bar with Ryan and Espo, so they could talk to her, and I’d take Beckett to another bar with O’Leary and we’d talk to her.”

“Who is O’Leary?” Dr Burke interjects.

“Detective O’Leary.” Mr Castle’s eyes sparkle. “He’s a mobile mountain. He’s about six-ten, and just about as wide. He and Beckett go way back, right to when she was a rookie.”
“Their relationship?”

“Oh, he’s gay. They’re pals. Paired up for work for a while when in uniform, but nothing else. He’s great. He had all sorts of stories. He’s...um... like her big brother. He’s pretty much the only person I’ve seen who can convince her to do anything at all. He told her to try to patch it up with Lanie and she did.”

“Mm. How very interesting. Am I correct in thinking that you and Detective O’Leary dealt with Detective Beckett while Detectives Ryan and Esposito dealt with Dr Parrish, and that you then collectively allowed Detective Beckett and Dr Parrish to talk?”

“Well, mostly. It took a bit more intervention. We got told to get lost, but each time it looked as if it was falling apart one of us went up to step in. All we got was told to butt out, but by the time they’d finished yelling at us they were pretty much on the same page.”

“Hm.” Dr Burke is beginning to understand. “Mr Castle, do you not detect a pattern here?” Mr Castle looks entirely blank. “Detective Beckett has responded to you and to Detective O’Leary. Neither of you need her to support you.”

“Oh. I thought it was about not talking. But it’s about protecting. She doesn’t have to. Protect us, I mean.” Mr Castle pauses. Dr Burke mentally applauds. “But she doesn’t need to protect Ryan or Espo but she doesn’t let them tell her anything – oh. Of course. She’s their boss. Same idea.”

“Exactly, Mr Castle.” Dr Burke waits expectantly.

“You think there’s something more.” Mr Castle acquires an unfocused gaze which Dr Burke assumes denotes thinking. “Oh – I see. No-one around her – none of the tough guys – needs protected – it’s she who needs time away from protecting people. Or she needs protected. Well. Very occasionally. And she doesn’t exactly ask for it...” he trails off. “I get it. She doesn’t ask because it wasn’t there. She even said that asking never helped. And she can’t ask for help from her subordinates – not that they formally are subordinates, but she’s the senior detective in the team.”

“Indeed. Her father has fundamentally failed in providing protection, at a time when it was most needed.” Dr Burke steeps his fingers. “Detective O’Leary seems to have managed it, and it is clear that in some manner you have made it clear, and far more importantly made Detective Beckett believe, that you will protect her when necessary. Therefore you managed to re-associate.” He hesitate. “This does not assist me in finding a way to help Detective Beckett re-establish a relationship with her father. She does not believe that her father will be able to support her, and it is extremely unlikely that she would attempt to find out.”

“But... but can’t you at least get them on good terms?”

“Naturally. However, you are hoping for a “happy ending”, Mr Castle, and I have to inform you that the ending is unlikely to be as conclusive as you would like. Real life is rarely as tidy as a book can be, and I would, if I were you, temper your hopes for Detective Beckett’s relationship with her father. You have already achieved much in attaining a relationship of your own with Detective Beckett. Do not over-reach and damage that.”

“I thought you said you didn’t do relationship counselling?”

“I do not. You are important to Detective Beckett’s recovery and happiness. That is my only interest.”
Castle shrugs unhappily. “She won’t be properly happy till she’s fixed matters with her father.”

“Fixing matters, as you put it, does not always entail the re-establishment of the original relationship. Sometimes the best that you can hope for is to establish a different, but effective, pattern of interaction.”

“Oh,” Castle says disappointedly.

“Concentrate on your own relationship with Detective Beckett, and leave that with her father to me. It will be much more profitable.” Dr Burke looks at the clock. “We are almost at the end of the session. Is there anything more for today?”

“No. Thank you.”

Castle returns home, somewhat bruised. He had, he realises, very much wanted to give Beckett the perfect happy ending, mending all her issues with her father. Only you can save yourself. He can’t. He can save them, because Beckett’s putting all her considerable will behind that, but not her relationships with others. She needs to decide to do that, and she still isn’t there.

He turns his mind to the other deeply interesting lesson from today. Beckett needs protected. Or… or wants to know that someone will protect her if need be? Castle isn’t even sure that wants is the right word – Beckett is only too likely to deny it if asked. But it fits. Even right back at the very start, on her joyless birthday, she’d cuddled in and let him lead and been soft and not at all wanting to take charge. And since then it’s been all about… hm. Not asking questions – protecting her privacy. Mildly assertive lovemaking – letting her know that he’ll make the decisions and let her not be in charge: let her stand down in safety. And latterly, coming when she needed him, to gather her in and protect her from the world.

Ah. It’s not what he’d imagined: romantically, swashbucklingly slaying dragons for a fair maiden. Beckett is perfectly capable of slaying her own dragons – at work. But outside work, she needs a safe haven, somewhere she’s protected and petted and cossetted close and doesn’t need to slay dragons. And he can give her that, because he’s secure enough, strong enough to let her shoot the bad guys, so long as he’s the only one with whom she stands down later. He has his own successes, his own reputation, his stable life; and Beckett needs someone who doesn’t need to rely on her for support or validation.

Dr Burke has carefully ensured that his schedule is clear for half an hour after Mr Castle’s session should end. Partly, this was to allow for over-running. Partly, it was to allow him to take account of any new insights or information which might become apparent. Dr Burke is not sure that he has learned anything completely new about Detective Beckett’s issues, but he has certainly been able to put another set of matters into their correct context.

Detective Beckett was stable for as long as she thought she was protecting her father and that he needed her. It appears that Detective O’Leary may have provided some respite, of a platonic nature. Then she came into the ambit of Mr Castle, who was instantly attracted and more importantly very much inclined to act upon that attraction. Mr Castle, Dr Burke surmises, is, or was, not used to resistance to his charms. Cynically, money, fame, good looks and a certain air of forceful masculinity would probably remove most objections. Detective Beckett, however, did resist, for some time. Dr Burke further surmises that Mr Castle had first wormed his way into Detective Beckett’s affections by applying that same forceful masculinity. It seems the only possible way in which two such apparently different characters would come together.
Unfortunately, a series of misunderstandings, undoubtedly caused by Detective Beckett’s inability to ask for help or indeed to reveal any weakness, and then compounded by Mr Castle’s fundamental belief in the sanctity of family bonds, led to a major breach. On the other hand, had the breach not occurred, it is extremely unlikely that Detective Beckett and Mr Castle would have formed such a strong bond. Mr Castle is considerably tougher, mentally and emotionally, than Dr Burke would have expected. He is certainly, in Dr Burke’s expert opinion, capable of providing Detective Beckett with the stability she will need. He is also intelligent enough, both in raw IQ and emotionally, to understand her issues.

Now, about her father. Mr Beckett has no idea how he had behaved while drunk. Detective Beckett has not told him of his words or actions. Mr Castle evidently does know, and has, wisely, declined to interfere. An amateur becoming involved – such as Mr Castle, or indeed Detective Beckett’s previous therapist – would be profoundly unhelpful. He makes a small note in his diary to contact an equally well-respected colleague, to discuss what should be done in regard to the previous therapist.

Returning to Mr Beckett, the first priority is to understand what he knows about how he behaved, and what he had thought about the way in which Detective Beckett had treated him once he became dry. After that, Dr Burke will need to consider how, or indeed whether, to undertake the exceedingly delicate task of enlightening him as to the effects of the actions Mr Beckett does not yet know he took. Intertwined with these two difficult items is the potential for Mr Beckett to introduce a new complication to this matter, as if there were not quite sufficient complexities already, if he should resent Mr Castle’s relationship with Detective Beckett or indeed Mr Castle’s interference in his relationship with his daughter.

Really, it is just as well that Detective Beckett had come to him, Dr Burke. No lesser practitioner – as has been seen – would be capable of unravelling this tangle. However, he does admit to some relief that the majority of his patients are much less complex and more easily assisted.

On that thought, he turns to one such patient.
At six p.m. Dr Burke is advised that Mr Beckett has arrived. He stands to greet him. Mr Beckett, he immediately notes, bears little physical resemblance to his daughter. Dr Burke concludes that Detective Beckett is, as she had implied, of very similar physical type to her mother. Mr Beckett is only of moderate height, and more wiry than muscular. Interestingly, he bears no physical resemblance whatsoever to Mr Castle. A minor complication: that Detective Beckett might unknowingly have been seeking out a man who physically resembles her father, but with the strength she thinks that her father lacks, is negated, much to Dr Burke’s relief. Further complexity is emphatically not required in this situation.

Dr Burke notes Mr Beckett’s slight air of unconscious hostility, and a more evident air of discomfort and wariness.

“Good evening, Mr Beckett. Thank you for agreeing to meet with me.”

“You’re welcome.” Mr Beckett does not sound welcoming at all.

“Mr Beckett, please explain why you agreed to see me.”

“Because if I don’t, Rick Castle will ensure that I never see or talk to my daughter again,” Mr Beckett spits out.

Oh, dear, Dr Burke thinks, in the strongest imprecation he allows himself within his treatment room. Here is the next complication.

“And you wish to resume contact with Detective Beckett?”

“Are you insane? Of course I do. I thought you were supposed to be a good shrink, not some quack charlatan.” Dr Burke begins to discern some considerable similarity of temperament between Mr Beckett and Detective Beckett.

“However, that does not require seeing me. How exactly do you think Mr Castle will know if you simply walk out of here now? I certainly would not disclose that to him. Moreover, how do you think he will stop you contacting your daughter? He can hardly confiscate your cell phone, or hers.”

“She won’t answer. She won’t see me. The only way I’ve found out that she’s okay at all is Rick Castle.”

“It is very hard,” Dr Burke says gently, from his standpoint as a man slightly older than Mr Beckett, “to watch one’s children decide that another means more to them than their parent does, and to see them form other emotional bonds. Even as they grow up under normal circumstances, that is a difficult separation.”

Mr Beckett winces. “I thought she loved me,” he whispers. “But right now it seems like she never did, ever since…”

Dr Burke is already certain that Mr Beckett requires a totally different technique from the blunt, harsh truths which have been effective with Detective Beckett. This man is close to broken, and needs empathy and gentleness. It is as well that he, Dr Burke, is older than Mr Beckett. This would be far more difficult were he younger, and did he not have a grown family himself. Mr Beckett will respond well to Dr Burke’s experience and age. Too, Detective Beckett can rely on
Mr Castle’s gentle but unstinting strength. Mr Beckett has no such option, although he will, of course, have his sponsor.

“Mr Beckett, Mr Castle believes that your daughter needs you. He has struck me as an intelligent man, and therefore he must have some reason for that belief. I, too, believe that it is necessary for you and Detective Beckett to repair your relationship. It is unlikely that it will be as it was before your wife passed. That, however, is perfectly normal and expected. It is inevitable that as your daughter grew to adulthood, your relationship would change. I have certainly discovered that as my children have matured, our relationships have constantly changed, sometimes with some violence and difficulty. I too am a parent, and therefore I believe that we have some common ground.”

Dr Burke smiles, ruefully and parentally, remembering – and allowing Mr Beckett to see him remembering – occasions on which such change had occurred. He decides that the most effective way to help Mr Beckett, who clearly needs such help, is to treat him as a man of experience and depth, and as a parent who has shared some of the same challenges as has Dr Burke.

“Mr Beckett, given that you are here of your own volition, and may depart at any time you wish, would you prefer to be addressed, and to address me, with first names? As I said, we have some common ground. You are not a patient, but here as a parent and as someone whose insights will help your daughter heal. I do not wish you to feel that you are being treated,” Dr Burke is, here, skirting the edges of truth, “but that you are assisting in treatment.” He pauses, until Mr Beckett inclines his head. “My name is Carter.”

“Call me Jim.”

“Shall we begin again, Jim?”

“Yeah. I’m sorry for being so tetchy. But… I thought everything was fine, and then she met Rick Castle and suddenly everything started falling apart. I thought he’d be good for her, and all that happened was that half the time she was with him and the other half either she fought with him or she wasn’t happy at his place and then she just told me that if she wasn’t enough family for me she was done. And she hasn’t spoken to me since. I just keep calling, and she doesn’t pick up. If it wasn’t for Rick I wouldn’t know anything.”

“That must be exceedingly irritating, as well as reassuring.”

“How do you – oh. One of yours did it, didn’t they?”

“Yes. My eldest daughter – I have two daughters, and a son – took offence at my – as she put it – practising on her. She refused to speak to me for some time. Her then-boyfriend, however, did. I did not appreciate the gatekeeping.”

Mr Beckett relaxes somewhat. “Yes, nor do I. I know he has Katie’s interests at heart – in fact, I thought he’d be good for her almost as soon as I met him: he’s got guts and he doesn’t let Katie push him around – but it doesn’t make it easier. Especially since he never actually tells me anything. I’m sure he knows what’s really wrong, but he’s as close-mouthed as an oyster. Just keeps saying to let him take care of Katie and trust that it’ll all be okay in the end.”

Dr Burke thinks idly that Mr Beckett will, rather soon, be escorting his daughter up the aisle, and remembers with a tiny pang how he had felt, doing the same.

“Jim, I appreciate that this is very uncomfortable for you, but would you please tell me about the immediate aftermath of your wife’s death, and include how you interacted with your daughter at
the time? If it is too painful, please stop, and we will talk of other things.”

“Shoes and ships and sealing wax?”

“Or cabbages and kings,” Dr Burke caps, and the two older men exchange a smile that contains tentative tendrils of mutual appreciation.

“Nicely done, Carter. We used to play that game at home.”

“We did too.” Dr Burke steeples his fingers, and waits for Mr Beckett to continue.

“I ought to go back a little further. Johanna – my wife – and I, well, we met at college. Not quite childhood sweethearts, but near enough. Never really looked at anyone else, not after I met her. Still, it wasn’t all wine and roses, we argued some, pretty harshly at times, but she was it for me. Me for her, too, which was a bit more surprising. We were both aiming for the top: she wanted to be the best defence attorney in Manhattan, I was into commercial law. Both ambitious, both hard-working. We wanted a family, but that… well. That was a bit harder. Didn’t come easily. Johanna had wanted several, and I sure didn’t object, but we only ever had Katie, and that took a long time. So when Katie came along, everything was pretty much perfect. As much as it ever is with a child, anyway.” Dr Burke smiles in sympathy. Children are hard work, no matter how much they are loved and wanted.

“Katie was bright, and mule-headed stubborn. Wanted to be the best at everything. Stuyvesant, scholarships, Stanford, that sort of thing. She was just like her mother had been. Even looked a lot like her, as she got through her teens.”

Dr Burke files that away. Detective Beckett had been like her mother in both looks and personality. That explains some more of Mr Beckett’s behaviour.

“And then Johanna was murdered. Stabbed in an alley. Katie was home for Christmas from Stanford. It was dreadful. I couldn’t believe she was gone. I had a drink, and it softened the blow. Got the funeral arranged. After that, I just couldn’t cope with anything. Katie… well, Katie just took over. Just like her mother would have done. And I couldn’t deal with the resemblance, so I drank more until I didn’t see it any more. Katie didn’t talk about her, and that helped. Then she went back to Stanford, but by that time I was already too far in to stop. Didn’t want to stop. Katie didn’t seem to need me… didn’t ask me for anything, didn’t talk about anything. She called a lot, though. She had the same voice, the same turns of speech. On the phone, it could have been her mother. So I drank some more, to blot the memories out.”

Mr Beckett stops. “I know now that I let Katie down then. She needed her mother and she needed to grieve too. But I didn’t see it at the time. All I saw was the bottle, and oblivion. It wiped out the memories, and it wiped out how alike they were.”

Mr Beckett’s emotions are raw, still. He is, however, not shying away from the first key point: that he failed his daughter.

“And then she turned up at home. She was there when I woke up. Said she’d got in the previous evening – I didn’t – I don’t – remember that at all, even now. She said I’d been drunk, and she was right. I don’t know what happened. I was so sorry. I promised I’d never do it again, and I meant it. But of course I did. She’d cleared out all the booze, but I just bought more. She came home more often – God knows how she funded it – and then she transferred to NYU, and even then I couldn’t or wouldn’t stop, even when she gave up Stanford. It was always her dream. She quit her dream to try to save me and I wouldn’t be saved.”
“Jim, do you remember anything at all about how you reacted to your daughter while you were still drinking?

“I was drunk so much... when I was sober, she was the only thing I had left. I asked her not to go, not to leave me. She was my only good thing. And then she left. Stopped getting me out the tank, stopped taking my calls, cut me off completely.”

“But you remember nothing of how she, and you, behaved when you were not sober?”

“No. When I went through AA, and the twelve steps – I spent nine months in rehab first – I told her everything I remembered, and asked if there was more I should know, and she cried, and said no, that it was enough. Ever since then, she’s been there.”

Dr Burke passes Mr Beckett the Kleenex. “Your daughter had unstintingly supported you since you became sober, had she not?”

“Yes. She couldn’t have done more. If I called, she’d always answer; if I needed to go to a conference – that’s always hard – she’s on the end of a phone. We had dinner every week, she comes on Christmas Day – she takes the early shift and we have our meal in the evening. She says it’s so the guys with young children can have the early part off, be with their families. I get that. We brought her up to do the right thing. Sometimes I wish we’d have the morning too: the whole day together, but Christmas is most important to kids.”

“I see. And does she ever refer to the time before you became sober?”

“No.”

“Mm.” Dr Burke pauses. So far, so good, and informative. As Mr Castle had surmised, Mr Beckett knows of no reason why his daughter should have given up on him. However, Detective Beckett had comprehensively avoided the issue of talking to her father about his behaviour when drunk, of which Mr Beckett has no memory. Dr Burke does not condemn him. He understands what it is to love one’s spouse that much. “What made you begin to worry that all was not well?”

Mr Beckett takes some time to collect his thoughts. “Well, it was pretty recent. First off it was fine. Really good, in fact. Katie bought me a game for Christmas, called Sorry, and she had been mentioning Rick for a few weeks, and it sounded like they were getting well-acquainted.” He smiles fondly. “So I teased her a little, like you do” – Dr Burke nods, and smiles reminiscently, equally fondly – “and it all sounded rather hopeful. But then I had to go to a conference, so Katie invited me round for dinner before I went and when I showed up I could hear them rowing from before the elevator doors opened. It was pretty clear they were furious with each other, but Katie was shut down mad, and Rick was yelling. I didn’t know what to do, so I just filibustered. He’s a big guy, Rick, and he’s a bit scary when he’s mad – though Katie’s just as scary, so I guess they cancelled out. Anyway, I said whatever came into my head, that Katie’d talked about him, that we’d played the game a lot, and Rick was yelling. I didn’t know what to do, so I just filibustered. He’s a big guy, Rick, and he’s a bit scary when he’s mad – though Katie’s just as scary, so I guess they cancelled out. Anyway, I said whatever came into my head, that Katie’d talked about him, that we’d played the game a lot, and suddenly he went sheet white and then Katie said he was leaving but I just kept talking, don’t know why, said he was her friend and told him she’d saved me. He went even paler, and then Katie used a voice that God Himself wouldn’t say no to and Rick went. Her mother used to have a voice a bit like that, but never quite as harsh. Suppose she needs to be harsh, as a cop.”

“She is a remarkable woman,” Dr Burke says, without actually specifying what he regards as remarkable. Disconcerting Mr Beckett will be unhelpful. He will have quite enough to process.

“I tried to find out what was going on, but Katie wasn’t talking about it. Anyway, a few days later, I got a call from Rick.”
“That must have been surprising.”

“I’ll say. So he showed up, as nervous as any teen meeting his girlfriend’s dad, and then he told me he wasn’t going to use me in a book, which I didn’t exactly expect to hear. He’s using Katie as his inspiration, though he does seem to understand the difference between her and his character. Well” – Mr Beckett smiles rather mischievously – “I pushed him a bit, to see what he was made of, and he got mad and bit back, so I thought he was likely able to stand up to Katie, and I told him my story. I believed him. He’s not the sort of guy to stab you in the back.”

“No,” Dr Burke agrees.

“And… well, I liked him. And it was clear that whether he knew it or not he was head over heels for Katie. What she felt… well, that I wasn’t sure about. Still not sure, though if I believe Rick then likely she’s just as gone on him.”

“I believe that to be the case,” Dr Burke says, dryly.

“Good,” Mr Beckett says. “I think.” He pulls his thoughts back on track. “So then Katie wanted some background for a case and I thought I’d like a look at both of them together so I suckerd them into coming for dinner. I didn’t notice anything that wasn’t like usual, that evening. Then they called me up and suggested I talk to some woman whose husband was an alcoholic. Berger, Barrow, something like that.”

“Berowitz.”

“That’s it. Fluffy blonde, couldn’t have argued her way out of a wet paper bag. My sponsor thought it was a pretty good plan. Rick’s idea, though.” This does not surprise Dr Burke. He finds it unlikely in the extreme that Detective Beckett would ever have asked her father to undertake an action which she felt would be too much for him. She would have been wrong, as is evident. She would also, unconsciously, be protecting herself from the situation, whilst pretending that she was only protecting her father. Dr Burke will need to hear Mr Beckett’s view of that meeting. Detective Beckett’s had been spare in the extreme, and had then only been mentioned in the context of her father’s highly unfortunate comment about Mr Castle’s family; and Mr Castle’s expansion had, naturally, not been able to enlighten Dr Burke as to Detective Beckett’s emotions.

“So I thought I’d have another little look at Rick with Katie, and told them to come round for breakfast. Katie wasn’t happy with me. Dad’s privilege, though. Anyway, they came, and then I showed Rick all the family photos, and Katie was just completely zoned out. I thought she’d at least complain, but she just wasn’t there at all. I was a bit worried about that. So – er – I finagled Rick into having us over for dinner, and that’s when it all started to go really wrong. Katie wasn’t happy. Wasn’t happy about me questioning why she was running round after the Berowitzes, and sure wasn’t happy about going to dinner. So when I actually thought about it, it finally struck me that Katie was always cheery when I saw her or spoke to her, which didn’t seem right. Then I realised that Rick had said that Katie wouldn’t talk to him because he was going to upset me. And then I started to wonder what Katie thought she was doing, because it wasn’t what I thought she was doing. I thought we were being a family, but I began to think that she might think she was protecting me. So I started to worry.”

“How did the dinner go?” Mr Beckett had arranged a dinner with Mr Castle’s family? It is astonishing, given Detective Beckett’s commentary and issues, that she had gone at all, still more so that she had completed the evening without an emotional breakdown. Mr Castle had mentioned this, he recalls, in the context of Detective Beckett not upsetting her father.

“It was great. Rick’s family were really good fun. It was the first time I’d been around a family
since… since Johanna died.”

Dr Burke raises an eyebrow. “I thought you had said that your daughter came round frequently.”

“Yes, of course. But that’s my family. I hadn’t been around any other family for – well, years.”

Ah, a classic miscommunication, which would readily have been resolved were it not for the history of which Mr Beckett is not aware.

“But Katie was out of sorts. She was playing tired, just like she did when she didn’t want to stay at her grandmother’s.” Mr Beckett grins. “Neither did I want to stay at her grandmother’s. That woman could glare down a grizzly, and she never thought I was good enough for her daughter. Guess that’s where Katie got her toughness from.”

“What did you think was wrong?”

“I hadn’t the faintest idea. Rick’s family were really nice to us. Couldn’t have been more welcoming. Clearly loved Katie, and extended it to me.”

“Have you had any further thoughts?”

“No. I thought we should have them back to dinner, and Katie wouldn’t have any of it. She just completely lost her temper like she hasn’t done since she was a teen, and told me that she didn’t want them in her apartment and if I invited them she wouldn’t come. Then she said she wasn’t enough and she was done and she walked out and I haven’t heard from her or seen her since. All I’ve got is from Rick. So why’d she do it, Carter? What am I missing?”
“Before we get to that, Jim, could we go back to your meeting with Mrs Berowitz? I am exceedingly interested in your thoughts on that occasion. I have the impression that that was the first time in which you became quite certain that there was something wrong with your daughter.”

“Yeah. Up till then it was all circumstantial, and it could just have been that Katie really was tired, or that she and Rick were having a row. God knows, I had a few with Johanna that sounded just as bad as the one I walked into, and we got through it.”

“Surmounting rows is the sign of a healthy relationship,” Dr Burke agrees. “And it is certainly my impression that they have done so.”

Mr Beckett smiles, a little wryly.

“I’d rather find out what I’m missing, than go back over things.”

“I know. Unfortunately, I need to know what you have concluded, before I can decide what is best for your daughter. Your perceptions are as important as hers, and I do not wish to taint your perceptions with my conclusions to date, nor with your daughter’s views. We cannot afford misunderstandings here, Jim. It is very important that I understand your observations.”

Dr Burke is deliberately appealing to Mr Beckett’s desperation to help Detective Beckett. He is certain that this will work, despite Mr Beckett’s clear desire to know what the real issue is. Dr Burke does not yet wish to discuss that.

“Okay, then,” Mr Beckett concedes. “I get that. Untainted evidence. So. Mrs Berowitz. Katie was tense from the off, and Rick knew it. He was leaning into her as if he was ready to grab her and take her out, but I didn’t see him lay a finger on her. Katie was as stiff as the fireplace poker. Anyway, I went through my story, same as Katie had heard before, but she – it was as if she’d never heard it. Found out that Katie had been running round trying to find Mr Berowitz, pulling him out the tank. Mrs Berowitz said she’d done it twice, took a shot at Katie not doing it another time, when he’d already been found. I couldn’t believe Mrs Berowitz was that selfish about it. She could go get her own husband, she didn’t need Katie for that. Then the stupid woman said she could never give up her husband, when I said that Katie had walked away. Katie was white. Cold, as if she’d been hit.”

Now that is interesting. Mr Castle had said that he had thought Detective Beckett to be stressed. Wired had been the word he had used. Mr Beckett regards her as having been cold.

“Damn woman had made her feel guilty. She never needed to feel guilty. She was the only reason I ever got dry. I was going to talk to her about why she did it…”

Mr Beckett stops, to compose himself. Dr Burke stays calm, and silent, to allow him to reveal his thoughts in his own way.

“Then Mrs Berowitz just wrote off everything I’d told her and Katie got mad. Really mad. I thought she’d grown out of her temper – when she was a teen she oftentimes let rip, but this was right back to that, except it was still cold.” Likewise, Mr Castle had regarded this as emotional, to the point almost of tears. It is extremely interesting that Mr Beckett, who knew Detective Beckett before tragedy had struck, believes her to have been unemotional, while Mr Castle, who has only seen her some time afterwards, regards her behaviour to have been – for her – extremely
emotional. Hm. The depth of repressed emotion that Dr Burke suspects to be present is substantial.

“She laid into Mrs Berowitz and then walked out. She said she couldn’t save me, and that Mrs Berowitz would just have to live with whatever decision she made.”

Mr Beckett blows his nose.

“Mrs Berowitz burst into tears, and I was just shocked. It sounded like Katie had never come to terms with any of it, but I’d always thought she had. I couldn’t believe it. We had to wait for someone to turn up, and I had time to think. Katie sounded like she still felt guilty for walking away, but she’d never let on. Sounded like she couldn’t deal with not being able to save me. It’s been five years, and I’d never seen a hint of that before. Rick made sure I got to my sponsor, and then he went to see Katie.”

Dr Burke does not mention that Detective Beckett had refused to see Mr Castle.

“I spent a long time with Ed.” Dr Burke produces a questioning look. “My sponsor. By the time I was okay again, Katie had texted, but it was too late to answer. I…” he looks shamefaced “… I wasn’t in a place where I could have the conversation we needed to have. She texted again before eight the next morning. Soon as I could, I called her. She said she was fine. Like I’d believe her. How she could think I would believe that, after how upset she was… I don’t know. And… I guess I was still a bit worked up from the whole thing, and I was a little, well, exasperated with her trying to shrug it off, so I told her that telling me she was fine was a lie. She didn’t let me finish. I was going to say that I was worried about her, but she lost her temper again and said…said…”

“Said what, Jim?” Dr Burke asks very carefully and gently.

“Said that I was ashamed of her, said that she could never have been enough. She said she was still trying – but then she wouldn’t say what and she cut the call and I couldn’t get through. I kept trying. Finally I called Rick, and he said leave it to him.”

“What did you think then?”

“I didn’t know what to think. It didn’t make any sense at all. So I called later. Rick hadn’t called me either. Her phone still wasn’t on, so I called Rick, and” – Mr Beckett winces, and colour flares in his face – “he said they were a bit busy.”

The uncomfortable tone tells Dr Burke everything he needs to know about Mr Beckett’s thoughts on that matter. Dr Burke is more inclined to believe that Mr Castle had not, in fact, been engaged in intimate congress; but in a much more protective position, much as he had been on Friday evening in this room.

“A lot later she called back. She sounded absolutely fine: even happy. I assumed that Rick had managed to get her to talk about it and – er – cheered her up. So we apologised to each other, and it was all fine. That day. But then I started putting the pieces together and I wasn’t nearly as sure that she was fine at all, but I didn’t think she’d talk to me – after all, if she wasn’t telling me the whole truth then she wasn’t going to start later.”

“Why did you think she wasn’t going to tell the whole truth?”

“Everything. She never got upset or cross, she never told me anything was wrong – not about work, or a bad movie. Nothing was ever wrong. It couldn’t possibly be true, when I actually thought about it. And now she was saying that she was fine again, but it wasn’t realistic that she
was better. She was” – he searches out a word – “sanitising. Censoring. Never telling me about anything unpleasant or unhappy. As if I wouldn’t cope.” He stops. “Or maybe she thought I wouldn’t care. If she meant it when she said that she was never enough for me, then maybe she thought I didn’t care enough to listen if she was upset. Anyway. Rick told me nothing, as usual” – that is bitter – “and Katie finally called and pretended she had an upset stomach and that was the whole problem. But she was lying. And then the next time I saw her I tried to get the truth out her and she wasn’t having it and then it all went to hell. Now she won’t take my calls and all Rick says is leave it to him.”

Dr Burke recognises a similarity from Mr Castle’s version of events. Detective Beckett had reacted to someone forcing her to see the truth by pushing them away. Indeed, she has tried the same tactic on him. It has failed with Mr Castle, who was strong enough – and emotionally involved enough – to evolve a strategy to manoeuvre around it, and it has failed with Dr Burke, who is professionally capable of withstanding all such tactics.

“I see.” Dr Burke does indeed see. Among other things, he sees that Mr Beckett had been deceived by his daughter into believing for some years that all was well. However, he has an outstanding concern.

“Jim, you have said a number of times that your daughter has said that she couldn’t save you. How do you interpret that?”

“It’s nonsense. She saved me by walking away, and then she saved me by being there after I got dry.”

“But you were the one who chose to stop drinking, were you not? You still do, every day.”

“Yes, but I needed a reason. Katie was the reason. If she hadn’t been there, I’d have had no reason.”

“She was your original reason for choosing to stop. But – forgive me – she has rejected you, and yet you have remained sober in the face of very considerable adversity.”

“Oh. I see. I didn’t explain very well. She was the reason to start, but after I’d been going to AA for a while I realised I couldn’t put my burden on her. It’s not up to her to keep me sober, it’s up to me. I’m the only one who can control myself. She can’t.”

At least Mr Beckett has a proper sense of the second C. Dr Burke swiftly considers his options. Gentle direction ought to be appropriate here.

“Jim, this conversation has been very helpful indeed in understanding your view of events and in understanding your daughter. I should like to ask a few further questions, which will not take long, and then we can discuss how best to help you reconnect with her.”

“Okay.” Mr Beckett looks determined, but nervous. “Whatever it takes.”

“Jim, your daughter chose to go into a profession, one of whose mottos is protect and serve. Do you think that your daughter was trying to protect Mrs Berowitz, and if so, from what?”

Mr Beckett is obviously thinking about that. “Mm,” he says slowly. “It wouldn’t surprise me. She’d be trying to stop her going through the same upset that Katie did.”

“That concurs with my thinking. Now, you have entirely correctly noted that it is you who is solely responsible for your sobriety. In the light of your daughter’s wish to protect strangers, do you consider that she may regard it as her job to protect you, and again, if so, from what?”
The pause as Mr Beckett thinks is much shorter, this time. “I can’t say it hadn’t occurred to me, recently. I said it, earlier, that I was beginning to wonder, but you making me lay it all out like this, and thinking about how she was always cheerful and everything was always fine, I think she was.” He pauses again. “You think she’s been trying to keep me away from anything that might upset me… and send me back down the bottle.” It is not a question. Dr Burke watches as Mr Beckett, displaying the same fierce intelligence as his daughter, takes the next step. “What else has Katie been hiding from me?” And then the next, colour and life draining from his face, leaving him abruptly old. “What did I do when I was drunk? What did I say to her?” There is a further, ghastly, silence.

“Why did she never tell me? She should have told me. It wasn’t her job to protect me from the truth.” He stops, hard. “Did I tell her something that made her think she wasn’t enough? Wasn’t family?” His face crumples greyly. “I did. I must have.”

Dr Burke shifts the box of Kleenex slightly, and decides that a modicum of truth of his own is necessary.

“Jim, I believe that without you in any way knowing it, or meaning to do so, your daughter has gained that impression. We could discuss it now, and we will if you wish to, but I believe that the best way to help you and your daughter through this is for a discussion to take place between you and your daughter as to what your precise words and actions were, and why she did not speak of them. I only know what she believes, and I would only be relating second hand information, without a proper context, which I consider would be very partial and potentially very damaging for both you and your daughter. I suggest that such a discussion takes place here, where I can assist. I strongly recommend that you do not try to open it otherwise, if you wish it to be fruitful.”

“Not much chance, if she won’t see me. So you think I should wait?”

“I do,” Dr Burke says gently. “However, I will tell you that your daughter had therapy some time ago. The therapist was, to say the least, incompetent. As a consequence, she has been labouring under considerable misapprehensions for some time, including relating to how she has dealt with you. Understandably, this has caused her unhappiness and discomfort. Under my guidance, she is uncovering and correcting these, but it has been uncomfortable.” Mr Beckett looks as if he might say something. “The therapist will be dealt with. I have already set the appropriate procedures in motion.” A relaxation.

“So what do we do, Carter?”

“I will contact you as soon as I think that a discussion can be profitable. It may take a little time. I suggest you stay in touch with Mr Castle, despite your understandably mixed feelings about his role, as he is a strong supporter of you re-establishing a family relationship with your daughter. It will be likely to ease your mind.”

Dr Burke applies a sympathetic expression, entirely sincere, to his face. “I counsel you to talk this over with your sponsor. You are naturally wondering what more you might have done, and how to resolve this, and it will be most upsetting for you until your daughter is ready to speak freely to you. Of your willingness to speak freely, I have no doubt. You are also most welcome to contact me at any time, if you wish for a further opinion. My receptionist will have instructions to make space for you. You are a strong man, Jim, but as you know, sometimes a little help is required to stay strong.”

“Appreciate it,” Mr Beckett says.

“Jim, if it is any consolation, I believe that your daughter is as distressed as you are at this breach
between you. I should like to see it mended in the shortest possible time. However, it will not be
the same as it was when she was nineteen. Do not expect that. She is older, and her experiences
have changed her, as yours have changed you. Your interactions need not be better, or worse, but
they will be different.”

“I guess.”

Dr Burke wishes that he could reassure Mr Beckett, but he cannot in good conscience do so. On
the balance of probabilities, matters will be satisfactorily resolved, but he is unwilling to guarantee
that. On the other hand, if he cannot do so, then no other psychiatrist in Manhattan could resolve
this conflict either.

“Jim, may I make one final suggestion?”

“Mm?”

“Please would you see your sponsor, after you leave this session? Even if it is only for a few
minutes, I profoundly believe it will be comforting.”

“I was going to,” Mr Beckett says. “It’s all arranged. He’s expecting me. Funny thing is, Rick
said the same thing. Even offered to be here, if I wanted. Guess he’s all in. Who else would put
up with us Becketts?”

*Only the very strong and the very brave*, Dr Burke thinks, and bids Mr Beckett farewell.

Before leaving, Dr Burke considers his next meeting with Detective Beckett. He hopes that she will
present herself for her scheduled appointment tomorrow. He is not at all sure that she will.
However, he now considers that he has all the main components of the information which he is
likely to need, and if she should not attend he will use the time to consider how best to manage the
extremely difficult meeting between Detective Beckett and Mr Beckett.

Beckett is sitting staring at a cold case file in the bullpen, not thinking exclusively about the file in
front of her. She is, in fact, thinking about the file and therapy in approximately a sixty-forty ratio,
and coming down on the side of just giving up on both for today and going home immediately shift
ends, possibly by way of a store selling chocolate and/or ice-cream. Comfort food, especially with
coffee. Maybe coffee chocolates? Coffee chocolate ice-cream? Both, with added coffee?

She’s getting as bubble-brained as the latest celebrity reality TV star, and she knows why. She
doesn’t want to go to therapy tonight. She doesn’t want to deal with Dr Burke and his hard truths
about her and her father. Friday had been an absolute disaster and she can’t face having what little
skin she has left peeled back and the flesh salted. She can’t bear the thought that she’s still looking
for her father to love her when he patently does not.

Castle hadn’t shown up yesterday, since cold cases are not his thing, and unless there’s a new case
shortly it’s likely to be the same for the short time that remains of today. Although she’d prefer him
in his accustomed chair next to her desk, in an odd sort of way it had been rather reassuring that he
hadn’t turned up yesterday or now: it assuages her nervousness that he feels he has to be there all
the time. At which point, her phone rings.

“Beckett.”

“It’s me.”

“Hey, Castle.”
“I forgot to tell you that I sorted everything out for next weekend. We can go Friday, come back late Sunday.”

“Thanks.” She sounds distracted.

“What’s the matter? Wrist sore?”

“No, just aches a bit. Too much writing.”

“I’ll kiss it better, later.”

“Yeah.”

There’s a pause. Beckett hadn’t exactly sounded enthusiastic.

“Do you want me to pick you up tonight? Or just see you at yours as usual?”

“I’m not going,” Beckett says combatively.

“Uh – what?”

Castle hears a short silence punctuated by the closing of a door.

“I’m not going.” Beckett says again. Castle picks up, underneath her normal precinct decisiveness, considerable unhappiness. What he doesn’t know is whether she is unhappy because she is remembering Friday’s fiasco or whether she’s unhappy because she knows she ought to go tonight.

“When were you supposed to be there?”

“Six.”

It’s only five now. Formally, shift ends in thirty minutes.

“Have you called to cancel?”

“No.”

This may be an improvement. If she hasn’t actually called to cancel, yet…

“When are you going to?”

“Huh?”

“Well, if you’re not going to go you ought to tell them. And since you’re not going how about we go for dinner somewhere?”

There is a nonplussed silence down the phone.

“I thought…”

“That I’d object? Not my decision. Not up to me.”

The last time he’d tried reverse psychology tactics they had worked. He hopes they will work again this time.

“But…”
“But?”

“But I thought you wanted me to go.” She sounds confused, which is already a lot better than combative.

“Only if it’s helping you and you decide to go. Otherwise, what’s the point? It’s up to you what you do.”

“But I thought you wanted me to come to the loft?” she stutters. “Don’t you?”

“Yeah, but that’s up to you too. When you’re ready.” He’s not going to issue ultimatums here. That would be fatal. “Anyway, you saw my family on Sunday morning and nothing went wrong, if you discount my mother’s presence. So you’ll get there. Up to you how long it takes.”

“But… but what if I can’t?”

“Then you can’t.”

“But I want to.” There’s a long pause. “If I go will you meet me there after, and then if I’m okay we could go for dinner?”

“Sure,” says Castle, without betraying by a single misplaced breath his enormous relief. “What time?”

“Seven.”

“Okay. We can go to Remy’s. See you later, Beckett.”
It would be exaggerating to say that Dr Burke is surprised to be informed that Detective Beckett has arrived for her appointment. It would be more accurate to say that he is mildly perplexed. Similarly, he is not relieved. It is for his patient to decide whether or not to attend. He is not a truant officer. It is true to say, however, that he had not necessarily expected Detective Beckett this evening. It is also true to say that he is mildly impressed that she has attended. Friday’s session, while the truths revealed had been entirely necessary, had been gruelling, and Dr Burke would have been entirely unsurprised had Detective Beckett decided to take an intermission while considering the matters that had been discussed.

However, she is here.

There are four matters which concern Dr Burke: that Detective Beckett has never told Mr Beckett the whole truth about his behaviour whilst inebriated; Detective Beckett’s guilt at having, as she sees it, walked away from her father when he needed her; Detective Beckett’s propensity to remove entirely from her ambit those who have hurt her; and Detective Beckett’s equal, and related, propensity to remove entirely from her ambit those who have attempted to point out the truth.

Dr Burke wishes most earnestly for her previous therapist to be cast out of the profession. Had they done their job properly, Dr Burke would not be trying to show Detective Beckett that she has believed and acted upon a false premise for at least five years. Given that she had been informed that all she needed to do was *grow up and get over it*, and having thought that she had done so, being told that in fact her actions have not allowed her to grow out of her issues must be a crushing blow. It is hard to take the actions you have been told by a trusted professional are correct, and then find that they are utterly wrong. It is hardly surprising that one does not wish to discuss the true position in those circumstances.

“Good evening, Detective Beckett.”

“Good evening.”

Dr Burke is not particularly reassured by the unusual formality.

“With what do you wish to begin?”

There is an entirely predictable silence. Dr Burke lets it draw out.

“I don’t like you,” Detective Beckett says angrily. “I don’t like your commentary and I don’t like your conclusions. You haven’t shown me any evidence or proof, you’ve just thrown out unsupported theories.”

Dr Burke regards Detective Beckett calmly. “If you believe that you can disprove my theories, then let us by all means explore that. I am very content to explore the evidence for and against each, and, as you are a detective, I assume that this will be acceptable to you. If your evidence is better than mine, then I will accept that. I have never claimed to be omniscient. Which theory would you like to attempt to disprove first? Perhaps you should list them, and then begin.”

“Fine. One. My father did not abuse me. Two. My father doesn’t care, and I don’t care about him. Three. Dealing with Castle’s family has nothing to do with dealing with my father.”

Detective Beckett glares at Dr Burke. “We can start with the third. I know you’re wrong because I had brunch with Castle and his family on Sunday and it was just fine.”
“Did you go to Mr Castle’s home for this brunch?”

“No, but that doesn’t matter. I spent Sunday morning with his family and we got on just fine.”

“That sounds remarkably promising, Detective. Do tell me more.” Detective Beckett entirely misses the subtlety behind that question. Dr Burke steeples his fingers under his chin, and watches her carefully.

“Castle invited me for brunch and I went.” Dr Burke does not, himself, partake of brunch. He controls his waistline vigorously, and brunch would damage it.

“Where did you go?”

“Balthazar. Spring Street. Typically Castle. Packed out. I don’t know how he got a table. It’s really popular.”

“What time?”

“Ten.”

“What did you wear?”

“You’re a fashion consultant as well as a shrink?” Detective Beckett says unpleasantly. Dr Burke ignores her attempt to anger him. It is merely another way of trying to push away the truth.

“I am interested in all of the evidence. What did you wear?”

“Shirt, pants, blazer.”

“And the others?”

“Castle was in a dark blue sweater over a cream button down and navy slacks. His mother” – she grimaces – “was wearing a multi-coloured kaftan, mid-length, probably silk. Orange and green, in an abstract pattern. Not easy on the eye – you could spot it a mile off and you’d still need sunglasses. Alexis had on a pretty cream top and black leggings, with a black bolero style cardigan.”

“So they were all relatively casually dressed, as you would expect for brunch.”

“Yeah.”

The need for a description has taken Detective Beckett into her professional zone, and removed some of the more obvious anger. Dr Burke does not think that this will survive his next few words.

“If you expected them to be casually dressed, why were you dressed more formally? Your description of your clothes sounds as if you were wearing similar garments to those which you wear to work.”

“Are you criticising my dress sense now?” Detective Beckett emits in incredulous fury.

“I am sure you looked perfectly stylish. I am merely pointing out the incongruity between your style of dress and theirs.” Dr Burke decides to point his moral. “Why did you feel it necessary to dress as if you were at work?”

“What? How did you” - Detective Beckett stops very hard on that sentence, but she has already given away the key point.
“So you agree that you were dressing as if you were at work?”

Detective Beckett looks as if she is about to deny it.

“The truth, please.”

“Yes,” she bites out. “So what?”

“That doesn’t imply that you were treating this as a normal, casual brunch. Why were you approaching it with a work mentality?”

“I… I…”

“Were you treating this casual brunch as if it were an investigation?”

“No.” Dr Burke produces a gaze that, from her expression, Detective Beckett last saw in her own mirror, practising her interrogation stare. “Fine. Yes. I can deal with families at work, so I guessed it would make it easier.” Dr Burke notes that the word is not easy.

“It does not appear to me that you were able to take it entirely in your stride, nor that it was, as you described it, fine? But, as I said, I shall be happy to be proved wrong. Please provide more of your evidence. For example, what were the subjects of conversation at this brunch?”

Detective Beckett is quite clearly gritting her teeth. Dr Burke takes that as a sign that she is realising that she is losing the argument on this area.

“Castle’s writing. His house in the Hamptons.” She stops.

“And?”

“His family wanted me to come back to the loft.” Detective Beckett’s teeth are clamped together.

“How kind of them. And of course, since you now have no issues with seeing his family, you accepted?”

Detective Beckett regards him as a cornered wolverine regards a hunter. “No,” she says bitterly.

Dr Burke does not place any undue stress on his next words. “That does not sound as if this issue is wholly solved. Substantially progressed, undoubtedly, but not solved. So, while you have made progress in coping with Mr Castle’s family, you have not yet shown that you have wholly resolved that issue. You may wish to consider why you still feel unable to go to the loft.”

He pauses. No answer eventuates. Dr Burke had not expected one. “Perhaps we should consider a different issue? Which would you prefer?”

“My father did not abuse me.”

“Your evidence for that?”

“I’m not a victim. I walked away from it and didn’t come back till I had independent evidence that he was dry.”

“Suggestive, certainly, but simply walking away does not prove that abuse did not occur, it simply proves that you were strong enough to leave a situation producing similar results to an abusive situation.”
“And he didn’t mean any of it. It was the alcohol, not him. Abuse is deliberate. This wasn’t.”

“An interesting distinction. Please expand.” Dr Burke perceives once more Detective Beckett’s desire to believe that her father was not deliberately cruel to her while apparently simultaneously believing that he does not care about her.

“When he was sober, he didn’t tell me he didn’t want me, he said he wanted to be a family. So since he only did it when he was drunk, it was part of his alcoholism.”

“Let us look at that more closely, then. Which of those statements did you believe to be true?”

“Huh?”

“When sober, your father wished you to be a family. When drunk, he told you to leave because you were not your mother. Which of those did you believe?”

There is a protracted silence. It appears that Detective Beckett has not considered the inconsistency of these positions. This is hardly surprising: it is well known that the pattern of deliberate emotional abuse involves enough apparent kindness to balance the unpleasant reality, until the victim’s behaviour adapts. As it happens, Dr Burke is quite certain that Mr Beckett was not deliberately abusing Detective Beckett, however it is necessary to disentangle the behavioural patterns in much the same way as if he had been.


“Mm. You seem to me to be more inclined to believe that he did not want to be a family.”

“Yeah. Well. He’s said so now.”

“Before he said so, what would you have believed?”

“Family.”

“Why?”

“That’s what he said when he made amends. He was sorry and he wanted to be a family again.”

“But you did not tell him that he had said the opposite when he was drunk.”

“No.”

“That implies that you believed that he did want to be a family. Until the recent statement, how did your father behave?”

“Like he wanted to be a family.”

“You are a detective of considerable ability. Would your father have been able to conceal his feelings from you for five years?”

“He did, though, didn’t he?” Detective Beckett says acidly. “So clearly I didn’t treat him like a suspect.”

“Detective Beckett, it seems that you yourself cannot decide what your father meant. We therefore have no conclusive evidence one way or the other as to whether he cared or not – we have moved from the question of abuse to the question of caring,” Dr Burke points out. “The two are very
closely linked, so this is not at all surprising.” There is, of course, a way to resolve this, but Dr Burke wishes to extract any further evidence or assumptions before introducing that suggestion. “However, I should like to return to the question of abuse, or not.”

He steeps his fingers. “Allow me to describe to you the pattern of deliberate emotional abuse, and then we can consider the evidence for or against your father’s behaviour. Note that I am not, in doing this, drawing any conclusion as to whether it was abuse, or whether it was deliberate.”

“Okay,” Detective Beckett mutters resentfully. Dr Burke observes her dislike of being proven wrong, and sympathises.

“Emotional abuse, at its core, is a pattern of behaviour which is designed to lead the victim into behaving in a way which affords the abuser gratification. In its simplest form, the perpetrator conditions the victim into reacting in a specific way. This may be by informing the victim that they are behaving unreasonably, unlike other people, or stupidly – when in fact they are not; or by becoming angry or tearful when the victim wishes to take some action which the perpetrator does not wish them to; and, most importantly, by rewarding the victim with kindness and/or the similitude of love when they behave as the perpetrator wishes. The outcome which the perpetrator desires is that the victim will behave exactly in accordance with their wishes, which generally involves subordinating the victim’s own needs and desires to theirs. That tends to result in the victim going out of their way to please the perpetrator and ensuring that any behaviour which might trigger the reaction of the perpetrator is minimised or absent.”

“Bullying.”

“There are considerable similarities, but one substantial difference. In bullying, the unpleasantness is generally not masked, and may or may not involve a situation where strong emotional bonds are expected to exist. In emotional abuse, it is more subtle and insidious, and takes place over a longer period. It will often present within a family unit – parent to child, or child to child, or spouse to spouse – or in a situation where close friendship is assumed.”

“Oh.” Dr Burke allows Detective Beckett to consider his words. “But that’s still deliberate. My father wasn’t acting deliberately. So it can’t be abuse.”

“If a perpetrator commits manslaughter, not murder, does that not produce the same outcome?” Detective Beckett fails to find an answer to that thesis.

“You said he abused me.”

“No, I said that the way you have behaved with him exhibited similarities with the way in which victims of emotional abuse react to their abuser. I have not said that your father was, or was not, an abuser.”

“Is it painful sitting on that fence?” Detective Beckett jibes. Dr Burke ignores that.

“There is, of course, a relatively simple way to deal with all of these evidential requirements, and for you to prove your case.”

“Yeah?” Detective Beckett says, extremely sceptically.

“This Gordian Knot would rapidly be cut were you to conduct an interview with your father, here, under my supervision.”

“What? You can’t possibly be serious.”
“I am perfectly serious. Witness evidence is always better than circumstantial evidence, is it not?”

“My father couldn’t cope with it.”

“I have interviewed your father and I am content that he will be able to withstand the truth. If I am there, if it is apparent that he is struggling, I will step in and pause or stop the interview.”

“When did you speak to my father?”

“Yesterday. You will recall that you gave me permission.”

“And I know you’ve spoken to Castle too,” Detective Beckett says bitterly. Dr Burke wonders whether Mr Castle will still be capable of speech after he sees Detective Beckett again. It does not presently appear likely.

“You do not have to decide now, Detective Beckett. I am perfectly content to continue treating you without such an interview taking place. I merely suggest that it would accelerate your healing. If, or when, you consider you are ready, then we can arrange it.” He considers briefly. “It might be best to wait until you have considered matters for a little longer, with my guidance.”

“No. We are going to deal with this once and for all and you’ll see that you were wrong.” Precisely as predicted, Dr Burke thinks, Detective Beckett has taken the bait. He considers that this meeting must take place sooner, rather than later. Detective Beckett’s state is not notably stable. “But I’m going to ask Castle to be there too.” This is not a surprise to Dr Burke either.

“Then shall we attempt to arrange this meeting for your normal time on Friday?”

“Fine.”

“Is there anything else you would like to discuss?”

“No.” Detective Beckett glances at her watch. “Castle will be waiting for me.”

Dr Burke notices something. “That is an unusual watch for a woman to wear.”

“It was Dad’s. He gave me it when he got dry.”

Dr Burke says absolutely nothing further. He considers that if Detective Beckett is still wearing that particular watch it is proof positive that she cares about her father.

“Good evening, Detective Beckett. I shall inform you about Friday.”

“Thank you.” Detective Beckett grits out. Dr Burke does not consider her to be thankful at all. He, on the other hand, is. It may have been a little manipulative, but reverse psychology works extremely effectively on Detective Beckett. He will need to have a further conversation with Mr Castle, and preferably with Mr Beckett, in order to ensure that all proceeds smoothly in a proper direction on Friday. He makes a note for his receptionist to contact both of them, and smiles in a satisfied manner as he prepares to leave.

Beckett finds Castle planted in the reception area, scribbling in his notebook and then, inspiration clearly failing, he sucks the end of his stubby pencil and humphs.

“Hey, Castle.”

“Beckett!” he bounces. “Just in time. Stand there for a minute.” He runs eyes up and down her
appreciatively. “Got it.” He scribbles some more.

“Care to explain?” Her voice is a little sharp.

“I ran out of inspiration,” Castle says simply, “and you showed up at just the right moment to supply some.” He smiles beautifully. “Dinner?”

“Yeah. Let’s get out of here.”

Castle slings an arm around her shoulders and snugs her in. This has the happy effect that she’s comfortably close and the less happy effect that he can detect every last tension knot in her back, of which there are many. He walks her down to his car, settles her into the passenger seat, and pulls out smoothly. As soon as they’re in the flow of traffic in the direction of Remy’s, he puts a large hand over her knee and squeezes. Automatics are so convenient.

“Rough session?” he rumbles.

“I don’t like him,” Beckett complains. “He’s a smug jerk who thinks he knows it all. He can’t prove anything. He thinks he’s a better investigator than me.” Her voice is rising.

“That’s dumb,” Castle manages to insert. “No-one’s a better investigator than you.”

“He said I should prove him wrong,” she growls. “He has to prove his dumbass theories. I don’t have to prove anything.”

“Okay,” Castle says, more to sound supportive than anything else.

“He wanted me to prove I was right.”

“So you did.”

There is a very uncomfortable silence, followed by a very embarrassed and completely inaudible mutter.

“Beckett?”

“Couldn’t.”

Castle nearly fails to stop at the intersection because he’s too busy trying to retrieve his dropped jaw from the footwell.

“Uh?” he manages, while trying to avoid causing an accident. What has Dr Burke done this time? He’d privately bet money – okay, a single dollar with himself, but still, money, that Beckett could have proved Dr Burke wrong.

“He had a smartass answer for everything.” This time the growl has fangs. “But I’ve got him. On Friday he’s going to have my dad there for me to talk to and then he’ll see he’s wrong.” She descends into blackly furious muttering. “Thinks he can prove me wrong? Witness evidence? He’ll eat his unsupported theories without ketchup.”

“Friday?” squawks Castle. “I thought we were going to the Hamptons on Friday night.”

Beckett stops muttering. “I’d have to go to therapy first anyway, or face Montgomery.”

“But… if you’ve been talking to your dad…” or interrogating, Beckett, and which will it be?
“Don’t you want to go?” she says. “I still want to. Don’t you?” She suddenly sounds painfully uncertain again. “I don’t have to go. If you need peace to write… I shouldn’t come. Friday isn’t going to be peaceful.”

“You’re coming,” Castle says very decisively and very firmly. “You don’t get to wriggle out it and hunker down in your apartment being miserable on your own.”

“So we can both be miserable? That’s dumb.”

“No, because you won’t be miserable with me. I’m a guaranteed cure for misery.” His hand creeps north of her knee. “I know just how to make you happy,” he purrs seductively.

“We can’t spend all the time in bed, Castle.”

“Bed? Bed? No, no, no. Walks on the beach, followed by hot chocolate and toasted marshmallows, make you happy. That’s what we’re going to do.”

“You won’t want to, after Friday’s session.”

“Why not?”

“I… I… please would you be there on Friday?”

When Castle flicks a glance across Beckett is hunched in the corner of the passenger seat. Asking clearly cost her something, and it’s equally apparent that there’s more to her concern than simply interrogating her father.

“Sure,” he says, in a comfortably reassuring rumble.
Castle finds a space relatively close to Remy’s and parks tidily. Beckett hasn’t said a word since she asked about the Hamptons, and remains cramped into her corner, about as far away from relaxed as she could get. Castle, being well brought up, politely opens her door for her and extends a hand. Admittedly, this has almost as much to do with Beckett’s lack of any impetus to move as politeness. Beckett’s fingers are cold in his.

“We can get it to go,” he says.

“No. The shakes never taste the same from a go-cup.”

Way to minimise, Beckett. Her hand is still in his as they walk in, and Castle is pretty sure she hasn’t noticed. It makes it easy to steer her into a booth which tucks her between Castle and the wall. Beckett’s responses to Castle have been about as useful as her non-reaction to being tucked beside the wall, which she normally doesn’t like. Still, at this stage, her hand is still contained within his.

The provision of a menu and the necessity to order brings Beckett back to some attentiveness. Castle despatches the server with the orders and then turns to the more important issue.

“What do you want me to do on Friday, Beckett?”

“Be there.”

This is not particularly helpful or informative, but it is totally achievable.

“I can do that. Anything else?”

“I don’t know. I don’t want to think about it.” She sounds tired, or maybe defeated.

“You need fed,” Castle distracts. “Not eating causes low blood sugar and destroys thinking.”

“And do you have any scientific evidence for this?”

“No,” he admits. “But it woke you up.” He rubs his thumb softly over her hand. “It’ll be okay. I’ll be there.”

“I just want it all to be over. Done. You told me that therapy takes time, but why is it so hard?”

Castle takes a chokingly large bite of his burger to avoid answering that immediately and truthfully. Because your first therapist fucked up is not exactly going to help anyone’s cause here, and it’s right at the front of his mouth. He splutters on the crumbs, and is promptly patted on the back. Even that is oddly indefinite, and her touch is swiftly withdrawn.

“All I wanted was to be able to deal with your family and work.” Nothing else arrives to expand on that statement. She pushes her burger around her plate, crumbles the edge of the bun, picks it up, puts it down unbitten; nibbles a fry without any apparent desire or enthusiasm. Castle steals one, his own being almost finished, and succeeds in carrying it off without Beckett raising the slightest protest.

He summons a server, speaks briefly to him, and fairly shortly Beckett’s burger and shake are residing in a doggy bag – again, without any comment, protest or objection.
“I’m taking you home,” he says. “If we’re there, then you can simply stand down.”

“Okay.”

Beckett obediently follows Castle out, sits in his car without the slightest move to try to take the driver’s seat, and remains wrapped in her cloud of gloomy non-communication all the way to her building, all the way up in the elevator, all the way into her apartment, and all the way, apparently on autopilot, to her kettle and the cupboard with the coffee mugs. At that point she appears to realise that there is life outside her skull.

“What’ll I do when he says flat out he doesn’t care?” she says hopelessly.

_What’ll you do if he says he does care?_ Castle wonders. At this point both outcomes are equally traumatic.

“You don’t need to think about it now. Let it all settle for tonight, then think about how you want to handle the whole situation tomorrow. You never go into Interrogation without having a plan, and all your thoughts in order with a list of questions, so why change now? Treat it like a witness interview.”

“You think that’ll help?” she says quietly.

“Letting it settle always works when I’m not sure where my plot is going.”

“This isn’t a book, Castle,” she says bitterly. “This is my life.”

He hugs, carefully, as she spoons coffee into the French press. “All the more reason to take time and think.”

“If it’s wrong – if Dr Burke is wrong, and since he’s wrong about everything else he’ll be wrong about this too” – she’s back to combative: Dr Burke clearly pushes all her confrontational buttons – “then whatever I do Dad’ll be back in the bottle. Not that it’ll matter to me: since he doesn’t care, why should I?” She stops. “Why can’t I just _not care_?”

Castle turns her into his clasp and gathers her close. There’s no sound, but he’s pretty sure she’s weeping: silently, so that nobody knows. He’s momentarily exasperated that she _still_ won’t show him her feelings until he actually pressures her into it, but that’s a discussion for later. Or possibly Dr Burke. He makes a little mental note to contact Dr Burke, considerably prior to Friday’s session. (His brain insists on inserting the word _torture_ into that sentence, right before _session_. Certainly for Beckett. Now if only he wasn’t certain that it will be torture for him too…) He thinks that he and Dr Burke need to have a very frank discussion about what is going to happen, and how they intend it to play out – and what Castle will do to Dr Burke if Beckett is as upset as she was last Friday. He will start with the Viking blood eagle. Then he’ll move on to drawing and quartering. Hanging would, he feels, be _otiose_. And unsatisfyingly quick.

He smooths up and down her back, consoling. “Stop hiding, Kate. C’mere.” He holds her closer, but tips her chin up, rather against her will, so that he can see her face. Tears are glimmering unshed in her eyes. “Stop hiding. You don’t need to hide from me.”
She doesn’t answer that, and Castle’s heart sinks a little. Instead she prepares the coffee tray, an almost indiscernible tremor in her tense fingers. Castle forestalls her by picking it up and transporting it to the table before she tries. He feels that if she tries, and drops it, a lot more than just two mugs and a French press will break. Beckett is suddenly, terrifyingly, fragile. The image of a decorated blown egg flits through his mind, and he shivers. More is resting on Friday than even he had thought. Their weekend in the Hamptons suddenly seems like a very good idea, but not necessarily for the reasons he, or Beckett, might first have believed.

Beckett, apparently impervious to normal human concerns such as being scalded, or pain, takes a mouthful of extremely hot coffee, completely undiluted by creamer and spices despite them being right there in front of her, and then leans forward to put her mug back down and doesn’t rise from her hunched, concealing position, elbows on knees, hair obscuring part of her face.

“It didn’t help,” she says. A moment’s thought reveals that this is a belated answer to his last sentence.

“Mm?”

“Crying didn’t work.”

Castle is abruptly recalled to Beckett’s comment on getting angry. *It never worked*, she had said. *He just drank more till he couldn’t hear me.*

“That worked. Why bother getting mad or upset? It didn’t stop him getting drunk. It didn’t make him care.”

He says nothing, merely projecting an air of comforting there-ness should she look to him for anything. It seems unlikely. Beckett’s back inside her own head and if she’s remembered he’s there, it’s not obvious.

“I just need to treat him like any witness. He’s not my concern.” *But you lay yourself bare for the victims, and all of it is your concern.* “All I need to do is plan it out. Then it’ll all be done.” *It won’t. It really won’t, Beckett.* “Nothing left to worry about.” Her voice drops almost to inaudibility. “Nothing in our way.” *But there will be, because you’re never going to get out of the guilt you’re drowning in if you don’t talk to your father properly.*

Castle decides in that instant that he will be seeking a meeting with Dr Burke first thing tomorrow morning. He is quite seriously worried about Beckett’s so-called ‘plan’ for this Friday.

He slides an arm around her, and is not much reassured when she doesn’t actively move away, since she also doesn’t lean into it. He couldn’t say that she’s exactly relaxed, there in the crook of his arm; but she is there. For an instant, again, he’d thought that she would resist, or worse remove herself. It seems not.

“How are you going to do it?” he asks. His motives for asking are certainly mixed. He intends to ensure that Dr Burke is briefed. He doesn’t want to be blindsided on Friday himself. He *hopes* that he can help Beckett to develop her plan in a way that will cause least trauma to everyone – though that’s up to her.

The one thing he is *not* going to do is to mention any of her plan to Jim.

“Don’t know yet. I need to think about it.” Castle ignores any ghost of a hint in that statement that might mean he should leave. He has no desire to leave, and no intention of suggesting it. In preference, he tugs a little to indicate that Beckett should be a good deal closer than she currently
is. She doesn’t react, seemingly lost in her head once more.

Castle doesn’t like that non-reaction. He doesn’t like this – or any – unhappy Beckett; he doesn’t like her fluctuating emotional states (and they worry him, because he can’t help feeling that the zigzagging high-to-lows are simply the warning signals for a major earthquake or eruption). He hasn’t forgotten that Beckett’s temper has been on a hair-trigger ever since her past began to be uncovered and her therapy began; ever since her locked-down control started to fail.

He wonders, suddenly, how exactly she had wound up with a damaged wrist. He’d – albeit through his monstrous hangover – had the distinct impression, on watching that first sparring session, that Beckett and Espo had been quite careful not to damage each other: punches and kicks had been pulled. On Sunday, though, she’d been bruised up and down her back. It doesn’t seem that they’d been pulling any blows. He makes a mental note to call Espo in the near future, or maybe to go to the Twelfth tomorrow.

He also doesn’t like how, every time Beckett’s upset, he seems to end up using sex, or at the very least sensuality, to calm and soothe her; because she doesn’t seem to be able to express emotions early enough to avoid a storm. He knows it works, and he knows she appreciates it, oh yes, but… it’s not entirely healthy. Dr Burke’s words swim into his mind: do you see the pattern here, and his, Castle’s, own response: she lets it all build up till it’s too much and then it explodes. There has to be a less physical way: a more emotional, more intelligent route than the physical explosion of orgasm. Maybe when they’re in the Hamptons, where previously they had, so very briefly, found it: found talk and laughter and happiness as well as spectacular sex; maybe there they can find that again.

Thinking paused, he notices that Beckett has still not nestled into him. He tugs once more, and when that fails to produce voluntary movement or attention, and regardless of his thoughts a moment ago, he hoists her up and simply plops her down where he wants her: in his lap and enclosing arms.

“You’re thinking too loud,” he says. “Stop thinking so loudly. I can’t hear what you’re thinking with all that noise going on in your head.”

“You’re not supposed to hear what’s going on in my head.”

Castle pouts at that same head. “Yes, I am. How’m I going to help you plan if I don’t know what’s in your head?”

There is a short, unhappy silence. “I don’t know what’s in my head any more.”

“Treat it like a case, then. Like I said a minute ago. Just like one of your Beckett-flavoured cases. They’re all a mess until you start pulling them apart.”

“A case?”

Beckett considers. She had got through brunch by pretending they were witnesses… maybe she should do that again. Witness – or suspect. But not now.

“Not now. Tomorrow.”

She has a sudden burst of Castle-like insanity which surely causes her mouth to speak before her brain has operated.

“Tomorrow night. O’Leary can help. He knows the history of what he said in the tank. I need to know what he was saying when I wasn’t there to hear it. Independent evidence. You know what
my father is thinking. I know he’s lying. So all three of us can do it.”

“What?” Castle emits. “O’Leary too?”

“Why not? Practically the whole world knows, but I’m not bringing Ryan and Espe into this. Or Lanie.”

Ah-oh. Lanie is not entirely fixed. That doesn’t indicate perfect trust, perfectly restored. Castle is still choking on the extraordinary inclusion of O’Leary when Beckett stands up before he can stop her and starts to pace.

“Right. Evidence. What he did when he was drunk. What he said. How he behaved when I pulled him out the tank. What O’Leary heard, or saw, or thought. What I remember from his rehab – and all the lies he’s told since. What he’s told you.” She takes a breath. “What I remember from before rehab.”

“How you feel?” Castle tentatively mentions.

“No. Feelings aren’t evidence.”

Castle starts to acquire a very bad feeling of his own as Beckett continues to pace and speak. She isn’t evincing the slightest interest in how she or her father feel or felt about anything. She’s completely focused on the tangible evidence: actions, words, timings. Gradually he realises that she’s assuming her father’s guilt – i.e., that his misconceived and miscommunicated statement about family was true in exactly the way she took it – and that she’s intent on proving that. She hasn’t even noticed it.

“I thought you were trying to prove Dr Burke wrong?”

“I will. All I need to do is show that it wasn’t deliberate. Abuse is deliberate. All I have to do is show that he was wasted to the point of blackout when he said it and doesn’t remember. Then it won’t be deliberate, and Dr Burke will see he’s wrong. And then I show that Dad doesn’t care, and we’re done. It doesn’t matter if he doesn’t care, I just need to know that’s the truth. When I know it, then I’ll get past it and it’ll be so unlike your family that I’ll be just fine with them.”

Beckett appears not to care that her plan will rip her father apart. Castle wonders if she’s, even for a second, considered that she may think that she can get through this without any emotion, but that it’s vanishingly unlikely that she will, and downright impossible that her father will. He also wonders if, down in some subconscious oubliette full of poisonous wyrm and venomous phantasms, this isn’t being driven by an unsuspected, unconscious desire to ensure that her father is made as miserable as he’s made her. He absolutely has to see Dr Burke. Beckett is, consciously or, far more likely, not, aiming for scorched earth, mutually assured destruction of her father and herself; and, like an overtired, over-emotional child breaking a treasured possession, will regret it bitterly as soon as it can’t be undone.

“Okay,” she says, the snap of cold command and this-is-how-it-will-be underlying the word. She takes her phone and stabs at the screen.

“O’Leary? Yeah, it’s me. Beckett.”

“I need you to come out for a beer. I’m buying.”

“I wanna go through what happened back when.”

“When my dad was being picked up drunk in the Park.”
“Yeah. I mean it. I’ll explain tomorrow.”

“Okay, now, then. Shrink says all my issues — sharks bite less hard than that emphasis — “are down to my dad abusing me.” You’re admitting that to O’Leary? Christ, Beckett.

“No, I don’t get that. Anyway. I don’t agree. Dad didn’t abuse me.” I notice you’re not mentioning anything about your Dad not caring, Beckett. “I’m going to prove it. But I need to know what you saw when you were there and I wasn’t. Evidence. I’m not having that shrink saying Dad abused me. It’s not true.”

“So I’ll see you tomorrow? Molloys?”

“Yeah, Castle’ll be there too.”

“See you. Bye.”

Castle also notices that Beckett hasn’t mentioned that Jim will be there when she does prove it. Or doesn’t. That’s a lot of evasion. He has a nasty feeling that he should have a word with O’Leary before tomorrow night too. Soon. Very, very soon. Mutually assured destruction, he thinks again. He can almost hear the ominous scraping of the missile silos opening.

Beckett is still pacing, the aggressive clack of her heels landing on the wooden floor, the hiss of her breath as she moves, the calculations running over her face and the hard look in her eyes: the one he’s seen in interrogation, most lately applied to Cal Donbass, and before that to James Cardon. Fear of Friday becomes outright terror. Scorch the earth and salt the fields. Detective Beckett is going in for the kill, and it’s quite obvious that she doesn’t care who goes down with her any more.

Castle has the sudden blinding realisation that Beckett has decided that since her father doesn’t care, and she thinks she wants not to care either, she’s forcibly ensuring that neither she nor her father will ever be in a position to even think about caring ever again. It’s the logical next step on from and then she does her best to make sure that whoever’s hurt her never gets the chance ever again. And Dr Burke has just handed her that chance.

The exceedingly clever Dr Burke may just have made an exceedingly large mistake. It appears that he has underestimated Beckett’s capacity for self-destruction. Perhaps this is not surprising. Everybody has underestimated Beckett’s capacity for self-destruction.
All alone with the memory

Beckett is still pacing, still ramrod straight and iron-faced. Castle, unusually, has no idea what to do. If she were in any way looking upset, as she had been earlier, he would take her in his arms; if she were infuriated he would do the same; if she were – miraculously – talking he would listen, and respond. But she is doing none of those things, and he is quite seriously scared that touching her will spill her pent-up need – ten years of pent-up need – into a disaster that will ensure that it’s not just Jim who never comes near her again. Dr Burke had said it is not unknown for such anger to be displaced on to…a party for whom the subject of therapy has deep feelings. This is precisely the moment in which that just might happen, and he hasn’t thought about how he will deal with it at all.

He stays extremely quiet and doesn’t draw attention to himself in any way: thinking frantically. When Beckett had lost her rag with Lanie, he’d got away with sheer assertiveness and angry, rough, wholly dominant sex. Which is all – he winces at the phrase – fucked up, but will work, because they’re so combustible together that the heat… is redirected. But he doesn’t want to take the chance. He also doesn’t want to leave while he’s so unsure of what to do. Instead, he finds his notebook and stub of pencil, flips the leaves to a clean, removable page, and starts to make notes. He’s covered two sides in bullet points before Beckett stops route marching through her apartment, and he hasn’t been hurrying. He puts his pencil down on a third page.

“What’re you doing?” she asks. It is not, Castle notes, her interrogation tone, nor yet a snap. It’s curious.

“Well, you were thinking, so I started writing down my thoughts for tomorrow till you stopped. If you’d been any longer, I’d have left you a note and gone home. I didn’t want to disturb you.” He shows her a following page, on which is already written Beckett, gone home, don’t think too late. C. He doesn’t mention that he’d written that first, so he could say that whenever she returned to Planet Earth. It all helps to create the impression he’ll say no to her.

Beckett flicks a glance at her watch and winces. “I was thinking.” She changes tack. “Do you want some more coffee? That’s got to be cold by now.”

“Okay,” Castle says, agreeably.

Hot coffee appears. Beckett doctors hers with massive cream and spice infusions, which is probably a good sign, and then snuggles into Castle’s side, which is definitely a very good sign. He drops his arm around her shoulders, where it clearly ought to be. She puts her cup down, leans her head on his wide shoulder, and, rather to Castle’s surprise, nuzzles his neck. It’s so unusual for Beckett to be simply affectionate that he doesn’t really think, simply lifts her legs over his lap, strokes her hair and down over her shoulder; eliciting a tiny soft noise and a definite snuggle in.

“Mmmmm,” she hums, and nuzzles in some more. Her hand creeps round on to his other shoulder, sneakily, as if he might not notice her cuddling him. (There is no universe in which he wouldn’t notice Kate Beckett cuddling him.) She’s quietly, subtly trying to offer up, yes, affection, without him quite noticing it – is that in case he might reject it? Surely not. But maybe this is not an evening where they should end up in bed. This might be an evening where they are snuggly-close with a little intermittent kissing. Who knows, they might even…

“Let’s watch a movie, Beckett.”
“Mmm?”


“Why am I not surprised?” she says dryly. “Okay.”

Castle, since he’s there and Beckett doesn’t look inclined to move from her curled up position on the couch, works out her system and puts the movie on. When he returns he is less surprised than earlier that Beckett, who is rapidly softening into certainly-Kate and maybe-Kat, nestles back into him so that they’re back to snuggly-close again.

It’s…comfortable, Castle thinks. Almost like when they were in the Hamptons. They discuss – argue – about the film; they’re physically close but it’s not the scorching, spectacular sex (good as that is); they’re not emotionally (Beckett’s not emotionally) all over the place. Beckett, in fact, is not in evidence at all. Kate-Kat is. Despite the fact that she’s clearly seen the movie a lot, each time there’s an exciting bit she yips and wriggles and even clasps his knee. That tickles, which is something he’d rather she hadn’t discovered, because he can see the possibilities for mischief and mayhem rising in her eyes. Which gives him a good excuse to hold her, and both her mischievous hands, more tightly.

In fact, it’s just plain nice. Kat’s laid her head back on his shoulder and he’s leaning on her and despite the point that he hasn’t actually so much as kissed her since… wow. Since Sunday. Castle decides that this is just plain unacceptable, rather than nice, and since the closing credits are starting to roll it’s a good time to restore the situation to acceptability. He nuzzles his nose into her hair to find her ear and then kisses its edge. She turns a little towards him, which makes it much easier to bring her legs back over his and cosset her into his frame, and then to drop a line of tiny peck-kisses along the line of her cheek and then jaw and then to arrive at her lips, which are already a fraction parted to meet him.

After that he doesn’t bother thinking any more. Kissing Kate-Kat is far too good to spoil it with thoughts, and she seems to be as happy with soft, affectionate, undemanding making out as he is. Unfortunately it has to come to an end, which is signalled by an enormous yawn from Kat followed by an embarrassed flush of colour.

“I think it’s your bedtime,” Castle says, only a little annoyingly. Surprisingly, this is not followed by mutilation of his ears or nose.

“Yeah.”

But Kat, who is curled up disturbingly pettably in his lap, doesn’t move. Castle has a rush of roguishness with an added dose of rakishness and exhibits it by grasping her bridal-style, standing up (no-one mentions the wobble that nearly tips him down again) and transporting her to her bedroom to drop her gently on the bed. She sits back up and tugs him to sitting on the edge, and then kisses him.

“Thanks,” she says. “The movie was a good idea. Just what I needed.” She peeps, a little uncertainly, through her lashes at his face. “Did you…”

“I had fun too,” Castle says, not making a joke out of it. “I’ve got Mission Impossible II and III. Shall I pack them on Friday?”
“Mmm, yes.” She yawns again.

“Bedtime.” He grins. “Where’s your teddy bear?”

Kat casts him a searing scowl which gradually morphs into a sly, seductive smirk. “I grew out of teddy bears when I discovered men,” she purrs. “I hope you’re not suggesting I need to go backwards?”

“No,” Castle says happily. “Only for the nights you don’t have me.” He drops a swift kiss on her nose, which is scrunching up cutely, and a slower one on her mouth. And then he slips out of her arms, before he doesn’t slip anywhere at all except into her bed and then her body. “I have to go home.”

“I know.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow. I’ll come by the precinct. I need some observation time.” *And I want a chat with Espo. Or Ryan. Maybe Ryan first. Get the story about that sparring match.*

It’s not until Beckett is dropping into sleep that she realises that Castle had left with his notes. She’d been so intent on making coffee and being affectionate, hoping that she’d made up for her lapse into pacing and thinking, that she’d forgotten to ask about Castle’s thoughts. Maybe when she’s sorted her own thoughts out, which will not be tonight because her thoughts are still not ordered. She needs to sleep on it, and let that straighten them out. She’ll go in early, and in the familiar environment of evidence, clues, witnesses and simply cop work, she’ll be able to apply Detective Beckett rather than drowning in *Katie.*

She isn’t going to be her father’s Katie any more. But she might yet manage to be Castle’s Kat.

Beckett slides into her chair in the bullpen far too early, and almost instantly slides out again to make herself coffee. Espresso. Lots of espresso. The caffeine hits her brain almost instantly, too. She looks at the paper in front of her and picks up her pen. So. Evidence. The details of the funeral, its aftermath, and her return to NYU are noted down. Each occasion on which her father had told her to go is added. It looks appallingly similar to her homicide timelines, only there are far more data points. Dates she’d gone to haul him out the tank.

A memory takes her: years ago. The beginning of the end, in fact. She’d been called, again, by Sergeant Hardon, up at Central Park Precinct, not long after she’d been moved to the Twelfth. By that time she’d been called many times, from many precincts. She could see the unwanted pity in every Sergeant’s eyes, in every precinct, each time she came. And so she’d gone to Central Park, still in uniform, as soon as shift was over. She’d forgotten that O’Leary had been moved there, or maybe she’d mistaken the dates and thought he hadn’t transferred yet.

Every time she’d gone, every time before that when Hardon had called, he’d pretended it was the first time. Pretended that he didn’t know Officer Beckett, to save her pride. Small mercy, to help her pretend in front of the NYPD. She’d wondered, later, if perhaps he’d had more personal experience than she knew, but never asked. She had enough to cope with, without the problems of others.

Anyway, she’d gone. Turned up and been ready to bail him out, take his filthy self home, the plastic sheet already over the back seat of her car, a bowl there, ready; all to avoid the vomit and urine staining her vehicle. She’d learned that trick fast. She’d been prepared for her father. By then, she’d been used to it: the filth and the tears and the begging. And the rejection for not being her mother.
She had not been prepared for O’Leary’s happy cry of “Beckett! You here to see me in my new shop?” She’d turned, and seen him, and turned away. He had no place in that scene. It had been shaming enough when it was cops who didn’t know her, with whom she’d never worked. And so she’d blocked him out, as if he weren’t there, as if she’d never met him, and taken her father home.

Two days later she’d been due to have a drink with O’Leary, to celebrate his transfer, talk about how she was getting on at the Twelfth. She’d seen the questions and the worry and concern on O’Leary’s massive visage, and avoided ever getting close to allowing him an opening. As if he’d never seen anything. He’d taken the hint. She’d still made sure she was too busy to see him for a while, until she could be sure that he wouldn’t pry. He hadn’t: small light in a dark world. He’d done better than that, because the next times she was called he wasn’t there, and then… then there had been the final time she had, when he’d clearly seen her and pretended not to; and she’d known then that O’Leary was the sort of friend she really needed – one who would let her pretend that none of it was happening and not ask any questions, one who’d simply go out for beers and talk shop and – because he was gay and not complicated at all – give her a brief hug if she needed it, and sparring practice when, far more often, she wanted that, and be a plus one if required – and she for him – and never ask anything at all, ever.

And then she’d decided that she couldn’t do it any more. She couldn’t keep pretending it was the first time, or the second. Couldn’t hide it from herself any more. By being there for him, she was a guaranteed safety net. An enabler, a co-dependent. So the next time Sergeant Hardon called, she said No. She wasn’t going. Hardon had argued, and guilt-tripped, and damn close to ordered – though he knew he had no right to give that order and if he tried she’d disobey – but she hadn’t gone. And then she’d gone to a bar in the East Village and begun. O’Leary had called, and she’d already had enough to tell him where she was. Not why. Never, ever why. Not long after, he’d shown up. She hadn’t cared if he was there or not, but he’d kept a line of drinks in front of her and matched her glass for glass and taken her home at the end. He’d made sure she was safe, but all she could force out were thanks, through the bitter taste of betrayal of her father and the gritted teeth holding back her hurt and pain and shame.

So she’d forced herself to invite him out, but it had never quite been the same again, even though he’d followed her lead and never mentioned it. She’d buried herself in work to be able to claim she was too busy to come out, when the truth was that seeing O’Leary was a jagged-sharp reminder of the day she’d walked away. She hadn’t seen him much, buried herself in work to dull the pain and exhaust her so that she could sleep, until her dad called her from rehab, until O’Leary made Detective too. And when Will had left, he’d been there to let her spar the pain away; the hurt that she’d never have a family outside her father because she couldn’t ever abandon him again.

Not that her father would have cared about that.

She marks those dates in too, and looks down at the black staining pool on the page, blotting it, and takes herself to the restroom to repair the damage before anyone else should arrive and might notice. When she returns she’s dry-eyed and cold.

For five long years she’s supported her father and they’ve talked about nothing. She’s been too scared to open any subject that might expose the cracks, and he’s never tried. She’d thought it was enough, for both of them. But it seems like he’s been hiding just as much as she has, for darker reasons. She forcibly tells herself that this is just another case, in which she’ll interview the prime suspect. Just another interview, just another day.

She starts to construct her questions, which, compared to her timeline, are scanty: why did you tell me to go? Why then reverse it to stay? and after an hour’s concentrated effort in which she doesn’t let a single breath or look betray her feelings, is done till tonight. As she folds up the two sheets of
paper and puts them safely in her purse, Montgomery arrives, and seeing her, stops by her desk.

“Beckett.”

“Sir.”

“You’re in early.”

“Sir. Wanted to get a head start before Ryan and Espo start disturbing the peace.” She forces a grin.

“Okay. How are things going?”

“Fine, sir. Wrist’s better.” She wiggles and then circles it, to prove it.

“And your appointments?” Montgomery says meaningfully.

“Fine too. I think Friday will be the last one.”

Montgomery casts her a very sharp glance indeed. “Really, Detective? I will require a clearance from your practitioner.”

“That’s fine, sir. I’m sure he’ll be quite happy to sign one.”

Beckett is absolutely certain that Dr Burke will not wish to treat her again as soon as she proves him to have been totally wrong. She hasn’t missed his belief in his own methods, and she can’t imagine that he’ll enjoy his oversized ego being spectacularly punctured.

Montgomery departs for his own office, wondering vaguely why Detective Beckett is so sure that she’ll be cleared by the shrink. It certainly doesn’t seem long enough to him, especially with that bullshit about the sparring last week. However, he’s not a shrink and doesn’t want to be. Managing his precinct is quite enough for him. On the other hand, managing his precinct includes making sure his star detective (and the reason that they’re top of the stats every month) is okay. Better than okay. He needs her to stay on top form. He flips over a few folders and finds the leave requests, and gently peruses Beckett’s. She took the four days. Hm. She’s still got six to take. She’d asked for them to be after spring break week, which kept her from conflicting with the family-style requests, but is in the mix with all the non-family requests. He can’t have all his non-family requests in that week, and anyway, that’s still a month and more away: spring break’s not over till April 20.

Beckett could use a break, he thinks impishly. He’ll see how today and tomorrow go, and make a decision on Friday. Come to think of it, even for Beckett today must have started early. Her to-go-cup had been in the trash can, and the mug on her desk only had black dregs in it. That’s not a good sign. He may be a desk-driving Captain these days, but he can still pick up a clue if he needs to. These clues tell him that Beckett’s stressed. Not very obviously, and certainly not at a level for which he needs to take action, but there’s a thread there. However, she’s not on shift and not on call this weekend, so even if nothing more is needed she’ll have a break. In fact, he’ll just make certain of it. She will not be sneaking into the bullpen to work. He marches back out of his office.

“Beckett.”

“Sir?”

“You are off this weekend, aren’t you?”
“Yes.”

“Any plans?”

“Going out of town for the weekend. Change of scene.”

“Good.”

Montgomery leaves again, with Beckett’s confused stare following him. She has absolutely no idea what that was about. Actually, she really doesn’t care. As long as he doesn’t bench her again for no reason then it’s all okay.

Shortly Ryan, and then Espo, turn up and she completely forgets about Montgomery as the day gets going.
Castle is woken by his buzzing alarm at his usual time, which allows him to share breakfast with Alexis and frequently also allows him to watch his mother’s all-too-common walks of shame. Today, thankfully, is not one of those days. Shortly, however, he wishes it were.

“Dad?”

“Yes?”

“Dad, why doesn’t Detective Beckett come here? You’re spending lots of time with her, but never here. Why not?”

“She said on Sunday, it’s been very busy at the precinct.”

“I don’t believe you,” Alexis says very firmly. “If it was cases you’d mention it. You always mention the cases even if you won’t tell me all the gory details, which is totally unfair.”

Castle’s heart sinks. This is not a conversation he wants to have.

“Grams and me” –

“Grams and I, pumpkin.”

“Stop trying to change the subject, Dad. Grams and I think something’s up. We thought maybe she doesn’t like us, but she doesn’t behave like she doesn’t like us, so why won’t she come here?”

“Alexis, Detective Beckett has other responsibilities. She can’t just do exactly what she likes when she’s off duty.” He looks very straight at his normally delightful daughter. “I don’t want you – or Grams – asking about it, or interfering, or trying to investigate. When it’s dealt with, she’ll be able to come round if we invite her. Until then, you just have to accept that she can’t come as often as anyone would like.”

Which last sentence is carefully constructed to give the impression that it’s also Beckett who can’t come as often as she’d like. Alexis looks back, speculation blooming in her face, and then looks at Castle’s serious expression.

“Okay, Dad. But she does know we like her, doesn’t she? She’s good for you. You haven’t been half as childish since Christmas. And I really don’t mind if you spend lots of evenings with her.” She smirks evilly. “I like the freedom, you know.”

“You like the quiet, you mean. No helicopter toys buzzing your homework.”

“Yes. So you have my permission to be out as often as you like. Even sleepovers.”

Castle splutters and Alexis makes a swift escape before he wrecks revenge on her.

After she’s gone, however, Castle recalls that he has to call Dr Burke, and probably O’Leary. Dr Burke is easiest, because that’s simply arranging an appointment time for before Friday lunchtime – he thinks that Burke will need a little time to consider this looming catastrophe. He’ll call after he’s tidied up breakfast and it’s got to office hours.

Castle manages the tidying up of breakfast, but then he’s distracted by a tendril of inspiration. He’s hauled out of his writing reverie by the ring of his phone, which turns out to be Dr Burke’s
receptionist, asking whether he could see Dr Burke this afternoon, at four. He agrees. Inspiration having fled, he texts O’Leary, asking what time he’s showing up at Molloy’s, and then asking if they can meet half an hour before that. Beckett hasn’t actually told him the timings, though he imagines that she’ll say when he shows up at the precinct. Anyway, it won’t be earlier than six-thirty.

All that done, he collects his coat and leaves for the Twelfth.

The bullpen is full of the depressed and bored air of detectives who are poring over old cases, and that’s just from Beckett, Espo and Ryan. The others all seem to be a little busier, and a lot cheerier. Castle wonders if Montgomery is still gerrymandering the caseload, and bounces up to Beckett’s desk brandishing coffee and good humour.

“Hey, Beckett,” he says happily.

“Hey, Castle,” she says, and smiles back. Castle notices an underlying unhappiness but is forestalled from asking by the arrival of both boys.

“Where you been, Castle? Haven’t seen you for a week. Don’tcha love us any more?” Ryan asks, faux-plaintively.

“Neither,” Castle says amiably, before it can get nasty. “Gina threatened me with fire-ants, honey and excision of my liver if I didn’t turn in at least three chapters before the weekend and two more by tonight. I managed it, so here I am. Unhoneyed, uneaten” – Beckett hides her expression – “and still in possession of my liver.”

“Does she threaten you like that often?”

“Usually she’s a bit more expansive about it. She must have been in a hurry.”

Castle perches on Beckett’s desk rather than in his chair, and precisely as expected is grumbled and growled at.

“Move, Castle. You’re sitting on my files.”

He doesn’t. Beckett taps him firmly and when he still doesn’t stand up shoves, only moderately gently.

“Castle, move. Go get coffee and get off my files.”

He stands up, acting as if he’s been put upon. “C’mon, Ryan. Beckett loves her cold case file more than she loves me” –

“It’s certainly quieter,” Beckett quips, to a snigger from Espo.

“– so let’s go get some doughnuts.” He pouts at Beckett. “And you’re not going to steal them all.”

“Sprinkles, please,” is all she says.

Ryan and Castle exit, leaving Beckett and Espo discussing whether it’s worth trying a fingerprint match on a smudge.

“How many doughnuts should we get?”
“Twice as many as you think, and an extra three for Beckett,” Ryan says lightly. “Might sweeten her disposition next time she goes sparring.”

“Yeah?” Castle says. “What’s that about?”

“Beckett was in a bad mood on Thursday an’ took it out on the mats. Glad it wasn’t me. Even Espo was having some trouble with her. It got a bit lively, and then it all went full out, an’ then Montgomery turned up and ripped us all a new one. But Espo took her down an’ she landed badly on her wrist. Couldn’t even brush her hair.”

“What?” Castle had certainly not realised it was that bad. And yet she’d taken it out the sling to try to console him.

“An’ no make up.”

“Wow. And it’s not broken?” Castle whistles.

“Yeah. But somehow it was all my fault that they were trying to kill each other. I was just watching.”

“Sounds like the best place to be. So why was Beckett so mad?”

“Dunno. She was thinking really hard, like when she’s working a difficult case. We thought she had something that she wasn’t letting us in on, but she wouldn’t talk. She just snapped at us. Then she took a breath and eased off and said she’d come sparring at lunchtime. So we left her to it.”

“Best thing for you. Death’s pretty permanent.”

“Think that’s what Espo was thinking. Beckett doesn’t usually get pissed at us.” Ryan shrugs.

“Whatever it was, she came out looking for a fight an’ Espo gave her one.”

“Oh,” Castle says, and turns to the vital business of ordering doughnuts in bulk. He’s learned what he needed to from Ryan. Next up, a chat with Espo.

The doughnuts are appreciated by the bullpen. Castle can tell this by the way that they are all gone in sixty milliseconds. Beckett receives her separate box first, affords him a dazzling smile and then refuses absolutely to share. Castle humphs for the sake of appearances and then produces his own doughnuts – chocolate, naturally – with a smug grin.

“You don’t think I expected you to share, do you?”

“You’d have been disappointed. It’s doughnuts. No cop shares doughnuts.”

“And I didn’t expect to be able to beat the bullpen to the box – anyway, they’ve all got guns and even doughnuts aren’t worth being shot over – so I got my own.” He smiles widely and takes a large bite while watching the flurry of doughnut-fuelled activity around the main box, where Ryan seems to be losing out. It reminds him of sharks around a bleeding whale.

“You’re everyone’s favourite guy right now,” Beckett says, with a grin. “If there’s any research you want to do that might involve annoying people, now’s your chance. They’ll all be on a sugar high.” The grin turns evil. “Try not to break anything while you’re playing, okay?”

“I’m not a child,” Castle murmurs. “Happy to prove it. Again.”

He departs at speed so that he retains the last word, and winds up, wholly not coincidentally, at
Espo’s desk, where Espo is just dealing with the last few crumbs of doughnut.

“Hey.”

“Yo, Castle. What d’you want?”

“A chat,” Castle says, with no humour at all. Espo’s expression darkens. “I wanna know what you thought you were doing sparring with Beckett till she got hurt.”

“Coffee,” Esposito says laconically, not noticeably intimidated, but equally serious.

They attain the break room, Espo’s ferocious scowl and Castle’s air of annoyance preventing anyone else joining them.

“Beckett came out lookin’ for a fight. Dunno why.”

“Thought you could pull your punches?”

“I was doin’. Right up till she kicked me in the gut. I can’t pull everything when I gotta focus on not bein’ badly hurt myself. Ask her why she was so mad. Takes two to keep it clean, an’ Beckett sure wasn’t tryin’.” Esposito drills Castle with a glare. “Wasn’t you, was it?”

“No.”

Espo looks very sceptical. “You ain’t been in for a week.”

“Doesn’t mean I didn’t see Beckett,” Castle says, unspecifically. The boys know there’s more going on than they see. So much was made clear back when he told them he’d got this, a month ago.

“But you know why.” It’s not a question.

“Mm,” Castle hums non-committally, and changes the subject. “How come you couldn’t hold back? Thought you were better than Beckett.”

“I am. But she’s prob’ly the best woman around right now, an’ like I said, she wasn’t holdin’ back. Came down to a choice between holdin’ back and bein’ in the ER or not holdin’ back an’ hopin’ both of us weren’t in the ER. Then Montgomery walked in.” Espo winces at the memory. “He wasn’t pleased. Reamed us all out. Just as well he di’n’t know about Beckett’s wrist, an’ we weren’t gonna let on. She fell on it, an’ messed it up. Went to see Lanie about it, but that’s about all I know.”

“She do this often?” Castle asks, falling into Espo’s laconic style.

“Naw. Once before. ‘S why we’re careful. Last time it was my wrist got sprained but Beckett got her shoulder dislocated. We got used as the floor mops by Montgomery. After that we watched it.”

“When was that?”

“’Bout – erm – maybe three years ago. She was out for blood. Funny thing was, I thought she’d been hitting the mats with someone else, ‘cause she had a whole set of bruises already. Got the feelin’ she’d had a break-up, but she don’t talk an’ I don’t ask.”

“Probably wise,” Castle murmurs sotto voce. Something is nagging at his mind. It’ll come, if he ignores it.
“Wondered if she’d been sparrin’ with O’Leary. She used to do that a bit,” Espo says, and that’s all it takes for the whole story to fall complete into Castle’s head.

Beckett had last been out for blood when she’d broken up with that Fed. O’Leary had thought – still thinks – that it was because of the Fed, but Castle knows that it’s because she’d wanted a family of her own but her dad’s issues had meant that it hadn’t worked out. This time… this time it’s still because of her dad’s issues, or more truthfully in both cases it’s because of Beckett’s reactions to her dad’s issues. Which is the same, really, as saying Beckett’s issues. And on Tuesday last Dr Burke had told Beckett that she was being abused, and she’d not taken it well (understatement is part of his writer’s craft) and on Wednesday she’d been brooding over it all day, and if he puts together Ryan’s comments about how she was behaving and Espo’s comments now he just bets that Beckett was brooding worse on Thursday and then took her entire fury and unhappiness on to the mats.

He’d thought about Beckett’s potential capacity for self-destruction last night. He might have been a day or two – or seven – late. If he’d known this when he’d spoken to Dr Burke at the weekend, he’d have mentioned it then. Instead he’ll need to mention it tonight. It’s the physical version of the emotional suicide – sparring so hard there’s no option but that she’ll get hurt. This is seriously fucked up. He supposes, very bitterly, that it could have been worse if it had been self-harming, not sparring, though he’s fairly certain that if Espo is the opposition that’s a distinction without much of a practical difference.

“You okay, bro? You look a bit zoned out there.”

“Yeah, it’s okay,” he says vaguely. “I’ll just make another coffee. Must be all the sugar in those doughnuts.”

“Yeah.” Espo clearly doesn’t believe him and equally isn’t going to pry. He wanders out as Castle fiddles with the machine.

Messing with the espresso machine is interrupted by the chirp of a text. It’s O’Leary, who says… what? Off-shift today. What’s up? Told Beckett seven, so a bit of time. Castle texts back straight away how about five thirty? We need to talk. Barely more of a gap later comes back Sure. Molloys.

The day progresses with a general lack of conversation and surfeit of case files. Beckett isn’t chatty – not that this is ever news – but Castle notices a rather heavier presence of Montgomery than normal. He seems to have an awful lot of matters to which he needs to attend which require walking past Beckett’s desk. Shortly after three, Castle makes his excuses and leaves: claiming that he’s bored for the boys’ benefit and that he’ll see her later for Beckett’s. She raises a cynical eyebrow but doesn’t interrogate him. A few minutes of a niggling guilty feeling into the cab journey, he texts her: Burke wanted to see me @ 4pm. Later. C. It doesn’t really improve the niggle. Not for the first time, there seem to be no good choices where Beckett is concerned. He broods all the way to Dr Burke’s office.

“Good afternoon, Mr Castle.”

“Hey.”

“I wished to talk with you, and with Mr Beckett separately, about Friday’s meeting. I have some concerns that, without proper support and planning, that it will be unproductive.”

“Unproductive?” says Castle incredulously. “Unproductive? Is that how you normally describe an absolute disaster?”
Dr Burke raises his eyebrows. “Would you care to explain?”

“Beckett is planning to interrogate her father to prove you wrong. She doesn’t care how much it hurts – her or him – because she thinks he doesn’t care. In fact, she’s planning to blow their relationship up so spectacularly that there’s no chance they ever speak to each other again. She thinks that’ll finish things and she’ll be fine afterwards, because she still thinks her father doesn’t care and wants to ensure that she doesn’t either. I think that ten seconds after she does that and discovers her father does care she’ll be sorry but it won’t ever be fixable again, and then she’ll drown in guilt and never come out.” He draws a breath. “Did you ask how she hurt her wrist?”

“Of course. She said that she had been sparring harder than usual, because she was frustrated with both her work and my comment that her behaviours were similar to those of an abuse victim.”

“Similar to? Beckett’s convinced you said her father abused her.”

“I have not. I have pointed that out on several occasions.”

“Anyway,” says Castle impatiently, “according to Espo, she was looking for blood from the moment she walked on the mats. And I think it’s the same thing. She doesn’t care any more how much she gets hurt as long as she gets rid of the thing hurting her. So sparring in a way that’s going to get her hurt – and it wasn’t the first time – stops her hurting from the other stuff; and blowing everything up with her father is just what we talked about before.”

“Hm,” Dr Burke emits. “An interesting analysis, Mr Castle. Given that you will be here on Friday, have you had any other thoughts about the likely progress of that meeting?”

“Beckett’s planning out her interrogation. She’s enlisted O’Leary, to go right back to when her father was being picked up drunk in Central Park. She wants me to add in what I know about what her father’s currently thinking. She’s not going to like that. We’re all supposed to be meeting tonight to work it out.” He pauses. Letting all of this out is actually very cathartic. “She isn’t mentioning her feelings at all. She’s only talking about getting facts. And” –

“And?”

“And I think actually she hasn’t realised that it’s going to blow up in her face. I just keep thinking that really deep down she’s doing this because he’s hurt her so much, for so long – without meaning to or even knowing that he did – to hurt him right back. But I’m sure she doesn’t know that.”

“Very astute, Mr Castle. Your analysis marches with mine.”

“You expected this?”

“I am a psychiatrist. I believe, however, that we can direct events so that catastrophe is avoided. As a first point, Detective Beckett is not aware that Mr Beckett has now realised that he has never been apprised of the full extent of his words and actions while drunk. She is also not aware that I will be seeing Mr Beckett tomorrow, and if necessary again prior to Friday’s meeting. Part of that discussion will cover Detective Beckett’s likely behaviour, so that he is prepared for it. I trust, too, that she is not aware of your deductions?”

“No.”

“Good.”

Castle bristles. “I don’t like going behind her back.”
“Mr Castle,” reproves Dr Burke, “we do not wish to go behind Detective Beckett’s back. However, I do not wish her to start down another misconceived line of thought. How do you think she will react if you mention any of your conclusions?”

Castle is brought up short. “Badly,” he has to admit.

“Precisely. Every time that Detective Beckett has been faced with an unpleasant truth about her actions and emotions, she has first denied and then sought to discredit the point. If you mention these conclusions now, she will undoubtedly refuse to deal with you, and if there is one point that is simple in this highly complex matter, it is that Detective Beckett refusing to maintain contact with you will be very likely to cause catastrophe.”

Dr Burke gazes sympathetically at Castle. “I appreciate that this is a highly unpleasant position for you. Quite naturally, you would prefer immediate honesty. I would also prefer that this were unnecessary. However, it is only two days, and the results will justify the delay. Honesty will be required, in any event, so you need not worry that you will be deceiving your beloved.” He smiles, gently, as Castle chokes, splutters, and generally fails to recover his composure. “Now, could we perhaps discuss your role in Friday’s session, and the potential directions that it might take?”
“Urrg?” Castle manages, still shell-shocked by Dr Burke’s comment.

“Friday’s session,” Dr Burke says briskly. “You have an important role to play, and it is essential that you are properly prepared.”

Dr Burke is, in fact, quite impressed by Mr Castle’s thinking, if not by his evident surprise that Dr Burke has identified his feelings. It would, by now, have been very hard to miss them. Mr Castle’s heart is quite blatantly on his sleeve where Detective Beckett is concerned. However, since this has resulted in Mr Castle turning his intelligence and empathy on Detective Beckett, it is to be welcomed. Still, it would be entirely unhelpful if Detective Beckett were to manufacture a quarrel with Mr Castle, such as would be entirely likely to occur were Mr Castle to outline his deductions to her outside the relatively controlled environment of Dr Burke’s treatment room.

“I’m on Beckett’s side,” Mr Castle says coldly.

“Was that in doubt?”

Mr Castle subsides, muttering. Dr Burke is sure he does not want to know what is being enunciated.

“That you are, as you put it, on Beckett’s side, is precisely why you are here. Detective Beckett both wholly trusts you and is prepared to rely on you. She has no doubt that you have her, and only her, interests at heart.”

“Oh,” Mr Castle emits. He sounds a little shocked.

“Surely you were aware of this?”

“It’s a little different when you hear it from a shr- psychiatrist,” Mr Castle stutters. Dr Burke is mildly surprised. Mr Castle’s behaviour with Detective Beckett had not led Dr Burke to consider that Mr Castle might be unsure of her feelings. Behaviour such as Mr Castle had exhibited is generally only acceptable when one is quite certain that the other person will not object.

“Mr Castle, we have only half an hour. Please can we now focus on Friday?”

“Yeah…okay.”

“You have told me Detective Beckett intends to interrogate her father. Are you aware of the direction that interrogation might take?”

“Not yet. I will be tomorrow, though. If I had to guess now, I’d guess she’s intending to push hard about what he remembers, backed up by whatever O’Leary tells her tonight. Then – if it’s like the way she does it at work – she’ll start picking up the inconsistencies between what he said drunk and what he said sober, and pushing on them. When he’s so confused he doesn’t know which way is up, she’ll hit him with the killer blow.”

“What is that?”

“If I were writing it, it would be what he said to her a month ago. She’ll hit him with all the ways he used to tell her she wasn’t enough, then she’ll put in all the ways he made her think he wanted to be a family – and then she’ll tell him she knows he was lying for the last five years, because he
said she wasn’t his family a month ago, stone cold sober. He’ll be so upset he won’t be able to argue. She’ll take it as proof, and then she’ll turn round and tell you she was right and you were wrong.”

“Fascinating. How will she show I was wrong?”

“Well, she’ll say that since he lied about caring for her, that he doesn’t, and that since he doesn’t care he wouldn’t have bothered to abuse her deliberately.”

“And your view of this sequence?”

“Utter bullshit.”

Vulgar, but pungent.

“Why?”

“First, because none of this is proof either way. Second, because Beckett’s not taking feelings into account. Hers or her dad’s. I think that as soon as she’s actually facing her father she’ll start to lose it.”

“I agree. And that, Mr Castle, is where you come in. Think of yourself as security. Every time tempers rise, it will be your job to deal with Detective Beckett.” Mr Castle looks appalled. “I will remove Mr Beckett from the situation. You merely need to take care of Detective Beckett. You already know how. I need not tell you what to do.”

“But… but…”

“Mr Castle,” Dr Burke says with some exasperation, “given Mr Beckett’s realisations, and Detective Beckett’s psychological fragility and the consequent risk of either or both of them precipitating some exceedingly unhelpful action – they can be remarkably similar – I have no choice but to ensure that this meeting takes place at the earliest possible time. While Mr Beckett may revert to alcohol, Detective Beckett is already taking risks with her physical wellbeing: witness her sparring match. I am really quite deeply concerned about her.”

“Okay. So if it all gets… emotional, you want me to what? Do what we did with Lanie?”

“Not precisely,” says Dr Burke, a touch uncomfortably. “I would prefer you behaved similarly to last Friday.”

Castle simply stares at him.

“What?”

“Detective Beckett finds psychological safety in your physical presence and actions, as demonstrated on Friday. That is what I need you to do. In short” –

“In short, hold on to her.”

“Yes,” Dr Burke says, a little flustered, steeping and unsteeping his fingers. “I would really very much prefer not to have to undertake this meeting so soon. However, we can only work with the situation we have. Simply be ready, Mr Castle.”

“We’re going out to the Hamptons straight after,” Castle says, apparently inconsequentially. “That was the plan, anyway. Beckett asked me if we could go. It sounded like she wanted some time
“I think that would be an excellent plan, no matter how Friday goes. Whatever Detective Beckett does or says, on Friday, before or after, to you or to others; it is not you with whom she has issues, nor will it be in any way your fault. Without you, Friday will be most unlikely to be successful. If it is not, then you could not have done more to resolve the position. You will be blameless.” Dr Burke shifts his hands. “I consider that it would be well to be ready to leave from here.”

“If I hadn’t pushed, none of this would have happened,” Castle says bitterly.

“You are wrong,” Dr Burke says sharply. “Detective Beckett would eventually have failed to control her feelings towards her father in any case. The unresolved issues between her and her father would have come to the fore. You may have accelerated the realisation, but you did not cause it. Furthermore, you have assisted in resolving it. As I said, you are blameless. Blaming yourself is pointless and self-indulgent.”

Castle growls unpleasantly. Dr Burke has no hesitation in meeting his eyes. “Do not introduce yet more complications to this situation, Mr Castle. We have enough with which to contend. There is no need to make your position more difficult.”

Castle retreats from his annoyance. “Now what? Beckett’s going to ask me what I think of her father’s actions, and I know he didn’t mean any of it. But if I say that she’ll think I’m on his side.”

“Tell her the truth as you see it, but make it clear that this is what Mr Beckett has shown you. It is most likely that Detective Beckett will then believe that he is attempting to deceive you too. That will be her assumption, but you will not have been in any way deceitful yourself. You must be honest, as you wish to be. If you are not honest with Detective Beckett then she will simply discard you, however much that might pain her.”

“Great,” Castle mutters. He can see at least a dozen ways that this can all go horribly wrong tonight, never mind waiting for Friday.

“Mr Castle, all you can do is ‘tell the truth and shame the Devil’ as the old saying would have it. You have no other choice. You cannot control Detective Beckett’s reactions. For what it is worth, however, I think that regardless of any immediate emotional reaction, in the end she will only respond to honesty.”

“You can put that on my tombstone,” Castle quips acidly. “Nice to know we’ve sorted out my epitaph in advance, even if it is at the last minute.”

Dr Burke does not answer that piece of silliness. “I will continue to consider the correct course of action on Friday. I also intend to speak to Mr Beckett in advance. Should you have any more insights, I would be very pleased if you would share them. They have to date been profoundly helpful. I would also appreciate it if you felt able to advise me of any notable information arising from your meeting tonight or any other time prior to Friday’s session.”

“Okay.”

“Further avoidable surprises are not to be welcomed,” Dr Burke says dryly. “It is my expectation that we will have a number of unavoidable surprises.”

“You can say that again,” Castle agrees. He glances at his watch. “I need to get going. I need to talk to O’Leary before Beckett shows up.”

“A wise move.” To Castle’s surprise, Dr Burke rises and accompanies him out of his office to the
“Thank you, Mr Castle. It is extremely helpful to have you involved. Do not hesitate to call if you think it necessary.” He pauses. “Trust your instincts. They have so far served you very well. Goodnight, Mr Castle.”

“Goodnight.”

O’Leary is not in Molloys when Castle gets there, a few moments early despite his fears. The bribe he’d offered the cab driver might have something to do with that, of course. He orders a beer and takes possession of a table which has just about enough space around it to fit the O’Leary mountain. Shortly, said mountain ambles through the door, spots Castle, waves, collects a beer of his own and descends.

“What’s this all about?” he rumbles. “What’s Beckett up to this time?”

“Breaking her dad and probably herself,” Castle growls, not troubling to contain his feelings and Dr Burke-induced irritation.

“Huh?”

“Thought you’d got the download from her last night?”

“Well, it was more info than I used to get, but it wasn’t very useful.” O’Leary casts a slow, gee-folks-what’s-up falsely innocent look at Castle. “Hey, Castle, how come you know what she said? You been seeing my Beckett behind my back?”

Castle grins, tightly and briefly, at O’Leary’s down-home folksiness and accent, more pronounced than usual. “Thought you were seeing your Pete. I’m seeing my Beckett.”

“Who’s doin’ something dumb. What’s goin’ on, Castle?”

“You know she’s seeing a shrink. She told you. She thinks the shrink’s talking bullshit and we’re supposed to help her prove it.”

“Shrink said her pa abused her?”

“Apparently so.”

“And she don’t like it.”

“You can say that again.”

“So why’d you wanna talk before she shows up?” Castle stares hard at O’Leary. “I don’t guess that look works on Beckett an’ it sure don’t work on me. What’s goin’ on? An’ what d’you mean breaking her dad an’ herself? What dumbass idea has she got into her head?”

“She says she wants to prove the shrink wrong. We’re going to provide evidence.”

O’Leary’s massive frame winces, and the table wobbles. “And?” he says, folksy accent entirely gone and Detective suddenly, shockingly in place.

“And I reckon it’s going to be an absolute disaster.”

“What are we going to do?”

“Tell the truth, and then try to divert her plan into something that’ll do what she says she wants to
do."

"Being?"

"Burke – the shrink – said she was acting as if her dad had been an abuser – emotional, not physical. Beckett heard your dad emotionally abused you. She doesn’t agree, but in the same breath she’s saying he doesn’t care so it doesn’t matter – and she doesn’t care in return. You heard her say that.”

"Yeah."

"I guess she wants you to tell the truth about anything you saw or heard when he was in the tank and she didn’t come to get him.”

"That’s simple,” O’Leary says bluntly. “Most of the time he was so drunk he couldn’t speak. Rest of the time he was drunk he cried for Katie to come and get him.”

"Nothing else?”

"Not unless you count the piss and vomit on the floor.”

"And sober?"

"Cried for Katie to come and get him, and said he was sorry, and phoned her, and wailed until the phone cut out.” O’Leary’s normally placidly amiable face is set and stern; his tone harsh. “Cried when she didn’t come and begged us to tell her he’d change, he’d ditch the booze, he’d be a family again. And a few days later he’d be back in our tank, and it would all be the same again. Sergeant called her, her pa called her, and she never came. Don’t blame her. When she did pick him up it didn’t stop him. Dunno how she put up with it.”

"That was it?”

"You were expecting something else,” O’Leary states. “What were you expecting me to say?”

"I thought Jim” – O’Leary raises fur stole sized brows at the familiar address – “might have mentioned another name.”

"Yeah?"

"Johanna.”

"Joanna?”

Castle pronounces the h more definitively. “Johanna.”

"Not Jo?”

“S’pose,” Castle says. “He’s never referred to her as Jo when I’ve heard him. Did he never mention a Johanna?”

O’Leary wrinkles up his brow in evident imitation of the Grand Canyon. “Can’t say I really listened to him. We’d got better things to do. And…well… it seemed like prying into Beckett’s life an’ I knew she didn’t want that. If she wanted me to know she’d’ve told me. If she’d wanted to explain why she wasn’t collecting her pa she’d’ve told me that.” He relapses into further thought, mechanically swigging his beer.
“Not then,” he eventually says. “Before. While she was still collecting him.” He searches back through dim memory. “Might have been the last time she did. Last time I saw it, anyway. She came, and the Sarge brought him up – he was filthy and still drunk, an’ he stank – and he looked at Beckett and said ‘I don’t want you. I want my Johanna.’ And Beckett just didn’t say a word an’ I pretended I hadn’t seen her or heard anything.”

“But?” Castle asks.

“But she flinched, as if he’d taken a stick to her, an’ then she manhandled him out an’ that was the last time I saw her collect her pa.”

“Ah.”

“You don’t sound surprised.”

“I’m not.”

“So what’s goin’ on that I don’t know about?”

“I think Beckett’s going to throw everything her dad said when he was drunk back in his face now, and then tell him that since he said she wasn’t family then, when he was too drunk to lie, and said it again a few weeks back – remember she told you when we were all in here last time – he’s been lying to her all the time he’s been dry.”

“That’s downright dumb,” O’Leary states flatly. “She really thinks that’s going to work?”

“She’s not thinking. She thinks she’s thinking, but she’s just reacting. It’s all going to go horribly wrong. She’s looking for an excuse to pick a fight that’ll mean she can justify walking away – but it isn’t going to work. She still can’t justify walking away the first time, when it really was the right thing to do.”

“Shit,” O’Leary mouths, and drains his beer, summons more, and drains most of a second bottle into the bargain.

“I have no clue what to do. I’m taking her out of Manhattan as soon as Friday’s over till Sunday night but I’ve been round this loop with myself, with her shrink, and with you, and I have absolutely no fucking clue what to do any more. I wish I could just shake some sense into her,” Castle finishes with venom.

“You can try it, an’ I can try it, but it ain’t either of us that she’s upset with, so it ain’t goin’ to work.”

“That’s not the point,” Castle spits. “How did I end up trying to fix this total mess anyway? All I get is grief from the shrink, grief from Jim and grief from my own family. I wish I’d never got involved.”

“The one thing you didn’t say there is that you’re getting grief from Beckett,” O’Leary points out.

“I’m not.”

O’Leary allows a silence to develop, and allows his face to develop a rather impish smile. Not that imps are that size.

“O-kay,” Castle says frustratedly. “Stop with the work-it-out-dumbo look. I know she didn’t ask me to get involved, and she’s the one person in all this fucking mess who doesn’t expect me to fix
it. Any-fucking-thing but, right up till last week. Now she just wants to fix it so it’s not in her way.”

O’Leary casts him a well-then look, which doesn’t do much to ameliorate Castle’s generally spilling over irritation.

“You’re the one who’s dating her,” O’Leary points out patiently. “You knew there was a problem with her pa. You didn’t have to get involved any further than dating but you did. So quit bitching about your own choices and let’s work out how to get you an’ Beckett out of this alive.”

“You don’t pull your punches, do you?”

“We-ell,” O’Leary drawls, “mostly I do, otherwise I think I’d be inside Rikers by now. NYPD doesn’t appreciate dead suspects litterin’ the sidewalks.”

Castle grins, a touch wryly. “Okay. Try and avoid turning me into a corpse, huh?”

“Beckett wouldn’t like it, an’ I’m scared of her. So how’re we going to do this?”

“Very, very carefully,” Castle says.

“I got that bit. Anything a bit more helpful?”

“Nope. Except the shrink said stick to the truth. I think he wants me to get shot.”

“What, there’s someone out there who hasn’t responded to your charm, wit and personality?”

“He responded all right. Told me off like I was still in kindergarten.” O’Leary splutters around his mouthful of beer. “I don’t like him,” Castle says. “I really don’t. He’s so far up his own pompous ass he could eat his dinner twice.” O’Leary snickers. “But he’s the only person in the whole world who’s made Beckett stop and think, so I guess he knows what he’s doing. Up till now, anyway. Now, he’s pissed her off.”

“Mistake,” O’Leary drawls.

“I don’t know. He’s clever enough that it might have been his plan all along. Upset or annoy her enough that she actually does something about the situation just to prove him wrong. If so, it’s working. I just really, really think that this one might be a step too far.”

Castle drains his own beer and relapses into a general attitude of resentful annoyance. Dr Burke has riled him, even if it’s been softened by flattery. Then again, Dr Burke invariably riles him. Every time he thinks he’s got a good way to reduce Dr Burke to rubble, Dr Burke manages to put him either in the wrong or at the very least in confusion. It’s not fair. Castle understands precisely why Beckett doesn’t like Dr Burke, and is entirely in agreement with her.

“What do you wanna happen, Castle?”

“I’ll settle for being alive at the other end of Friday.”

“Best outcome?”

“Beckett and her dad are actually talking to each other honestly, and not shouting or worse not talking at all. And I’m still alive.”

“Mm. Well, here she is. She don’t look terribly happy.”
Castle looks up. Arriving on track one is Badass Beckett, in full beat-em-up mode. Great.
“Hey, O’Leary, Castle.”

“Hey, Beckett,” comes in stereo.

“Beer?”

“Please,” says O’Leary, heaving into standing.

“I can manage two bottles and a soda.”

“You can’t manage four bottles and a soda. Your teeny little hands don’t do that.”

“Watch me.”

O’Leary follows Beckett. She turns round and glares at such intensity that Castle is surprised that two holes do not form in his forehead.

“I can manage, O’Leary.”

He sits back down, and looks unhappily at Castle.

“This is not gonna go well.”

“Nope.”

Beckett lands in a chair with a decisive thump, sets down four bottles and a soda for herself, and as swiftly produces a notebook. “Right,” she says. “What do we got?”

The men look at each other with you-go, no, you go expressions. The silence lasts around ten seconds.


“What d’you want? You ain’t told me anything, so why don’t you explain first an’ then I can tell you somethin’ useful rather than a ton of nothin’ that won’t help.”

“Castle didn’t explain?”

“Nope. An’ even if he had I wanna hear it from you, not your boyfriend.”

“Dumb shrink says my dad was an abuser. He’s wrong. He thinks my dad didn’t mean it when he said I wasn’t enough family for him. He’s wrong there too.”

“Don’t you think the shrink might know a thing or two?”

“I’m sure he knows lots of things,” Beckett spits out, “but he’s wrong about this.”

“So why’d he think it?”

Beckett briefly relates the reasoning behind the mention of abuse. Castle watches O’Leary, rather than Beckett, as she does. O’Leary has a very fine poker face, but the restless tapping of his sausage-sized fingers on his knee tell their own tale.
“Mm. Now how about this business of not being enough family?”

Another very sketchy explanation. O’Leary’s fingers are now tapping faster than a virtuoso on a piano keyboard.

“Mm,” O’Leary emits again. Beckett runs out of explanation, or (more likely) doesn’t see any need to explain further, coupled with considerable disinclination to explain further. There is an ominous pause. Castle considers O’Leary’s tense, tapping fingers, and the set of his mountainous shoulders. “So what do you wanna know?” O’Leary says mildly. Castle is instantly both suspicious and very, very worried.


O’Leary repeats the unadorned facts that he’d told Castle a few moments ago.


“What were you expecting?”

Beckett shrugs, frustratedly. “Something. Anything. I know all that. There has to be more. There has to be something to prove he didn’t care then and pretended he did till now. Had me on a string, till he slipped up.” She shuts her mouth very fast. Castle thinks that she might have been about to go back to I missed my chance to have a family.

“Had you on a string?” O’Leary rumbles.

“Yeah. He called, I went. Every single time. He rang, I answered. Soon as he got out of rehab. He kept saying I was the reason he got sober.” Her mouth pinches. “He was still lying about that right up till last month. Made me think he needed me. Made me think he was making up for never wanting me when he was drunk.”

Castle is watching O’Leary, still. Beckett isn’t paying attention to either of them, staring at the inside of her head, but O’Leary’s mass appears to be gathering itself into a state of readiness. Castle is developing the clear impression that O’Leary is considering taking some unspecified action. He also has the clear impression that matters are shortly going to get messy.

“Sounds to me like your pa really did a number on you, Beckett.”

O’Leary’s choosing now to actually force Beckett into talking? He’s never made her talk before. Why now? Where’s a nuclear bunker when Castle needs it?

“What d’you mean?” Beckett snaps.

“Well,” he drags it out so it sounds more like waaalll, “I know what I call it when someone says how high whenever someone else says hop, frog.”

“What do you call it?” Another snap. Beckett’s extremely limited patience has already expired, and Castle can see the tight line of her mouth and the crease in her brow. He can also see O’Leary’s small movements, which appear to be leaving him in a position of combat readiness. Castle shifts very marginally to be closer to Beckett on the other side from O’Leary. He’s developed an inkling of O’Leary’s next plan.

“I call it bein’ too nice. Lettin’ someone else tell you what to do. Iffen you get into the habit” – O’Leary’s folksiness is suddenly back, and Castle has to wonder why – “‘cause you don’t wanna upset someone, I call that bein’ messed around. Messed up. Abused.”
“My dad did not abuse me.”

O’Leary magnificently ignores Beckett’s infuriated words. “I watched you pick him up a dozen times an’ every time you let him say whatever he wanted and do whatever he wanted an’ you just put up with it. An’ then you stopped an’ you drank yourself unconscious ‘cause you were so upset you let him suffer for his own sins, rather than you sufferin’ for him. So I’m reckonin’ he did abuse you. Did he hit you?”

“No!”

“Hit you in the emotions, though.”

“He was drunk. He never meant it.”

“If he never meant it when he was drunk, he must’ve meant what he said when he was sober.”

Castle is fascinated. O’Leary’s slow, drawling accent makes him sound like a talking haybarn in the Mid-West, but Castle can see where this is going – strangely, Beckett doesn’t seem to, or maybe doesn’t want to – and it’s clear that O’Leary is a very intelligent haybarn indeed.

“Oh, he meant what he said when he was drunk. He just didn’t mean me to know it.”

“So he didn’t mean what he said when he was sober?”

“Exactly.”

“So he’s been takin’ advantage of you for five years by makin’ you think he wanted to be a family?”

“Yeah.”

“So how’s that not abusin’ you?”

Beckett flaps like a goldfish out of water and entirely fails to find words. Every muscle in her body gathers itself to flee. O’Leary drops a redwood-sized arm round her shoulders.

“You’re not goin’ anywhere, Beckett. You want my help to deal with what’s goin’ on, you got it. But I ain’t lettin’ you go into interrogation – an’ I know that’s what you’re plannin’ on – without bein’ properly prepared. An’ right now you’re not. You haven’t even got the story straight in your own head, so how’d you think you were gonna get any sense outta anyone else? Huh?”

Castle is open-mouthed in shock. He’d had O’Leary pegged as a great guy, a bit big-brotherly, but basically someone who’d let Beckett ride on through. This is not what he’d expected. From the stunned expression on Beckett’s face, neither had she.

“You need to straighten up your thinkin’. If you’re gonna claim your pa didn’t mess you up, then you better have some good reasonin’, because all the facts I got point me to he did. Either he did when he was drunk or he did when he got dry, or both.”

Or neither is patently not an option, Castle thinks, and stays very quiet.

“So what’ve you got, Beckett?”

Beckett pulls two smudged sheets out of her purse and lays them on the table. Castle shuffles round to see them – really, Beckett’s scrawl is practically illiterate: he’d almost suspect her of having skipped school every time that particular one of the three Rs came up – and works out that it’s a
detailed timeline, with supporting points of fact, and a not-detailed list of questions. Hardly any questions, actually.

“Okay,” O’Leary is saying. “You got the same facts I got.”

“Yeah. Let’s start there. Castle’s facts come a lot later. Park them for now.”

Beckett and O’Leary go through the facts without anything more, or anything new, coming to light.

“So them’s the facts. What about motive?”

“Motive?”

“Your pa must have had some motive. Feelin’s. They all do, ‘less it’s a serial killer. So if you’re sayin’ that he didn’t abuse you even though all these facts say he did, it’s gotta be in the feelin’s.”

“Uh?” Beckett says inelegantly.

“All your facts,” O’Leary says very patiently, “say that he either abused you when he was drunk by sayin’ he didn’t want you till you did everything you could to try and stop him drinkin’ so he didn’t say it any more; or they say that he abused you when he was sober by playin’ on sayin’ he wanted to be a family an’ you saved him, so you never went off with someone else an’ left him to look after himself like a normal adult does. So why’re you still sayin’ that it wasn’t abuse? ‘Cause I just don’t get it, Beckett. The facts are starin’ you in the face, an’ you’re ignoring them.”

“He didn’t.” She’s locked down. It’s a statement that doesn’t admit dissent.

“That ain’t an argument. You don’t take that from your suspects an’ I don’t take it from you. C’mion. Can’t you do better than that?”

“Feelings aren’t your concern, O’Leary,” Beckett says, but under the half-rebuke, and the glance he casts her in return, she’s already pale; the crease in her brow deeper, her eyes puddling in pain.

“You screwin’ up is my concern. We’re pals. How’re you goin’ to prove the shrink wrong if you can’t even prove me wrong? He’s going to be clever.”

“Still pretending you’re a hayseed just off the farm, O’Leary?”

“Works for me,” he says happily, but isn’t diverted. “So, feelings. Motive.”

“Simple. When he was drunk he thought I was Mom. He was so upset she was dead that he couldn’t control his mouth. He missed her so much. Then it wasn’t Mom and he drank to forget she was gone. Wasn’t about me. It was about his memories. Mom kept him together. So he wanted her and didn’t want me, and when he was drunk he said so. Like I said, simple.”

O’Leary nods. Castle has the strangest impression that it’s anything but agreement. Beckett is still completely locked down: not the slightest hint of a reaction. “And then he got dry.”

“He wanted to remember Mom. I was the only person with any connection. So he wanted to see me so he had his memories. Like a living photo. ‘S not that he cares about me, it’s that he wants to keep his memories fresh.”

O’Leary nods again, with as little agreement.

“So that’s that bit,” Beckett says briskly, in a very let’s-move-right-along-here fashion. O’Leary looks as if he wants to argue, and then stops. His arm is still holding Beckett in place, and then
drops away. “Castle. What’s my dad been saying to you?”

Castle swallows asking me my intentions like this is still 1890 and takes a breath. “He asks if you’re okay, and then he says you don’t take his calls. He says he wants to see you. That he misses you and you’re his family.”

Beckett’s face remains completely closed down: now white and frozen like the Alaskan winter ice. “So he’s telling you the same bullshit he’s telling me. At least he’s consistent.” Castle winces. “He sounded really upset.”

“Sure he did. He used to sound really upset to me too. He’s good at it. Really convincing. Guess we’ll see on Friday.” She shrugs, and shrugs off the subject, as if it’s snow sliding off her icy cover. “Want another?”

O’Leary shakes his head. Castle does too. “I’ve had enough,” Castle says. Beckett doesn’t see him tap O’Leary’s knee, or the exchange of glances.

“Me too,” O’Leary says. “Pete’s cookin’. He’ll be upset if I’m not there to eat it.”


“This ain’t right.”

“Tell me about it. I need the restroom. Can you hang around a moment or two longer?”

“Sure. ‘Nother beer?”

“No thanks.”

Castle disappears. O’Leary meditatively raises his beer to his mouth, waves a casual farewell as Beckett exits the bar, and awaits developments.

“I get what you mean,” O’Leary rumbles when Castle returns. “None so blind…”

“Especially when they really don’t want to see. Any helpful thoughts?”

“Naw. She ain’t thinking at all, never mind straight. Never heard so much crap in my life, and she don’t even see that none of it makes sense. ‘S not like her. It’s as if she just won’t hear anything that doesn’t fit her theory. If she was like that she’d never have been a detective. I don’t get it. What’s she playin’ at?”

“If she accepts the shrink’s right, she’s got to rethink her whole life. Everything about her father. If she accepts that it looked like abuse, then she’s got to accept that for a while she was a victim. If she accepts that he does care, then she’s got to accept that she should have told him the whole truth back when.”

“Hang on,” O’Leary whistles. “She never told him what he said? Oh boy. Oh Lordy. He doesn’t know? You never said he didn’t know what he said.”

“No. He doesn’t remember any of it.”

“Oh, boy. If I were you I’d be running for Ohio. Or Texas. Or out the country. I hear Iraq’s nice this time of year, an’ it might be safer.”

“Thanks.”
“But since you aren’t gonna run out on her – an’ if you do, I’ll find you – all you can do is be there an’ pick up the pieces.”

“Great.”

“Tell you somethin’, though.”

“Yeah? Am I going to like it any better than the rest of what’s happened tonight?”

“Oh, I guess you will,” O’Leary says happily.

“Go on, then.”

“Saw Beckett’s face when she came in, just before she sat down. Stopped scowlin’ at the world for a moment, just when she looked at you.” He blushes, sunset over the vast expanse of a prairie. “Pete looks at me that way,” he mumbles. “Don’t let her get away.”

Castle doesn’t say a word. From the look O’Leary’s giving him, he doesn’t have to.

“Notice you didn’t say that you were goin’ home.”

“No,” Castle fends off the impending question.

“Good.” He drains his beer. “See you, Castle.”

“Night.”

Castle exits the bar and decides on a mind-clearing, longish walk. In the direction of Beckett’s apartment, naturally. He can always pick up a cab if it starts to rain or his feet get tired, but for now he wants the physical rhythm of walking and movement. Later, he wants a different physical rhythm. In between, he wants to know what Beckett’s thinking and planning – if she knows. And it would be extremely pleasant if that took place in conjunction with the same soft affection that she’d been applying to him yesterday.

The chill evening air clears his head a little, but not enough to work out any more reasons why Beckett’s so pig-headedly stupid and so determined not to see reality beyond the thoughts he’d outlined.

Dr Burke, having politely escorted Mr Castle to the door, returns to his office and then, reconsidering, enters the small kitchen to prepare a pot of delicate Orange Pekoe tea. He carefully assembles a fine porcelain cup and saucer, measures the tea leaves with exactitude, ensures that the fine porcelain teapot which he keeps solely for this tea is gently warmed prior to infusing his tea, and conveys the result to his desk. He is, by now, extremely concerned by the potential ramifications of the proposed meeting on Friday, but as he had said to Mr Castle, he is also intensely concerned that failing to have the meeting at the earliest opportunity will result in either Detective Beckett or Mr Beckett taking precipitous and catastrophic action. Therefore, in addition to ensuring that Mr Beckett has been contacted and has agreed to attend, he wishes to take some time to think logically about this most illogical of situations. Too, he has failed to consume sufficient fluid as yet today, and his tea will correct that deficiency before he should suffer a headache arising from that lack. He gently congratulates himself on having researched the science behind the oft-made claim that one should drink eight or more cups of water per day, and having found that it has never been properly tested. It appears, from the scant research available, that any fluid will suffice, and that in any event the purpose of one’s body indicating thirst is to indicate that one should drink.
If only minds were as well-regulated as the thirst reflex, Dr Burke laments. Detective Beckett is wilfully blinding herself to the facts, in order not to confront her misconceptions. Mr Castle, having found himself at the centre of the maelstrom, is desperately trying to stay above the surface while still ensuring that Detective Beckett knows that he is always and only there for her. Dr Burke thinks, with a detached fondness which he would never show in sessions with either Detective Beckett or Mr Castle, that deep and abiding love for another can move mountains. Or Detective Beckett, which requires much the same strength. It is indeed fortunate that Detective Beckett appears to be equally enamoured, although she is far less inclined, or indeed able, to reveal her feelings. However, they are now perfectly obvious to Dr Burke’s skilled observation. Mr Castle should have no doubts that his emotions are wholly reciprocated.

He summons his receptionist, and is informed that Mr Beckett has accepted the invitation to the session on Friday. All participants’ presence ensured, Dr Burke considers his notes. Detective Beckett may think that she will be controlling the session, but she will not be. Dr Burke has no intention of allowing the meeting to descend into over-emotional accusations. There will be truth, there will undoubtedly be painful revelations, but to the best of Dr Burke’s considerable abilities as a psychiatrist there will, in the end, be resolution.

He turns to his notes and his papers, and applies a formidable mind to the problems ahead.
Castle knocks on Beckett’s door, and waits. And waits. And waits some more. And knocks again, and waits. And knocks much harder, and waits mere seconds before pulling out his phone and dialling. He can hear it ringing in the apartment.

“Beckett?”

“It’s Castle. Are you okay? Why aren’t you answering the door?”

The door opens. Beckett is wrapped in a towel and her hair is dripping lather soggily round her head.

“I was in the shower,” she says unnecessarily. “I didn’t expect you. I didn’t hear the door.” She shivers. “Can you make yourself a coffee, while I finish up?”

“I could” –

“No.” She shivers again. The room is not at all cold, even if you’re only wrapped in a towel.

“Okay.”

Beckett disappears back to her neglected shower.

It appears to Castle, not a man ignorant of the stages of women’s showering, that Beckett was less than halfway through washing her hair, at best. That implies that she’s been in the shower for only a few moments. He hadn’t exactly walked at Olympic pace, and for once had obeyed every Don’t Walk sign. Hm. What’s Beckett been doing for the last hour?

He mechanically makes coffee, only realising halfway through that he hadn’t had to think about finding anything: that he hadn’t even had a momentary hesitation in obtaining a mug. The shower is still running in the background, and he prowls around Beckett’s apartment, not allowing minor little details, such as preserving her privacy, to stop him investigating the top layer of papers on her desk. It’s the notes she’d had in the bar, plus a few added extras of generally little import. Except for one matter. He peers more closely, and shakes his head. The smudges had generally not been present earlier. He prods very carefully at the paper and, as he had surmised, finds it to be very slightly damp.

He returns to the couch, borrows a book and makes himself comfortable, and waits for Beckett to reappear, at which time he intends to turn her into cuddlesome soft Kat, snuggled warmly in his clasp and just where she ought to be and he wants her. Questioning her about why she’s been upset over her papers can wait for a little while, and anyway if he cuddles her close and cossets her into warmth then she’s far more likely to talk.

When Beckett finally reappears she’s put on soft, cosy sweats and her hair is damp. A hairdryer doesn’t appear to have figured, which is mildly surprising. She pads over and sits next to Castle, who instinctively slides an arm round her to tuck her in. There’s a small but very definite snuggle in return, and then her head slips on to Castle’s shoulder and her arm slips round his middle. Nothing is said. Beckett’s hand stays softly resting on Castle’s hipbone even as he turns her and lifts her into his lap, whereupon she hums contentedly and snuggles in more positively. Her face is buried almost into the yoke of his shirt, where he can’t see her face. He is not convinced that this is down to either affection or accident. On the other hand, it allows him to smooth firmly up and down her back, all the way from nape to the curve of her backside, in the assertive fashion that she
generally likes best and has the best results. When he gets tired of Beckett-petting, he runs his hand up into the wisps of short hair at the base of her skull and lifts her head. There’s a small, cross noise and she tries to nuzzle in again.

“Out you come, Beckett,” Castle says mischievously. “You can’t use my shirt as a towel any more: it’s already damp.”

The answer – if he could call it that – sounds much like a growl.

“That’s not nice,” he says reprovingly – and then notices that in fact his shirt is very damp. He ceases trying to lift her head to kiss her and instead kisses the available option of her hair, wrapping his other arm around her. “It’ll be okay. C’mere.” His tone is smoothly possessive; his grip firm, pressing her into him. Her arms tighten around him in response, though her head doesn’t yet rise. “C’mon. I want to kiss you, and I can’t if you’re hiding in my shirt.”

Her face appears. Castle says nothing at all about the slight redness of her eyes. He doesn’t get the opportunity. His smooth assertion is entirely overwhelmed by Beckett taking hard possession of his mouth and backing it up with a sudden iron grip that would be better applied to taking down criminals than intimate relations. This is entirely not the plan. He does the asserting here. Beckett does the becoming cuddlesome Kat. Unfortunately, though his brain thinks that, his body thinks that Beckett being assertive is very arousing indeed, and right now his body is in full control. Well. Actually, Beckett is in full control of his body. He isn’t in any sort of control at all, which is no doubt why he’s already devoid of shirt, belt, and thought. Beckett’s still invading his mouth, and there’s little room for him to manoeuvre…unless… he surges into action, flips them over and ends up above her on the couch, pressing into her, pushing down to trap her hands in his and taking her mouth to reverse her assault and raid on his own account.

She’s still fighting for control of the kiss as he drives into her lush lips and searches the hot depths to find passionate response, nips on her lip and then sucks it gently into his own mouth to soothe the small sting, and she stops fighting and the edge of frantic desperation eases. As it does, as she does, Castle pulls away and sits back up and brings her up to be held against him, tucked into his warm, bare chest, dropping small kisses on her nose and forehead.

“It won’t help, you know.”

There’s a long silence.

“You’re the only clear thing I’ve got,” Beckett eventually says, dropping her eyes and trying very hard to hide. “I can’t… I wish we were in the Hamptons right now,” she says miserably. “It was all so much easier there.”

“Mmm?” Castle hums.

“Everything’s right on top of me here. No space. No space to think. I know what the facts look like but I know there’s more and I just can’t work it out here.”

Wishful thinking, Beckett. There isn’t more.

“You don’t have to do everything on Friday. It’s not time-limited. You can do some of it and then think about it over the weekend. Can’t you?”

“I just want it done. Answers. I want to move on. I don’t want him messing up my life any more. I put it on hold for him for years and look where it got me. I’m not doing it again. Don’t I get a life?”

“Sure you do,” Castle says, and doesn’t add right here with me. “But, you know, it doesn’t have to
be black and white. You could just let the past lie. It’s gone. Just accept that the facts are what they are and not worry about it, fix what your dad said and then move on.” He strokes her dark hair softly. “Couldn’t you?”

“I can’t. If I don’t fix it it’ll be there poisoning everything. Just like it is already.”

“Uh?”

“Still can’t deal with your family, can I?” she says bitterly. “How’s that supposed to work? ‘Hey, Alexis, I’m dating Beckett but she can’t stand seeing us together so she won’t come here.’ Like that’s going to go down well. I couldn’t even sit through Sunday brunch. You come as a team. Team Castle Family. So it’s fix it or watch it fail. Eventually, you’d walk.”

Castle can’t truthfully deny that. After all, it’s why he’d tried to walk away the first time.

“But…” he says, “why can’t you just accept the facts? Everyone agrees what they are.”

“I wasn’t abused. If I’d been abused the first therapist would have said so.”

“The first therapist who fucked it all up?” Castle emits furiously. “That’s who you’re going to believe? Someone who was wrong about everything and you’re taking that as gospel? Wake up and smell the coffee, Beckett. You’ve been working on a false premise for years. You have to go back to the beginning and rip that therapy apart. It was wrong, and until you get through that nothing’s going to be on a firm footing.” He forces her face up to look at him. “Everyone who’s got half a brain who’s seen the facts – me, O’Leary, Dr Burke even if he is a pompous arrogant jerk – can see that even if it wasn’t abuse because your dad never meant it it’s had the same result. You can’t have it both ways. Either it was like abuse when he was drunk or it was like abuse when he was sober. You just don’t want to believe it. Whether he meant to or not your dad hurt you, and trying to pretend he didn’t won’t help.”

He takes an infuriated breath, completely devoid of filter or control. “If you’d only tell your dad the truth about what he said then you might fix this. If you’re going to mess around trying to pretend it’s something different and hiding the truth you never will. It’s up to you, Beckett.”

She wrenches herself away from him, halfway across the room. “Mess around? Is that what you think this is? If I’d told my dad the truth he’d have gone straight back to the bottle and then he’d be dead. I lost my mom. I thought I’d lost my dad. Some days I wished I had. At least then it would all have been over. Instead he crawled out and I thought it was because he loved me. So how could I kill him? I might as well have put my Glock to his head and fired.”

“And that’s not what you’ve done now? You haven’t even told him why you won’t talk to him. How’s it going to make it any worse? If he isn’t head down in a bottle right now why’d you think he will be? He’ll already be thinking the worst. So you might as well tell him it because I can absolutely guarantee it won’t be any worse than what he’s thinking. Anyway, since he’s seen Dr Burke he’s probably already worked out that it’s all down to when he was drunk and since your dad isn’t dumb chances are he’s nearly got it anyway.”

“So what’re you saying? I’ve killed him anyway?”

“No. Listen, Beckett. He’s not drunk even though he thinks you’ve given up on him. He’s strong enough to take this.” Castle takes a breath and prays. “And it’s not your fault whatever he does. You can’t control him. You never could. Say what you have to say and move on.”

Her little bird is in her hands, twisting and twisting over it. Castle’s terrified that her restless hands
will snap its fragile beak, or a leg: she keeps turning it until she realises what she’s doing and puts it down; only to pick up the little red stone and start again. She says nothing, just keeps turning and twisting and staring sightlessly at her hands.

Castle rises to cross the room to her, standing behind her and then wrapping her into his arms. “Just for a change, think about what you want.”

“I know what I want. I just don’t get what I want. Why bother asking? I can’t have it till I get over my dad.” She sounds hopeless, and defeated. “It would have been better if he’d never got dry and never come back. At least then I’d never have thought he cared.”

“What do you want?”

“I want you,” she whispers, after a long silence in which Castle has plenty of time to reflect that he shouldn’t have asked.

“Good,” he murmurs into her ear, “because I want you too.” His arms tighten around her. “We can talk about that in the Hamptons. But you need to tell your dad the truth. It’s the only way you’ll move on, Kate.” He stops. She’s cold in his grip: shivering. “I’ll be there. I’m on your side, whatever it is.” Her hand comes up to cover his, and it’s cold, too: the red stone hard against the back of his fingers. “You only have to decide if you’re ready. If it’s too soon, it’s okay. I’ll wait. Just so long as you tell me that you need time. It’s up to you. Yes, or no, Kate: ready to talk to him, or not yet.”

He stops. She’s still trembling: chilled and still and silent; her hand has dropped limply away.

“Only yes, or no. Nothing else.”

He holds on to her, and doesn’t say more. Simple choices, simple decisions, and no pressure. He’s said far more than he should have, far more than he meant to, and his only hope now is that he hasn’t pushed too hard. He’s surprised that she hasn’t told him to leave. Even short weeks ago, she’d have thrown him out for this overstepping, and yet here he is, still holding her as she thinks. Dr Burke had thought that there was a chance she’d explode at him, but it hasn’t happened. Perhaps that should be yet.

Here she is, letting him support her.

“I’ll try. Friday. But you have to promise that you’ll get me out if I ask you to.” It sounds childish, asking for a promise, but Castle isn’t at all sure that it is. What she is really asking of him is to be on her side whatever Dr Burke, or her father, try and persuade her to do, but that’s simple. He is, and he will be.

“Promise,” he says, with barely a pause, and she slumps into him, as if that’s all she needs to fall apart. He takes her back to the couch, and curls her into his side: not, now, on his lap. Nothing is said. Nothing happens. When he turns to her, her long lashes are down, and her body lax and dead weight against him. He ponders for a few moments, considering whether to leave or not. Finally he extricates his phone and calls home. His mother is there, and intending to be there all night. He exchanges a few words with Alexis, who is supportive, and swipes off. Beckett hasn’t so much as twitched.

First things first. He repositions himself so that he can lift her without crippling injury, and manages to stand and then pick her up to convey her to her bedroom. He lays her down gently, folds back the comforter, removes her sweatpants very carefully and tries not to swallow his tongue at the pretty, lacy panties beneath, and slips her beneath the covers. He takes off her top equally
delicately and is only too glad that he hadn’t known she was braless under it. Finally, he covers her up and retreats silently. In all that, she hasn’t woken, or stirred.

Halfway across the room it occurs to him that he should close the drapes. When he turns, his gaze snags on Beckett’s white face, sleep taking the animation from it and leaving only dragging tiredness and a disturbingly pinched, sharp outline. He’s seen the waking emotion, but he has only occasionally stayed all night with her since her father’s ill-worded comments and so he hasn’t really seen the full toll she’s paying. This really cannot continue. While she may find rest and respite in the Hamptons with him this weekend, much more of this and she will snap. Friday is going to be excruciatingly, exquisitely painful – but this cannot continue.

It’s no consolation at all for Castle to realise that this is precisely the position that Dr Burke had observed. He doesn’t like Dr Burke one little bit, and he doesn’t like crediting him with considerable understanding and intelligence. Unfortunately, Dr Burke has both. Along with an ego a mile high and two miles wide, of course. When this is all done, he will wave goodbye to Dr Burke with intense relief.

He closes the drapes and exits the bedroom, finds a book and then returns. Suddenly, he wants to be close to Beckett, so that even in her heavy sleep she’ll somehow sense him there. He prepares for bed, very quietly, and angles the sidelight so that it falls away from her face. She still hasn’t moved when he slides under the comforter.

He’s been reading for some time, and is thinking about stopping to go to sleep, when Beckett makes an odd little noise and then turns towards him, her sleeping hand landing on his leg. Castle lays the book aside and decides that this is a good time to turn out the light and cuddle down. Almost as soon as he does, Beckett wriggles, still asleep, into him and brings her arm across him. Another small noise exits her mouth, and then resolves into words. *You’re here.* She wraps herself into him more closely and is again wholly lax.

Castle falls into sleep still wondering how often Beckett has turned over in her sleep looking for him, and not finding him there. That he knows she understands the necessity doesn’t really help. No wonder that she’d said that he wouldn’t leave if she could only come to the loft. He embraces her, and slumbers.

Deep in the night, Beckett wakes, and is shocked into full wakefulness, rather than the half-waking that would take her to the bathroom and back, by the large, warm, comforting presence – snoring softly, till she elbows him and he turns over – of Castle in her bed. She attends to necessity, and returns to curl into him, an arm across his midriff and spooned into his broad back. He turns over, deeply asleep still, and pulls her in, emitting a rumble that resolves itself into *my Kat, c’mere.* Beckett falls back into comforted sleep, as close to Castle as she can manage.
I tried to touch

When Beckett wakes she’s sprawled out across the bed, not across Castle. For a second she thinks she dreamt it, but then there’s a whiffle tickling her neck and a large hand swamping hers and since she doesn’t think there’s been a Bigfoot coming out her closets she guesses that it really is Castle. Still here, still keeping her safe, and still very, very sexy; all tousled and sleepy and… and suddenly very much exuding just fell into bed-ness. Sleepy turns into sleepy-eyed and lazy, predatory smile; the hand over hers has become the hand sliding under her neck, propping him up to gaze down at her; his other hand spreading over her stomach.

“This is nice,” he purrs, and extends his fingers to flirt at the bottom of her ribcage. “I like you all warm and tousled and in bed with me.” His hand slides upward, slowly and intently. Beckett’s hand slides over his flank. “All soft and snuggly” – his head descends – “and right here” – and his mouth meets hers: sure and slow and searchingly seductive. Beckett opens for him and lets him take and explore as he chooses, softly receptive and perfectly content that Castle should take the lead right now.

And so he does. Firm hands skate over her side, glide across her breast, slither back downwards to her hip and then grip and turn her into him, so that she can feel his hard need pressing into her. She curls her leg up around his middle and gasps as he instantly accepts the open invitation, slipping a hand over her ass to cup her and stroke, shifting the light cotton panties she’s still wearing to rub them over slick skin. Her own hands bite into the span of his back to hold him to her.

“Mmmm,” Castle rumbles. “I know what you want.” She can feel him smiling against her lips. “Me. Let’s do some things that you want me to do.”

He unfurls her and pushes her on to her back on the bed, dark hair spilling across the pillows and dark eyes hazy. His mouth explores her jaw, her throat, round to a place by her ear that makes her gasp and wriggle and grip hard; and then he shifts down again and nibbles delicately along each collarbone; morning stubble scraping gently. Beckett reaches for him, and finds her hands replaced around Castle’s neck. “Uh-uh. We don’t have that much time.” Huh? Oh. Work. Ugh. “I got this.” He kisses lower. “I got you.” His mouth closes on her breast and the stubble scrapes and she stops thinking about anything in favour of pulling his head closer. He spends less time than she’d like there, but since the next movement is also downward, with a wicked twirl of tongue to bid farewell to her breasts and hello to her navel, she forgets to complain. Then she forgets everything including her name as he slips her panties away and opens her up and kisses the inner face of her thighs once, twice, and then begins to work her up with firm tongue and wicked fingers and the friction from the stubble and oh Castle more there please there Castle and she’s almost there, so close it would only take a touch and instead he rises over her and then thrusts in fully in one hard movement and his hand flickers between them and she’s gone.

A fortunate three minutes later her alarm goes off. Castle, previously lying peacefully playing with her hair, is electric-shocked into sitting up. Beckett groans, reaches out without looking and slaps it off.

“Why do you have a nuclear attack warning level alarm?”

“It puts me to sleep,” Beckett says flippantly.

“Ow. My ears are ringing.”

“Time to get going,” she says, and struggles out of bed.
“Don’t you like mornings?”

“Ugh.”

“But Beckett, how can you not like mornings? All the promise and potential of a beautiful day” –

“It’s raining.”

“Still, a lovely new day.”

“It’ll still be a lovely new day later. Except I have to go to work, you know, the thing that pays me, so the only promise and potential I’ve got is clapping killers in clink.”

“Have I told you how hot you are when you alliterate? Especially with non-standard terms?”

Beckett smiles. “No, but I’m sure you’ll be thinking about it.” The smile drains from her face.

“Work.” She turns to the bathroom.

“I could help you shower,” Castle says with an equal mix of mischief and seductiveness.

“I have a start time,” Beckett points out tartly.

Castle pouts, insincerely.

“You don’t like the optimism of a new day and you don’t like me helping you shower. You fall asleep on me when I come round.” he grumps. “You’ve had your wicked way with me and now you’re casting me aside until you need me to come to your session on Friday. How unkind you are.” He smirks at her back, and awaits a smart reply.

The bathroom door clicks shut in lieu of an answer.

Behind the closed door, Beckett draws a pained breath. Surely Castle had meant that as humorous? He must have done. She stands under the heat of the shower and tries to let it soak the hornet sting of biting truth away. Surely he doesn’t think she’s unkind or ungrateful? Or… or does he? After all, it’s not like she’s been kind to her father, is it? But it’s Castle, who’s been unfailingly supportive. He’s had to put up with everything, including her father. And it’s she who has dragged him into all this mess. He didn’t have to get involved. He certainly doesn’t have to go on Friday, or pull her out if she needs it, or listen to all that history. All it’ll prove is that she’s a screwed up mess. He doesn’t need to see any more of the worst of her, and she’s been unreasonable to ask him to sit through it. Ungrateful, asking him to do ever more to support her. All it’s done is put him in unpleasant situations.

She has an agonising memory of her mother telling her never to be ungrateful, when she’d been complaining about some perceived unfairness. She knows how bruised and furious she is that her father had conned her into doing everything for him, out of guilt; and it’s Castle who triggered this whole change and mess – and he knows it, and likely he feels guilty about that, and now she’s doing just what her father did and she can’t stand it. She deals with the remainder of her morning routine as quickly as she can and exits the bathroom.

“Castle?”

“Mhm?” He takes a step towards her. Beckett steps back. She’ll never be able to give him an out if he touches her. He’s just too much. He means too much. She needs him too much – and that thought pushes her into it.
“Castle… I… You don’t have to come on Friday. I… Just come to the precinct instead.”

“What?”

“It’s not your family. You shouldn’t be involved. It’s not fair to put you through it.”

“What?”

She inadvertently steps back again from the force of his word.

“You shouldn’t be put between me and my Dad. That’s Burke’s job. Not yours. You shouldn’t be dragged into a family fight that’s nothing to do with you.”

“You don’t want me there?”

“I… You’re only going because I pushed you into it and it’s clear you think I’m just leaning on you without giving you anything back. You don’t need to be there. It’s the precinct you want to be in, for inspiration. You don’t have to wait till Friday for that.”

He stands silent, staring at her. Beckett can’t meet his eyes. She had asked too much. Otherwise he’d be arguing.

“Can…” she stops. Castle still hasn’t said a word more. “I have to get to work,” she hurries out. “I can’t be late.”

“No.”

Beckett collects a jacket from the closet, not incidentally hiding her face. She’s doing the right thing. Not Castle’s circus, not his clowns. He’d have done it for her, but he shouldn’t have to and she should never have asked. “Okay,” she says without a hint of her misery escaping. “Will I see you later at the precinct?”

“No.”

“Okay,” she repeats, and makes sure she’s still hiding her face.

“No, I will not be missing on Friday. No, you are not pulling that piece of stupidity on me. I said I’d tell you if I wouldn’t or couldn’t do something and you don’t get to make that decision for me.” Beckett finds herself being hauled out of her space, flipped round, and shaken by Castle’s hard grip on her shoulders. “No, you are not going in there on your own. What do you think I’ll see that I don’t know already? Huh? I know it’s going to be a mess – for you. The only thing I care about is getting you back out of there in one piece and taking you out of Manhattan. You can’t show me anything I don’t know already.” He shakes her shoulders again. “I’m not flattered that you think I can be bullied by you. I can’t. I’m really not happy that you’re hiding again. Stop it. Look at me and tell me you don’t want me there.” She can’t. “See? You do want me there, you just don’t want to ask for it. Or you don’t want me to see it. Well, newflash, Beckett, I’m going to be there and I’m going to see through whatever happens. Whatever you try.” She finds her shoulders shaken, for a third time, and then her chin is grasped and tipped up and she is ruthlessly kissed and pressed in until she doesn’t know which way is up. “You are not wriggling out of this by making stupid statements.” He crashes down on her mouth again, brooking no resistance.

“Now you have to be at work.” Castle pushes her towards the door with rather more force than she expects.

“But…but…”
“But I’m going to wash up and go home and then I’m going to see you in the precinct later – I’ll have to, because you’ll need to leave me your key to lock up behind me. You can come out to lunch with me, when we are going to discuss this piece of idiocy properly – and if you try to come up with any excuse to wriggle out of lunch that isn’t a verified new corpse I’ll perp-walk you out of the bullpen myself.”

“Uh? Lunch?”

“Yep, lunch. And discussion, before you come up with another dumb idea like this one,” Castle says with considerable irritation.

“Uh?” Beckett finds further words forestalled by the sharp click of the bathroom door in her face. “Key on the nightstand,” she calls through the door. It’s easier than arguing, and doesn’t make her late. She’s cutting it fine as it is.

“Later, Beckett.”

Beckett attains the precinct and her desk at her normal time. The first cup of coffee doesn’t touch the sides. Nor does the second. Nor the third. After the third, she stops. None of it is really dealing with the cold ache in her middle or the worry that she’s truly mis-stepped with Castle. He’d been really annoyed with her, and now he wants to talk. She can’t face another lacerating row fuelled on her own insecurity and misconceptions and issues. She buries her head in the first file she finds and barely raises it to greet Ryan and Espo when they arrive, a short time later. Fortunately, they respect the Keep Off signs.

By late morning Beckett still hasn’t worked out what to say to Castle, and into the bargain she is now too worried and tense to be hungry anyway. She can’t go to the gym because Espo won’t spar with her this week after the damage of last week; and she can’t wreak havoc on a homicide because yet again there are no murders on her rota. In short, she has nothing to focus her thoughts upon, and as a direct result they are roiling around her head.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes,” she says generally, and escapes from the claustrophobic clutch of unproductive thoughts, aiming out of the precinct and over to Tompkins Square Park, where the trees are just beginning to put out leaves and indicate spring is probably here. It’s stopped raining, though the grey sky is pregnant with the possibility of further drizzle and unpleasantness. Spring is sprung, Beckett thinks miserably, but unlike the grass, her hopes are not rising. She plops down on a handy bench, and stares at the green grass, completely unable to put two thoughts together sensibly. Nothing makes sense at all.

After a while, which achieves nothing in the way of conclusions and less in the way of relieving her worry and stress, she gets up and starts to pace through the park. It doesn’t help her thinking, but it keeps her in motion, which has always helped. Till now. She’s stressed by the thought of Friday. She’s stressed by Castle’s infuriated reaction to being given an out from the whole damn mess. She’s stressed by the thought of the weekend, now: she’d intended it to allow her a space to say what she felt, but she’s been rocked by her own failure to deal with a flippant statement that had nevertheless stung hard enough to contain a very unpleasant truth, after Dr Burke had ripped the scabs off her wounds. Suddenly, she just wants to stop: to run far, far away, where there are no people and no problems and no need to deal with anything or anyone. She could, in fact, just go home and pack a bag and leave. Right now. The logistics of leaving roll through her mind. Credit card, passport, washbag, clothes until she could hit a cheap store. Car, or plane ticket? Car. Cash. Disappear without a trace.

But then she wouldn’t have Castle. Who, for some completely inconceivable reason, still seems to want to have her. Maybe she could take him too.
Or maybe not. He, after all, has a family, with whom he has to, and more importantly wants to, stay. That’s where this whole mess began, and ends. Her inability to deal with anyone’s family. Castle’s or her own. Castle doesn’t come without his family, however much she needs and wants and – say it – loves him: if she can’t deal with his family she won’t have him. Then again, if she can’t be grateful for what he does she won’t have him either.

Well, after tomorrow evening she’ll be finally shot of her millstone father and able to move on without caring that he doesn’t care; without trying to make him love her when he hasn’t since the moment her mother was buried. In vino, veritas. All the rest was simply a lie. Actually, who cares if he abused her or not? Why’s she worrying about his exoneration? They’re all right: he did abuse her. If she’s going to get shot of him, it simply doesn’t matter, just like absolutely everyone’s been telling her. So she needn’t bother with it. Anyway. After tomorrow her father won’t be a problem any more. Not her problem, anyway.

She slumps back down on a different bench, heedless that she should have returned to work long since. It’s not as if there’s a new murder, just the endless list of cold cases. She ought to work them: those victims deserve justice too. But for the first time ever she can’t find solace in the thought of doing her job. In fact, she doesn’t want to go back to the bullpen. She doesn’t want to do anything. Her hands fall still between her knees. Shortly, it begins to drizzle. She doesn’t notice, and doesn’t care, and the time passes imperceptibly and inexorably.

Castle had picked up Beckett’s key following a swift clean up, and, still more than somewhat irritated by Beckett’s mistaken assumptions, taken himself home where, he hopes, he can soothe himself into serenity with a hot shower, smooth shave and clean, fresh clothes. He lets himself into his own home, only to be greeted by his mother. This is exactly not what he needs in his irritated state.

“well, darling?”

“Good morning, Mother.”

Castle attempts to move past her.

“Hang on, kiddo. Where were you last night?”

“Out.”

“Out?” Martha repeats, with heavy disbelief. “Was that another murder that wasn’t on the news?”

“Mother, this is none of your business. Stop interfering.”

“Ah, so you were with Katherine.”

“Mother…” Castle says, annoyance tinging his tone.

“Now, darling, there’s nothing wrong with spending time with your girlfriend. But I do think you should bring her home occasionally.”

“Mother, you have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Well, it doesn’t say much for either of you if you won’t even bring her home.”

“Thank you for that extremely flattering comment. Has it occurred to you that insulting Beckett and me isn’t exactly going to encourage me to ask her over?”
“Well, why won’t she come here then? Surely you’ve asked her over already?”

“No,” Castle says baldly.

“What? Richard, have you no manners?”

“I have quite enough manners not to inflict you on Beckett.”

“Richard, that was uncalled for.”

“No, Mother, it was quite justified. Butt out of our business. You were meddling on Sunday and you’re trying to meddle now. Don’t. I’m certainly not asking Beckett over for you to interrogate her.”

“But Richard” –

“Mother, listen very carefully. Don’t do anything at all that interferes in any way between me and Beckett.” He smiles, not at all filially.

“Don’t give me that look. You’re still my child.”

“Right now, I’m your landlord.”

“You wouldn’t,” Martha says, horrified.

“Care to take the chance? You don’t know what’s going on so don’t meddle.”

“There’s an easy answer, kiddo. Tell me what’s going on.”

“Not your business. Just for once, stay out of it.” He glares at his mother. “Now, I’d like to have a shower. Without any of your maternal machinations.” He stalks off, annoyance in every sinew, and only just stops himself slamming the door. His shower, shave and clean, fresh clothes don’t improve his mood one iota, and when he’s ready to leave for the precinct, quite some time later since cold cases continue to bore him stupid, he’s still not calmed down.

When he gets in, he initially thinks Beckett must have stepped out for a moment. He drops his umbrella by her desk and wanders over to exchange compliments with the boys.

“Hey, guys.”

“Castle, what’cha doin’ here?”

“Came to see you all.”

Esposito makes a disbelieving noise. “Yeah, right, bro. That’s why you’re looking at Beckett’s desk. She ain’t here.”

“Huh?”

“Went out” – he looks at his watch – “Huh. Over an hour ago.”

“Thought she’d gone out to get a coffee,” Ryan pipes up. Castle casts a quick scan over the Beckett desk and observes two used mugs and, poking out of the trash can, a familiarly logoed go-cup. She would have been in by eight; it’s now almost noon. Hm. Three cups in three hours – if she went out at eleven, which is what Espo seems to be saying – is very plausible, as is going for a vanilla latte if she’s in need of the flavour hit. That’s normal. Taking an hour about it is not, and she knew that
he was coming in to take her for lunch.

“For an hour? Not likely,” Esposito says derisively. “Ten minutes to get a Danish, yeah.”

“Maybe she went to the morgue,” Ryan suggests, very doubtfully.

*And maybe she’s avoiding me*, Castle thinks. The thought does not please him. “I said I’d buy her lunch,” he actually says. “How could anyone skip out on that?”

Esposito and Ryan look cynically at each other.

“Guess she forgot.”

“Or got a better offer.”

“Movin’ up the scale from writers to movie stars.”

“Yeah. Prob’ly we’ll see a pap shot on page six of her and Keanu Reeves. Hear he’s in town.”

“Ha. Ha,” Castle says flatly. “Where is she?”

“No idea.”

“And that doesn’t worry you? Beckett went out for a short break more than an hour ago and hasn’t come back? Can’t you track her phone or something?”

“What? She’s a grown woman. She’s got a gun. Call her. Don’t you think you’re totally over-reacting?”

Castle finds himself in a very nasty dilemma. He’s let his mouth run away with his worries instead of simply calling Beckett, and now he can’t explain to the boys without explaining considerably more than he wants to about Beckett’s issues and, more importantly, this morning’s… um… exchange, which he feels has triggered a completely disproportionate reaction with which he will nevertheless need to deal. He isn’t dealing with it very well so far.

In the two seconds of thought he’s taken, Esposito is already regarding him with a grim glare that promises pain and suffering.

“Why d’you think we should be worried, Castle?”

*Oh, shit.*
Chapter 98: Come in, come out of the rain

“Er… I’m totally over-reacting?” he backtracks. This is clearly not sufficient.

“Really? Bit odd that your first reaction is to try to track her. That’s a really big over-reaction. Most people just call a phone.” Ryan scowls, which doesn’t really fit his face. He should leave the scowling to Esposito, who is demonstrating exactly how to do it.

“What do you know that we don’t? Why haven’t you just called her?”

“What have you screwed up this time? Isn’t she taking your calls?”

“Have you upset Beckett?”

“No!” Castle eventually manages to fit an answer into the machine-gun barrage of questions. “Nothing. I was just watching re-runs of the X-files and everyone knows alien abduction is real.”

Both detectives regard him with sceptical cynicism and identically black looks.

“D’you really think we’ll swallow that crap? You only come out with that stuff when you’re trying to hide something.”

“Why haven’t you called her?” Ryan, again.

“Because… Look, calling her now.”

Castle attains the break room without the other men, dials and waits for Beckett to pick up.

She doesn’t.

He waits a couple of minutes, and dials again.

“Beckett.”

Castle is unreasonably relieved that she has taken the call. He is not relieved by her uninflected, dead voice.

“Where are you? I thought we were having lunch?”

“It’s not lunchtime yet. I’m fine. I’ll see you later.”

“It’s twelve-thirty.”

There is a pause. It seems to Castle that Beckett hadn’t known how late it was. This is also not a relief.

“I’m not hungry.” This, now, comes as no surprise at all.

“Then don’t eat. Tell me where you are, and I’ll meet you.”

“I…” Castle thinks that that statement might have ended don’t want to, but somewhat to his
surprise it takes a U-turn and finishes up “Okay. I’m in Tompkins Square Park.” He manages not to say *why are you outside in the cold and the rain?* which is unlikely to help anyone right now. “Near the playground.”

“Okay. See you in a few minutes.”

Castle slides out of the bullpen without attracting Esposito or Ryan’s attention. He’s not very keen on exacerbating his errors. He is very keen on talking to Beckett, whose behaviour has been deeply weird ever since she closed the bathroom door this morning. Yesterday evening she was desperate for him to be with her at Dr Burke’s tomorrow; this morning she’s trying to tell him he shouldn’t go even though she wants him there. And then when he tells her that’s not going to happen she disappears from the one place he’d have thought she always ran to, not from: her work, and no-one had a single solitary clue where she’s gone or why.

He reflects rather ruefully that while Dr Burke had warned him that Beckett might displace irritation or anger on to others, he had entirely failed to warn Castle that he, Castle, might find himself more easily annoyed than usual. Then again, if Beckett weren’t acting so mule-headed, he wouldn’t be so annoyed. How does she think he’d *not* come to the session tomorrow?

His thoughts wander. If he hadn’t called her, it didn’t sound like she would have called him. It certainly didn’t sound like she was planning to come back to the bullpen, though it also didn’t sound like she’d had the faintest idea of the time. He wonders just how long she’s been out in the rain, currently falling quietly on his umbrella. He has no idea where to start the conversation any more. Earlier, when he’d been vaguely considering Remy’s, it had all been relatively simple. Tell Beckett he was attending, reassure her that it was his choice, and remind her that they’ll be leaving for the Hamptons the minute it’s over and don’t forget to pack that very tactile crimson dress please Beckett? Now, he’s splashing through ever deepening puddles in rain which seems to be getting heavier without a clue what’s going on or indeed whether Beckett has any intention of going to therapy, the Hamptons, or even out of the rain. He sploshes on, depressed.

Finally he spots a dark-headed figure, bedraggledly slumped on a damp bench under a tree. She looks up only when his feet stop in front of her.

“Hey,” she emits. It has as much life as the sodden piece of litter swirling round the park in the March wind.

Castle looks at the damp bench and even damper Beckett and internally concedes that his coat will need dried later. He sits down and aligns the umbrella to cover both of them. Not that it will improve Beckett, who is currently dripping gently from each draggled lock of hair. She doesn’t seem to have noticed that, either.

“Why are you out here?”

She shrugs. “Needed space.”

“You’ve been out here for nearly two hours.”

She shrugs again. “So? It’s not like there’s been a body drop.”

Castle stares at the side of her head. Beckett *not caring* about closing cases?

“It’s raining. You’re soaked.”

Another shrug. “Hadn’t noticed.”
“We were supposed to have lunch.”

“Didn’t notice the time.”

She hasn’t looked at him since he sat down. Her voice has all the intonation and emotion of a brick. She isn’t even annoyed. She just isn’t there. The lights aren’t on and there’s clearly nobody home.

“I’m coming to your session tomorrow.”

“Okay. Up to you. You don’t have to.”

“You wanted me there,” Castle emits, already frustrated and moving rapidly towards furious. “What’s changed? You know I’m on your side. You asked me to promise I’d be there to get you out.”

“I shouldn’t have. Anyway, it doesn’t matter. You were all right. Burke, O’Leary, you. Drunk or sober it was abuse. So all I have to do is tell him so and walk away for good. You don’t need to be there for that. You don’t need to be there at all. It’ll all be over in five minutes. It’s been staring me in the face for a week and I’ve been trying to deny it. Well, you were right. Burke was right. I’m sure he’ll be very happy about that.” Her voice is that same dead, defeated tone as she’d had last night. “I’m sure you’re all very happy that I’ve seen the light. Dad abused me and Q.E.D. he didn’t care and won’t care. I can deal with the rest myself. I don’t need you there because there’s no reason for you to be there. Go in, say my piece, and leave. Burke can deal with my dad. I’m done dealing with my dad.”

“Then what?”

Beckett shrugs. “Get on with my life.” There’s a half beat pause. “Get a life.”

“Will you still come to the Hamptons with me?”

She looks at him for the first time. There’s nothing in her eyes. “If you want.”

“What about what you want?”

“It takes two, Castle,” she says wearily. “See whether you still even want to go after tomorrow.”

Castle loses his already frayed control.

“You stop this pig-assed stupid behaviour right now. I don’t give a flying fuck what happens tomorrow and it certainly won’t stop me taking you to the Hamptons, but you have to want to go. You’re the one who suggested it and you’re the one who kept saying you wanted time together and now you’re backtracking? I know what I want but you just keep hiding and now you’re hoping that somehow it’ll all go away if you just sit in the rain till you dissolve?”

“It’ll all go away tomorrow night,” Beckett flashes back, now angry herself. “Come if you want to. Just remember it was all your idea to make it a spectator sport. I’m sure there’s a TV show in there somewhere. Wrangling Relatives, you could call it. Or Feuding Families. Or just The Becketts. You could run it against The Waltons, for the contrast value. Planning to move into script writing, Castle?” Her tone would have riled the Archangel Michael. Castle, who is no angel never mind archangel, is instantly riled.

“That’s ridiculous. I thought you’d got past this. I told you months ago I wouldn’t use your father in” –
“In a book.”

“You really think I’d split hairs like that? You think that? The hell with that. The” – his mouth snaps shut on hell with you. Dr Burke’s words hit his brain just in time. Such anger to be displaced…are you prepared? “You’re doing just what he said would happen,” he says slowly. “I thought it would happen last night, but it’s now. He said you might lose it with me but it would really be the situation. I guess it’s in his damn textbook somewhere.”

“What?”

“Dr Burke said you’d get angry with me but it wouldn’t really be at me. And it’s not me, is it? It’s your dad. It’s the crap your first therapist fed you. It’s the whole thing. You’re yelling at me because I’m here.”

“I’m yelling at you? You’ve been yelling at me since early this morning,” Beckett bites back. “The hell with you. That’s what you were about to say, so why don’t I just say it for you? I’ve seen the error of my ways thanks to you and O’Leary – the edge on that would cut rock – “so now that you’ve indulged your saviour complex you can fuck off back to your perfect life where you don’t have to deal with any of my issues and ungratefulness and leave me alone just like you were just about to say. I don’t want you there tomorrow and I’m not coming to the Hamptons either. Just leave me alone.”

She stands up and is five steps away and still moving before Castle reacts. A handful of long strides later and he’s caught up and locked a hand over her arm to stop her moving.

“The only way to make you listen is to yell. Didn’t you hear a single word I said? I’m going to be there and then we are going to the Hamptons because this has nothing to do with you and me at all and everything to do with you being scared to tell your father the truth in case” –

“In case he kills himself. Is that what you were going to say? Well, go right ahead. I don’t care what he does any more. He’s not my problem. I can’t change the past but I can damn well not make the same mistake in future. I can’t control him and I’m not going to.” She draws a harried, scarifying breath. “But I can control what happens next.” Her voice locks down to cold and clear. “You are not coming to tomorrow’s session. This is still my therapy, whatever you seem to think, and I have the right to say who is there. You’ve done enough. If you wanted gratitude, you can have it. Thank you.” Bitter, vicious sarcasm inflects each word. “Go find someone who’ll appreciate you like you deserve. Someone else. I wouldn’t be in this mess if you hadn’t shoved your way into my life. Pardon me if I’m not grateful enough for that.”

She pulls her arm away with a sharp movement and begins to walk again, in the opposite direction from where he’d come in, leaving him standing in the rain under his umbrella with absolutely no idea what to do. Dr Burke had predicted this but, now that it’s all exploded in a public park, Castle can’t use the only answer he knows will work, and he doesn’t have a Plan B. He doesn’t, in fact, have a Plan A.

But he does have one, nuclear, option.

Beckett just keeps walking, out of the park, along the streets, under the now-driving rain. She is not going to get into another situation where she feels she has to behave in a certain way, go where she’s told, be grateful or happy or nice just to keep people happy. Just to try to make them love her. She’s not grateful and she’s not happy and she certainly isn’t nice, or kind, or lovable; and she is not going to pretend she is or try to be. It didn’t work last time and it won’t work this time and she is not going to repeat her mistakes.
She walks on. She doesn’t weep. It didn’t help for ten years and it hasn’t helped for the last two months and it won’t help now. Cut her losses. Last time she wasted ten years of her life in an abusive relationship that she didn’t even recognise, till they all forced her into it. This time she’s wasted ten weeks. She supposes that’s an improvement. The shorter time doesn’t make it hurt any less, though. Her feet keep walking. The rain keeps soaking her cheeks.

Shortly, she pulls out her phone and prepares to lie through her teeth to her Captain. She has never, ever, requested personal time when not sick. She is about to tap dance her way through not explaining why she needs it.

“Sir, Beckett.”

“Beckett?” Montgomery sounds dumbfounded. “Why aren’t you in the bullpen? You’re supposed to be at work. Where are you, Detective?”

“Sir… I need to take the rest of the day. Personal reasons. There isn’t anything on my desk that can’t wait.” She pauses. “Sir, please…actually could I take leave tomorrow?”

“Why?”

“Personal reasons,” Beckett says again.

In his office, Montgomery is staring fixedly at the phone, which is making noises that he just does not get. He understands all the words. He completely does not understand the sum total of the sentences.

“That’s not good enough, Beckett. You’re supposed to be on shift and working. I need a better reason.”

There is a very uncomfortable pause, during which Montgomery looks out of his office and observes that Beckett’s desk appears to have been abandoned precipitately. He doesn’t like the conclusions that he’s drawing.

“It’s about my dad,” comes eventually. “I need some time to deal with it.”

Montgomery doesn’t believe that this is anything like the whole truth. On the other hand, Beckett voluntarily requesting leave without being too sick to stand up is an unprecedented occurrence, which behoves him to tread extremely carefully. The stress overtones in Beckett’s voice do not lead him to the conclusion that she is thinking logically or indeed sanely. It is quite possible that if he pushes she will say something irrevocable. There is an edge of desperation to her words which is becoming more obvious by the moment.

“Okay, Detective. You can take this afternoon and tomorrow. But this had better be sorted out soon. Report to me first thing on Monday and if you haven’t got a solution that enables you to do your scheduled shifts then you’ll need to use up your accumulated leave from Monday till you sort it out.”

“Sir.”

Montgomery puts the phone down and thinks hard. He can’t afford to give Beckett obviously preferential treatment – that way lies disaster for the bullpen. He has to treat her like he’d treat any other cop in the same circumstances. But he is absolutely sure that the problems she’s got are related to her father, therapy, that round of so-called stomach flu and her consequent benching. He just hasn’t got any way at all of sorting it out for her. No-one does. Until she is prepared to tell him exactly what is going on, there is nothing he can do to help, and she is quite clearly not prepared to
tell him more than the absolute bare minimum. But he is intensely worried that his best detective is wobbling on the edge of a cliff, and he doesn’t want the next call to be *I resign effective immediately*. To his credit, his first concern is that Beckett is a cop to the core and resigning would break her. His second is that his stats would plummet. Fortunately being human and being the Captain point in the same direction, which isn’t always the case. Also fortunately, he had already been thinking about forcing her to take leave next week.

Montgomery prowls out into the bullpen and lurks menacingly behind Esposito, who appears to be checking the sports results instead of lab results.

“Detective Esposito. Detective Ryan.”

“Sir!” They jump. Montgomery experiences a flash of satisfaction. He’s still got the knack.

“Detective Beckett is unwell. She expects to be back Monday.”

“Uh?” his supposedly intelligent detectives blurt.

“Was I not clear? Detective Beckett is unwell. You’ll need to do without her till Monday.” He marches off, leaving two dumbfounded detectives behind him.

“What’s that all about?”

“Dunno. Where’s Castle?”

“Dunno. Musta sneaked out.”

They trade confused faces, and identical shrugs. “Guess I know where he is,” Ryan says. “With Beckett.”

“That’s okay then.”

Ryan nods. Both of them go back to the sports – oops, lab or canvass – results.

Beckett has reached her car and, without entering the precinct for any reason at all, starts it up and turns it towards home. When she gets there, she’ll decide what to do. Except she needn’t go home at all, if she doesn’t want to. Nor does she need to have her phone on. She switches it off. It’s still raining. Instead of homeward, she diverts towards the Holland Tunnel, and out of Manhattan. After that, she aims for the Liberty State Park, in default of any other matter. It’s exactly the opposite direction from home.

She only wants to be alone. Nothing else. Too many people wanting too much of her; too many people needing her; too many people expecting her to fit their mould; too many people trying to force her to accept their thinking. Simply… too many people, and she’s suddenly drowning in all their needs and wants and attitudes. She only wants to be herself. She can’t find herself and she’s run out.

So now Detective Beckett has disappeared. Gone away. Who cares? Not she.

Castle, still standing in Tompkins Square Park in the pouring rain, pulls out his phone and searches out Dr Burke’s number. Shortly he is speaking to the efficient receptionist.

“I need to speak to Dr Burke urgently, please.” He can hear his own desperation and haste to beat the clock. There is clicking. He imagines the polished nails on the keys.
“He will be free at four.”

“That’s too late. I need to talk to him now.” Before Beckett withdraws consent for Dr Burke to talk to him, Castle.

“He is with a patient, and can’t be interrupted. However, I could ask him to call you immediately afterwards, at two. Would that do?”

Castle checks his watch. It’s one-fifteen.

“It’ll have to do. It’s really important I speak to him as soon as he’s done.”

“Certainly. Who shall I say has called?”

“Rick Castle.” He gives his cell and home numbers. “Tell him… tell him it’s about Detective Beckett. Thank you.”

Having no other place to go, he goes home. The loft is empty. This is very fortunate, as Castle is not in the mood for company and is quite sufficiently angry with himself, Beckett, and the day till now to evict his mother if she should so much as blink sideways, never mind actually speak. He goes straight to his study, shuts the door, makes sure his cell phone is charging, and waits.

At two-oh-two his phone rings. He snatches it up and swipes on.

“Rick Castle.”

“Mr Castle.” Dr Burke’s smooth, soothing tones are, for once, an immense relief. “What is the matter?”

“Beckett won’t let me come tomorrow and she’s bailed on our weekend and I just bet she’s going to ring you to withdraw consent to talk to me but maybe she hasn’t yet?”

“What?” Dr Burke says sharply. “How has this arisen?” Castle would almost say that he sounded flustered.

Dr Burke is more than merely flustered. He is appalled. If there had been one external data point on which he had thought that he could rely, it would have been that Detective Beckett would not engineer another breach with Mr Castle. That she has is profoundly disturbing.

“If I knew that I could fix it,” Castle says forcefully.

“Tell me what happened, in as much, and the most accurate, detail as you can.”

“Last night she got O’Leary and me in a bar and cross-questioned him about her dad’s behaviour back in the day. O’Leary effectively read her the riot act about not seeing what was under her nose. Then she kept insisting she wasn’t abused and we both got angry and then she said she wanted me there and she wanted to go to the Hamptons and made me promise I’d get her out tomorrow’s session if she asked me.”

“You both got angry? What could you say to her that would make her angry?”

“She said that if she’d been abused the first therapist would have picked it up and I said he was wrong about everything and told her that one way or another her dad hurt her and she had to tell him the truth. And she said she might as well have killed him and I said he’s already thinking the worst and whatever happened it wasn’t her fault and she should think about what she wanted.” He
gulps in a breath. “And then she made me promise to come tomorrow. But now she’s completely flipped.”
“This is it, the apocalypse

“Flipped?” Dr Burke queries. “Please explain.”

“Flipped one-eighty. This morning she said she didn’t want me there.”

“What, precisely, was said? From the beginning.”

Castle relates his words – leaving out exactly where he and Beckett had been, and their relative states of undress – but being precise about his words. “And then she came out and said I didn’t need to come like she shouldn’t have asked me. And she was just going to go off to work like nothing was wrong at all. I was – er – a bit irritated.”

“Mm?”

Castle relates, not without some pauses and a lot of wincing, the next part, with considerable accuracy.

“And so you went to find Detective Beckett in time for lunch?”

“Yes. But she wasn’t there. I mean, she wasn’t in the precinct. She’d been gone for an hour when I got there, and nobody knew where she’d gone.”

“Where was she?”

“Sitting in the park in the rain. No umbrella, no hat, nothing. She was dripping wet,” Castle adds, irrelevantly. “She didn’t seem to notice.”

“Mm. Was she pleased to see you?”

“Not obviously. She was completely flat. She didn’t even care about work. She always cares about murder, even if it’s only cold cases. I can’t think when she didn’t use work to deal with everything. She didn’t seem to care at all.”

Dr Burke is entirely unreassured by this comment.

“When Montgomery benched her she was absolutely devastated. I’d have said work was the most important thing in her whole life and she walked out and didn’t care that she’d been missing for hours.”

“What happened next?”

“I said I was coming to the session, and she said it was up to me, and when I said she’d wanted me there she said she shouldn’t have made me promise.” He stops, and pulls his voice under control again. “Then she said that we’d all been right and it was abuse and she didn’t need me there because you could deal with her dad and she was done with it.”

Dr Burke, safely in his office, winces, where no-one can see him.

“And then I asked if she’d still come to the Hamptons and she just said to see if I still wanted to tomorrow and – er – I sort of lost my temper a bit and then she did and then she got really nasty and just before I was about to bite back I remembered what you said.”

“Ah.”
“But I think I made a mistake.”

“Oh?”

“I said that she was yelling because I was there, but it was everything else she was really yelling about. And then she said I’d been yelling and told me I was just indulging my *saviour complex* – Dr Burke draws in breath. Detective Beckett knows exactly how to hurt Mr Castle. He does have a saviour complex, but up until now this has been channelled into reasonably safe directions – “and I should leave her alone. She didn’t want me at tomorrow’s session and she wouldn’t come to the Hamptons. So I said I was going to come and she was coming to the Hamptons and then she said if I wanted gratitude” – much becomes instantly clear to Dr Burke – “I could have it, but that she wouldn’t be in this mess if it weren’t for me. And then she just walked off, and I didn’t know what to do.”

“Because you could not use the assertive physicality which you might have done in private?”

“Yeah. Being arrested isn’t that much fun.”

“Mm.” Dr Burke considers, briefly. “This is a very unhelpful development, Mr Castle.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

“However, I can see exactly how the situation has arisen.”

“Uh?”

“Mr Castle, with the best of motives and at Detective Beckett’s request, you and Detective O’Leary have led her to understand that the effects of her father’s behaviour are equivalent to being abused. Understandably, this realisation has made her very unhappy. You then took the correct option in staying with her.” Dr Burke pauses, to consider how he should describe the outcomes.

“Yeah, so? Why’d she suddenly blow up like that? I didn’t do anything.”

“I am afraid that is an incorrect assumption. Last night, you and Detective O’Leary – I quote – *read her the riot act*. In effect, in her mind, you told her what she should think about her father, forced her to realise that she was wrong, and you then compounded that by telling her what she should do in Friday’s session, being to tell him the truth.”

“But then she said she wanted me there,” Castle almost wails.

“Indeed. But that is the foundation for this morning’s disagreement. You made a jest that she was casting you aside till she needed you. That was… ill-judged.” There is mild rebuke in Dr Burke’s voice.

“Firstly, that is just the action which Detective Beckett currently believes her father took in relation to her, which has hurt her inordinately badly. She is hardly likely to react well to the suggestion, which you made in terms, that she is behaving as her father did. It is not in the slightest surprising that she promptly offered you the ability to walk away from her therapy session. She could hardly do otherwise, when faced with the statement that she was relying on you for support only when she needed or wanted it, and without considering your feelings.”

“But…”

“Secondly, Detective Beckett does not believe that she will be or indeed deserves supported, because her father did not or could not do so, and because of her guilt at walking away. You have
proceeded, again in her mind, both earlier and later this morning, to tell Detective Beckett that she must behave in a certain way, being one of which you approve, in order to support her.”

“What? I wouldn’t. I didn’t.”

“But she thinks you have. It is up to Detective Beckett how her therapy progresses. You and Detective O’Leary have insisted that she recognise the abuse. You have attempted to insist that she tells her father the truth, and then that you should attend the session. Were I Detective Beckett, I might, in her already fragile state and in a situation where she has finally realised that everything she has believed to be true may be wrong, regard that as you wishing to ensure that she follows your script as to how the session should go. You have then informed her that regardless of her wishes she will be visiting the Hamptons with you. All of this has been conducted with anger and high emotions from both of you.”

Dr Burke pauses. There is silence on Mr Castle’s part.

“I am certain you did not intend this, Mr Castle, but can you not see how your behaviour this morning could be taken to be equivalent to that of Mr Beckett’s?”

“What? No. It wasn’t.”

“Unfortunately, it was taken as such. You have, so Detective Beckett thinks, effectively informed her of the way in which you expect her to behave: to wit, to be grateful for your assistance and to conduct her therapy in the way in which you have suggested: when she objects you have become angry and insisted that she should behave as you wish. In what way does that appear to her to differ from her father’s manipulations?”

There is a particularly horrible silence.

“But… but…” Dr Burke waits. “But she only had to say she didn’t want me there.”

“According to your own narrative, Detective Beckett did say that, and you ignored it.”

Another very unpleasant silence.

“But… but I never meant” –

“No. You did not mean to. I have no doubt of that,” Dr Burke says soothingly. “However, Detective Beckett is currently particularly emotionally fragile. There were only two options: that she allowed you to have your way, and potentially would come to resent it if she later considered that there were a similarity with her father’s behaviour, which we might well have avoided by careful management of Friday’s session; or that she considered that you were behaving in a way similar to her father and took immediate steps to ensure that she was not subject to it. It appears that you have triggered the second alternative. You have done so from the best of motives: to support Detective Beckett; and with the best of intentions; but having been pushed into seeing her father’s behaviour as abusive, and in a situation where everything she thought that she had been correct in doing was in fact wrong, she was then in a state of mind where even ordinarily supportive actions would readily be misinterpreted. She has fundamentally misinterpreted what you meant, but that does not change the outcome.”

“But I need to be there. You said so.” He sounds like a child appealing to higher authority.

“You cannot be there. Detective Beckett has said she does not want you there. Therefore you will not be there.”
“What? But…” No! He has to be there. He’s the one who holds her up, who lets her stand down.

“Mr Castle, this is Detective Beckett’s treatment. Regardless of what you or I might wish, you have no right at all to be a part of it unless she so requests. She has withdrawn her consent and you have told me this. It would be a disgraceful breach of my duty to my patient to allow you to be present without her explicit consent, which she will have to give to me herself. The most that I can now do is ask her to confirm whether she wishes you to be present. I shall not do so until as late as possible tomorrow. Perhaps she will have reconsidered by then.”

“But… but how… It won’t work unless I’m there.”

“There will be other ways to manage the session. There will have to be.” Dr Burke pauses. “I have another patient, Mr Castle, for whom I am now late. I must go. Thank you. Goodbye.”

Castle puts the phone down, absolutely distraught. Dr Burke’s comment that Beckett has fundamentally misinterpreted what he meant – which she has – is no consolation at all. He didn’t mean anything like that. He’s been so careful to leave it up to Beckett: to tell her – and mean – that it’s always her decision.

Right up till last night and this morning, in fact. Oh, fuck. She’s got it all wrong but there’s no way she’ll listen to him now. He doesn’t even know where she is, though he assumes that she went back to the precinct. He hopes that she went back to the precinct.

She hadn’t walked out the park in the direction of the precinct. Oh God. But surely she went back. Didn’t she? He can’t even get in touch with Ryan or Esposito to ask: he’s started enough hares running this morning. But surely she would have gone back to work? She’s a cop to the core, and work has always been her refuge.

Maybe later, maybe he should go to her apartment. Not to apologise. She misunderstood, and he’s not going to apologise for wanting to support her. To explain. To explain what he really meant and to reassure her that he won’t go if she doesn’t want him there. That she needn’t go to the Hamptons if she doesn’t want to. But he does want to: he wanted her there to tell her… to tell her… But he can’t bear to think that, right now.

Surely she will be at her apartment later?

Dr Burke disposes of his patient in good order, and then turns to the patient-free time which he has at four. He is quite considerably more worried than he had allowed Mr Castle to know. Detective Beckett should not have reacted to Mr Castle in that way. Dr Burke had been quite certain that she was well aware of Mr Castle’s feelings and, while he would have understood and indeed had expected that there might be some emotional outpourings of anger, he cannot immediately see a good reason for the instant shut down and removal of Mr Castle from the equation.

However, he is quite certain that if he reconsider his everything he has learned about Detective Beckett from herself, Mr Castle, and Mr Beckett, he will find the clue he needs. He procures a pot of tea, steeples his fingers beneath his chin, and slips into profound concentration.

Some moments later his eyes spring open. He has, naturally, found his clue. All it required was his focused attention. It had been Mr Castle who had said it. She was sodden drunk. Kept saying that she had to support everyone, that everyone needed her. She didn’t want anyone wanting anything any more. Mr Castle and Detective O’Leary had gone from unquestioning, unstinting support to demanding something of Detective Beckett. The only two people who had not, from Dr Burke’s knowledge, asked anything more of her than that she be herself, had made demands. They had, in
fact, wanted something.

Ah. He rapidly dials Mr Castle. This must be followed up.

“Rick Castle.”

Mr Castle sounds extremely distressed. Dr Burke regrets this, but cannot do anything about it.

“Dr Burke, Mr Castle. I wish to ask you a question about the time when you called upon Detective Beckett and she was drunk. You told me that she had said that she did not want anyone to want anything from her. Is that correct?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Did Detective Beckett say anything more on that subject?”

“Yes. She said that Beckett had disappeared. Gone away.”

“Ah. Thank you.” Of course. Mr Castle had said that too, in a previous appointment.

“Is that it?” Mr Castle now sounds both distressed and irritated. Dr Burke regrets that he is now precluded from comforting Mr Castle with information.

“I require to think, Mr Castle. I must reconsider the way in which tomorrow might go. I may have further questions as my thoughts develop. Your insights remain profoundly helpful, but I cannot give you answers which I neither yet have, nor which I have consent to discuss with you.”

“Screwed all ways up,” Mr Castle says, profanely and bitterly.

“Mr Castle,” Dr Burke says, painedly, “what would you have me do? Betray all professional ethics, patient confidentiality and Detective Beckett’s trust; or leave you angered? I do not have a choice here. You do. I thank you for your answer, which will assist, and may, if you agree, have further questions.”

“What else can I do?” Mr Castle says miserably.

“Thank you. Goodbye.”

Dr Burke returns to his thinking. He is concerned that Detective Beckett may have finally broken under the pressure of her own repressed guilt and unhappiness, and the pressure of being needed. He is quite deeply concerned that she had abandoned her work, which she herself had described to him in highly positive terms. It seems worryingly likely that she has detached herself from almost everything to which she might have felt an attachment. Dr Burke recalls to the front of his mind another concern which Mr Castle had raised: that he believes that Detective Beckett is unconsciously planning to hurt her father so badly that there is no hope of a reconciliation. Dr Burke thinks that Mr Castle has failed to take the next step. Detective Beckett is unwittingly also planning to cause herself significant pain because she unconsciously believes that she deserves it for abandoning her father.

Detective Beckett, in fact, is unknowingly aiming for emotional, though certainly not physical, suicide. Dr Burke thinks with considerable irritation that Mr Castle’s mistake could not have been more badly timed, and with very much more self-recrimination that he should not have assumed that Mr Castle’s apparently innate ability to achieve the right method of dealing with Detective Beckett would continue. Without Mr Castle to ground her, there is no-one to stop her to whom she might listen. The best that Dr Burke can hope for is that Friday passes without an irrevocable
breach between Detective Beckett and her father. It appears extremely unlikely that any amicable resolution can be achieved without the ability to rely on Mr Castle to calm Detective Beckett while Dr Burke temporarily extracts Mr Beckett from the situation.

Dr Burke rapidly reformats his plans for seeing Mr Beckett, which session is due very shortly. Indeed, Mr Beckett will be here any moment. How fortunate that Dr Burke is a very flexible thinker.

“Good afternoon, Jim.”

“Carter.”

“As we discussed when I asked you to come in, Detective Beckett has agreed to meet with you under my guidance tomorrow. I wished to have a short discussion with you before that to prepare you for the likely way in which this will progress, and to reiterate my strong suggestion that your sponsor should be within easy reach. On that note, I can, if you wish, provide him with a quiet space here.”

Mr Beckett nods, looking relieved. “I’ll tell him.”

“Now, concerning tomorrow. As a result of the incompetence of her earlier therapist, your daughter is, probably unknowingly, carrying considerable anger and resentment of the way in which she considers her life to have been spent. It can be expected that she will release all of that, most likely in a highly emotional manner.”

“Oh.”

“I am led to believe, by Mr Castle” – Mr Beckett raises his eyebrows – “who has kept me informed, that your daughter intends to treat this as if it were a police interview. I do not believe that this will last for very long. I do believe that she will endeavour to surprise admissions from you, and probably also endeavour to push you into reacting without thought. I counsel you to try not to react immediately, no matter how far you are provoked. Listen, and think. If you should consider at any time that the situation is too much for you, no matter how trivial it seems, you must signal and I will arrange for a time-out.”

“Oh.”

“From what Mr Castle has said, Jim, your daughter is on the edge of committing irrevocable actions. I do not wish to see that happen. There have been developments which mean that it is presently unlikely that Mr Castle will be present” –

“What? She’s had a fight with Rick?” Mr Beckett looks horrified.

“Yes, and it is still entirely possible that tomorrow’s session will not take place. If it does, at present, a good outcome might merely be that there is scope for another session at a later time. A bad outcome might well mean that you and your daughter make statements and counter-statements which lead to a permanent breach.”

Mr Beckett looks daunted and frightened by Dr Burke’s words.

“She’s really that close?”

“She is. I appreciate that I am asking you to do something extremely difficult. You will naturally wish to defend yourself and to show her that she is wrong. Do not. With input from me, and caution from you, Detective Beckett may yet talk herself round.”
Dr Burke pauses. His next statement will not go down well.

“Your daughter will accuse you of abusing her.”

“What the hell! That’s nonsense. I never did. I never would have.” Mr Beckett leaps immediately to anger. “How can she say that?”

“And there, Jim, is the reason why we are having this discussion now.”

Mr Beckett is stopped in his tracks. “Oh. Oh God. That’s exactly what you meant, isn’t it?”

Dr Burke nods. “Jim, you need to understand that abuse is not only physical. The way in which Detective Beckett has reacted to your alcoholism, both during and after, bears substantial similarities to the way in which victims of emotional abuse react. Allow me to explain.”

“You’d better.”

Dr Burke lays out the pathology, watching with concern as Mr Beckett becomes more and more strained and upset.

“So you see, Jim, all these matters are likely to be raised tomorrow. You have to be prepared.”

Mr Beckett nods, brokenly.

“Let us now take some time to discuss possible strategies, both without and with Mr Castle’s presence.”
Losing all you've ever known

Castle is even less happy when Dr Burke says *Goodbye* than he was before the psychiatrist rang. Beckett’s drunken meanderings on the subject of *disappearance* had been quite terrifying enough when she had been too drunk to do anything about them and he had been there to stop her. The thought that she might be thinking the same thing stone cold sober and with no limits whatsoever on her ability to act on her thinking is spine-chilling. He’d thought that she’d go back to the precinct. Now he’s sure she hasn’t. She could be anywhere.

But surely she will go home, tonight? Won’t she? He can still go round and explain. Can’t he?

Suddenly he has to check. He dials her phone. Straight to voicemail. He doesn’t leave a message.

When he’s tried twice more, and it’s gone straight to voicemail every time, he’s on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Even having his call declined would be better than this. Even being *blocked* would be better than this. At least that way he’d know she’s still there.

A troubling thought enters his head. He does have a way to try to find her. He could… he could ask O’Leary. But if her phone’s switched off… or dead… that won’t work. O’Leary could try to track her car. It’s… that would be nuclear. If she wants to disappear – he doesn’t have the right to stop her, or to find her, or to do anything.

Anything he does to find her will only prove that he’s trying to make her do what he wants. Trying to fit her to his mould. Making demands. He can’t do anything, he can’t try to find her, he can only try to call and try to go to her apartment.

He has a sudden, blinding realisation of how Jim Beckett must feel, and is bitterly sorry for his hard words to him. He’s now equally in the dark. Except he, at least, knows why. Jim doesn’t even have that. Not that it’s any consolation at all. Six hours of this is already killing him. Jim’s had weeks of it.

It’s nearly six thirty. He’s wasted the whole latter part of the afternoon worrying and fretting and chewing his fingernails to the elbow. Beckett would tut at him for that, he thinks, and a stab of instant agony pierces his chest. She wouldn’t, and she won’t. Because she isn’t here. Because she won’t be here.

Because she’s checked out.

---

Beckett is sitting in the Light Rail Café outside the park, drinking as much coffee as her stomach lining will stand and thinking about nothing except the speed of the raindrops rolling down the café windows. She’s as out of it as she had been in Tompkins Square Park. She doesn’t need to do anything, be anywhere, answer anything. Detective Beckett… who’s she?

It occurs to her that she’s only twenty minutes from the airport. She could buy a last minute ticket: go anywhere in the USA. It’s a shame her passport’s at home. She could have gone anywhere in the world. Just step on a plane and be gone. She watches the raindrops, and lets the time roll by. When it starts to get dark she vaguely thinks she ought to leave. She visits the restroom, and then dawdles out to her car; sits in the driver’s seat, and wonders what to do now.

She doesn’t have to do anything. She doesn’t have to go home, where the pressure of expectation is there in her little stone bird, in the smooth red quartz beside it; she doesn’t have to go to the
precinct, where every file reminds her that the victims demand justice. Detective Beckett, Katie, Kate… she’s none of them. All those names come with neediness and demands and expectations that she can’t meet.

What’s in a name? Everything. Everything she can no longer deal with. She stares at her driver’s licence in the dim light of the car’s internal bulbs. Katherine Houghton Beckett. Detective Kate Beckett of the Twelfth Precinct.

Katie Beckett who walked away from the father who didn’t love her.

What’s in a name? Memories; clawing through her; pain and tears. Why are you Katie, why aren’t you Johanna? Her father, drunk. Detective Beckett? Kate, please Kate, I didn’t know who to call. Julia Berowitz, demanding she find her drunkard missing husband. Wake up and smell the coffee, Beckett. You can’t have it both ways. Castle, demanding she see it his way and be grateful for it. My Kat. Just as long as she did therapy his way.

What’s in a name? Only a history of heartache.

She puts her licence away, and takes her car key out, intending to start the car, still with no idea where she’ll go next. It occurs to her that something’s wrong: the keys aren’t right – the key to her apartment isn’t there. Oh, shit. She’s shocked into reality. She doesn’t have her apartment key because she left it so Castle could lock up. He hadn’t given her it back and she’d totally forgotten about it.

Well, that makes her decision for her. She can’t go home. Call it cowardice – there’s another name to add to her total; goes right along with betrayer, abandoner, and victim – but there is no way she’s going near Castle or his loft to pick it up. She certainly isn’t picking up her spare from her father. She’d rather rent an SRO for a few days. He can drop it at the precinct, and she’ll pick it up from Ryan – no, Esposito, who won’t ask questions – on Monday. But she can’t bear to deal with it tonight.

She starts a search on her phone, passing over the missed calls as irrelevant. More expectations which she can’t meet. There’s a cheap chain hotel less than three miles away. That’ll do for tonight. As long as it has a hot shower and she can stop at a pharmacy on the way to buy some bath products, it’ll be fine. She locates a Walgreens that isn’t too much of a detour and, not too much later, is pulling up at the hotel. The receptionist looks at her somewhat askance until she spots the shield and gun, and, clearly assuming some cop reason for needing to be here, asks no questions whatsoever but provides a basic room for the night in short order. She’ll decide what to do about the next few nights tomorrow. Apart from anything else, she’ll need some clean underwear and t-shirts. She doesn’t much like the thought of not having clean underwear first thing tomorrow, but now that she’s here she’s abruptly utterly exhausted, and going out to the Newport Mall to find some tonight is too much. She showers briefly and collapses on to the bed to watch bubble-gum TV till she falls asleep.

Watching a third half-baked, barely plotted soap, it occurs to her that actually she’d be better off telling O’Leary to get the key from Castle. O’Leary, after all, already knows the situation and therefore she won’t have to watch her team speculating and casting sidelong glances and probably tattling to Lanie. She doesn’t want Lanie to know. They aren’t back on those terms yet. Maybe they never will be. She taps out a text to O’Leary: short and to the point. Castle has my apartment key. Please get it from him. I’ll get it from you Monday. That done, her exhaustion overtakes her and she collapses into sleeping like the dead.

Castle finally gathers up his courage to go to Beckett’s apartment at slightly after eight. He goes
down to the garage to use his relatively discreet Mercedes rather than the flashy Ferrari, and as he’s extracting his car key from his pants pocket he finds to his annoyance that one of the keys on his ring must have come loose, because it’s wormed its way down to the bottom of said pocket where it will undoubtedly cause a rip. He tugs it out to put it back where it belongs and realises, appalled, that it’s Beckett’s apartment key. He’d locked up behind him this morning, dropped it in his pocket and completely forgotten to give it back. Right. He’d better return it. And, he thinks, it gives him an excuse to go. Of course she’ll have a spare with a neighbour – his doorman has a spare – but he shouldn’t keep her key.

Not when she’s made it perfectly clear that she wants to be left alone.

He’s just stepped out of the parked car close by Beckett’s block when his phone rings.

“Rick Castle.”

“Castle. What the hell is going on?”

“O’Leary? Uh?”

“I’ve just had a text from Beckett telling me to get her key from you. What the fuck, Castle?”

“Where are you? You’ve heard from her? Where is she? Is she with you?”

“Molloy’s with Pete, yes, no idea, no. Now tell me what’s happening.”

“It’s… complicated.”

“You don’t say. S’pose you’d better come over.” O’Leary reeks off Molloy’s address, as if Castle mightn’t know it, and Castle sets off.

“So,” O’Leary says as Castle arrives by his table. “What’s goin’ on?”

Castle had entered the bar to find a relatively normal-sized man sitting with O’Leary. That is to say, he’s only a fraction shorter than Castle, but somewhat less broad-framed, dark hair, blue-grey eyes. He looks up, smiles, and waves his beer bottle.

“So you’re Beckett’s boyfriend,” he says amiably, with a down-home Alabama drawl.

“I wish,” Castle mutters.

“This is Pete,” O’Leary says, rather unnecessarily. Castle had rather guessed that.

“Nice to meet you, Pete,” Castle manages. Pete grins.

“Hear y’all have a little problem,” he says slowly. “Guess I’ll just find myself sumthin’ to do while you’re makin’ plans.”

“Thanks,” O’Leary says, and gives Pete a look that Castle recognises from his own mirror, when thinking about Beckett.

Pete wanders off to play a round of pool. O’Leary pushes Castle in the direction of the bar and a bottle of beer. “Look like you need a drink. Pete, you wanna beer to go with that game?”

“Naw,” slithers round the pool table.

The men crack their beers.
“Okay. What’s up?”

Castle explains. It’s no easier the second time, even massively abbreviated from Dr Burke’s drawing out of every grisly entrail.

“So,” O’Leary rumbles, “she was weird last night, and then you thought she’d fixed the problem. And then you made a dumb joke, Beckett didn’t get the joke, and then you had a fight ‘stead of makin’ up. An’ now you’re banned from the shrink an’ she won’t go with you this weekend.”

Castle nods, miserably.

“An’ you have no idea where she is because she’s told me to get her key from you. So that means she ain’t home. This is a fine mess you got us into.”

“Yeah,” Castle drags.

“So why’re you so worried? So she’s had a spat with you an’ walked off. Happens. Likely she’s found a room somewhere for the night.”

“I don’t think she went back to the bullpen.”


“She went off in the wrong direction.”

“Prob’ly just to get away as fast as possible. D’you check?”

“No. Didn’t want to set Espo or Ryan thinking.”


“Hey, Esposito?”

“Yeah, look, you know you offered me a match, well, I’m feelin’ a bit unchallenged, an’ I got some spare time next week, an’ I thought if you had a bit of time we could test each other out a bit.”

“Yeah, sounds good. No cheatin’ though. No warmin’ up with Beckett beforehand. She c’n watch. Learn somethin’.”

“Really? Montgomery told you? Wow. Musta caught the flu. No usin’ that as an excuse, Esposito. I hear you’re too mean to get the flu.”

“Seeya next week. Settle it then. Bye.”

O’Leary turns back to Castle. “You were right. She called in sick, musta been straight after she walked off. Esposito don’t expect to see her till Monday.” The San Andreas Fault appears in O’Leary’s brow. “This ain’t good.”

“She wasn’t sick. She just shut down.” Castle looks full at O’Leary, who is looming over the back of a chair. “She told me – she got absolutely wasted like she did once with you – she just wanted to disappear. A while ago. But I think that’s what she’s done. Gone away. I don’t even know if she’ll turn up tomorrow but I can’t be there. I can’t do anything till I get to explain.”
“This really ain’t good.”

“Can you call her?”

O’Leary acquires an expression of confusion of a size which a worried whale might display. “I could, but what’m I gonna say when she asks why I’m callin’?”

“Don’t know.” Castle drains his beer without really noticing. “Espo said she was ill and you wanted to bring her chicken soup? I don’t know.”

O’Leary regards Castle with some interest. “You’d better give me her key, anyway.” His massive visage lights up. “That’ll do it.”

“What?” Castle asks, dully, handing the key over.

“I’ll call her to tell her I’ve got the key. Then we’ll have a bit of a chat.”

“‘Kay.”

O’Leary pats him on the head. “We can fix this. Want another beer?”

“Can’t. Got the car.” Castle makes a face. “If I didn’t I’d have had the bourbon.”

“Sit there, an’ stay quiet. If Beckett thinks you’re with me she’ll have my guts.”

Beckett is dragged up from the bottom of the ocean of her sleep by her phone. Automatically, she swipes on: forgetting that she’s not on call and Dispatch won’t be ringing her. The habit of always answering is too ingrained to be overcome.

“Beckett.”

“Hey, Beckett. O’Leary here.”

“What do you want, O’Leary?”

“I got your keys. You wanna come by and collect ‘em?”

“No.” O’Leary hears a yawn.

“You sleeping?”

“No. The phone woke me.”

“Bit early to be asleep. You okay? If you’re ill you should be at home.”

“I’m settled for now. I’ll get them Monday.”

“You got a spare, then? You never used to have a spare set.”

“I’m fine. Stop fussing.” She yawns again. She just wants to sleep, quiet and undisturbed and alone.

“If you’re ill,” O’Leary says patiently but inexorably, “you should be home in your own bed, not sleepin’ on someone’s floor.”

“I’m fine, if someone would just let me sleep.” Please just let her sleep.
“I’ll let you sleep if you tell me where you are. You’ve worried me now. An’ you know it’s not good for my blood pressure for you to worry me.”

“In a hotel. Okay? Stop babysitting me, O’Leary.”

“You need it. You shouldn’t be in a hotel if you’re ill. I think,” he drawls, to Beckett’s astonishment, “I think I should come get you and take you home.”

Beckett stares tiredly at her phone. “Just let me sleep, O’Leary. I” –

“Naw. You sound horrible. I’m going to come get you.”

“Go away, O’Leary. I’ll get the key from you tomorrow if it’ll get you off my back. I just wanna” –

“You just wanna be home in your own place. Not infecting a whole hotel. Not polite, Beckett. C’mon. Where are you an’ I’ll make sure you get home okay. I’m only at Molloys. Not as if it’s far from you.”

“I don’t wanna move,” she says. “Just leave me alone.”

“I’ll leave you alone when you’re safe in your own bed, Beckett. Don’t make me trace your phone to find you.”

“O’Leary, if you do that I’ll report you,” Beckett says, icy anger momentarily overcoming her exhaustion. “You’re not my boss and you’re way out of line here. I’ve told you to leave me alone and I meant it. We are done here. Just leave me alone.”

She swipes off, switches the phone off, and tries to seek sleep again. Some time later, she finds it, by which time all her limited peace has evaporated, to be replaced by inchoate but vaguely unpleasant dreams.

“That didn’t go so good,” O’Leary rumbles dispiritedly. “Beckett threatened to report me an’ I still don’t know where she is. Says she’s in a hotel.”

“Like there aren’t thousands of those in Manhattan.”

“Yeah. I think you have to leave it, Castle. She said she’d pick the key up from me tomorrow. Least you know she’ll do that.”

“You think? I don’t. I think she just said that to shut you up.”

“Yeah, well. If she don’t come by the precinct… we’ll see. Anyway, time I went home.”

O’Leary’s bulk rises from the chair and he moves to find Pete. Castle looks at the surrounding bar and the table and doesn’t find any comfort in it whatsoever. Today, it’s fair to conclude, has not been a good day. Today, in fact, has been a total disaster.

He quietly gets up and exits. No point sitting here, when sitting won’t achieve anything. No point seeking, when there’s no chance of finding. No point to anything, tonight.

He arrives home, avoids socialising with consummate ease, and settles into the comfort of his study and the burn of bourbon, until he’s dulled the edges of the day.
Beckett does not wake early, or easily, falling back into the cotton-wool comfort of a warm bed and sleep more than once before her eyes remain open. Nothing to do, nowhere to go, no-one to be. She doesn’t need to do anything she doesn’t want to. And she doesn’t want to do anything. She manages to check out, but only because she isn’t sure she wants to stay another night.

It’s not raining, today. She goes back to the park, sitting where she can see out into the Hudson, the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island. Her phone remains off. Her mind remains blank. The decisive Detective Beckett, always on the move, always doing something, always in charge – has disappeared, and a dead-eyed woman sitting on a park bench in yesterday’s creased clothes and with still hands and empty mind is all that remains.

Presently, she stands and wanders off. Despite her desire to do nothing, she has a nagging feeling that she should at least recover her key. That way, she’ll have options. Starting with clean clothes and her passport.

She starts the car and proceeds calmly through the Holland Park Tunnel and up to the Central Park precinct. She has deliberately not called O’Leary. During the drive, she has acquired some reservations about his behaviour. She has every intention of taking her key and leaving in as few moments as possible. He’d been far too pushy, and she doesn’t want to talk. He never used to make her talk, and she doesn’t like the change. He’s never expected anything from her, and she doesn’t like that change either.
Hopes and betrayals

She pulls up at the precinct, parks tidily with her police ID on display, and walks in. Sergeant Hardon is on the desk.

“Detective Beckett, hello,” he says, and continues before she can even open her mouth on a greeting. “Have you come to pick up that Berowitz guy? He’s in the tank again. We called his wife: did she ask you to come by?”

“No. No,” Beckett says, trying not to let her voice rise in horror. “I dropped by to see O’Leary. He’d picked up some stuff for me.” She starts for the elevator.

“Detective Beckett? Kate?” comes from behind her.

Oh fuck no. Noooooo!

“Kate, please? I need your help. Please?” It’s Julia Berowitz. Beckett turns, pulling on her professional persona as she does.

“I…”

“He’s worse.”

“That’s” –

“Looks like you two have some things to talk about,” Sergeant Hardon interrupts happily. “Take your time, Beckett. Don’t worry, I’ll call O’Leary and get him down here.” Sergeant Hardon is dialling before she can say no.

“Kate, you have to help me. David’s not well. I really need your help.”

It’s horribly familiar. She’s been there already. Julia leaning on her and needing her and making demands and forcing her to get involved.

“I can’t,” she says. “Orders.”

“But Kate, what will I do?”

Beckett can’t deal with this.

“Do what I told you,” she snaps. “Go to Al-Anon. Get therapy. I told you, you can only save yourself. Your husband is an alcoholic. He’ll pull you down with him. God knows, my Dad did.”

“I can help him. I can.”

“I said that, once. I can’t help you.”

Beckett doesn’t notice O’Leary coming out the elevator.

“You,” Julia spits viciously, “walked away from your own father and wouldn’t help him. You don’t help anyone, do you? Just dump them and carry on. You were supposed to help me and you won’t. How do you live with yourself? How can you just leave your own family like that?”

“I went back to my dad when he got dry and it was the biggest mistake I’ve ever made,” Beckett
cries, pushed right over the edge. “You don’t get it, Julia. You never have. You will, though. Oh God, you will. He’ll abuse you when he’s drunk – no, he won’t hit you, but you’ll be cleaning up his mess until you can’t bear it any more, and then you’ll try and walk and you’ll feel guilty till he gets dry. If he gets dry. Maybe you’ll be lucky. Luckier than I was. Maybe he’ll kill himself first.”

Julia is standing, mouth open, wordless, white-faced in the path of Beckett’s fury.

“But then if he gets dry there’ll be different abuse. You’ll do anything to keep him sober. Because you think you love him. He’ll keep you dancing on a string, and you won’t even know it, until you get round to paying for therapy all over again. So get used to it, Julia, because you’ve just signed your life away. I didn’t believe any of it but it’s true. You might as well let him die now, because that way you’ll be able to have a life. Maybe.”

She turns away, fury and tears mixed on her face, then turns back.

“You haven’t been there yet. When you have, then ask me how I’ve lived with it. Because I haven’t. I put my whole life aside to support my father and I’ve wasted it. Ten years, Julia. Did you want a family? I did. You won’t have one. At least you managed the husband, but you won’t be able to care for a child and a drunk. Better give that dream up now.”

Julia is weeping.

“You’ll have to give up everything. I did. And at the end of it all you’ll have is nothing. Your friends’ll slip away. Or you will. Too embarrassing. But you think you can help him. You can save him. Because you love him. I loved my dad. But he didn’t love me and David doesn’t love you. The only thing he loves is the bottle. Good luck, Julia. You’re going to need it. Because one day you’ll wake up and walk out and you’ll wish he’d died. And then you’ll spend the rest of your life feeling guilty until you realise that he’s ruined your life and you’ll still feel guilty.”

She draws a shuddering breath, oblivious to O’Leary’s massive presence almost at her shoulder.

“You’re so shocked,” Beckett says bitterly. “You’d never walk away. Well, I’m no saint. I walked away to save myself and it still didn’t work. I’d have been better off if I’d shot him myself the first time I found him drunk. Not that you’ll believe me. But when you find he’s been abusing you, you’ll remember this and wish you’d listened. Enjoy your saintly martyrdom, Julia. It’s all you’ll have.”

She turns again, and finds her vitriolic fury wrapped into O’Leary’s giant chest and redwood-sized arms.


She doesn’t see his signal to the Sergeant, who nods. She’s shaking in his restraining arms as the flood-tide of her fury swallows her up; drowned in the wash of adrenaline-fuelled anger.

She doesn’t see Julia weeping unstoppably behind her as she sees her shambling, drunken husband brought up from the cells.

“Keys, Beckett.” O’Leary’s bass doesn’t register. He takes her small purse and roots through it, finding them. He hasn’t lost contact with her for a second. “Where’s your car?”

“Front.”

“C’mon. Home time. You ain’t right.”
“Leave me alone.”

“Nope. You can’t drive like that. I’ll get you home and then you can do what you like.”

Beckett doesn’t object further. It’s not going to work, and O’Leary’s so big that she can’t stop him doing whatever he’s going to do. She slumps into the passenger seat and closes her eyes. O’Leary knows where she lives: she doesn’t have to tell him. Slow, silent tears refuse to stay behind her eyelids, and she turns her face to the window. She’s cold, and she’s tired, and she should have stayed gone: that way she’d never have seen Julia Berowitz again.

When O’Leary pulls up and parks she’s superficially composed. He walks her up, produces her key, follows her in, and steers her to the couch. “C’n I have a coffee, Beckett?”

“Sure.” She rises from the couch and aims for her bathroom. O’Leary doesn’t ask any questions at all. As soon as she’s out the way and the kettle filled and on he pulls out his phone and taps out a text to Castle.

Beckett back. Problem at precinct with some woman picking up same drunk when I met you first. B lost it. Brought her home.

He presses Send and puts the phone away just in time for Beckett reappearing. She pulls down two mugs and instant coffee. O’Leary receives a normal strength dose. Beckett’s has double that. Again, he doesn’t say a word. Beckett doesn’t offer an explanation, only creamer for his coffee. Since inside his deceptively bulky frame, drawling accent and general hayseed persona O’Leary is actually pretty bright, he has taken the lesson (and a great many conclusions that he’s fairly sure Castle would have preferred O’Leary hadn’t drawn) from Castle’s truncated tale, and has decided that the best offense is quite definitely not to ask anything and not to push any further at all. He sits down next to her, cramping her into the corner without at all meaning to (these tiny little couches are no good. His is much bigger) and pats her shoulder, wordlessly.

Beckett drinks her coffee and neither accepts nor rejects O’Leary’s presence. Her day went to hell the moment Julia reappeared, so it can’t really get any worse. She maintains rigid control of her expression and her tear ducts. O’Leary’ll be gone shortly, and she can wash, change, and decide what to do. Alone. She can pack, and leave. Go away. Somewhere. Somewhere no-one wants anything from her.

She finishes her coffee. “You done, O’Leary?” she asks.

“Not quite. Don’t have your asbestos throat.” He pauses. “You sure you’re okay? Sounded pretty worked up, back at Central Park. I can sit a spell longer, if you want some comp’ny for a minute.”

“I’m fine.”

“If you wanna talk…”

Beckett’s eyes flare into furious life. “What, so you can tell me what I ought to do all over again? Like Thursday? Tell me I’m missing the point? No thanks. Tell me I’m screwing up? You already did that. Not your problem. Not your business.”

“You tryin’ to pick a fight with me, Beckett? ‘Cause it ain’t gonna work. Iffen you think I can’t tell that you were cryin’ all the way home an’ you’re just waitin’ for me to leave so you can start again you’re wrong. You need a pal.” He stops for a half-beat. “Or two. An’ I think the other one just arrived.”

Just because we were pals back in the day.”

“No. Sometimes bein’ pals means doin’ things you won’t like. Like now.” O’Leary gets up and opens the door to admit Castle.

“This is my apartment, and I want you both to leave.”

Castle and O’Leary look at each other, with almost identical expressions, and O’Leary shuts the door behind them.

“No-one’s going to make you do anything, Beckett. Whatever you want to do is up to you. You can go to Dr Burke or not go, or go to the Hamptons or not go: whatever you decide. But right now you need a friend – or two – and we’re here. No-one here wants anything from you. Needs anything from you.” Castle takes a careful breath. “I was wrong yesterday, but you misunderstood me too. It’s still up to you. It’s always up to you.” Castle moves further inside, closer. O’Leary stays back. “C’mon. You don’t need to say anything now.” He sits down, careful not to touch her.

Beckett stands up, walks to her bedroom, and closes the door behind her. Castle and O’Leary exchange glances. Both of them hear a single choked off noise.


“Thanks. See you. If I’m not dead.”

O’Leary grins widely. “Neither of us is dead yet. We’re already on the good side.” He departs, quietly.

Castle makes himself coffee and settles in for a long wait in which he intends to do precisely nothing for now except read one of Beckett’s books until she reappears and he can work out what she wants. Assertive sexuality is not going to figure in this discussion. It simply won’t work. Well. It would work, but it won’t solve anything for more than a short while and then they’ll be right back here in the same disaster all over again. He casts a glance at his watch. He’s got about four hours before Beckett’s due at Dr Burke’s, and at the moment he’ll be metaphorically sitting on the kerb outside. If an hour passes with nothing, then he’ll consider taking her in a coffee.

Beckett has closed the door on the world. Less than an hour back in Manhattan and everyone wants something. Julia-you’ve-got-to-help-me-Berowitz. O’Leary insisting he takes her home and tattling to Castle that she’s back. Oh yes, she sees that plain as day. O’Leary wants her to be home. She emits a choked-off, furious half-sob, and buries the rest and her face in her pillow. Castle turning up at all. Castle wants her to… what?

Who cares? He wants. They all want. Everybody wants something from her and she has nothing to give. She’s tired: bone-deep weary from supporting her father, waste as that has been; her team; the victims and their families. It’s only in the last few weeks that anyone, apart from occasional times with O’Leary, has supported her, and that’s been rocked by Castle’s insistence that she do it his way. She emits another miserable noise, this time muffled by the pillow. She’d only wanted to be able to stand down and stop with someone who didn’t seem to make any demands on her. Until he did, and it had all been too much for her and she’d lost her temper and lost all her ability to see the other side of the argument. Too many people wanted too much from her, and now she’s run out: Castle had simply been the last straw.

Castle reads without enthusiasm, punctuated by frequent glances at his watch and an inordinate amount of self-control to stop himself walking in on Beckett and pulling her into his arms for some of what Dr Burke had described as physical consolation and/or psychological safety. After an hour,
he puts the kettle on, and constructs a trayful of one mug, creamer and spices; together with the French press. He has no idea how she might want to drink her coffee, today. It’ll be up to her. If, of course, she drinks it at all.

Once the coffee has brewed, he pours a mugful for himself, and takes the rest through to Beckett’s bedroom. She’s lying on her bed on her side, face pressed into a pillow. He puts the tray down on the nightstand, and retreats. As he exits, he says softly, “Coffee,” and then re-closes the door behind him.

Beckett doesn’t move when Castle enters. She expects nothing other than his usual behaviour: assertive physicality; and she isn’t going to invite that. She is vaguely surprised when there is a click on the nightstand, the single word *coffee*, and retreat. The aroma writhes around her head and into her nostrils.

She sits up, tucking the pillow behind her, and discovers that *coffee* is actually a tray which provides all known options for how she takes her coffee. It is, in fact, a caffeinated version of *up to you, Beckett*. The sight kicks her brain into some sort of life and actions. Mostly, the action is downing the first half mugful neat, without pause for breath. The second half is also black. Then she looks at the French press, and discovers that it contains only half the coffee that there should be. Conclusion: Castle has been drinking some of it. Conclusion two: he’s drinking it elsewhere. Her frazzled mind puts that together with his failure to use assertive physicality and, now penetrating, his words when he came in: *I was wrong, but you misunderstood. It’s still up to you, it’s always up to you.* And his conduct since he arrived here backs that up.

She drinks the rest of the coffee. Maybe it’ll help. Finishing the pot doesn’t help. She’s still too tired and too empty to think of an answer. She flops back on her pillows and fails to find any thought that isn’t *I want to go away.*

Then her phone rings. She doesn’t recognise the number, which right now is a good start. She doesn’t want to talk to anyone she knows. She supposes she ought to answer, but before she does the ringing stops. There is a short gap, and then it rings again.

“Beckett.”

“Detective Beckett. This is Dr Burke. Please would you confirm who will be present at tonight’s session?”

“Me.”

“Thank you,” Dr Burke says without a pause. In fact, he has said that before Beckett has really considered whether she has finished her sentence. “Previously, you had told me that Mr Castle would be attending. I will be perfectly happy, however, if he is not there.” There is a very slight emphasis on *not.* “This, after all, is your therapy and your family. Outsiders may be unhelpful. Perhaps you should inform him that he should not attend, or I shall do it for you if you so wish.”

“But…”

“Mm?”

“I thought he had seen you?”

“Yes, but that does not entitle him to attend your sessions. They are private. I will not permit anyone to attend without your consent. That would be entirely unethical, and damaging. It is entirely up to you as to whether any person, including yourself, attends. The only compulsory
attendee, of course, would be me, and even then should you ask me to remove myself for a few moments I would do so. In short, Detective Beckett, Mr Castle’s presence is dependent on your consent. As I have said, I will be content if he is not there.”

In his Midtown office, Dr Burke is trying a very risky strategy; although since at this point the alternative is no Mr Castle, which Dr Burke considers will court catastrophe, he believes it justified. He is trying, once more, to use reverse psychology on Detective Beckett. He has very little hope that it will work. If Detective Beckett is still angry, it will fail. If, as he hopes, she is now merely exhausted, there is the slimmest of chances that it might work.

“But…”

“The presence of amateurs is not generally recommended,” Dr Burke says in his most arrogant tones. “They are far more likely to do harm than good.”

Beckett’s temper flashes into searing life. “He’s better for me than you are,” she bites out. “At least he cares. You don’t, it’s just your job to open all the wounds back up. When you were a child you probably pulled the wings off flies. I’ll decide if he’s going to do more harm than good.”

In Beckett’s main room, Castle jerks into shocked alertness as her voice rises to audibility.

“As your psychiatrist, I consider that I would be failing in my duty to you if I did not point out the disadvantages” –

“If you’d really thought there were disadvantages you’d have pointed them out last time when I said I was bringing him.”

Dr Burke’s heart sinks.

“You just don’t want him there. In case he shows you up as the arrogant bastard you are. Well, he’s coming.” She swipes off, viciously.

On the other side of the door, Castle is slack-jawed with shock.

In his Midtown room, Dr Burke gives heartfelt thanks, wholly swamped by relief. He drinks his tea, and indulges himself in a stress-relieving chocolate cookie. Just one. He will need the rest of the packet for the period after Detective Beckett leaves.

In her bedroom, Detective Beckett surges off the bed, spends a precise and focused ten minutes in the shower and a further three minutes putting on her make-up perfectly; dresses for Interrogation, and stalks out. She is entirely unsurprised to find Castle still sitting on her couch, though she is marginally surprised – or would be, had she any attention to spare for it – to find him reading *Naked in Death*.

She stands straight and steel-stiff in front of him.

“Did you mean it?”

“Mean what?”

“That it’s up to me.”

“Yes.”

“But you said you were going to be there whatever. How’s that up to me?”
“I was wrong, okay?” Castle pauses, and then jumps straight in. “But you were wrong too. I never meant that you just picked me up when you needed me. You don’t call half enough even when you do need me. We had this discussion. We agreed you ask, and I come if I want to or can. It was a bad joke yesterday, but it was a joke. I wasn’t trying to make a point.”

“So why were you telling me you wouldn’t let me keep you out of therapy and wouldn’t let me not go to the Hamptons?”

“Because I lost my temper, okay? You were desperate for me to go with you and then the next morning you turned straight round and said you didn’t want me there and I hadn’t a clue why. What did you expect? Then you wouldn’t tell me if you wanted to come to the Hamptons. It was your idea, and you wouldn’t say yes or no.”

“You might not even want to go after tonight.”

“That’s up to me. You weren’t giving me any clues. I thought you were backing out. Ditching me.”

“No. You weren’t listening and I… was scared, and everything about this makes me angry. Being scared makes me angry. You kept pushing me to see that Dad abused me and… and you wouldn’t give me time to think and I can’t stand being a victim. I’m not a victim.”

“No. You’re not. But.. everything makes you angry? Including me?”

“Not you. You were there and pushing and pushing and… and you’d said I was using you and” –

“We were both wrong,” Castle states flatly. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“What do you want? Actually want, for you?”

“I want you to come with me,” Beckett says, and her stance softens, “please?”

“Sure. I always said I would if you wanted me there.”

“I want you there.” She stops. “I want… if you want…” All the harsh posture is gone, replaced by that same unhappy insecurity and inability to say what she wants. Castle doesn’t force her to the words. Not now. There will be enough words, only a little later than now, between her and her father.

“I want. Come here, Beckett.”
Poison in your head

Castle stands up and wraps her in. She half-falls against him, which is not wholly reassuring. On
the other hand, he manages to sit them both down comfortably, with Beckett safely on his knee and
in his arms. But this is still not the time for sex: even were there the temporal space, which there
isn’t; she’s tired, and there’s been enough trouble yesterday and today already. He surrounds her,
and doesn’t pet, and doesn’t ask any questions.

“Julia was there,” Beckett drags out.

“Mm-uh?”

“At Central Park precinct. Collecting her husband.” Beckett stops, and breathes slowly, the pace of
each inhaled molecule rigidly regulated. “She said she needed me and then got mad when I said no.
I told her what she should do, all over again, but she hasn’t done it and she won’t do it. She still
thinks there’s a better outcome.” Bitter knowledge taints the still air. “She’ll learn. Just like I did.”

“Her problem.”

“She told me I walked away. It’s true. But if I’d done it properly back then I wouldn’t be doing it
again tonight. It would never have happened again. He’d be gone.”

Castle very deliberately doesn’t react at all. He’s been expecting that since she opened her mouth.

“He will be soon, anyway.”

But she’s tensed up as soon as she says it. Hardly the attitude of someone who’s desperate to walk
away, and for whom cutting out her father from her life will be as easy as she says it will be.

“He’s just another witness, Beckett, and when you’ve finished we’ll go. D’you still want to go to
the Hamptons?”

“Yeah,” Beckett says slowly, as if she can’t quite believe it’s still on offer.

“Okay. Your car or mine?”

“Yours. I… I’m not sure I’m going to want to drive, after. Dr Burke annoys me, and that’s not a
good start to a journey.”

Castle thinks that that’s a very minor component of a much larger reason Beckett shouldn’t drive,
but since it’s the right answer he doesn’t explore it.

“Okay,” he says again. “If you want to go, then you need to pack, and we can go straight away.”
He forces a grin on to his mouth and hopes that it appears in his voice. “Please will you bring that
lovely crimson dress? The strokable one? It’s soft and swirly and very pettable.”

“Is that a word?”

“Swirly? Of course it is. So is pettable. Pleeeasse?”

Beckett emits a half-hearted growl and doesn’t say no. On the other hand she isn’t exactly leaping
out of his lap to pack either.

“When do we need to be at Dr Burke’s?”
“Usual time. Six thirty.”

“It’s nearly five now.”

“Oh.”

Beckett sounds very tired indeed.

“I could help you pack. Ensure everything is suitable.”

“You just want an excuse to rootle through my underwear.”

“I like doing that much better when you’re wearing it,” Castle murmurs. The resulting growl is not half-hearted at all.

“You are not helping me pack.” She thinks of a diversion. “If we’re going straight from Dr Burke’s, then don’t you need a car?”

“Downstairs already. I was going to leave it here, but we can take it if you like. I guess we’d get out of Manhattan faster, if we did. But you still need to pack.”

“Okay.” Beckett aims for her bedroom, stalked by Castle. “No. You are not helping, okay?”

Castle pouts. “But Beckett, I need to make sure you’ve got the right dress.”

“If I promise to pack that same dress will you go and sit down and stop acting like creepy stalker-guy?”

“Yes,” says Castle, perfectly happily now that he’s got what he wants. Which want was not, in fact, the dress; but a more alive Beckett than the previous ghostly version.

Beckett carefully considers not packing the crimson dress. Then she thinks that, given that the crimson dress induces soft petting and cuddles and stroking, she does want to pack it; and therefore does. With appropriate underwear. And nightwear.

Shortly her bag is packed. Unfortunately this means that there is now nothing at all standing between Beckett, Dr Burke, and her father. She sits on her bed and tries to recreate Detective Beckett. She’s not Katie, that victim of abuse. She’s Detective Kate Beckett of the Twelfth Precinct, who can deal with unpleasantness, hostile witnesses, and liars without turning a perfectly groomed hair.

What’s in a name? An entire personality, that’s what. The personality she needs now to be done with this whole charade and pretence.

When she walks back out of the bedroom with her weekend bag she is perfectly, totally, and entirely Detective Kate Beckett.

She is still perfectly, totally, and entirely Detective Kate Beckett when she slips into the passenger seat of Castle’s very luxurious but discreet Mercedes, her notes in her purse; still perfectly, totally, and entirely Detective Kate Beckett when she teases Castle about letting her drive it and is firmly told no, it’s his toy; still perfectly, totally, and entirely Detective Kate Beckett when Castle parks at Dr Burke’s; and still perfectly, totally, and entirely Detective Kate Beckett when she walks into reception and then into the consulting room.

Her father is not there.
“Good evening, Detective Beckett. Mr Castle.” Dr Burke manages to infuse a trace of disapproval into the last two words. “Please be seated.”

“Where’s my father?” Detective Beckett raps.

“He is in another room. Is there anything you wish to discuss before he joins us?”

“No. Let’s get this done. It won’t take long.”

Detective Beckett’s tone would have been better used to sound the advance at Omaha Beach. Dr Burke hears its clarion call with misgivings. From his expression, Mr Castle not only recognises the tone but regards it with outright terror.

“Nothing? Very well. There is one procedural matter to explain before we begin. You, or your father, may at any time request a short recess for any reason. You need not state the reason. If such is requested, all parties must accept it. When it occurs, it is usual for the parties to occupy separate rooms for the duration. I may suggest a recess, if I consider that the situation warrants it. Mr Castle may not.”

“Understood,” Detective Beckett says, crisply. She takes two pieces of paper from her purse, smoothing them out. Mr Castle clearly recognises those, too.

Dr Burke fetches Mr Beckett, with considerable trepidation. When he returns, he observes that Detective Beckett is completely impassive.

“Dad,” she says coolly. There is no particular emotion apparent. The same is not true of Mr Beckett.

“Katie,” he says desperately. “Katie, what did I do?”

“Don’t you remember?” she says, still cool and collected. “Why don’t you tell me what you think happened?”

Dr Burke admires Detective Beckett’s ability to command the room. Every eye is fixed on her.

“Katie, you’ve heard it all before. I don’t know anything more. I don’t remember.”

“Don’t you mean I was too drunk to remember?”

“Yes,” Mr Beckett says desolately. “But I don’t know what I did now, either. We were just talking and you lost your temper and walked out.”

“And when you got dry?” Still nothing but dispassion. Detective Beckett might never have met her father before.

“We were a family again. I don’t know why you don’t see that.”

“We hadn’t been a family for five years, because the only family you wanted was a whiskey bottle. Why were you so keen on being a family again?”

“You were all I had. If it wasn’t for you I’d never have got dry. You know this. Why are we going through it? That hasn’t changed.”

Dr Burke considers intervening, and does not.

“I was all you had?”
“Yes. You were all that was left of our family.”

“Mm,” Detective Beckett says. “All that was left?”

“You were all I had left. All I had to remind me.”

Dr Burke winces. Detective Beckett does not. Interestingly, Mr Castle does.

“So you got dry because I was all you had left to remind you of Mom. You said I saved you. Wasn’t it your job to save yourself?”

“I did. But I needed to start. You were the start.”

“Because I reminded you of Mom.” Her voice is still terrifyingly dispassionate.

“I said that. You were my only family.”

“Because I reminded you of Mom.”

“Yes. What don’t you get about that?”

“I understand it perfectly.”

“Katie, what is this? I don’t get why you’re so upset with me. What happened?”

Detective Beckett ignores that.

“So I saved you. I was the reason you crawled out of a bottle.”

Dr Burke would have preferred anger, or contempt, to this cool analysis. Mr Beckett is already looking confused.

“Yes.”

“And I’m your only family.”

“Yes.”

“So why did you crawl into the bottle in the first place? If I mean so much to you. If I’m your family.”

“Because I couldn’t deal with how much you were like your mother. You were so like her so I drank to wipe out all the memories. Every time I saw you I saw her. Every time you spoke. You sound so much like her. And then I couldn’t stop.”

“But you don’t remember anything?” Still cool and calm, though there is an edge on the question that Mr Beckett clearly senses. Dr Burke notices that Detective Beckett’s knuckles are white in her lap.

“No. Katie, why are you behaving like this? I don’t remember. I never did remember. I don’t remember any of it.”

“So you really don’t remember me coming home,” she bites, ice on each word, “and you telling me I should go away because you didn’t want me, you wanted Mom.”

Mr Beckett turns sheet white. “I said what?”
“Go away. I don’t want you. I want Johanna.” Each word, cold and clear, strikes like steel. “In vino, veritas.”

“I…” Mr Beckett clearly remembers Dr Burke’s earlier admonitions. “I don’t… I can’t remember, Katie.” It sounds like a plea for mercy. Mercy is not in evidence. “Why did you never say?”

“You really don’t remember saying that every time you got wasted? Every time I came to get you out the tank.”

“Katie, no! I never would have meant it. I don’t remember any of it. I meant what I said when I was dry again.”

“So when you were so drunk you were vomiting, you could still lie, but when you were sober, you always told the truth?” An elegant eyebrow lifts sceptically. Disbelief hangs heavy in the claustrophobic atmosphere of the interrogation room. “Usually when people are that drunk, they haven’t the coherence to lie consistently.”

Mr Beckett clearly thinks that there is a chink of light at the end of this tunnel.

“Yes, I told the truth when I was sober. You meant everything. You – just the thought of you saved me, and then I could do it. Every day, one day at a time.”

“You kept telling me that. That you did it because of me. That seeing me was really important. That it was really important to you to be a family.”

“It is.”

“So I’ve been there for you. Been your family. Never let you down. Saved you. Did whatever you wanted and whatever was needed.”

“Yes. Katie, why are you questioning this? That… I just wanted to be a family. Didn’t you?”

Detective Beckett ignores that question too.

“In fact, I did exactly what you wanted me to.” She changes topic. “I cut and dyed my hair, you know,” she says conversationally, “so I didn’t look so much like Mom. At least it stopped you making that mistake again.” That stiletto is still sinking in when Detective Beckett carries on. “For two years I tried to make you better, but nothing I did worked. I didn’t talk about Mom, because it made you cry, and then you drank. I wanted to talk about Mom. I wanted to remember her. But I couldn’t, because you just cried and got drunk again. So I stopped. I cleaned you up and picked you up and listened to you promise you wouldn’t do it again if only I’d be there. I was there, but you didn’t stop.”

She pauses: breathes out, breathes in. Dr Burke watches her control and waits, poised to step in at any moment. This cold dissection surely cannot last?

“But then you got dry, and you were – we were – happy again. Just as long as I was there to be a family with you. Just as long as we didn’t talk about it. After all, there was no point dragging up old scores. You were happy and as long as you were happy you didn’t drink. And I had my dad back.”

“So why aren’t you talking to me now? Why did you stop taking my calls?”

“But Dr Burke here” – that has a fine edge on it too – “showed me that it wasn’t all bluebirds and roses. I wouldn’t believe him, until I went back through all of it. I changed my behaviour and my
appearance and didn’t do things I wanted to do because you were drunk, or because on the rare occasions you were sober you pleaded with me, or because you might have gone back to the bottle. I changed me to try to keep you happy. Dr Burke thinks that’s emotional abuse. I argued with him. I was sure that it wasn’t, because you were so drunk you didn’t know you were doing it. Because I thought that you needed me because you wanted to be a family. Because I thought that when you got dry, under it all, you still loved me.”

“Katie…”

“And then you met Castle.”

Dr Burke sees the sucker punch a fraction too late to stop it.

“And he had a much nicer family. They weren’t harsh to poor dear Julia Berowitz. They were kind and friendly and sociable. They liked you, instantly. You liked them. When you saw them, you didn’t have to worry about what they remembered or what they might think of you, because they didn’t know your past. They never needed to forgive you for anything. In fact” – she pauses slightly – “it was just like being part of a family again.”

Dr Burke emits a strangled gasp. Castle doesn’t manage the strangulation part.

“That wasn’t” –

“So,” Beckett says over her father’s half-emitted speech, “if you meant what you said when you were sober, if that was always the truth, that must have been the truth too. That you weren’t part of a family. You liked being family with me right up until a better offer came along. As long as I was your well-behaved, compliant daughter who was always there for you when you needed me.”

Beckett’s control is beginning to slip. “And then it looked like I wouldn’t be because I’d finally met someone else.”

“No, it wasn’t” –

“You abused me overtly when you were drunk, but I used to think you didn’t mean it because you pretended you loved me once you got dry. And then you proved you didn’t. So. If you don’t remember what you said when you were drunk, then you couldn’t have been deliberately abusing me. You couldn’t have been trying to make me behave how you wanted. But I did, anyway.” She throws a take-that glance at Dr Burke. “But then you must have been doing so when you were sober.”

There’s a tiny silence. Jim opens his mouth and Beckett runs right over him: no filter, no care, no calm any more.

“So which is it, Dad? Abuse because you were too drunk to tell the truth and never cared about me anyway because everything was about you and Mom, and I was only important because I reminded you of her; or abuse because you wanted someone at your beck and call once you were sober and I was stupid enough to give up my life to do it? You didn’t care, either way. I gave up all my chances to look after you and it was all a lie. I came back from Stanford; I went to be a cop; I broke up with Will; I spent weekends and Christmas with you; I had to admit to my team and my Captain that they needed to babysit me so I could be there for you if you were away – all because I thought that you needed me.” She’s in full spate now. “And it was all a complete waste of time and effort because actually you never cared at all.”

“That’s not true, Katie,” Jim cries.
“I don’t believe you. You ruined my life the first time with whisky and you didn’t even notice. Then you couldn’t stand that I’d found someone else and might not come running whenever you called, so you tried to ruin that too. Of course you manipulated Castle into inviting you for dinner. That way you could weasel your way into his family and be everyone’s best friend because you don’t remember any of what you did. It’s just me who can’t stand seeing a happy family, thanks to you. You got forgiveness, and all I got was hurt.”

“I wasn’t. Katie, please stop. Let me explain.”

But Beckett can’t stop, now. Her voice has risen.

“You wanted to be best pals with Castle’s family because I’m not enough. You wanted Mom, and I’m not Mom. Fine. I’m done with trying to make you love me. Keep your memories. I’m done. You never loved me and you never will. I wish I’d let you kill yourself. Don’t call me Katie. I’m not Katie. My name is Kate.”

Both Becketts are white and crying, but it doesn’t look like Detective Beckett is going to stop any time soon.

“I think a recess is indicated,” Dr Burke says, before Mr Beckett can turn this outpouring of emotion into an absolute catastrophe by trying to argue. Dr Burke signals to Castle, and whisks Mr Beckett out of the room.

Castle doesn’t hesitate to pull Beckett into his arms and simply let her sob hopelessly into his shoulder. He’s pretty certain that Beckett hadn’t meant to lose control like that, but she has. All he can do right now is hold her while she weeps and wait. Ten years of agony, and everything she should have said five years ago, plus a very large dose of hurt and hurtful misunderstanding and misbegotten nightmare, spilling out over her shattered, devastated father.

“He never cared,” she sobs.

“He hasn’t answered, yet,” Castle points out, very gently. “If you don’t let him answer you’ll always wonder what he said.” He hugs her, carefully. He doesn’t ask about Will. He doesn’t want to know how close he’d come to never meeting an unmarried Beckett at all.

“What’s the point? He’ll just justify himself and come up with all sorts of bullshit reasons and it’ll all be just the same as it ever was.”

“Beckett… Kate, those weren’t crocodile tears he was crying. He’s really shocked. I don’t think he knew anything about it.”

“Whose side are you on? I thought you were on my side.”

Castle holds on to her, before she can try to run. “I am. I always am. That doesn’t mean that I can’t disagree with you, but what happens is always up to you. I just think you could do this all once, get it all out, and then it’s done. You’ll never have to do it again. We can go off to the Hamptons tonight with it all behind you and we can start clean.” He smirks into her hair. “Or dirty, if you prefer.” She doesn’t react.

“Let him answer. Maybe he’ll say something useful. Maybe he won’t. But listen to him, just for now, and then we’ll go.”

“I want to go now,” Beckett says, miserably. “I want to go away and never come back.”
Past does have its say

Castle cuddles and delicately soothes Beckett into sitting down next to him, without losing contact with her. She’s shivering: white and chilled; no fire left in her eyes and no strength in her body or hands. She’s laid the whole maggot-ridden rotting mess bare, as she should have been made to do five years ago, and the reaction is already hitting her. He knows that next door, Dr Burke will be trying to calm Jim. That’s not his problem or concern. His sole concern is right here, slow bitter tears on her cheeks, pinched white lips ready to spit out more venomous history. She needs to step back from the brink.

“Come here,” he says softly. “Stand down now. You’ve said your piece. Just stand down with me.” He stops talking, and lets his strength enfold her.

“I didn’t want to say all that. I never lose it like that in interrogation. I meant just to ask the questions and get the answers and prove it and it all went wrong and none of that was relevant at all. I just wanted this all to be over and to walk away.” She stops, and swipes violently at her eyes. “And then it all came out and I never wanted to say any of that because even though he doesn’t care at all I’m still scared to hurt him because he might get drunk again and die and it’ll all be my fault.” She can’t continue. Castle hands her a Kleenex from a handy box and keeps hold, trying to persuade her, wordlessly, to lean on him.

Instead, she leans forward, elbows on her knees, shoulders hunched under his still-encircling arm, so that he has to slide forward to stay touching her; to keep trying to force strength into her.

“Now he knows. Now we’ll never be a family again. He’ll never want to see me,” she sobs, completely contradicting everything she’s said in the last half hour and indeed in the last month. Castle does not say I thought that was what you wanted. Just as he, O’Leary and Dr Burke had thought, when it came to the point that it all broke apart Beckett did too. And now it’s up to Dr Burke and he to pick up the pieces and try to put the broken Becketts – definitely plural Becketts – back together: singularly and collectively. He wonders, idly, uselessly and certainly as a diversion from the appalling mess in the crook of his arm, what the collective noun for Becketts might be. A fight? A torture? Anything but a family.

“He’ll never believe I wanted to forgive him. I did forgive him until he said he didn’t want to be a family and then it all went wrong. He didn’t forgive me for leaving and now he won’t.” She dissolves into incoherent tears again. Castle continues to cuddle her in, bending around her to shield her from the empty room.

“I want to go away,” is all that he can hear.

Dr Burke steers Mr Beckett into another room where his sponsor is waiting. Mr Beckett is quite clearly completely devastated by his daughter’s statements and by the truth that she had withheld from him for all the time he had been sober.

Mr Beckett is persuaded into sitting down, and Dr Burke provides a glass of water and then busies himself making a pot of tea for all concerned. He does not feel that coffee will help. Tea is very soothing, he finds. While he is occupied, Mr Beckett’s sponsor is very gently calming him down, although Mr Beckett is still highly distressed and emotional, with considerable justification.

Dr Burke thinks that, highly emotional as it had been, in fact the session is proceeding very much as predicted. While Detective Beckett had opened with interrogation, as Mr Castle had predicted,
she had lost control, feelings had been exposed, and the truth had been revealed. It had been intensely painful, but Dr Burke had not imposed a recess earlier in order that Detective Beckett’s entire position was laid out before calling a temporary halt to allow both Becketts to restore some small equilibrium. By allowing a continuation, Detective Beckett had had no chance to stop and think, nor to close down her outpouring of the past before everything had been uncovered.

On balance, that had not been a bad first part of the session, despite the emotion and raised voices which might leave less experienced practitioners, or non-practitioners, thinking otherwise. However, managing the second part appropriately will be complex. Dr Burke will have to rely on Mr Castle’s protective instincts and will himself need to deal with Mr Beckett before the two protagonists can be allowed to be in the same room. It would be useful to have a short conversation with Mr Castle. Mr Beckett can safely be left with his sponsor. Dr Burke wishes that he need not detach Mr Castle from Detective Beckett, but he has no option.

He knocks tentatively – he has no desire to interrupt if physical consolation is ongoing – and on hearing a rumble peers round the door. Mr Castle looks up, clearly irritated by the interruption: Detective Beckett does not, and indeed would have some difficulty in so doing given that she is completely swamped by Mr Castle’s bulk. It is really most peculiar. Dr Burke has never thought of Detective Beckett as small, and indeed even when Mr Castle had collected her she had not seemed so, but she presently appears unexpectedly delicate.

Dr Burke indicates without words that he wishes Mr Castle to come out of the room. Mr Castle murmurs something inaudible and – Dr Burke is already looking away – drops a soft kiss on Detective Beckett’s hair. He arrives outside the door at some speed and closes it very carefully.

“What is it?” he snaps.

“That went quite well,” Dr Burke opens.

“What?”

“All the truth that should have been told in the past is now on the table. Of course, it has been very painful on both parts, but, unless you are aware of any other issues, there are now no secrets poisoning the relationship between Detective Beckett and her father.”

“No. Hurry up, will you. I want to get back to Beckett before she starts running. Again,” he adds bitterly.

“Yes,” Dr Burke assents. “Mr Beckett should have an opportunity to make his points before Detective Beckett leaves.”

“I said that. But she says she wants to go now.”

“Has she explicitly asked you to take her out of Manhattan?”

“No quite, if you want to chop logic here.”

“Has Detective Beckett said anything else?”

“Oh, only that she never meant to say all that, and now they’ll never be family.”

“Good. We have a chance to set this on the right footing, Mr Castle.” Dr Burke smiles, a little tiredly. “Please keep Detective Beckett with you. It will take me a little time to calm Mr Beckett. If you feel the need to go out for a short walk with her, that may not be unhelpful. Please try to bring her back, but not at the expense of her becoming upset with you. I expect that I shall need at least a
Dr Burke returns to Mr Beckett.

Castle returns to his Beckett. She doesn’t appear to have shifted position in the slightest since he went out and came back. He sits back down and hugs her.

“Beckett,” he murmurs, “let’s go for a walk. We can go and come back, and Dr Burke even suggested it. I need a coffee, and you always need coffee, and I think some fresh air would be good.” He surveys her closely. “But you might want to go to the restroom first and tidy up. Your mascara’s run, and you’d hate to go out like that.”

“Run?” She looks pathetically at him. “Run?”

“Yep. Black smudges, here.” He runs a very gentle finger just below her eyes.

“I pay $20 a tube and it’s *supposed* to be waterproof,” she wails. It would be funny that she’s focusing on the totally trivial, if she weren’t so very upset by everything. It’s just one thing too many for her.

“You can go fix it, and then let’s go get coffee.” He stands up, and pulls her with him, catching her in and holding her tightly against him. “C’mon, Beckett. You’ll feel better with coffee.” He keeps an arm around her and steers her out of the door and towards the restroom. When she reappears, looking less like a raccoon but no less miserable, Castle puts his arm round her shoulders, tucks her in neatly, and takes the shortest possible route to the building exit and the nearest coffee bar.

Fortunately a coffee bar is readily found, this being Manhattan, and equally fortunately the short walk and biting March wind has stung colour into Beckett’s white face, so that it doesn’t look as if she’s about to collapse. Of course that doesn’t mean that she isn’t about to collapse, but anything is an improvement at this point. He installs her in a quiet corner and orders the usual precinct concoctions. Something normal. Something that says Detective Kate Beckett, even if he’d rather say *sweetheart*. Or *my love*.

For a while, they simply sit. Castle keeps a warm, undemandingly affectionate arm around Beckett, says nothing, and sips his coffee without any hurry at all. Gradually Beckett eases very slightly under his quietly peaceful contact, and the high tension air around her loosens. When she finally moves very slightly to be closer to him, Castle breathes a soundless sigh of relief and tightens his arm round her. Now that they’re out of Dr Burke’s rooms, some of the claustrophobia and worry which had been plaguing him has dissipated, and in addition Beckett’s shattering outflow of emotion had, as the excessively clever Dr Burke had noted, at least laid everything on the table.

By the time both coffees are finished, Castle is half-propping Beckett up. Catharsis is exhausting, but she’s not done yet: it’s her father’s turn.

“C’mon, Beckett. Time to go.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Nor do I,” Castle says with complete honesty, “but don’t you think you should just get it over with and then we’ll go away and not have it hanging over you?” He squeezes her gently against him. “I’d rather be in the Hamptons right now, with you. Let’s do this, and go. Just us, for the rest of the weekend. I even told Joe to leave me an extra-large bag of marshmallows, for the hot chocolate.”

Beckett leans her head on his shoulder. “I just want to go,” she says, “and never come back here
“One last thing, Beckett. Then we’ll go.”

She stands, reluctantly, but consents to have her hand taken and be led out of the café, too broken on her own pain to argue or protest. Even Castle’s firm arm around her back fails to impart any life into her dead eyes and slumped body.

“Why didn’t she tell me? I thought we’d dealt with everything and now I find that I never knew most of what I did.”

“Jim, your daughter thought she was protecting you. She thought that she had” – Dr Burke’s tone hardens – “grown up and got over it because that is what her earlier therapist told her she had to do. She also wished to ensure that you had no reason to return to alcohol. That decision had several roots: the guilt that she felt, and feels, about walking away from you; a strong inclination to protect, currently funnelled into her work as a detective; and most importantly her desperate need to be loved and forgiven by you.”

“Forgiven? What do I have to forgive?”

“In your mind, nothing. In hers – everything. I do not think you understand just how difficult it was for her to stop enabling you. Just as she is the last memory of your wife for you, you represent the last link with her mother for your daughter.” Dr Burke pauses. “Has your daughter ever mentioned your wife to you, since you became sober?”

Mr Beckett thinks for a long, painful time. “No,” he says eventually. “I don’t remember it. But she wouldn’t look at the family photos, when I showed them to Rick.”

“Why do you now think that is?”

“I… but she could have spoken to me about Johanna.”

“She did not know that. Your commentary when drunk had affected her behaviour to such an extent that she was thoroughly conditioned to avoid that subject. Either you had declared that she should leave because she was not your wife, or mourned, wept, and sought solace in alcohol. Jim, it is absolutely unsurprising that she did not try. Had she been properly treated the first time, she would have been told that she had to disclose the full truth, and we would not be here. However, she was led to believe that her grief was less important than others, and so she has subjugated it for years.”

“But… but she sounded as if she hated me,” Mr Beckett whispers, close to weeping again. “How will she ever believe me? She… I don’t know how to make it better. How do I make it better?”

“Jim,” his sponsor says, “you know how to make it better. Go back to basics. You’ve listened, and it’s really hurt. Now you have to try to make amends. Katie thinks you don’t care about her, and that’s going to take time to cure, but you can start now. You did it before, all the way. You can do it again now. If she didn’t care, she wouldn’t have spilt out all that rage and pain. Start with that.”

Dr Burke stays quiet. Mr Beckett’s sponsor may not be a psychiatrist, but his prescription is accurate. Later, he and the sponsor will have to have a conversation about Mr Beckett receiving more formal counselling, but for now it is sufficient.

“You think she still cares?”

“I do,” Dr Burke says with authority. “She may have tried to hide it from you and from herself, but
Mr Castle and I both believe that she does. As you have just been told, if she did not care, she
would not have lost control. That is an extremely sound foundation on which to build.”

Mr Beckett sniffs, and blows his nose, and drinks his tea. There is a short space of quiet, in which
Mr Beckett slowly recovers some composure, though he is still badly shocked and clearly very
unhappy. No-one tries to hurry him. Dr Burke had heard Mr Castle and Detective Beckett go out,
and he is quite certain that the elevator bell has not rung to indicate that they have returned. He is
not yet worried by that. He has faith in Mr Castle.

Mr Beckett is slowly recovering more colour, though there is a tremor in his hands, and his face is
creased and old. In the background, Dr Burke hears the quiet noise of the elevator, and footsteps,
and concludes that Mr Castle and Detective Beckett have returned.

“Would you like to begin again?” he asks neutrally. “It is up to you.”

“I have to start somewhere,” Mr Beckett says wearily. “Might as well be now.”

“Allow me to have a short conversation with your daughter first, then,” Dr Burke says. “You have
listened to her. She must now listen to you. I will return in a few moments.”

Dr Burke leaves Mr Beckett to his sponsor and, safely outside the closed doors of both rooms,
refreshes himself and considers. Mr Beckett had listened and largely not reacted. Detective Beckett
might well be considerably less compliant. This would be normal. She is the one who has suffered
most, and while it is not wholly Mr Beckett’s fault, that is where it all began.

“Detective Beckett?”

She is sitting close to Mr Castle, who is once again cradling her protectively. Unsurprisingly, she is
still pale and tired-looking. The formidable woman with whom the session had opened is not in
evidence.

“Yeah?”

“If you wish to continue, your father is ready to do so. If we are to continue, then I counsel that you
should listen to your father without interruption.” She looks ready to protest. “Listening does not
imply acceptance. It merely means that he should be able to speak his piece.” Detective Beckett’s
hand closes on Mr Castle’s, tightly enough that her knuckles whiten. Mr Castle lays his other hand
over it, and, though it must surely hurt, shows nothing.

“Up to you, Beckett,” he says. There is a short silence.

“Okay,” she says resignedly. As Dr Burke goes to fetch Mr Beckett he thinks he hears her say I
want to go.

Everyone is sitting down again. Castle has Beckett close to him, a slightly defiant arm around her;
Dr Burke is a little removed from the group; Jim is on a chair facing his daughter: tense, and
drawn, and terrifyingly fragile. It seems to Castle that none of the main characters know quite
where to start, but it’s not his place to interfere.

“Katie” – Jim winces – “Kate” – Castle winces – “I… I don’t know what to say to you. I don’t even
know what to call you, now. I’m so sorry. I…” His speech falls into dead air. Beckett hasn’t
looked at him since he came in. “Can’t we start again?” he tries hopelessly.

“I don’t know.” Jim looks as if he’s been stabbed. “You’re the one who wanted someone
different.” Beckett doesn’t sound accusatory or condemnatory, only exhausted: flat words lying
lifelessly between them.

“I don’t know what I said,” Jim says. “I don’t remember any of it. I don’t remember anything once the whisky hit my throat and that’s down to me. I loved her so much,” he says brokenly, “and she was gone, and I couldn’t cope with that. So I drank till I couldn’t remember anything. You were the only reminder. We wanted you so badly and it was so difficult” – Castle draws in breath: he hadn’t realised that Beckett wasn’t an only child through her parents’ choice – “and then you were her all over again and it hurt so much that I didn’t have both of you…” Jim has started to weep. Beckett is, Castle thinks, too exhausted to react. “I couldn’t bear her to be gone. That’s why I clung on to you when I was sober, but then you looked like her and you sounded like her and you behaved like her and it all got too much and I had to forget.”

Castle’s hand hurts. Beckett’s nails are digging in and her grip is vice-like, but there’s no emotion coming off her at all. He’s not actually sure that she’s taking any of this in.

“I don’t know why I would tell you to leave. I don’t remember it. I can’t believe that I did and I don’t know why it happened. You were all I had: the only thing left to love.”

Beckett makes a strangled, agonised sound in her throat.
I'm empty and aching

“When you walked away I finally got it. And when you came back – you know, I didn’t think you would. I never thought that you’d come back: I thought I’d have to find you but you came. It was... it was like the sun came out. It wasn’t that... if I thought I was slipping, I thought of that day.”

“You told me I saved you. You told me I was the only thing that kept you sober.”

“I didn’t realise what you thought I meant. It was up to me not to drink. I only needed to know that... that you had let me have another chance. I never meant you to give up your life. I never meant to stop you having Will, or Rick.” Tears are spilling down his face, pooling in the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, the grooves by his mouth. Opposite, his daughter is blank-faced and still. Castle is watching Dr Burke, who appears unwilling to intervene. Castle has to trust that this is the right thing to do.

“I just meant that Rick’s family was the first family we’d had anything to do with. I didn’t mean his was a better family, or that we weren’t a family. I guess I hoped...” he trails off. Castle meets Dr Burke’s eyes, and is granted an infinitesimal shake of the head.

Beckett still says, does, nothing. Castle thinks that she can’t speak, or react.

“I can’t give you the time back, Katie. I’m just so sorry...”

Dr Burke finally intervenes, murmuring in Jim’s ear. Jim rises and leaves. Beckett doesn’t even seem to notice.

“C’mon, Kate. Let’s go,” Castle says. “I’ll go tell Burke we’re leaving. We can be there in a couple of hours. Do you need anything before we leave?”

She shakes her head. “I just want to go,” she forces out, tears held back behind the words. “Can’t we go?”

Castle taps on the door of the other room, and when Dr Burke pokes his head out explains.

“I think that would be best,” Dr Burke says. “There is nothing more to be gained from continuing. Detective Beckett has exhausted herself, and needs time to recover. Take Detective Beckett away as you had planned, Mr Castle, but be careful of her. Today’s revelations may readily come back to hurt her later.”

Castle withdraws, sombrely. “C’mon, Beckett. School’s out.” He has no option but to pull her up and keep an arm round her, since she is making no effort at all to move. He expects that she’ll be out cold as soon as he starts the car.

Beckett installed in the passenger seat, Castle starts to roll out towards the Midtown Tunnel and out on to the I-495. He puts on a relatively soothing playlist which he used to use to calm himself whenever Gina had been particularly annoying, and doesn’t try to talk. Occasionally he slips a hand on to Beckett’s knee, just to let her know that he’s there for her. She isn’t responding, and she isn’t there.

By the time they’re passing Flushing Meadow a quick glance shows that Beckett’s eyes are shut and her breathing has smoothed out. It hasn’t cured the pinched, white cast to her face, nor the sharp edges to her shoulders. However, sleep is probably the best thing right now. The alternatives
are all much, much worse, and when he has her safely in his Hamptons home they can both relax.

The big car purrs through the miles and the dimming evening light. They’ve missed the worst of the weekend exit traffic, and Castle doesn’t scruple to ignore the speed limits. The sooner they’re there, the sooner he can feed Beckett, provide good wine, and simply cosset her close and show her how much he wants to make it all better for her. And later, he’ll be able to hold her to him all night and when she wakes she’ll be there; when she wakes he’ll be there; as if they were totally, properly, together. Maybe now, now that the whole mess is out there, maybe now they can be.

“We’re here, Beckett,” he says, and gently wobbles her shoulder.

“’M asleep.” She tries to turn over, and wakes as she realises that this is not a bed. “Urg?”

“We’re home. Well, the Hamptons. Come on, let’s get you inside.”

Beckett exits the car slightly clumsily, and finds Castle already at her side with her bag in his other hand.

“Food,” he says enthusiastically. “We should have plenty and it won’t take long to fix dinner. Do you want some wine, or… or soda?” The last is added as it belatedly occurs to him that Beckett may not like the idea of alcohol, having just gone through a very painful therapy session which arose from the effects of alcohol.

“Whatever.”

They’ve walked up to the door. Castle puts down Beckett’s bag, which is remarkably light (Gina used to carry half a ton in baggage. Meredith had two tons, at least half of which was makeup) to open the door. He looks at Beckett, smiles lazily – and sweeps her up into his arms to carry her inside, just like the first time.

“There,” he says. “Home. Just us.” He bends a little, and kisses her gently: stands her back on her feet. “Just you and me.” And he kisses her much harder, forceful and definite, knowing without knowing how he knows that she needs him to be sure, and strong – and to show that she’s still his regardless of the pain that had gone down in that therapy room. Her arms come round his neck, her body softens and curves into him, and suddenly all her pain and stress slips away for now and she’s simply soft, pettable Kat.

He has no expectation that this will last.

On the other hand he’s going to make sure that they both enjoy it while it does. He explores her mouth smoothly, holding her tightly and not giving so much as a hint that he might let go (he’s never going to let go) until she’s as relaxed as he thinks she’ll get.

“Dinner?”

Beckett manages a genuine, if still exhausted, smile. “Please. Something easy?”

Castle rummages in the fridge. “Pasta, or grilled cheese, or – no, that takes too long – salad – Joe, why did you get broccoli? You know I hate it” –

“I like broccoli,” Beckett points out. Castle ignores this ridiculously provocative statement, since no-one he knows likes broccoli and he is sure Beckett is just being annoying.

He emerges from the fridge. “Pasta?” he semi-asks.
“Okay.”

“Pasta with carbonara sauce, garlic bread and salad.” He looks a touch embarrassed. “Ready-made sauce and garlic bread.” Beckett nods. “And then ice-cream, if you want. It shouldn’t take more than about fifteen minutes.”

“Sounds good. Can I help?”

“No need. You could unpack.” There’s a little hitch. “Um… you remember where my room is?”

Beckett flicks a glance up through her lashes at his slight uncertainty. “Yes,” she says, tiredly, and wanders off in the correct direction. Castle converts his desire to follow her and damn the dinner into brisk efficiency, as a result of which dinner is almost ready when Beckett returns, changed into a softly draped green top and a calf-length rich brown skirt, with flats. Not a trace of icy Detective Beckett, nor of the furious, devastated Katie, remains. Unless, of course, Castle looks down into the very furthest depths of her hazel eyes, where tiny smears of chill agony remain: little raindrops of bitterness.

He dishes up dinner, Beckett conveys salad and garlic bread to the table, and only then does he realise that there’s nothing on the table to drink.

“Wine, soda, water?”

Beckett doesn’t hesitate. “Wine, please.”

Castle rustles up two glasses and a good white in short order. There is a small clink as they raise them to each other.

“That’s better,” Beckett says, after a mouthful of wine and some of the pasta. It’s not clear whether she means the food and wine, or the totality of being out of Manhattan. At this point, Castle is merely glad that she is not still in that ghastly state in which she’d left Dr Burke’s, nor is she spilling out anger and/or hurt on him. She polishes off a substantial quantity of pasta, though only one glass of wine, and then an equally substantial quantity of ice-cream.

“When did you last eat?” Castle abruptly wonders, unfortunately allowing the thought that should have stayed in his head to escape from his mouth. Beckett doesn’t answer, reserve descending around her. “Coffee?” he asks, rather than ruin the mood further.

“Please.” She looks tired, again.

Beckett hadn’t realised how hungry she was until dinner appeared, at which time she had great difficulty not falling upon it like a starving predator on the first deer it had killed for a week. With extreme self-restraint she maintains her table manners. The wine is not nearly as troublesome. She doesn’t want much of that. She is enormously comforted and, though she wishes she had more faith, reassured by Castle’s searching kisses: the memory of three hours ago still sharp and cutting. Castle’s well-meant question about how long it’s been since she ate triggers thought – Thursday? She doesn’t remember even getting breakfast on Thursday, and after that she wasn’t hungry. Wednesday dinner? That’s worrying.

“When did you last eat?” Castle abruptly wonders, unfortunately allowing the thought that should have stayed in his head to escape from his mouth. Beckett doesn’t answer, reserve descending around her. “Coffee?” he asks, rather than ruin the mood further.

“Please.” She looks tired, again.

Beckett hadn’t realised how hungry she was until dinner appeared, at which time she had great difficulty not falling upon it like a starving predator on the first deer it had killed for a week. With extreme self-restraint she maintains her table manners. The wine is not nearly as troublesome. She doesn’t want much of that. She is enormously comforted and, though she wishes she had more faith, reassured by Castle’s searching kisses: the memory of three hours ago still sharp and cutting. Castle’s well-meant question about how long it’s been since she ate triggers thought – Thursday? She doesn’t remember even getting breakfast on Thursday, and after that she wasn’t hungry. Wednesday dinner? That’s worrying.

“Please,” she says in answer to the question of coffee. Maybe it’ll wake her up a bit. Long enough to snuggle into her nice big warm Castle, anyway. She could do with some snuggling. She pads over to the couch with her coffee, and curls up in the corner with her now unshod feet tucked under her skirt. Castle sits down next to her and very unsubtly lays his arm along the back of the couch. Equally unsubtly, Beckett puts her coffee mug down and wriggles herself into that particularly
Beckett-shaped space between Castle’s hip and shoulder. Perfectly sized for her to lay her head on his shoulder and be nestled in. In fact, just plain perfect. Well, not quite. She recovers her coffee. *Now* it’s perfect. Castle is cuddling her in and being outside Manhattan is the best idea she could have had.

She’s too tired to think about anything that’s happened in the last couple of days, and truth to tell she doesn’t want to, especially this evening. She just wants peace, and quiet, and no demands. She snuggles in more closely, taking comfort from her large, cosy Castle, who brings his arm round her to wrap her in with just the right amount of strength. Without meaning to, or even really noticing, she emits a quiet little mew-murmur.

Next thing she knows, she’s being carried to Castle’s excessively large and comfortable bed. This time, her noise is questioning. He’s stolen her coffee cup, which is not fair.

“You fell asleep, Beckett. C’mon. Bedtime. It’s too dark to go for a walk on the beach now, and you’d only fall asleep in my exceptional hot chocolate which would be a total waste of marshmallows and cream.”

“Bed?”

“Sleep. You’ve been asleep, you’re mostly asleep now; therefore sleep in comfort.”

Beckett manages to focus on the important matters: teeth, cleaning off her make-up, and so forth, before investigating her unpacking for just long enough to find her nightwear and fall into bed. She’s asleep before she’s breathed twice.

As a result she entirely misses Castle’s strangulated reaction to her choice of nightwear. She would have been very disappointed by missing it, if only she’d known. She’d picked it specially to ensure that he’d be speechless. Though she had hoped when she selected it that he would not be tongue-tied.

Castle stares at the astonishing sight of one knocked-out Beckett in an amazingly tiny emerald-green baby-doll and matching tiny briefs which are just not quite see-through enough. *Why* does she have to be asleep? The universe hates him, he is sure. He covers her up in self-defence and pads softly back to the main room, to think over the evening without the immense distraction that a snuggly Beckett-Kat provides.

Much as it pains him to agree with Dr Burke, the evening could have gone massively worse than it did. Beckett’s complete shut-down doesn’t worry him half as much as a screamingly emotional fight would have done, because the shut-down meant that no irrevocable words could be said. There is, however tentatively, hope. On which note he discovers that he, too, is wrung out by – in his case – the second-hand emotions of tonight, and quietly prepares himself for bed.

It is, Castle thinks sleepily, the best bedtime present ever to be cuddling up to a sleeping Beckett in his bed and know that he needn’t rise – well, *wake* – early to leave, nor need she. He drapes a possessive arm over her waist and tucks his Beckett in against him and falls blissfully into dreams.

Beckett slowly surfaces to find herself half-buried under a very warm mound of Castle, who is snuffling into his pillow – oh. That’s her pillow. And her. He’s lying with one arm and one leg across her, as well as half his chest. And even in his sleep he’s clearly very happy to have her there. Possibly the final word of that thought is unnecessary. However, breathing is necessary, and she is being slowly squashed into suffocation. She shoves Castle’s sleep-sodden self and achieves enough movement to allow her lungs to expand. Then she closes her eyes again.
When she next opens them, she’s in empty space, with a warm dent where there ought to be a warm Castle. Or a hot one. She humphs, and turns her back on the space. It’s not supposed to be a space. It’s supposed to be a cosy Castle. Or more usefully, a concupiscent Castle. She’d packed this nightwear especially to appeal to him, and he’s not here to be appealed to. She humphs, again.

“What’s that noise for, Beckett?”

“You’re here.”

“Where else would I be?”

“You weren’t here when I woke up,” Beckett points out.

“Did you miss me, Beckett?” Castle purrs insinuatingly.

“No,” she lies, not convincingly. To cover her untruthfulness, she pushes the covers off herself. After that, Castle wouldn’t have noticed if she’d claimed that she was Elektra. He seems to have lost the power of speech. And thought. He’s staring at her so hard that the fabric ought to disintegrate. It doesn’t. This doesn’t seem to faze Castle in the slightest. On the other hand, he’s still frozen in place, which is not the plan. She stretches, which reveals the top edge of the very brief briefs, and a slash of toned stomach. Castle gulps, and then seems to recover himself.

“Pretty,” he growls. “My pretty Kat.”

And then he falls on her, devouring her mouth and pinning her under him: demanding access and receiving it; taking and raiding and plundering and then conquering. She doesn’t put up any resistance at all, welcoming him in and encouraging him to take more: to take everything. In his arms is the single place that – here in the Hamptons – she can be, and admit to being, safe; can feel – and can admit to herself – that she is loved and wanted: petted and protected and cherished.

“Mine,” she gasps out: the first time she’s ever claimed him with the same possession as he does her. This is why she wanted to be here: a place where she can be free of all the clinging restrictions of her everyday life; a place where she can open up and reveal herself. That first step now taken, maybe… maybe the next will be easier, later, when she’s more relaxed, eased by the fresh Atlantic air.

Beckett reaches up and pulls Castle down to her lips again, gripping hard into the firm muscle of his back. For a moment, he lets her, and then reasserts himself, lifting off and propping himself up on one elbow to examine Beckett with lazily predatory eyes and smile; darkness and desire bleeding into his gaze.

“I like this,” he says darkly, and strokes down over the silk-chiffon. “Very pretty. Now I know why you wouldn’t let me help pack. You didn’t want to spoil the surprise. I like surprises like this. The only question is” – he pauses, and twitches the fabric back and forth – “should I leave it on, or take it off?” He twitches it across her chest again. “What do you think?”

Thinking is not the first thing on what is left of Beckett’s mind. In fact, thinking is positively not on her mind. Castle shouldn’t be thinking either. She runs a hand over his naked chest and carries on down, which has exactly the effect that she expects. He promptly decides that the fabric can be moved, does so, and then applies an excellently practised and mobile mouth to her thoroughly receptive breasts. She squirms under it, and retaliates with some welljudged stroking of the weight in her hands, which produces stroking across her, which very shortly results in Castle’s rising above her and oh-so-slowly slipping into her and, when he’s fully home, filling her almost too full, leaning down and taking back her mouth and then his body and mouth move in time and he’s
stealing the noise from her lips and she’s purloining his and then it changes to be harder, faster: his solid strength covering her softness and she cedes all else to the sensation and soars and shatters around him.

She finds herself cuddled in and happily relaxes into the soft mattress and smooth sheets. She’ll just stay here for a while. It’s warm and cosy and safe and home. Her eyes drift shut, her hand slips over Castle’s and pulls it up to lie safely over her heart, where it ought to be. She doesn’t mean to become so, but in instants she’s asleep again: all the exhaustion caused by the stress and pain of the last month catching up with her and overwhelming her.

Castle finds himself in a minor, and very pleasant, dilemma. He can continue to cosset his sleeping Beckett-beauty (and she is beautiful in anything, but the tiny little teeny-weeny baby-doll is particularly attractive) and close his eyes again; or he could give her a few moments and then go and wash and consider the options for breakfast. Her ribs are disturbingly evident, though the curves over them are still delightfully strokable. On balance, he thinks breakfast. Beckett’s grip has fallen away and her breathing has slowed to the cadence of deep sleep. He’ll leave her to it. She needs the rest.
The weather outside is frightful

Beckett wakes to the presence of the smell of coffee and the absence of Castle, who, from the tapping noises, has found inspiration. She cleans up, doesn’t bother with more than a swift slick of mascara, and puts on jeans and a warm cable-knit sweater over a soft t-shirt. Then she looks around, which she hadn’t really done with Castle’s bedroom last time, being far more concerned with looking (et cetera) at Castle. There appears to be a door out to the rear of the house, with some decking which must be nice in the summer, and a variety of other landscape features for which the weather is far too chilly. Pools are very nice – but only when the water temperature is a long way north of ten degrees and the air temperature above twenty. She throws on a jacket, opens the door and quietly goes out, shutting it tidily behind her so as not to disturb him.

Out leads her, after a short walk, to the beach, and the Atlantic tide. Lowish tide, she thinks, and watches for a while. She thinks it might be coming in. There’s feeble sun struggling through smudged grey clouds; the occasional smear of its light on the water; small white horses on the surface in the thin, lazy wind. She’s glad of the heavy jumper, though the wind is still cool, promising spring but not bringing it.

She carries on, down to the edge of the water on the firm, damp sand, where the waves ripple in and retreat, ripple in and retreat. She watches those for another while, counting to see if every seventh wave is bigger, as superstition would have it. If it is, she can’t tell. She’s a big city girl: heart and soul, summer trips to the Adirondacks as a child aside. She turns, and starts to walk parallel to the sea, face to the wind: it can blow her back, later. For now, she needs to move: moving helps her think, and thinking is a necessity. The gleams through the grey sky and the foam on the waves and the wind on her cheeks might ground her.

Behind her, a silhouette on the decking of the rear of his house, Castle watches the slim figure walking away. He doesn’t call out, or go after her; simply sits, warm in a thick wool coat, and watches her go. It’s up to her. It’s always up to her, and he’s expected her to seek solitude from the moment he stopped writing, found the bed empty and the door unlocked. He’ll be waiting for her, when she returns.

Beckett shies from the thought of the previous evening as does a horse from a rattlesnake, and for much the same reason: the amount of poison unleashed. She’d meant to stay calm, and cool, and find the truth, and leave. Her boots leave footprints on the sand behind her, washing out with the incoming tide, just like she’d meant to leave the memories of her father, drunk, behind her to wash out with her incoming life. Instead she’s still enmeshed in the seine net of guilt and obligation, now woven with the memories of his devastation as she’d told the truth; his tears; his stumbling speech carrying agony and apology that she couldn’t cope with, emotionally exhausted as she had already been. And so it had been left unfinished.

Her truth was laid out on the table, and her father had eaten a bitter meal from it, but she remains unfed.

She walks on, curving a little up the sand from the curling waves now lapping too close to her feet, trying to gain mental distance from the Manhattan treatment room as she has gained physical distance. It’s far more difficult to leave her thoughts and pain and memories behind her, to let the wind and waves wash them all away like her footprints; blur them, like the light mist out on the water blurring the horizon. Vanishing point, she thinks, and stops, and stares out into the horizon over Gardiners Bay. Vanishing would have been so easy – would be so easy. All she would have to do is keep travelling eastwards, always eastwards, into the morning sun. Or take the weekend, one
last opportunity for joy, and then go from the city to leave westward, into the setting sun.

And yet she can’t escape her past. She never has. Even now, now when she’s awoken and not distracted by Castle’s infinitely reassuring, solid, stable strength, her rage and pain still eat at her. Laying it out has merely put it in a place to be acknowledged: it hasn’t helped her work through it. She’s still trying not to own it, to believe that it will leave of its own accord. Except it won’t. It will no more leave than the vast waters leading into the Atlantic will part for her. She has to work through it.

She’s walked so far that she’s found some rocks of a size to sit on, and does, pulling her feet up and wrapping her arms around her bent knees, made small and still by the weight of care and the distance still to travel. She sits, and stares out, and tries to make sense of yesterday evening, there on the cold grey stone under a cold grey sky next to the cold grey water; lost in cold grey thoughts.

Castle is not precisely worried. Not yet, anyway. More… a little perturbed. Beckett’s walk he could understand, and her need for time and solitude to clear (he hopes) her head. But it’s not that warm, and the grey skies promise at least rain, and possibly a spring storm. He goes back inside, meditatively nibbles at a Danish, puts the rest of the pastries away again, sips his coffee and wonders how long Beckett will be. A little time later, he pours more coffee, and finds a book.

A long while later, he is distracted from his book by the sound of footsteps and the opening door. He looks up to find, as expected, Beckett, who is looking rather windswept and a little damp at the edges. She stands on the mat and then shivers. Castle scowls theatrically.

“You’re cold,” he points out, and then grins. “Good excuse to light the fire.” But before he does he divests her of her coat, also slightly damp, and hugs her. “There. A little warming up while the fire gets going.” He turns away, messes with a firefighter for a moment, and shortly there are cheerful flames and a pleasant smell of burning pinewood. Heat will take a little longer.

While he’s been lighting fires, Beckett has produced more coffee and found the Danishes, some of which are now reposing on a plate in front of her, and one of which is already disappearing down her throat. She shivers again, and wraps her palms round her coffee cup. Castle, never one to miss an opportunity, cuddles her in. The cable knit is not nearly as strokable as the pretty green angora sweater, he finds.

“I needed to think,” Beckett says, bleakly. “But it didn’t help. Just the same old thoughts. Nothing new. Me upset, Dad upset, he’s hurt because I told the truth and I don’t know if he’s still lying to me. Nothing’s fixed.”

Castle hums, encouraging her to continue, without actually saying anything.

“I just wanted it all to be over. Done. Then I could put it all behind me and…” she trails off, breathes, “…and start fresh. Finally able to try for what I wanted.” She stops again. “I hoped… I wanted to come here so we could just be us. Have time to be us. Not having everything interfering and always getting in the way because it’s all around me. Us. A chance… no cases and no Dr Burke and no-one else and no issues. But it’s still all trailing round behind me.”

*Like one who on a lonesome road, Castle thinks, and carries on the quote, doth walk in fear and dread, because they know a frightful fiend doth close behind them tread.*

“I thought I’d be free of it all. Free to tell you…” her voice starts to drop away, and Castle doesn’t ask her to speak up. Abruptly she hides her face in his shoulder. He doesn’t press. He thinks he knows what she wants to say, and pushing her to it really won’t help. A forced admission has no
value. So he merely holds her close, everything he wants to say confined to his hand around her shoulder.

A gravelling noise on the window makes him look up, to find that the ominous clouds have brought the storm. It’s pouring and the sky is dark: it looks like the foul weather has set in for the next few hours, at least. He’d hoped for a walk, but it’s warm here, the fire is colouring the room with comfortingly orange-red hues; and all in all it’s not actually the worst thing in the world to be stormbound in a warm house with Beckett and no-one else, especially when they have food, drink, and a fire. And thinking of food…

“It’s lunchtime, Beckett,” he bounces.

Beckett regards the plateful of remaining Danishes. “I only just got breakfast,” she says.

“They’ll still be there later. Or tomorrow. I’ll put them in a box. Lunch. I have a nice soup, or there’s grilled cheese” –

“We had that last time we were here.”

“So? I like grilled cheese sandwiches.”

“I didn’t say I didn’t.”

“Or both, or…” he tugs her up and tows her to the kitchen with unwarranted enthusiasm, “… let’s see what’s in the fridge. We could have a picnic in front of the fire.”

The fridge is clearly nicknamed Legion, as it contains many. Different foodstuffs, that is. This deduction is forced upon Beckett by the small fridge magnet with that name across a small demon. She is not impressed by the punning reference.

“We’ve got tomatoes, salad, fruit, cheese, crackers, quiche, pies, pate, Danishes” –

“You wouldn’t let me eat my Danishes,” Beckett points out.

Castle emerges from the fridge. “That was when I thought we were having soup and grilled cheese sandwiches. A picnic is much more fun.” He buries his head in the fridge again. “Sodas…” And out again. It’s like watching a happy jack-in-the-box. He moves to a bread bin. “Here we are. Bread. Look, baguettes!” As if she’s never seen a baguette before. And back to the fridge, again. “Butter. Better take that out or it won’t spread.” He does so.

There is now a pile of food that used to be in the fridge on the counter. Beckett looks at the potential feeding of the five thousand rather than the two who are actually here, and despairs. Then she spots a cold game pie with cranberry topping, stops despairing and starts trying to find plates and a knife to cut it with. A couple of slices of that will be just wonderful. Suddenly a picnic seems like a stunningly good idea, especially with the lashing rain hammering the windows; the frivolity just what she needs, right here, right now; the simple pleasure of a sunny carefree day reincarnated on a rug in front of a pinewood fire.

Shortly there are plates and cutlery; trays arranged with salad segregated from soda, pies parted from pate, bread and butter; glasses and paper napkins. It’s hugely, massively excessive for two people, and would have been excessive for twelve – and it’s wonderful. She’s warmed up by the fire, sufficiently so to remove her sweater. The food is, naturally, top quality and delicious, the atmosphere is relaxed and happy; everything combines in that delightful lightness of being that she had felt here previously. All her tension and worries drain away, unnoticed and unmourned.
Beckett is reaching for a third slice of game pie (well, they weren’t very big, she justifies, and good food should be enjoyed and savoured) when Castle taps her fingers. She growls intimidatorily, and when that fails to have any effect whatsoever and he has the temerity to trap her fingers, she tries a pout.

“Uh-uh. You won’t want your dinner.”

“Will too,” Beckett says faux-crossly, and pouts some more, deliberately sulky-adorably. She tugs hopefully to retrieve her hand and resume her assault on the pie. The sharp tang of the cranberries set against the meltingly rich meat jelly and the tender, luscious venison and duck is quite irresistible. Resistance, in Beckett’s case, is futile.

Unfortunately Castle is imposing resistance on her, which is very unfair. He won’t let go of her hand, and he’s tugging at her again, instead of her tugging at him. In fact, it’s a sharp tug which overbalances her, and somehow she’s ended up with her head in his lap looking up at a very smug grin.

“I thought we could go back to the Plaza Café, since you liked it so much. You wouldn’t want to go and then not have an appetite.”

Beckett supposes not. It doesn’t remove the full-lipped pout.

“But,” adds Castle silkily, “you could have a treat.”

“Oh?”

“Open your mouth and close your eyes and you will have a big surprise,” he singsongs childishly.

“Last time someone said that and I believed them it was medicine and I was six,” Beckett retorts.

Castle merely dangles a strawberry (where did he get strawberries from in March, Beckett wonders) above her nose and then gradually lowers it to her parting lips for her to taste. Her tongue swirls round it, and Castle’s eyes darken with intent. He leans down, and down… and Beckett swipes the strawberry into her mouth and chomps happily on it, while Castle finds that actually he doesn’t bend that far.

“No fair, Beckett. I was going to share it with you and you’ve eaten it all.”

“Not my fault you’re inflexible,” she says smugly. “I could have eaten my half if the position were reversed. Maybe you should do some yoga? I’m sure that would improve your positioning.”

Castle splutters, and then smiles slowly. “I know what would improve my positioning,” he rasps, and simply lifts Beckett up to him, kisses her soundly, and puts her back down in his lap again. She smiles up. His hand strokes around the curve of her face, fingertips delicately delineating the fine bone structure. She turns her cheek into his caress with a soft sound of contentment.

“That’s better. Let’s put everything away and then just stay here for a while. We could keep the strawberries,” Castle entices.

“Okay,” Beckett says lazily, and makes no move to sit up at all.

“That’s not helping.”

Beckett humphs and sits up. Castle acquires an expression of sheer mischief and grabs hold of her waist, stands her up and then, instead of clearing up, pulls her against him and takes suave
possession of her mouth, sliding one hand over her ass and keeping her pressed very tightly against him. Smooth assertiveness is firmly on the cards. He’s exploring her mouth and Beckett happily sinks into sensuality: exploring on her own account and adding a seductive wiggle against him.

“We should clear up,” Castle murmurs.

“Mm?”

“We should.”

“Why?” Beckett wiggles more seductively. She thinks the clearing up could wait.

“Because it’s covering the rug.”

“Mm?”

“And I have every intention of snuggling up on that rug in front of the fire and spending the rest of the afternoon exploring all the lovely possibilities of a wet day in the Hamptons.” The slight emphasis on wet says it all, really.

“Such a hard choice.”

Castle flings her a scorching look, lets go in a severe hurry, and is halfway to the kitchen with a high stacked tray before Beckett has blinked. She picks up the plates, cutlery and glasses, and follows.

Two minutes later the rug is clear. The kitchen, however, looks like a bomb has hit it. Neither Castle nor Beckett care at all. They are back in the living room, with Beckett flat on her back on the rug and Castle next to her, hand in hand. There’s a peaceful, quiet interlude.

It lasts approximately a tenth of a second. Then Castle reaches over, Beckett leans up on one arm and is as swiftly pulled down on top of him. She kisses him, hard and demanding – and is swiftly dispossessed of the idea that she should be hard and demanding. Castle is very hard. And demanding, though that’s rather secondary. She melts into him, spreading across him and squirming into a perfect alignment. He’s more comfortable than the floor.

Somewhat surprisingly, matters are confined to kissing. Very hot, passionate, extensive kissing, but kissing. After a while even that ceases, and Beckett finds herself simply cuddled in with her head neatly tucked on Castle’s shoulder.

“Nice as this is, Beckett, I think we should move to the couch.”

“Uh?”

“Couch. I brought the Mission Impossibles like we agreed. The couch is more comfortable for snuggling, anyway. I think the rug is overrated. It’s not thick enough to make up for the floor.”

“I didn’t mind,” she says mischievously.

“You would’ve if you’d been the one on your back on the floor. Ow.”

Castle rolls them over and hoists himself up. Beckett casts him a speculative glance, followed up with a languorous lick of her lips. His eyes spark, but all he does is lean down and haul her up to him, to tow her to the couch. He bounces off to put the DVD in and returns with the remote.

Shortly the familiar theme music plays, the movie starts, and Castle snuggles Beckett into him.
Against all his instincts, wishes and desires; and the insistent thrumming of his blood, largely concentrated below his belt, he thinks that a cuddlesome daytime not involving scorching sex would be a good idea. They need to be comfortable, not carnal; serene, not salacious.

Beckett likes Mission Impossible II as much as the original, and is soon quite engrossed. Castle, who can more or less recite it word for word, pays only a modicum of attention to the film but considerably more to all the possible ways to ease Beckett down and bring her to a place where important admissions might follow. He is dead certain of her feelings, but hearing the actual words out loud would be really nice.

The movie finishes, Ethan Hunt saves the world again, and Beckett emerges from action-movie heaven. She does not emerge from Castle’s close embrace. It’s far too cosy even to try.

“When’s dinner?” she asks.

“Seven. Car at quarter to. Why? D’you need hours to primp?”

“That’s you, Castle. Shower, make-up, dress, good to go. I can do it in twenty minutes.”

Castle half-turns and peers out the window, realising that it’s stopped raining. “Look,” he says happily. “It’s sunny now. Let’s go for that walk. Skim stones. Build sandcastles. Paddle in the surf.”

“Paddle? It’ll be freezing.”

“Okay, maybe not paddle. C’mon. Let’s go now.” He lollops off to find outerwear.

Beckett locates boots, sweater and jacket, and swathes herself in all of them; achieving the door just as Castle does. He is carrying two buckets and spades.
“That’s not fair,” Beckett says indignantly, when they’ve gone down on to the sand and are building sandcastles under a surprisingly warm afternoon sun. She doesn’t know how Castle managed to persuade her to build sandcastles. She hasn’t built a sandcastle since she was a child on Coney Island and starting now seemed ridiculous. But somehow she is doing it, under the pressure of Castle’s best big blue puppy dog eyes and stream of burbling brainless frivolity. She has no idea why he wants to build sandcastles either, but he’d looked so hopeful that she hadn’t been able to refuse. “Your bucket’s twice as big as mine. And how come I got the girly pink one? Do I look girly?”

“No,” Castle says quickly. “But I only have two buckets, and this one’s mine. That one was Alexis’s.”

“Still not fair. You’ve got an advantage.”

“Yes,” he smirks. “I do.”

“You’re cheating.”

“No, you just didn’t think of it first and ask me to swap.” He smirks more widely.

Building sandcastles is a natural human instinct, Castle thinks, and Beckett could certainly do to be recalled to some fun activities that don’t require thought and do keep her occupied in the sunshine. She’s still a bit pale. He has, however, pulled a fast one. Beckett, being insanely competitive, had eventually agreed to a sandcastle building competition. Castle’s is currently twice the height of hers. He does, however, have a motive to win, by cheating or otherwise. The winner gets the first three toasted marshmallows, and he adores marshmallows. He knows this is very shallow. He piles up his sand as fast as he can.

He doesn’t notice Beckett sneakily digging a drainage system and moat that undermines all his work, until his beautiful sandcastle slumps into a sloppy heap.

“I win,” Beckett says happily, and then follows it up with a pious look and even more piously smug comment, “Cheating doesn’t pay, Castle.”

“I didn’t cheat. You cheated.”

“I didn’t. But even if I had you didn’t say cheating wasn’t allowed. All I did was install a moat. Every castle needs a moat, to keep it safe from raiders.”

“How appropriate.”

“Huh?”

“Clearly I should have a moat to keep me safe from raiders. Seeing how you’ve got a gun and shield, that would be you. Tell me your middle name means moat.”

“No. It doesn’t.”

“The universe has no sense of what’s fitting,” Castle grumps, and very carefully doesn’t mention that Beckett’s just tacitly agreed that she should be all his. Moats, after all, surround castles. Or Castles.
He looks at his watch and squeaks. “It’s after five! We should get back. Otherwise there won’t be time for hot chocolate and roasted marshmallows. And the fire might go out.”

“We could have the hot chocolate later,” Beckett says mischievously. “Hot chocolate and marshmallows now will spoil your dinner.”

Castle looks disgruntled at this intrusion of reality. “I suppose so,” he says, and suddenly smirks evilly. “I wouldn’t like anything to spoil my chances of eating well.”

Beckett raises a very well-bred eyebrow. “Naturally,” she drawls. “Though I think you should work up an appetite.”

“Oh?”

“Catch me if you can, Castle,” and just like the last time she takes off running, at full stretch over the damp sand. This time, though, he’s prepared. He jogs after her, not exerting himself, and reaches the house a minute or two after she does. She’s sitting on the decking, tapping her fingers ostentatiously.

“Very slow,” she says.

“I have stamina,” Castle leers. “Why hurry, when long, slow exertion is just as good?”

Beckett mutters under her breath. A thin line of scarlet limns her cheekbone. Castle smiles, sleepily. “Let’s get ready, Beckett. Wouldn’t want to be late for dinner, or too late home.” He extends a hand to her, and when she takes it tugs gently to bring her against him, shielding her from the gathering winds. She looks far better than even this morning, which itself was a vast improvement on last night: there is sparkle in her eyes and a quirk at her lips, which deserves acknowledged with a kiss. So he does, and then finds it remarkably difficult to stop. This is undoubtedly Beckett’s fault. It’s not his fault that she’s softened and curved and fallen into purring Kat-Beckett who is utterly irresistibly pettable and kissable. It’s not his fault that she’s responsive and pressing close and kissing him back. And it is definitely not his fault that he’s addicted to her. He’s blaming all known and unknown deities for that one. Or genetics. Yeah. Genetics. It’s genetics that produced Beckett. They’ll have beautiful children… what the hell? No no no. Not the plan. But a little voice in the back of his head says yes the plan, just not now.

The hard shock of the thought has had one useful outcome, he supposes. He’s stopped kissing Beckett. This is probably a good thing, since they are supposed to go out for dinner. He unlocks the door and they go in. Beckett aims straight for the bedroom and when he follows her he finds that she’s shedding outerwear, innerwear and underwear in a straight line from the bedroom door to the en-suite door which she shuts, wearing only what looked like a very tiny pair of black lacy panties, as the black lacy bra which he really wishes he’d known about hits the floor in front of it. The lock clicks over.

Castle sits down on the bed and divests himself of everything down to boxers and t-shirt, ready for his own chance at the shower. He thinks that he might have got sand in his socks, though he really doesn’t know how. He humphs sulkily to himself that Beckett has locked the door. The humph has barely finished the ph when the lock unclicks. Then the shower starts. Castle draws the obvious conclusion, smiles widely, and waits. He thinks about joining her, but that would absolutely ensure that they don’t go out for dinner.

A few moments later Beckett emerges, sleekly damp around the hair and wrapped in a towel. Well. Wrapped might be a bit of an overstatement. The towel is maybe an inch above the tips of her breasts and maybe three inches below her ass. There is an awful lot of Beckett that is not wrapped
in a towel, and all of it is sashaying out of the bathroom and towards the closet. The sway as she moves is definitely studied. Castle is studying it extremely attentively, especially when Beckett bends slightly to collect something from the lower shelf.

And then she straightens up, turns round with a splash of scarlet silk in her hands, regards Castle with a sly, seductive gaze from under swept lashes accompanied by a nibble and lick of her lips, and drops the towel. Castle freezes in place. Beckett smirks.

“See something you like?” she husks.

“Oh, yes.”

“Just stay there,” Beckett orders. Castle pouts. He doesn’t want to stay there. He wants to collect his Beckett and turn her into his Kat, who rubs against him and purrs pleasurably when stroked.

Beckett stretches in a leisurely, languorous fashion all the way from head to toes, producing some rather interesting ripple effects around the level of her ribs, and then shakes out the scarlet scraps of silk to reveal them to be (as Castle had hoped and expected) some minimalist pieces of underwear, clearly purchased from the shop for sin and sexuality.

Beckett stretches out one leg, points her toes, and slowly – very slowly – inserts one foot into one of the scraps. It becomes evident that there is a small amount of lace involved, at the front. The second foot enters. Castle would very much like to enter something else, right now. The slice of scarlet proceeds, slowly, to rise up the skyscraper length of Beckett’s legs and eventually makes it to the top. By this time Castle is nearly dead with the effort of self-control, and astonishingly aroused. Beckett is now quite definitely the Kat who got the cream. She puts on her bra with a completely unnecessary amount of stretching, thrusting forward, and adjustment of the cups. Then she straightens up, and smirks. Castle does not straighten up. He can’t move.

The silk scraps, once on, are extremely classy. They are also utterly erotic. And that unbelievably sexy witch – no, not witch, succubus – is now undulating gently back to the closet. The back view is just as sexy as the front.

“I can feel the creepy staring, Castle.” Beckett’s voice entwines itself into his ears and slinks into his head. It doesn’t at all sound like she’s objecting to his focused vision. “Aren’t you going to get ready?” He is so ready it hurts. “It’ll still be there after dinner.” Not for long it won’t be. After dinner there is going to be some more than mild assertion of his feelings. She pulls out the dress. “Do the zip up for me?” He knows she can do it herself. She did last time. This is just unfair. She’s torturing him. He stands up (part of him has been standing for some time) and zips her up, being exceedingly careful not to touch her with anything more than his fingertips.

Until he changes his mind. He spins her round, hauls her against him and grinds into her. She gasps, and her fingers close on his ass, and he takes her mouth hard and deep, flattens his hand over her ass and presses her in, then whisks the skirt of that very nice red dress up to her waist so he can cup her, then stroke her through the silk, then slip under it to tease the nerves until it’s she who’s hopelessly aroused and panting and rubbing against him and then he slides fingers in and out and swallows her moan and then… stops.

“Now we’re both wound up,” he says hoarsely. “We’ll both need to wait, because there isn’t time. When we get back, though…” He dives for the shower, and turns it to cold. Beckett will have to find her own solution.

Both of them are ready, if somewhat flushed in Beckett’s case and constricted in Castle’s, when the car arrives. They sit very primly in the back, excruciatingly careful not to bump shoulders or knees.
They are only one ill-judged touch away from some decidedly improper behaviour. Beckett’s fingers steal towards Castle’s, and retreat; his toward her knee, and retire. The restaurant can’t come soon enough for either of them.

Good food and good wine – Beckett starts with only half a glass – help. Being on opposite sides of the table helps more. Talking about whatever takes their fancy – politics or travel or movies or books – also helps. By the time their entrees arrive they have both conquered the urge to haul the other out back and find a handy wall. Mostly. The dark in Castle’s eyes and the sparking gold in Beckett’s are undiminished. However, the food is as good as the previous time, the desserts are excellent, and coffee cannot be neglected.

It can, however, be hurried. And it is.

In the car back, it becomes obvious to Beckett that Castle has had a short word with the driver. It was probably of the order of *Every minute off the journey is ten dollars in your pocket.* Fortunately, on this journey they’ve scrapped the no-touching policy and Castle has a firm arm round her shoulders which protects her from the worst of the Indy 500 racing line turns. So she wriggles into a very acceptable position which allows her to nibble mischievously at his neck and lay an elegantly long fingered hand on his thigh. He can – and she hopes he will – be assertive when they get home, but right now she wants to play. She squeezes, gently. There is an inhalation of breath, and an – er – *thickening* not far away. The arm around her tightens. She flexes her fingertips, and draws a wicked little pattern. This time it’s a muffled groan. Her hand moves an inch northward – and Castle’s other hand clamps over it.

“Stop,” he hisses in her ear. “No more, till we get inside.” She smirks, and tries to move her hand. Castle brings it to his lips and nibbles gently on her fingers, then turns it over and licks across her palm, then turns it back and sucks lewdly on her forefinger. His other hand has dropped down from her shoulder to flirt lazily with the top of her breast. He smirks just as wickedly as Beckett had, and proceeds to amuse himself by winding her tighter and higher till she grabs his hand and, in default of brute strength, indents the back of his hand with her nails.

When she thinks about it later, she’ll be astonished that they escaped the traffic cops or indeed alive. The driver makes it home in half the time they made it there, is amply rewarded by Castle, whose thanks are profuse but very rapid, and departs.

The door is flung open, Beckett arrives inside at speed with Castle crashing in behind her, and after that it all becomes an X-rated Fast and Furious. Her coat skids across the floor, though she doesn’t notice where it lands because by that time Castle is ravaging her mouth and hoisting up her dress and finding her already hot and wet and oh-so-ready for him and her hands have parted his belt and zip and found him hot and hard and oh-so-ready for her and then he’s pushed the silk aside and surged into her: thick and long and perfect and that fast it’s all over.

He doesn’t slide out of her, simply picks her up and she wraps legs round his waist and arms round his neck as he carries her to the bedroom. She is lifted slightly, and whimpers at his leaving her body, then is stood in front of him, when she realises the zip in the back of the dress is undone. The look in his eyes burns down every sensitised nerve and sends electricity dancing over her skin. There’s an instant’s silence, a fractional pause, while he looks, and then he reaches out and pushes the dress off her shoulders so that it pools about her strappy heels on the floor and looks her up and down again, slow appreciation of her in two scraps of scarlet silk and black stiletto heels, the lower scrap soaked, the upper doing nothing at all to disguise the proud jut of her nipples and then emphasising the lush curves of cream skin. Flaming scarlet silk, lace fronted panties; lace as the upper half of the cups of the bra. Nearly but not quite revealing, and utterly erotic.
Castle unbuttons his shirt and lets it slide to the floor, following it with his dress pants. Beckett’s hot gaze slithers over him as he does, and he grows and hardens again. He simply reaches out and takes possession of her once more, forcefully assertive as he owns her mouth, smoothly so as he presses into her, definitive as he walks her to the bed and lowers her on to it, gazing hotly at his Kat in his bed in his home. It means more, somehow, because she can’t come to the loft – yet, that has to be yet – and so this is the only time and place that he can feel that she’s in his home.

He sits down by her, spreading his hand out over her middle, his thumb flirting at the underside of her breast, his little finger teasing at the edge of her panties. She reaches up to pull him down, and finds that Castle is not inclined to be pulled. Instead he leans down slowly, bypasses her parted lips and licks delicately along the shell of her ear, finishing with a soft nip and a slide over the nerve to make her squirm.

“Let me,” he whispers insinuatingly into her ear. “I know what you like. I’ll lead now. No need for you to decide. I’ll give you everything you need. Everything you want. Just us, Kat. Just you and me and nothing else.”

She sighs contentedly and completely relaxes, tacit consent to wherever he will take her. He’ll do it right: he always has, right from the very first kiss months ago, perfectly and instinctively attuned to her desires and her body, and here, outside Manhattan and inside a peaceful Castle-bubble, she can finally stand down and be part of a them. Kat who doesn’t need to hold anybody up at all, but who can rely on Castle to hold her up when she needs to stand down. Her hands soften on his shoulders, touching but no longer tugging, waiting for him to begin.

Begin he does, flicking over the nerve by her ear some more, trailing deliciously over the sharp line of her jaw, kissing her deeply but not for long enough, and she mews a little crossly as he leaves her mouth and nibbles gently over each clavicle and works his way into the valley of her cleavage. Once there, he seems to have stopped to enjoy the scenery. A wolfish, predatory expression has crept into his eyes as he sits up, replaces her in the centre of the gigantic bed, and unbuckles each thin ankle strap of the high-heeled black shoes she’s still wearing, dropping them carelessly over the edge of the bed.

“Gorgeous,” he growls, “but let’s not literally tear up the sheets.” He kisses each ankle, careful not to tickle her, places each back down more widely and looms over her to place himself between her legs, his face below her chin, and shifts to return to his brief contemplation of the landscape, leaning on his elbows either side of her. “Mmm,” he hums deeply, and flicks out his tongue to taste. He slides the fabric of the bra across her taut nipples and swollen breasts, and she gasps and writhes under the delightful friction. He carries on, winding her higher, changing gasp to moan only by his playing with the fabric: he leans left, licks and sucks wetly for a moment; repeats to the right; drags the damp fabric across her and has to wriggle a little lower so that he can lower a little weight to keep her under his mouth and fingers.

His hands sneak beneath her (he thinks of his hands under her under him) to unclasp her bra: he doesn’t need it in the way now, and slips it from her so that he has unhindered access to roll and tease and play: tiny pinches that don’t hurt but send her upward; kisses and then hard suction, nips soothed by tantalising tongue; never letting her come down and he knows it won’t take much, wants her sky high and screaming and shattering all because of, all for, him. He touches more firmly, slides one hand down between them and twitches the soaked silk between her legs across her and that’s it: she screams out his name and shatters for him.
Castle takes full advantage of Kat’s blissed out state to wriggle down a little further and lay his head on her stomach without putting much weight on her. When she’s ready, they’ll play some more: everything he wants to do with her and to her and for her; to be everything she needs, here and everywhere else, always and forever and ever. When he can get her out of Manhattan (he shivers at how close she came to cutting him off, lost in her own insecurity and pain and pushing everyone away) she’s so different: playful and sparky and wholly adorable; her heart in her eyes even if it’s not (yet) on her tongue.

He feels a hand smoothing through his hair, lazily, as if it can’t help itself, twining slowly. It’s soothing, this petting, and he understands suddenly why it works on Beckett, or Kat, so very often. He emits a deep, contented rumble, and stretches a hand above his head to meet hers. He misses her hand, but finds a pleasantly soft curve and point instead, which is fair trade, and essays some petting of his own, not particularly trying to arouse, yet. Her hands become more intent, more purposeful, and skate around the jut of his jaw, trying to reach further down. She can’t move far with him blocking her, and if she’s ready for more he is definitely so. He stops playing with her breast and strokes down her side to her hip, lifts his head and slips further down, trailing his mouth across her navel, stopping at the lace panel of the panties.

“I know you like this,” he purrs darkly, vibrating the lace. “Don’t you?”

“Mmmm. Kiss me, Castle.”

“Soon,” he promises. “Soon, Kat.” Before he tastes, he intends to touch. He settles into a more comfortable position and lets his fingers loose: feather light strokes on the satin skin of her inner thigh, smooth pale cream against the scarlet silk. As he had with the bra, he slides the fabric across her, and then lengthwise to press and pull on the knot of nerves, and she writhes, already wet again and making occasional soft moans and whimpers of desire and need. His finger slips beneath the material, stroking through hot slick folds and playing teasingly at her entrance, a little in, a little out: one finger, two; never deep enough or full enough for his Kat who’s pleading for more, harder, more please Castle more and twisting to bring him to her desire, but this is his game, this time: she can have her way later or tomorrow or another day, but now he’s going to hold her on the edge of ecstasy until he’s had his fill of showing her stars.

His fingers stroke harder, and then he lifts her slightly and peels away the panties, all the way down her legs and then parts her again and strokes some more: dipping in and feeling the muscles flutter and twitch; sliding to the nerve endings and she’s bucking and twisting: her hands in his hair, and then he finally leans in, breathes over her to tease, and puts his mouth on her and she cries out wordlessly, losing speech. He has to hold her hips still to carry on, and takes her with his tongue and then withdraws to lick firmly straight along her, end to end and she screams, bucks and writhes and tries to escape the exquisite torture of absolute ecstasy, but he won’t let that happen, takes her again and again until the pre-orgasmic flutter is constant and at last he stops, surges up and thrusts into her open, willing, desperate body; seats himself fully, wrapped in her tight heat and then withdraws, thrusts; withdraws, thrusts; takes her mouth with his without a pause and it’s all about possession then: she just has to be his; he already is hers, like it or not; and he thrusts harder, faster and she comes screaming as he groans out her name and collapses atop her, rolling over and taking her with him to hold her close and keep her.

“Mine,” he murmurs into her hair. “Whatever happens, mine.” She makes a soft mew-murmur of assent and snuggles into his shoulder, a leg flung over his, an arm over his chest, idly sketching
fence-posts on his shoulder. He turns the lights off, starlight from the clear night, drifting through
the window, the only illumination. Here in the covering, concealing darkness she might speak
plainly. Sometimes, darkness can reveal secrets, not hide them.

“Whatever happens?” she questions.

“Whatever it is.” He listens carefully to the quality of her silence and the intonation of her
breathing. “What’s wrong?”

“Noth… everything. Nothing’s fixed and I still can’t face your family. Out here it’s good: it’s like
there’s no-one else. No drunk father, no loving daughter; just an island. Every time I think about
doing this in Manhattan, going to your loft, I just can’t see it. I spook.” Self-contempt colours the
words. “Worst thing is, I know why, now. Dr Burke” – the name is bitten out – “explained it all.
But understanding it doesn’t mean I’ve got over it. I thought by the time we got here I’d be able to
make it work but it doesn’t matter what I understand, I can’t feel anything but stupid pathetic envy
and what’s the point of being in love with you if I can’t even face your family?”

She only realises what she’s admitted when Castle gasps and his arm clamps tightly round her. By
that time it’s far too late to escape.

“Plenty of point, Kat. Plenty. See, being in love lets me say I can wait as long as it takes, till you’re
ready. You’re still trying. You faced your father. I’m here for you. That’s all we need, for now.”
He stops. “Love’s all we need.”

A damp patch spreads on his chest. He holds her, deep in the covering night, and blinks the
dampness in his own eyes away. After tonight, anything has become possible. “Come here,
sweetheart,” falls out his mouth, and he pulls her up so that he can kiss her: first the top of her head
and then, raising her further, her forehead, and then her lips, gently and sweetly. And then he
simply cuddles her until the silent tears dry.

“I need a shower,” she says eventually, tiredness lining each short word.

She rolls off Castle and sits up, slowly, not really making it to straightened up. Castle crawls over
to unfold beside her, and looks down at their collective toes in the moonlight. He wiggles his, and
nudges hers.

“C’mon. Let’s go shower. Will you wash my back?”

Kat yawns. “Yeah,” she says, “if you wash mine.”

“Sure. But no funny stuff. You wore me out.”

“Kay,” she yawns again. “Me too.” She pauses, and then seems to realise that she’s on the wrong
end of the snark-score. “No funny stuff from you, either. Shower only.”

“You’re about to fall asleep in the shower. C’mon.”

The shower is short and involves only washing. The sheets are changed swiftly, the two of them
working in tandem. Beckett then collapses into them, pulls the comforter over her, closes her eyes,
and from the change in her breathing is asleep before Castle has really tucked his toes in. He lies
there, staring into the night, and hugging close the warm new knowledge that Beckett-Kate-Kat
loves him. Shortly, he turns over, spoons into her, and hugs both Kat and knowledge to his
overflowing heart.
Beckett wakes cosily cuddled, snuggled against the wide warm wall of Castle’s chest, and doesn’t see the point of moving anywhere. She’s also still completely naked. She closes her eyes again, and dozes, feeling safe, and secure, and loved. Coming here had been the right thing to do. Absolutely the right thing. Doze swiftly turns to deep sleep.

Castle wakes a little after, and leaves himself and his arm exactly where they are, curled around Beckett, who is curled like a cat into him. She’s completely naked, which is excellent, and deeply asleep, which isn’t. But – but she loves him, and she said so. Coming here had been absolutely the right thing to do. He closes his eyes again, and dozes lightly, never quite losing awareness of Beckett tucked beside him.

After another stretch of time, in which it has become clear that Beckett is not going to wake any time soon, Castle succumbs to the nagging of his body, pads to the bathroom, and then, wrapped in a dark blue robe, to the kitchen. He sets the percolator to make his favourite brew of coffee, and inhales the aroma. He needs to do some thinking. Beckett undoubtedly does too, but that’s a different matter.

Thought one: Admissions have been made that can’t be unsaid, and the greatest of these is love, he thinks, not whimsically at all. They – that mysterious, tangled, intertwined mess that is now a they – are good. Better than good.

Thought two: against that is the problem of Jim, and Beckett’s still-unmended bitterness and guilt. There’s a long road still ahead there.

Thought three: Manhattan beckons, late tonight. In Manhattan, that crushing emotional claustrophobia sets in, and all issues reassert themselves. They can’t stay up here: the weekend was fine but he has other responsibilities.

Thought four: well, that comes full circle round to thought one. Love conquers all. Knowing what he knows, they can get through this, with care, and attention.

He wanders back into the bedroom and into bed, swiping his laptop on the way and only just not spilling his refilled coffee. He becomes aware that his bare feet are cold, and the sheets are very likely warm, and that the bed, and in particular the bed full of Beckett, who is still curled up on her side far into the arms of Morpheus, is a far better place to be on a bright but chill early March morning. He studies her dark hair spread out over the pillows, her hand half-hidden beneath her chin, her dark lashes sweeping her cheeks and the slight curve of her full lips: a tiny hint of a smile. Happy dreams, maybe: she deserves some of those. Inspired by the sight of her relaxed, he begins to tap quietly over his keyboard, and soon his neglected coffee is cold.

He’s disturbed from free-flowing inspiration by a half-stretch and movement beside him, which, it transpires, is Beckett turning over and murmuring you’re here, as she had done before; reaching out for him and finding him there. Since Castle is sitting up, propped against the headboard, what her grasping hands find is his legs. Specifically, his upper thigh. Up is suddenly much on his mind.

Beckett’s eyes peel open, still hazy with sleep and somewhat confused.

“Why’re you up there,” she slurs. “C’m back down here.”

Castle puts his laptop safely out the way, ensures he can’t knock over the coffee, and complies. Beckett wriggles over him.

“ ‘S better,” she says, and closes her eyes, hugging him close and – really? – breathing him in. He wraps his arms round her and enjoys the affection. He also very much enjoys naked Beckett draped
Very much not objecting. In fact – *oh oh oh* – it seems that sleepiness is now sexiness and she is on a route southward – *oohhhhh* – which involves detailed attention to his nipples, his navel, and now… *oohhhhh* her mouth is hot and wet and her tongue flicking and the suction and he’s utterly helpless when she does that to him and his hands are fisted in her hair but there’s only one person in control here and it surely is not him. He surrenders to her glorious mouth and comes hard.

Kat wriggles back up his body with an *I drank the cream* feline smile and sprawls back across his heaving chest. “Mmmm,” she hums, and licks her lips. Castle will deal with that self-satisfied smile. He will. Just as soon as he’s recovered from her actions. For now, he’s going to hold on to her. Post-coital snuggling is very important.

“Now what?” Kat purrs. “You’re awake.”

“I’ve been awake for ages. It’s you who’s been fast asleep. I did write half a chapter, though. Your sleeping was very inspiring.” Purr shifts to semi-growl. Castle doesn’t like the growl, and whilst parts of him will still need a little recovery time, there is absolutely nothing wrong with his hands. He strokes all the way down Kat’s back, over her beautiful ass, and then wanders further to stroke between her legs, where he finds that she’s already wet and ready for his touch. Touch he does, dancing fingers and then firmer strokes, tiny circles and then gentle pinches, slow and sure and searchingly assertive: stating his intent through his hands until he’s ready to replace fingers with hard length and oh-so-slowly taking her; not rolling them, leaving her atop him and she sits up, her breasts proud for him to taste and palm and lavish caresses upon. This will not be hard and fast, primal and primitive and possessive: this will be slow, and sensual, and *loving*.

So it is. He brings her down to kiss her deeply: giving and taking, and gradually they fall into harmonised rhythm and then to stronger, harder motion and then nothing is left but them and the movement and the glory.

Quite a lot later they’re sitting out on the decking under a surprisingly warm March sun, eating the remains of the Danishes and drinking Castle’s excellent coffee. Beckett licks her fingers clean, at which Castle’s eyes flare hotly, wipes them on her jeans, and then lays her hand over his and intertwines their fingers.

“I wish we could stay here,” she says pensively. “Just until everything was cleared up. It’s all so much easier, here.” She looks uncertain. “There’s still so much to work through.” Her voice falls away, quiet and tired and fading. “I know why I’m doing it, but why do you? I get mad when I’m scared and all of this scares me. My dad, your family, everything. Everyone wants something, and that’s scary too.”

Castle untwines his fingers, turns his hand up under Beckett’s, and re-clasps hers. He doesn’t say anything, but actively projects a confidential, talk-to-me atmosphere.

“Even you and O’Leary seemed to want something. Do it this way. See the truth we see. Change your mind. Listen to us.” Her hand clenches. “All of you. No-one’s happy with just me.” She stops. “Not even me.”

Castle replaces one hand with the other, and curls the freed arm around her consolingly. He still doesn’t say anything.

“I thought that Friday would be the end. Instead Dad’s still crying that I’m all he’s got and I don’t know what to believe. It’s not even my word against his. It’s *his* word against his, and how am I meant to find out what’s true then? *He* doesn’t even know. He doesn’t remember any of it, he only
remembers when he was sober, and now he says I misunderstood that too. He *never meant* that we weren’t a family.”

Castle can hear the agony clawing through her controlled voice. Tears are not far away, he thinks; the promise of pain potent.

“Maybe he didn’t. But maybe he did and he’s just screwing with my head now. I looked it all up, you know. After you and O’Leary forced me to see. How can I trust anything he says? He might mean it, but he might just be trying to get me back to being his patsy. How do I know?”

“You don’t,” Castle says, soothingly, “and that’s okay. You need time. Never mind your dad, he’s got other people to talk to if he needs to. You need time to think through what you want to think about. You’ve got Dr Burke to talk to” –

“I don’t like him,” she says crossly.

“Nor do I, but every time I have to talk to him he seems to talk sense. Anyway, you’ve got him to talk to, O’Leary to drink with – he won’t be pushing you, he just doesn’t want you hurt any more. He’s still your best pal.

“No, he’s not,” Beckett mutters.

“Uh? He is. Don’t push him away.”

“He’s not. You are,” emerges in a deeply embarrassed flush of crimson and indistinct mumble.

“Different,” Castle murmurs. “I’m…” he swallows “…your lover. He’s your friend.”

“You’re my best friend,” she insists.

Castle leaves it. “Anyway, you need time. It’s all come to a head now, and it’s up to you how long you take and what you do. It’s nobody else’s decision.”

She’s silent for a long while, clutching his hand.

“C’mon, Beckett,” Castle says eventually. “Let’s go for a walk along the beach. Blow the cobwebs away.” She quirks an eyebrow. “Then we’ll come back and have hot chocolate.”

“Okay,” she says.

Castle fetches jackets and reappears, politely holding Beckett’s for her to slip into and then donning his own. The wisdom of jackets becomes evident as they move down on to the beach, where the wind is much more noticeable than the sheltered nook at the back of Castle’s house. Beckett shivers slightly, and is instantly wrapped into Castle’s broad frame. It doesn’t really stop the wind, but she appreciates the care he’s giving her. She winds her arm around his waist in return. The fresh air and smell of ozone help, surprisingly. She’s here, she doesn’t need to think about anything, she only needs to relax and stand down, safe with Castle, who she loves, who loves her; and both of them said it. *She* said it.

Her mind wanders, far away from her feet crunching on the damp sand, to last night, a place where she’d been brave enough to say the truth; brave enough to say what she really feels. She holds Castle tighter. But love… is love enough? It’s why she started, but Dr Burke’s methods have stripped her raw and right now she feels that she’s as far from her goal as she ever was, love or no love.
“What if I never manage it?” she says.

“You will manage it.” Castle’s tone doesn’t admit disagreement. That’s a tone Beckett normally hears from her own mouth. “When have you ever not managed something you set your mind to?”

“Couldn’t save my dad,” comes bitterly.

“Not the same. You couldn’t control that. Now, answer the question. When have you ever not managed something you really set your mind to? Something you really wanted, that you could control?”

“Never,” she eventually admits.

“Thought so,” Castle says smugly. “So why break the habit now?”

He leaves that hanging, and smoothly turns them round. “I’m cold,” he says. “Let’s go home and have hot chocolate.”
I'm still standing

Hot chocolate does not take long. Lighting the fire to toast the marshmallows takes a little longer, but shortly they’re both ensconced in front of the fire with the large bag of marshmallows, the toasting forks, and nothing much else. Beckett is lying on her stomach idly twirling her marshmallow and kicking her feet; Castle has his elbows on his knees and is practically twitching with impatience for his treat to be ready. As soon as it's turned even faintly coloured he’s pulling his fork back and snatching it off the end.

He pops the marshmallow into his mouth with a look of blissful happiness and then squeaks in pain and fans his tongue.

“Was it hot, Castle?” Beckett says evilly, twirling hers round to even up the toasting.

“Ow ow ow,” he whines. “Hurts.”

“Awwww, poor baby,” she drawls, very unsympathetically, and twirls her perfectly roasted marshmallow out of the fire, letting it cool before sliding it into her mouth.

“You should kiss it better, not be mean to me.”

“I’m not being mean. Mean would be stealing your marshmallows.” Her fingers steal closer to the bag.

Castle’s hand arrives on her back, progresses to her side, and (having checked her drink was out the way on the hearth) rolls her over.

“Uh?” Beckett emits indignantly. “What’re you doing?”

Castle has unfolded, and is looming over her. “Asserting myself,” he says suavely, and leans down very slowly and kisses her thoroughly. “There will be no stealing of marshmallows here, Detective Beckett. Theft will be regarded very severely.” He kisses her again, and imprisons her hands within his, beside her head. She laughs up at him, entirely uncowed by his fake severity. This is probably because it would take her a mere thousandth of a second to have him crying uncle and totally incapacitated. He’s seen her sparring.

“I’m not stealing anything. You offered me the marshmallows and I accepted.”

“You had designs on the bag. It was clear that you were planning a major heist.”

He kisses her again, deeply, and then rolls away, swipes the marshmallow bag and stabs three on to his toasting fork.

“Hey!” Beckett squawks. “Leave some for me.” She sits up and starts searching for the bag. Castle protects it. Beckett scoots past him and tries to recover it, and then casts Castle a scathing glance as he holds it above his head. “I’m not falling for that trick twice,” she says.

“You already did,” Castle smirks, drops the bag, (marshmallows scatter everywhere) and grabs her. “Gotcha, Beckett,” and he hauls her into his lap and kisses her again, much harder and more possessively, his hand in her hair to hold her in place. Eventually he lifts off. “That’s better. You belong here,” he says, provocatively. “Right here with me.”

Beckett opens her mouth. Castle kisses it again. “My Kat,” he murmurs into her mouth. “You
know, real cats never do anything they don’t want to. They go their own way, and can’t be driven. I always wanted a cat, but Mother wouldn’t let me have one. So unfair. But there are always cats in theatres – they’re all called Gus, after Eliot’s theatre cat whose name was really Asparagus, but that’s such a fuss” –

“Is there a point to this, Castle, or are you about to break into song?”

He pouts.

“Cats – or indeed Kats” – the revised spelling is audible – “shouldn’t be herded. It doesn’t work. They should be enticed. Cosseted. Persuaded.” His voice moves to a deep, gravelled growl. “Petted and stroked.”

His words hold her more tightly than his arms. She curves in, turning her face up to him, and he accepts her open invitation and brushes lips across hers.

The romantic moment is shattered by the growling of his stomach, swiftly joined by an answering complaint from Beckett’s.

“And fed,” she points out. “I’m hungry. Can we get another picnic?”

“Sure.”

So that’s what they do. This time, though, it’s preceded by finding the marshmallows and post-scripted by roasting them, with a considerable quantity of lusciously creamy hot chocolate and (since there will have to be driving) no alcohol. This time, too, they take the time to tidy up, although Castle assures Beckett that the excellent Joe will deal with the usual cleaning service.

After lunch, the mood is more pensive than romantic. Beckett, snuggled into Castle, is thinking, again. It takes a few minutes for her to emerge from thought.

“What do I do about Dad?” she asks miserably. “How do I know if he’s telling the truth, or messing me up?”

Castle finds himself in a dilemma. He’s pretty sure that Jim is absolutely telling the truth about his love for his daughter, but it is possible that Jim is simply a really excellent liar. However, he has a thought.

“Um…” he says hesitantly, “there might be… well…”

“Spit it out, Castle. I got nothing so anything has to be better. Even if I’m not going to like it.”

“Well…” She isn’t going to like it, but it’s an idea. “Dr Burke has had a couple of sessions with your dad. And he’s not susceptible to manipulation or lies” –

“No, he just does the manipulating,” Beckett points out acidly.

“Yeah, but… maybe if we both go see him, and I tell both of you what your dad said to me and he tells you what your dad said to him and we all discuss what we think of it… erm… maybe that would give you some evidence?”

There is complete silence. It is not punctuated by brisk denial, miserable denial, or furious denial. Nor is it punctuated by enthusiastic assent. It has a quality of deep thought. Castle keeps his arm round Beckett and his mouth completely shut. She leans into him and keeps thinking. Since he’s not being shouted down or argued with, Castle considers that Beckett is considering his off-the-
wall idea very seriously. This is a good thing.

“When?” she suddenly says.

“Have you cancelled your schedule?”

“No.”

“Tuesday? You’d be there anyway.”

“I suppose so. It would be a start.” Her voice falls, almost to inaudibility. “I got through Friday. I’ve started. I just need to keep going.”

“You don’t need to do it on your own. I’m here. I’ll let you stand down. Sure we both screwed up Thursday and Friday, but we cleared that up and we’re still standing.”

She moves uncomfortably, colour washing across her face. “I can’t… can’t promise you I won’t do it again. Take it wrongly, lose it, run.”

“I can’t promise I won’t let my mouth run ahead of my brain, or that I won’t lose my temper,” Castle shrugs. “We’re human: we make mistakes. What matters for now is that we try to mend them.” He grins widely. “Or that O’Leary makes us make up.”

Beckett manages an answering grin. “He’s big enough to knock our heads together,” she agrees. “Okay. I’ll try, you’ll try, and O’Leary will umpire.”

“With Pete as back-up.”

“You’ve met Pete?”

“Er…”

“Wow. O’Leary must really like you.”

Castle feels he’s dodged a bullet there. He refrains from explaining the circumstances in which he met Pete. It’s undoubtedly safer that way.

“Now what?” he asks.

“When will we need to leave to get back?”

“As late as you like, as long as I’m home for breakfast. Eight? Get you home before you turn into a pumpkin.” She growls. “Okay, not a pumpkin. Though you are very ed – ow!”

“Don’t even think about finishing that sentence.”

Castle squeaks as his nose is pinched. “No, Beckett,” he whines obediently, and then rapidly tips her into his lap and imprisons her there, lying flat with her head on his thighs and his hand holding her down. “Now, isn’t this fun,” he drawls. “I’ve got you pinned down so you can’t mutilate me any more, and I can do whatever I please.” He follows up by tracing her lips. “Mmmm.” His free hand wanders around her jawline, and down over her collarbones. She wriggles, but doesn’t get to move anywhere much. Since wriggling isn’t going to help, she squirms into a perfectly comfortable position and awaits developments.

Developments arise in the form of a smooth stroke over her side all the way from shoulder to hip, which is very nice, and then being pulled up to be cosseted in and softly kissed, which is even
better. She curls in and enjoys herself. Soft making out is very reassuring: it reminds her that there is far more to this than sex. On the thought, she murmurs mine, and nuzzles further into Castle’s neck to murmur again love you, almost unheard. His clasp tightens to hold her close, and he murmurs love you too in return, and then kisses her much harder, more desperately, more searchingly.

“We can get through this, Beckett. We will.”

She doesn’t answer in words. She clutches herself to him, and makes an attempt to meld into his skin. She wants to get through this, but she’s not yet confident that they – no, not they, they are okay again, but she – can manage to get past the issues that her father has left her with.

“Hey, hey. None of that.” Oh. She’s welling up, and Castle’s noticed. “Don’t do that. We can fix this.”

“I can’t win,” she weeps. “It doesn’t matter what I do or say, I’m wrong. Wrong not to tell him the truth then, wrong to tell him what he did now. You saw him Friday. You didn’t see him before, when he was crying about Mom, or telling me to go; you didn’t see him after he got dry. I don’t know what to believe any more. None of it makes sense.”

“Does it have to?” Castle asks, tentatively.

“Uh?” Beckett says very inelegantly and rather soggily.

“Well, in my youth I wasn’t always a model of sobriety” – Beckett manages a waterlogged quirk of an eyebrow – “and sometimes – promise you won’t arrest me? – I even got just a little high, and from what I do remember consistency wasn’t a big part of my thinking. If I was thinking at all.”

“This is comparable how?”

Castle winces. “The more I drank – er, et cetera – the less consistent I got. Okay, so it was mostly trivial: whether I would carry on with Storm; what I wanted for the next semi-major character, that sort of thing… but sometimes it was more important.”

He winces again, at the memory. “Some of my biggest fights with Gina started there. I’d… well. I told her sober that I didn’t want Alexis thinking she could get a different answer from each of us. Consistency, you know? It certainly wasn’t going to be consistent with Meredith, who never paid any attention and always just did whatever was easiest and suited her at the time. So sober, I was really big on consistency between us. But then I woke up one morning and she was really upset and angry and apparently I’d said – in front of Alexis, which was just unbelievably wrong because I tried never to be drunk near her and I never did anything stronger after she arrived – that it didn’t matter what Gina thought, Alexis was my child and it would always be my decision and I’d over-ride her if I thought fit. We weren’t getting on so well by then anyway, which is probably why I got drunk, but I’d never have said or believed that sober. It would have been a really short way to fuck up Alexis, never mind what was left of the marriage.” He squirms very uncomfortably. “It wasn’t the only thing. Just the worst.”

Beckett doesn’t say anything.

“So I can see that it’s possible that he said something dreadful when he was drunk which he really didn’t believe. Whether he did believe it or not, I don’t know.”

Beckett still doesn’t say anything.

“Let’s not think about it now. Let’s go back out. Skim stones. Walk. Just be us and not think about
anyone else until tomorrow.”

She looks up at him, wide hazel eyes shimmering under a sheen of liquid.

“Okay. Just us.”

And so they go back out into the faint warmth of the pallid March sun; sheltering each other from the bite of the sharp wind; walk along and skim stones, pick up shells. There are no gleaming quartz facets shining up from the sand, today, but there are plenty of flat stones for skimming, at which Castle is much better than Beckett.

“Aaargh!” she yells frustratedly, as yet another stone doesn’t even attempt to skip before sinking. “How come you’re so good at this?”

“Practice. We’ve been coming here every year for the last ten, several times a year, and I couldn’t let Alexis beat me, so I practiced.”

“I’m sure my dad did that for fishing,” Beckett says without thinking, and then sucks in air against the sudden emotional punch and utterly fails to control her face, eyes or voice. She cries ugly, this time, gasping sobs and crumpled face, the brief slick of mascara clearly not waterproof, the rasp of scratching breath not sufficient to carry her misery; blowing her nose wetly. It’s the all-consuming misery of the child whose dreams are broken on the wheel of harsh reality. Castle tries to take her in his arms but she doesn’t lean on him, though she doesn’t resist. Dr Burke’s last few words ring in his head. Be careful of her…may come back to hurt her later. Here’s later. So he is careful, a light hold rather than the tight clasp he’d usually employ; no other contact, no dropped kisses on the bent dark head, no soft stroking of the hunched, compressed shoulders. When she leans in, if she leans in, then cossetting will be appropriate, but not now.

Beckett can’t stop crying. She can’t even control it. Actually, automatically remembering how her dad used to be, before Stanford, before her mom, before the whiskey and the tears and the tank and the vomit and the guilt and the pain. The days when he used to be her strong, safe dad, who taught her to fish and to whittle; encouraged her to follow her dream and disapproved of her wilder boyfriends.

The days and nights when he fell apart and became the ivy to her enforced oak; the days and nights she’d buried her guilt in work and more work; the day he’d looked at her – stone cold sober, clear eyes – as if she’d hung the moon and stars and sun; as if she was a miracle he didn’t deserve. She weeps harder, as his white, shocked, old face of Friday haunts her – but was he shocked because she’d discovered the truth or shocked because she was totally mistaken?

She feels herself being drawn along the strand and encouraged to sit down on a large, flat rock. Nothing else is done, or said. She’s shielded from the wind, but she can’t hide from the ten years of pain that’s fallen in on her since Wednesday, since she was forcibly shown – and then investigated – the truth of her reactions and their causes.

A long, miserable space later she’s almost stopped crying, down to occasional gulped sobs and sniffs. Tears haven’t helped. The fundamental contradiction remains unsolved, and remains as simple as it had been from the very first moment: did he lie when he was drunk or lie when he was sober?

She stands up and walks down to the very edge of the water, putting her boots a little at risk from the tide, and stares out as if the grey-blue sea will give her answers, or insight.

Castle lets her go. She’s hidden in her own head, and she needs to work it out on her own. He
remembers, belatedly, the key mantra: *only you can save yourself*. He’d add to that: *only you can forgive yourself*. They’d forced her – all of them – to see the problem. It might be very dangerous for O’Leary and him to go any further. They almost went far too far on Wednesday, and then he did on Thursday/Friday. Time to stay back, and absolutely not to make any demands in relation to this situation.

In fact, let Beckett save herself, which implies letting her get to a point – by herself – where she can forgive herself.

He watches her watching the sea, scuffing her feet, occasionally taking a swift step back to avoid the clutching waves: at first she’s closed in, hunched tight around herself; arms wrapped in: even though she’s looking out over the ocean somehow her head is bent, bowed under the weight of all her thoughts. After a while, her spine straightens, she stands a little taller, and a little taller still; her shoulders unfurl; the impression of weight diminishes. In some way, here, she’s recovering herself under the sea breeze and the vast expanse of water in front of her.

Still he doesn’t disturb her. This is as necessary to her as the soft making out, the picnics, the dinner, his assertive lovemaking and the change of scenery: she’s re-establishing who she is, who she wants to be. It’s taken all weekend, almost, and he wishes he – they – could stay longer: out here in the clear light and the fresh wind. They have a few more hours, though. Maybe it’s enough for now. He hopes it can be enough for now.

She turns, as the wind whips her hair, and on her face he sees a strange almost-peace; missing, he thinks, since the last time they were here. He waits for her, even now not meeting her halfway. It’s for her to come to him, it’s for her to work out her own salvation. *Only she can save herself*. He sits on the rock, and watches her come to him, reach out both hands to grip his shoulders, standing in the space he makes between his spread knees. He finally reaches for her, hands laced lightly in the small of her back, his upward tilted gaze serious. No flirting now, no sex, no silliness or triviality, no jokes to – deliberately – break the mood and change the game. It’s for her to speak: uncover her thoughts and point the way. He wants to start, to show her that it’s all possible; everything’s possible; but he can’t. Jim Beckett – and Dr Burke’s blunt explanations – have taught him that.

“It’s clearer, here,” she says, above his head. “You were right.”

“About what?”

“We both go see Dr Burke on Tuesday. And…” she trails off, breathes in, deeply, gathers herself, “…I guess I’ll need to keep going. Friday. Next week. Whatever it takes.”

“I’ll be waiting for you, after. And…” it’s Castle’s turn to trail off, “…and if we haven’t finished Tuesday, and you want me there on Friday, then…”

She dips her head to his, pauses, leaning forehead to forehead, and kisses his brow in lieu of thanks. He pulls her in tighter, and pillows his head against her shoulder. She leans over to rest her cheek on the top of his head, and stays like that for some time.
“A last hot chocolate, Beckett? Before we have to go?”

They’ve not spoken about anything more. Instead, they’ve watched the third Mission Impossible, oohed and ahhed at Ethan Hunt’s exploits, snuggled together and been close. Everything else has been parked. Peacefulness is more important, now: comfort that will carry her through the coming days.

“Yes, please.”

She follows Castle to the kitchen to see if she can discover how he makes it taste so good. She’s sure there’s a secret ingredient. She peers around him, and is tutted at.

“Naughty. Don’t peek. It won’t taste as good.”

“Is that why you keep your eyes shut?” Beckett says in a tone dripping with sex.

Castle chokes and nearly spills the boiling milk.


“Inappropriate?” she smirks. “Whenever you put food in your mouth at dinner last night you closed your eyes when you chewed.”

Castle chokes again. Beckett retains the smirk, and keeps trying to spot the magic addition. All her detecting skills don’t help her. Strangely, though, the chocolate mix is in an unmarked tin. This rouses her suspicions.

“I’ve got it!” she cries. “I can’t spot it because it’s already there. It’s in the chocolate.”

Castle smiles in an offensively superior fashion.

“You think?”

“Yep. It’s not ordinary chocolate.”

“Nothing I do is ordinary, Beckett. I’m extraordinary.”

“Extraordinarily something, that’s for sure.”

Castle humphs, and pouts. “You don’t deserve my extraordinary hot chocolate with cream and marshmallows, that’s my for sure.”

Beckett pouts in return. Castle catches her as she sneaks her hand towards the mugs and wraps her into him.

“Oh look,” he says with a complete lack of any surprise. “I’ve caught a thief.” He smiles slowly. “What on earth will I do with her?”

“You could give me my hot chocolate,” Beckett says, from inside his arms.

“I don’t think so. You were nasty to me.”
“You sound like you’re five. And I wasn’t nasty. I said something. I didn’t specify whether it was good or bad. You assumed. Jumped to conclusions. So you should give me my hot chocolate.”

“Or I could give you something else,” Castle says suavely, and then very unsuavely dabs cream on her nose and snickers. “Suits you, Beckett.”

Beckett swipes the cream off her nose and licks it very slowly and lasciviously from her finger. Castle is riveted to the sight of the tip of her pink tongue circling her fingertip, lapping gently.

“Mmmm. Tasty.”

Castle smiles very wolfishly. “I like cream too,” he says. “But I like this better,” and he dips his head slightly and kisses her in a way that brooks no argument or resistance. “Don’t you?”

“I suppose I could be persuaded.”

“Persuaded?” he murmurs. “Okay.”

He starts with tiny little kisses on her lips, followed by a soft nip on the full lower lip that she nibbles habitually, then draws that between his to soothe it. “Open up,” he growls gently. She does, and he takes full advantage, a possessory seduction that leads to total ownership. His hand slips from the small of her back to her ass; the other to knot into her hair and slant her head to give him easier, and then unfettered, access. She curves in and surrenders, sinking into him without a qualm, and the kisses heat up: move from lips to neck to lips again; shirts open and skin meets skin; and he moves a little so that he can turn her very slightly and palm and mould her through the soft cotton and show her that he’s here. She rolls her hips against him and pushes her breast into his hand and the kiss becomes only the first point of mutual insanity.

They don’t have time for this. They should be packing up, drinking a last hot chocolate, putting on shoes and coats. Not frantically sharing breath and tongues, ripping open clothes and letting them fall; not grasping and clasping and gripping or grinding and rolling; not hard strokes thrusting and wet heat opening and he taking and she giving and explosion. Not a mutual movement to the bedroom and the proof that neither can resist the other as they give and take all over again.

They don’t have time for this desperate, wordless lovemaking.

They don’t have time – but they do have need – for a shower; vital clean-up; but that, too, becomes a seduction; the sponge and shower gel smoothing across their bodies until they mutually beg – first words, in all this time they don’t have – make love to me again and this time it’s slow and sensual, the frantic desperation muted.

After, clean but not yet dressed, Beckett lies in Castle’s arms, curled into him, quiet and sated and peaceful. Her eyes and body are soft.

“You always know. Even when I don’t. How do you know?”

“I’m… outside. You’re too far in to see. Sometimes the onlooker understands far more of the game.”

“Cliché,” she ripostes, but gently.

“Doesn’t mean it can’t be right.”

“You feel outside?”
There’s a note of uncertainty that makes Castle hesitate and consider the wording of his reply more carefully than he might otherwise have. His arms stay round her, ready to lock if she tries to flee.

“Not an outsider” – he emphasises the last syllable – “but outside. You and your dad are all tied up emotionally. I’m not part of that. Just like O’Leary isn’t, or Ryan and Espo, or Lanie.” He takes a breath. “You and me are a different thing. Your dad’s not part of that.”

Beckett snickers, swiftly killed. She eases down against his chest again. “Okay. I get it.”

“We ought to pack up. It’s nearly eight.”


“I…” Castle stops, before that thought can exit his head. *I’d happily keep you here forever* is one thing, granted Alexis would need to have decided to leave home first, but *I thought you wanted to sort it all out with your dad* is probably not helpful. Not while she’s curled into him and more-or-less at peace. He draws little patterns on her back: a mandala of affection. “We can come back here,” he says instead. “Often, if you want to. If it helps.”

“It helps. Thanks, Castle.”

Traffic is light: late March not being peak season for weekending in the Hamptons. Castle drives fairly sedately, hoping that the concealing darkness will encourage Beckett to say something more. His hopes for words are in vain, but not long into the journey she lays a hand on his knee, as if she’s drawing strength or hope from him. He has plenty of that to give. Her hand stays still, as she looks out the window, watching the road pass by.

“Will you be at the precinct tomorrow?” she asks, about halfway.

“Sure.”

Silence redescends. It lasts for another while.

“I’ll tell Dr Burke you’re coming to Tuesday’s session.”

“Okay.”

And that appears to be that. But her hand hasn’t left his leg since she put it there. It’s not pressing or teasing or doing anything interesting at all, but now that he thinks about it she hasn’t actually been out of contact with him for more than a moment or two since… since she stared out over the sea and then turned back to him and agreed to keep seeing Dr Burke. Detective Kate Beckett doesn’t cling. But soft Kat might, very pleasurably. However, this is neither Beckett nor Kat. Certainly it’s not a Katie.

That had hit Jim harder than almost anything else. *Don’t call me Katie. I’m not Katie. My name is Kate.* If Alexis were to say *don’t call me pumpkin*… that would be hard. *What’s in a name?* In this case, a whole lot of history. A whole family’s history, and all the memories that broke on Jim’s whiskey bottles; all the love bound up in their past that had – so it seems – dissolved in alcohol and death.

Castle thinks about that, and names, all the way home. He’d changed his, after all. Richard Rodgers had become Rick Castle. Scholarship geek with no real friends had become megastar celebrity playboy who’d been the toast of the town. And then he’d become *Castle!* with that peculiarly irritated, snarky tone that only Beckett could ever produce, and then after a few weeks
of that he’d become Castle in a whole variety of tones from furious to orgasmic. She’s never used his first name, that he can remember, though he’s called her Beckett (mostly); Kate (when she’s really upset) and Kat (when she’s soft and pettable in his arms and bed).

Nothing has been said for an hour and more, as both Castle and Beckett are lost in their separate thoughts. Finally they pull up at Beckett’s, and Castle extracts himself and then Beckett’s bag from the Mercedes.

“Coffee, Castle?” she asks.

Castle flicks a quick glance at his watch. Relatively sedate or not, they’ve made good time, and he can easily afford a stay with Beckett.

“Yes, thanks.”

He stretches, and as he relaxes back manages to twine his arm around Beckett. She hadn’t been far away, though. More of this odd need for contact with him. He wonders if she’s actually aware that she’s doing it. Whether she is or isn’t, though, he certainly likes it. She needs so little: she’s so incredibly self-sufficient and so capable – most of the time – hard ass, hard-headed and tough; but now she needs support, and she needs him. She loves him, and she said so, too. Maybe that’s why she feels able to be so tactile. Maybe that’s who his underlying Kat-Kate-Beckett ought to be, wants to be: cuddlesome and pettable off-duty; soft and loving. He snugs her in more assertively, and they proceed to the elevator and Beckett’s apartment without losing the close contact.

He still hasn’t lost contact with her in any fashion when they’re sitting on Beckett’s couch with coffee. She’s – he thinks – a little sleepy, a little soft: it’s almost sweet. He plops a kiss on top of her head, since it’s there. After the hell of Friday, he’d expected her to be tense when they came back: forced back into her chestnut-spiky shell that protects her – protected her – from her history. If she is intending to try to force herself back into her shell, it’s not apparent right now. She murmurs contentedly and lays her head on his shoulder. The Hamptons may not have resolved everything, but it’s certainly cleared up one mystery: Beckett’s feelings. If he’d been asked if he’d take a clear statement of I love you on Thursday lunchtime – he’d have bitten the offeror’s arm off.

Beckett is tired. The weekend has helped enormously – well, Castle has helped enormously, though it wouldn’t have worked if he hadn’t taken her out of Manhattan – but it’s not really enough to bring her ravaged emotions under full control. She still feels very fragile: as if another shock will shatter her. She curls into Castle and murmurs formlessly. He’s her safety and her shield, right now.

“I’ve finished, Beckett. It’s time I went home.” His sleepy, lazy smile twines through his baritone and into her ears. “Time for a goodnight kiss.” She feels one large hand cup her chin, the other removes her cup to the table and then, on its return, catches her legs to swing them over his knee and follows up by shunting her into his lap. This has, without her active effort but with her active appreciation, brought her into the perfect alignment for kisses. His lips skate over hers, his tongue requests she let him in, his wide span spreads across her back and curls round her neck, the possessive grip leashed and restrained, for now.

“I don’t want you to go,” she manages, before his kiss takes all the words away.

“I don’t want to go either, but I need to. You know that. I’ll be there tomorrow.” He punctuates each sentence with a searching kiss.

“I know.” But her grip is painfully hard on his shoulders, and her breathing has a ragged edge. Castle doesn’t comment on either, simply kisses her again, and again, and again: forcefully
assertive and making it clear in every thrust of his tongue and firm stroke of his hands over her back that he has her, and will keep her, and will relieve her of any need to slay dragons, right now. Dragon-slaying will wait till Tuesday.

“I’d like a nice new murder,” he says hopefully.

“Me too.” She pauses. “We shouldn’t wish for murder.”

“Keeps us both in work,” Castle says mordantly. “Maybe some lowlife who deserves it could be dead. That way you don’t need to be upset.”

“Mm,” she assents.

He stands up, perforce standing Beckett up too, and manoeuvres towards the door. She lets go, reluctantly.

“Night, Castle.”

“Till tomorrow, Beckett. I’ll be there.”

Monday morning early finds Beckett at her desk, which does not differ in any noticeable respect from the state in which she had left it on Thursday. The coffee mugs are beginning to grow cultures: a caffeine-fuelled Petri dish. She repatriates them to the break room, before she can catch some vile disease. She has no hope that the algae will have any useful properties, such as solving cold cases, or at least eating the paperwork.

“Yo, Beckett. You done skivin’ off with so-called flu?”

“Maybe you should eat healthy. Take vitamins. Do a bit of exercise.”

Beckett thinks fast. Montgomery must have made an excuse for her. She grins evilly.

“Give me a day or two, and I’ll ram those vitamins right down your Irish throat, Ryan. You want a sparring lesson?”

“No,” Ryan says very rapidly. Esposito sniggers.

“Your pal called me.”

“Huh?”

“O’Leary. Y’know? Big guy, knew you back when?”

“Oh?” Beckett is moderately suspicious, but hides it well. “What’d he want?”

“Sparrin’. He said you should watch. Learn something. Agreed on Thursday.” Beckett splutters furiously. Esposito unobtrusively studies her. He hadn’t been at all convinced by either Montgomery’s flat statements or O’Leary’s explanation for his call, and to his eye Beckett isn’t showing any signs of actual illness. He can’t see anything, in fact. Not being dumb, however, and having already had several weeks of strange goings-on and barely-there explanations from Castle, he is pretty sure that Beckett’s flu was imaginary, and that Castle’s outright terror when she hadn’t been there – that man can’t act worth a damn, and he hadn’t managed to hide it at all – had hidden much more than he and Ryan knew. O’Leary’s call had just been the frosting on the cake, really. Castle and O’Leary seem to know an awful lot about what’s going on. Question is, does he want to know? Or does he just want to treat Beckett like normal? On balance treating her like normal is
safer. For him. That O'Leary is a bit too big for him to take chances. He’d been nearly as protective as Castle, when they’d been sorting out Lanie.

“I’ll bring the popcorn,” Ryan says happily. “Anyway, Beckett, you won’t be up to sparring for a day or two. How’s that wrist?”

“Fine,” she says automatically, and circles her hand to prove it. “Now, if you’re finished asking questions, don’t we have any new murders to solve?”

“Not yet. We’re next up, though. Don’t wanna wish anyone dead, but I’m fed up of cold cases an’ paperwork.”

“Still nothing?”

“Still nuthin’.”

“Ugh,” Beckett says, and starts to sort through the files on her desk. They are in no way improved from Thursday. Coffee does not help them. A slow hour, and then a slower second one, passes by. Esposito and Ryan discuss basketball. Other detectives wander past. Montgomery occasionally peers out of his office. The phone does not ring.

By the time Castle turns up, Beckett is ready to chew the legs off her desk with boredom.

“Coffee service,” arrives happily over her shoulder, followed by her usual order.

Esposito, still unobtrusively studying, notes the change of Beckett’s expression, the speed with which she conceals it, and the way in which Castle starts to move a hand towards her and then stops, and draws some very accurate conclusions which he has no intention of letting past his lips. Not even to Ryan.

Not ten minutes later Beckett’s phone rings and they have finally got a new case. She only just doesn’t cheer.

“C’mon, boys. Body drop at a building site on Rivington. Let’s go. Castle, with me.”

When they get there, Lanie is directing CSU and poking gently at the body. It’s revoltingly suffused about the face, the reason for which is not entirely obvious.

“What’ve you got, Lanie?”

“Not sure yet, but I think he suffocated. Looks like carbon monoxide, but I’ll have to run tox. No obvious GSW, doesn’t look like he got bashed on the head. I’ll need to check for stabbings.”

“ID?”

“Driver’s licence in his pocket.” Lanie hands it over. “Riccardo Belvez.”

Beckett looks it over. “Okay. You work your magic and get me a cause of death. Ryan, Espo, you guys get talking to the men on the site. How’d they find him?”

“Dug him up,” Esposito says bluntly.

“Ooohhh, grave-robbers!”

“I don’t think so. Unless Burke’s got a sideline,” Beckett snarks – but only to Castle’s ears.
He snorts. “That’s cruel, Beckett. But funny. We should find out if his best friend” –
“... doesn’t have any friends,” Beckett bitches –
“is a Hare.”
“More like Hannibal Lecter.”
“Maybe you should give him a packet of fava beans as a farewell gift.”
“Rather give him a bullet,” Beckett snarks, with enough viciousness for Castle to cast her a glance. She looks a little shamefaced. “I don’t like him.”
“I’d never have guessed,” Castle says very dryly, and, unseen by the others, skims a hand over her back.

Back in the precinct, Beckett’s running the ID and finding that Belvez lives out in Brooklyn. He’s not married. He doesn’t appear to have any girlfriend. This is not helpful. A little further digging reveals that he only moved into Brooklyn two months ago. The landlord is relatively forthcoming, once Beckett tells him that if he doesn’t spill his guts (actually, she says *talk to me* in tones that imply that not talking would be a really big mistake, but Castle’s so happy to see her on a case and enjoying herself and *normal* again, that his authorial filters have defaulted to Dashiell Hammett) she’ll have him brought in by the two biggest cops she can find.

“So he moved here from New Mexico? Did he say why?”
“Dunno. Expect he needed a job,” the landlord grumps. “Paid me on time, though. Deposit, too.”
Beckett makes a note. *Check bank.*

“Any visitors? Girlfriend? Boyfriend?”
“I don’t have none of that shit,” the landlord says angrily. “Ain’t having no boyfriends round here.”
Castle’s eyes widen.

“Okay. We’ll need in. I’ll be over in” – she checks her watch – “half an hour. I’ll need the spare key.”

“Okay.”
“Road trip?” Castle asks happily.

“Yep. Let’s go.”
Breathing in the chemicals

As the day goes on, Castle becomes more and more sure that Montgomery actually made a really big mistake by keeping Beckett clear of new cases for so long. That is, for more than around a week. She’s so much more alive with a murderer to pursue: all her spark is sparkling.

Belvez’s apartment is a two room walk-up, fortunately only on the second floor, in an indifferent state of cleanliness. CSU are summoned, just in case of any leads, and while they’re making their way over Beckett issues instructions to Ryan and Espo relating to bank accounts, phones, street cameras and all the other paraphernalia of investigation. She then tosses Castle a pair of gloves and they start to look around.

“This is weird, Beckett.”

“What?”

“He’s got four unused cans of shaving foam.”

“Well, that’s weird. Maybe he bulk buys.”

“They rattle. Shaving foam doesn’t rattle.”

Beckett appears in the bathroom doorway. Castle demonstrates.

“Oh, maybe you got something there. Leave them for CSU. In fact, let’s get out of this room. CSU need to have a proper look.”

“But Beckett…” Castle whines.

“No buts.” She glares at the bathroom, and incidentally at Castle. “CSU can sweep it. We’ll go search his living room. Come on.”

Castle trails after her. The desk is covered in papers. The papers are covered in meaningless diagrams and strings of letters and numbers. Memory is heaving into action and finding long-disused information in Castle’s head, when Beckett makes a very satisfied noise.

“Chemical formulae,” she says smugly. “What’s a down on his luck guy doing drawing formulae in his apartment?”

“What did that run on him show?”

“Nothing yet. I think I’ll put out a feeler to New Mexico. This isn’t your normal economic migrant to New York. Something’s up.” She smiles ferally. “This one is definitely my kind of case. Let’s see if we can find an expert who speaks chemistry.”

“Um… I know a guy at NYU.”

“You do?”

“Sure I do. He told me how to make explosives for Derrick Storm, out of candle wax, fertiliser and a couple of household ingredients.”

“Okaaayyy,” Beckett drawls. “And I suppose you just had to test the recipe?”
Castle’s ears turn pink. “Well…”

“Mmm?”

“There was quite a big hole in the beach. But it all filled up again in a couple of tides.”

Beckett quirks a sardonic eyebrow.

“It did! And it’s a private beach anyway. If I want to make explosives, I can.”

“I don’t think I want to know any more. If I did, I’d have to arrest you and turn you over to Homeland Security.”

“I liked that sentence right up till you mentioned Homeland Security,” Castle grumps. “Why’d you have to kill the mood like that?”

“Focus, Castle. This is a murder, not some seedy club.”

Castle grumbles under his breath until they’ve finished searching the desk and they’re on the way back to the bullpen.

“What do we got, Espo?” Beckett whips out, before she’s even hit her desk.

“Footage’ll take a coupla hours. Phone records on the way – Ryan’s on it. Bank we’re waitin’ on. Lanie ain’t called yet. Social security number’s backed up so we don’t even know what his job was, if he got one.”

At that opportune moment Beckett’s phone rings. It’s Lanie.

“I can’t see any cause of death other than suffocation. He wasn’t strangled, but his lungs were inflated, so I’m waiting for tox results to confirm carbon monoxide. Should have them tomorrow.”

“Can’t you speed it up?”

“You say that every time. No.”

“You say that every time, too,” Beckett humphs.

“Tomorrow, Kate. Fastest I can manage.”


Beckett puts the phone down, and looks about her for Castle. He isn’t there. Ryan and Espo are slaving over a hot computer, chasing down cross-connections. She assumes Castle’s gone off to the restroom, and looks at the photos of the formulae. Castle, she thinks irritably, had no right to go to the restroom before he’d contacted his guy who speaks chemistry.

“Detective Beckett.”

“Sir?”

“A word.” Beckett doesn’t fail to miss the lack of any please.

“Sir.” She follows Montgomery into his office.

“Now. Explain last week.”
Beckett gulps. It’s not often Montgomery pulls the full Captain bit, but clearly he is now.

“My father said he didn’t want to be family after I’ve spent five years looking out for him,” she says baldly and rapidly. “Friday was a joint session with the shrink. It got to me. It won’t happen again, sir.”

“How can I be sure of that, Detective?”

Beckett opens her mouth, and shuts it again; repeats the motion. Montgomery simply waits.

“I… you can’t, sir. But please don’t bench me again. I can’t… please don’t.”

Montgomery stares grimly at her. “I heard about your outburst at Central Park,” he says. “If you’d been on duty, there’d be a reprimand on your file already.”

Beckett shrinks into herself. Montgomery observes it with some discomfort, and decides that rating her further is possibly counterproductive.

“What happened?”

“She said she needed my help. I said no. Orders. She asked me how I could live with myself if I never helped anyone.”

Montgomery winces. “I see. So you obeyed orders, even if you were provoked into losing your temper. Hmm. It’s just as well that Detective O’Leary was present.”

Beckett stands at parade rest. Montgomery surveys her, assessingly, and changes tack.

“Are you still seeing the shrink?”

“Yessir.”

“Okay.” He thinks for a few minutes, during which Beckett says nothing and keeps looking hopefully towards the door. “Fine. Here’s how it’s going to be. You do your shifts and no more. You take Castle with you if you’re working a case. If your father’s getting to you, you come tell me before you go disappearing off. If you tell me, we can work something out. If you do that again, you’ll take three days unpaid. After I’ve told you what I think of it.”

“Sir.”

“And no getting hurt on the mats, either. If you’re gonna spar, be careful. Dismissed.”

“Sir.”

Beckett escapes, feeling somewhat flayed. She attains the relative safety of her desk and glares impartially around the bullpen – and then glares very partially indeed at Castle’s still empty chair. She wants a guy who speaks chemistry. Castle promised her one, and he hasn’t delivered, which gives her a reason to be cross, and he’s disappeared. She harrumphs, and goes to harass Ryan.

Castle is in the stairwell. He is not, in fact, hiding. He has even spoken to the guy he knows, who has promised to arrive at the Twelfth after he has finished lecturing for the day. He is now, however, rather than giving Beckett the good news, talking to O’Leary. That hadn’t been the plan, but he’d needed the restroom, and then his phone had rung before he could write her a note, and he certainly isn’t going to have any sort of a conversation with O’Leary with the bullpen listening in.

Not, it turns out, that they would have been able to hear much. Castle barely gets a word in.
O’Leary is filling him in on the Friday afternoon storm. He’s a lot more descriptive than Beckett had been, that’s for sure. Castle quietly and privately thanks Beckett’s overworked guardian angel for the existence of O’Leary, and when he’s done offers to buy as many beers as O’Leary can drink (he can always sell a few investments to fund it, and it probably won’t need to be so many that the market moves) when there’s a convenient moment.

O’Leary rings off eventually, and Castle wanders back out to find a very irritated Beckett. He forestalls the irritation by opening his mouth.

“John’s coming over after teaching ends.”

“John?”

“Chemical guy. Formally: Professor John Terrison of NYU.”

Beckett’s scowl disappears as if it had never been. “When?”

Castle shrugs. “About five, I suppose.” It’s three now.

“Good.” The feral smile is back on her lips. “Coffee. If I lean over Ryan again he’ll try and strangle me with the camera footage.”

She leads the way to the break room and competently sets up the machine. Castle takes a very much more careful look around the break room than he usually does, and observes that there is a quiet corner where it’s possible to lurk unseen by the bullpen.

“C’mon,” he says hopefully, “let’s play hooky for five minutes. There’s a comfy seat” – Beckett makes a rude noise – “okay, a seat, there, where Ryan won’t spot you and strangle you” – “Like he could,” she mutters darkly.

“and we can drink coffee in a civilised fashion.” He bats his eyelashes at her, and widens his eyes to the utmost.

“Okay. Five minutes.” She sits down where he’s indicated. Castle sits down right next to her, tucks an arm around her, and drinks his coffee. Beckett taps his hand where it’s curved around her waist. “What is this?”

“A hand,” Castle says innocently.

Beckett glares at full fearsomeness. It has no effect on Castle, who smiles boyishly back at her, completely impervious to any glare. “A hand?”

“Yep.”

“Why is this hand round my waist?”

“It got lonely,” Castle says soulfully. “It misses you.” Beckett considers vomiting. “And you probably need a hug, but that’s a bit obvious so this’ll have to do.” That’s a little better. She might not have to vomit after all.

“Why do I need a hug?”

“Because Montgomery hauled you in and you looked uncomfortable. So, hug. Well, this half-version, anyway. For now. You can have a proper one later, when no-one will interrupt.”
“Can I?” she says snarkily. She drains her coffee, and stands up. Castle’s hand slides down from her waist to her hip, and draws a little squiggle which produces a small wiggle in return. “Work, Castle.”

At five or so a small, neat man with yellow-stained fingers appears, who Castle greets enthusiastically and who, once extracted from Castle’s happy reminiscences, is provided with tea in the conference room.

“So, Professor Terrison,” Beckett says, friendly but professional, “Castle says you teach chemistry at NYU?”

He looks a little embarrassed. “Call me John. Yes, well, I’m the head of department, now, and mostly I do research” –

“He does really cool stuff,” Castle bounces.

“Shush, Castle. I want to hear John. I can hear you talk all day.”

“and anyway, Rick said you found some diagrams and you needed someone to take a look?”

“Yes. I’ve got the papers here.” She spreads them out on the table for John to inspect. He regards them intently, and then starts to mutter words that mean less than nothing to Beckett. She hears definitely organic, and then benzoid, and then ought to be soluble polyimide but this isn’t quite… Her patience is, despite her extreme gratitude that John has come here, wearing a little thin as the unknown technical terms – what the hell is trifluoromethyl or dianhydride anyway – hit her ears and bounce off.

“Right,” John says, just as she’s about to run out the door and drown herself in di-hydrogen monoxide. “I can’t tell you what this is right now, but if you’ll let me I’ll take it away and have a proper look. It’s really interesting. I’d have liked to have met this person. It reminds me really closely of something we’re working with but it’s not quite the same.”

“I’ll get you copies,” Beckett says. “I don’t want to push” – Castle snorts – “but how long will it take?”

“Hmm. Day or two, maybe. If I can match it up to something then faster.”

John wanders off with copies in his clutch, murmuring technical terms to himself. Beckett returns to harassing Espo and Ryan.

Work does not produce any more results after John has left, and at shift end there is nothing new. Montgomery peers beadily out of his office door, and Beckett takes the hint and decamps. Castle wanders after her.

“Want some company?”

She turns to him, only barely shorter than he, and meets his eyes. “Not tonight, thank you. I need some time to think.”

He looks very seriously at her. “Alone?”

“Alone.” She smiles, but there’s a hint of wistfulness behind it. “I need to think, before tomorrow. I won’t have time before Burke. Do you want a ride home?” It’s a conversation closer.

“Yeah. Thanks. But… no hugs? I promised you proper hugs later.”
“Yes…” She would like hugs. But she has to think before Dr Burke tomorrow. She ought to confirm her appointment, too, and tell him that Castle is coming. Her desire to annoy Dr Burke as much as he annoys her is childish, and she can be better than that.

“I need some time. I… only you can save yourself, yeah? I’ve got to work it out, and if you come by I won’t because I’ll just want to… to be hugged.”

Castle isn’t entirely convinced, but he’d rather leave her to it than push the point. He slips into the passenger seat, and – much as Beckett had done yesterday – puts a hand on her knee. Hers slides over it, briefly, and then returns to the wheel. Still, before he leaves the car he leans over to kiss her, and for an instant she holds him tightly.

He watches her cruiser depart before entering his building.

At after six on Monday, Dr Burke is still in his office. He is contemplating the problem of the Becketts. After the joint session had concluded, with no real resolution but, as consolation, no secrets left uncovered, Friday had included a draining discussion with Mr Beckett, who had been deeply distressed and had required all the efforts of both Dr Burke and his sponsor in order to be in any state to leave. His daughter’s state of fury, disbelief and then semi-catatonia had left him convinced that there was no possibility of reconciliation, and it had taken considerable time to convince him otherwise. He had been desperate to take any actions which might bring his daughter back into contact, and so Dr Burke had taken the opportunity to obtain explicit consent from him to inform Detective Beckett of any matters which he might have mentioned to Dr Burke and to tell her of his feelings. Mr Beckett had been pathetically grateful that Dr Burke would remind Detective Beckett of his words.

Dr Burke is concerned that Detective Beckett had failed to take in a single word that her father had said. He wishes to discuss with her, if she should attend, her views on what had been said. While Dr Burke believes Mr Beckett to have been absolutely sincere in his remorse, and to wish to re-establish a relationship with Detective Beckett, it had been perfectly clear that she had not been in any state to have absorbed anything of his pain. Dr Burke considers this to be a result of her protective mechanisms, developed over time. Her outpouring of all her feelings, as should have happened years ago, had left her empty.

He sips his tea, and rejects any notion that a cookie might be soothing. He does not need such a prop. There will be a key to this conundrum. He merely needs to think logically and consider the personalities involved.

At that moment his receptionist knocks and, on entering, advises him that Detective Beckett has confirmed tomorrow’s appointment, and has said that Mr Castle will be accompanying her. This development is helpful. Clearly the weekend has not produced another breach. Dr Burke dismisses his receptionist with a smile and courtesy, and returns to his contemplations.

He begins with the two firm principles which are clear in this situation: Detective Beckett wants to be cured in order that she can have a healthy relationship with Mr Castle (which end Mr Castle entirely supports, despite the very occasional mis-step); and Mr Beckett is desperate to mend matters with his daughter. Dr Burke has no doubt at all of Mr Beckett’s sincerity. He does, however, wish that Detective Beckett was not so hard to read. He recalls Mr Castle’s words. *She never meant to say all that, and now she thinks they’ll never be family.* There is, however faintly, hope.

He considers very carefully the ethics of his next thought. He would like to know if Detective
Beckett had said anything further of use over the weekend. It would be possible to find out simply by asking Mr Castle, and Detective Beckett has not withdrawn her consent for Dr Burke to talk to Mr Castle about any aspect of her treatment. It would therefore not be in breach of his duty to her to ask. She had lost her composure remarkably quickly, in fact, and while he is sure that her disagreement with Mr Castle had removed much of Detective Beckett’s normal control and composure, now that he has a chance to look back with the benefit of two days’ distancing, Dr Burke wonders if there had not been more to it than that. He has, he admits to himself, no grounds for that thought at all. He detests the concept of gut instinct, which is almost always either wrong or simply an erroneous shorthand term for an accumulation of clues and conclusions which individually are too small to register in one’s conscious mind.

He considers, again, whether he should speak to Mr Castle. It is a finely balanced decision. He does not believe in games of chance or gambling, but he pulls a dime from his pocket and flips it. As it spins downward, as he had expected, the result he wishes for becomes clear. The coin, naturally, lands on the opposite face. That is irrelevant. The mere act of tossing a coin has made the right path evident.

He lifts the telephone.

“Castle.”

“Mr Castle. This is Dr Burke.”

“Oh. Hi. Um…”

“I understand you will be attending with Detective Beckett tomorrow.”

“Er… yes.”

“I would not normally do this, Mr Castle, but is there anything of which I should be aware that would assist me in guiding the session? It appeared to me on Friday that Detective Beckett was very quick to lose her composure, compared to her usual behaviour.”

“She ran into Julia Berowitz. I didn’t know till today but Julia told Beckett that she never helps anyone and Beckett lost her temper and unloaded. O’Leary said it was like watching a flamethrower. It sounds like it was the other half of what she said to Jim.”

“And this was triggered by a comment that she does not help others?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you. Now, is there anything that Detective Beckett has said subsequent to Friday’s session that might help?”

“She doesn’t know if he’s lying.”

Dr Burke raises his eyebrows. That is, in fact, a significant admission. It may, indeed, represent considerable progress.

“She said it wasn’t even her word against his. It was his word against his. And then she wondered if he was just messing with her head. She’d looked up emotional abuse.”

“I see. That is helpful to know.” Dr Burke thinks for an instant. “Have you any insight into what Detective Beckett wants?”
Castle sighs. “She says,” he says heavily, “that she wants this done. That’s what she says.”

“What do you believe?”

“I think that she wants to believe that her dad wants to be a family. But she doesn’t think he’ll ever forgive her for Friday. I don’t think she thinks that he’s ever forgiven her for any of it, anyway.”

“In fact, what she needs is forgiveness.”

“I suppose so.”

“Thank you. That is indeed very helpful. I shall see you tomorrow, Mr Castle. Let us hope that it is a productive session.”

“Um… is Jim okay? Well, not okay, but…”

“He is distressed, but not in imminent danger. His sponsor is a man of great good sense.”

“Thanks. Bye.”

“Goodbye.”

Dr Burke is really most heartened by that conversation. It appears that there will be a route through this morass of emotions to achieve a reasonable relationship between Mr Beckett and Detective Beckett. He takes up his fountain pen with some optimism.
Butterflies are free to fly

Beckett had wanted Castle to come home with her very badly, but she has to think and Castle is not conducive to thinking. Not when she’s upset, anyway. His physical presence is simply too much for her, and the still-overwhelming reactions to him mean that all that would happen is that they’d end up, if not in bed, certainly in a state of non-thought. She can’t keep letting herself drown all the complications in sex. Love or not, that won’t help.

So, Kate, think. Start by thinking about what you want.

What does Kate Beckett want? She lays her pen down and stares out of the window. Easy things first. She wants Castle. Scratch that. She is in love with Rick Castle. She wants to be able to have a proper relationship where they go to each other’s homes and like each other’s family and don’t keep falling over her problems with all of that. Easy to say, at least. So what does she need to do to get there?

She stares unfocusedly out the window some more, into the early twilight. Gradually she faces up to the main problem: her relationship – or not – with her father. For ten years, theirs has been a relationship based on lies and built with guilt bricks. His alcoholism, her guilt firstly that she couldn’t save him and then that she’d walked away. His guilt that he’d fallen, her resentment – never spoken – that he had. Her lies, based on what she’d been told was a need to grow up and get over it, to try and fill the gap. She’d wanted him to love her, and so she’d hidden the truth of what he’d said and done from him, and hoped that it was enough for him to forgive her, just as he’d hoped that she would forgive him.

All that that had left them was that neither of them could ever really have forgiven – each other, or themselves. Because there is no forgiveness without the truth. You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. No truth, no freedom. No truth, no forgiveness.

No forgiveness, no freedom.

With the thought, comes that same feeling of realisation as when she solves her most complex cases: followed by relief, understanding, and to some extent a weight being lifted. She’s never been happy, because she’s never been free. Never forgiven her father for falling, nor herself for failing him.

Which leads to the other key question: does she believe her father wants a relationship that isn’t based on her running when he calls; isn’t grounded in her misconception that he needs her to stay sober?

That’s much harder.

That goes back to the whole core of this problem, the polluted mess that the clean air of the Hamptons couldn’t clear up: whether her father lied when drunk, lied when sober; whether he knew or didn’t know what he had said; what he had meant by just like family. He’d said she’d misunderstood… but he himself didn’t know why he’d told her to go or begged her to stay; didn’t know what he meant drunk or sober. How, then, should she?

And yet… and yet she sees his face on Friday: white and weeping and sunken in pain. If it had been a witness, or a suspect… what then would she have thought? And yet… the evidence had all been one way. The only counterweight is his own word, and that’s contradictory.
Which brings her right back round to Castle’s suggestion. Castle’s views of her dad, and Dr Burke’s views of her dad. Tomorrow. But this time, the session in the light of forgiving – if not her father, understand enough to try to forgive herself.

It’s full dark, now, only the small circle of light from her desk lamp to see by; and it’s late. Time to sleep. She’s done enough, for today.

By nine a.m. Belvez’s Social Security number has paid some belated dividends. He was working in a pharmacy on Clinton. Interestingly, his major had been chemistry, back in New Mexico State University – and hmmm, what has she here? – he’d done a post-grad in it too, and he’s been part of a research group there. Mmmm. So why on earth is someone with some serious smarts and qualifications selling pills in the front of a pharmacy? He doesn’t even have a pharmacy minor. Beckett’s well-developed antennae for the weird and complicated are not so much twitching as whipping. She chews the end of her pen and ponders.

Pondering is not improved by the dearth of information. She quits pondering in favour of caffeinating, and makes herself a coffee. Fortunately, before it’s finished Lanie’s report pops up in her e-mail.

Now this is truly weird. Their boy Belvez had indeed been suffocated with carbon monoxide. However, there are no soot particles, and no other gases. It looks, says Lanie’s report, as if it was pure carbon monoxide. Not a contaminant in sight. Or in spectroscopy, for that matter. Where on earth do you…

“In a lab!” Beckett says out loud.

“What?” says Castle.

Beckett drops her pen. Castle does not drop the coffee or the pastries – just.

“He was suffocated with pure carbon monoxide. It must have come from a lab.”

“Or a supplier who supplies labs,” Castle offers up.

“Yeah, that too. Okay. Ryan!”

“Yo?”

“What’ve you got with cameras?”

“Not a lot. Nothing useful anywhere.”

“Okay. Move on to running all the possible suppliers of gases to labs. We’re looking for carbon monoxide suppliers.”

She thinks for a moment. “You know, NYU isn’t very far from Rivington… How could I have missed that? We should have asked John if he recognised Belvez. Might have seen him around. Espo?”

“Yo?”

“As well as gas suppliers see if you can get camera footage round the NYU at Silver Center, Washington Square.”

“On it.”
“Castle, let’s go visit your pal again. With a photo.”

But when they get into the car there’s a surprising pause. The key is in the ignition, but Beckett doesn’t turn it. She isn’t looking at Castle, either.

“I couldn’t forgive him,” she blurts out. “And then I couldn’t forgive me either.” Castle puts a hand on her knee and then a Kleenex in her hand, and then regardless of being parked only fifty yards or so from the front of the precinct puts an arm around her and pulls her head on to his shoulder.

“How do I know if he lied or not? Everything goes back to that. I can’t get past it. I can’t forgive anything if I don’t know what I’m forgiving.” She stops and pulls back into the driver’s seat. “I shouldn’t be thinking about this now. I need to concentrate. There’s a corpse out there who shouldn’t be dead.”

“A few moments won’t make much difference, Beckett. It’ll take that long if the lights are red instead of green.” He pats her knee. “Take a breath. I’m here.” Her hand fumbles for his as she struggles for composure, and she grips hard. He folds thick fingers over her slim ones and doesn’t let go till her grasp loosens and her breathing is calm again. The moment passes as if it had never been.

The car starts, the traffic is no worse than normal, and most of the lights are green. Beckett’s momentary melting has, by the time they’ve circled twice to find a parking space, made no difference at all to anything, especially as John is giving a lecture and won’t be available for another fifteen minutes. Beckett carries Castle off to the nearest supplier of more hot caffeine and they return just as class is dismissed.

“Rick?” John queries from behind his lectern, and emerges. “I was going to call you.”

“Oh?” Beckett says. “What have you got?”

“Come round to my office. They’ll want the hall for the next lecture.” And indeed students are already spilling in from the top of the theatre.

John’s office is full of paper, computers, and models. He looks faux-sternly at Castle. “Rick, this time do you think you could not play with the models? They’re not toys.” Castle humphs.

“You said you were going to call?” Beckett prompts.

“Yes. These papers… this is a version of a chemical” – it’s very obvious that John is massively simplifying – “which we’ve been developing. We’re hoping that it’ll be useful for optoelectronics.”

“What’s that?”

“Um – one of the uses could be better fibre optics.”

“Okay. So?”

“Well, this is pretty advanced stuff, and I wouldn’t expect it just to be lying around.”

“John, this is our guy.” Beckett produces a photo of him that was taken before he was suffocated – taken from the driver’s licence. No point upsetting Castle’s pal with the ugly truth of death.

“Ricky?”

“Yes?”
“No, not you, Rick. This is Ricky. Ricky Belvez. I interviewed him to join our group a couple of months ago, to start in a week or two. He really knew his stuff.”

“Why would he be working in a pharmacy on Clinton?”

“What? I have no idea. He was here? I thought he was finishing up his last project. I just needed the funding to come through so he could start.”

“Funding?”

“Research grant. This one’s funded by Verizon.”

“Who else is in the group? Anyone who might have been a bit put out that a new guy’s joining?”

John thinks about it. “Not really. But Ricky had a reputation already. His papers were getting cited a bit more than a post-grad might. I was hoping that catching him would help us on the funding side.” He looks grieved. “Now he’s dead? What a waste. He was shaping up to be brilliant.”

“Was there anyone you knew about that knew him well?” Castle asks. “Girlfriend, family, anything?”

“Not that I knew. If he’d only started here, I’d be able to tell you.”

“Okay,” Beckett says sympathetically. “I’m afraid we’ll have to talk to all of your group. Can you give us the details?”

John produces all the details without a fuss. Beckett doesn’t point out that this is unusually co-operative and that normally the university bureaucracy would forbid it. Never look a gift horse in the mouth.

“Thank you. If there’s anything else, just let me know.”

Back at the bullpen, they run background on each of John’s research group for the rest of the day. Phone records have shown many calls to two numbers, but all Espo’s efforts haven’t managed to extract the owner of the number yet. Footage is inconclusive.

“Why wasn’t there a computer?”

“Huh?”

“Why didn’t he have a computer?” Castle repeats. “Everyone’s got a laptop or an i-Pad. Where was his?”

“I don’t remember seeing one.” Beckett gets on to CSU. They hadn’t found a computer or laptop either. “Maybe he took it around with him?”

“If John thought he wasn’t finished at New Mexico, maybe they know something?”

“Okay, let’s put out a request.”

At shift end the request has not been answered, background on the other chemists is being gathered, and the absence of a laptop is still a mystery. Montgomery repeats yesterday’s meaningful stare, but on seeing Beckett already packing up pulls himself back into his office in the manner of a cautious tortoise.

Castle watches Beckett tidy up her desk for the morning and notes the tiny tremblings of her
fingertips. She’s not exactly happy. This is not exactly surprising. She hasn’t been happy with therapy since the day it began.

“Time to go,” she says.

“How’d you get to leave already?” Ryan mutters.

“Orders. Montgomery doesn’t like it when I’m sick. No-one to keep an eye on you two.” Both detectives regard her blackly. “Night, all.” She disappears before they can think of a riposte. Castle collects his coat in no particular hurry and ambles after her, catching up at the elevator.

“Ready?”

“No. But I don’t have any choice.”

Castle doesn’t hesitate to sit firmly next to Beckett and, not apologetically at all, keep a hand on hers. Dr Burke looks smoothly back at both of them and is entirely unfazed.

“Good evening.”

“Hey.”

“Hello.”

“Where would you like to begin, Detective Beckett?”

“We – Castle – had an idea. About my father. I don’t know if he’s lying about all of it or none of it or something in between,” she blurts out in one breath. Dr Burke observes her knuckles gleaming white where they are clutching Mr Castle’s hand.

“Why does that matter to you?” he asks.

“He… I…” she stops, and regroups. Mr Castle strokes his thumb over her fingers, still gripping. “I need to know the truth. If I don’t know the truth I don’t know what he meant. You both know what I think and you know what he said Friday, but I don’t know what he’s said to you. You need to say. Castle needs to say and you need to say and then we work out what was true. Or not true,” she finishes bleakly.

“And how do you consider that will this help you?”

Detective Beckett winces, and swallows. “If I know the truth, I can… I can forgive myself,” she rushes out.

Dr Burke remains impassive, externally. Internally, he rejoices.

“For what do you think you need forgiveness? You have supported your father far beyond the point when most would have believed he no longer required it.”

Detective Beckett looks at him, nonplussed.

“Uh?”

“For what do you need forgiven? More to the point, why do you still believe that you acted wrongly? There was no shame in walking away. You did not cause your father’s disease, you could not control it and you could not cure it. In those circumstances, the only option is to leave.” Dr
Burke pauses, to let that sink in. “Your father’s decisions are for your father’s account, not yours. Now, why do you think you need to know the truth of his feelings to forgive yourself? You do not need his validation. Your feelings are your own, and you have a right to have them just as you have the responsibility to own them. Forgiveness will come from yourself, not from your father’s words or deeds.”

Detective Beckett does not appear to have contemplated that possibility. Mr Castle, on the other hand, has a very strange look on his face. He appears to have undergone an epiphany. Dr Burke would very much like to know what Mr Castle is thinking, but telepathy is, regrettably, a myth. It would make the psychiatrist’s life so much easier.

“It’s not his validation,” Detective Beckett denies. “It’s mine. I need to know the truth. If I don’t, I’ll never believe the answers. They’ll just be stupid theories with nothing to back them.”

“In fact, you need evidence. You need a reason for his behaviour, so that you can understand it. Only once you understand will you be able to move on.”

“Yes. What you said. That’s all I need.”

“Really?” Dr Burke asks pointedly. “How do you feel about your statements to your father on Friday?” He observes Mr Castle’s wince. More pertinently, he observes Detective Beckett’s wince, her face contorting, and Mr Castle’s murmur in her ear. Dr Burke suspects that it contains the words just tell him.

“I never meant to say it. He’s never going to forgive me.” She dissolves into misery. Mr Castle puts an arm round her and glares at Dr Burke, who looks coolly back at him.

“So, in fact, you also want his forgiveness. Even if rationally you know that you do not need it, emotionally you are still looking for it.”

“It doesn’t matter what I want or look for. I won’t get it. Now he knows I didn’t tell him the truth then, and he couldn’t stand hearing it anyway. He wanted something different, and I can’t keep being something different. I don’t know if he’s messing with my head so I go running back or if he really means it and he never meant it to be like that.”

“So you need the truth to establish how you should deal with your relationship with your father. Whether, in fact, you should make any effort to preserve a relationship at all. It is not necessary to have a relationship if that will damage you. It is merely necessary to understand the reasons for your choice.”

Dr Burke steeples his fingers. “So, Detective Beckett, in order to make your choice and understand your reasons, you require the evidence that will assist you. Now that we have established that, let us begin. With whom do you wish to start?”

Detective Beckett regards him damply, and then with more intensity, before she turns to Mr Castle, who looks less than happy at the change. “Castle. You start. Right from the beginning.” She acquires a slight edge. “I never did hear how my father started talking to you.”

“Er-um” – the stare takes on a cut-glass edge – “After the first time I met him – erm – at yours, I went to talk to him. I told you all about it.” She nods, after a moment. “I thought he was pretty tough. He certainly faced me down. I still don’t know” – Mr Castle sounds vaguely indignant – “how he managed to manipulate that dinner invitation out of me. Anyway. After you walked out of Julia Berowitz’s, he told her that she should listen to you. But he acts just like you when you’re upset: he just closed himself off. The only difference was he went to see his sponsor, and you
just…” he stops.

“Leave.” she says bitterly. “Just like always. Go away. Leave it behind till I can cope.”

Mr Castle does not say anything to that. Dr Burke thinks that this displays some considerable wisdom.

“Anyway,” he says firmly, and to Dr Burke’s surprise Detective Beckett eases slightly. Surprise is muted when he notices Mr Castle’s hand stroking over her fingers again, in the manner of gentling a very shy deer. Ah. Another facet of physical consolation.

“After Julia” – Dr Burke thinks that that sounds like a poorly written romance novel, and is hard-pressed to conceal his inappropriate momentary amusement – “your dad called me. He said” – Mr Castle looks back into memory for, Dr Burke thinks, the precise words – “she’s always been more than enough. She could never let me down. I’m her dad. He sounded scared that you were upset.”

“Scared?” Detective Beckett whispers, as if she doesn’t believe it.

“Scared. Then he called before I came to yours for that gorgeous dinner and please will you cook it again because the food was so good” –

“Castle!” Mr Castle rapidly refocuses to the point under a sharp and, it would appear, extremely familiar tone of irritation.

“to ask if you were okay and try and get me to tell him what was going on and he was worried, Kate” – Dr Burke blinks at the use of her first name – “and he wanted to help you.”

Mr Castle pauses, and takes what looks, to Dr Burke’s extremely experienced eyes, to be a very nervous breath.

“And then it all went to hell after the Hamptons. So I phoned him.”

“You did what?”
“You misread my meaning

“I called him.”


“To make sure he was sober,” Mr Castle snaps. “If he hadn’t been, you’d never have forgiven yourself. If he’d been drunk I’d have got him into rehab.” He snaps his mouth shut. Detective Beckett is opening and closing her mouth and clearly not finding any suitable words. Dr Burke is very glad of that. He does not approve of profanity. “He was desperate. He said you were everything. He said he couldn’t bear you walking away again.”

Mr Castle mutters something under his breath. Dr Burke thinks it might have been I think I know how he feels.

“He said it again. What would he do without you? You were his only family.” Dr Burke has the peculiar impression that Mr Castle has censored that conversation. “He was absolutely devastated, Beckett. Every time I spoke to him, he was utterly miserable. All he could do was be miserable and then yell at me.”

“He yelled at you?”

“About taking care of you. Yeah. He got pretty damn protective, your dad.” Mr Castle was clearly unimpressed by this behaviour. Dr Burke, by contrast, entirely approves. Mr Castle’s previous reputation would have given any father pause.

“Why was he yelling at you? I can take care of myself.”

Mr Castle opens his mouth, closes it, clamps his arm around Detective Beckett in a fashion more suggestive of arrest than amorosity, and opens his mouth again.

“So, to summarise your experience, Mr Castle,” Dr Burke interjects before he might be embroiled in a row between Mr Castle and Detective Beckett. Such an incident would be unpleasant. In any event, if Dr Burke had wished to practice in the field of relationship counselling he would have done so. He did not so wish then, and has no desire to alter that decision now, certainly not with these two. He may be at the top of his profession but the relationship in front of him is several lifetimes’ work. “Mr Beckett has consistently said or implied to you that Detective Beckett is the most important part of his life, to the point where he has come into direct conflict with you. Is that correct?”

“Yes,” Mr Castle states.

“Please describe in more detail the ‘conflict’ issue.”

Dr Burke wishes to draw out a point which he believes it very important for Detective Beckett to understand. She had accused her father of trying to destroy her relationship with Mr Castle, having previously destroyed her relationship with ‘Will’, whoever he may have been, in order to ensure that she remained at his beck and call. Dr Burke considers that, from admittedly a standpoint of believing that Mr Beckett had no such intention, the embarrassment that having to reveal Mr Beckett’s commentary will cause Mr Castle is quite amply justified if it should show Detective Beckett that her father has been actively promoting Mr Castle’s advances.

Mr Castle appears to be about to argue. Dr Burke fixes him with a meaningful stare, until light
dawns. Then Mr Castle squirms uncomfortably, recollects himself, appears to ensure that his arm is still preventing Detective Beckett’s escape should such be required, and scowls. Naturally, such an expression has no effect upon Dr Burke, who is not susceptible to manipulation. He preserves an expression of calmness, and does not tell Mr Castle to stop his childish expressions.

“He said,” Mr Castle forces out, “that it looked like he and you were going to be part of my family. He thought that was a reasonable assumption. Then he complained I was keeping you from him, and I lost my temper and he said all he wanted was to be your dad and I’d better know what I was doing.” He pauses, and calms himself. “And then you said I was to get him to see Dr Burke, so I went to see him. He didn’t believe me. I told him you’d be safe with me even if you never saw him again and he called me some names.” – Detective Beckett tries to pull away, and is prevented – “Anyway. He wound up the last time I spoke to him by asking me my intentions, like some Civil War era father, and told me he’d come after me with a gun if this all didn’t work to help you.” The last sentence is emitted through Mr Castle’s firmly gritted teeth, with an expression of extreme dislike for the necessity of articulating it.

“I should like to point out, Detective Beckett, that Mr Castle’s comments are precisely in accordance with those that your father has made to me. Mr Beckett opened our acquaintance by informing me that if I thought he did not wish to see you again I was a – quote – *quack charlatan.*” Mr Castle snorts. Detective Beckett looks as if she might be inclined to agree with her father. “However, on discovering that I was a worthy foe, he then informed me that he had thought that Mr Castle would be good for you. He believes that both of you have strong feelings for the other, although he was far more sure of Mr Castle’s feelings than of yours, Detective Beckett. He thinks that to be a good thing.”

Dr Burke observes the scarlet faces of both Mr Castle and Detective Beckett with some satisfaction.

“In short, your father has made a considerable number of comments which together have given me the clear impression that he is not merely supportive of a relationship between you, but was actively promoting it: most plainly by showing Mr Castle the family” – Dr Burke has chosen that word entirely deliberately – “photographs and then by manoeuvring him into extending the invitation for both you and your father to join his family for dinner. He wished, I believe, to see how your respective families might fit together.”

Detective Beckett is pallid. Mr Castle is still somewhat scarlet about the tips of his ears. He is also still preventing Detective Beckett from fleeing the room. It is perfectly clear that she is assessing the fastest way to leave.

“He was *matchmaking*?” she finally says, appalled. Mr Castle looks distinctly vindicated.

“That is a definite possibility,” Dr Burke says dryly. “In any event, the one action it is clear that your father was not taking was attempting to dissociate you from Mr Castle. Quite the reverse.”

“Wish he’d told me that,” Mr Castle mutters darkly. Perhaps fortunately, Detective Beckett does not appear to have heard this. Dr Burke does not think that she is appreciating her father’s actions, although he is unsure whether she is white with rage or with ghastly realisation. When she swallows convulsively, he concludes that it is the latter.

“No…” she says, almost entirely bloodless, and then, “Let go!” She pulls away from Mr Castle and exits precipitately. Dr Burke listens carefully and infers that she has reached the female restroom. He raises an eyebrow towards Mr Castle.

“This” – Mr Castle gestures to the door – “happened before. She’s throwing up in the restroom.
And no,” he adds forcefully, “she is *not* pregnant. At least I really hope not.” Dr Burke does too. That would not be a helpful or indeed happy event.

“This happened before?” Dr Burke queries.

“Yeah. After she ran off from Julia Berowitz and her dad. After he called her the next morning and she lost it with him and I said he’d gone to see Ed straight after Julia – she went running for the restroom just like that and then Montgomery” – Dr Burke raises his eyebrows again – “Captain Montgomery, her boss – offered her time out to take care of him and she did it again and then he benched her because she was either sick or unfit for duty.”

“I do not imagine that being suspended made Detective Beckett happy?”

Mr Castle fixes Dr Burke with a very sardonic expression. “You’ve been treating her for several weeks and you ask that? Rhetorical questions are my department, not yours.”

Dr Burke allows himself to make an appreciative gesture. “Indeed. It might be advisable for her Captain not to be made aware of her moment of weakness.” For the first time, Castle acquires a slight feeling of liking for Dr Burke. “I do not believe such knowledge would be helpful to any party.”

“No.”

“Now, Mr Castle, why do you think Detective Beckett has exhibited the same reaction as previously?”

“Oh, because she can’t cope with being reminded of either her own or her father’s weakness,” Mr Castle says, as if that must be the most obvious conclusion to draw. “It’s all stress. She’s always stressed and she’s always hiding herself from everything. She hid from her dad until he worked out it was wrong and then she threw up when it all got too much. Now she’s finding that she can’t hide from herself any more, and it’s all got too much.”

Dr Burke regards Mr Castle with some fascination. It appears that Mr Castle might have a future as a psychiatrist, should he ever wish to cease writing potboiler novels, although his methods are perhaps too unusual for general application.

“What did you do last time?”

Mr Castle colours faintly. “Followed her,” he says shortly. Ah. Physical consolation. Again. Dr Burke does not need to know about that.

“Mm. I would prefer you did not do that in these offices. My staff would not appreciate it.”

Mr Castle quite noticeably does not assent to that comment. “If she needs me, I’m going,” he says instead.

Of course he will, Dr Burke thinks. There is no point trying to stop him. Wrestling is undignified. Most fortunately, at that moment Detective Beckett re-enters and sits down. Mr Castle immediately puts his arm back around her. It still bears a close resemblance to an arrest. Detective Beckett’s skin is green tinged, and Dr Burke observes a decided lack of dark eyeliner and a preponderance of redness.

“He wanted to push us together?” Detective Beckett’s words are ragged. “Not… get in the way? He wanted you to… to look after me? Oh, God.”
Detective Beckett has become very pale again. Mr Castle has clearly expected this. His posture becomes exactly as it had been on Friday evening: wholly protective and suddenly very much larger than Detective Beckett, enveloping her. Dr Burke finds it necessary that he should abruptly remember that he has an urgent matter to discuss with one of his colleagues, makes a swift apology for his impending brief absence, and exits, rapidly.

Castle wraps his arms round his absolutely shocked Beckett-bundle as soon as Dr Burke leaves the room and tries to infuse her with warmth and strength. It’s totally clear that she had not expected to find that her father was actively encouraging Castle’s relationship with her. She shivers, and curls closer into the safe haven of his body. A few minutes pass. Dr Burke re-appears, almost unnoticed.

“He asked you your intentions?” she finally emits, sounding confused. Castle still holds her more closely, and waits. “Why?”

“I expect he didn’t want me to hurt you,” Castle says. “I’d do the same.”

There is no answer. Detective Beckett is obviously trying to absorb and understand this information. Dr Burke observes, and waits patiently. Realisation should not be hurried. Detective Beckett must reach her own conclusions in her own good time. Forcing the pace will certainly not help. It appears that Mr Castle has also taken that lesson, following Thursday. His fingers, however, unlike his mouth, are not still; stroking over Detective Beckett’s hands. Mr Castle, Dr Burke thinks painedly, is a very fidgety man. Still, if it soothes Detective Beckett, which it appears to do, he will not object.

“He wasn’t trying to push us apart? Oh, God.” She gulps. “I said…” Another gulp. “He’ll never forgive me. He didn’t mean that and now he’s never going to forgive me for thinking he did.”

Somewhat to Dr Burke’s surprise (he is never subject to consternation), Detective Beckett does not begin to cry. He had expected it, as, too from his expression, had Mr Castle; who looks at Detective Beckett and then murmurs something to her. She shakes her head. Mr Castle shrugs.

“Up to you, Beckett,” he says more audibly. “Just say if you want to, though.”

“What else has my father said to you?” Detective Beckett looks, half-frightened, at Dr Burke. “What did you think of it?”

Dr Burke steeples his fingers and collects his thoughts in an orderly fashion. “He informed me of his feelings after your mother died, and told me that he had let you down then. He says that he remembers nothing of the times when he was not sober, and I consider this to be the truth.”

Detective Beckett regards him straightly, but says nothing. Dr Burke appreciates her focused attention, and is grateful for the drive that has taken her to the NYPD. He considers that such focus, applied to criminal behaviour, can only make the city safer.

“Mr Beckett had begun to be concerned that you, Detective Beckett, were concealing your feelings from him, and that what he believed to be ordinary family activity, such as dining together, was in fact, in your mind, protecting him from his own weaknesses. He was, in fact, worried about you at the time at which – as he put it – he ‘finagled’ Mr Castle into a dinner invitation.” Dr Burke taps his fingers together where they are steepling and unsteepling, and considers his next words carefully. “Your father told me that this particular dinner was the first time he had been around another” – the emphasis is very pointed and entirely deliberate – “family for some considerable time. He referred to your visits as his family. It is my view that the most unfortunate word choice which he used to you, Detective Beckett, was an error. A considerable error, which it is entirely unsurprising that you misinterpreted as you did, but still, an error. He did not mean that you were
Mr Castle has, in the course of that discussion, tightened his clasp around Detective Beckett, in almost a precise ratio to her face whitening. Dr Burke pauses in his exposition, in case she should wish to comment.

“He didn’t… it was all a mistake?” She pulls her rising voice back down, and her expression freezes. “My mistake,” she says coldly. “All down to me. He wanted our family and I fucked it up” – Dr Burke winces – “by abandoning him again.” Tears crawl from her eyes, but her hard control does not falter. “Doesn’t matter what I do, it’s all just one long screwed up mess and it’s all my fault.”

Detective Beckett wipes her pallid face, and forces her eyes to dryness. “I’d better get used to no family. Seeing as how I’ve driven it away.” Her voice is flat: *this is how it is so deal with it.* Mr Castle looks extremely concerned.

“Why do you persist in blaming yourself and assuming that mistakes cannot be mended?” Dr Burke says sternly. “You have not heard your father’s views, and yet you assume without evidence that he will not forgive you for a misunderstanding which you assume is solely your error. It was not. You continually take an absolutist view, which is equally unjustified and unhelpful.” Mr Castle raises eyebrows at the tone taken. Dr Burke is entirely undeterred.

“You may believe you cannot be forgiven, but that is simply because you appear to be unable to stop blaming yourself for actions which were neither your fault nor your responsibility. Merely because you are unable to forgive yourself does not mean that no-one else, specifically your father, will forgive you, nor does it mean that you do not deserve forgiveness. You did not cause your father’s fall, nor did you put erroneous words in his mouth. Why then do you continue to blame yourself for his actions?”

Detective Beckett is silent for a moment.

“Because every time he saw me when he was drunk it was my fault for being so like my mother. You heard him say it on Friday. *You looked like her and you sounded like her and you behaved like her.* That’s what he said. That’s why he drank. He had to forget. He had to forget me so he drank. Who else caused it? If I’d never been there he wouldn’t have carried on drinking because there wouldn’t have been anything to trigger his memories.”

“And yet he said that you were the only thing he had left to love.”

“Words are cheap,” Detective Beckett says bitterly. “You can buy them by the million in any bookstore. Actions are more truthful.”

Mr Castle, who had looked particularly pained by her first statement, appears to be considerably relieved by her second. Dr Burke notes that Detective Beckett’s fingers are entangled in Mr Castle’s and she appears to be clinging to him, again. He concludes that Mr Castle’s actions are providing Detective Beckett with the reassurance that she needs as to his feelings.

“In that case, let us consider your father’s actions. At first, he drank. When drunk, he rejected you. When sober, he clung to you. After you refused, quite correctly, to enable him any further, he first tried to become sober without assistance, predictably failed, and then went to rehabilitation. He still attends support meetings and is in regular contact with his sponsor.” Detective Beckett nods once, sharply.

“He then spent five years ensuring that he was in contact with you. He waited to approach you
until he had remained sober for long enough to prove that he was entirely serious, and then kept in very regular contact. Neither of you had any reason to consider the underlying, and unresolved, issues.” Dr Burke pauses. “Until, that is, the advent of Mr and Mrs Berowitz and of Mr Castle.”

Mr Castle startles. Detective Beckett simply becomes more colourless.

“The case of the Berowitzes brought alcoholism, and your experiences, back to you. Coincident with that occurrence, Mr Castle was reminding you of the manner in which a caring father behaves while simultaneously appearing to disapprove of your relationship with your father, which he had fundamentally misunderstood. The combination served to re-awaken the resentments which you thought that you had overcome, and imposed a great deal of unacknowledged stress upon you.”

Mr Castle has tensed. Dr Burke regrets the necessity, but the only way in which this situation can be properly resolved is with complete honesty. Mr Castle has been a very important part of the tangled interactions, and while he is a force for good in this matter, he has also committed some errors. Not nearly as many as both Detective and Mr Beckett, however, and in general not nearly as significant.

“You and Mr Castle managed to resolve your differences. However, your father detected that you were unhappy, and sought to alleviate that by encouraging you to spend time with Mr Castle. Unfortunately, he was not aware of his own actions while drunk, and therefore was unaware of the difficulties which you experience” – the present tense is deliberately used – “when you are placed in the position of observing a normal father-daughter relationship.” Dr Burke steeples his fingers. “I find it very surprising that you were able to maintain your composure in the face of such a stressful situation. Few people in your position would have been able to attend at all, still less conceal their stress throughout the whole evening. However, your father did not understand why you were, as he put it, out of sorts.”

Dr Burke pauses there, and considers whether to continue. Mr Castle appears to have recovered himself. Detective Beckett appears, by contrast, to be approaching a point where she might no longer be able to absorb further information. On balance, Dr Burke thinks that he will be able to finish his exposition, and then end the session, in order to allow Detective Beckett to consider his words at her leisure.
The power to know

“Your father therefore tried to find out. Unfortunately, he did so clumsily, and in doing so attempted to force you into a situation where you would be required to entertain a family in your own home, which would make you entirely uncomfortable and remove your safe space. It is entirely unsurprising, and given your general wish not to upset him also commendable, that you refused. Had you felt able to explain, however, matters would not have eventuated as they did. Your father compounded his original error with words which gave you, in your already highly stressed state, entirely the wrong impression as to his motives and meaning.”

“I know this,” Detective Beckett says angrily. “Get to the point. I don’t need a repetition of how I got here.” Mr Castle strokes her hand, to no effect whatsoever.

“After you informed your father that you were no longer prepared to continue seeing him,” Dr Burke continues coolly, “he continued to attempt to make contact. He wished to correct his error. Despite his upset, he remained completely sober. He has, in fact, ensured that he did not make the same mistake as he did when you stopped enabling him. On being informed by Mr Castle that you wished him to see me, he did so without hesitation, although he must have known that I had no duty to spare his feelings. You are my patient, not he. He has been, I consider, completely honest with me about his mistakes, now and in the past. However, the underlying theme of all of his comments has been that he loves you, and will take any action in order to mend this breach. After you left on Friday his sole concern was you: that you would not wish to reconcile in any way. He was” – Dr Burke considers the non-technical term, and chooses it – “heartbroken at the thought.”

“And your point is?”

“Your father’s actions, which you consider may be a more accurate indication of his feelings than words, are entirely congruent with his words once sober, his single error aside. I recall to you his words on Friday: I didn’t mean…that we weren’t a family. You were all I had left to love. All that he has done since Mr Castle appeared in your life has been to try to ensure that you were happy. In short, Detective Beckett, he has tried to act as a father should.”

Detective Beckett buries her face in Mr Castle’s shoulder. Entirely predictably, Mr Castle scowls blackly at Dr Burke. Really, this protectiveness is very tiring, and the aggression directed at Dr Burke quite unnecessary, especially considering that Dr Burke’s treatment plan is, in fact, working, despite Mr Castle’s scowls and Detective Beckett’s stubbornness. Dr Burke will deserve all the professional plaudits which this unusual approach to treatment will garner.

Detective Beckett clearly says something to Mr Castle, although what it might be is completely obfuscated by the fact that her face is still buried in his shoulder and his arms are around her.

“Okay, Beckett,” he says, and pats her gently.

Mr Castle turns to Dr Burke. “We’re going home.”

“I think that would be wise. Detective Beckett needs time to consider. Detective, I will maintain your session schedule unless you advise me that you will not attend on any given date.”

Mr Castle takes Detective Beckett out in the same over-protective manner which he has adopted for the last few moments. Once the door of his treatment room is safely closed, Dr Burke smiles in an avuncular fashion and concludes smugly that the romantic relationship between them is progressing extremely satisfactorily.
“Let’s go, Beckett. I’m hungry. Have you any food, or do we need to get takeout on the way?”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Well, I am. You don’t have to eat, but I have a deep and desperate need for the perfect New York pizza. We’ll pick one up on the way, okay?”

“Kay.”

Castle takes her car keys from her hand, opening the passenger door for her and providing a very tiny push to propel her into it. She doesn’t argue, which is fortunate. Castle does not really feel capable of preserving his cool if she starts to argue. He is going to take her home, they will eat, and there will be absolutely no stresses or strains or difficult realisations.

At least, not from him. Beckett’s continuing pallid state does not incline him to a comfortable state of mind. She’s not in the same universe he is, that’s for sure. Then again, Castle is also pretty certain that the unpleasantly intelligent Dr Burke had chosen every word in that last, devastating explanation with exactitude. He has tried to act as a father should. Try as Castle might, he can’t find any way to disagree with that. Jim might have been more than somewhat annoyed with him (really, Jim and Beckett are very alike) but everything Castle has seen has fitted Dr Burke’s analysis perfectly. Dr Burke, Castle thinks with irritation, is far too clever for anybody’s good, especially Beckett’s. Okay, so the wounds have been ripped back open, cleaned, drained, and carefully dressed, but healing only comes after the pain, and there are no painkillers for mental pain.

Well. There are no prescription painkillers. But there is him. He’ll be her painkiller. After all, though she doesn’t know it, she’s killed the pain of writer’s block for him. And, it occurs to him, it might be advisable to speak to Jim, when Beckett isn’t around. He ought to be told that she’s okay, for a given value of okay. Perhaps not actively self-destructive would be most accurate. Not that he will use those words to Jim.

Beckett’s hand has arrived on his knee while he’s been shifting the seat and mirrors to suit him. Once again, it’s entirely non-sexual. He covers her hand briefly, reflects that today might be the first time she’s ever been comfortable enough with her feelings for him that she can reveal in front of others that she needs him there – even to Dr Burke, from whom there appear to be no secrets, whether she would want secrets or not, (Friday doesn’t count, as then, as with all previous times, he’d driven that contact.) and then pulls out into the traffic.

Beckett’s apartment is full of the delicious smell of pepperoni pizza. Castle is disposing of a substantial portion. Beckett is nibbling on a single slice with no enthusiasm at all. They are drinking water. There hadn’t even been soda in the fridge, which Castle wishes he had known as he’d have got some of that too. The room is very quiet. Castle tries not to talk with his mouth full (manners had been drummed into him) and while he expects that Beckett had been taught the same she also doesn’t seem to be in the mood for light, flirtatious conversation. Therefore dinner proceeds in silence.

Beckett puts down her half-eaten slice of pizza and drains her water glass.

“Coffee?”

“Please.”

The plates are removed, and coffee arrives on the small table by the couch. Castle, having been
given the clear impression that his assistance would be unwanted, has made himself comfortable there and briefly and very unobtrusively texted Alexis to say that he’ll be late. Beckett sets the tray down and then sits down as close as is possible without actually being in his lap, laying her head on his shoulder and sighing quietly.

“Do you think he was trying to be a father?”

Castle’s mouth flaps uselessly for a moment. She’s asking him? “Uh?” he says, pointlessly.

“What do you think? You’ve heard him since… since I haven’t.”

He doesn’t say anything.

“Truth, Castle. Please? I just need – I can’t process this. Tell me what you think the truth is.” She gulps. “You’ve never lied to me.”

“Even if you don’t like it?”

She swallows again. “Even then. I can’t promise I won’t get angry.” Her eyes are liquid, that soft sheen that in any other woman he’s known would mean tears already falling. “I can’t promise I won’t… go away. I always had to be angry someplace else.”

Oh. That’s something it would have been good to know some time ago. That puts some things in proper context.

“I have a solution for that,” Castle says mischievously, waggling his eyebrows. “Where did you put your handcuffs?” She jabs him in the ribs. “Ow! That’s not nice.” But it has stopped her misery spilling over.

“No handcuffs.”

“Awww, you’re not being any fun at all.” He cuddles her in, and slips a hand round her face, reverting to seriousness. “I can’t promise I won’t get angry back. I’m not a saint, Beckett.”

“I noticed,” she manages to snark. “No saint does what you do. They’d be de-sanctified.”

“Is that a word?”

“You have a better one?”

“No,” Castle admits.

“Then stop trying to wriggle out of answering the question. Do you think my father was trying to be a father?”

“Yes,” Castle says bluntly. “He was doing exactly what I’d have done. Trying to get in touch, trying to explain. Sizing me up and deciding if I was good enough for you, and then doing what all parents do: getting to meet me on home ground and then at my home.”

Beckett says precisely nothing. On the other hand, she isn’t disappearing over the horizon either. On balance, that’s good. He can’t see her face, though. She’s turned away from him and dropped her elbows on to her knees. There is no sound, so it’s a mystery why he’s sure she’s crying. Again. It’s just as well that skin is waterproof, or she’d dissolve.

He hoists her up into his lap, assertively, and holds her tightly, tipping her chin upward so that he can see the eyeliner smudging downward. “It’s okay,” he murmurs. “It’ll be okay. You can fix
“But what if he doesn’t want to? Why should he want to? I just proved I never believed him and never forgave him and why should he bother?”

“Because he’s your dad, Kate. He’d never have come to Dr Burke’s if he didn’t want to fix it.”

“But then I said all that,” she sobs.

Castle is not impressed by all this self-flagellation. He doesn’t think it’s necessary and he’s just a little tired of the loop. Most of this is driven by his distinct dislike of Beckett being so broken. God knows, she’s had enough to deal with, but wallowing in it is really not going to move anything along.

“So you said all that. So? Everyone there knew that you had to lay out the whole truth rather than hiding it. Even your dad knew that. You’re the only one who thinks that you should hide your feelings and let everyone else believe in the lies. Truth hurts, Kate, but nothing ever works if it’s built on lies. God knows my two marriages didn’t,” he adds bitterly.

“Uh?”

“One had an affair. One thought she could keep me writing as long as she was permanently next to me. Except she pretended she wanted me, when what she really wanted was the royalties.”

Beckett half-turns and hugs him.

“Lies are corrosive. They even corrode gold rings.”

“Not possible, Castle,” Beckett says automatically and didactically. “Gold doesn’t dissolve in anything but aqua regia.”

“What?”

“Gold dissolves in aqua regia.”

“Will you stop spoiling my metaphors? That one was really good.”

“And change the habit of a lifetime?”

“A lifetime?” Castle says smoothly. “Why, Miss Beckett, are you proposing that we spend a lifetime together? This is such a surprise. I’m quite speechless.”

“That was twenty words. Speechless? If I thought I could render” – he makes an appreciative noise – “you speechless I’d propose it again.” She smirks nastily, sure that neither of them are serious.

“If it made me speechless I couldn’t accept. That would be counterproductive. I think you should let me propose.”

“Why, Mr Castle!” Beckett assumes a completely faked appearance of astonishment. “I had never expected that.” She grins, matching Castle’s evil grin precisely.

“You haven’t answered me.”

“Nope. Then again, you didn’t ask me a question.”

Castle thinks that this conversation, while deeply arousing, amusing, and certainly putting both of
them in a much better mood than previously, should probably wait until Beckett is at least able to walk through the door of his loft without running away or breaking down. And some time after that he will certainly propose. He is not inclined to be proposed to. That would be quite, quite wrong. He’ll do any proposing that’s to be done.

“No,” he says suavely. “I didn’t. You didn’t ask me one, either.” He’s watching her very closely.

“No” – she doesn’t manage to finish the word before he’s stolen it from her tongue.

Castle kisses Beckett with smooth assertion and a complete lack of apology. His hands skim over her back and settle firmly at her neck and hip. His tongue searches her mouth, which is pleasingly receptive. She melts into him, sliding her hands round his neck and accepting him pressing her closer inward. The hand at her hip comes round, untucking her shirt as he goes, and then starting on its buttons. The shirt falls off her shoulders.

“Question, Beckett. Shall I do this” – he draws a line straight down between her breasts and stops at the button of her pants – “or this?” and he licks below her ear where it makes her gasp and wriggle.

“Both,” she breathes out.

“Greedy,” he rasps into her ear, “but okay then.” And he does, so that she squirms and squeaks.

“Another question.” She sighs assentingly. “Shall I do this” – his mouth closes over her breast – “or this?” as his fingers loosen her pants and slip inside.

“Both,” she moans. “Castle.”

“Definitely greedy.”

His wicked mouth and evil fingers play freely. The pants follow the shirt to the floor. Beckett is stretched out across his lap, totally lax and receptive under his forceful, demanding touch, soaked and moaning.

“One last question.”

“Stop with the questions. Make love to me, Castle.”

“You haven’t heard it yet.”

“Please just do it.”

“Here or in bed?”

“I don’t care.”

Castle does care. Bending over her like this is going to hurt his back. “Bed,” he says, strokes his fingers through her to make her whimper and then shifts her so he can stand, sweep her up and have her laid out on the bed where he shortly joins her, stripped and so very ready to make love to her. He attends to her breasts for a little longer, palming and rolling, then sucking till she writhes and cries out; not letting her play with him for fear this will all come to a premature halt; and when she is totally and beautifully all the way up and issuing breathless orders which he ignores quite happily, he takes her slowly and gently and kisses her deeply and brings them both to soft, sweet release.
After, she snuggles into him and curls an arm over his chest. Her quiet breathing makes him thinks she’s slipping towards sleep, but after a while it hasn’t changed. Castle’s post-coital happiness shifts towards detection, and detects Beckett’s fingers lightly drawing patterns on his chest, her toes twitching against his, and then a slight hum. He concludes that thought is taking place, and awaits developments, drawing soothing little patterns of his own on her back.

“You really think he was trying to be my dad?”

“Yes.”

He can’t say anything else. She’d wanted the truth. Her fingers tighten.

“Will you come to the precinct tomorrow?”

“We’ve got a case. Of course I will.”

“Good.”

She doesn’t say anything more, until Castle starts making reluctant noises about having to go home.

“I’ll fix this.”

“In your own time. I said I’d wait. We’ve got plenty of time.” He cuddles her close. “I know how you feel. It’s enough.”

“You’re enough,” she says, with emphasis. “Just knowing you’ve got my back. Even that.”

“I’ll be there.” He kisses her gently. “You can’t get rid of me.”

“Don’t want to,” rises from her lips.

“Good,” Castle says with satisfaction, and then with considerably less satisfaction. “I’ve got to get home, though.”

Beckett curls her arms more tightly around him, and then releases him. “I know,” she sighs.

“Till tomorrow.”

“Love you,” she murmurs in return.

“Love you too.”

Beckett’s morning shower is not soothing, nor does it leave her in the correct frame of mind for work. Her brain worries at Dr Burke’s and Castle’s conviction that her father was not lying, and indeed was trying to be fatherly. She might dislike Dr Burke, but she doesn’t doubt his truthfulness or intelligence. As for Castle, she trusts him to tell her the truth. Or at least what he firmly believes to be the truth, even if she won’t like it.

She reaches her desk no more sure of her next action than she had been on leaving Dr Burke’s office last night, and gratefully pulls their nice new case towards her. Footage is still inconclusive. However, the two numbers which Belvez had been ringing are not inconclusive. One is a Leon Belvez. That sounds like it’s likely to be family. Beckett makes a note for Espo and Ryan to follow up. The other is a Michael Merowin. Beckett dives into following him up herself, mainly because he’s a name she remembers from John’s list of his research group. This feels hopeful. She likes
hopeful, and she likes progress, and right now she’d like to interview Merowin to try for some of both. The fact that she won’t have to think about her father is a convenient bonus.

Unfortunately it’s only eight-thirty. That’s probably too early for NYU. On the other hand… she could find out this Merowin’s schedule by calling the department’s office, and then ambush him. She smiles ferally at the thought as she carries on with the current state of evidential play and thoughts which might turn into leads to follow. Interviewing a surprised witness-suspect will cheer her up. It always does.

As does the delicious scent of her favourite form of caffeine and the rustle of the bag round her favourite form of pastry accompanied by her favourite – and only – partner.

“Breakfast,” he says happily. She’s already halfway into the bear claw.

“Mmm umphmm,” she responds, around a mouthful of flakes. Castle appears to have translated this very accurately into delicious thank you.

She swallows, downs a large slug of coffee, hums happily, and grins.

“Look. This guy Merowin is one of the two regular numbers in the phone list, and he’s part of the research group.”

“So are we going to have a chat with him?”

“Yep. I was just about to get his schedule.” She picks up the phone and has a brief conversation. “Okay, he’ll be free of his teaching group at ten.”

Ryan and Esposito rattle in on twin Yos. “Got a hit on the phone records, boys. Can you follow up Leon Belvez, and Castle and I will take Merowin.”

“Unfair,” Ryan says. “You get to go out.”

“I get to speak chemistry, too,” Beckett says dryly, “which is worse than high-school German. Give me Russian any day.”

“Spanish would be easy,” Esposito says smugly. Everyone glares at him. Bi-lingual doesn’t count.

“You speak fluent Russian?” Castle says

“Didn’t I tell you? I told you I’d been in Kiev. How do you think I managed?”

Castle is impressed. He only just manages to keep his mouth shut on will you talk Russian in bed, Beckett? which would be astonishingly hot, but saying so here will result in him being astonishingly cold on account of being, not astonishingly, dead.

“Got the Silver Center footage, Beckett.”

“And?”

“It might be helpful. I’ll get the techs to try to run it through.”

“I thought you were the King of Cameras?” Castle says.

“Yeah, but the techs can take out everything that doesn’t have people in so I only use my top-class skills” – Espo snorts derisively – “on the frames that matter.”
“Okay. Try not to get square eyes. Espo, can you have another go at finding his laptop? He must have had one.” She stands up and stretches, then drains the now-cold coffee and puts her coat on.

“Let’s go, Castle.”
“Yeah?” he says.

“Detective Kate Beckett, NYPD.”

“Rick Castle, her partner.”

“Are you Michael Merowin?”

“Yeah, I’m Dr Merowin. What’s this about?”

“We’d like to ask you a few questions about Riccardo Belvez.”

“Oh, John’s new hotshot who’s gonna start as soon as we get the grant. Him?”

“Yep, him. Did you know him?”

“Not really. Heard about him joining. If it gets us the grant, great.”

“So you didn’t know him well.”

“Nah. He was coming in from New Mexico, and I’ve been East Coast all the way.”

“Mm,” Beckett says, in a way Castle recognises. “How long have you been in Professor Terrison’s group?”

“Since post-grad. Five years, now. I’m the senior researcher.”

“Seems a bit strange you didn’t know Dr Belvez, then. I thought that he was getting a bit of publicity?”

“We don’t get publicity. We’re not celebrities,” Merowin casts a scathing glance at Castle. “We do much more important work than writing formulaic thrillers. Our formulae change lives, not that we get paid for it.”

Beckett and Castle exchange glances. That’ll be worth a look. Some chemistry is much more lucrative than others. Of course, it’s often highly illegal, too. The rattling shaving foam is clearly in both their minds.

“So you didn’t know Dr Belvez?”

“I just said so, didn’t I?”

“So why did you call him so often?”

“What?”
“We have his phone records. Your number comes up a lot. That’s a lot of talking to someone you didn’t know.” Beckett looks hard at Merowin. “Want to reconsider?”

“No,” Merowin says defiantly. “You got it wrong.”

“Okay,” Beckett says casually. “Better come down to the station with us, then, till we get it checked out.”

“What? I can’t go down there. I’ve got a synthesis running. It’ll be ruined. That’s two weeks’ work that’ll be wasted. You can’t make me.”

Beckett simply stares at him. Castle preserves a poker face, and watches Merowin crumble.

“Okay, okay. I thought if I said I didn’t know him you’d go away. I haven’t time to take a trip to the cop shop. I can’t afford this experiment to go wrong. Sure I knew about Ricky Belvez. John interviewed him and he was gonna transfer. So he called me, ‘cause I’d been here longest and he reckoned I’d know all the practical stuff, like where to live cheaply, show him around a bit, introduce him to the rest of the group.”

“Mm?” Beckett hums encouragingly.

“And so I did. No point pissing off John’s new blue-eyed boy. He sounded pretty grateful for the heads-up, too. So I thought he might not be so bad. Anyway, he kept calling, and it was okay. I thought we could be pals, maybe, and anyway we have to work together” – he clearly remembers – “would’ve worked together – and it’s not good to be on the outs when you’re doing complex syntheses.” He grins, suddenly. “A bad mental atmosphere doesn’t really contaminate the experiment, but you sometimes wonder.”

“Did he mention any other friends, or girlfriends?”

“Or boyfriends?” Castle adds, remembering the hostility of the landlord. Beckett nudges his knee with hers without being obvious.

“Um…” Merowin flicks his eyes away, and back again.

“Boyfriend?” Beckett follows up on Castle’s question.

“Yeah…”

Merowin is clearly unhappy with the admission.

“Do you know his name? Address?”

There is a small but definite flicker.

“You do, don’t you?” Castle is sympathetic, but firm. “C’mon, Mike” – Beckett wouldn’t have done that, but man-to-man it seems to work – “you said you were getting to be pals, and if you’d been working together successfully you’d both have benefited. Help us out here.”

Merowin’s eyes flicker around, and don’t find any help in the Periodic Table on the wall, nor in the stick-and-ball models in bright colours. Beckett stays absolutely quiet, and nudges Castle to keep him wordless too when it looks like he might fill the silence.


Castle bursts into laughter. “You’re kidding, yeah?”
Beckett looks entirely blank. So does Merowin.

“Guess you don’t have children?”

“No.” There’s a slight edge on that which makes Beckett wonder if Merowin even has a girlfriend.
Or a boyfriend. “I’m single. What’s the deal?”

“Troy Bolton is the star of High School Musical, beloved of pre-teens everywhere. Set in New Mexico, in fact.”

Beckett wonders instantly if the name was a fake. It’s just too coincidental. Castle is clearly thinking the same, and his eyes are sparkling. He so loves mysteries and conspiracies.

“Did he mention any other names?”

“Not that I remember.”

That’s a relief. If there had been other names from stupid teen musicals (not that she’d ever admit that she went to see it, one evening when she just needed something totally mindless, and anyway the songs were good) she would have had to go outside and scream. Or burst into song, perhaps.

“Do you know anything more about this Troy Bolton?”

“I think he lived in Queens.”

“Why?”

“Ricky said he might look for an apartment there.”

“Oh? So you didn’t know he already had one in Brooklyn? He’s been there for two months already.”

Merowin’s mouth drops open very unattractively. “Two months? He said he would get here next week.”

“He did?” This just gets more and more confusing. Merowin nods. “Okay. Thank you. If you remember anything else, call me. Anything at all.”

They leave, confused.

“Back to the Twelfth, Castle. This is weird. Let’s see if there’s anything sensible back in the bullpen.”

Back in the bullpen there is Beckett’s murder board. The so-called Troy Bolton is added. Espos has located Leon Belvez – in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He is indeed Riccardo’s brother. He is also not a chemist, but a linguist, teaching in a high school. Much to Castle’s disappointment, it is not called East High. Beckett details Esposito to talk to him, seeing as Espo claimed linguistic skills earlier, which does not go down brilliantly, and glares until Espo does as he’s told. He huffs off, swearing in Spanish, or possibly Army.

“What do you got, Ryan?”


“You’ll like this, Beckett.”
“What is it?” she says impatiently.

“We found a laptop.”

“Where?”

“I tracked through the camera footage, and Belvez had been around the campus, late Sunday. So I got uniforms to have a look, and one of the buildings had lockers. CSU had the keys from the apartment sweep, and they took over. Still waiting for the rest of the results, but they opened up the laptop for me.”

“Good work. What d’you find?”

“A lot of stuff that means nothing to me. Formulae like the ones in his apartment.”

“Any e-mail?”

Ryan’s smug grin widens. “You bet. Some of it was standard stuff: spam, back and forward about the move to NYU with the department, though he was writing as if he was still back in Albuquerque which was totally weird, his tenancy. Landlord was harassing him a bit about visitors. Belvez wasn’t having any of it, an’ told him to back right off.”

“Can’t be the landlord,” Castle says. “Where would a Brooklyn landlord get lab-grade carbon monoxide from?”

“Right. Though we’d better check that he doesn’t have some relative at NYU. If we don’t, he’ll turn out to be first cousin to a lab tech. Ryan, after you’ve finished downloading, you get on with that.”

“Yo. Anyway, there was some pretty non-standard stuff. All in chemistry-speak.”

“With John Terrison or Michael Merowin?”

“No. Not with anyone in the research group at NYU. Not with New Mexico State, either.”

“So who with?”

“Well,” Ryan says slowly, grinning.

“Get on with it,” Beckett says dangerously.

“A woman called Karlen Petersen.”

“So?”

“So Karlen Petersen is a lab tech at NYU.”

“Access to carbon monoxide.”

“Yes. She signed for the last delivery.”

“What’s her connection?” Beckett’s eyes are sparkling with the knowledge of a trail to follow.


“Or any names from High School Musical,” Castle says, and then has to explain in detail, to Ryan’s ever increasing horror.

“That is so not cool, bro. You shouldn’t know all this.”

“Pre-teen daughter, back then. Of course I know all this.”

“Are we going to interview this Petersen woman, Castle? Or would you prefer to stay here and continue educating Ryan about teen movies?”

Castle scuttles after her, looking blue.

“What about lunch?”

“Lunch?”

“It’s lunchtime.”

“Crime fighters do not stop for lunch. If you hadn’t been showing off to Ryan, we might have had time to grab a sandwich.”

Castle grumps all the way to NYU about his falling blood sugar levels and the risk of collapse. Beckett ignores him. Just as they get out the car she hands him a candy bar. “There,” she says, and pats him on the head, as if he were a child.

“That’s so sweet, Beckett. You must really like me.”

She wriggles uncomfortably, and then finds her snark. “No, I just want the complaining to stop.”

“What are you going to eat?”

“I’m not hungry,” she says.

Castle casts her a sceptical glance, and doesn’t comment. Yet. He’ll make sure she has something, later. Somehow.

Karlen Petersen is not around today. It’s her day off. On the other hand, Beckett persuades an address out of her co-worker, who doesn’t seem to like Karlen much and is only too happy to tell the cops where to find her, and off she and Castle traipse in the general direction of Queens.

“Queens,” Beckett says musingly. “That’s where Merowin thought that Belvez was looking for an apartment.”

“Are you thinking that actually he was asking about Karlen Petersen?”

“Maybe. Seems a bit unlikely that this was coincidental. There’s a lot of misdirection going on here, and it all seems to be emanating from Belvez.”

“Deliberately throwing people off his trail. He must have been part of the black science ops at Area 51. Developing alien technology to improve our lives.”

“Oh, God. Here we go,” Beckett sighs. “There are no aliens. Therefore there is no alien tech. Therefore this is one of your insane theories. Can we stick to theories that might be even vaguely
plausible? Just for once?"

Castle knows she doesn’t mean it. How could anyone not include the possibility of alien tech? It is just not possible that anyone could not believe. Except for Beckett, professional disbeliever and cynic.

Which is, he abruptly realises, why she’s so desperate for evidence and reasons around her father’s actions. She can’t believe without evidence, and she’ll take any scraps and clues that she can get. Now, does that mean that she’s looking for evidence to believe him – or to believe her own misconceptions? He thinks, and hopes, that it’s the first. She was so upset when she thought he wouldn’t forgive her, surely she wants to gather the evidence to believe her father?

Maybe that’s why she’s not hungry; why she questioned him so intensely; why she’s throwing herself back into this case. Maybe after they’ve seen Karlen they should stop for the day, have something to eat – even if Beckett hardly eats anything, and talk about nothing. He’s pretty sure that Beckett, having talked last night, won’t want to talk about much this evening.

Karlen Petersen is not in. This is very annoying. Beckett and Castle humph their way back to the Twelfth, for rather different reasons. Castle is bored, and had wanted to know about anything that might validate his alien tech theory to amuse himself by annoying Beckett, all of which was spoilt. Beckett had wanted to follow up her lead, and solve the homicide. Neither of them are happy. It would not be said that both of them are sulking, but only because anyone suggesting that Beckett might be sulking would shortly be bleeding out on the sidewalk. Castle is quite definitely pouting. Sulkily.

They get into the bullpen and practically flounce into their respective seats, in synchronised discontent.

“Yo, Beckett. Get anything?”

“Total washout. Wasn’t at work, wasn’t at home,” Beckett growls. “Waste of time. Tell me you boys did better.”

Ryan and Esposito look at each other in a very you-no-you way. “Um… no,” Ryan admits.

“What have you been doing all afternoon?”

“Working. ‘S not our fault that everything we looked at was useless. My eyes are square with looking at the camera footage again.”

“An’ I’ve got RSI from searchin’ the bank and phone records.”

Beckett does not appear sympathetic.

“Anyway, until we get something more there’s no point staring at the same old data. We’ve ripped it apart every way there is.”

“I agree,” Montgomery says from behind them. “Go home for the night and look at it fresh tomorrow.” He flaps his hands at them, shooing them towards the elevator. “That means you too, Beckett. Out.”

Beckett hits the elevator with a distinctly disgruntled flip of her hair. She can feel linkages idling just outside her knowledge, and she wants to push on till they fall into place. However, Montgomery is frowning at her and even as she steps into the elevator she can feel his beady eye ensuring that she’s really leaving. She humphs.
“What’s up?”

“I can feel it. It’s right there, and Montgomery packed us off.” She makes a frustrated growling noise.

“Let’s go get dinner. C’mon. Favourite burgers, favourite shakes, comfortable booths – it all says Remy’s to me.”

Beckett doesn’t look massively enthusiastic. However, she doesn’t object. They amble to Remy’s – well, Castle ambles. Beckett strides, and has to wait for Castle every second lamppost. After six lampposts, he puts an arm round her to keep her with him, and speeds up his amble slightly in return.

“No hurry, Beckett. Slow down. Hurrying like that will upset your digestion. You wouldn’t want a stomach-ache, would you?”

“I don’t think walking at a pace that would barely beat an arthritic tortoise to the next cross-walk counts as hurrying.”

“Enjoy the day. Experience the atmosphere” –

“Of truck exhausts, pollution, noise and sirens?”

“You have no soul,” Castle pouts. “Here am I pointing out the beauty of the evening and you’re sucking all the romance out of it.”

“The Lower East Side is not romantic.”

Beckett realises her error approximately half a second too late.

“You want romance, Beckett? Let’s do that, then. Nice restaurant, you can dress up, I’ll even give you flowers.”

“No, thanks.”

There is a pause.

“I keep thinking I should ring my dad,” she says flatly. Castle stops dead. “But I’m scared to.” There is a noticeable gap before they start to move again.

“Um…” Castle says, unproductively. He thinks that’s a terrible idea – as expressed. He also thinks that another Dr Burke-moderated meeting of Beckett and her father might be a really good idea, however. He steers Beckett along the sidewalk to Remy’s, pondering. Beckett is also pondering, rather than, say, pulling out her phone and diving headfirst into another disaster. The impending discussion may go better with food, and even if it doesn’t, he’s hungry.

“What do you want?” he asks, when they’re safely stowed in a quiet booth near the back.

Beckett looks as if her first answer is nothing, but then considers. “Vanilla milkshake, please.” She doesn’t mention anything further. Castle doesn’t query it, and without further ado orders for both of them (and, unusually, is not growled at for doing so).

“So, why do you want to ring your dad?”

She shrugs. “To get his side of the story? Hear it all again when I’m not so wound up I can’t deal with any of it? See if I can tell if he’s lying this time?” She drinks her milkshake, and looks at him.
“If I don’t listen to him I’ll never get anywhere.”

“Okay,” Castle says, deliberately slow and a touch doubtful, in the hope that she’ll ask him what he thinks.

“Don’t you think I should call him?”

“Um,” Castle emits, still trying to make sure that Beckett is quite definitely asking him for his views and not just looking for a rubber stamp of her thoughts.

“Castle, what do you think?” she snaps. “I need a second view here. Friday didn’t exactly go to plan, did it?”

Well, that’s pretty clear. As is Beckett’s tone. Oh well, he can only die once. Though pain can be made to last for a very long time indeed.

“I don’t think you should call him.” Her mouth opens. “I think you should do another joint session with Dr Burke and him instead.” It shuts again, with a decided click of her teeth. Another large quantity of milkshake disappears. She wipes her mouth before Castle can point out the milkshake moustache.

“Repeat Friday?” she says with disbelief.

“Not exactly. Friday you were upset before you even began” – he doesn’t remind her why – “and it got all the truth out on the table but neither of you really got past it. If you did it again, then you’ll be calmer and you’ll have headspace to listen to him. And you’ve had a chance to think about what he said without him around, but it might be better to have a bit longer anyway.”

“Huh,” Beckett says. It sounds more like that might be an idea than you are insane. This is a major win. Some of the tension has dropped out of her shoulders. She steals one of his fries, and then another. When she reaches for yet another Castle traps her thieving fingers, summons a server, and orders another portion of fries. He doesn’t let go till the fries arrive, and then pushes them under her nose.

“Eat, Beckett. I’m not giving up any more fries to your ravenous ravaging raids.” Beckett fixes him with a quizzical semi-glare. “I’m not. I need my strength.” A quirked eyebrow joins the quizzicality. Castle smiles lazily. Beckett brings a fry to her lips and the tip of her pink tongue welcomes it into her mouth. The lazy smile turns predatory. Beckett simply smirks, and follows up by tonguing salt off her lips. Such preliminaries done, she demolishes almost the entire remainder of the fries in extremely short order, leaving only two. Castle’s fingers creep towards them, and are removed. Shortly eating the fries is not at all upon his mind. Beckett is eating the fries, with a wholly unnecessary amount of sucking on the end, slowly taking them between her lips, licking her lips slowly and erotically after the fry has disappeared into her mouth, and then repeating with the final one. Castle watches this hypnotic performance with absolute attention.

“I think it’s time we went home, Beckett.”
Beckett’s apartment is perfectly tidy and does not smell of pepperoni pizza. Other than that, it’s not at all different from Friday night, objectively. Subjectively, it feels very different. This may, of course, be because Beckett barely allowed Castle to take his coat off before she’d wrapped her arms round his neck and kissed him hard. He’s never going to back away from that invitation. Well. Order.

Some significant time later he lifts off her luscious lips. He doesn’t, naturally, let go. That would be dumb, and Castle tries very hard not to be dumb, especially not in front of Beckett, who is never normally shy of calling him on it if she thinks he is. Anyway, she’s nicely tucked against him and pressed against all the right areas. That would be from head to foot. And tip to root, too. He’s very slightly canted into the cradling of her hips.

“Okay,” she says, surprisingly briskly given their position and her face. “I’m not going to rush into calling Dad.” Castle notes the return to Dad, not my dad, or even more distancingly my father. “I’m going to see Burke on Friday and discuss it with him. He’s a total pain in the ass, but he’s clever.” Her mouth twists at having to admit that Dr Burke has a good point. Castle pats the ass in which there might be pain, purely to ensure that there isn’t pain.

“Okay,” Castle says amiably. “So what do we do between now and then?”

“We solve the case, and tomorrow evening we get to watch Espo take on O’Leary.”

“Ooohhh. That should be interesting. What’s the odds? I’ll give you two-to-one on O’Leary.”

“No bet. O’Leary’s big, and good, but Espo’s mean and sneaky. Should be pretty even, till O’Leary gets bored and uses his size.”

Castle makes a face. “But I won’t understand the finer points,” he says plaintively.

“I’ll help you with that,” Beckett says.

“You will?”

“Sure.” She grins exceedingly evilly past his ear, ensuring that he can’t see her expression.

“That’s great,” Castle enthuses. “It’ll really help me writing about it. Will you explain everything?”

“Actually, you’ll learn much better by doing. I’ll get Espo to give you some training.”

Castle squawks loudly and jerks a whole inch away from her. “What?”

“Learn by doing, Castle.”

“No! No way am I getting on a mat with Esposito. He’ll murder me and you’ll all hide the body. I’m not doing that.”

He becomes aware that there is snickering under his ear.

“You’re mean, Beckett.”

“You believed me,” she sniggers.
“That was unkind.”

“You’re the one who said you needed to keep your strength up. So, well” – she sniggers again – “sparring is good exercise and would keep your strength up.”

“I do need to keep my strength up,” Castle growls dangerously. “Maybe a spot of weight training?” He picks Beckett up before she’s quite got the point, and carries her without apparent effort. “Or maybe some press-ups?”

He drops her on her bed, flat on her back, feet dangling over the end, and falls over her, catching his weight on his hands and lowering himself down in classical press-up style to kiss her nose. She scrunches it at him, and laughs.

“Got you good,” she sniggers. (Sniggers? How can she snigger when she’s joking about his mutilation and likely death?)

“And now I’ve got you.” He lowers all his weight on to her and smirks. “You might do all this sparring and so on but I’m much bigger than you and you’re not going anywhere.”

“I noticed you were much bigger,” Beckett husks, and wiggles seductively to check. “But that’s not going to help you.” She reaches up, pulls one arm out from under him, and rolls them.

At least, that was the plan. Absolutely nothing happens. She tries again, with the same lack of result, and looks up at his smirking, smugly satisfied face.

“Do carry on, Beckett,” he oozes. “Please do carry on. It feels so good.” She punches his shoulder. He smirks more widely. “I don’t spar. I do exercise. Weights, and endurance training. So you’re not going anywhere.” He dips his head very slightly to kiss her again, more forcefully, and then rolls them over as Beckett had wanted to do. “But since you wanted to be on top…”

Beckett splutters, and looks adorably confused and frustrated. It’s so cute when she’s discombobulated – and so unusual. Castle lies there and enjoys it, although he’s definitely not thinking of Manhattan. More thinking of the nearer landscape, say within around six inches of him. He does keep his arms wrapped tightly around her, demonstrating the sheer physical strength that he’s tended to keep well-hidden from most people. He’d started with a demonstration of assertive masculinity, way back when, and she’d liked it then, and since; but he’s never really exerted sheer strength to prove he’s – well, er, up to her weight. Sweeping her off her feet, literally, doesn’t really count.

“Got you good,” he murmurs, and strokes lazily down her back and over her hip. The scowl that’s being directed straight between his eyes is rather deflating to the libido, but on the other hand (he uses it to pet her hair) it’s so much fun to get one over on Beckett that he thinks it’s a fair trade. He continues to sport the smug smirk.

“This is not fair,” Beckett grumps.

“But it would have been fair if you’d used your training to defeat me?”

“Yes,” she says, very illogically.

It’s Castle’s turn to cock a quizzical eyebrow at her. She flumps down on to his chest and mutters darkly into it. Her commentary does not sound flattering, from the fragments available. Castle doesn’t care, while he’s surrounded by Beckett. He toes his shoes off, wriggles into a comfortable alignment which preserves his armful of Beckett, and closes his eyes peacefully.
This action does not meet with universal approval.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“Snoozing. Waiting for you to stop sulking at me.”

“I am not sulking,” Beckett states in tones conveying Castle’s impending doom.

“Oh?” Castle says interestingly. “What are you doing, then? Enjoying my muscular company? Taking advantage of my broad chest and firm pectorals?”

“Watching your ego expand, Narcissus.”

Castle snickers. “You’re just miffed” – Beckett squawks – “because you didn’t get your own way.” A disgruntled mutter arrives below his chin, swiftly followed by some rather more audible commentary on overgrown wannabe macho men. “That’s not nice. I don’t comment on it when you maul my nose or ears, do I?”

“Yes.”

Castle is stopped. “Not often.” He thinks he hears a disbelieving harrumph. “Anyway, you’re where you wanted to be. On top. So why are you still grumping at me? Come up here so I can kiss you.” He doesn’t give her time to move before he moves her anyway.

Beckett is more than a little surprised that Castle hadn’t been flippable, and is consequently considering appropriate revenge. Whether or not he spars or takes some other form of exercise, she’d appreciated the muscles without thinking that it might imply that he wasn’t exactly easy to push around. She does manage to kick her shoes off as he drags her up over his body. She does not want dirtied bed linen.

Before she can think up a suitably vengeful solution to Castle being an overgrown bully, he’s quite unfairly persuaded her head to arrive at his and kissed her smoothly and deeply. She hadn’t even had a chance to resist. Not even a chance of some token resistance to prove a point. It’s not fair. She’ll have to come up with another form of vengeance later. When he’s not kissing her. When she can think. When she isn’t kissing him. Or cupping his face, or nibbling the lobe of his ear (he wriggles, mmmmm, that’s right where she wants pressure), and down his neck (this is not popular, from the come back noises emerging from his vacated mouth), or slipping downwards to his chest and incidentally opening his button-down on the way. Purely accidentally, of course. As was her happy little purr when his skin was exposed. Anyway, that was totally buried by Castle’s predatory rumbling growl, so it didn’t count.

She ghosts her lips over Castle’s nice firm pecs with particular attention to the use of the edge of her teeth to add a little hint of spice as she slides over his nipples. She can feel Castle – er – standing to attention against her stomach. He’s certainly paying attention now. There will be no more snoozing. That was just plain rude. Even if she had been sulking, which she hadn’t, because she does not sulk.

She wriggles a little further down, and draws a delicate pattern with her tongue right around his sternum. Simultaneously, she takes advantage of Castle’s loosened arms to slip sideways, whereupon her hand – totally accidentally, naturally – slides across the front of his pants and – oh dear – appears to become stuck on a prominent bulge right in the middle. Ooops. Especially ooops, because that appears to have recalled Castle from merely paying complete attention to full participation. She is not on top any more. This is – well, actually, pretty much exactly what she’d planned. It’s just that she’d planned it starting from being able to flip Castle. Oh well. She’s
flexible.

Castle doesn’t seem to want to bother with any more verbal foreplay. Her silk t-shirt has disappeared – she might have heard it swish over the floor if she hadn’t been panting and gasping – and he’s pressing down with that lovely firm chest and ohhhh she loves it when he’s assertive. It feels so very, very good to be soft Kat, enclosed, covered, caressed and loved. Well applied strength is just fine with her. Well applied fingers work, too. And lips, currently working towards her ribs. Or somewhere in that vicinity, anyway.

She allows her fingers to do a little work of their own, producing a very pleasing groan-growl and a marked increase in the speed of her pants departing her legs. In perfectly reasonable and understandable retaliation, she shoves his shirt off his shoulders and points out her action with a light scrape of fingernails over the revealed skin.

“My Kat’s got claws,” Castle murmurs silkily, and demonstrates his enthusiasm for the thought by drawing the lace-shrouded tip of one firm breast into his avidly seeking mouth. “Try not to draw too much blood,” he says around it. Hmmm. Blood doesn’t wash out that easily. On the other hand, she’ll absolutely take the extra washing if he keeps doing that. Ohhhhh. No-one except him has ever made her feel like that simply by attending to her breasts.

He does keep doing that. In return, she lets her fingers do some walking, and then a little delicate tracery in sensitive areas, and then a little removal of some fabric which is in the way – and then it’s all taken out of her naughty hands as she’s stripped in two rapid, forceful movements: she opens to him, and takes him in. Or is taken. Whatever. Thinking is not required. Encouragement does not appear necessary, but it might be helpful, so she provides some, just in case. She follows up her carefully judged stroke of fingers with a totally filthy murmur describing how he feels: right here right now right inside.

On balance, it was a major mistake to try to match words with a wordsmith. That is a game she is exceedingly unlikely to win, especially now that Castle’s taken it as a challenge. He’s stopped moving and withdrawn – huh – stopped kissing her – double huh, with a side of irritation – and his mouth is at her ear.

And then he starts to talk. Well, murmur, in a deep furry baritone that drizzles sex all over her skin and massages it into every nerve ending. He licks at the sensitive spot behind her ear, and then begins.

“Shall I tell you how good it is to have you, hot and wet and tight around me? To be all the way inside you? To have you under me, open and ready and mine?” She mews. “To know that with barely a kiss you’ll be damp? That if I kiss you your mouth will be pliant and soft and giving?” The mew shifts towards a moan.

“Or maybe I should tell you how hot you are in those tiny little scraps of the sexiest silk and lace that you wore in the Hamptons? When I watch you in the precinct you’ll know I’m thinking of them on you and you’ll remember what we did and you’ll be all wet, all for me.”

He nips her ear, a tiny sting, and soothes it. His arm is across her, a hard thigh between her legs, pressing and a little rough where the coarse hair rubs her, his arousal evident against her hip.

“Or maybe I should tell you how it feels to make you gasp and squirm against me because I’ve put my lips on your breast and taken your nipple into my mouth and sucked. I know how much you like that. Almost as much as I like doing it.” He does it, briefly, and her hands clutch at his hair.

“Castle!”
“See?” He does it again, which is really totally unnecessary because she’d got the point the first time, when he took the point… ohhhhhhh.

“Or how you taste when I put my mouth on you; let my tongue play and circle and tease you? How you writhe so that I have to hold you still? How you whimper and moan and then scream my name? How it feels when I know you’re so close and everything goes still just for an instant before you shatter?”

“Shall I tell you how it feels when I touch you? When my fingers find that you’ve soaked your panties and slide them over you, tantalising you? When I slip under them and find you there, slippery and squirming and desperate for more? When I stroke you and maybe pinch just a little harder and you cry out my name? When you’re hot against my hand and my fingers are inside you, filling you, taking you?”

His fingers match his words, thrusting in counterpoint.

“Or maybe that’s wrong. Maybe I should tell you how good you feel cuddled against me, soft and curved and petted and cherished? How I feel when you’re soft Kat for me, only for me, and I know that no-one else even knows she exists?”

“Or maybe that’s all wrong too. Maybe I should tell you how I feel when you take me in your mouth: when your lips are hot on me and your mouth wet and you play with me? How it’s always too good to resist? How you make me hard with barely a look and a kiss? How you undo me with your mouth, whether around me or on my lips, and then take me into your body and it’s everything?”

He moves across so he’s over her, settled between her legs where she wants him, but he doesn’t enter.

“Should I tell you how I lose myself in you, how I know you’re lost in me, when we’re together? How there’s nothing left in the world but us, as close as we can be?”

He shifts a fraction, preparing; poised.

“Or I could simply tell you that I’m yours, and you’re mine. That I never want to let go of you. That together we’re everything each other needs.” He thrusts into her needy, waiting body. “Should I tell you how you feel right now? Tight and fluttering and hot and wet and right on the edge and now!” and he drives them both right over.

“Or maybe I should only tell you that I love you,” he says softly into her hair, “because that’s enough.”

“Love you too,” she murmurs in return, soft and sated and satisfied. “That’s enough for me.”

Some time later, when he reluctantly has to leave, she cuddles his love to her heart and sleeps soundly.

Beckett wakes up bright, enthusiastic and raring to go. It occurs to her, as she’s humming happily under a hot shower, that this is more like Castle’s normal state than hers. On the other hand, she has a case, she has a witness, who might rapidly become a suspect, and something to do: to wit, chase down this witness-suspect. Karlen Petersen is right at the top of her to-do list. As, in fact, could the landlord usefully be. Something about him twitches her instincts, and it’s not only the implication that he exudes homophobia. Unpleasant as that is, there’s something else. She is definitely keen to get going, and get going she does, arriving at her desk nice and early and
promptly burying herself in the information they do have.

Not long later, with the application of some logical thought, she has an extensive – and rational – to do list. Things have been a little scattershot so far, and now it’s time to impose order – now that they have some matters upon which to impose it. She grins nastily at her basic list, and begins to expand each section, flicking her attention back and forth from her murder board. She’s so happily absorbed that she doesn’t notice Montgomery pass by.

Montgomery, however, notices her. He also notices, with a swift glance at his watch, that Beckett has entirely forgotten his edict that she is to work her shifts and nothing more. He considers his options as he makes himself a coffee. He could call her on it. He considers, and rejects, that plan. Even from his brief wander past her, it’s perfectly obvious that she is much happier with life. He might even have heard her humming. On balance, he thinks he’ll ignore the early morning, though he’s intending to preserve the beady eye at the end of shift.

Beckett looks at her list with considerable satisfaction. It’s neatly laid out, though the less said about her handwriting the better, and covers everything she can think of in perfectly logical and detailed sections. She stretches widely, and swings briskly off to get a coffee from the break room, mulling over her lovely logical list as she does.

She wants to start with Karlen Petersen and the landlord, Michael A-something. Ahlbrechtssen. That’s it. Michael Ahlbrechtssen. There are too many consonants in that name. It’ll barely fit in forms. She very much wants a reason to haul in the landlord, but she can’t find a sound reason. Gut feel just won’t cut it. Karlen Petersen, on the other hand, will, if only she can track her down.

She strides back to her desk, and contemplates her list. First off, get Ahlbrechtssen into the system and see what pops up. Second, while some poor benighted person – Ryan, say – is running that, she’ll have another go at tracking Karlen Petersen. And Ryan can just run her in a bit more detail –

Ahh. That’s what’s been nagging at her mind. Names. Specifically, surnames, and even more specifically the surnames of the landlord and the lab tech. (The landlord and the lab tech? Sounds like a really bad Wattpad romance.) They both sound very… Nordic. And aren’t a lot of Nordic people related, somehow? Maybe that casual statement about the landlord would turn out to be cousin to a lab tech wasn’t so dumb after all.

Where the hell is Ryan? He should be in by now. It’s only half an hour before shift starts. She needs him to get started. And Espo. He’s probably resting for tonight’s exhibition match with O’Leary. Beckett smiles nastily. Espo’s going to get a hell of a shock.
Fortunately, before Beckett can be further irritated by Ryan’s totally unreasonable absence despite the fact that he need not be in for another twenty minutes, he appears. She barely waits for him to get a coffee before she starts explaining her list and setting out what she wants done. Espo arrives a few minutes later and receives his own instructions.

Beckett acquires yet another cup of coffee and considers all the actions she can take. Since she can’t – yet, and she is counting down the minutes till she can – call NYU to see whether Petersen has shown up for work today, she looks at the rest, and starts on setting out her thinking for getting a warrant for Petersen’s and Ahlbrechtssen’s phone records. She won’t get it on her current (lack of) evidence, but she’ll want to be some way up the curve when she does have grounds.

Her diligence is helped by the knowledge that even if she could call NYU, Castle won’t be in for another little while – about two hours, most likely, he’s not notably keen on arriving before ten… hmm. Is that possibly because he’s spending time in a gym? The strength he’d rather pleasantly and very surprisingly demonstrated yesterday had to be produced somehow. Anyway, she can’t go see Petersen without him. It’s not worth the whining afterwards… Oh. And, she remembers, Montgomery had issued a direct order that she was to take Castle with her if she was working on a case. Um. Better obey that. She has no desire to have black marks on her file.

She’s so engrossed in her case that the first she notices of Castle is the presence of a large cup of coffee and the delicate aroma of vanilla syrup. Further investigation uncovers a bag containing a bear claw. Further investigation than that, in the form of looking round, reveals Castle, swigging his own coffee and exchanging compliments with the boys. She downs the coffee in three large gulps, interspersed with disposing of the bear claw, and is ready to roll.

“Castle, c’mon. Back to NYU. We’re going after Karlen Petersen again.”

“Will she be there?”

“She’s supposed to be on shift. They couldn’t confirm if she was in, but it’s worth a go. If not, we’ll try her apartment again. After that, we’ll start thinking about how to find her.”

“You think she’s avoiding us?”

“It’s a possibility. If she is, that’s pretty suggestive.”

Castle bounces out behind Beckett, made happy by her evident enthusiasm for the day and the case. He’d worried that she might be fretting about her father, but it looks like she’s turned her formidable intelligence and work ethic on to the new case, which is a far better home for it than fretfulness. From the boys’ complaints, she had put in a morning’s work before they’d even got it, but it’s entirely probable (because he’s seen her do it) that she’d simply intensified her focus and ripped her case apart to re-order it into logical lines of enquiry in a much shorter time than that.

He fits himself into the car rapidly before Beckett can drive off without him – she appears to be that keen on getting going.

“You’ve had an idea, haven’t you?” he says.

“Names.”

“Names?”
“Both their names are Nordic. It’s worth a look. Anything might be a lead right now.”

Castle pats Beckett’s knee, being the only reachable bit of Beckett that won’t cause an accident, is growled at for doing so when she’s driving, which he counts as a hands-down win, and stays perfectly primly in the passenger seat until they reach the Silver Center again.

This time they go straight to the small office where lab techs apparently live when they are not taking care of labs and the scientists who work in them. A tall, nearly blonde woman of late middle age is cleaning up glassware in a large sink. It’s clear that she used to be fit.

“Karlen Petersen?”

“Who’s askin’?”

“Detective Kate Beckett.”

“And her partner. Rick Castle.”

“What’dya want?”

“We want to talk to you about Ricky Belvez. You knew him.”

“Sure I knew him,” arrives in a Minneapolis tone. “He was joinin’ the group here.”

“Why was he calling you so often?”

“Wanted somewhere to live. Told him about Brooklyn. Fitted his budget – ‘s a lot more expensive here than in Albuquerque, he said.”

“But he’s been here a couple of months. Why was he still calling you so often after he moved in?”

“Liked talking to me.”

Beckett thinks that’s a straight out lie, but she’s not going to start a fight now. Later might be a different matter.

“So did you tell him about the apartment he moved into?”

“Yep.”

“How did you know about it?”

Petersen’s eyes flick away and back again. Beckett observes it with interest, and unnoticeably kicks Castle gently when she thinks he’s about to speak.

“Heard it” –

“On the grapevine?” Castle says flippantly, swiftly followed by ow!

“Ignore him,” Beckett says. “How did you hear about it?”

“I heard from a friend of mine.”

“That’s how I got my apartment, too,” Beckett says. “Who was the friend?”

“Mike.”
“Mike? Michael Merowin?”
“No, not him. Mike Ahlbrechtssen.”

Beckett kicks Castle again as he opens his mouth, to keep him quiet.

“He’s a friend of yours?”

“Yeah.”

“How’d you know him?”

“I used to rent an apartment from him.”

That’s so plausible it’s got to be untrue. “Mmm? When was that?”

“Few years ago. Don’t remember exactly.”

“In Brooklyn?” Petersen does the eye flick again. “Or somewhere else?” Beckett says, with force behind it.

“Minneapolis,” Petersen says reluctantly.

“So you’ve known him a long time?”

“Yeah.”

“What was his problem with Ricky?” Beckett asks, innocently. Petersen falls right into the trap.

“That guy who was staying over with him. ‘S not right.”

“Which guy?”

“Ricky called him Troy.” Castle splutters, and grins widely. “He was there all the freakin’ time. Mike didn’t think it was right. An’ Ricky wasn’t allowed to sublet. No extras. So whatever was goin’ on, this Troy dude shouldn’t’ve been stayin’ there.”

“Did you ever see Troy?” Castle asks, evading Beckett’s toes.

“Naw. Ricky told me ‘bout him. An’ anyway, Mike’s got cameras in the hallway an’ on the door. Stops trouble.” She suddenly looks as if she didn’t mean to say that.

Now that’s something good to know. And Beckett has enough for a warrant for the footage if she needs one, because this Troy is definitely a person of interest. Considerable interest. Still, her instincts are telling her that there’s more to come from Petersen. It might be very interesting to get Ryan to run a search for Petersen – and indeed Ahlbrechtssen – around the Silver Center, particularly the loading bays, and around the apartment in Brooklyn. See who was where, when. Then she can find out why.

“Okay,” she says briskly. “Thank you for your time. If you think of anything else, give me a call on this number. We might want to talk to you again, so if you’re thinking of going away,” –


“– tell me first.”
Petersen looks disconcerted by that last statement. Good. A little disconcertment on the part of her witness-suspects is just what Beckett likes. Nervous people tend to fret, and get careless, and then babble.

“I’ve got bruises,” Castle says plaintively when they’re on the way to Brooklyn to have another happy little chat with Mike-the-landlord. “Why’d you keep kicking me?”

“I didn’t kick you. I poked you with my foot to keep you quiet. She was nervous before we even started, and you joking would’ve relaxed her. I didn’t want her relaxed. The more she frets the more she’ll spill later.”

“Still,” he grumps, “you injured me. That wasn’t kind.”

Beckett gives that the answer it deserves. Castle waits in vain for words.

“If you’re not nice to me I won’t give you the benefit of my brilliant insights.”

“I can be very nice to you,” Beckett husks.

“I know you can be, but you aren’t being.”

“I won’t be nice to you if you play pedant.”

“How about if I play wolf?” Castle purrs.

“I might consider it. Should I wear a red coat? Am I likely to be eaten all up?”

Castle chokes, and recovers himself. “I’d prefer the red underwear to Red Riding Hood. We can discuss eating later.”

“How do you know I’m not wearing it?”

Beckett is, for the first time in weeks within Manhattan, having considerable fun winding Castle up and bantering back and forth. He chokes again. It’s very satisfying. As is – she checks quickly – the darkness of his eyes. Sadly, he is not quite reduced to a puddle.

“I don’t. Yet,” he says ominously.

“We’re watching the Espo-O’Leary show tonight,” Beckett says happily.

“You’re changing the subject.”

“Yep. Have you bought the popcorn?”

“Ryan said he would.”

“Yeah. He never does, though.”

“Sweet or salty?”

“Uh?”

“The popcorn.”

Beckett tongues her lips gently, in an unbelievably invitingly seductive gesture promising wickedness. She knows exactly what it will do to Castle. Sure enough, he growls.
“I like… salty,” she says lazily, and knows he’ll take her subtext without effort.

“That can be arranged, later. I like sweet,” he says in the same tone, and lets her take that meaning as easily. She emits a very tiny inadvertent noise.

Most fortunately, they are coming into the right part of Brooklyn and Beckett needs to concentrate on the traffic and the route to her destination. The cruiser remains quiet, though there’s a certain air of anticipation, swiftly doused as soon as Beckett switches the engine off.

“Mr Ahlbrechtssen, Detective Beckett.”

“What d’you want now?”

“What’s Karlen Petersen to you?”

“None of your business.”

“Riccardo Belvez is dead. Everything about him is my business. What’s your relationship with Karlen Petersen?”

“Grew up together.”

“In Minneapolis?”

“Yeah. So?”

“So who got here first?”

“Me. Got lucky with this place.”

“Karlen your girlfriend?” Castle asks. This time Beckett doesn’t kick him. This guy’s already nervous, and tag-teaming will make him more so.

“Was, once. We drifted.”

Castle thinks that he will not ever, never ever, say that about himself and Beckett. Not ever. From the look on Beckett’s face she’s not thinking about anything but her case, though.

“But not far enough that she didn’t get in touch when she got here.”

“Naw.”

“She told you Belvez was looking for a rental.”

“Yeah.”

“But once he got in, you weren’t so happy with his visitors.”

“No. I don’t allow extras, and that guy was there all the time.”

“Yeah, we’d like a look at him too. I want the camera footage, inside and out.”

“I want to see a warrant.”

“Sure. But if I have to go away and get a warrant I’ll make sure all your other tenants know that I’m looking at it. How’s that going to go down? And if I find a single code violation I’ll have the city down on you in a New York minute, Mike. So. Do you want to be the man who makes my life
Ahlbrechtssen cringes under the force of personality being projected. “Okay,” he emits.

“Thank you.”

Beckett stands up in a way that doesn’t so much imply as order the handing over of the footage. Ahlbrechtssen jerks to his feet and doesn’t quite run to his den to get it and hand it over. Castle watches his scared scuttle with respect for Beckett’s laser-like intimidation.

They leave, wrapped in Beckett’s considerable aura of complete satisfaction. Castle thinks that it’s because despite everything, she’s still the best in the business at what she does. He thinks, again, that Montgomery shouldn’t have kept her off new cases.

“Ryan!”

“Yo, Beckett?”

“We’ve got some footage. I want you to run it for our corpse, Karlen Petersen, Michael Ahlbrechtssen, and anyone from the lab group. Or anyone else interesting.” Ryan pauses. “What are you waiting for?”

“Nothing. ‘S just that Espo an’ O’Leary’ll be tearing up the mats in a couple of hours, an’ I wanna see it.”

“Better work fast, then. And if you get that finished, I want you to go back through the footage from round the Silver Center to see if you can find anyone matching up to the Brooklyn footage.”

Ryan looks disconsolate. Beckett is impervious – at least until she’s messing with the coffee machine.

“You won’t really make him miss it, will you?”

“No, but I’m going to let him think I will.”

“That’s mean.”

“Yep. It’ll keep him honest.” Her evil smirk hasn’t diminished in the slightest. “Coming? We’ve got work to do.”

They do indeed have work to do. CSU have opened up the four cans of shaving cream. Interestingly, there were as-yet unidentified prints on them. Beckett makes a snipped out enquiry and finds that the lab is – as ever, but annoyingly – backed up. Maybe tomorrow, she is told.

“I need those prints,” she growls. Speed is promised. Speedily.

“So what was the rattle?” Castle asks hopefully. “I want to know. I found they rattled, so I should get to find out what it was.”

“Hmm,” says Beckett, reading the e-mail. “Verrrry interesting.”

“What, Beckett?”

“Mmm. I didn’t expect that.”

“I see. Yes. That’s really useful. Hmm.”

“Beckett! Stop it and tell me what CSU found.”

“Hmmm,” she says again, mischievously.

Castle leans in, drops his voice, and suffuses it with sheer sex. “Beckett, if you don’t stop teasing me I won’t stop teasing you later on until you’re so worked up you can’t even whimper.” Her eyes flare and just for an instant her body softens towards his before she turns her screen and lets him read.

He whistles sharply. “Really? That is so not what I thought. I thought it would be pills.”

“So did I. Chemist, rattles, gotta be pills, really.”

“But… why on earth has he got lens cases hidden anywhere?” Castle asks. There is a short silence.

“I’ve got it!” Beckett suddenly says. “Your John said they were into optical stuff. Optics equals lenses. Get John over here, Castle. We need to talk to him about this. He needs to look at this.”

Castle is dialling before she’s even finished the sentence.

“John, it’s Rick. Can you get down to the Twelfth Precinct? Beckett’s got something she needs you to look at.”

“Yeah, sure I owe you. Shall I name a character after you?”

“Oh, okay then. But it’s an honour,” he says disappointedly.

“See you. Bye.”

He turns to Beckett. “He’ll be here as fast as he can.”

“Yeah,” she says: fast acknowledgement, but Castle can see that she’s already past that, calculations shifting over her face and through her eyes, seeing the evidence and rearranging it.

“Right. This isn’t about drugs, or homophobia, or anything like that. This is starting to look like industrial espionage. The only reason he’s wandering around with lens cases is because someone’s wanting what’s in them. How much is a better, cheaper fibre optic cable worth? Or something else? Espo!”

“Yo?”

“Espo, what’d you pay for a better rifle sight?”

“Much as I needed to. Anythin’ that gave me the edge.”

“Thought so. John said Verizon. Espo. Get on the phone to New Mexico and find out who was funding them. Soon as we’ve got that, we can see if there might be competitors who’d pay more.”

“Bet it’ll be the CIA,” Castle bounces. “We’ve uncovered an international spy ring.”

“I doubt it,” Beckett says witheringly.

Espo, recognising an outright order when he hears one, gets moving. Shortly he’s dialling. While he waits for the call to be answered, he contemplates the relative positions of Beckett and Castle, and adds them to his earlier thinking. The sum total is as clear as a target in his rifle sights.
Whatever had been going on – and Espo is quite sure it still is going on, because it’s not at all normal for Montgomery to haul Beckett in and rip her a new one – Castle is protecting Beckett. It’s all in the positioning. And, of course, the not very well concealed expressions flitting across his face. Right now, that’s considerable admiration, which of course Castle should display, since Beckett’s the best cop Espo’s ever met, but under that there is some relief, and under that there’s something more.

“Hey,” says the phone, in a tone which suggests he missed the first answer.

“Yeah, thanks. Detective Esposito from…” and he gets on with the task.

Less than half an hour later, John arrives. By that time, Espo has established that the New Mexico group was funded by Raytheon. Castle, of course, is jubilant.

“See, Beckett? I told you there would be an international spy ring.”

“You said it would be the CIA. There are no CIA agents showing up here. There is a huge defence company who fund thousands of projects in all sorts of sectors.”

“I bet we find the CIA,” Castle grumbles.

“If we do, you can call your pal there and get some useful information.”

“Sophia?” Beckett blinks. She hadn’t appreciated that he’d been shadowing a woman. Castle notices. “I don’t think she’d tell me anything. We didn’t part on the best of terms.” He cringes slightly, and drops his embarrassed voice. “In fact, she threatened to shoot me in the guts if she ever saw me or heard from me again.”

“What did you do?” Beckett enquires, fascinated. “I mean, you’re a bit irritating, and smug, and you’re full of wild ideas that go nowhere, but shooting you in the gut is unreasonable.” She grins evilly. “Shooting you in the leg I could understand. That might keep you out of trouble.”

“Um… I might have asked a few too many questions after she’d told me to shut up.”

Beckett raises an eyebrow. That doesn’t sound like it warrants shooting in the gut. On the other hand, she is perfectly reassured that this Sophia person won’t be laying skeletal fingers on the closet door.

“Er… and she might have been trying to listen to the wire feed at the time.”

Well, that makes more sense. The eyebrow descends.

At that opportune moment Professor Terrison arrives. “Hello,” he says mildly. “Rick said you needed me urgently?”

“Yes. We found these at Belvez’s apartment.” She hands over one of the lens cases.

Terrison frowns at them. “That’s odd,” he says. “Why would Ricky have these at his apartment? These get kept at the lab.”

“They were hidden,” Beckett says bluntly.

“Oh,” he says, clearly surprised. “We use these for transporting gels.” His yellow-tipped fingers delicately open one cap, carefully keeping the case level. “Hmm. I’d need to take them back to the lab to have a look at them properly, but I think these might be examples of his syntheses.”
Beckett looks questioningly at Terrison.

“Um…” he’s clearly trying to think of the least insulting way to explain. “Um… the results of those papers you found with the formulae on, well, he might have made the chemical the formula represents.”

“Okay. What do you need to do?”

A minute later she wishes she hadn’t asked that. A whole bunch of technical terms bounce around her ears and make no sense.

“Right,” she says after a moment or two more of unintelligible science-speak. “Basically you need your equipment to examine these things.”

“Yes,” says Terrison, stopped in his tracks.

“Fine. You can’t take them now. Chain of custody. We’ll need someone with you.”

Terrison shrugs, clearly completely oblivious to the implications of that statement. Beckett pushes him another few places further down the suspect rankings.

“Okay, Detective. Bring them round tomorrow, early, and we’ll put them through the works.”

“Eight do?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, then. Thank you.”

Terrison smiles and takes his leave. He is passed on the way by the mountainous form of O’Leary, sporting a sabre-toothed grin.
“Hey,” rumbles around the bullpen. Several detectives look up to see who’s vibrating the floorboards.

“Hey, O’Leary,” comes from Beckett and Castle in unison.

“Hey,” add Ryan and Espo.

“You ready to rumble, little man?” O’Leary says amiably, flexing an elephantine arm.

“You bet, mountain-man.”

Pleasantries exchanged, everyone tidies up, only a few minutes after shift end. Montgomery’s Captainly glare around, preparatory to ordering the team out, stops abruptly when it hits the mass of male muscle that is O’Leary, and he wanders out of his office to examine for himself the Bigfoot denting his floors.

“You’re Detective O’Leary?”

“Yessir.”

“Beckett’s friend and sparring partner?”

“Yessir,” says O’Leary, more doubtfully.

“You’re here for?”

“Sparring, sir.”

“Not with Beckett, you’re not. Not after last time.”

“Nossir. With Detective Esposito, sir.”

“Okay.” Montgomery looks O’Leary up and down, examines Esposito, re-examines O’Leary, and sighs. “Please try not to break my detective. One damaged detective from sparring is quite enough for this month.”

O’Leary’s enormous eyebrows wriggle in confusion.

“Detective Beckett’s last sparring match was less than successful. I can’t use damaged detectives. So don’t. Okay?”

“I’ll try, sir,” O’Leary promises meekly. Behind him, Espo is scowling blackly at the implication that Montgomery thinks that he can’t take O’Leary. Castle mutters to Ryan, who mutters back. It is possible that an entirely illicit bet is being made.

“Beckett!” Montgomery raps out. “No sparring. You got that? I’m not having you breaking your wrist this time.”

“Sir, I tripped.”

“I didn’t believe that the first time and I don’t believe you now. No sparring. That’s an order.”
“Yessir,” she says, drooping. She’d just have liked a nice warm up round with each of them. Clears her head, sparring. Spoilsport.

Castle notices her sudden droop and runs a concealed hand across her back. She straightens up.

“Okay, let’s get this party started,” she announces, and leads the way to the gym.

When the two fighters emerge, Castle wonders how on earth Espo will ever manage so much as to land a blow on O'Leary. He looks tiny in comparison (though so does just about everyone) and worryingly thin.

Castle, Beckett and Ryan deposit themselves on a handy bench to watch the show. For the first few moves, the two on the mats are testing each other out, feints, kicks, the odd punch. Gradually matters speed up. For a mobile giant redwood, O’Leary has surprisingly fast moves. Espo’s quicker, but O’Leary’s mile-long reach means that he’s not landing much. In fact, almost nothing, and it’s beginning to rile him.

For all Beckett’s assurances that she would explain everything to Castle, she’s not explaining anything. Her eyes are riveted to the pair duking it out. Her hands are moving in sync with the men on the mat, her body bending as if it were her out there.

It occurs to Castle that despite the intense mental stress and overall fragility that she’s had since before Christmas, she’s actually as tough as they come. She’s watching as an expert, he’s only an interested observer, and that means – and he should have seen it the first time he watched her spar with Espo – that she does this a lot. Puts herself through this physical exertion, the falls, the bruises, the pain. Blocking out everything else. That last round, where she’d gone all out and hurt herself… that was only the strongest manifestation.

Esposito, Beckett notices, is beginning to try harder, but his temper – always there under the surface – is rising too. Not being able to land much on O’Leary isn’t making him happy. He starts to go in faster, and that works, as he gets in under O’Leary’s reach and uses sheer speed to start landing blows. Good tactics, Espo.

Unfortunately, O’Leary doesn’t take long to get wise to that, and drops Esposito with a well-placed kick and throw. This is not noticeably improving Esposito’s mood. He goes in again, and manages to rock O’Leary’s frame with a solid punch to the stomach.

“You’re a lot tougher than Beckett,” O’Leary says happily. “She’s sneaky, but she’s not as good as you.”

Beckett splutters, very audibly. O’Leary takes his eye off Esposito for half an instant, which is all it takes for Esposito to land a sweep kick that puts him on the mat. The walls shudder. Esposito grins ferally.

“One-all, mountain. Best of three?”

“Sure. Then let’s go for beers and discuss technique. Seeing as Beckett’s not allowed to have a go – and what’s that about?”

“Got a little rough” –

“Espo, leave it,” Beckett whip-cracks. She knows all too well what is likely to happen if O’Leary decides to be protective. Which is utterly ridiculous because O’Leary’s thrown her all over the mats in the past and Espo’s always had her back since the moment they started working together. “O’Leary, I went full out and hurt myself doing it. No-one else’s fault. So no getting all Papa-bear
on Espo, okay?"

O'Leary regards her with a big-brotherly stare. Beckett glares right back, and adds a black-as-midnight scowl for good measure. “But,” he says.

“But nothing. This is my precinct, and Espo’s my people, and I went all out. So play fair, O’Leary. Or I’ll tell Pete on you.”

The last is just plain low, but Beckett knows that it’ll work. Atlas winces, right on cue.

“Beckett, that’s not fair,” he whines.

“Nor would you breaking Espo be” – Espo growls – “C’mon, Espo, if O’Leary lands on you you’ll have no ribs unbroken, and what use’ll you be then?” She turns back to O’Leary. “Get on with it, then. You mentioned beers, and you’re wasting time.”


It’s the last time he looks cheerful for the next three minutes, which is how long it takes O’Leary to put him flat on his back, having spent the three minutes proving that a really good enormous guy will always beat a really good normal sized guy.

O’Leary extends a hand, and hoists Esposito up when he takes it. They bump fists, and go off to clean up as the best of friends.

The table around which everyone is sitting is flavoured with the slightly spicy scent of various male shower gels. They all have a drink, and in Espo and O’Leary’s case, two, by popular consent and by way of appreciation for the show. Beckett, O’Leary and Esposito are conducting a discussion centred around technicalities, such as placing one’s centre of balance, how and when to pull a punch, and the need for constant practice.

“So, Beckett,” O’Leary rumbles. “What’s all this about you gettin’ hurt? Have you forgotten how to play?”


“Out of sorts, more like,” O’Leary suggests. “Not like you to hit the mats and forget how to play nice.”

“Bored of old cases. Hadn’t seen a new one in too long. We’ve got a nice one now, though,” she distracts.

“You do?”


“Foreigners?” Beckett says. She wasn’t aware that there were foreigners involved.

“Well, you said they were from outta state. Minnesota and New Mexico. Makes ‘em foreign, in my book.” Espo’s born-and-bred in New York attitude is showing.


In the background, Castle and Ryan are discussing basketball, without much knowledge on either
part. Ryan is a touch disgruntled, having put ten dollars on Espo in precinctly solidarity without actually considering the reality of a difference of a foot in height and possibly two feet in width. Castle, who despite all appearances had both listened to Beckett and is capable of assessing probability quite accurately, is trying not to smirk smugly.

More drinks happen, some food happens, and everyone relaxes by degrees. The arrangement of personalities also shifts slightly. Somehow Beckett is sandwiched between the two big men, with Espo next to O’Leary and Ryan next to Castle. This has not been entirely accidental on the part of O’Leary and Castle. It also allows Castle to slip a warm hand on to Beckett’s knee at regular intervals without the boys noticing. O’Leary noticing is entirely irrelevant.

“Time for me to go home,” Ryan slurs slightly, some time later. He wobbles very slightly as he hoists himself to his feet. Castle, who has paced himself carefully; O’Leary, who would require the entire annual output of Anheuser-Busch InBev to wobble more than, say, the continental shelf; Beckett, who has stuck to soda since her single beer at the beginning of the evening; and Espo, who has the world’s hardest head, all jeer. Ryan leaves with only a few mildly embittered comments on the subject of so-called friends.

During the next round of beers, Espo, not a man susceptible to atmosphere, becomes aware that there is a marginal tension about the table. He couldn’t have said why, because the banter and technical discussion is undiminished and nobody is blocking him out, but he’s getting the distinct sense that O’Leary and Castle would rather like him to leave. Beckett appears to be entirely oblivious to the possibility.

It occurs to Espo that O’Leary might want a little chat with Beckett, centering around exactly how she hurt herself. It further occurs to him that O’Leary won’t be doing that in front of her team, and while Espo would pay good money to hear what’s going on with Beckett, that’s not going to happen this side of Kingdom Come, or possibly the Atlantic becoming beer and O’Leary drinking all of it, which is almost as near. He drains his beer, and makes his excuses and leaves. Beckett looks mildly confused at his early departure. O’Leary winks at him, over Beckett’s head.

“So, Beckett,” O’Leary says again. “What’s all this about you gettin’ hurt? What did you do?”

“Fell on my wrist. Sprained it.”

“Fell over Espo?”

“Yeah. No need for you to play Big Brother, O’Leary. It wasn’t Espo’s fault. I went in too hard and paid for it.”

“Hmm,” he rumbles sceptically. Castle tucks an arm round Beckett now that the boys are both gone. “Why?”

“O’Leary, you’re not my brother. Leave it.”

“I was worried about you, Beckett,” he rumbles embarrassedly. “I don’t wanna pry, but it ain’t like you to be runnin’ off an’ then pickin’ a fight with me. I didn’t mean to push you. Just wanted to say my piece, an’ you asked me to say it.”

“I don’t remember asking you to tell me I’m screwing up, or how I should deal with my dad.”

“Nup. But you did ask me for help, an’ sometimes you get more help than you bargained for.”

Beckett stays silent for a moment, processing, then peeks up through her eyelashes at O’Leary’s cliff-sized face. “’Kay,” she says. “Friends again?”
“Never stopped, Beckett.” He plucks her out of Castle’s arm and hugs her fraternally. She *oofs* as he takes the air out her. “Friends.” He hands her back to Castle with a grin. “Pete won’t approve of me cuddlin’ up to you.”

Beckett laughs.

“Pete approves of you whatever you do. You pair are so cute it gives me tooth decay.”

“An’ you two here ain’t?” There is a very Beckett bristle.

“I’m not cute,” Castle complains. “I’m ruggedly handsome. All my PR says so.”

O’Leary grins widely, blinding a passing server with the reflection from his teeth. “Put you two together an’ it’s cute.” Beckett growls warningly, which is very much *not* cute. O’Leary takes the hint. “Okay. I’ll keep my mouth shut. But don’t let it all build up again, or I’ll have to *talk* to your boyfriend here.”

“Talk to Castle!” Beckett ejects. “You got something to say about me, you say it to me. You don’t go sneaking around being all macho and protective and big dumb man – or you,” she flips round and says to Castle, who is currently hard-pressed not to laugh.

“You don’t go messing with Castle ‘cause you’ve got a problem with me.” she ripostes to O’Leary, who is quite openly laughing at her. “If I find out you’ve been doing that I’ll come over to Central Park and shoot you.”

“No, you won’t, Beckett. I’m too cute,” O’Leary smirks mischievously at her. “You love me really, even when I’m messin’ with you.”

She throws up her hands in disgust and then snickers.

“I’ll get you later. You wait.”

O’Leary looks theatrically terrified, and then grins. “Bring it on, butterfly,” he says, and gets a friendly (maybe) punch in the shoulder.

Castle sits, swigs his beer from the bottle, and watches the floor show with unvoiced relief as Beckett and O’Leary re-establish themselves after the previous week’s tensions. It’s a lot easier than fixing things with Lanie had been. In fact, no fixing had been required, really.

“Time to go home,” O’Leary says when he’s drained his drink. He stands, and stretches. Castle has a momentary vision of O’Leary as an Ent, and considers that the film makers missed a trick in failing to cast him, although maybe eight or nine years ago he wasn’t quite as large.

“Night, O’Leary,” Beckett grins. “Still a lightweight.”

O’Leary is unfazed. “Night, butterfly,” he smiles back, from a safe distance.


“Yeah.” But she doesn’t rise, yet, instead staying in the crook of his arm for a moment more.

“I need to get home.”

“Yeah.” She stands, stretches as O’Leary had, and picks up her purse. “Want a ride?”

“Sure.”
In the car, there’s comfortable silence. At least, until Castle has an idea, and fails to examine it before letting it loose.

“Um…Beckett?”

“Yes?”

“Um… do you think you could stand another try at Sunday brunch?”

The silence acquires a rather less comfortable quality. Not, however, angry. Thoughtful, perhaps.

“I… maybe. Ask me again after tomorrow night.”

They’ve reached Broome Street, and Castle’s building. Beckett parks neatly, and Castle leans over to kiss her searchingly before he gets out and goes inside.

“Till tomorrow, Beckett.”

“Night, Castle.”

Overnight, finger prints have arrived. They are not currently much help. Not in the database, not in the files, not anywhere. Mystery fingerprints. Just what Beckett doesn’t want. She growls at them. They don’t magically identify themselves. She growls again, just in case. Nothing happens. She looks at her watch, and realises that she needs to hustle to get to NYU for eight. There’s no way she’s letting John Terrison look at her evidence without her there. She only just remembers to text Castle to tell him where she’s going.

John is delighted to see her, clearly exulting in the opportunity to bring another rookie into the science fold. He explains carefully what he is going to start with, only interrupted by Castle hurrying in, somewhat tousled and with a cut on his chin where he’s shaved rather too quickly. Castle’s eyes, however, are sparkling and interested, and he pays intense attention to John’s information.

“So, I’m going to start by simply refracting light through it to see what happens,” he says, and demonstrates. The optical machine – Beckett has no idea what he called it two seconds after he dropped the name – does its bit, John makes a note of the results, and they move on.

And on. And on. Beckett had never really liked chemistry. Sure, she’d done as well in it in high school as everything else, but she hadn’t been at all passionate about it. It had just been one more subject to get a good grade in to bolster her college applications. Castle, regrettably, is as curious about each test as he was about the first, and asks a sufficiently large number of questions to make it clear that he is interested. Beckett tunes out somewhat, enough to stop her brain turning to chemical sludge but not enough that she will miss anything that might be useful, in between the results happening, and thinks about how preferable math had been to chemistry. Statistics has actually been useful to her day-to-day job.

It seems that John’s tests are leading him to the conclusion that this is indeed Ricky Belvez’s synthesis. From the happy, enthusiastic noises John is making (Beckett sees exactly why he’s a friend of Castle’s) it seems that it outperforms John’s variant on the same thing, which, amazingly, is making John very, very pleased.

“This is wonderful,” John enthuses. “Outperforms mine by two percent. This movement of the amino group” – he gestures at a diagram on the papers – “must be what’s done it… unless it’s the trifluoromethyl placement.” He looks up at Beckett. “I have to work through these. Ricky’s made
the breakthrough we’ve been looking for.” He’s acquired an introspective, faraway look as he runs chemistry through his head. “I need to get into my lab.”

“Who would have wanted this?”

“Everyone,” John says simply. “All the big telecom companies, anyone who uses optics. Defence companies, I suppose. They’ve approached us to fund before, but Verizon offered a better deal this time.”

“Could someone have been spying on Ricky?” Castle asks, hopefully.

“I can’t think why. It would be quicker to get it when he was still in New Mexico. You can’t just cook this up in the sink – or on the beach, Rick – you need a lab.”

Beckett doesn’t say anything – then. She simply thanks John for his input and conveys herself and Castle back to the Twelfth, thinking furiously all the way and entirely ignoring Castle’s ever-wilder suggestions about spies, the CIA, the Russians, the Chinese, and little green men from Mars. She isn’t actually sure whether he mentioned the last one, but it seems plausible, with Castle on a roll.

“Yo, Beckett,” Espo is on her almost as soon as the elevator doors open. “We got something.”

“I got something,” Ryan points out. “On the footage from the building. C’mon. You gotta see this. It’s last week. We got all of the last three weeks, but this is the best view.”

This turns out to be relatively clear footage of a man who is definitely not Ricky Belvez. It seems very likely that this is the mysterious Troy Bolton. This version is not handsome, not under twenty, and does not sing. Not on camera, anyway.

“That’s good. Any info on who this guy might be?”

“Naw. He’s only come up this time. That’s not all, Beckett. Look at this.”

A little further on is some equally clear footage of none other than Karlen Petersen. She is let in by Bolton. Albrechtssen enters. A while after that, Bolton leaves, and shortly after, oddly, Belvez. Some time later Petersen and Albrechtssen exit, together. Very together, seeing as his arm’s round her waist. No-one else enters or leaves for the rest of that evening.

“The best view?” Beckett queries.

“Every couple of nights, right up till last Friday. ‘Cept that Troy person.”

“So they had their little meeting on Friday night, but nothing since?”

“Yes,” Ryan says.

“Huh. Roll back a little, Ryan. I wanna see what Bolton’s carrying.”

“McDonalds. But…” he rolls the frames forward… “our girl Karlen’s carrying a pharmacy bag.”

“Shaving foam canisters?”

“I’ll see if I can get some measurements. Even if they’re not precise, it might help.”

“Good work.” Beckett claps him on the shoulder.
“What’ve you got, Espo?”

“I’ve got ID on those fingerprints – well, some of them. Some are Belvez – expected that – some are Petersen – checked that after Ryan found her on the footage. There’s one more bunch of prints that we can’t ID – guess those are Bolton’s.”

“Okay, so they were all handling the cans. Have we got prints from those lens cases?”

“Waiting for them.”

“Speed them up.”

Espo scowls dyspeptically at Beckett’s oblivious head. He’s been trying. On the other hand, this is badass Beckett, the terror of the Twelfth (and plenty of other places), back in business, which is good.

“I want to know whose those prints are,” Beckett growls. “Troy Bolton my ass.”

“Could be Chad Danforth,”

“Who?” Beckett says dangerously. It’s not a question, despite the uplift at the end.

“Er…” Beckett fixes him with a scowl straight from the veriest depths of Hell, Castle thinks. “Hang on, you knew that! You’ve seen High School Musical. Why, Beckett!”

“Got ‘em, Beckett,” Esposito says, just before she whips up her Glock and shoots Castle.

“What?”

“Lens case prints.”

“Whose are they?” she says.

“Belvez, and some guy called Carter. Kyle Carter.”

“What’s he?”

“Still running him.”

“Is it the same as the prints on the cans?”

“No.”

“Carter’ll be the CIA spy,” Castle says happily. “Just you wait.”

“No spies.”

“Awww. No fun.”

“Catching killers is not entertainment,” Beckett says repressively. It has no effect whatsoever on Castle’s happy bounciness.

“But spies, Beckett.”
“No spies.”

“But” –

“No spies.”

Castle slumps back in his seat, pouting. Beckett regards Esposito’s desk. It could not be said that she was glaring. It could, however, be said with total truth that her fingers are tapping impatiently. Very impatiently. Castle is not stupid enough to point the tell out. Nor is he stupid enough to remind her of her appointment with Dr Burke this evening. Nor does he remind her that they missed lunch, though his stomach is reminding him of that approximately every ten minutes. He doesn’t want to do anything, this afternoon, that might disturb Beckett’s murderer-hunting equilibrium. There will be quite enough disturbance at Dr Burke’s. But he might wander out and get them coffee and pastries, or doughnuts. He’d better get enough for the boys, too.

He stands up. Beckett looks up.

“Where’re you going?”

“Coffee.”

“Yes please,” she says, only half aware that he isn’t aiming for the break room. Castle escapes without further interrogation.

Further interrogation by Beckett, that is. Ryan has whipped into the elevator with him.

“Come to carry the doughnuts?”

“Yeah.” The doors close. “And to check if Beckett’s okay.”

“Why?” Castle asks bluntly, and without much consideration for Ryan’s feelings. “I thought she’d made it pretty clear she didn’t want fussed round.”

Ryan colours up. “I don’t think it’s fussing to make sure she’s okay.”

“She’s okay,” Castle says blandly. “Stick to the crime, or ask her yourself.”

“I’m not that dumb.”

Castle says nothing, very pointedly. He sympathises with the boys’ desire to ensure their team is all okay and that Beckett’s back in business. He does not sympathise one jot with them asking him about it. They should know not to. He turns to the serious business of selecting doughnuts and getting the correct coffee order.

Back in the precinct, Ryan back at his own desk and explaining something to Espo in an undertone – Castle assumes it to be a rather bitterly edged variant on never said squat – Beckett is still tapping and glaring. This time, though, she’s glaring at her timeline and murder board. Suddenly she pushes off the edge of the desk.

“Ryan!”

“Yo?”

“What happened with the Silver Center footage?”

“Still getting the techs to run it.”
Beckett mutters darkly to herself. She can feel the picture coming together, but she needs more to get a warrant for Petersen’s bank records. On the other hand, she already has Belvez’s. But there had been no mysterious large lodgements there. She’d certainly have noticed that. Without noticing, she’s drunk her coffee and eaten the doughnuts. Without noticing, it’s five-thirty.

Definitely noticing is Montgomery, who has emerged from his Captain’s cave to glare impartially around the room. Castle catches the glare. Beckett doesn’t, but on Castle’s indrawn breath she looks up.

“What is it?”

“It’s half past five. You have an appointment.” Beckett says something short and very rude. “And Montgomery is about to throw you out because it’s end of shift.” She says something even more rude. “If he hears that there’ll be trouble. Such dreadful language,” he says sententiously, “for a young lady.”

Beckett regards him with considerable disfavour. “Like you’ve never used dreadful language, old man?”

“Old? Old? I am in my prime.” He leans in. “And since I still owe you your just desserts from yesterday, we’ll just add today’s insults to the total. I’ll show you old,” he grumbles.

“Beckett,” Montgomery raps behind her head, “since you apparently failed to look at the clock, it’s end of shift. Time to go. I want you out of here in the next five minutes – and you pair,” he adds to Ryan and Esposito. “And since I also know that you are all off shift this weekend, I don’t expect to see a single alteration to the state of that murder board before Monday morning.” To emphasise his point, he takes a photo of it on his phone. Beckett only just manages to choke off her infuriated yowl. She had planned to do some serious thinking over the weekend, and now she’s been kyboshed.

She’s still griping about Montgomery until they reach Dr Burke’s office, when she is recalled to the reasons for being here and is abruptly sobered and tense. Castle reaches for her hand and links his fingers between hers, small contact to provide reassurance.

“Good evening, Detective Beckett. Mr Castle.”

“Hey.”

“Hallo.”

“What would you like to discuss?” Dr Burke asks Detective Beckett, noting in passing that Mr Castle has hold of her hand, lightly, to be sure, but he is in contact. Dr Burke’s instincts are aroused. The need for contact indicates that Detective Beckett is under some stress. This is hardly unusual. He allows the silence to continue, in order that Detective Beckett may take some control of the direction of the session.

“I wanted to call Dad,” she says bluntly. “But I was scared that he won’t talk to me. And Castle said he thought that it would be better to do another joint session with Dad and me instead.”

Dr Burke is very grateful for Mr Castle’s suggestion, and for the way in which he had managed to stop Detective Beckett committing the cardinal error of speaking to her father without planning or preparation, and without, therefore, a clear view of the outcome she wishes to achieve with such a call.

“I think that might be wise,” Dr Burke says mildly. “In that way you may first discuss the
outcomes you wish from such a meeting with your father, and then if the joint meeting is not progressing as you would prefer we can pause it or defer it until a later date. What do you wish to achieve?”

“I need to hear his side of the story. Try and work out if he’s telling the truth about wanting to be a family.” Detective Beckett’s mouth twists. “He can be witness in his own defence.”

Mr Castle winces, clearly envisaging a rerun of last Friday’s meeting. Dr Burke is far more sanguine. Detective Beckett appears much calmer and far more grounded, and she is thinking relatively clearly, albeit prompted by Mr Castle. However, if she had been in the same headlong mode as had been evident prior to and including last Friday, she would not have accepted the suggestion that she should not immediately call her father but instead discuss the possibility of a moderated meeting tonight. Dr Burke considers this to be very substantial progress.

“That appears to be a very good place to begin. How will you then approach it if, firstly, you assess him to have been telling the truth when he became sober, with the exception of his error of a few weeks ago, and then, separately, if you assess him to have been telling the truth when drunk?”

Detective Beckett opens her mouth, then closes it, and becomes deep in thought. Mr Castle also appears deep in thought, although Dr Burke wonders whether Mr Castle’s thoughts bear any relation to the subject at hand. He appears to be twitching the fingers of his free hand in a way which strongly suggests that he wants to write something down. After a moment the twitching irritates Dr Burke sufficiently that he rises, retrieves a pad and pen from his desk and hands it to Mr Castle, who absently thanks him and begins to scribble rapidly. Detective Beckett does not appear to notice or, if she does notice, care. Presumably she is used to Mr Castle’s inspiration-driven fugues. Dr Burke admits to himself that Mr Castle is much more restful, and considerably less aggressively protective, when he is scribbling, and considers the virtues of providing him with pen and paper immediately upon his entry should he be attending with Detective Beckett at any future time.

Finally Detective Beckett looks up. Mr Castle almost immediately ceases to scribble – really, his handwriting is almost doctoral in its illegibility – caps the pen, tears off the sheets upon which he has written and tucks them into a pocket. He lays the pen and paper down and returns one hand to intertwine with Detective Beckett’s. She does not appear to react. She is, Dr Burke thinks, entirely focused on her views of the directions to take with her father.

“If he was telling the truth,” she says, edged with pain and acid, “if… then” – she gulps, and steels herself: Mr Castle’s hand tightens round hers – “then we need to talk about what he said when he was drinking, not just when he was drunk.”

“Mmm?” hums Dr Burke encouragingly.

“He needs to know all of it. Why… why everything. Why I walked away.”

“He also needs to know not just your reasons for acting as you did, but how you felt at each time. You need to acknowledge your own feelings, and express them. You had the right to do so, but were convinced otherwise. Now is the time to remedy that earlier situation.”

Dr Burke keeps from his face the satisfaction of knowing that the previous practitioner is currently being examined by a professional conduct board.

“How I felt?”

“Indeed. We can discuss that, so that you understand your own feelings, and why they are valid,
before attempting to explain them to your father. Now, what do you wish to achieve by telling that to your father?”

“I…” she stops. “I want him to understand that it wasn’t just him who was hurting. That when I needed someone to lean on there wasn’t anyone. That I didn’t have my dad. I had to do it all myself and then I had to try and look after him.” She stops again. “That I wanted him to love me, not some memory of Mom.” Her hand tightens brutally on Mr Castle’s: knuckles white; skin, face pallid; nail tips piercing the fabric of Dr Burke’s pale blue couch. Dr Burke briefly hopes that it will not rip. It had been quite costly, although he considers that his patients deserve comfort, not penny-pinching.

“And then, when you have explained that?”

“I think… maybe he needs to explain again. What he felt, then.”

Dr Burke could cheer, were he of such an uncontrolled disposition, which he is not. Detective Beckett has, at last, applied her intelligence in the correct direction. This is to be a discussion, not a diatribe. Of course, it may still degenerate, but it will start on the correct footing.

“Mmmm?”

“I don’t know, after that. I don’t know if I can listen and not get angry. Even if he’s been telling the truth all this time.” She looks unhappy. “I don’t think it’ll be like it is on TV: everyone hugging it out and it all being forgiven in one go. I don’t think I can do that.”

“Television is hardly a good guide to the reality of psychotherapy,” Dr Burke points out acerbically. Really, television has done more damage to the image of his profession and the results that patients expect from it – and in a ridiculously short time, too – than anything since psychiatry’s invention. “In fact, it is so unlike reality that I would counsel you to ignore everything that you may have seen. It is utterly unrealistic to expect that you can forgive ten, or indeed the initial five, years of trauma with one talk. Forgiveness, if it is even warranted, takes time. Amends must be made, and feelings accepted. If you were to think that you had forgiven all your father’s transgressions in one session, I would expect you to be seeking help again exactly as you have had to now, in two years or so. You cannot reasonably forgive your father in full until you have forgiven yourself, and that is unlikely to be immediate.”

Dr Burke, to his shame, realises that he has himself become emotional, and has emitted a sound that might be best transcribed as pah! He retrieves his composure and calm voice, and nearly loses both again when he realises that Mr Castle is scribbling once more. Dr Burke has a sudden disconcerting feeling that Mr Castle is making notes on him, and hopes with all his heart that he is not going to appear in a mass-market thriller of the sort sold in airport bookstores. Perhaps he should endeavour to read one of Mr Castle’s books?

“Oh,” Detective Beckett says. She appears much relieved, if depressingly surprised, by his words. “Oh.”

“It need not all be said at once, either. You need only say as much as you feel able to manage, and then you may pause, or stop, or ask your father to leave temporarily or completely so that you may discuss your feelings with me thereafter. You may have Mr Castle with you if you so wish, though that is always up to you.” Dr Burke allows that to permeate. “I think you are wise to pause there, and not plan any further ahead. It will be much more efficient to await the results if matters eventuate in this way.”

“Okay,” Detective Beckett says, slowly. Of course, Dr Burke thinks, she would prefer to have
every possible option analysed, but that would be very unproductive, and will be entirely likely to lead Detective Beckett into a maze of differing possibilities and probabilities, which will not be conducive to clear thinking and a successful resolution in the minimum necessary time.

He allows Detective Beckett a brief time to process all that has been said. Mr Castle has stopped his scribbling, and has removed his hand from Detective Beckett’s in order to place it round her shoulders. Dr Burke deduces that Mr Castle expects that the second alternative which Detective Beckett must consider will require some more definite reassurance. Dr Burke does not consider Mr Castle to be wrong in this expectation.

“So, Detective Beckett. You have adequately considered the strategy to be followed should your father have been telling the truth when sober, about wishing to be a family again. Shall we now consider the strategy to be followed should you determine that he does not appear to have been telling the truth?”

“I suppose so.”

Detective Beckett takes another short while to consider her thoughts. This time Mr Castle does not attempt to scribble. This may be because Detective Beckett is both mentally and physically shrinking away from the hard answers which she has clearly reached.

“If he was telling the truth when he was drunk…” she takes a breath, and continues “…then I have to… to accept that he’s not going to be a family. That it’s all been a lie. And maybe I need to tell him that and move on. Work out what I would have liked, and why seeing Castle with Alexis was so painful, and try to work through that instead.”

“Mm?” Dr Burke queries. Detective Beckett is missing an aspect of this alternative scenario. She has not mentioned her own forgiveness of herself. She has also stopped speaking, and her eyes are puddled. Mr Castle is quite definitely holding her comfortably. She sniffs. Mr Castle, in a manner completely suggestive of a parental reflex, passes her a Kleenex and only just snaps his mouth closed before uttering a comment of the order of Blow, honey. Some aspects of raising children are never forgotten, and some reflexes do not diminish with time. However, it would have been regrettable if Mr Castle had spoken the words upon his tongue. Detective Beckett’s reflex reaction would undoubtedly have been discomposing to the harmony of Dr Burke’s décor, and to Mr Castle’s pain-free existence.

Detective Beckett does not seem to be making the necessary connection to her self-forgiveness.

“How do you think that you will move on?”

There is a long, pained silence.

“I don’t know.”

“What do you want to achieve?”

“I want… I want to have a normal life. Be able to go to Castle’s without worrying about breaking down. Not be worrying about my father.” Mr Castle pulls her closer, and murmurs something inaudible to Dr Burke.

“What do you think would stop you worrying about your father, if you have already concluded that he does not wish to be a family?”

Detective Beckett shrugs, to the limited extent that Mr Castle’s grip allows. As Detective Beckett has shrunk, he appears to have expanded to encircle her.
“I don’t know. You can’t stop caring just like that.”

“But you will have done all you can.”

“Will I?”

“You will,” Dr Burke says sternly. “There is no point continuing an unproductive line of action. I am sure that you do not pursue unproductive lines of enquiry at work, so why should you do so in your private life?”

“But there I’m sure I’ve done everything I can. Got to the end of the trail. How do I know that here? How do I live with myself if I can’t look in the mirror and say I did everything I could? How do I forgive myself for not being a family?”


That, Detective Beckett, is something that you will have to establish. That has been the core of your issues since you first saw me: your inability to forgive yourself for your own actions. I will remind you that you cannot control the actions of others, and that therefore there is nothing for which to forgive yourself in that respect. In addition, you should recall that once a course of action proves ineffective, or damaging, there is no shame in abandoning it.”

“But…”

“Detective Beckett, I counsel that you should think through your own actions and feelings whilst your father was drunk, with considerable care. You should consider them in the light of the three Cs, and reflect. I suggest that it would be wise for you to consider also a discussion of the results of your thinking before any further session involving your father.”


“On that note, Detective, the time for our session is almost over. Is there anything more that you wish to discuss?”

“No. Not now.”

“In that case, good night.”

“Good night. Thank you.”

Dr Burke watches Detective Beckett leave, somewhat swathed in the large frame of Mr Castle, who is clearly taking no trouble at all to conceal his feelings from the world at large. Dr Burke regards this as a positive matter. After all, Detective Beckett herself had pointed out that actions are far more telling than words. Dr Burke regards Detective Beckett’s actions in allowing Mr Castle to display affection in public as extremely telling. Despite that, he is still entirely decided that should either of them ever require relationship counselling he will be unavailable. Permanently unavailable. He strongly suspects that they would bring considerable persuasion to bear, which would be tedious, and ultimately unavailing. He begins to clear his desk, preparatory to enjoying a pleasant weekend.


Beckett considers. Therapy generally destroys her appetite, and anywhere with drinks is liable to abrade her open wounds, straight after a session. Movie? There’s nothing she wants to see.

“Home.”

Castle likes that idea. Beckett’s apartment, coffee, takeout and cuddles. Or something like that. And if she wants to talk, that would be just fine too. Not that it’s terribly likely, but she is rather more communicative than she was before they went to the Hamptons, and she’s even asked for his advice. Well, demanded it. With menaces, and the spectre of her Glock. Still, she wanted his advice, and didn’t kill him slowly and painfully for giving a view which was different from hers.

The first thing Castle does when they enter Beckett’s neat apartment is take his coat off. The second thing he does, however, is catch her in and kiss her, first delicately, and then searchingly and deeply. She sighs, and curves against him, letting him hold her close to him and hold her up. 
It’s time for her to stand down, safe with him. He slides her coat off and tidily hangs it up for her; without asking Beckett turns to her kitchen to put the kettle on and assemble the constituents of coffee. Castle notes with some pleased relief that the tray contains creamers and spices and concludes that Beckett is in a less dreadfully miserable mood than after any previous therapy session. In fact, comparatively, she is almost cheerful. Almost.

They settle on to the couch and Beckett settles herself into Castle, who is conspicuously not objecting and indeed is encouraging her with a warm and not-quite-forceful curve of his arm around her. She wriggles a little to get completely comfortable and ensure that she can reach her coffee mug without having to move more than her arm. She sips her coffee, and contemplates.

“This isn’t going to be any fun, is it?” she says, out of the blue.

“Uh? Oh – you mean next session, or the session with your dad?”

“Both,” Beckett says gloomily, and snuggles a bit more closely to try to abate the gloom. “Ugh.” She sips some more coffee, until she finds that it’s all gone, when she sets the mug down with an air of disappointment at its failure to refill itself. Castle, who is perfectly content with the quantity of coffee in his mug and the quantity of Beckett curled close in his arm, does not offer to do anything about it, and in fact simply presses Beckett’s shoulder a little till she’s tucked her head on to his shoulder and couldn’t be closer unless she were in his lap. No doubt they’ll get there, too.

“You don’t have to discuss it any more now. In fact, you shouldn’t. We have some other things to talk about. Such as your provocations yesterday, and today.”

“Provocations?” Beckett queries sleepily. “I didn’t provoke anything.”

“You provoked me by teasing me about the lens cases. You provoked me by saying you’d dress up as Red Riding Hood so I could eat you all up, and you didn’t. And you provoked me by calling me old.”

“Do you ever forget anything?” she asks snippily. “You must be first cousin to an elephant.”

“Do you want to see my tru” –

“Shut up, Castle.”

“Okay,” he says amiably – and leans down and kisses her deeply. “Isn’t that a nicer way for me to be quiet?”

Beckett rolls her eyes. Castle simply kisses her again. “Rolling eyes isn’t nice.”

“But justifiable,” she snarks, and does it again for effect. So he kisses her again. For effect.

The effect of opening her shirt, however, is not an eye roll. More of a sleepy, sultry smile. So he opens it some more, to see what he’ll uncover. He’s rather hoping for red, even though the shirt is blue. On uncovering it, however, and finding the underpinnings (as it were) to be a shifting shade of teal blue-green, blue in one light and green the next moment, he lets that hope sink without a trace of regret.

“It’s not red,” he says, faux-unhappily. “I like you in red.”

“Doesn’t go,” Beckett says. “Red was yesterday. Today it’s blue.”

“Green.”
“Blue.”

“Definitely green.”

“I bought it and it’s blue. Teal blue.”

“I want it to be green,” Castle says firmly.

“Why are you so bothered? I’m wearing it. It wouldn’t suit you. It wouldn’t fit you, either,” she says hurriedly, watching the mischief rise on his face.

“Blue’s neutral. Green means go.”

“I didn’t notice that red meant stop the other day. It looked like red meant start,” Beckett points out. Castle pouts, stymied.

“You’ve got so many pieces of sexy lingerie. It’s very distracting.”

“Is it?” Beckett purrs. “That’s good to know.”

Castle suddenly realises that he’s just given a major hostage to fortune, and to Beckett’s well-developed sense of ragging. His heart sinks, momentarily. Concentration will clearly be in very short supply for some considerable time to come. Then it rises, along with other areas. She looks so very good in whatever she is – or isn’t – wearing, and his imagination is excellent. He may never be bored ever again. Possibly frustrated, but never bored.

He runs a light touch around the revealed edge of lace (which is definitely green, whatever Beckett thinks) and enjoys the slight elevation in her breathing. This is very nice. Very nice indeed – Uh? Ohhhhh. That’s cheating. She’s rolled him up, horse, foot and guns, and he’s putty in her hands. And then mouth. Ohhhhh Beckett. He would slide the shirt from her shoulders, but he can’t quite reach without spoiling her fun. He compromises by running his hands into her hair, and then all he can do is hold on and gasp out her name.

She slithers back into his lap, smirking. All he’s capable of doing right now is cuddling her close – and holding her destructively evil hands so that she can’t do him further mischief until he’s ready to make some mischief of his own. In a minute, he’ll take sweet revenge for that piece of wonderful wickedness. She’ll be left gasping his name. Oh yes. Ohhhh yes.

He starts with some delicately placed stroking, which touches nothing significant but promises that it might with every sweep of teasing fingertips. She mews, a little crossness tinging the satisfied tones, and wriggles into a more encouraging position. Castle is quite happy to be encouraged, and takes full advantage. He transfers both of Beckett’s hands to one of his, places them against her shoulder and out the way, and then, still delicately, undoes her pants and shimmies them from her. She tugs against him, without any force at all, and then curves sensually into his chest in a way which encourages his free hand to slip and slide over her taut breasts in their green-blue covering, to play with the peaked nipples and tease and pluck and roll and palm, until Beckett is panting and making very sexy little noises which he steals from her with a deep kiss.

Once he’s started kissing her again, he can’t find a single reason for stopping. His hand wanders southward, tantalisingly softly, pausing at her stomach, then gliding gently between her legs to rest cupping the hot centre of her body, so that she presses into him. He plays a little, teasing, so close to the pressure and touch that she wants, that her body is demanding from him; but never quite delivering on the promise of his hand. Beckett mews again, slipping easily into strokable, pettable Kat who curves and slides against him and is as happy to be taken anywhere he wants to take her as
he is to do the taking. He pets some more, silkily seducing her into purring delightfully.

“I like stroking my Kat,” he murmurs into her ear, and adds a kiss below it. She curves against him, and somehow his shirt has become open and they’re skin to skin and her mouth is against his collarbone and nibbling naughtily, with a little lick now and then to soothe the tiny sharp sting.

“Mmm,” is all he gets in return, and a definite wriggle of intent.

“I’m going to take you to bed.”

“Mmmm.”

“But first, I’m going to stroke you some more.”

His hand shifts the smooth fabric between her legs, rubbing it against her, sensing the spreading dampness below, dropping his grip on her hands to bring her closer and take her mouth with no apology: her hands come around his neck and pull him down to her and she’s so responsive, so receptive, so simply his. When finally his fingers slide under the pretty teal blue panties to find heat and wet and open readiness, she’s so wound up it’s a matter of a few firm thrusts to find a spot that sends her moaning and a wicked thumb to flick the knot of over-sensitised nerves and she shatters around his talented hand.

And then he simply cossets her languid body close against him until she shivers slightly and rouses, when he puts her from him, rises, pulls her up against him, and – because he wants to and she likes it and this can be how they roll – sweeps her up to carry her to her bed and lay her down, shucks his own pants and shirt and joins her there.

Beckett opens sex-hazed eyes and delivers a deliberately sultry, come-and-get-it look containing a considerable layer of admiration for the big, muscular frame beside her. She loves the way his size can envelop her: the feeling that – regardless of her gun and shield – when they’re in private he can be the rock that she needs to anchor to, the one person with whom she’ll always be able to stand down and be Kat; the one person who she trusts to take the lead when she needs that.

She reaches up to him and pulls him down over her, feeling his weight and bulk press her into the mattress, opening to fit him into the cradle of her hips where she needs his hardness pushing and demanding that she open further, raise her body to his and let him take her. She brings a leg round his waist to force him closer and have him as near as he can be, and for a minute he does as she wants, but then he ceases to pillage her mouth and repel all her answering attacks and rises up on his elbows.

“I’ve got you,” he purrs, velvet seduction slinking down her skin to pool between her legs. She lifts into him, and rubs. “I’ve got you right where we both like it: as close as we can be.”

“Not quite,” she husks, and rubs again, and reaches down. “These are in the way.” And she pushes his boxers off.

“Take it easy. We’ve got plenty of time.” Castle smiles wolfishly, and kisses her much more possessively than earlier. “I’ve caught my Kat, and now I’m going to play with you.” He takes her mouth again, a little roughly, a little use of size and weight to pin her under him, a little answering sigh and roll of her hips to keep him cradled where she wants him. She melts under his hard mouth, happy to be loved in just the slightly assertive way that she appreciates most. She would, however, appreciate it even more if her own panties weren’t still in the way. She would do something about it, if there weren’t a significant quantity of Castle also in the way. She could, of course, move him just a little… Beckett slides her hands down Castle’s beautifully muscular flanks and attempts to
lift his hips the narrow fraction of an inch that would allow her to remove her own panties and wiggle Castle into just the right place.

“Tut-tut,” Castle smirks. “Something you want?”

Beckett makes a frustrated noise as lifting his hips proves impossible. Castle smirks more widely. Beckett considers revenge for the smirk, and is frustrated in that too when Castle bends his head to hers and bypasses her parted lips to trace a long line along her cheekbone and round to her ear, where he nips neatly on the lobe and then licks beneath the curve. She wriggles. She always wriggles when he does that, and it’s not fair that he’s using it to stop her wriggling her panties off and him into his proper place. He does it again, and she wriggles again, even though she’s expecting it, and then he basely uses her wriggle to catch her hands to her sides and slither down her body and then she stops thinking about his despicably sneaky conduct and unfair use of size and strength and the weakness of playing with that nerve below her ear because he’s slowly peeling away her panties – finally! – and settling his broad shoulders into place and her hands move to his head and suddenly clench on his skull as his devilish tongue begins to tease and taste and take her. She’s driven up and up and up, twisting and bucking under his mouth and wicked fingers and evil touch, and very shortly she’s screaming his name and shattering for him.

Beckett finds herself snuggled up and tucked into Castle’s lovely wide, warm frame. She stretches luxuriantly in his arms, and discovers, very unsurprisingly, that he’s very pleased to have her right there. She’s pleased to have him right there. A wiggle against him later, and curling her leg backwards over his, and there’s a space for him in just the right place, so he shifts to slide over her, once forward, once back, gliding through slick folds and she reaches down to grip and stroke and then place him at her entrance when he’s in no position to argue – not with her hand around him – and slide on to him. She sighs as he fills her, a gasp as he’s snug within, a quiet moan as his hands close over her breasts, a cry when he starts to move and growls a description of exactly how he feels, how she feels, into her ear as he thrusts and she slides and her hands are over his on her and this time they break together.

He hasn’t let go, Beckett discovers: Castle’s arms are still wrapped around her though his hands have dropped to less sensitive areas: her shoulder, her stomach. She flexes slightly to ensure that she still has four limbs and a head, any or all of which could have fallen off without her noticing in the sheer delight of their lovemaking. Castle makes a sleepy, growly noise of general discontent with any movement at all that isn’t firmly back into him, and she humours his post-coital need to cuddle without any discontent of her own at all.

She remembers something, floating back into her head on a cloud of loved-up fluffiness which is so completely unlike her usual sharp, logical thinking that it must be important.

“Didn’t you ask me about brunch on Sunday?” she queries, fuzzily.

“Uh, yeah?”

“I wanna give it a go, again,” she muses. “See if I can…” she doesn’t finish the sentence, but she’s pretty sure Castle hears it… do better.

“Okay. ’S long as it’s you who wants it.”

“I do.” Beckett is waking up a bit. “Maybe what I need is a bit of desensitisation. Like when you’ve got a phobia” – Castle jerks – “okay, not exactly a phobia, but you know they do those exercises if you’re scared of flying: you look at planes, you sit in stationary planes, and so on?”

“Ye-es.” He doesn’t sound wholly convinced, but Beckett thinks she might be on to something
“Look,” she says firmly. “I’ve got to sort things about my dad. I can’t get around that.” Wish I could, she thinks, oh, I really wish I could, but I’ve got to face it. Whatever happens. “But maybe if I see your family not at your loft it would make it easier to face up to coming to the loft?” It ends on a question.

Castle rolls on to his back without actually letting go of Beckett, who ends up sprawled out across him in the manner of a resting, sated tiger. He stares unfocusedly at the ceiling and thinks about it. The more he thinks about it, the more it starts to make sense. Lots of sense. It also becomes borne upon him that, while Beckett has been saying since the start (almost) that she wants to be able to come to his loft and be able to see his family there without difficulties, this is the first time that he’s heard her come up with a strategy that explicitly acknowledges that she has to deal with her father too. In fact, she seems to be taking proper ownership (he winces at the term) of both ends of the problem.

“Okay,” he says mildly, and then much more enthusiastically, “Yes. Let’s try it. Same rules for you as last time?”

“Yes. And…”

“And?”

“And could you try to stop your mother stomping all over the raw patches?”

“I can try,” Castle says ruefully. “But I tried last time and we know how well that went.”

Beckett pauses. “Um… if you really have to, you can tell her a bit about Dad. That we’re… um… working through some stuff from when he was drunk.” She shivers, and Castle pulls her closer to warm her chilled soul.

“Only if I have to,” he promises. “Now, important things. Same place as last time? Balthazar? If I can get a reservation. Ten o’clock Sunday morning?”

“Yes.” Suddenly there’s spirit and fire around her. “Yes. Let’s do this, Castle.”
Poison ivy

Saturday passes in a comfortable, if tedious, round of chores and shopping for essentials, accompanied by no thinking at all. At least, it starts with essentials, and indeed she even takes home the cleaners, cleansers, and other items – there are even some cans of soup and similar long-life products: rice, pasta, sauces. After that, though, another thought seeps softly into her contentment. On Friday, Castle had, albeit in ridiculously ill-timed digression, mentioned how much he had liked the Georgian meal she had made. He’s done so many things to help her. Cooking for him is a very small start to recompense, but he’ll be delighted if she does. She thinks carefully about dates, both the temporal meaning of dates and the everyday slang version, and decides that if she prepared most of it in advance, which is possible, then Monday night would be a good option. If nothing else, it’ll give her a soothing pastime on Sunday afternoon, which otherwise, whatever Castle says to his mother, is likely to be a rather unhappy period.

Another thought occurs to her. She checks some information – Google is so useful – and considers options. Then she adds another, specialised, shop to her plan. She’ll start there. Certain things require a couple of days’ notice to be properly arranged.

Right. This is a good plan. She surges out the door and does some much more enjoyable shopping. A couple of hours later everything for Monday except the wine is in her fridge, which is therefore remarkably more occupied than usual, her other arrangements are made, and she sits down with a contented smile. Then she hops up again to get her phone and text Castle to make sure that he’s on board with the arrangements. If not, she supposes she could always invite Lanie over to help eat it all, but that would be a very second-best arrangement and both of them would know it.

Fortunately the question does not arise. Castle is predictably enthusiastic and delighted and has accepted with so much alacrity she’s surprised the ether hasn’t scorched with the speed of his reply. Perfect. Just – perfect.

Castle, having slept very poorly in consequence of repeatedly dreaming that Beckett was nicely cuddled into him and woken with a start every time to realise that she wasn’t, takes a while to rouse fully. Eventually, he manages to book Balthazar, mainly by playing on his celebrity status, and wanders out, scruffily unshaven and wrapped in a robe of considerable softness achieved almost wholly by its considerable age. He aims for the coffee machine, in the hope that this will fire enough neurons to allow him to shave without cutting his throat and dress without putting his boxers on backwards.

“Darling!” carols from the couch. Oh God. He hasn’t had enough coffee for this.

“Mother,” he says flatly. “Isn’t it a bit early for you?”

“Nonsense, darling. It’s a beautiful day.”

Castle glances out the window. It’s grey and cloudy.

“Really?”

“I have an audition at noon. It’s a beautiful day.”

Castle decides not to enquire into the nature of the production, which will only terrify and/or disappoint him.
“That’s great. In celebration, I’ll take you to brunch tomorrow.”

His mother regards him rather beadily. “I heard you making a reservation, and you hadn’t even heard about my audition then. A reservation for four? Is dear Katherine going to join us again?”

“Yes, she is.”

“How lovely. We haven’t seen her for ages.”

Two weeks, thinks Castle, is hardly ages. A little of his mother goes a very long way, especially where Beckett is concerned.

“She’s far too busy. The poor girl slaves away and never has any fun.”

Castle is absolutely certain that his face gives away nothing at all.

“Unless she’s spending time with you, though I do wonder if that’s fun for her as well as you. You do seem to be having a remarkable number of late evenings.”

“This is Manhattan, where the city – and homicide – never sleeps. The Twelfth deals with a lot of cases.”

“Every Tuesday and Friday,” his mother says sardonically. “I never realised that murderers worked to a schedule.”

“Where’s Alexis?”

“She went out to meet friends. Stop changing the subject, darling.”

“I’m not. I don’t want her to hear this.”

His mother’s ears prick up, and she assumes a stage attitude of complete attention. “Well, this is a surprise. Some explanation, darling? Not before time.”

“Mother, I don’t owe you any explanations of anything. However, in order to stop you putting your foot in it, I’ll explain a little. Beckett and her father are working through some issues. It’s not easy for either of them. So don’t ask about family, or try and bully” –

“I don’t bully” –

“Bully,” Castle says with emphasis, “her into coming to the loft. She’ll do that when she’s ready. But every time you start nagging” –

“I do not nag,” his mother says with annoyance.

“nagging,” Castle says with even more emphasis, “you make it more likely that she doesn’t. So stop bullying, stop nagging and for goodness sake stop trying to matchmake. We’re both adults. I really do not need you trying to interfere in our relationship.”

“Aha!” Martha cries. “I knew it! You are having a relationship. Darling, I would never interfere. Of course I won’t say a thing.”

Castle’s jaw drops open. Never interfere? His mother does nothing but attempt to interfere.

“If it’s families which upset her, then I could take Alexis for a nice spa weekend and you could bring her to the loft without her being upset.”
His jaw hits the floor. That is – that is actually a potentially brilliant idea. His mother has just redeemed herself after months of annoyance. How did he not think of that? He sweeps her into a massive bear hug and even twirls her round. “That’s perfect, Mother.” He hugs her again. “Thank you.”

“Oh, pish. It’s obvious. I’ll let you know where I’ve chosen. All-inclusive, of course.”

“Of course, Mother. When would you ever choose otherwise?”

But his usual cynicism about his mother’s talent for spending his money extravagantly is absent. She’s so often been so infuriating about Beckett that he’d forgotten that she is, in fact, a pretty keen observer of human nature. She’s certainly drawn the correct conclusions from almost no information at all.

“Well, darling, ta-ta for now. Off to my audition.”

“Break a leg, Mother,” Castle replies automatically and very happily.

The door closes behind Hurricane Martha and Castle breathes a contented sigh. He makes himself another coffee and retires to wash and dress on a solid base of happiness, after which he flips open his laptop and starts to write fluently and rapidly.

Writing is momentarily disturbed by the chime of his phone and the slight pang of fear as he sees a text from Beckett. He reads it with delight. You liked my cooking so much I thought we could do it again. How about Monday? He sends back Yes please as fast as he can tap, and goes back to his chapter in the best possible mood in this, currently the best of all possible worlds.

On Sunday morning Beckett wakes up, nervously considers brunch and in particular the events of the previous brunch, considers further the comments that Dr Burke had made following said brunch, and then considers her wardrobe. She certainly isn’t going to wear anything that advertises that there might be Kat-who-likes-softness, but this time maybe she doesn’t need to treat it like she’s interviewing suspects either. She compromises on soft black pants, less tailored than she’d wear to work, and a forest-green polo neck sweater which clings gently to her form without being revealing. Of course, she’ll still wear heels, but in this case it can be heeled boots, less formal than she’d wear for work. Her make-up is as pristine as usual, however. She doesn’t feel any less nervous. She’s just trying to hide it better, and make-up is a very large part of that. Normality. Detective Kate Beckett who can cope with everything with a sardonic eyebrow, a quirked smirk, and an intimidating high heeled stride. Maybe if she copes with this better she might manage to be a little closer to Kate Beckett who has a nice normal life with nice normal attitudes and absolutely no issues with other people’s families.

She reminds herself firmly that Castle’s family has previously been on the side of supporting – not to say attempting to force – their relationship, and that this is desensitisation not Thanksgiving dinner. She can leave it any time she likes, and try again another time. It’s not a pass/fail exam. More like continuous assessment. That thought doesn’t really help. She pushes it away. It’s not an exam or assessment at all, and even if it were Castle doesn’t assess her, he simply supports without judgement. That’s all she needs to know, right now.

She pulls herself together, dresses as she had intended, and leaves for Balthazar.

At the entrance, she can see the collective Castles chattering enthusiastically at each other. (Not to. Definitely at.) Martha, even at this range, is gesturing particularly theatrically and appears to be in high good humour. This is not reassuring. As she gets closer, it’s clear Martha is describing an
audition – oh, yesterday? – which appears to have gone extremely well. Maybe that will keep Martha off her case. Far off her case. She goes over, deliberately producing her swinging, confident stride. The thought fake it till you make it is buried below the surface of her mind, where she doesn’t recognise it, but it’s the best strategy all the same. She manages a fairly sincere smile and soft hey. Castle looks up and smiles delightedly, Alexis squeaks a happy greeting, and Martha smiles knowingly. Ugh. That’s exactly what Beckett didn’t want: Martha being inquisitive and no doubt dropping I know what you’ve been up to subtext. Or, since this is Martha Rodgers, Grande Dame, non-subtext.

Much to Beckett’s amazement, Martha doesn’t say a word. Everyone orders, with a preponderance of patisserie and pancakes or waffles. Substantial quantities of coffee arise, Martha adds a mimosa and ignores Castle’s raised eyebrows with magnificent indifference. Beckett feels Castle’s hard thigh press against hers under the table, and presses back just enough to show she’s noticed. The warmth against her is very reassuring, as Castle’s solid physicality always is. She bites into a particularly delicious pastry, inhales the scent of good coffee, and simply listens to Martha’s description of the audition, given in an outrageously camped-up fashion which has the group in stitches. Not by a single look, glance, phrase or quip does she make any reference at all to Beckett coming to the loft, and every time the conversation even thinks about wandering in that direction it’s firmly redirected. As a consequence, the meal is actually almost relaxing for Beckett, as family occasions have recently gone, although that’s not exactly a high hurdle to beat. More like the difference between the bottom of the Atlantic and the bottom of a Great Lake.

Beckett eats, and sips coffee, and puts in occasional comments to keep the collective Castle conversation flowing in a direction which she can deal with. It’s still very, very uncomfortable for her, but she is not being pressured in any way, so all her stress is internally generated. She can manage that. She will manage that.

She does manage that. She sits it out without a single piece of evidence that she’s in any way stressed – at least for everyone but Castle, whose thigh remains pressed against hers – until everyone has finished, even Martha’s flow of conversation has broken down, and Castle is dealing with the check. Her goodbyes are polite, cheerful and notably – to everyone but herself and the suspiciously comment-free Castle – unstressed. She goes home, congratulates herself on survival and not having to walk out, and demolishes a large bar of chocolate washed down with a large mug of very strong coffee, not doctored or diluted with anything at all. She feels much better after that. Chocolate is, after all, a known stress-reliever. Then she looks out of the window, finds that it isn’t raining, changes into warm running gear and goes out to deal with her remaining stress in a way that she knows will certainly work: a long, fast run to stretch her body and clear her mind.

It works beautifully. Three miles later, hot, sweaty and tired, she falls back into her apartment to draw a scalding hot bath with the Dead Sea’s volume of bath salts, and dissolves in it until her muscles are soothed and her skin crinkled.

Having rid herself of one source of stress, she curls up in the corner of her couch and begins, reluctantly, to think through the homework Dr Burke had set her. Consider her own actions and feelings while her father was drunk, in the light of the three Cs. What had she done? She’s always thought about what her father had done, before. She’d… picked up the pieces. She’d made the decisions: the coffin, the flowers, all the matters relating to the funeral. She hadn’t, after the first few times, asked her father. He hadn’t been able to answer, whether it was because of tears, indecisive I don’t knows, or complete incomprehension. So she’d simply done it all.

How had she felt about that? Utterly miserable and wholly resentful, she realises. Everyone had rapidly expected that she’d do it all. And, in some socially terrified corner of her mind, she couldn’t let her mother’s memory down: couldn’t let her father’s incapacity taint her farewell. It
wasn’t as if she’d had any earlier opportunity to grieve, before the funeral and the interment: too busy having to arrange it all; this would be it, and she felt the weight of pressure to say her last goodbyes in a way that meant she could always be sure that, looking back, she’d done her best. Maybe even then she’d already been covering for her father.

Trying to control the situation. She winces. That’s the middle C, for sure. Shame it’s not as melodic. It had, however, set the key for the rest of the symphony of her father’s disease.

She thinks, again, about how she’d come home that first time; how her father had mistaken her for her mother; how he’d realised, and told her to go away. First, her actions. She’d not gone away. She’d cleaned him up and then gone to sleep and the next day cut and dyed her hair. Because – she’d said this – because she’d thought she caused it. The first C, right on cue. And she’d resented that, too. Then she’d spent two years pouring the booze away and trying to be a good daughter and trying to cure him. C number three – jackpot, in the alcohol abuse stakes.

And jackpot in the resentment stakes, too. She’d pushed that down, fought it back until, her father finally sober, she’d thought she’d conquered it: done everything to push it away. She’d – oh God – spent all those first two dreadful years proving she was a good daughter, a good family to her father, to try to cure her venomous resentment and guilt. How could she resent him, if she did so much for him? Surely it proved she loved him? Even when she walked away to save herself, she’d suffered through her feelings of guilt by telling herself it was the only thing to be done. All the while she’d never realised just how deep her resentment ran. Didn’t you love me enough to stay away from the pit? He’d proved he hadn’t, the first time he’d drunkenly told her to leave because she wasn’t her mother.

But even when she’d walked away, she’d felt compelled to leave his number unblocked. Just in case he ever called her when he was sober. He never had. Not until he’d gone to rehab and been dry for nine months. He’d only ever called her when he was drunk: all of which calls could be summarised as Katie, rescue me; Katie, save me.

Of course, maybe he’d never called sober because he’d never been sober. In all his amends, he’d never mentioned his experience during those three long years where every call and every knock on the door could have been those final, fatal words: Miss Beckett, I’m sorry…

Then again, neither had she. She’s never mentioned that he called and called, leaving his drunken messages till her voicemail was full; never mentioned that she listened to all of them. She’s never mentioned how she felt when he missed her graduation from NYU, and then from the Academy, because after all she’d been told over and over in that first, futile therapy that she was expecting too much, that only children are upset if their parents miss events, that she’d had friends there, so why not just be happy with that? She’s never mentioned again how bitterly each time she’d watched proud parents celebrating with their children, and stood alone, because after all it was just a childish need for validation, and she should be happy for herself. More resentment, and more guilt that she felt it.

Her father had never known how she felt, because she felt that she should just get over it, and grow up. After all, that’s what she’d been told. Resentment was unworthy: she should be the bigger person, be the adult, and forgive; whether he made amends, or got sober, or not. The therapist had, at least, stopped short of telling her to go back to her father.

She digresses for a moment. In the harsh chiaroscuro comparison to Dr Burke’s acerbic, abrading brilliance, she can see that the first therapist was close to criminally incompetent, and that everything she had thought was correct had not been. It helps, to acknowledge that in plain words. She says it out loud, to the empty air of her apartment and the little stone bird and blood-red quartz
```
beside it.

“The first therapist was wrong.”

It follows, therefore, that if she thinks about what that first therapist had told her she should do, and 
then considers the limited guidance that Dr Burke has so far provided concerning the period when 
her father was drunk, then… oh. So that’s what the appallingly clever Dr Burke is doing. He’d 
even said so: I suggest that it would be wise for you to consider also a discussion of the results of 
your thinking before any further session involving your father. He’d wanted her to realise for 
herself that her previous steps were all wrong; he’d wanted her to own that realisation. Only by 
accepting it for herself would she believe it. She is, by nature and by profession, a disbeliever.

So. If the previous therapist were wrong, it also follows that if she thinks back to all that therapist’s 
comments and instructions, and then unpicks them in the light of the excessively irritating Dr 
Burke’s commentary, she might at least find the roots of this strangulating ivy, and later be able to 
apply enough mental paraquat to kill it.

She makes herself more coffee, turns to her small escritoire in the corner, facing out the window 
into the busy Manhattan streets, and begins.
```
Esposito is less than happy on Monday morning. Mainly, he is complaining about the unfairness of O’Leary’s size and weight. This is, apparently, cheating. As is not giving Esposito a rematch, which actually seems to be the main point of annoyance. Why it’s taken Espo till now to start bitching is anyone’s guess. What was wrong with Friday?

“Get over yourself, Espo,” Beckett says sardonically. “If he hadn’t had training you’d have turned him into ground beef despite his size, and we’d have had to listen to you crowing about it all week.”

“He should pick on someone his own size,” Esposito grumbles.

“The way I remember it, you were pretty keen to go at him. You could have said no.”

“How did you ever manage to spar with him?”

“Practice,” Beckett says, lightly. Espo doesn’t miss the brittle edge, though. “That was a long time ago.”

“Bet you never put him down.”

“Nope. But I gave it a damn good try.” She smiles smugly. “And I didn’t complain after, either.” The smile grows sardonic fangs. “I’m not playing ‘whose is bigger’ though.”

Esposito splutters disgustedly. Beckett snickers, and congratulates herself on the deflection of the conversation as Ryan arrives.

“Okay. What do we need to get today? Espo, are you chasing those prints?”

“Chasin’ Carter’s. Still nothin’ on those other ones.”

“Have you tried asking New Mexico?”

“Uh?”

“I was thinking that maybe the prints might belong to Leon Belvez,” Beckett says, dropping a bombshell.

“What? How?”

“Are you sure that ain’t one of Castle’s way-out crazy theories?” Esposito says suspiciously.

“Gut feeling,” Beckett says. “Might be totally wrong. But it might not. Ryan, can you get a cleaned up picture of that footage that might be Bolton and see if you can compare it to Leon Belvez? See if there’s anything in the Silver Center footage that might show up Troy – have the techs managed anything since Friday night?”

“On it,” Ryan says.


“I’m thinking that post-grad research doesn’t pay as well as a big industrial espionage payoff, that’s what I’m thinking. Teaching doesn’t pay as well as stealing high-tech secrets, either. I think we
need another look into both Belvezes’ financials. We’ve got Ricky’s, and there wasn’t anything unusual in there, but to get Leon’s we’re going to need a warrant, and for that I need this pesky stuff called evidence.”

“I finally worked out the measurements,” Ryan interjects. “Whatever was in that bag, it was the right size for shaving foam cans. Course, it was also the right size for air freshener. Can’t prove anything by that.”

“No, but we can run a bluff, can’t we?” Beckett says coolly. “How’s your poker face, Ryan? I think I’d enjoy some interrogation this morning.”

“Pretty good.”

“Then let’s get Karlen in here and push a whole lot on those cans.”

Castle arrives not long later, while Beckett is impatiently waiting for Karlen Petersen to arrive in an interrogation room. She brings him up to speed, and basks in the admiration in his gaze.

“So Ryan and I are going to take Karlen, but while we’re waiting, what’s the story here? Why would the Belvezes work together to sell Ricky’s lens formula, and how did Karlen and the unknown Troy Bolton get involved? And where does Kyle Carter fit in? I need a crazy theory, Castle, so I can tear it apart to get the real story.”

Castle pouts. “You won’t let me into Interrogation, you demand a crazy theory and you only want to destroy it? You don’t value my wonderful insights at all. I shouldn’t think up a theory at all. You don’t deserve one.”

“Think of your dinner, Castle,” Beckett says mischievously. “Sing for your supper.”

“That is unfair,” he says.

“My crime, my rules. Tell me the story, Castle.”

Castle starts to ponder. While he ponders, Beckett is ticking off what she has and what she doesn’t.

“We’ve not got ID on that set of prints. We don’t know who Kyle Carter is. We don’t know if Karlen carried in the shaving foam – but I’m going to bluff her till she doesn’t know which way’s up. I don’t know who this Bolton guy is – but I think he might be Leon Belvez. Espo’s looking into that.”

She glares viciously at her murder board. “I just need one thing to break. One lousy little break.”

“I think I got your break,” Esposito says smugly. “Troy Bolton is Leon Belvez. Or his identical twin.”

“Leon’s, I hope. It didn’t look much like Zac Efron on the footage.”

“I sent New Mexico the clip. They confirmed. They’re runnin’ prints now. Dunno what made you think of it, Beckett.”

“Gut instinct. Now we know who all was there. Ricky, Leon, and Karlen. Then there’s Kyle Carter. We still don’t know who he is.”

“If I were writing this, he’d be another lab tech.”

Beckett surges into life. “Espo! Get on to New Mexico State again. I wanna know if they’ve got a
lab tech or someone else in the chemistry labs called Kyle Carter. Picture if you can get it – it ought to be on his security pass if he does work there.”

“Tra-la-la-la-la,” Castle carols.

“What’s that?”

“I’ve sung, so I get my supper,” Castle says happily. Beckett rolls her eyes in a very put-upon fashion, at which point Ryan appears.

“Petersen in Interrogation, Beckett.”

“Oh. Let’s go do this. Castle, are you gonna watch?”

“Sure I am.”

Karlen Petersen is putting up a good show of indifference well mixed with an attitude of dumb insolence. It lasts for a whole three minutes, which is not coincidentally about how long it takes Beckett to work through the preliminaries and read Petersen her Miranda rights.

“Do you understand?”

“What?” Petersen’s been shocked out her stained acrylic socks and sneakers. “I’m a suspect?”

“Too right,” Ryan says.

“Ms Petersen,” Beckett says, with intimidating formality, “you told me you had never met Troy Bolton.”

“Naw.”

“So how do you explain this?” Beckett pushes the stills across the table. The photo shows Bolton letting Petersen in.

“Forgot.”

“Forgot a whole evening spent with him?”

“Yeah.”

“And forgot the month of evenings before that?”

Petersen looks about her frantically. Ryan and Beckett stay entirely impassive. There is an ever-lengthening, ever more uncomfortable silence. Finally Beckett breaks it.

“If you won’t answer that, then maybe you’ll tell us what was in the Walgreens bag you were carrying?” Beckett bares her teeth. It might, in some prehistoric monster, have been termed a smile. On Beckett, it merely intimidates. Petersen is sweating copiously.

“Deodorant.”

“Really?” Beckett says sceptically, not concealing her utter disbelief in the slightest. “You left it there Friday. He was murdered Sunday.” Petersen cringes at the blunt word. “Funny thing is, there wasn’t any deodorant in his apartment.”

“Must have got a bit smelly around him, once it got hot,” Ryan says.
“So since it wasn’t deodorant, what was it?”

“Shaving foam. He asked me to pick it up for him.”

“Four cans at a time?” Ryan asks. “That’s a lot of shaving. Man didn’t have a beard when he got dead.”

Petersen shudders.

“An’ anyway, he hadn’t used any of ‘em. The one he was using was a completely different brand.”

Beckett picks up again.

“You told me you knew Albrechtssen” – Petersen looks bewildered at the sudden change of tack – “because you used to rent a room from him.”

“Yeah, so? That’s no crime.”

“You didn’t mention that you were still pretty friendly.” Beckett tosses another photo still on the table. This one’s the one where Petersen and Albrechtssen are all cuddled up together. “Looking very cosy there.”

Another pause.

“So in fact pretty much everything you told me first time was a lie,” Beckett says. “Hope you like company, because you’ll have plenty of it in Bedford Hills. You’ll be an accessory to murder, at a minimum.”

She stands up. Ryan follows.

“Nice meeting you,” she says casually as they both move to the door. “Ryan, get them to take her into Booking, will you?”

“Sure, Detective.”

Beckett’s hand hasn’t even reached the door handle when Petersen caves.

“It wasn’t like that.”

Beckett turns slowly, exuding disbelief. “What was it like, then?” She doesn’t sit down, or move away from the door.

“Ricky had this compound, better than anything else around. He was going to join Professor Terrison’s group, but he got here early.”

“Why?”

“Doctor Merowin suggested it.”

Beckett flicks a fast glance at Ryan. So Merowin had been lying too. Well, well, well. Isn’t that just peachy? Lies, damn lies, and chemistry post-grads. She smiles viciously. This is turning out to be a very good day. A very good day indeed.

In Observation, Castle and, only a few minutes into it, Esposito watch Petersen crumble like a stale cookie, and when she mentions Merowin Espo hightails it out, presumably to get Merowin brought in before Beckett’s even made the call.
Back in Interrogation, Beckett is becoming happier and happier. Not that a single flicker shows upon her face. Oh no. That’s stern and cold. Petersen, clearly terrified by the very real threat of prison, is spilling it. There’s more spilling than at a toddler tea party.

“So Dr Merowin said to Ricky that Professor Terrison would need to see samples, and Ricky said he could get some sent from New Mexico, his old lab tech would do it for him.”

“What was the tech’s name?”

“Kieran, Kris, somethin’ like that.”

“Kyle?” Ryan says.

“Coulda been. Didn’t pay much attention.”

“Dr Merowin had told Ricky he should make some up here, too. Prove it wasn’t a freak result. Ricky got pissed with him and said he’d need a proper lab: he couldn’t do it in a kitchen sink like Merowin’s stuff. So Merowin said he’d get Ricky into his lab, and I’d cover the tracks for any tech stuff. But he needed to eat, but Mike let him off meeting the rent, so he got a part-time job in the pharmacy to cover food.”

“Why were you doing all this?”

“Merowin paid me. Fifty grand.”

“What was Albrechtsson’s share in all this? He’s only a landlord.”

“He heard me and Ricky talking, and wanted in. He could put people off the scent about Troy too, by pretending it was a gay relationship an’ he didn’t approve.”

“What’s Troy got to do with anything?”

“He brought the samples. Couldn’t put them in the post, could ya? So he was gettin’ like a courier fee.”

Beckett sees the mechanism. What she doesn’t yet see is why, but – annoyingly – it’s beginning to look a lot like industrial espionage. Castle’s crazy theory is quite possibly right.

“Why was Merowin doing this?”

But that’s where Petersen runs out of gas. She doesn’t know. No matter how much Beckett and Ryan tag team her, she doesn’t know. She goes down to Holding, where her next stop will likely be trying to make a deal with the DA. Good luck with that one. The DA is not a notably soft touch. More like concrete, really, and he’s due for re-election shortly and won’t want to look soft on crime.

She strides back to the bullpen in full forward mode. “Espo?”

“Merowin’s being brought in.” he says quickly. “An’ Castle was right: there’s a lab tech in the chemistry department at New Mexico State by the name of Kyle Carter. Got a bit of a history of being free with his fists after a drink, ‘s why his prints were in the system.”

“Good work. We’ll need a warrant for Leon Belvez’s, Merowin’s, Petersen’s and Albrechtsson’s financials. New Mexico can play with Kyle Carter. He doesn’t sound worth a fight.” She turns. “Castle, wanna tag team with me when Merowin’s got here?”
Castle makes a happy little noise. “Spies and murder? Try to stop me, Beckett.” He grins. “Coffee? Just to fuel you up for the next one. Can’t have you losing your edge.”

Beckett’s edge, far from being lost, is very obvious in her smile. Castle could have thrown a silk scarf and the fabric would have parted on it.

“Okay, no edge lost. None. Not so much as an atom. No, an electron shell… no, a neutron” –

“Castle! Stop.” He stops. “Coffee? You just promised me coffee.” She’s facing away from the boys, and therefore produces a tiny… pout? It’s adorable. It’s also gone in a nanosecond, and the edge reappears. Castle deduces that coffee is necessary to his continued good health, though he won’t taste a drop of it. He makes it swiftly and competently, and pushes it into Beckett’s hand before she can scald herself by snatching it out of the machine. From the speed at which she drinks it, he concludes that she hasn’t had enough coffee today, which is a situation which should rapidly be remedied before someone – he – gets hurt.

Beckett smiles, edgily. “We’re nearly there. I can feel it.”

“Good. I’m looking forward to dinner.”

“Case first. Dinner after.”

“ Thought Montgomery still had you on a curfew?”

“Not if I’ve just about solved it. He’ll cut me some slack.”

“Will I, Detective? How nice to know what I’ll do before I’ve decided,” Montgomery says smoothly from the break room door.

Beckett chokes on her coffee. Castle pats her on the back.

“It’s all coming together, sir. Ryan and I interviewed Karlen Petersen this morning and the whole thing’s beginning to make sense. We’re” – she gestures to incorporate Castle – “about to interview Mike Merowin. We’re getting warrants for the financials for the whole gang. We’re nearly there,” she says plaintively.

It has no effect on Montgomery at all. “And you’ll be nearly there tomorrow, too. If Petersen and Merowin are in Holding, going home at a reasonable hour won’t hurt you.” He smiles, still smoothly but with an undertone which demands obedience. “I’ll cut you a little slack, but by seven p.m. you’re to be out of here. No matter what. You can start again in the morning, as early as you like, but you’ve got the twenty-four hours to keep them in Holding so you don’t need to be here till midnight.”

“Yes, sir,” Beckett forces out.

Castle catches Montgomery’s eye above Beckett’s frustrated head, and is not entirely surprised when Montgomery winks. Castle, however, thinks that the underlying order to go home will be enforced, possibly with menaces. On the other hand, he’s going to get a very good dinner from it, for which he has already made overnight arrangements, and he’s pretty sure that he can cheer Beckett up even if Montgomery does enforce curfew, so all in all it’s not a bad outcome.

Which is not at all what Beckett thinks, since she’s muttering almost as blackly as her coffee, which, Castle now notices, she hadn’t whitened at all. Badass Beckett time. He would feel a little sorry for Merowin, but the man deserves it for trying to lie to Beckett. He should have known that wouldn’t work.
Beckett spots Esposito and drains the cup in one scalding draught. “C’mon.” her smile is even more sharp edged, and her walk is wholly assertive. As she strides into Interrogation, Merowin pales, clearly seeing a different Beckett from the woman who’d interviewed him a few days ago.

“You lied about everything,” Beckett states baldly. “I’m going to read you your rights” – she does – “but not one word of that is going to change where you’re going. Conspiracy to murder, Mike.” No Dr Merowin here. “Even if you didn’t kill him, you’ll go down for murder one. Rikers, Mike, and once the gangs find out that you’re a chemist your life’ll be worth nothing if you don’t start cooking up meth for them. Course, if you’re caught you’ll have years added on. Life in Rikers, Mike. Enjoy it, because that’s what’s ahead of you.” She grins humourlessly. “The only chance you’ve got to make anything better is the one I’m going to give you right now. Tell me the absolute truth, from beginning to end. One slip, one little fib, one lie – and I walk out and you take your chances with the DA and the jury. I’ve got all the evidence.” She pauses. Merowin is shaking. “Up to you, Mike.”

His silence doesn’t last for more than a moment, and then his terrified speech pours out so fast that Beckett is truly grateful that this is all being recorded. Even Castle couldn’t have squeezed a single word in edgeways.

“It wasn’t fair,” he starts, petulantly and angrily. “I was senior post-grad and John should have given me the gig. I can synthesise as well as anyone. But he went and got Belvez from New Mexico. Of course I’d read his papers but he wasn’t doing anything I couldn’t have done.”

*But you didn’t think of it,* Beckett muses. So, jealousy.

“So John thought we’d be all pals together – dumb fuck, like that was ever gonna happen” – Beckett kicks Castle to stop him defending his friend – “and then I thought, well, I didn’t have to be second best to some jumped up hick kid from New fucking Mexico State. I knew this guy who’s in a big fibre optic company and I knew he’d pay a fortune for this tech. I just needed samples. So I told Ricky that the funding had come through early, but not to let anyone know, just to come up and we’d find him a temporary apartment. Dumbass was so fixated on his syntheses he never got his head into the real world. Just believed everything I told him. Called himself a scientist? Never asked a single question.”

He finally takes a breath, jealousy twisting his face.

“Anyway, I promised Petersen and Albrechtssen a share of the payoff if they made sure Ricky was somewhere I knew about. So they spun you that yarn about Troy Bolton to make you think he was a boyfriend and staying around a lot. He was just a courier.”

“He was Leon Belvez. How’d you convince him to bring the lens cases?”

“Didn’t have to. Ricky asked him. Thought his big brother would like a weekend in the big city seeing the sights.” Contempt for the non-New Yorker drips through his voice. “Kyle Carter got the samples ready for Leon to pick up and up he came. It was all going just fine. They went round to Ricky’s to get the samples. Leon went out – Ricky said he wanted to walk around, see Times Square all lit up” – Beckett hears *hick* – “and Karlen texted me so I could call Ricky down to the lab. That way she and Albrechtssen could doctor the cans to put the lens cases in so I could hand them off to my pal. He’d already transferred the money.”

“So why’d you need to kill him?”

“Stupid hick got a cab. Turned up too early and heard me talking to my friend. I offered him a cut but he wasn’t having it. So I hit him, and he went down. Then I hooked him up to a carbon
monoxide canister cause that way I’d be able to claim the compound too. I’d have patented it and I’d have been rich. I’d never have to kowtow to Terrison ever again.”

Beckett stands up. Her voice is cold. “Michael Merowin, you are under arrest for the murder of Riccardo Belvez.” She cuffs him. Castle watches impassively as he’s marched out, and handed over to Holding for now.

When she returns, she looks a little drained.

“Good result, Beckett.”

“Yeah. All pride and jealousy. Couldn’t believe someone was better than him.”

“You got him, Beckett?” Montgomery says from the doorway of his office.

“Yessir.”

“Good work. Quitting time for you. You can do the paperwork tomorrow. You’ve even got an hour to spare.”

Montgomery watches her leave, trailed by Castle. He thinks that on this week’s evidence that he should put Beckett and the team back on the rota, and stop worrying about her hours. She seems to be pretty much back to normal. As the elevator door shuts, he can just see a sliver of Castle moving very definitely into his detective. He nods satisfiedly to himself. That’s just fine. He’ll read them the lecture about PDA, in due course. If necessary.
Food, glorious food

Castle follows Beckett out of the precinct.

“Want a ride home, Castle?”

“I thought I was coming for dinner,” he says very plaintively.

“You are. But not until seven-thirty.” She smiles sultrily. “I need some time first.”

Castle looks at her, looks at the smile, and acquires a predatory smile of his own. “I still like red.”

“Do you?” says Beckett provocatively. “That’s interesting.” She gets into the cruiser. Castle slides into the passenger seat and slides a hand on to her knee. His fingers are promptly – oh. Not rapped. His fingers are under her elegant hand, which is lying on his. He turns his hand upward and closes it on hers, stroking his thumb over the smooth skin. Not a word is said about his presumption.

She switches the engine on and pulls her hand on to the wheel, reluctantly. Castle leaves his hand on her leg and, as they move out into the traffic, sets up a rhythmic stroking just inward and above her knee. It’s sufficiently far from any sensitive areas that he’s unlikely to be chastised for doing so, and indeed he isn’t. Each time she shifts gear she meets his hand on the return to the wheel. He’s deeply regretful when they reach his block.

“Seven-thirty?” he asks, hoping for an earlier start.

“Yep. See you then.”

In default of the extra time he’d hoped to have at Beckett’s, he swipes a kiss over her full lips and bounces out the car before she can react.

“Later, Beckett.”

She makes her way back to her apartment, plotting busily. All that could be prepared in advance had been, after her thinking on Sunday – and during, every time she needed a moment away from it. There had been a number of such moments. Concentrating on chopping had calmed her. She starts to cook, happily, thinking of old days in Kiev: the colours and the autumn fresh edge in the air, the winter snow swirling, all caught up in the scents of the cuisine.

Table set, everything timed to perfection for dinner not long after seven-thirty, she retires to a shower and to dressing: her outfit planned as precisely as her menu. Red underwear: not the set Castle has seen, but a deeper shade: dark crimson silk and lace, sleek against her satin skin, accentuating the swell of her hips and the curves of her breasts. She smiles seductively at her own reflection, and approves herself. The top she’s chosen is also crimson: a draped silky blouse, soft and a little clingy. Not at all what she wears to work. Nor is the skirt, a full black wool affair that falls to mid-calf, the fullness disguising a slit up one side. He won’t notice that, at first. Later, she’s sure he’ll find out. She would be very disappointed if he didn’t.

Castle spends the time he wishes he didn’t have in showering, shaving carefully, and dressing in an ostensibly relaxed, casual fashion which in fact had taken him a little time to select: dark dress pants and a cream cotton shirt with an almost invisible blue stripe which (he flatters himself) matches his eyes. He covers it with a cashmere jumper, also a flattering shade of blue, and finishes with a dab of aftershave. He’ll buy chocolates, on the way: Beckett loves really excellent chocolate and he loves making her happy. And he loves excellent chocolate, too.
He also loves kissing his Beckett-turning-to-Kat in his arms. Which might be why he does so before the door is barely shut, his coat is not off, and the chocolates are still in his hand and therefore banging into her back.

“Ow,” she complains.

“Sorry,” Castle apologises automatically, and puts the chocolates down without letting go of Kat. Definitely Kat. Soft, flowing garments, the delicious aromas of interesting cooking, a set table – this is Kat, who just occasionally peeks out for an evening and is – not domesticated, Kats (unlike some cats) are not domesticated – feminine, which allows him to be correspondingly masculine, which, now that he’s put the chocolates down, involves drawing her against him and kissing her without any apologies at all. His gorgeously strokable Kat curves in, inviting him to keep her close, and emits a contented, happy purr. He holds her close, and emits a deeper, velvety rumble of his own.

Beckett, feeling very kittenishly feline, would be perfectly content to stay curled into Castle and be petted (et cetera) for quite some time, but having prepared dinner with care and attention she also thinks it would be a shame for it to be spoilt. She achieves a small degree of detachment from Castle, which is to say that she is no longer plastered against him, and swishes sensually to poke and prod at her cooking. From the intake of breath behind her, she thinks that the sway she’d put into her step has revealed the slit in her skirt. When she turns to find him almost on top of her, eyes darkened and intent blazing in them, she’s sure of it.

She hands him warmed plates before he can act on instinct: instinct being to keep kissing. Et cetera. Plates are followed by a bottle of the same wine as last time, and small platters of interesting food arrive thereafter. Some is the same as last time. Some looks distinctly different. This time, he doesn’t hesitate before diving in, though he notices with some amusement that Beckett-Kat has bought three of those glorious cheesy breads. He still can’t pronounce the word. This time, too, the table is set a little differently. Their respective chairs are one each side of a corner, and while that makes reaching some dishes a little awkward, it means that she can be in more or less constant contact. Who, precisely, initiates the contact might be a matter of some debate.

“This is great,” he says sincerely. “Just as good as last time.”

Beckett almost blushes. Castle raises his glass. “To good food and good times,” he toasts. Beckett tips hers in return, and both of them sip. There isn’t much conversation, but there is a lot of happy munching and noises of appreciation. Finally they’ve eaten their way to a standstill. There is even an – admittedly miniscule – sliver of khachapuri left. They both look at it. Neither of them move.

“That was delicious, Beckett. Just one request?”

“Mmmmm?”

“Don’t ask me to run or even walk fast for the rest of the evening? My stomach and I need to spend some quality time digesting.” Beckett snickers. “Beckett, are you seriously telling me that you’d be able to move faster than a three-toed sloth right now?” She smirks. “This is a major impediment to our relationship, you realise?”

“How is your sluggish digestion an impediment to our relationship? You can commune with your digestion if you wish, but what’s that got to do with me?”

“You’ll take shameless advantage of me when I can’t run away,” Castle says, with an annoyingly angelic expression.
“I’ll take advantage of you?” Beckett emits incredulously. “Says the man who was pinning me down in bed and telling me that he was much bigger than me so I wouldn’t be going anywhere?”

“You tried to wrestle me. You just didn’t like it when I wouldn’t be wrestled and wrestled you instead. And you still got to be on top, so why are you complaining?”

Beckett growls. Castle stretches a long arm towards her from his lounging posture on her couch, catches her wrist and tugs her towards him. “No growling,” he says lazily. “That’s not nice. Come and be petted.” She doesn’t seem to need to go anywhere, seeing as she’s mysteriously already there. Now both large hands are circling her waist and bringing her smoothly into his lap, where, equally mysteriously, she seems to be snuggled in. Naturally, Castle’s hand has sneaked through the split in her skirt and is resting warmly on her thigh. His fingertips are moving back and forth, very slightly.

Since it’s there, Beckett nibbles delicately on Castle’s neck, and travels up his jaw to land up on firm lips. His arm tightens around her, the hand on her thigh grips more firmly, and while she begins an assault on his mouth, it’s definitely he who finishes it. She retaliates with a raid on the location of his sweater, which, while beautifully soft and strokable, is quite certainly in the way. If she manages to throw it in the right direction, he might even forget to take it home. Taking the sweater off, sadly, means that his hands are momentarily displaced, but they swiftly return to their previous positions. That’s just perfect. Beckett, while deeply appreciating Castle’s ability to provide a firmly assertive form of extremely satisfying sexuality, is feeling mischievously feline and is, like even the largest of big cats when comfortable, inclined to play.

She takes instant and rapid advantage of Castle’s otherwise occupied hands to open all the buttons of his very nice shirt. This provides both lovely warm skin to curl and curve against and freedom to kiss or lick or nibble as she chooses. Right now, she chooses to nibble. One of her hands chooses to explore his belt buckle. Magically, it falls open. It must be magic. Or telekinesis. Whichever, it results in her head being brought up, and Castle’s kiss becoming hard, and sure, and wholly possessive. He takes her mouth without quarter, but not without her putting up a fight. He wins, naturally. He was supposed to win.

He continues to kiss her, occasionally nipping gently at her lip or moving to strum on the nerve below her ear; kissing until she is lax in his clasp; kissing until she’s boneless and curved into him. Only then does he slide a hand beneath the silky shirt, untucking and gliding over her spine, vertebrae still a little more prominent than he’d really like; only then does the hand on her thigh stretch a little more widely to wander ever closer to her soft centre.

“Mine,” he murmurs into her ear, “all soft and relaxed and mine.” She emits a contented noise, and says nothing. She – how odd – likes being told that she’s Castle’s, in that smoothly possessive fashion. It makes her feel safe, and cherished, and loved: someone who wants her, wants to keep her close, doesn’t want her to leave. Doesn’t tell her to go. Oh. Oh. That’s why she likes it so much.

“Yours,” she breathes, and cuddles as close as she can, stretching up to place her lips firmly on his and ignite the fire. His mouth responds, his arms close over her, and she simply loses herself in his strength and touch. He’s so right for her, forceful and assertive, never quite dominating but always there to take the lead and let her – not. Unless she wants to, of course, when she knows that he’ll give place, for a while. But now, she doesn’t want to lead. She wants to be led, and loved.

Castle catches Beckett-now-definitely-Kat’s mood in an instant, and quite deliberately exerts himself to be very assertively male in kiss, and touch, and demeanour. He cups the back of her head to slant it as he wishes, rearranges her against him so that the other remains under her skirt and free
to roam as he pleases, and proceeds to do precisely as he pleases with her, which very shortly, it is clear, is pleasing her. His fingers move over the delicate skin of her inner thigh in time with the hand now curling round her skull to stroke her jaw and with the thrusts of his tongue to raid and plunder and conquer.

She sighs and opens to him, as responsive as she always is, perfectly fitted to him, perfectly matching. He teases her, not touching as intimately as it’s clear she’d like, tantalising with an occasional stroke over the fragile fabric covering her, and then stopping entirely to remove his hand from her leg and turn to the swell of her breast, slipping up under the loosened shirt and finding that same fragility of fabric.

Suddenly he has to see it, to reveal her, to have her and hold her and love her. He slides her aside for an instant, stands and yet once more sweeps her up against him to take her, carry her, to bed. He doesn’t know or care what deep-seated primitive instinct makes him do so, all he knows or cares about is that he can, and it matters that he can: that he can be tall and strong and assertively masculine for her.

Her eyes, as he looks at her in his arms, hers around his neck, are sleepy and hazy, only aware of him, and deep within them is not just the love she’s declared, but trust. He stands her by the bed, simply holding her close, her head against his shoulder, his cheek on her hair, their arms locked around each other: and for a moment there is only stillness, and silence, and closeness, and love; two people as near as they can be.

And then his Kat raises her face, and he kisses her, and the stillness and silence are gone.

His open shirt slides from his shoulders, assisted by elegant, evil hands, to leave his torso bared; he’s swift to capture her hands and then to turn to the draped silk that shrouds her. He slows down: this will be seduction; slow and sensual. The fiery ignition of the astonishing physical connection that first joined them is… not what’s wanted or needed, now.

“Slowly,” he whispers, a deep rasp that brings a shiver. “Slowly, Kat. I’ll lead, now, just like you want me to. Just let me. I’ll take us where we want to go. Just the way you want it.” She murmurs consent, assent, and curves against him, her wrists utterly relaxed and at ease in his clasp. He lets go of them, leaves that hand around her waist to support her, kisses her with power and possession and passion, still, somehow, deep and slow and sure that searching, he’ll find her: his Beckett-Kate-Kat, his love.

A hand glides over the dip above her collarbones, coming to rest with fingers a fraction above the first fastened button, questing until it releases it from the small loop that holds it. Not buttonholes, tonight, but small silk cord loops and silk covered buttons, so small and almost invisible that at first he’d thought it a t-shirt. The first button falls open, a little cream skin bright against the blood-crimson fabric, and the tips of his fingers follow the opening as lightly as the silk had dusted over her. He kisses her willing mouth again, hard punctuation of soft discovery, and slips down to a second silken loop: repeats. No haste, here. No hurrying.

When he reaches the fourth loop her breathing deepens, and he lifts from her lips to watch his fingers against her skin, achingly gentle, wholly controlled: those same fingers release the fifth and final loop and spread the silk aside, showing him at last the fragile, flaming crimson of her bra: stark contrast to the cream of her skin and yet so perfectly complementary; cut to dress the swell of her breast in the haute couture of seduction. He realises that she’d chosen red because he’d said he liked it, and his own heart swells in his chest. His Beckett doesn’t talk much, but her actions make her meaning plain: she’s given him, this evening, so many actions to show she’s listening to him, that she, as much as he for her, wants to make him happy.
“Beautiful,” he purrs, bending to the colour so that his breath vibrates the lace and peaks her nipples ready for his avid mouth. He kisses above the fabric, a delicate butterfly touch that draws a gasp from her, a shiver of desire, and the arm around her waist is there to hold her. Strength in his arm, strength in the leashed power behind his kiss, strength as he draws her nipple into his mouth and rolls and plays with his tongue, and she’s dipped back over his arm to arch up to him; offering herself to whatever he chooses to do.

He chooses to stay where he is, switching from side to side, mobile lips and tongue gently working at her, causing deeper gasps, turning to sighs. She curves and arches and her hands are in his hair to hold his head to her; both his hands behind her now to support her. He pulls a little at the soft collar of the blouse, and her hands drop to allow him to remove it and cast it away, then return to his head. His same searching hand releases the fastening of her skirt, which falls to the floor, leaving her in crimson silk and nothing more: brief panties that draw the eye and accentuate the slim curve of her hips, the high cut lengthening her legs still further, the triangular cut and lace panel pointing the way. For a moment, he sets her back from him and simply admires: his eyes wholly darkened, his mind filled up with her and only her. He pushes her to sitting on the bed and goes to one knee before her, takes her in his mouth again and brings her back to mewing and arching to him until he leaves those beautiful, delectable mounds and peaks and kisses straight down the line of her sternum, to navel; pushes her again to lay her back on her bed, kneels between her legs and grasps her hips, nudges delicately with his elbows to spread her wider and settles to her.

There’s a short pause while he breathes her in: the scent of her arousal and the tangible heat emanating from her: he loves the sheer femaleness of it – of her. He’s known a lot of women, but he will only ever know this one in future, has known that since he’d first met her. She’s the only, the last, his alpha to omega.

He bends forward that final fraction and licks one hard stroke straight along her. She bucks and then writhes as he does it again, holding her still: plays with the slithery fabric until she can’t help but moan, smiles wickedly against her and shows her what the Big Bad Wolf can really do with Red Riding Hood. When he draws her panties off, and begins again, her cries do not relate to pain or fear in any way. He needs both hands to hold her, but his talented tongue alternately dances and thrusts, over and in and out, and then she stills for that instant before she shatters and he drinks her climax down.
Give me the key

Castle peels himself away from his blissed-out Beckett, who mews in soft, cross protest at his absence, strips in two swift movements, and repositions her along the length of the bed to join her, slipping a hand under her to remove her bra and leave her as naked as he. He rolls her into him: her leg comes up over his, her arm around his ribs, and she’s curled across him, dropping tiny playful peck-kisses on his neck. The laxity of her body indicates she’s not ready for anything more, yet. He’s content to wait and pet gently, before leading her to more. He lies comfortably surrounded, surrounding, his quietly sated, satisfied Kat; and dreams of the day that this will be permanent, and permanently in his loft.

Dreaming abruptly ceases when Kat nips his ear sharply, curls her fingers round him, and makes it perfectly clear that it’s playtime again. Well, he’s certainly up for playtime. Even more so when she slithers over him and simultaneously dives into his mouth before he can react and envelops him in one smooth movement. He nearly explodes on the spot: she’s slick and hot and tight and perfect and his hands drop to her ass to hold her so he’s fully within her, she moves on him, squirming, and rises a little and her beautiful breasts are right there in reach and he takes one, then the other, then back; she grips his shoulders and rocks into him and his hips cant into her as she rides him till he can’t bear it any longer and releases her breasts and rolls them and then takes her hard and fast and frantic and she’s right there with him, all the way to explosion.

He rolls back and takes her with him, unwilling to let her be even the slightest fraction of an inch away from him. Fortunately, she’s happy to cuddle in and stay right where she should be: safe with him. She pulls a cover over them and the next thing he knows it’s past midnight, and he’s woken with Kat still snuggled close against him and breathing in the slow cadence of deep, restful sleep, her ribs expanding and contracting within his encircling arm. He wants this as he’s wanted nothing else in his life: the only comparable strength of feeling his instant, overwhelming love for his newborn daughter. He wants his Beckett to be here, with him, against him, safe in his love, drowning him in hers; this night, and every night.

And yet he still must wait upon her healing, which, while begun, has still so much ground to cover. He turns to his side, and without waking her spoons her in, breathes the faint scent of her hair, and sleeps again.

Beckett wakes cosily warm and comfortable, wholly rested, and approximately five seconds before her attack-warning level alarm goes off. She silences it before it can wake the large figure of Castle, sprawled out across the bed and still sound asleep. She intends to indulge in a little inspection of her own. He, after all, spends a great deal of time inspecting her. She looks at his face, younger in sleep, but less compelling without the bright blue fire of his eyes, the constant play of expression and emotion across his face. Still, as she looks at him, her heart flips over. With him, anything, everything, is possible. Whatever happens, he’s there for her. Whatever will happen, he will be there. She knows that as surely as she knows her own heart. She lies back down, head pillowed on his chest, and listens to the slow, sure beat of his heart for the few moments that she can spare before she has to rise and prepare for work.

Castle wakes to find a warm, but disappointingly empty, space beside him, looks at the clock, listens to the splashing noises from the bathroom, and deduces that Beckett is getting ready for work. He pouts a little, mostly at himself for not waking earlier, stretches hugely and pads off to put the kettle on. On returning, he finds Beckett disporting herself at her dressing table clad only in an extremely fetching – it certainly fetches him to her – dark green underwear set, a few damp tendrils of hair curling round her ears, and her make-up half done. She sees him looming behind
her in the mirror, meets his gaze, and smiles with no reserve or artifice at all. It’s devastating. He returns it as openly, and sees her equally devastated, both of them in the best possible way. However, she is clean and fresh, and he is definitely not.

“Can I take a shower?”

“Sure. By the time you’re done, I’ll be done. Coffee?”

“Already put the kettle on.” He smirks. “I know your little foibles, Beckett. And your need for intravenous caffeine.” He fakes realisation. “You’re functional? How are you functional before coffee? Every other time I’ve seen you pre-coffee you’ve been close to catatonic.”

Beckett growls, not in a friendly way, and applies both her eyeliner and a frigid shoulder.

“Too early?”

Another growl. Castle concludes that it is too early to tease, and takes his shower in the hope that Beckett will have poured down her first mugful. About that point he realises that it would have been sensible to bring a change of clothes. He tucks the towel around his waist, and wanders back out of the bathroom to see whether he can find yesterday’s boxers (ugh) and shirt. The boxers are found. The shirt is nowhere to be seen. He excavates a very hazy memory of losing the sweater, but not the shirt, before ever attaining the bedroom, and retains the towel for some warmth as he follows his nose to the coffee and a rather more convivial Beckett. She’s quite openly ogling his chest as he walks towards her.

He accepts the proffered cup of coffee, thinks very quietly that Beckett must have had at least one mug, since there is spark and intelligence in her face, and enjoys this moment of peaceful domesticity and togetherness.

Then he starts to search out his shirt. It must be somewhere near the bed, surely? It seems to have disappeared entirely.

“Beckett, where’s my shirt?” There is a suspicious silence. “I need to put on my shirt to go home.” He thinks for a second. “And my sweater. It’s gone missing, too.” He’s watching her very, very carefully. There’s the tiniest hint of colour on her cheeks, and he doesn’t think it’s from the heat of the coffee. “Beckett?” He grins mischievously. “You know where they are, don’t you?”

“Nope,” she says, unconvincingly.

Castle sidles up to her, takes the cup out of her hand and puts it down with his own, and tugs her into his embrace. “You do,” he says happily. “You’re trying to steal my very expensive imported cotton shirts. And my beautiful sweater. They won’t fit you, Beckett.”

There is a mutter somewhere around his ribcage. “Not stealing,” is the most likely interpretation, and more clearly, “just ‘cause you can’t keep track of your clothes.”

“I keep track of your clothes,” Castle flips back, “especially as I’m taking them off – ow! That wasn’t nice,” he says reproachfully, “and nor is stealing my shirt.”

“It’s right there,” Beckett says, a little sulkily. “Behind the couch on the window side.” It’s not fair. Why hadn’t Castle thought to bring a change of clothes? He’d never have noticed leaving it if he’d done that. And she’d wanted it. On days when he isn’t here, or can’t stay, or if she were unhappy. Just until she’s fixed.

“Ugh,” she emits gloomily.
“What?”

“Dr Burke.” She makes another disgusted noise. “And it’s going to be paperwork all day today to wrap up the case and the supporting evidence.”

“Ugh,” Castle agrees. “I don’t like paperwork days.”

“You never do any.”

“Can’t,” he says smugly. “I’m not a cop. You keep reminding me of that, too. You can’t have it both ways, Beckett.”

There is another growl. Then she drains her coffee, glances at her watch, squawks at the time, and hurriedly digs a key out her purse.

“You’ll need to lock up,” she says, and then pauses, blushing. “Maybe… you should get a copy cut?”

Castle is still mentally gibbering at that line when the door closes behind Beckett. He’s not sure what he said in reply. *Urg?* seems most likely, but since she didn’t hit him, shut down, burst into tears or do something that might otherwise indicate he’d said something really dumb that made her think he wouldn’t want a key he must have said something that meant *yes*. Yes, yes, *yes!*

He scrabbles frantically around till he’s found and donned all of his clothes, skitters out the door, only just remembering to lock it, tears home to shave and change, and tears out again to the nearest locksmith to have his copy key cut before anything can get in the way, such as mutant giant spiders invading Broome Street, or an earthquake, or an alien invasion.

He is only calmed when the new key, bright and shiny and still hot from the cutter, slides on to his key ring, right next to that for his own loft. He has a thought, and asks the technician to make a copy of his key. She might not be able to use it – yet – but it’ll be ready when she is.

In the bullpen, Beckett is collating all her evidence, and ensuring that the missing pieces are going to be in her hands in extremely short order by using a combination of a dazzling smile and straight-up intimidation, sometimes on the same person at once. Everything is promised by the end of the day, Beckett intimidates further and everything is promised by three p.m., at which time Beckett stops intimidating and emits happy, thank-you flavoured noises. This is productive of much relief, in particular around Ryan and Esposito, who had been suffering the majority of the intimidation and a definite minority of dazzling smiles. They feel that this is unfair.

Castle saunters in around noon, happily smug about missing the paperwork, and instantly less happily smug when he discovers that it isn’t yet finished. He makes some hurried noises about getting everyone lunch, and is firmly told to sit down, keep quiet and do what he’s told till they’re ready to go. Doing what he’s told mostly seems to involve holding on to bits of paper until Beckett’s ready to put them in the correct place in the file for the DA. This is a very tedious way to spend time. He has no free hand to play with his phone, all he can do is watch Beckett and whine about the amount of paper that seems to be needed until she’s done. It takes at least four hours, he is sure, though his watch – which is a liar – says that it’s only been half an hour.

“Can we go get lunch now?” he pleads.

“C’mon, Beckett,” the boys join in. “We’re hungry.”

“What are you all, grade-schoolers? It’s barely half past twelve.”
“Be-cke-ettt,” they all whine in unison.

“Oh, for God’s sake. You’re all about five years old.”

“Please, Mom,” Ryan sniggers. Snigger is cut off sharply by Beckett’s glare.

“You’re all going to keep bleating till I say yes, aren’t you? Sheeple.”

Esposito tries a baa, and gets almost as far as the b before he thinks better of it.

“Sheeple?” Castle queries. “Is that English?”

“New word,” Beckett says airily. “It means people who follow each other like sheep. Seeing as you three are all following each other bleating pathetically, I thought it was appropriate.” She smirks.

Esposito, Ryan, and Castle all glare at her. It has no effect whatsoever.

“Anyway, I thought we were going for lunch. Have you all changed your minds?” She plucks up her purse and is looking back at them from the elevator before they’ve really recognised the change. The three boys suitably reduced to a sense of their own silliness, Beckett smirks happily and leads off.

After a comfortable lunch that’s not eaten at their desks, everyone’s happy. Beckett’s even happier when she’s parcellled up all of the evidence and sent off the neat package to the DA. Out of her hands, now. On to the next one.

Unfortunately, on to the next one does not occur this afternoon, and five-thirty rolls around all too soon.

“Do you want me to come with you, Beckett?” Castle asks quietly, “or just collect you after?” She’s drawn taut, again. He hasn’t had a chance to give back her key, let alone offer her his. It’s not something he – or, no doubt, she – wants the boys breaking in on. She looks uncertain.

“I… don’t know.”

“In that case I’m coming with you,” he says cheerfully, “and you can decide when we get there.” She doesn’t argue with him, and Castle deduces that she isn’t yet sure whether she’ll need him once she’s in there. He stops her before she can start the car.

“You need your apartment key back.” He hesitates slightly. “I got a copy cut.”

“Good,” she says.

Castle slips a large hand round her face, and turns her to him. “Here’s yours.” He puts it into her hand, hesitates again, and then goes for it. “And a copy of mine. For when you’re ready.”

There is utter silence in the cruiser. Beckett is staring down at the familiar and the unfamiliar keys in her hand. Her eyes are wide in shock, and as he watches a sheen creeps over them, swiftly blinked away.

“Key?” she says blankly. “Your key? But…”

“My key. For when you’re ready.” He remembers something. “But I’ve – well, Mother did – had an idea.”
“Huh?”

“If I could guarantee that she and Alexis weren’t there, then do you think you might be able to come to the loft? Desensitisation, like with brunch out?”

The sheen regathers. “You… you can’t do that. You can’t push them out just to deal with my issues. That’s not fair.” Her head drops, to stare at the two keys together in her hand.

“Hardly pushing out,” Castle says very dryly. “Mother suggested it. She wants an expensive spa weekend with Alexis, and Alexis has never knowingly rejected a pamper session with Mother. I think she likes watching the show, as much as anything else. So there’s no pushing out. More like them going on a weekend break.” He stops there. Now is not the time to tell her the rest. He’ll save that news for later.

There’s no answer. There’s no move to start the car. There’s no movement of the hand the keys are in. Castle closes Beckett’s hand over both keys and continues to hold it, swamped in his much bigger span.

“We need to go, Beckett,” he reminds her after a moment or two. She doesn’t seem to hear him. “Kate!” Her head jerks up. Her eyes are still sheened, puddling at the corners. “We need to go.”

She swallows hard and blinks harder; repeats, searches out a Kleenex and blows her nose. “Yes,” she says. “We should go.” But still she doesn’t put the twin keys away.

“Kate,” Castle says rather desperately, “if you don’t want to drive at least let me.”

Finally she springs into life. Well, not exactly life. Or indeed springs. She achieves dropping the keys into her purse, and turning the car key in the ignition, and driving. None of it is done with any indication that Beckett is in the same universe as Castle, or the cruiser. Fortunately she seems to be driving with attention to the road.

Beckett is concentrating very hard on the road and driving in order not to have to think about anything else. Castle’s gesture of complete confidence that she’ll fix herself has left her emotionally stunned and reeling. She can’t believe, even now, even knowing how he feels and she feels, how easily he can provide such wholesale support. She parks the car, and parks the thoughts. Castle’s arm slides firmly around her waist as they walk towards Dr Burke’s office, and fails to be withdrawn when they arrive there.

Dr Burke’s room is its usual cool, unemotional place. The only emotions it displays are the ones brought here by its visitors, disappearing as soon as they do. Dr Burke is his usual cool, unemotional self. Castle is still holding on to her. Beckett’s mind is still in turmoil.

“Good evening,” Dr Burke says. He is mildly surprised, and slightly worried, that Mr Castle is already providing physical reassurance to Detective Beckett. It implies that there is an issue of which he is not yet aware.

“Hey,” Mr Castle says, regrettably informally. Detective Beckett merely emits a noise, and is persuaded to sitting by Mr Castle, who then murmurs something to her. She nods. Mr Castle stands up. “Can I wait outside?” he says.

“I think that would be wise,” Dr Burke agrees, and adds, with a tiny touch of malice, “Would you like a pen and paper?”

“No, thank you. I have my own,” Mr Castle replies very blandly, and exits without further exchanges of compliments.
“Detective Beckett?”

“Uh?”

“Detective Beckett, is there some matter affecting you?”

“Oh, no” – Dr Burke is entirely unconvinced of the veracity of that statement – “just something to think about.”

“In that case, shall we consider your thoughts following our last session?”

“Okay.”

Despite her assent, Detective Beckett says nothing further. She appears to be entirely confused, which is not a state in which Dr Burke has previously seen her. Highly emotional or furiously angry, or entirely reserved, but not confused.

“Detective Beckett, I do not think that you will be able to concentrate on your thoughts following the last session unless you deal with the matter which is clearly on your mind now. What has occurred?”

“Castle gave me a key to his loft.”

Dr Burke fails to see the reason for this to cause confusion of this degree. He is, in fact, surprised. He would have expected that to make Detective Beckett still more sure of Mr Castle’s feelings, and therefore to provide her with further stability.

“Why should this be a matter for concern? Do you feel unable to reciprocate?” That would be understandable.

“No, I said he should get one cut for my apartment, and then he gave me mine back and then one for his loft.”

Dr Burke considers for a second. “So you are on an equal footing. Why does this gesture concern you?”

“Because I can’t go there. I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to go there and he’s just so sure I can fix this and how’s he so sure when I’m not?”

“Detective Beckett, has not Mr Castle always displayed confidence in your ability to resolve this matter?”

Dr Burke has not heard Mr Castle say so, but he is completely confident of this deduction.

“Well…” Dr Burke quirs an eyebrow. “Yes,” she says.

“So why should you be surprised that he is so now?”

Detective Beckett is silenced. Thought appears to be occurring, not before time. Finally her face clears, she ceases to try to find answers in the swirling pattern of the carpet, and says merely, “Of course he would.”
“That having been established, shall we return to the main subject of this evening’s session?”

“Okay,” Detective Beckett says, with considerably more intelligence and attention than had been evident previously.

“I had asked you to consider your own actions and feelings, the latter in particular, whilst your father was under the influence of alcohol; and to relate those actions and feelings to the three Cs: causation, control, and cure. Have you had time in which to consider these matters?”

“Yes.”

“And what conclusions have you drawn?”

“I thought – felt – I’d caused it. So I cut my hair and coloured it. But right from the beginning I had to do everything. Keep up appearances.” Her mouth twists and her voice is bitter. “Control what other people saw.” She breathes.

“How did you feel about that?”

“I… I hated it. I shouldn’t have had to do everything. I shouldn’t have had to pick up all the pieces because my father couldn’t make a single decision.” She breathes deeply. Dr Burke is reminded that Mr Castle is only just outside, as her fingers flex and bite on the couch cushion. “But I did. Then I cleaned him up and poured away the booze and collected his sodden drunk self from every precinct in Manhattan. I thought it would cure him.”

“Detective Beckett, tell me with complete honesty how you felt about your father during the two-year period about which we are talking.”

Detective Beckett says nothing. Her face is – Dr Burke dislikes descriptive language, but he can think of no other word – broken. He infers that she does not wish to admit her own feelings, and that she is still ashamed of them.

He allows the uncomfortable silence to continue, and fills it by reviewing the most interesting book which he has been reading: a historical discursion on the diseases prevalent in mediaeval Europe and their effect on the mobility and economic power of the workforce. It had been quite fascinating. It had not previously occurred to him that one could trace freedom of movement and indeed the later rise of unionisation to patterns of epidemic illness. Most interesting.

“I… was… resentful,” Detective Beckett drags out. “I hated that he couldn’t support me. I had to do everything and he wouldn’t or couldn’t do anything and then he blamed me anyway because I looked like her. He didn’t love me enough to stop drinking and I hated it. All he ever wanted was for me to come and save him. Pick up the pieces. Even when I wouldn’t any more he kept calling. He was always drunk. He wasn’t a parent any more. He’d checked out the day Mom died. He missed my graduation, he missed my passing-out parade. He doesn’t even remember that he did.”

“But you have never told him of your feelings?”

“No. We’ve been through this.”

“We have. But I wish you to say again why you did not do so, when he made his amends.”
“Because I thought I just had to grow up and get over myself. Because I couldn’t bear to do anything that might send him back to the bottle. Because I thought he loved me and wanted to be a family and I really, really wanted my family back. I didn’t have anyone else.”

“Now, what do you think?”

“He needs to know,” Detective Beckett says miserably. “He’ll be so disappointed in me.”

“Why?”

“For not getting over the resentment.”

“He will be disappointed, or you are disappointed in yourself?”

Detective Beckett is, once more, brought up short.

“I have said before, Detective Beckett, that you must first forgive yourself. Why do you feel that you should not resent your father’s behaviour, except that your first therapist told you that your feelings were of no account?”

“Because you’re supposed to forgive people. Not store up grudges and resent them. Everyone expects you to forgive.”

“So you are disappointed in yourself because you have not lived up to the expectations of others. Have they been in your position?”

Detective Beckett shrugs.

“When you attended Al-Anon, did others not speak of their feelings?”

“Yes.”

“Did they not admit to anger, and resentment?”

“Yes,” she says slowly. It appears to Dr Burke that Detective Beckett had, possibly deliberately, forgotten that experience.

“Detective Beckett, was your therapy before or after you attended Al-Anon?”

“During. The therapist suggested it. But Al-Anon wasn’t helping so I stayed with therapy.”

“Why did it not help?”

“It conflicted. The therapist said one thing, the group said other things. I thought the professional” – there is a very hard edge on that word, with which Dr Burke is entirely in agreement – “would know best.” She inhales, exhales, inhales. “Of course, the therapist was wrong.”

Dr Burke gives mental thanks. “Indeed,” is all he says, however. “So what does that tell you?”

“That I should believe the feelings of the people who were in the same position as me?”

“It would certainly be an area to consider. No two people’s experiences are ever precisely the same, however.” He smiles gently. “Now, you have said that others at Al-Anon expressed anger and resentment. How did you feel about those people?”

“Huh?”
“How did you feel about them?”

“I knew where they were at. They were all trying to deal with the same stuff I was. I suppose I felt sorry for them.”

“So you did not feel that they were responsible for their own suffering?”

“No.”

“Why then do you feel that you are?”

“What?”

“You are blaming yourself for not being able to deal with a situation that you did not cause. Until you can stop blaming yourself, you will make less progress than otherwise.” Dr Burke steeples his fingers, and continues. “I consider that it would be useful for you to tell your father the whole story of his addiction, from your perspective, at the earliest time at which you feel able so to do. I have come to the conclusion that this will be the key to unlocking the situation. Although I have said, and strongly believe, that you will be unable to forgive your father until you forgive yourself, I also do not consider that you will be able to forgive yourself until you have established for yourself your father’s feelings. I suggest that you consider carefully when that meeting should be.”

“Friday,” Detective Beckett says definitively.

Dr Burke is surprised that she wishes to undertake this meeting so soon, but naturally does not show his feelings.

“Very well,” he says. “I shall contact your father directly to arrange it.”

Detective Beckett nods.

“Would you like to discuss anything else?”

“No, thank you.” She stands, as Dr Burke politely stands too, and is ushered out of the room and into Castle’s waiting presence.

“Good night,” she says.

“Night,” Castle adds.

“Good night, Detective Beckett. Mr Castle.”

Dr Burke watches as Mr Castle wraps his arm around Detective Beckett in a comfortably protective fashion, and goes back to his office to consider what he will say to Mr Beckett.

It is now a week and a half since the tempestuous session at his office. Detective Beckett’s desire to bring matters to a head has arrived some considerable time earlier than he had expected, and in fact he had warned Mr Beckett that it might be some weeks before any contact might be made. He meditates on the situation for a few moments. The solution, now, is extraordinarily simple: the execution of that solution is extraordinarily complex. Detective Beckett must hear that her father forgives her, that he accepts his responsibility for the original trauma, and that he does not blame her for either her actions or her feelings. That, Dr Burke contends, is simple. However, Detective Beckett must then believe her father’s position, internalise it, and so have a foundation for her own self-forgiveness. Having done that, she may then truly forgive her father. Only after she has forgiven her father, will she be able to be comfortable with Mr Castle’s family at his home.
Dr Burke consults his watch, and on discovering it to be still before eight concludes that there would be no harm in telephoning Mr Beckett now. He considers that it would be unconscionable to allow Mr Beckett to suffer further when, by advising him of the potential for a meeting on Friday, Dr Burke can also inform him that his daughter’s state does not give cause for concern. He dials.

“Jim Beckett.”

“Mr Beckett, this is Dr Burke.”

“Dr Burke? Carter? Is everything okay? Is something wrong with Katie?”

“No, nothing. She wishes to have another session with you, this Friday.”

“She does? Friday? I thought you said that would take time?”

“I thought that it would indeed take longer,” Dr Burke says calmly. “It appears that time out of Manhattan with Mr Castle has allowed her to clarify her thinking to such an extent that she is prepared to embark upon another session at which she will be, in my opinion, in a place where she can also begin to listen to and absorb your point of view. You will recall that she was not so prepared, ten days ago.”

“That’s good, right?”

“I believe so,” says Dr Burke reassuringly. “A word of caution, however. Despite the good intentions of both of you to listen to each other, it is still quite possible that there will be high emotion and that the session will be paused, or stopped. Do not regard this as failure. Psychotherapy is not, you will appreciate, as seen on television.”

“Nor is law,” Mr Beckett says dryly. “I get it. This isn’t going to be a quick fix.”

“Unfortunately not. I believe a short session with you prior to Friday might be helpful?”

“Yes, probably.” Mr Beckett does not sound enthusiastic, but he is co-operative. How fortunate.

“I have an open session on Thursday evening, at six thirty?”

“Okay. Thanks for calling. Appreciate it.”

“I shall see you on Thursday, Jim.”

Castle collects Beckett as she exits the treatment room, runs a rapid, assessing, and unnoticed gaze over her, breathes a silent sigh of relief that she appears relatively unscathed and he will not have to dismember Dr Burke, or make Beckett think that he agrees with her plans to do so.

“Let’s go home,” he says.

“Yeah. I’m tired.”

“Want me to drive?”

“Not that tired.”

Castle smirks. “Have it your own way. I’ll have my own way later.” Beckett quirs a very sardonic eyebrow at him, and simply smiles inscrutably at his comment. Still, she doesn’t object to his hand on her knee.
“Do you want dropped off?” she asks, instead.

Castle emits a surprised noise. “Why?”

“You were out all night last night. I thought…”

“It’s okay. As long as I don’t stay out tonight. Otherwise I’ll probably be grounded for a week, and what fun would that be?”

“Not much – for you. We’d all have homicides to deal with: you’d just have to hear about it,” Beckett points out mischievously, and starts to parallel park before Castle can wreak revenge.

It takes until they’re inside Beckett’s apartment with coffee, comfortably tucked into each other, for Castle’s curiosity to spill over.

“How did you get on?”

“Survived.”

Castle leaves that where it lies. “Good,” he says, and sips his coffee, restraining, albeit with considerable difficulty, his curiosity from making any further enquiries.

“We agreed that Dad should be there on Friday,” Castle chokes. “Try again. Listen to him. Work out the truth.” Her face twists. “Try to fix this mess, one way or another. I can’t stand it hanging over me any more.”

“Up to you, Beckett,” Castle says supportively. “It’s always up to you.” He takes another drink of his coffee, makes a small face at discovering that it’s already tepid and rather nasty, and grins. “How about something nicer to talk about?”

“What?” Beckett says with considerable alacrity. Castle deduces that she would rather talk about anything else than Friday, and goes along with it, despite a searing desire to find out what exactly she is planning before it’s dropped on his unsuspecting (if not precisely innocent) head.

“You know I said Mother wanted a spa break?”

“Yes?”

“She’s found one. This weekend.”

Beckett’s jaw drops. “She doesn’t take things slowly, does she?”

“Hurricane Martha?” Castle says. “No. More like headlong, runaway train style. Anyway, she’s kidnapped my credit card and my daughter and informed me that they are all off this weekend – Friday night, to be precise, and won’t be back till late on Sunday. If it wasn’t for Alexis telling her that there’s no way she’s missing school, they’d be there for a week.”

Beckett acquires a slightly lopsided smile. Castle rambles on.

“Personally I don’t see the attraction, but Mother says it re-energises her, and with this new part – the audition she was telling everyone about on Sunday – she needs to even out her chakra balance and attain mental centrality. Though how she can find her centre when she can’t even find the English language escapes me.”

Beckett snorts with laughter.
“No, really, Beckett. Chakra balance is vitally important to Mother’s visualisation of her part. Don’t mock it.”

“Discussions about chakras always make me think of the word *tantric*,” Beckett says innocently and very distractingly.

Castle’s eyes flare. “Oh? Something you’d like to share, Beckett?” he says. “I thought you did yoga?”

“I do.” She leaves that hanging, purely to provoke Castle. Her yoga classes do not involve tantric anything. Castle’s mind, however, is clearly provoked to thoughts of the most usual accompanying word. He’s looking extremely predatory and not a little dominant.

“I give a very good massage, straightening out all the kinks in all seven major chakra points.” His voice is deeper, a lazy drawl that could act as massage oil all on its own. It flows over Beckett’s skin and leaves her sensitised without so much as a touch.

“Can you?” she husks in return. “You know how to stimulate chakras?”

“None better to stimulate your chakras,” he replies in a velvet voice that ruffles all of her nerves and rubs against her sacral and root chakras in a very stimulating fashion. Who needs massage? He can just keep talking. His baritone clearly has previously unknown abilities to resonate against synapses and slither down into her dampening core. “Now, if only I’d known that you liked massages, I’d have brought some oil.”

“Would you?” Beckett says, her eyes sleepy.

“Mmmm. Yes.”

“Mmmm. There might be some oil in the bathroom.” Beckett does not mention that the oil was a present from Lanie, at least a year ago, has never been opened, and she has absolutely no idea whether it will still have any of its scent or not. She can’t even remember what scent it had, if any. Massage oil hasn’t figured in her life since Will, and not more than once then. It hadn’t done anything for her, and she could achieve the same outcome on Will without needing oil, or indeed massage.

Castle rises, prowls off to the bathroom, audibly opens the cupboard, and emits a very satisfied growl which leaves every single nerve Beckett possesses singing with arousal. He returns with a small bottle and puts it on the table in front of them. A towel is flipped over the back of the couch. “There we are. It’s nicer if the oil’s warmed, though.” He wanders off again and returns with a small jug of hot water, in which the oil bottle is shortly floating.

Beckett looks at it. The bottle looks back. Castle looks at both of them. Then he ignores the oil, and places both large hands round her face. Then he begins, very carefully, gently, and delicately, to massage first her crown chakra, and then the third eye. His strong fingers rhythmically soothe Beckett into purring compliance to his touch: she is persuaded into lying down with her head in his lap where he can continue to stroke.

“Are you okay with me touching your throat,” he asks.

“Mmmm,” Beckett hums. Castle puts fingertips on the length of her neck, barely touching, rubs so lightly that a butterfly’s wing wouldn’t have been smirched. She’s a little tense: vulnerability not a feeling that leaves her comfortable, but as his hands remain light on the hollow she relaxes again and the pulse under the tips of his fingers calms and slows. He doesn’t stay there, though. He can
sense that this is a place where she’s least easy with his fingers, though she likes his lips there.

His next stop will be her heart chakra. He walks the fingers of one hand down into the vee of her button-down, and undoes the first fastened button. His other hand reaches for the little bottle of now-warm oil, and opens it without needing to look, replacing it on the table. A soft scent of ylang-ylang drifts into the air. Another button falls away, and another, and another, until the shirt is wholly open and falling wide away from her chest and revealing a pretty white cotton bra. How fortunate: he can leave that there.

“Pretty,” Castle rumbles. His fingers ignore the chakra pattern and wander down to undo Beckett’s pants and uncover neat white cotton panties. She purrs, turning to an indignant noise when his fingers wander back upward. “I wouldn’t want to get oil on your clothes. We’re getting to the point where a little…lubrication… will help matters along.” He smiles lazily down into her hazy eyes. “Still want a massage, Beckett? Because if so, I think we’d better put the towel down. I don’t want to get oil on your couch, or on my clothes.”

“You could take your clothes off,” Beckett points out.

“I don’t think so,” Castle murmurs seductively. “This is your massage. Just lie back and enjoy it.” In direct contradiction, he sits and then stands her up, slips off her shirt and pants, spreads the towel out one handed (where does she get these bedcover sized towels?) across his lap and the couch, and encourages her back down with her head returning to his lap.

She smiles up. “I’ve to do nothing? Okay then, I won’t do this” – and she sits up to kiss him, briefly – “or this” – and she slides a hand over his chest – “or this” – and the hand lands up right next to her cheek, and that is not his or her cheek she’s palming. Her hands return to her sides, and she smirks. “But you said do nothing, so that’s what I’ll do.”

Castle tuts reprovingly. “You can’t provoke me like that, Beckett. Be a good girl,” he says patronisingly, and is instantly elbowed – “ow! and you will get your reward.”

Beckett glares up at him as he smiles sweetly. She looks very cute – and very sexy. Castle reverts to his original plan, which involves a great deal of carefully judged touching under the guise of massage, in which she will do nothing at all and he will reduce her to a puddle of satisfaction.
Your hand moves lower

A tiny drop of oil pools warmly on Beckett’s throat, and is oh-so-gently massaged in and around. Without her conscious consent, her eyes close, and her neck loosens. The scent of the oil rises around her, and helps her to relax further. Another drop falls, neatly between her clavicles, and trickles downward, where it’s greeted by soft fingertips and encouraged to drift over her skin. Another drop, falling at the start of her cleavage, those same fingertips delicately sliding the oil along the valley between her breasts; adding another drop, gliding it sideways on to the swell of flesh; adding a third, spreading it over the white cotton, which slowly becomes transparent, clinging wetly to glistening curves and dark pink tips. His fingers follow the fluid, leaving a trail of sparking heat and desire.

Beckett wriggles slightly under the touch, but is enjoying proceedings far too much to move more. The warm oil is dissolving her into a warm puddle of liquid, and moving, or doing anything that requires more effort than letting Castle play precisely as he pleases, is simply too difficult to contemplate. She soaks herself in the sensual atmosphere around her and lets herself drift. Large, warm, gentle hands glide over her oiled skin and bra, and the heat of the oil and his hands seeps into her and pools and runs under her skin and downward.

He doesn’t move from the slick surface of her breasts: up to her collarbones, down to her ribs; up again, barely enough pressure for it to be a massage, a little too much to be entirely a seduction. Beckett murmurs contentedly and slips further into mindless pleasure, a quirk of a smile curving her lips.

Castle observes Beckett shifting out of both Detective Badass Beckett and Kate (or Katie) who hates therapy into his sexy, cuddlesome Kat who likes being petted and stroked; acquires a feeling of intense satisfaction that it’s taken him less than ten minutes of focused attention, and starts to alter his touch to be quite conclusively seductive. His wicked hands turn to palming and rolling, an occasional soft pinch and pull, asserting his ability to play with her unless she should say stop. She certainly isn’t saying stop right now.

He places a pool of oil, still warm, very neatly into her navel, and uses it to spread out across her flat stomach and the jut of her hips, extending down almost to the narrow lace edge of her panties. Not quite, though. Not yet. He returns to her breasts: long smooth strokes and languid touch, and she melts and flows and pools as the oil did, beginning to arch ever so slightly into his hands, beginning to purr for him. He knows just how sensitive her breasts are, how easy it is to bring her up by teasing her nipples, and now that she’s relaxed and receptive there’s no more need to confine this to massage when he can fondle and play instead.

The oil has soaked completely into the cotton bra now. He slides the translucent fabric back and forward across her, wholly in control of her reactions and her pleasure, and pushes up his shirt sleeve to slip that arm beneath her head, around her shoulders, his hand locking there to hold her close for his touch. She wriggles closer in, tucking her head into the notch between his hip and stomach. Castle’s very happy for her to be there, but she won’t be allowed to tease him. That’s not what this evening is about at all. She’s been stressed, she needs de-stressed, and he knows exactly how.

“Like that?” he asks, knowing from her purring, feline laxity that she does. “Let’s keep doing things you like.” She merely hums, assenting, and bends into him. He continues to tease, overtly sexual now, telling her what he’s doing in a silkily wicked baritone that touches her as surely as his fingers.
He returns to the long sweeping strokes that reach from shoulder to the top edge of her panties, now beginning to soak up the traces of oil that each stroke has brought there. Her bare skin glistens slickly. Castle drops a further tear of oil below her navel, and rubs it in. If he were really soothing her chakra points, she’d need to turn over, but there’s no way he’s going to interrupt this seduction by suggesting that she does that. He’ll just improvise. His naughty fingers draw naughty patterns first up to, then over, the rim of her panties, letting the oil seep in and spread translucently there too. He lets his fingers slip and slide, trickling his touch from skin to fabric and back to skin again, feathering closer and closer to a frontal approximation to the rearward location of the root chakra.

“You like that, too,” he half-growls. “Don’t you?” She arches to his hand, and whimpers softly. “You do. Let’s do this some more.” He adds a final drop of oil to the surface of the fabric, and watches it intently, eyes focused and darkened. The warm liquid seeps through and over the knot of nerves between her legs, and he sops it up with a single firm stroke. She moans, and Castle grins lazily and does it again. “You definitely like that.” And again, and again, until she’s squirming and the hand still around her shoulder is gripping and clamping and the hand between her legs hasn’t dipped below the fabric once and she’s gasping out instructions which Castle ignores with magnificent disdain as he turns her as liquid and flowing as the oil.

“Let’s just keep doing this thing you like,” he purrs, as predatory as a panther playing with the prey under its paw; and does, wholly in control, wholly assertive, till she writhes and moans and gasps his name and finally his fingers slip below the material and over and in and she shudders and shivers and shatters around his hands.

Castle waits for her to re-open her eyes. Depressingly, he does actually have to leave shortly. He would rather be sharing a shower, and relieving his own – er – frustration. Still, he enjoys immensely turning Beckett-Kat into a hot mess of sheer lust, and he’s not a callow youth who can’t control himself.

In his lap, his Kat stretches slowly, opens huge, hazy eyes and gazes up at him, nibbling her lip in a highly provocative manner. Castle is hard-pressed (oh, that was so not a good word choice) not to sweep her up in her towel, drop her in the shower, strip and join her – and then join with her. He can’t, though. He really does have to go home.

“I have to go,” he says rather reluctantly.

“Yeah,” Beckett says, even more reluctantly.

“You didn’t answer about the weekend.”

No. She hadn’t. That was not entirely accidental. “Um…” she says, inarticulately. Castle looks down where she’s still draped across his lap, a disconcertingly understanding expression on his face.

“Think about it,” he says instead of trying any cajoling. He’d like to cajole, and persuade, and win her over. He bites down on that idea and manages to preserve his record of leaving it up to Beckett. Pushing her about this would be a bad plan. His loft, after all, is a family home.

“Ohay,” she says, uncertainly.

“Up to you,” he says more brightly than he feels. “Anyway, I need to go. Stop preventing me, Beckett. It’s not fair.”

“Preventing you? How am I preventing you?”
“You’re pinning me down.”

Beckett manages a patented glare, scowl and eye-roll, almost simultaneously. “Don’t be ridiculous,” she snips.

“But you’re not moving,” Castle says in a likewise patented annoyingly saintly fashion, “so I can’t get up.”

“Really? You can’t get up? That’s not what it feels like.”

Castle splutters. Beckett smirks. Smirk is removed when Castle picks her up, along with the towel, and redeposits her further down the couch so he can stand up. Further commentary on his state of frustration is not required. It’s perfectly obvious. He does lean over her, carefully not getting oil on his clothes by staying behind her head, and kisses her with exquisite attention to detail and considerable assertiveness, before he leaves, with a smug Till tomorrow and smirk of his own.

Left to herself, Beckett considers not just Castle’s key, but Castle’s offer of a weekend in his loft, without his family. She has no happy memories of his loft. Every time she’s been there, it’s been tense and miserable: she’s had to keep herself under tight control not to lose her composure, and she hasn’t been back since the evening when her father forced a happy, family – her mouth twists and her thoughts are acid-bitter – dinner on her.

But, a little voice says calmly, but that was when his family – specifically his daughter – was there. This time they won’t be. She had thought that the second brunch meeting would be desensitising. Castle had used the same word. His family won’t be there. It… it might be different. She can’t help feeling it’s – well – cheating, though. But it wasn’t her idea. It’s not her who’s cheating. And, she works out, she doesn’t have to decide now. It’s only Tuesday. Friday is a long way away. She can go and shower and sleep.

So she does. Sleep brings her an idea. She examines it, and finds it plausible. She’ll try. With a get-out clause. It’s not as if they’re outside Manhattan.

Castle rushes into the Twelfth late in the afternoon, having deliberately avoided any possibility of being made to do paperwork, but summoned by Ryan’s text: get here quick, you’re needed. He’s panicked all the way, and bribed the cab driver lavishly to make it here in a ridiculously short time.


Beckett emerges from the break room, bearing an enormous box. With the cop instinct for anything full of the key food groups of sugar, fat, preservatives, artificial colourants and still more sugar, preferably deep fried, the entire bullpen descends around them with the aspect of a starved flock of vultures descending on a dead elephant.

“What’ve you got there?” he says, more than a little ticked off that she’s evidently just fine and Ryan’s pranked him into rushing here like a St Bernard galumphing up the Alps on a rescue mission. He scowls at Ryan, who smirks.

“Wait and see,” Beckett says irritatively.

Castle scowls more blackly. “I thought you were hurt, or ill. Why am I here? There hasn’t been a body drop.” Then he looks more closely.

“What – why are you carrying a gigantic cake box?”
“Cake?” says the bullpen in ravenous unison. “It’s a cake?” Castle is drowned under a tsunami of cops all heading for Beckett. When he disentangles himself, he finds that the cake box is no longer in view. At the same moment, so does everyone else. A half-nanosecond after that, he notices that Beckett’s desk is sporting the gigantic cake she has brought out. Half a nanosecond after that, so does everyone else. And half a nanosecond after that, Beckett’s command voice cuts through the air.

“Back off,” she says, with her hand on her Glock. The impending wave of sugar-deprived cops collapses back in on itself, whimpering. “All of you back off.” She grins very widely. Castle acquires a feeling of absolute terror, five minutes too late. “I’m a Detective,” she says, “and I detect that Castle is guilty of having a birthday without telling us. Without damaging the cake – ‘cause if you do you won’t get any – do your worst, guys!”

Montgomery, watching unseen from his office doorway, smiles, smirks, sniggers and then full-out belly-laughs at Castle’s appalled face as the cops congregate around him. Montgomery knows what’s coming, but Castle is clearly imagining mayhem. Beckett’s looking very mischievous. Montgomery concludes she’s pranking Castle into thinking he’s about to be covered in shaving foam, or decorated with something glittery, or taken to the gym for a sparring lesson.

“Happy birthday,” they all chorus – and then run for Beckett’s desk, where the cake is waiting.

“C’mon, Castle,” she says with an evilly gotcha grin, “you’ve got to cut it up, birthday boy.”

Ryan produces a knife from the break room and Castle doles out cake to everyone, who return to their desks sighing happily over delicious sugary fattening cake.

“How did you know it was my birthday?” he asks, around a mouthful of cake.

Beckett colours up. “Looked it up,” she mutters, embarrassed.

“Thank you,” he says. It dawns on him that Beckett, who wouldn’t celebrate her own birthday with so much as a cupcake four months ago or so, has gone to some trouble to make sure he celebrates his in the Twelfth, regardless of what or where else he might celebrate. (Dinner tonight with his family, at Le Cirque, in fact.) Birthday cakes of that size are not mere off-the-counter impulses. This was planned. Of course she’s taken the opportunity to tease him – he had really thought that his next stop would be some sort of hazing – but no. She’s overcome her vast reserve and hatred of anything that might be a celebration to give him a birthday surprise. A public birthday surprise. He could cry with happiness.

“And…”

“Mm?” he emits, muffled by the truly excellent cake.

“… um…” No-one else is within earshot, and anyway the noise of an entire bullpen munching enthusiastically on cake would cover almost anything short of a Fourth of July brass band parading through the precinct. “…um… I’d like to come to the loft but I don’t know if I can do it but can we try? But I might have to go home.” The colour in her face is now scorching, and she won’t meet his gaze.

“Okay,” is all he says for now. “Okay, Beckett. We’ll talk about it when we need to.”

Dr Burke is contemplating the curious case of the Becketts, aided by a pot of tea. He has resolutely ignored the nagging desire to purchase a packet of chocolate cookies, not being swayed by his baser instincts and certainly not being in need of any external assistance to resolve the difficulties.
which they have with each other. His main concern, today, is Mr Beckett. Mr Beckett, on hearing Detective Beckett’s thoughts on the period of his addiction, is entirely likely to be shocked, horrified, and made utterly miserable. All of those are manageable, and expected. More concerningly, Mr Beckett may also be plunged into guilt of his own, which will then require treated. Dr Burke will, if necessary, recommend another practitioner. While successfully treating Detective Beckett will be a considerable feather in his professional cap, he has no desire whatsoever to be further enmeshed in the Becketts’ affairs. One Beckett, he considers, is enough for any psychiatrist, in any one lifetime. Were he a follower of Buddhism, he further considers, he would have accumulated an enormous quantity of merit.

Mr Beckett should, as the previous time, be pre-briefed as to the likely content of the session, in order to be able to listen and not react with high emotion. Dr Burke expects that there will be quite enough high emotion even with pre-warning, and does not appreciate the possibility of free fights over his expensively soothing furnishings. He continues to ponder until Mr Beckett’s arrival is announced.

“Good evening, Jim.”

Dr Burke considers Mr Beckett’s demeanour, and notes the signs of stress in the lines around his eyes and mouth. However, his eyes are clear, and although Mr Beckett appears tired and indefinably older, there are none of the signs that would indicate that he has resorted to alcohol or similar substances. Dr Burke is slightly reassured.

“Hello. I didn’t expect to be seeing you again this soon.”

“No. Nor did I. It appears that Detective Beckett has undergone something of a change of heart, having had time away from the city to consider the events of the previous session with you. Painful as it was for you, it has achieved something of a breakthrough in her thinking.”

“Rick took her out of Manhattan?” Mr Beckett looks thoroughly pleased with that piece of information. “Good. That’s very good. Even if neither of them are telling me anything.”

“You need not worry about your daughter’s relationship with Mr Castle. They appear to me to be very content with each other.”

Mr Beckett relaxes considerably. “So, about tomorrow,” he says. “I guess you don’t think it’s going to be easy on me, since I’m here.”

“No,” Dr Burke says bluntly. “I do not.” Mr Beckett’s expression is one of scared resignation, though there is also a look of determination which is disconcertingly similar to that which Detective Beckett had worn when stating that this session should take place tomorrow. “However, at her session last Friday, your daughter informed me that she had been considering whether to call you directly.”

Mr Beckett is clearly astounded by that statement. “She what?” he emits.

“Mr Castle persuaded her that it would be more sensible to have a joint session.” Mr Beckett opens his mouth. “I concur with that view.” He closes it again. “I conclude that your daughter is hoping to re-establish relations with you. If she were not, she would not have considered calling you.”

“Oh.”

“However, the only way in which you will achieve a renewed relationship – you will remember that I have noted that this may be on a different footing to the relationship which you had when
your daughter was nineteen – is if the whole truth of what she experienced, both emotionally and externally, is laid out.”

“Oh. But didn’t she do that last time?” Mr Beckett looks quite ill at the thought of a repeat of the previous meeting. Dr Burke entirely sympathises. He would, in Mr Beckett’s place, consider illness if that were to reoccur. Fortunately, he believes that this will not be the case, with a modicum of preparation and some care by both Dr Burke and Mr Castle.

“Last time, Detective Beckett was more concerned with telling you of your actions. This time, she needs to inform you of her own emotions and actions in response to yours.” Dr Burke steeple his fingers. “Your daughter does not believe that you have ever forgiven her for – as she put it – abandoning you. Nor is she confident that you will understand why she did not tell you of her feelings at the time when you were endeavouring to make amends.”

Dr Burke does not mention what those emotions had been. That would be unhelpful at this stage. That must wait for Detective Beckett to speak openly to her father: a happenstance which has been non-existent until very recently.

“You will recall that I mentioned that her first therapist had been incompetent. The issues we are addressing now spring from that incompetence.”

Mr Beckett is apparently devoid of thought or understanding. His face is entirely blank.

“Jim?”

“How can she think that? How could she ever think that?”

“That, Jim, is something your daughter needs to analyse for herself, which is part of the purpose of tomorrow’s meeting.” Dr Burke pauses. “Now, let us turn to specifics. Certain matters will be the same as last time. Time out will be available on request, and should be used as often as you require it. Mr Castle will ensure that your daughter has support; and your sponsor is welcome to be here, although in another room.”

Dr Burke smiles reassuringly at Mr Beckett. “I do believe this to be significant progress, Jim. I know it is very hard to work through, but I have considerable hope. Your daughter is a remarkable woman, and she is motivated to resolve the issue.”
Walls come tumbling down

Friday does not bring any interesting cases. It brings, rather too early in the day for Beckett’s liking, mundane murder with the ubiquitously clichéd blunt instrument; the body dumped without the slightest effort at concealment. The dumpee proves to be a known lowlife, which does not induce the team to sympathy. The dumper had masked his features but sadly failed to wear gloves to mask his fingerprints. Perhaps he’d thought that fingerprints could not be retrieved from fabric. He might well have been right, if only he’d realised that shoes are not made of fabric. There is a beautifully clear set of prints where the corpse had been shoved into an industrial Dumpster.

All that they need to wrap this up neatly in double-quick time is the lab to reply. Unfortunately the lab is, yet again, overloaded, and can only say that they’ll have them by Monday. Or Tuesday. Soon. Beckett mutters and growls and threatens, none of which gets her anywhere.

Five thirty rolls around far too quickly for her liking. Castle taps his watch. Beckett glares, and starts to clear up very, very slowly. It’s quite obvious that she is procrastinating. It’s equally obvious that she is very unenthusiastic about this evening’s session. Castle deduces this from the way in which she’s gone to the restroom at least ten times since lunchtime, and her eyeliner’s been reapplied every time. (The alignment vis-à-vis her sweeping lashes is very slightly different. He is well aware that this is long past creepy staring territory and far into obsessive. He doesn’t care.)

There is no more room for procrastination. Beckett has cleared her desk, switched off her computer (why couldn’t it have gone wrong? Then she’d have had to fix it.) and assumed her coat. She does manage her normal walk to the elevator, but only because Ryan, Espo and Montgomery are watching. Castle tip-tapping his fingers over her hand, dangling purposelessly at her side, isn’t much of a consolation.

“What did I think I could do this?” she asks, hopelessly.

“Because you thought you could. You could call it off. No-one would mind.”

“I’d mind,” she snaps. “This is hard enough without delaying it further.”

Despite her snapping, Castle still curls an arm around her as they walk to her car. “You don’t have to pretend with me,” he points out. “Always up to you. On the other hand, I put some very nice wine in the fridge – if you feel up to it – there is a slow-cooked pork roast simmering in the oven, and a chocolate dessert with cream. If you feel up to it. If not, drop me at mine, and it will all go in a doggy bag and come to yours without the slightest harm to my top-class cuisine. Dinner will just be a little later than planned.” His arm tightens reassuringly. “Let’s just see how it goes, okay?”

She hunches defensively within his clasp, and doesn’t reply. She can feel her shoulders knotting already, and she hasn’t even got to the car, let alone Dr Burke’s office, still less seen her father. Suddenly all this seems like a major mistake. Her steps slow.

“Got collywobbles, Beckett?”

“What?”

“Collywobbles.”

“You made that up.”

“Didn’t,” Castle says childishly, and not at all childishly takes advantage of her surprise to keep her
moving along to the car.

“That’s not a word. It’s just silly. You made it up.”

“Didn’t. It’s an English word.”

“No it’s not. I speak English.” She automatically unlocks the car and slides in, distracted by the familiar effort of arguing with Castle.

“Not English language, English as in the country. It is a word from England,” he says pedantically, clicking his seatbelt shut.

“I still think you’re making it up.” They pull out.

“Nope. I heard it on a book tour and I’ve never had the chance to use it. Now I have.” He smiles seraphically. ”And you didn’t know it, so point to me.”

“Point to you?” Beckett squawks. “That’s insanely competitive.”

“Pot, meet kettle,” Castle says very annoyingly. He knows exactly what he’s doing – distracting her. It’s working, too. They’re almost at Dr Burke’s office.

“I am not arguing with you about a word that dumb.”

“It’s not dumb. Just ‘cause I knew a word you didn’t, you’re cross.”

“Bet you don’t know what it means,” Beckett humphs, pulling automatically into a parking space with minimal fuss.

“Do so. I never use a word if I don’t know its meaning.”

“And? What does it mean, then?” They’re entering the office, in the elevator to Dr Burke’s floor.

“Butterflies in your tummy,” Castle says primly.

“Oh. Well, I don’t have butterflies or these stupid collywhatsits. So there,” she adds, very childishly indeed, and on the last word opens the door into Dr Burke’s office.

“Dr Burke is ready for you, Detective Beckett,” the receptionist says immediately. There is no sign of Jim. Castle is much relieved by that, though he is fairly sure he can hear Jim and Ed in a room behind him. He doesn’t mention that to this Beckett.

“Good evening, Detective Beckett, Mr Castle.”

“Hello.”

“Hey.”

“Detective Beckett, as with the previous session with your father, you may request a time out at any point, for any reason.”

Dr Burke looks at Detective Beckett, and is reassured by her calm expression and that she is not in contact with Mr Castle. That suggests to him that she is not, as yet, overly stressed or already upset.

“How do you wish to proceed?”
“Say what I need to. All of it.” Detective Beckett’s composure falters slightly. “As much as I can manage.” She reaches for Mr Castle’s hand, without looking. Naturally, thinks Dr Burke, the hand is there, waiting for her clutch. She releases it a second later. “Try to listen to whatever he says.”

“That is all you can do, Detective. Remember that you control only yourself. You are not responsible for others’ reactions.”

Dr Burke turns to the door, but does not miss Mr Castle’s brief embrace and murmur of Up to you. It is followed by a word which makes no sense at all. It had sounded like collywobbles, but that is clearly a nonsense. Dr Burke must have misheard. He knocks on the door of the room in which he has placed Mr Beckett and his sponsor, ensures that the sponsor has everything which he needs to be comfortable, and escorts Mr Beckett out.

“Jim, is there anything that you want to do or say before we begin?”

“No. Let’s get started.”

Dr Burke ushers Mr Beckett into the room where Detective Beckett and Mr Castle are ensconced, and watches Detective Beckett very carefully as he does so. She flinches fractionally, and recovers. “Dad,” she says. Dr Burke is heartened by that address, despite its largely neutral delivery. It is not the same cool, impassive tone of two weeks ago, carrying overtones of interrogation. It is, Dr Burke thinks, hinting at the possibility of rapprochement.

“Katie – Kate.” Mr Beckett corrects himself. Detective Beckett winces very slightly, unnoticed by her father, certainly noticed by Mr Castle, who, however, does not take any action. Dr Burke mentally applauds him. Detective Beckett does not state which name she would prefer.

“I need to tell you what it was like for me,” she says, without explaining anything further. Dr Burke declines to add any commentary. Mr Castle remains perfectly silent, and is not even fidgeting. Mr Beckett says nothing, and retreats into the back cushion of the armchair.

Detective Beckett begins to tell the story which Dr Burke, and equally clearly Mr Castle, has already heard. Her voice starts steadily. It takes only the brief time for her to reach a description of her emotions at having to deal with the majority of the funeral arrangements for it to begin to shake.

“I felt I had to keep up appearances. To give Mom what she deserved. You couldn’t or wouldn’t decide about anything, and it all fell on me. I had to be the adult and you didn’t.” All three men watch as she pulls her voice back under control. Not one of them moves. All of them are aware that this has to be said: that it should have been said five years past. “I wanted space and time to grieve, and you took it away. You had all the time you wanted.”

A small noise comes from Mr Beckett, but he does not seek a time out. Mr Castle is not touching Detective Beckett. Her voice is not accusatory, but unhappy.

“I wanted to talk about Mom. Remember her. But every time I did you started to cry. And then you started to drink. Or drink more. So as well as Mom being gone you might as well have been gone. You had me to lean on. I had no-one.”

Dr Burke notices that Detective Beckett is only referring to her actions and needs at that crucial time. She has not yet mentioned her emotions. If she does not shortly start so to do, he will need to prompt it. He does not wish to have to prompt her: it will indicate that this will be more difficult than it has to be. Mr Beckett is already whitening, the creases in his face deepening, his eyes dull,
pooling at the corners as every unweighted, unhappy word falls on him as a blow. This is going to be very hard. Dr Burke resolves to watch even more carefully than he had thought. Mr Beckett, under the pain, has an aura of gritted determination to hear out his daughter, but, in a remarkable and unhelpful resemblance to her behaviour, may well take that to extremes. Dr Burke thinks that it may well fall to him to enforce a necessary recess. Mr Castle appears to be watching Detective Beckett very closely, too, but has pulled all his over-exuberant personality back so that he might as well be invisible. Again, Dr Burke applauds Mr Castle’s good sense.

“So I just got on with it. No-one else would.” She stops. Everyone hears the harsh breath she draws. Mr Beckett leans towards her, checks, clearly unsure of her reaction should he do so, sits back with evident effort, flicks a glance to Mr Castle, who answers with one short, sharp headshake, and does not touch Detective Beckett or even move towards her. This gesture and lack of movement does not appear to ease Mr Beckett’s now-biting tension. His knuckles are as white as those of his daughter, who is gripping the edge of the couch.

The silence draws out. Detective Beckett’s face is bloodless, her hands now locked together. She is displaying, to Dr Burke’s expert eye, all the signs of being at a decision point. Dr Burke is wholly certain that it is whether to speak of her emotions or not. The suffocating, claustrophobic atmosphere closes around them. Detective Beckett must speak soon, or Dr Burke will be forced to intervene. He does not wish to have to do so. Detective Beckett’s fingers twine and twist, painfully taut.

“I hated it,” she says: a sobbed out breath. “I hated that I had to deal with everyone and everything. When did I get to cry? You never gave me any chance because you never dealt with anything and I get that you loved her but so did I.”

Detective Beckett bursts into tears and turns desperately into Mr Castle to sob into his protective shoulder.

“I think a recess is indicated,” Dr Burke says, looking not at Detective Beckett but at Mr Beckett, who nods, incapable of speech. Dr Burke ushers him out, into the room where his sponsor is waiting, and remains with him. Mr Castle can be trusted to console Detective Beckett. Mr Beckett may require some rather more direct intervention.

“She never said,” Mr Beckett whispers. “I never knew and she never said. Why didn’t she say?”

Dr Burke does not answer him.

“Jim,” his sponsor says, “think it through.”

There is a space of quiet, while Mr Beckett considers. It is evident that he does not enjoy his considerations.

“She didn’t say then,” he forces out through white, thinned lips, “because I wouldn’t have heard her, or cared.” He stops. “But why didn’t she say later? When I got dry? I asked her if there was anything more. She could have said then.” His voice dies away. “Why didn’t she?” He reaches for a handkerchief, and scrubs at his eyes, then blows his nose.

“Protect and serve,” he abruptly bites out. “That’s it, isn’t it? She was protecting me.” Bitterness and reproach infuses his tone. “She wasn’t sure of me. She didn’t believe in me.” Tears trickle sullenly from his eyes. “When she came… it was like the sun came out. It meant everything. I thought she believed in me…” He buries his face in his handkerchief. “It’s all been lies,” he says brokenly. “Everything I thought… it’s all been lies. She never believed me. Never really believed that I would stay dry. She’s felt she had to protect me all this time and she never wanted to, and
then she thought I told her that we weren’t a family and she thinks I meant it. She thinks I lied to her. No wonder she hates me.”

“Jim,” Dr Burke says firmly, “do you really think you would be here if your daughter hated you? She asked for this session, to tell you the truth that should have been told five years ago.”

“She’s lied to me for five years. What’s one more lie, to finish it off?”

“Explain how she has lied,” Dr Burke says.

“She’s been protecting me from everything she really felt because she doesn’t think I could have coped with it. Thought I’d start drinking again.”

“Hmm. Why is protecting you a lie?”

“Because I asked her if there was anything else and she said no then. Now she says there was. How’s that not lying.”

Dr Burke considers his options. The easiest way to correct Mr Beckett’s misapprehension would be to tell him of Detective Beckett’s words and some part of her hopelessly mismanaged original therapy, which, it is now perfectly obvious, has damaged both Becketts.

“Please wait for a moment,” Dr Burke says. “I must speak to Detective Beckett before answering.” He departs, leaving Mr Beckett small and devastated behind him.

“Detective Beckett,” Dr Burke says, “you previously gave me permission to talk freely to your father.” She nods, from her position wrapped into Mr Castle’s arms. “Does that consent still apply?”

Dr Burke will remember, later, that before Detective Beckett replied she looked at Mr Castle. He does not appear to give her any indication of how she should reply, as is proper.

“Yes,” she says, and then, “Is Dad okay?”

“He is a little shocked,” Dr Burke says, and justifies the lie to himself by recalling Detective Beckett’s struggle to bring herself this far, and the inordinate weight of guilt that she has arrogated to herself when unwarranted. The potential for further guilt, much more warranted, but at this stage thoroughly unhelpful, must be minimised. Therefore, he will lie for the sake of expediency. Detective Beckett’s query indicates concern. Concern implies care. Such a reaction gives hope for a positive outcome, when (Dr Burke does not admit that there is any doubt) Dr Burke brings Mr Beckett back in.

“Thank you,” he says, and leaves the room to the sound of Detective Beckett asking sharp, unhappy questions and the reply of an indistinct but soothing rumble from Mr Castle.

“Jim,” Dr Burke says, “I believe that there are matters of which you are not aware. I wish to make you aware of them, and I have your daughter’s continuing consent to speak freely to you. You need not, therefore, be concerned as to the propriety of either listening, or asking for clarification.”

Mr Beckett nods. He is still incapable of speech.

“Your daughter has told me about the point at which, after you had called her from your rehabilitation, she came to see you. You have told me that for you, it was as if the sun came out.”

“But not for her,” Mr Beckett says, bleakly.
“Let me tell you how your daughter described that same meeting.” Mr Beckett braces, as if for more blows. “She said: *He was so pleased to see me. It was great. He was my Dad again. He was back. Every time he looked at me he lit up.*” Dr Burke stops there. Mr Beckett sags into his chair. His sponsor regards him worriedly. “Then she told me: *I wanted him to be my Dad again. I just wanted it to be like it used to be. If he was happy, he wouldn’t be crying, and then he wouldn’t be drinking, and I thought he loved me. And I needed him to want to see me. So I did everything to keep him happy. I wanted our family back. I thought we had our family back.*”

Dr Burke has sat down, and now steeplets his fingers, observing Mr Beckett closely. Understanding is beginning to light his face. Dr Burke pauses for a moment, in case Mr Beckett should say something now. He does not.

“The last statement which your daughter made of which I wish you to be aware is this: she said *I needed him to look at me as if he loved me.* Your daughter was, and is, entirely unsure that you cared about her, largely as a result of your words whilst drunk. You had, after all, told her to leave, and that you did not want to see her, because she was not her mother. She had taken those words to heart.”

Mr Beckett is now entirely white. Realisation has come into his eyes. Dr Burke, however, is not yet finished.

“In addition to that, Jim, your daughter’s previous therapy is also relevant. The therapist informed Detective Beckett, in essence, that her feelings were of less consequence than those of others, which your daughter believed and acted upon, and that your daughter should – I quote Detective Beckett – *grow up and get over herself.*”

Mr Beckett emits a noise of absolute fury. “I will see them struck off,” he bites.

“That will not be necessary,” Dr Burke says calmly. “Their censure is already assured.”

Mr Beckett growls most alarmingly, but subsides. Dr Burke allows a pause, for Mr Beckett to consider what he has heard. He has always regarded Mr Beckett as quite as ferociously (he considers the adjective to be entirely apposite) intelligent as his daughter: the difference between them largely consisting of Detective Beckett’s capacity for intimidation. Dr Burke catches the eye of Mr Beckett’s sponsor, receives a small agreeing nod.

“Excuse me for a moment,” Dr Burke says.

Dr Burke wishes to assure himself that Mr Castle and Detective Beckett are content to wait for Mr Beckett to recover some composure and process all that he has just learned. He will need to know whether Mr Beckett is prepared to continue, but he has left Detective Beckett for longer than he would like, and it would be unfortunate if she were to become unsettled. On balance, however, he considers that matters continue to progress in the correct direction.
“Detective Beckett?”

“Yes?”

“Your father is still endeavouring to process what he has heard this evening, both from you and from me. Are you content to wait a little longer for him to return?”

Detective Beckett, still held closely by Mr Castle, nods. Her face is disturbingly still and grey.

“Detective Beckett, your father is not angry, or disappointed, or upset by you. He is having some difficulty coming to terms with your reasons for not telling him the truth earlier. This is understandable and normal. At present, I believe that he simply needs a few moments more.”

Detective Beckett nods again. Dr Burke exits.

“Do you think that’s true?” she asks unhappily. “That he’s” – her mouth twists – “processing?”

Castle doesn’t say anything. He’s been surreptitiously checking his watch, and it’s been nearly a quarter of an hour since Dr Burke called a recess. Sure, they’ve only been here half an hour, but that’s halfway through the session and they haven’t exactly got very far.

“I don’t know,” he says, truthfully. “I don’t think Dr Burke would lie about that.” Castle is not entirely sure that Dr Burke always tells the whole truth, but he’s fairly sure that he wouldn’t outright lie. Unless, of course, he felt it necessary for everyone’s good. Which means that he might lie. Oh God. Surely not?

Beckett nestles further into him, pale and tense, looking, Castle thinks, for warmth and strength that she doesn’t have. She’s shivering slightly.

“It’ll be okay, Beckett,” he says, and hopes beyond all hope that he’s not lying. Surprisingly, she doesn’t argue.

“Maybe if he’s still thinking – at least he’s not walking away,” she says. “But I still don’t know if he lied when he was sober or lied when he was drunk, and it’s not like he can tell me.”

“Don’t worry about that now. Tell him the truth that you saw, back then. That’s all you can do. How he feels is his problem, not yours. You’ve got me now. It’s not him or no-one. It’s not him or me, either. You’re not on your own anymore, whatever happens. Just tell the truth, and then you can move on.”

“Yeah,” she drags out. “I guess.”

“If nothing else cheers you up, think of the chocolate dessert. Good for collywobbles.”

“We’re not back to ridiculous made-up words, are we?”


“It’s still a dumb word.”

The squabble is still going on a few seconds later when Dr Burke re-enters.
“Detective Beckett, your father wishes to continue. Do you wish to continue?”

“Yes.” Her voice is uncertain.

Dr Burke brings Mr Beckett back into the treatment room, and carefully observes Detective Beckett as he does so. The first expression to cross her face, as she notices her father’s white, miserable and aged look, is guilt. The second is worry. His next observation is that she has moved away from Mr Castle.

“Detective Beckett,” Dr Burke says, “you had explained to your father your actions and to some extent your emotions, prior to, and shortly after, the funeral. Please continue.”

Detective Beckett swallows, and knots her hands together. “I thought when the funeral was over that it might not be so bad. That you’d be okay – not okay. Grieving, but like normal. I called home because I needed to know that you were there, we were still family, even without Mom. But every time I called you were a little more distant, slurring – and you still wouldn’t talk about her, and every time I wanted to and tried you cried and I couldn’t stand to hear you crying. So I stopped talking about her to you. I still thought we were family, then.”

Detective Beckett swallows, and breathes harshly.

“I got really worried about you. I couldn’t talk about anything I wanted to, and you sounded drunk, so I got a cheap flight and came home to see if you were okay. I wanted us to be okay, so I’d bought you a silly little present – A Guide to Attorney-speak – because before… before it was the sort of thing that would have made you laugh. And then when I came home you were so pleased to see me when I came in that I didn’t even notice that you were absolutely wasted. But it wasn’t me. You thought I was Mom. You were so happy because it was Mom…”

Tears are falling from Detective Beckett’s eyes. Her father is not far behind.

“I wasn’t. I can’t forget how you realised it wasn’t Mom, it was me, and you were so disappointed: you downed the whiskey and you started to cry and you told me to leave because you didn’t want me. You broke my heart, Dad. You broke me. You swore at me when I poured the booze away and put you to bed. In the morning, you didn’t remember any of it. You apologised, and said you didn’t mean to drink so much, and you didn’t remember anything, and you were pleased to see me and I thought it was just a one-time blip and you’d never do it again. But I went and got my hair cut and coloured so that you couldn’t mix us up, so maybe somewhere deep down I already knew it wasn’t just that once. I never tried to talk to you about Mom again. I couldn’t face starting you down that road.”

Detective Beckett reaches blindly for Mr Castle’s hand, which is there to take hers: his thumb rubbing over it. This discussion is, Dr Burke knows, entirely necessary, and some five years overdue. However, the depth of pain in the room is immense. Detective Beckett blows her nose.

“You got worse. So I transferred. I’d loved Stanford, but I couldn’t – thought I couldn’t – watch you drowning. I thought that if I came home then you’d stop it. I thought all you needed was to be reminded that you had a family, because when you were sober you begged me to be there for you. And then I couldn’t face being a lawyer. Too close to what Mom had been, and maybe some of it was that I wanted something more direct, and maybe some was that it would set you off again. I don’t know, now. Everything set you off. It wouldn’t have mattered what I did. It doesn’t matter. Probably I’d never have been happy as a lawyer like I am being a cop. So I changed my life. It didn’t stop you drinking. You weren’t there when I graduated from NYU and you weren’t there when I graduated from the Academy but by then I didn’t expect you to be.” Mr Beckett is weeping too, now. “Everyone else had someone. I didn’t. I was on my own, because my friends had their
parents there and I didn’t. And you know what? I was relieved. Relieved you weren’t there, drunk. Because by then I was picking you up and cleaning you up more nights than I wasn’t. Most times, you fought and swore and told me to leave because I wasn’t Mom. But when you sobered up you cried and promised and said I was the only thing you had left and begged me not to go. Even though I’d moved out, I came and got you. I hated that too, but I thought I had to do it because I kept thinking you would stop and I just wanted my Dad back.”

Detective Beckett stops, and mops at her eyes.

“I was relieved that you didn’t come, and then I felt guilty about that because you’d been to everything else… before. Before it all went wrong. But the therapist had said that it was childish to expect you to be there and I should just be grown up about it. So I tried. I really tried. But I never quite managed it. Everyone else has photos with their parents – I took half of them. In my photo there’s just me. I don’t look at it. I don’t like looking at the one you have.”

Mr Castle winces.

“Eventually I couldn’t do it any more. Couldn’t stand going to Central Park Precinct and pretending it wasn’t the same as last time. Couldn’t stand the sergeant pretending it wasn’t another cop even though I was in uniform. Couldn’t stand any of it any more, and finally I worked out that you were never going to stop. I was never enough for you to stop. It didn’t matter what you said when you were sober because you hardly ever were. So I left you to it. I never blocked your number just in case one day you were sober again, but you never were. Every time my phone rang or someone knocked on my door it could have been another cop telling me you were dead. You don’t know what that feels like. I do. You feel terrified and somewhere under that you think maybe this is it, maybe I’ll never need to worry again. It’s sick and horrible but at least then it would be done.”

Dr Burke maintains professional calm. No-one else in the room is calm. Two people are weeping. One is frozen white and clearly exerting excessive control not simply to take Detective Beckett away right now.

“So I walked away and I’ve felt guilty about it ever since. Guilty about not supporting you and guilty about wishing it would all be over and guilty that even when you got dry I couldn’t just forgive you and move on and grow up and get over it. You don’t remember the Christmases you ruined. You don’t remember any of it. You got to start clean and try again and all I got was tainted memories and trying not to resent every last minute of it. I can’t bear Christmas. All those people who have happy families and happy memories. Christmas is all about forgiveness and happiness and you never forgave me for walking away from you but anyway I can’t forgive myself for doing it and I still hate that you made it happen at all.”

Detective Beckett runs out of words and dissolves into hopeless tears. Mr Beckett stares at her, white and old and appalled.

“I can’t… Why did you never tell me, Katie – Kate? You should have told me this long ago. I thought we were fixed. When you came to rehab… it meant everything.”

“That was why I never said. How could I? Because when you got dry I thought I had my Dad back. Family. I thought you loved me and I couldn’t bear it if you started drinking again and what would you have done if I’d said all this? I needed us to be family again and I couldn’t bear if you were disappointed with me.” She breathes, scratching in the silence. “But then you liked Castle’s family better and you said so and I realised it was all wasted. It wasn’t me who did it. You did it all for yourself. I didn’t matter. You found a family who didn’t have the history and hadn’t abandoned you and didn’t have any complications. A family who you didn’t have to hide your feelings from. You never really managed to forgive me for leaving and I didn’t forgive you either. I should just
call it quits. I can’t grow up and get over it” –

“Enough,” Dr Burke says firmly. “Detective Beckett, you are already aware that the previous therapist was utterly wrong. You have told your father the truth about how you felt. Now you must let him answer.”

Mr Castle finally moves to place his arm round Detective Beckett. Dr Burke approves of the timing. Detective Beckett needs to know that Mr Castle will let her stand on her own and fight her own battles, but will be there for her when she has finished. She also needs to know that he will support her through adversity without fuss or fanfare. He is murmuring into her ear, too softly for Mr Beckett to hear through his high-stoked emotions. Dr Burke, however, can hear. He has no compunction about listening very closely.

“Stand down, Beckett. Just let him speak now. You said you wanted the truth, so let him tell his. If he’s lying, you’ll know, or Dr Burke will. If he’s not, you need to know. Let’s move this forward. I’ll still be here. I’ll always be here.” Mr Castle’s arm tightens, not quite imperceptibly. “We’ve got this.”

In this short interlude, Mr Beckett has succeeded in drying his eyes, though his face is lined and drained, the corners of his mouth sagging.

“I… I can’t say what would have happened if you’d said all this five years ago. How can I? But whatever might have happened, I wish you had told me then. I could have told you that I never blamed you for walking away. You didn’t abandon me.” He draws in air. “I’d abandoned you long before that for whiskey. It took you going for me to realise it. If you hadn’t, I’d have drunk myself to death anyway. I let you down. I never thought you were wrong to go. You’ve never disappointed me. Never. I never thought you’d come when I got dry. I’d missed so much… but you came and it was as if the lights went back on.”

Detective Beckett is still. The phrase shell-shocked flits into Dr Burke’s mind, and is despatched as unwontedly frivolous. He is no writer.

“But you came,” Mr Beckett repeats. “I couldn’t bear the thought that you might go, because I had the chance to be family again and you had come. You believed in me. I thought you believed in me.”

“I did!” Detective Beckett cries. “That’s why I couldn’t mess it up for you.”

“It wasn’t you who would mess it up, Katie! It was down to me. Only me, never you. No-one but me could control it. You never could, till I fixed myself.”

Detective Beckett is crying, again.

“You have to believe me, Katie: I never thought it was your fault. The only one who could stop me was me. I wish you’d told me” –

“See, you are disappointed in me. I knew that would happen but Dr Burke here said I had to tell the truth and when I thought about it, it seemed worth it but” –

“But no, Katie.” Dr Burke notices that Mr Beckett has, in high emotion, reverted to calling his daughter Katie. “I’m not disappointed in you. But you can’t keep hiding everything that’s wrong in case anything upsets me. That’s life. If I can’t deal with life what’s the point? I get why you did it, but you can’t keep doing it. I can cope, and if I couldn’t that’s not down to you.”

Dr Burke hears an interesting note in Mr Beckett’s voice. It sounds like resolve.
“You need to start living your life for you, not trying to forgive yourself for something you were never to blame for. This all began because I couldn’t stay away from the bottle and that had nothing to do with you. Nothing. I’ve owned up to my mistakes. You need to own up to yours – you should have told me the truth long ago, and I should have spotted what you were doing and made you.” Mr Beckett takes a very deep breath. “I don’t need you to protect me, Katie. I just want us to be a normal family.” Another deep breath. “I don’t want Rick’s family instead of ours. I want to be” – his voice hitches – “friends with them as well.”

“And when you said you didn’t want me, you wanted Mom, and told me to leave?”

“I don’t know. I don’t remember saying it, but I guess I did.”

“Over and over,” Detective Beckett says bitterly.

“I don’t know, Katie. I don’t know. If you’d said that to me I’d still be angry now too. Maybe I just hurt so much I wanted everyone around me to hurt too. I don’t know.” He breathes again, and stands up. “I think... I think I should go now.” Mr Beckett’s tired misery becomes apparent. “I wish I’d known. I’d have told you then that it was never your fault. There’s nothing to forgive you for.” His voice breaks. “Maybe you can forgive me? You’re my daughter. You’re all I have left.”

Mr Beckett leaves precipitately, before Detective Beckett can speak, and Dr Burke perforce must follow, to ensure that he goes to his sponsor.

Left behind, Beckett stares piteously at the space where her father had been. Castle’s arm around her lies unnoticed. Suddenly she turns into his shoulder and burrows in, desperately. She doesn’t say anything.

She continues not to say anything until Dr Burke returns.

“That went as well as could be expected,” Dr Burke says. Detective Beckett regards him with scowling unhappiness, and appears to be about to argue. “You have achieved both of your initial objectives: to tell your father what he said when he was drinking, and to express and thereby acknowledge your own feelings to him. You had wished him to understand that he was not there for you to lean on. You have managed all of these statements without losing your temper or emotions running unmanageably highly. That is not to say that it has not been very difficult for you, or for your father. You have his statements to consider: first among them, I suggest, that you have nothing, in his view, for which to forgive yourself, and that he considers that you have done nothing for which you need forgiven. He must likewise consider yours.”

Dr Burke smiles, studiedly paternally. “I suggest, Detective Beckett, that we do not continue further tonight, and that you likewise do not think over this evening’s session for a short while. You need to relax and refresh yourself before so doing. Remember that forgiveness takes time, and effort. It is not, regardless of the impression given by television or magazines, quick or easy. It is normal, natural and expected to take time to consider the situation. Do not rush to judgement.”

“Excuse me,” Detective Beckett says. She does not appear nauseous. Dr Burke therefore does not enquire.

Dr Burke looks at Mr Castle. Mr Castle looks straight back at him.

“I infer,” Dr Burke says dryly, “that you are intending that Detective Beckett will benefit from some comforting gestures.”
“Do you?” Castle responds equally dryly. “How fortunate that your inferences won’t make a blind bit of difference to my intentions.”

“There is no need to become irritated. We have the same wish: that Detective Beckett is eased and healed.”

Mr Castle initially scowls, fading into a sardonic smile. “With the crucial difference that you’ll never see her again at the end of it.”

“I should be most disappointed if my treatment were not successful. After that, it is for Detective Beckett to decide who, or why, she might see anyone. However, if there were to be a homicide in my vicinity, I should certainly wish that she were in charge of the case.”

It is apparent to Dr Burke that Mr Castle is repressing a strong desire to suggest that he, Dr Burke, is most likely to be the victim of such an event. Before he can act on that desire, Detective Beckett returns.

“Let’s go,” she says. “Good night, Dr Burke.”

“Good night,” Mr Castle follows.

“Good evening. I shall see you, unless you wish otherwise, on Tuesday.”
Take me home

“Where are we going, Beckett?”

Beckett stops dead in front of her car. She hadn’t thought any further than out of Dr Burke’s office. On the other hand, there is a small overnight – over weekend – bag in the trunk. Just in case she felt able to try. Castle crashes into her, trips, automatically puts his hands out to save himself and ends up trapping her against the side of the cruiser. This might have been accidental. Or not.

“Not very smooth,” she snips, glad to have something else to think about for a moment while she tries to decide what to do. What she can cope with doing.

“You tripped me,” Castle says indignantly.

“I did not. You ran into me.”

Castle smirks evilly. “I thought you liked me running into you,” he says, with a complete change of mood. “You certainly didn’t seem to mind” –

“Shut up.”


He’s still trapping her against the car. Since he’s there, it seems like a good plan to crowd her, just a little, just enough to make a point. She pushes him back again, which was not the idea. Still, he can take a hint when he’s hit over the head with a brick. He steps back, and tries but fails to look penitent.

“You don’t look very sorry for falling into me.”

“I’m not,” Castle says mischievously. “I like falling into you.”

“Didn’t you just say that a minute ago and I told you to be quiet?”

“Actually you said shut up, but I’ll forgive you for snapping at me. Can we at least get in the car, though? It’s not warm out here.” Castle is, in fact, perfectly cosy in his scarf and overcoat. Beckett still appears pinched and chilled.

Okay.” She unlocks the car and they both get in. For an instant nothing more happens, till Beckett starts it up and warm air begins to flow from the vents. Castle clamps down on his surging desire to ask – or tell – Beckett where they’re going, and leaves it entirely up to her. He is very surprised when, instead of dropping him at Broome Street and turning for home, which he had dismally expected from the lack of answers, commentary or relaxation, she switches off the engine and follows him out the car, collecting a bag from the trunk on the way.

“Urg?” he says, articulately, taking the bag from her.

“Today can’t get any worse, so I might as well see if I can do it.”
Hardly flattering, or comfortable. Castle wraps an arm round her midriff as they pass the doorman, ignores the doorman’s knowing glance, and conducts Beckett to his loft without ever losing contact with her. She hesitates on the doorstep: Castle waits and doesn’t push – and certainly doesn’t pick her up and sweep her inside – and after a second she steps in.

“Smells good,” she says, though there’s strain under the words. She doesn’t follow him further inside.

Castle puts the bag down, turns round, pushes her coat off her shoulders, catches it and tosses it on to a handy chair, and draws her in to kiss her smoothly but forcefully. His large hands settle around her waist and nape; his tongue leisurely explores her mouth without entertaining any resistance; he pulls her tightly against him until she melts and curves for him. He doesn’t hurry to lift from her soft mouth; he doesn’t hasten to cease to press into her. Only when he’s sure that she’s relaxed into him and her immediate tension at being here has lifted does he stop.

“There,” he says with satisfaction. “Properly welcomed.” He doesn’t let go of her, steering her to the kitchen and keeping her beside him while he drops green beans into boiling water, puts small rolls on a plate and butter in a dish. “Would you put these on the table, please?” Beckett complies, but then stands there, looking around, as if she’s never been here before. “Beckett?” She starts, and comes back to his side to receive the wine bottle.

Castle proudly extricates a joint of pork, smelling deliciously of rosemary and hints of garlic, glazed with honey, and puts the meat on a carving board to slice it. The whole piece neatly and rapidly reduced to gently steaming, perfectly even slices, he drains the beans, pops them in a serving dish and brings the whole lot to the table. Then he looks around it, slightly bemused.

“Ah! Plates,” he says, as if hunting for gold, and produces them. “Okay. Help yourself.” He watches unobtrusively as Beckett takes only a single slice of meat and a few green beans, while he opens and pours the wine. Reassuringly, she doesn’t object to the wine.

Castle had carefully set the table on two adjacent sides, rather than opposite each other, and takes full advantage of his preparation to ensure that his knee is pressed against Beckett’s as much as is possible without pushing her off her chair. She is more nibbling than eating, though the widening of her eyes on first tasting the meat was very flattering. Still, two mice would not have eaten less than she is managing. He refrains from any comment, and reflects that his slow cooked pork will be just as delicious cold in sandwiches tomorrow, or later, or as a midnight feast, as it is right now.

Beckett eventually nibbles her way through the small amount she had taken, sips her way through approximately half of her (not large) glass of wine, and indicates that she is finished. Castle clears away, tutts when Beckett attempts to assist, tutts some more when she points out that he helped at hers and turnabout is supposed to be fair play, and eventually rumbles at her to go and sit down again because if she doesn’t there will be no dessert.

“No dessert?” she wails, insincerely.

“Nope. Not one sliver of chocolate shall pass your lips.”

He produces an astonishingly ornate confection from the fridge, at which Beckett’s eyes light up, and adds a container of whipped cream. She delicately tongues her lips. Castle considers the many advantages of using a well-toned stomach as a plate, and reluctantly abandons the idea, at least for today. On first sight of the dessert, Beckett had sat back down faster than a streak of lightning, if lightning ever sat down. On reflection, that was not one of his better comparisons.

“That looks wonderful,” she says delightedly.
Castle smiles smugly. “Knew you’d like it,” he says. “I couldn’t have my Beckett left unsatisfied.”

Beckett quirks an eyebrow at his use of the possessive pronoun. He sits back down and worms his arm around her. “My Beckett,” he says definitively, and kisses her fast and hard.

“My dessert,” Beckett says, hopefully possessive in her turn. A slice of dessert sized to her satisfaction is produced, which unlike the entrée would feed a family of tigers, if tigers ate chocolate dessert, and is then slathered in whipped cream. Beckett clearly has no concerns about the state of her arteries. Nor is she apparently worried about a balanced diet; or indeed indigestion. The chocolate dessert is gone faster than doughnuts in the precinct, which Castle would have sworn blind was utterly impossible.


“No, thank you,” she says disappointedly. “It will keep, won’t it?”

“Yes. Don’t worry, there will still be chocolate tomorrow.” He waggles his eyebrows villainously. “Though we could leave the cream out. I’m sure we could find a use for it.”

Beckett rolls her eyes. “I could have it on my coffee, I suppose,” she says dryly.

Castle congratulates himself on bringing her to a state of less discomfort or indeed almost comfort with being here, whisks the plates and dessert off the table, flicks the coffee machine on, and tidies up in an unbelievably short time, finishing just as the coffee is ready. Beckett applauds, only mildly sardonically.

“I’ll put you up for a time and motion study,” she says, and grins.

“My timing is impeccable,” Castle preens. “As is my motion.”

Beckett splutters out the coffee she had just sipped, and blushes bright scarlet. Castle smirks, and self-congratulates some more. By way of self-reward, he places his arm around Beckett’s shoulders and cuddles her in. She wriggles a little bit to be perfectly comfortable.

“There,” he says. “Isn’t this cosy?”

“Mmm.”

Beckett is indeed cosy. Her initial discomfort has dissipated in Castle’s reassuringly normal mix of nonsense, care, and innuendo, and being curled into him and breathing in his comforting scent of cologne and masculinity is definitely keeping her more grounded and less miserable than she might otherwise have been.

“I think he meant it,” she says slowly. “He says he doesn’t remember and he’s so shocked by it that I believe that’s true. He says he doesn’t know why. If he was denying it or giving me reasons I’d think he was lying.” She burrows closer into Castle. “I can get that he was hurting so much that it just all spilled over because drunk he had no filters and nothing to stop it. *Each man kills the thing he loves,*” she quotes acidly. Castle tucks his arm round her and says nothing.

“So… so maybe it was the truth both times. The truth of his pain when he was drunk, and the truth about wanting to hang on to me when he was sober.” Her thoughts drift slowly from her mouth. “He thinks he abandoned me, first.”

Castle says nothing to that, either. He has no right to judge Jim’s actions. He also doesn’t want to think about what would happen if he lost a beloved wife. Not least because he’d like to have a
beloved wife, and the only possibility is sitting right next to him.

“I… ought to forgive him. But I can’t. Not yet. I need time. I need to think about it. I think he was telling the truth. I think he really means it when he says there’s nothing he needs to forgive me for. But I can’t just believe it straight away, just because he says it.”

“You don’t have to, Kate. You just have to take your time and think about it. You’ve done the hardest bit – you talked to him, and you listened to him. Everything else will be easier.”

“You think?” but she’s not aggressive about it, she’s wondering.

Castle shrugs. “I guess,” he says ambivalently. “I don’t know. It’s got to be better that all the truth’s out there, though. Yeah?”

“Mm,” she hums, which is neither agreement nor disagreement, and is also the end of her conversation on the matter. She burrows in yet more, and curls her arm around his chest. Her dark head is tucked against his shoulder, so he drops a light kiss on the top of it and drinks the remains of his coffee. Beckett seems to be thinking, or possibly dozing, but it’s clear she’s not crying (his shirt is not damp, so he thinks this is a good bet) and so he’ll just lean his cheek on her head and stay nicely snuggled up.

Something is moving under his head. Castle wakes from a dream of a small cherry-coloured boat rocking in the waves and finds that Beckett is trying to untangle herself from him. In his sleep-fuzzed state, this is not a good plan.

“Stay here,” he slurs. “Comfy.”


“Couch is comfy,” Castle mutters. “Come back here.” About that point he wakes up a little more. “Oh.” His ears turn pink. “Did we both fall asleep?”

Beckett colours up in turn. “Er… yeah.” She yawns. Yawning being infectious, Castle yawns too.

“I think maybe it might be bedtime,” Castle says. It wasn’t exactly how he’d planned the remainder of the evening, nor indeed introducing Beckett to his bedroom. He looks at his watch and discovers it to be midnight. “Um…” he says uncertainly, “…are you okay to stay?” He hardly sounds smooth, suave or sophisticated. Then again, Beckett doesn’t look any of those either. She looks as uncertain as he feels. In fact, she looks much less certain than he feels. Castle revises his thoughts, rapidly.

“Easy question, Beckett. Do you want to stay, if you could?” All that needs is a yes or no answer.

“Yes,” she says without a pause.

“So let’s try.” He waggles his eyebrows lasciviously, and gestures towards the study door. “Come this way, my pretty.”

Beckett makes a truly horrible face at him, but goes where indicated, with a flip of her hair that indicates some disapproval of his phraseology. Castle picks up her small bag, and follows. She stops, partway into the study, and as she had done on entering the loft, looks around as if she’d never seen it before. Castle takes her bag straight through to his bedroom, drops it by the side of the bed he doesn’t favour, and comes back to see her continuing to stand, as still as a stump, approximately two feet inside the study door and therefore not, as she should be, two feet inside the bedroom door. He pads over to her and takes her in his arms, cossetting her. This is, he knows, a
huge step, and he won’t hurry it. Pushing will undoubtedly spook Beckett, and there is no hint of a Kat here in his loft. There’s not been much Kate, either. Falling asleep on the couch or not.

And so they simply stay where she stood: no movement one way or the other; he’s gently rubbing circles on her back, not quite a stroke, certainly not massage. Maybe it’s just a mindless, loving caress: wholly instinctive. She’s not quite tense; not quite relaxed; not pulling away; not curving in. They stay like that for some moments, till her head drops on to his shoulder, and her stance softens, and her decision is made. Even then, Castle doesn’t move until she does, one small step towards his bedroom door.

He instantly scoops her up and carries her through. She squeaks in surprise, though surely she knows by now how much he loves picking her up and carrying her to bed? Anyway, he will do so for this first time sharing his bed, even if she threatened to shoot him. He puts her down on it carefully. She yawns, widely.

“You need to sleep. So do I,” he says as he yawns himself, again. “Would you like the bathroom first?”

“‘Kay, thanks.” She pads quietly off with her bag. Castle undresses and swathes himself in his luxuriously warm (if old) robe while he waits for her to return. She reappears, with bag, in a silky kimono which shows off several yards of excellent legs but sadly nothing of what she might be wearing (or not wearing) under it, and then glances slightly uncertainly at the bed.

“Which side do you want?”

“Usual one,” Castle says. “Same as at yours.”

“‘Kay.” She sits down on the left hand edge, and then leans back against the pillows. Castle watches with mild, affectionate and carefully hidden amusement as her lashes drift downwards and are jerked upward. He disappears to the bathroom to complete his own night time routine, perfectly sure that Beckett will be out for the count before he returns.

Indeed she is. When he returns, only a few moments later, the kimono is messily dropped on the floor – he tidily puts it over a chair – and Beckett is buried under the comforter with barely her eyebrows visible. Her soft, regular breathing indicates sleep, or the next closest cousin to it. Castle slides in on his preferred side – how useful that they aren’t fighting for the same side: that would be very detrimental to marital harmony – that’s a bit premature. He squashes that thought down. She very nearly spooked when his family wasn’t here, she just about made it through brunch somehow else with them, she’s a long way from sorting out her relationship with her father even if they’re finally listening to each other’s truth. That thought is a very long way in advance of the facts.

On the other hand, a long term plan is not such a bad thing to have.

He wriggles down into his comfortable mattress and his comfortable pillows in his comfortable bed and reaches out to cuddle in his sound-asleep and very comfortable Beckett. His fingers discover a very familiar-feeling covering. A small peek tells him that she’s wearing the same emerald-green babydoll nightwear which he had appreciated enormously in the Hamptons. He winds an arm under her neck, the other around her waist, and falls asleep to dream of an emerald-green Beckett-Kat surrounded by emerald-green cats in a variety of feline, flexible positions. He wakes up, gasping, on its conversion into a nightmare where the cats swarm suffocatingly over him and he loses touch with his Beckett-Kat.

When he realises that it was only a dream and he is still safely in his own bed, unsuffocated and
thankfully feline-less, he also realises that his Beckett-Kat is not. There is a space, which is not warm, where she ought to be. The clock indicates that it is three a.m. There is no light in the bathroom, which is the obvious answer. Castle rapidly becomes worried. He switches a small light on, notices her bag still present in his first frantic look around, and becomes less worried. The kimono is present. His robe is not. He concludes that whatever she is doing, she is at least warm while doing it. He also concludes that if he goes hunting for her he will be cold. The kimono, while exceedingly pretty, will not fit him. He makes a small mental note to buy a second robe, tomorrow. He resolutely closes his eyes and tries to go back to sleep. It doesn’t work. Even after switching the light off, it doesn’t work. The faint traces of scent of Beckett are not soothing while she isn’t there.

On the other hand, if she’s got up, there’s a reason. She might simply have woken and not been able to sleep, so got up so as not to disturb him. Or, far more likely, her roiling thoughts have woken her and she is curled up somewhere, contemplating them. He can’t – he listens closely – hear crying. He can’t hear movement. She isn’t packing and running away. Therefore he needs to give her a little space. He lies quietly, and waits. Eventually, he drifts back into sleep, only dimly aware that there is a warm body slipping in next to him and nestling into his side, an arm sliding over him.
Alone in the moonlight

Beckett had woken up cosily snuggled into Castle’s wide, warm chest, surrounded by the comforting size, scent and general aura of Castle-ness. Unfortunately, all of this does not stop her brain staying awake, rather than returning to the sleep which she would definitely have preferred. After a few moments of resolutely un-somnolent brain, she realises that she will shortly begin to toss and turn, which will be – even in this cruise-liner sized bed – disturbing to her companion. She delicately extracts herself from his grasp, and slips silently out of the sheets. There is enough ambient light sneaking through the window for her to consider first her kimono and, more helpfully, Castle’s enormous, fluffy, somewhat worn robe, which has the huge advantages over her kimono of being much warmer and smelling delightfully of Castle’s cologne.

She tiptoes out of the bedroom to avoid disturbing Castle’s gentle whiffling and sound sleep, pauses in the study, decides that she’d rather be further out of the way, and betakes herself to the main room and the couch. About that point, she also realises that she would like a glass of water and that – unexpectedly – she is peckish. She remembers how delicious the pork was, and also the amount of chocolate dessert remaining. Both are in the fridge, and it’s not difficult to find that in the kitchen, seeing as it’s the size of a house. If she’s really lucky, she’ll find some bread. Suddenly a sandwich seems like a really good idea.

With the assistance of a small side light, switched on in the main room, Beckett locates everything she wants with less noise than a ghost would make but – seeing as she is not ectoplasmic but corporeal – considerably more enjoyment and success. She settles down with her illicit midnight feast in a more pensive and less fretful mood than the one which had roused her from her – er, Castle’s – bed in the first place. Each bite is just as delicious as earlier. Cold slow roast pork is excellent, she decides, and munches slowly to extract every last morsel of deliciousness. When she’s finished savouring her sandwich, she starts to think back over how it had felt to come to the loft.

She had been very, very nervous about coming here. Absence of family in person or not, the loft is full of family atmosphere: photos, bits and pieces of decoration, and so forth. Albeit the toys in the study are Castle’s, it is, despite its location and value, a family home at heart, and she had not been at all sure, standing in the front doorway, that she could even manage to cope with that. But she’d taken the first step: to come inside. Only she knows how appallingly desperate her desire to turn round and run had been.

But she had overcome it. Fought herself and won. Though, standing a foot inside the front door and producing a stunningly accurate imitation of a statue, she’s not at all sure that she would have held on to the victory if Castle hadn’t – at just exactly the right time – pulled her in and kissed her in that particularly masculine, assertive, I’ve-got-this-and-you-too fashion which lets her know that it’s fine to stand down, that there’s respite and surcease, that someone has her back.

But then she’d been almost equally statue-like not ten minutes later when asked to put bread on the table, as if it were commonplace, normal, usual. As if it were something that she did, or would do, or could do, every day. The assumptions contained within it were amazing: broadly, you’re here, so you can be treated like one of the family; I don’t need to stand on ceremony, Beckett, and do everything myself as if you were a first time guest. Even if he wouldn’t let her help tidy up.

She’d nearly spooked again at the prospect of staying. And that was just plain dumb, because Castle’s stayed with her plenty of times, and – well, she likes sharing a bed with him, not just for the obvious reason. It’s comforting, and makes her happy. And again, he’d brought her safely past
the wrecking rocks, by going back to the simple question that had reminded her why she was doing this. She did want to be able to stay. That, after all, was the whole point of all of this. Then he’d simply held her till she stepped forward, and only then swooshed her up into his arms (which he really does far too often but it’s just so good when he does) and carried her to bed. It could only have been better if they hadn’t both been so tired that anything – er – enthusiastic was entirely out of the question.

She stops at that. Castle, who normally appears to be as capable of managing without sleep as she is, and who has never obviously been tired even when she’s been exhausted, had been tired. Hmm. It looks like all this mess is taking a toll on him too. All the more reason to sort it out. But she managed to come here, and stay here, and she hasn’t yet had to leave because she can’t cope. Though she’d never have managed it if Martha or Alexis were here. Even the thought makes her stressed and shiver. She concentrates firmly on the small victory and buries her nose in the soft robe to remember exactly why she’s doing this, one tiny, tiny step at a time.

And one more consideration, apparently small but in fact saying much more than it did: which side? Usual one. They each have a usual side. They’ve been together enough to have usual sides. This is really getting quite serious.

Good. She wants it to be serious. Very serious.

Her thoughts wander from the sleeping man two full rooms away, back to the problem of her own father. That requires fuel, and comforting fuel at that. She goes to investigate a substantial slice of chocolate dessert and an equally substantial covering of cream. Since there is a second and indeed third canister of cream in the fridge, she doesn’t feel in the slightest scrap guilty about it. (She never feels guilty about eating chocolate dessert, and anyway there is plenty left for tomorrow. It would have fed a dozen, not just two, with some left over. Eating some more of it is positively her public duty.)

When she’s finished with the chocolate dessert, which is even better for being part of a midnight feast, she begins to think about the session with Dr Burke. Specifically, she thinks about her father. Food, some sleep, and managing to overcome her demons long enough to come to the loft and stay there, even when she wanted to run, has put her in a rather better place to consider what had actually occurred there.

She thinks it over for a while, consciously trying to assess her father as she would a neutral witness. She wasn’t a neutral witness: but she’d not lost her temper – lost control of her tear ducts, but not of her temper – and she’d got the core of the problem out between them. Her father had been so passionately desperate to say that he didn’t blame her, that he’d abandoned her first…

If he’d been a witness, would she have believed him? She tries, very hard, to take her emotions out the equation, and doesn’t exactly succeed. She can’t quite see past her own hurt, guilt and pain – and can’t quite manage to believe her father’s absolution of her – to analyse properly, calmly.

She sits for long enough to stop her emotions spilling over, and then quietly creeps back into bed, to curl close to Castle’s frame and hold him to her, or her to him, and fall back to sleep.

In the morning, she is not wakeful at all. In fact, she is so sleepy that she emits an offended growl when Castle untucks himself from her, then firmly re-closes her eyes, snuggles deeply into the pillows, not incidentally covering her ears, and pulls the comforter up to her eyebrows. Seconds later she’s breathing deeply and sound asleep again.

Castle, in need of both his bathroom and some coffee, avails himself of both and then looks with
first confusion and then amusement at the minimal but still telling detritus of a solo midnight feast. He investigates the fridge and finds that a substantial chunk of chocolate dessert has clearly disappeared into the Beckett maw. He’ll tease her about that, but for now he’s merely happy that she was comfortable enough in his home to go seeking late night snacks and that she’s eating enough, even if it is at odd times.

He tidies the plates and glass into the dishwasher from where they’d been left in the sink, meditatively sips at his coffee and concludes that Beckett had done some food-fuelled thinking in the small hours of the night. That’s probably good, at least so he assumes because she’s still here, and explains why she’s still asleep. He wanders back into his study, collects his laptop, and puts himself back into bed, propped up on a pile of pillows, and starts to write. Of course, he also casts regular glances at Beckett, procrastinates, glances at Beckett, looks at all his favourite websites, glances at Beckett, wonders if Beckett would notice if he peeled back the comforter to be able to glance at Beckett and confirm in daylight what he is sure is her emerald babydoll nightwear, contemplates a simile, pulls his fingers off the edge of the comforter, glances at Beckett, and eventually gives up and simply stares at sleeping Beckett.

Finally she wakes up, about an hour later: stretches and yawns and emits a murmurous little noise that has no words. Castle instantly slides down (the laptop having been put aside long ago) to catch her in, kick the comforter away from her, and finally finally finally get to see properly (not just a peek) what she’s chosen to wear.

It is indeed the beautiful emerald green babydoll, covering a beautiful, just-woken Kate Beckett, who stretches again and slinks against him.

“Hey,” she purrs into his neck.

“Good morning,” he says happily. “C’mere.” He pulls her over him. She wiggles sensuously.

“You’re pleased to see me,” she says unnecessarily, and wiggles again.

Castle smiles lazily, and pets her hair in such a way that her head comes down and her lips meet his. He takes immediate advantage, surging into her mouth: taking and owning it, and she sighs contentedly and concedes. She lies soft over him, breasts pressed into his chest, the thin silk the only thing between them. He rucks it up over her back, and glides his hand over smooth skin and then down over soft silk, teasing delicately by moving the fabric without touching anything else, because that makes Beckett squirm and wriggle and flex against him, which he could stand more or less several lifetimes of her doing. Of course, when she wriggles like that – oh god do it again – it makes him push up into her and clutch her tighter and – oh god more – she really does not need those teeny weeny briefs which are just in the way so they go in one swift movement and – yes mine now – he rolls them and takes her and it’s all her, fitting around him as if some bountiful God had made her specially, all her and here and his and Kate!

He rolls on to his back, taking a lax, purringly contented Kat with him, and blurrrily thinks that they could simply stay here all day, with occasional forays as far as the shower and kitchen. She’s finally here, again; for the first time in his bed not hers. Okay, that’s only happened because his family aren’t here, but she hasn’t passed his door willingly – oh. Probably ever before. He’s no longer sure – scrap that, he is dead certain – that any of the previous times were because she wanted to be here. This time, he’s dead certain that she did, and while he’s also pretty certain that she had several wobbles about it, she got past them. She’s here, this time, because she wants to be here. He cuddles her close, and a last tiny little piece of unrealised worry dissolves. She really meant it. She really meant all of it.

“I love you,” he whispers, and all his heart is in the words.
“Me too,” she murmurs into his collarbone, and very possessively, “mine.”

They don’t make it out of bed for some time, after that, and when they do it only takes them as far as Castle’s gigantic shower, in which they spend long enough to resemble a pair of prunes. Washing is not the only activity in which they participate. First Castle washes Beckett’s hair – though to be fair since she was already kneeling and his hands had found their way into her hair it was a natural progression – and then she returns the favour, though in that case she’d been lifted up which allowed her to reach, and the rise and fall had resulted in a very satisfying head massage for Castle and a very satisfying – er – outcome for both of them shortly thereafter.

By the time they’re dressed, it’s practically lunchtime.

“I’m hungry,” Castle smirks, “after all that exercise.”

“Exercise is good for you,” Beckett points out, sanctimoniously.

“As is eating.” His eyebrows waggle at her, and he licks his lips. The food in the fridge is not obviously the first thought that eating has brought to Castle’s mind. Beckett wanders over to the fridge and investigates.

Castle watches her affectionately, and fails to remark on her complete comfort in his loft as of this morning. That would be a considerable error. He prowls up behind her, snugs his arms around her waist from behind, and peers over her shoulder at the contents.

“Still some left,” he says, “despite your midnight ravages.”

“I do not ravage,” Beckett says awfully. “I was merely a touch peckish.” She’s put on the cut-glass tones of a grand society dame.

Castle grins. “A touch? Sure, there’s plenty of meat left, but I’m sure there was a lot more dessert than that last night.”

Beckett blushes beautifully, but attempts to carry it off in style. “You wanted me to make myself at home, didn’t you?”

And then she realises exactly what she’s just said, scarlet sweeps across her face, she turns away – and Castle flips her round and kisses her hard and picks her up and carries her to the couch, without stopping his conquering of her mouth, and sits with her on his lap.

“Yes,” he growls deeply, “and you have no idea how happy I am that you did.”

“Oh, I think I might,” Beckett purrs, and wriggles against his very evident happiness.

“I wanted you to feel at home here, just as much as I feel comfortable in your apartment.”

“You raid my fridge, Castle? I thought it was a mouse stealing all my takeout. Maybe I should take my key back,” Beckett says mischievously, and has her hair tenderly tugged to bring her face up for a sound kissing in revenge.

“You will not,” Castle says forcefully. “I wouldn’t give you it back if you held me at gunpoint.”

“Could be arranged,” Beckett says even more naughtily, and is soundly and extensively kissed again. She could keep playing this game all day, if Castle will. She can cope with kisses, and the more kisses she gets the more she can cope with his loft.
“Lunch?” she asks hopefully.

“But you had breakfast. You might have had it at three a.m., but you had breakfast.”

“How did you know I was up at three?”


“You woke up? And you didn’t come out to see where I was?”

“No. You weren’t leaving, so if you wanted to think” – Beckett squirms uncomfortably, which leaves Castle uncomfortable in a rather different way – “I wasn’t going to disturb you. Anyway, you came back to bed and snuggled in and your face wasn’t damp, so you weren’t mad or too upset.”

“You were still awake?”

“Ummm… only just.”

“I want lunch, please.”

Beckett changes the subject. She would rather like some food before Castle asks the obvious questions. Apart from anything else, she really is hungry.

“Okay. Cold pork, salad, bread.”

“And chocolate dessert.”

Castle grins evilly. “You already had yours.”

Beckett glares. “Try and stop me.”

Castle recognises both the futility of trying and the inevitability of pain if he does try. “Okay, okay. You can have as much dessert as you want.”

Beckett slithers off his knee, leaving Castle to take a moment to be able to stand comfortably, and aims arrow-straight for the fridge. By the time Castle’s joined her, the meat, the butter, and the chocolate dessert are all on the counter, she’s rootling out the bread, and the only things that are missing are the salad, which Castle produces from a different drawer of the fridge, and the canister of cream. Knives, plates, and condiments appear rapidly, and shortly thereafter both of them are digging in.

Lunch proceeds through the chocolate dessert, during which Castle asks not one question about why Beckett had been up thinking in the middle of the night, and Beckett emits not one word about it.

Once they’ve tidied up, got coffee and put themselves on the couch, Beckett looks around, slowly. She deliberately reviews the photos on the piano, and on the shelves dividing this room from Castle’s study. She takes in everything, forcing herself to notice the family nature of the room, to accept it. It doesn’t entirely work. On the other hand, although Castle’s arms are close around her, they haven’t tightened: he isn’t encouraging her head down on to his shoulder, or pulling her into his lap. She concludes that the sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach is not apparent, and further concludes that her reactions are therefore far less severe than previously. It wasn’t as if she was trying to conceal them. This is hopeful. Hardly the final outcome, but hopeful. The thought of Alexis or Martha or both walking in right now, however, causes her to shudder – and it’s not that
she’s snuggled up to Castle, either. It’s just the thought of the whole *family* atmosphere.

Still, she hangs on to the main points: she got here, she’s stayed here, and she isn’t running screaming right now even though she’s looking at the family photos.
Eventually looking round the room palls. Castle is playing chopsticks up and down Beckett’s arm, which is beginning to become mildly irritating.

“Finished your creepy staring?”

“I do not stare creepily,” Beckett asserts. “You stare creepily. All the time.”

“What shall we do?” Castle asks, without commenting on his penchant for staring at Beckett. Entirely non-creepily, naturally.

Beckett smirks naughtily. “I know,” she husks, and runs a finger over his cheek. “I have a really good idea. You’ll enjoy it.” She licks her lips. “After all, you already have. Several times.” Castle’s eyes go very dark and intent. “I’d better just go and get ready.” He smiles wolfishly. “Back in a moment.”

She slips off the couch and sashays into the study with a wicked sway of her hips, and Castle barely restrains himself from prowling after her. He waits, exerting massive self control, until she returns. He is extraordinarily disappointed that she is still dressed in her jeans and soft jumper. Her hands are behind her back. She comes back, and grins evilly at his expression.

“Here we are,” she says very smugly, and puts the Sorry box on the table. Castle’s jaw drops to the floor.

“You… but you…. But I thought…”

“I know you thought,” Beckett says smugly. “But you did it to me.”

“I what?”

“You did it to me,” Beckett repeats, smirking. “Don’t you remember? How very disappointing.”

Castle hauls his brain out of its current state of lust-fuzzed incapacity and chases down the memory. Since the speed of his neurons is currently more snail than Michael Johnson, it doesn’t exactly speed to the front of his mind. Oh. Yes. He had. Straight after they bought the game and went back to Beckett’s apartment and he’d done exactly this to her and they’d played the game and been relaxed and easy and made out and been happy.

“Why’d you bring it, Beckett?” he asks, genuinely interested in her reasons. Her fingers pause in their busy setting up of the board and men.

“No marshmallows,” she says flippantly.

“C’mon.”

There’s a pause.

“I like it,” she blushes. “It’s… it’s nice.”

Castle deduces that what she really means is that it’s soothing, relaxing, and affectionate – undemanding. It’s also the closest thing she’s got to something she shares with her father… Oh. Oh, now, there’s a possibility. He opens his mouth immediately.
“I’ve got an idea,” he blurts out, and wishes he hadn’t upon the instant.

Beckett’s expressive eyebrows wander up and down again in interested surprise. “Spit it out, then. You’re not normally shy of coming out with your” – the word crazy, or possibly insane, is audible – “ideas.” She waits expectantly.

“Er… um…”

“Get on with it.”

“Um… maybe you should play Sorry with your dad at the next session with Dr Burke?”

“What?”

“Um… well… your dad said the first time I met him when you were – er – throwing me out, that you’d played it a lot with him, and you only bought it for his present because you thought he’d like it and then you thought you’d like it too, so… um… don’t kill me okay – maybe if you both played it that would remind you both where you thought you were before this all blew up? Now please don’t shoot me.”

“Didn’t bring my gun out. I leave it locked in the precinct on Fridays in case I’m tempted to shoot Burke,” Beckett says sardonically and rather automatically. Her mind is spinning faster than a jet engine. It’s an insane suggestion. It’s more insane than Castle’s usual theories involving CIA spies or zombie apocalypses. It’s utterly ridiculous. She finishes putting out the men and shuffles the cards blindly.

“I think they might be properly shuffled now, Beckett,” Castle points out, when she’s still shuffling three full minutes later. It’s nonsensical. It’s utterly crazy. It’s insane.

And she can’t get it out of her head. She tries to concentrate on the game, and barely succeeds – only because she certainly isn’t going to hand Castle something that would amount to a walkover victory. She’s not that flabbergasted. Well, she is, but she’s also not going to give him the satisfaction of showing it.

For the first half of the game it’s all okay. She’s not exactly winning, but she’s not so far behind that a little luck and a Sorry card won’t change the outcome. But in the back of her mind Castle’s words are eating away at her, and then she remembers how it had been at Christmas, when her dad had loved the game and they’d played it and it had been the best Christmas since… before and it had very, very nearly been just as it should be all day through. They’d even hugged each other and she had thought they’d really meant it.

“Beckett? Kate? Kate, are you okay?” Castle’s warm embrace wraps her in. “You’re crying. Don’t cry, sweetheart.”

She sniffs. “Not crying.” Castle’s disbelief is palpable.

“My shirt is wet. Since my shoulders don’t exude liquid, it must be you.” The words are teasing. The arms around her are strong and supportive. Beckett sniffs again, and wrestles a Kleenex out of her jeans pocket to blow her nose, noisily. Having done so, she finds herself to have been tucked in again. Her hair is being stroked, her shoulders patted. “Didn’t mean to make you cry.” He’s kissing the top of her head.

“Not you,” snuffles into his shoulder. “Christmas.”

Which makes no sense to Castle at all.
“We played it and it was just like family.”

Ah. Now he gets it. “Yeah?” he murmurs encouragingly, “That was good, wasn’t it? Just like you want it to be.”

There’s another sniff, and no answer for a moment. “Mmmfff.”

“Hmm?”

“It was. It was really like it should be.”

Castle, exerting astonishing control, does not say that’s because it was real, Beckett. Admittedly, that’s because he’s nearly bitten his tongue off with the effort. He thinks she might suspect it, but he hasn’t said it, so she probably can’t kill him. Anyway, she’s stopped crying. The sniffs are less snuffly, too. Good. His best cotton shirts are not to be used as handkerchiefs. Not even by Beckett. He pets her hair some more, and keeps biting his errant tongue. Suddenly he sniggers.


“I just had a thought.”

“What thought?”

“I had this vision of Dr Burke’s face if you told him he had to play Sorry during a session.”

Beckett sniggers soggily in turn. “It’s almost worth it.” She sniggers again. “It totally might be.” Castle says nothing at all, and pets. “Do you really think it could work?” she says, shortly after.

“Haven’t a clue,” Castle says casually. “Do you? It’s up to you.”

“Yeah.” Beckett closes off that line of conversation. “I’ll think about it later.” She turns back to the game. “I’m going to win this,” she states, and draws the next card.

She doesn’t win. In fact, she’s some way behind. Castle dials back his normal triumphalism, but claims that he’s owed his traditional prize anyway.

“Prize? You don’t need a prize.”

“Yes, I do. I won, despite your best efforts, so I get a prize.”

Beckett rolls her eyes at his insistence. Castle pounces, and takes her mouth in one fast movement. There’s a falsely cross squeak under his lips, which merely allows him to invade and raid and possess. She softens and curves into him, wriggles into his lap and twines her arms around his neck, and falls into the kiss without a single further protest.

Protest there may not be, but wicked, wanton fingers there certainly are. Currently, they are trip-trapping down his shirt and unbuttoning in order to play – oooohhhh – with his flat nipples and make them erect and tight: nerves running straight down to his groin and tightening the flesh and dragging all his blood downward. That’s not fair. She’s not kissing him any more. Come back, Beckett.

On second feelings – thought is not involved – don’t. She’s very delicately nipping on his pecs and then does something so totally evil to his nipples with her mouth and teeth that she surely learnt it in a hitherto unadvertised trip to the dark side of sexuality. He groans, and he’d swear he could feel her lips forming a smirk against his chest. And then he stops thinking altogether as she does it
again and all there is now is the streaking fire from chest to groin and her mouth and her lips and her – oh god – teeth please Beckett do it some more and she does and it’s glorious but it’s rousing all his most predatory instincts and fuck his hands are knotting in her hair and he’s not quite pushing her head down but – oh Christ – he wants to because he’s straining to reach her and – oh fuck – she’s released him – oh thank Christ oh yes Beckett more please Beckett – and he’s within the hot wet cavern of her mouth and there’s nothing in the world but her lips around him and everything she can do with every part of her wicked, wicked mouth and all there is to do is groan out her name and lose himself in the glory of her.

She’s still perfectly wholly dressed and – apart from any lip gloss she might originally have had – made up. If it weren’t for the wholly mischievous and notably smug I’ve-ruined-you look in her eyes, she could be sitting primly at her desk: the very proper Detective Beckett.

He is not looking prim or proper. He is, he perceives, extremely not prim or proper. His clothes are undone and in the case of his shirt, half off. His pants are open. He is – er – untucked. He re-dresses himself, at least as far as pants are concerned. Beckett is nestled into his side, which makes closing his shirt impossible, and also undesirable. Beckett is not, however, undesirable. Beckett, especially when pretending to be prim and proper – after that display? – is very desirable indeed. His desire may require a little time to become obvious, but it is not in any way diminished by her actions. Rather the reverse.

He slides his hands around her and hoists her back into his lap, where he can explore without let, hindrance, or needing to stretch or bend awkwardly. Anyway, she’s nice and warm and her jumper is fluffy – not the green angora affair, but a red one which is clearly a cousin. Therefore she should cuddle in and keep his naked chest warm until they come up with a better idea. He has lots of better ideas. It’s the coming up that requires a short interval. That doesn’t need to stop him kissing her, though. A lot of making out can be fitted into the available space, and if his hands should happen to wander enthusiastically, well, he’s sure she won’t complain.

She certainly doesn’t complain. It doesn’t take a lot of heavy petting for her to be boneless and feline against him, purring happily at each stroke of his hands and generally encouraging him to more. The Sorry game sits forgotten on the table, looking rather lonesome. If it had been a pet, it would have wandered off sulking, since clearly its humans are far more interested in each other than in it.

Castle is recalled to a sense of place (any time is the right time to make out with Beckett) when a marginally over-exuberant movement results in her foot banging into the table.

“Ow!” she says crossly, straightening up.

“I could kiss it better,” Castle says.

“It’s my foot, Castle. Are you saying that you’ll kiss my feet?” She suddenly grins. “I suppose that’s the right way round. You kneeling at my feet… mmmm. I like that idea. Possibly a bit over the top for the bullpen, but definitely the right relative statuses.”

Castle growls dangerously. “You think? If I were to kneel at your feet the only reason would be to listen to you begging me for more.”

“You reckon? No way.”

“Is that a challenge?”

“Yep.” One she’s absolutely confident that she’ll lose. Competitiveness can be so useful, properly
directed. So even if it looks as if she’s lost, she’ll actually win. Hands down. Well. Something like that.

“Okay then. You, my dear detective, are going down.”

_No, that’s what you’re doing_, Beckett thinks, and smiles a satisfied, cat-with-the-cream smile. Two milliseconds later she is standing up and being propelled backwards into the bedroom at some speed.

“Huh?”

“I’m not embarking on a challenge like that in the middle of the living room. Fate would intervene at the most embarrassing possible moment, probably in the form of my mother.”

“Way to ruin the moment, Castle.”

“That would. However, if I carry you off to my lair” –

“This is not carrying. Frogmarching, perhaps.” –

“and shut the doors behind us, then there will be no interruptions and the neighbours won’t complain about the noise.”

Beckett splutters gracelessly and indignantly. “One, you have no neighbours. Two, I don’t make that much noise.”

Castle quirks a very wolfish eyebrow. “Wanna bet? What’ll you bet, Beckett?” His eyes flare hotly. “How about another delicious Georgian meal, cooked by your own fair hand?”

“If you lose, I want…” she stops. She can’t think of anything that might actually be achievable. Coming here is not, because everyone will be back. Playing Sorry with her father is not, because she can’t face that either. Asking Castle to arrange for the kidnap, assault or murder of Dr Burke is unfair, and besides which, why should he have the pleasure? She’d like it, in her more irritated moments. Castle can get in line.

“You can think about it later,” Castle says arrogantly. “I have a bet to win. So you don’t need to bother thinking what’ll happen if I lose, because I’m not going to lose.”

Beckett opens her mouth on an infuriated rebuttal, which merely allows Castle to start as he means to go on, invading it with a firm thrust of tongue followed by a teasing, gentle stroke; walking her backwards with every repetition; closing doors behind them as promised, one hand locking her head in position for his avid mouth. He can feel her arousal against his chest where he’s pressed her into him, tattooed her over him. He walks her backwards almost to the bed, and slides his hand down over her ass to hold her where he can roll hips against her and grind a little into her and make her gasp out a tiny mew before he’s even gotten started. He acquires the predatory smile of a well-fed lion which is nevertheless perfectly happy to play with its next meal for a while before eating, and takes a second or two to plan his attack.

He starts by sliding his hands up under Beckett’s latest variety of tactile sweater, which lifts it to reveal a toned stomach. He kisses that, and kisses upward as the sweater moves. He removes it over her head, and appreciates, with a heated gaze and projection of very male knowledge, the black scraps of lace and fabric below. He doesn’t remove them. He twitches the fabric to produce a little friction, a delicate rubbing, and she emits another mew-gasp.

“You liked that,” he growls darkly into her ear, and does it again. Then he damps the fabric with
his mouth and tongue and does it again. This time the mew-gasp is more of a mew-moan. He grins. “You’re already making little sexy noises, Beckett. I think you should make more of them.” He bends a little, and draws a taut breast and erect nipple into his mouth: playing and rolling while he holds her to stop her escaping; nipping just a little to change the tempo; sucking much harder and then dropping away; playing her like an instrument and sending strumming vibration all through each nerve. Her mews are now wholly moans and orders not to stop. He doesn’t pay any attention to the orders, and he does stop.

His strong fingers slide over her ribs, down into the concavity of her waist, the matching convexity of her hips curving out, and then sneaking like thieves into the waistband of her pants, robbing the button from its buttonhole, the zip from its teeth, and finally the pants from her body. The black scraps below are as stunningly sexy as the bra, and even more minimalist; almost revealing but wholly erotic in their almost-concealment. He runs a long finger down to trace the top edge, then each leg, lifting each and so leaving her spread wider. She sighs out a long breath of need.

Finally he sinks down on to his knees before her. The position conveys not one single hint of submission or subservience, and the dark intent of his blazing eyes indicates his desire that she’ll be soaked and screaming for him before he’s anywhere close to done. When that same questing finger draws a hard line straight through the centre of the black lace, he finds that the first of those will not be far away. Her hips lift to him, and he drops a hard, erotic kiss into her navel; a quick flicker of tongue promising more to come, and she squirms in his grip and moans his name.

Castle looks up the lean length of Beckett’s body with a feral grin and burning gaze: he might be kneeling, but he’s anything but a supplicant. An arm snakes around the flare of her hips; the hand at its end planted firmly on the jut of bone, trapping her. He’ll need to hold her up. He will certainly need to hold her up, shortly, but he can easily do that with a single arm. Happily, that leaves one hand free to work.

And work it does. He leans in, blowing softly over her stomach, a tiny scrape of five o’clock shadow over fragile skin: a little roughness without his touch being anything other than gentle. “You like that,” he murmurs, “but you’ll like this more.” He drags his mouth down to the edge of the panties, and stops, listening to the hitch in her breathing. “You’ll like this a lot more,” he breathes across her, and she writhes in his grasp. He sits back on his heels, his head at the perfect height, and runs his free fingers along the lace rim over her stomach, dipping briefly beneath and tickling the soft curls; returning to dance across and over the front, teasing her with the promise of a firmer, deeper, lower touch that doesn’t arise no matter how she twists and arches. He’ll get there. When she’s ready.

Castle leans forward once again and nuzzles the thin black fabric, right in the centre of the frontispiece, pulling the material so that friction heats her core. Beckett emits some very profane words indeed and makes a determined attempt, through her threats of mayhem and gasped-out moans, to force him to where she evidently thinks that he should be, and isn’t. Castle, not inclined to allow his plan – or his bet – to be derailed, uses his free hand to detach hers and locks his other hand around her slim wrists, resettling that arm around her waist. He smirks up at her dilated, hazy gaze and purrs into her skin, “Tut, tut, Detective. That was cheating. You shouldn’t cheat. It’ll only get you into trouble.” Trouble, in this instance, meaning being pinioned in his grip. “I’ve caught you. No more tugging on my ears.”
Castle returns to the bounty spread before him. Beckett is quite clearly very aroused indeed, and he has every intention of stoking her higher. He teases ever closer to her scalding centre, and her commentary rises in pitch. He tugs and slides at the damp fabric between her legs, strokes over it; tantalises and plays. “You like this,” he growls against her, and she whimpers simply from the vibrations of his voice, resonating against fabric and flesh. “But I like it more. You’re so wet, just for me, and now I’m going to make you scream my name; I’ll hold you up because your legs won’t hold you; I’m going to do everything I promised and you’re going to love every last second of it. I’ll lead, and you’ll follow, and you’ll see stars, Beckett.”

He begins again with another sweep of hard fingertips along the edge of her panties where they accentuate the cream of her inner thigh; then along the high cut to her hips. He follows that with hot breath and swift mouth, delicate sharp nips on sensitive skin, and she wobbles. He trails a light, unsatisfying line through her centre, and bares his teeth as she jerks.

“Like that?” but he doesn’t give her a chance to answer before he does it again, harder, slips one long finger beneath her panties and through sodden folds, dragging slickness over her over-sensitive nerves and she’s crying his name: Castle don’t stop again there just like that more Castle. One should never disappoint a detective, so he does it again, and again, and then enters her with a wicked little curl and takes her with his fingers till her muscles flutter around him and he stops: bleeds a baritone rumble of no words but much desire against her stomach once more until she’s dropped back a fraction.

“Don’t stop,” she moans. “Castle.”

“I have a bet to win,” he rasps. “You’re already making a lot of noise.” His voice drops into a velvet semi-bass that he only ever uses with Beckett. “You’ll make a lot more before we’re done.” One-handed, he rolls her panties from her hips, encourages her feet closer and lifts each one to remove them, widens her stance to his measurements again: kisses each fine-cut calf muscle and then upwards, side to side, over her knees. Halfway to heaven, he becomes aware that he is now holding her up, and she is definitely making more noise. He drops little busses further up, and further, and closer, and puts both hands firmly on her hips to hold her still and finally puts his mouth on her and begins to wind her into ecstasy: licking and nipping and thrusting and sucking till she’s screaming his name, a long desperation of Castle Castle Castle please Castle now Castle please and he takes her right up and over the edge and lets her fall.

“You lose,” Castle says happily when Beckett opens her eyes. He’s laid her out on the bed, taking her bra off so that she’s utterly naked and beautiful. “You have to make me another delicious dinner.”

“Mm,” Beckett hums, and looks at him sleepily. “You’re overdressed.”

“Am I?” he asks innocently. “Are you asking me to do something about it?”

Beckett flexes indolently, just like a contented, lazy cat. “If you want,” she purrs, and curves into the stroke of his hand.

“Don’t you want?” he grins, perfectly confident.

She sends a leisurely, languorous look over him. He is instantly aroused. “I could be persuaded,” she husks teasingly.
“Persuaded, hmm? Maybe I need persuaded. I’m quite happy with the position.” He strokes some more, and she pushes back into the touch. “I like you naked in my bed.”

“I like you naked in mine,” Beckett says, possessively.

“No, no, no. This time you’re in my bed. My Kat, all stretched out and strokable in my bed.” He demonstrates. She wriggles. He kisses her. She hauls him down, flicks his button down open and whips it off his shoulders. Then she kisses him. After that he doesn’t remember much. It’s all dissolved in a haze of delight which ends with his Kat sprawled bonelessly across him and both of them completely naked and exhausted.

“We didn’t finish the game,” she murmurs.

“‘S not going anywhere.”

“I’m not going anywhere either.”

“I’m not letting you,” Castle says provocatively. “Now you’re finally here because you want to be, I’m not letting you go.”

Beckett raises an eyebrow. “Kidnapping is still a felony, Castle.”

“Are you going to arrest me?”

“Nah. You’d enjoy it far too much.”

“Only if it involved handcuffs,” Castle says, hopefully lecherous, and almost instantly whuffs as Beckett wreaks revenge by leaning a far-too-sharp elbow into his stomach.

“Nope.” He pouts. It has as much effect as usual, that is, none. “I’m hungry.”

“Again? Where do you put it all?”

“I exercise.”

“I noticed,” Castle leers. “We could do some more… exercise – ow! Stoppit.” He rolls over and flattens her into the sheets. “No more of that. Let’s do something else instead.” When her mouth opens on some totally irrelevant words, he kissing her deeply, which progresses to slipping over her and then slipping into her and then it’s just them. Eventually, however, the grumblings of stomachs become too loud to ignore.

“Dinner,” Castle says definitively, “and I don’t mean you,” he hurriedly adds, as Beckett stretches luxuriously and very attractively. He grabs his robe and exits before dinner is once again delayed.

A moment or so later Beckett pads out behind him, swathed in her short silky kimono with her long silky legs on full display. They fall – not without some awkwardness and barely averted crashes – into a slightly dissonant rhythm which gradually metamorphoses into a certain degree of harmony. The counter acquires all the accoutrements of an almost-picnic like meal without disaster, and following the informality of the setting, when Beckett hops up on to a stool, Castle slides in beside her, curls an arm around her and presses a hard thigh into hers.

There is little about the consumption of cold meat and salad, or indeed the rolls that accompany these viands, that inspires romance or lust. The same is emphatically not true of dessert. The arm around Beckett becomes an assertive – but easily escapable, should she so wish – restraint on her ability to lift her spoon.
“What are you doing?”

“I’ll feed you,” Castle rasps, and lifts her spoon to her lips. This, it is instantly and painfully clear, was an astonishing mistake. Beckett’s tongue peeks out from her lush mouth, now a little swollen from their earlier activities, traces her lower lip, extends a fraction to flirt with the spoon and then its cream and chocolate contents, and then laps delicately at the dessert. Castle almost drops it. He knows what that luscious mouth can do – she did it. All of it – and she should not, emphatically not, be doing it with a spoon. Not if she doesn’t want bent over the counter and damn the dessert. He emits a growl-groan and thanks his stars that he is not wearing tight pants. Or indeed any pants. His boxers are quite constricting enough.

“If you carry on doing that, you won’t get to finish your dessert.”

“Oh? Is something wrong?” She laps again, sensuously, and adds a swirl of tongue. Castle’s arm flexes and tightens, without any conscious input from his brain.

“No, I’m just pointing out consequences.”

“Poor baby,” Beckett says insincerely. “It must be… hard… for you, watching me eat dessert.” She takes another lascivious lick of the spoon, which is now mysteriously devoid of dessert.

“I’ll show you just how hard it is if you do that again.”

“Is that a threat?” she asks, peeping flirtatiously through her eyelashes.

“No, the threat is that you don’t get any more dessert.”

“So give me my spoon to eat my dessert and you won’t have any more problems.”

Castle growls and mutters. Beckett sniggers and snickers – and doesn’t force her hands out of his grip.

“You,” he says direfully, “are a witch.”

“If I were,” Beckett says, momentarily vengeful, “I’d turn Burke into a frog.”

“Not a good plan.”

“Yes it is.”

“No. Can you imagine a six-foot two frog – he’s a little taller than me.”

“Than I, Castle.”


“Might offset the co-pay.”

“You could sell him to a French restaurant. Weeks of recipes.”

“Eurgh.”

Castle’s hand has dropped from her wrists to her hip. Beckett takes instant advantage and
demolishes the remains of her dessert in three fast bites. It’s like watching the doughnuts disappear in the bullpen.

“Now you’ve no leverage,” she points out smugly.

“Oh?” Castle says through a mouthful of chocolate. “On what evidence are you basing that erroneous conclusion?”

“You can’t deprive me of dessert any more.” Obviously Beckett thinks that this is a clinching argument.

“True,” Castle drawls, as he checks out the situation to ensure no collateral damage will result from his next move. And then he tugs Beckett off her bar stool and into his broad frame, pins her hands out the way and grins wolfishly. “Now you’ve no leverage. I’ve got all the leverage.” He leans in dangerously: very assertively male. Beckett’s eyes darken and dilate. Nervousness is not the dominant expression. Nor is naivety. The slick, parted lips and deliberately erotic lick of her tongue over them is proof of that. He also remembers how receptive she had been – how she had invited – a little light bondage and a lot of gently forceful, assertive strength.

He slides off his own stool and looms up over her, lets go of her wrists only to haul her against him, angle her head and capture her mouth. Her hands slip into his hair, she softens and curves into his hard body; her lips open and welcome him in, and he envelops her in his bulk and just a smidgeon of forceful strength. She sighs quietly into his kiss and melts for him.

The kimono is draped suggestively over Castle’s robe. Beckett is draped sensuously over Castle. Deep, quiet breathing indicates sleep. The open drapes allow a trickle of moonlight to stripe across the two intertwined bodies.

Beckett wakes, deep in the night, unpleasantly sticky and sweaty. She’s still nestled against Castle, curled in the crook of his arm. He had been very satisfyingly predatory, possessive and primal: forceful in all the best ways. However, much as she had enjoyed it – all of it – she is slightly sore and nastily sticky. She uncurls and carefully detaches herself from Castle and the tangled covers, and goes to run herself a hot bath. A shower is too noisy. She borrows – thieves – a large splurge of muscle relaxant that she finds after some searching, and slides contentedly into the water.

The tub is soothing to muscle, stubble-scraped skin, and mind. Beckett applies a leisurely touch to soaping herself, enjoying becoming clean, enjoying the memory of Castle’s touch: hands and mouth and hardness, and then lets body and mind float free. The aroma of the soap is redolent, of course, of Castle’s usual spicy, male scent, but naturally his soap would co-ordinate with his aftershave. That’s soothing, too: it’s very comforting and safe to be surrounded by aroma-of-Castle or indeed body-of-Castle. Or preferably both. Castles are supposed to surround people – her – and keep them safe. She luxuriates in the heat of the water and gives thanks that she’s been able to get this far.

A thought floats into her relaxed brain. Castle had, in a fit of possibly insane brilliance or brilliant insanity – it’s about the same where he’s concerned – suggested that she play Sorry again with her dad. It occurs to her that she and Castle had – sort of – made up over the game; and that, as she had earlier thought, she and her dad had last been wholly comfortable together while playing it. She sniffs, and slides deeper into the hot water, which is very consoling. Her thoughts drift back over Christmas, and the two psychotherapy sessions which have included her father.

She wants so badly to believe him: that he’s telling the truth. But she’d wanted to believe him equally badly ten years past; she’d wanted to believe him any time these last weeks. In between, she’d hoped and pretended and told herself that she did believe. His distraught face swims in her
mind’s eye: utterly appalled at his own words and behaviour, at the truth. Or had he merely seemed so, because despite all this long, unhappy story she still wants so badly to believe him?

She’s used to assessing witnesses, suspects, other cops: she’s trained to do so quickly and accurately. Her reputation depends on sifting truth from lies, motive from mess, relevance from the irrelevant. She is – everyone says so – brilliant at her job: commendation attends her team and her: top of the stats and at the top of their game. So why, now, here, doesn’t she trust her judgement when it comes to her father? She doesn’t. But if he were part of a case, she’d be very inclined to believe him.

Slowly, it dawns upon her that her uncertainly is because she is deeply emotionally involved: her judgement may be compromised because of it. She doesn’t know what is knowledge: dispassionate and objective, and what is emotion: subjective and error-prone. She pursues that thought as she would hunt down a perpetrator, and considers it as she would that same perpetrator in Interrogation.

She is still deeply, bitterly, desperately hurt by all her father’s actions. Her emotions bear no link to her professional annoyance at the act of murder, at the life cut off untimely, the waste of some victim’s potential and future. This is not that feeling. This is deep and festering hurt.

And realising that: that her uncertainty and roiling feelings, her long-buried resentment bubbling to the surface, her inability to judge and sift the evidence and reach a reasoned, provable conclusion are all the result of the pain she’s been squashing down, ignoring, denying and concealing for ten years; finally realising that truth, she begins, quite silently, to weep.

Castle wakes up just about far enough to realise that he is revoltingly sweaty and that he doesn’t like it. Not sophisticated or suave at all. That established, he also becomes vaguely aware that his personal Beckett-blanket is missing: absent without leave. He concludes that she’s got up to think, again, probably accompanied by some form of midnight snack; and decides not to disturb her. If she’s awake anyway, it won’t matter if he puts the shower on, and maybe she’ll hear it and join him. He heaves himself out of bed and towards the bathroom, in which process he entirely fails, owing to his sleep-soaked state, to notice the thin line of light that would indicate that the bathroom is already occupied. He pushes the door wide open and stands stock still, blinking foolishly in the unexpected bright light, observing a crying Beckett in his bath.

“Why are you crying in the bath?” he asks, stupidly, still sleep-fuzzed, and walks towards her. He cuddles her into his stark naked chest, and pats gently. After a moment, he firmly slides her forwards and slips into what he discovers is still very hot water, settling behind her and crossing his arms about her, bringing her back against him to be wrapped in. “Hey, hey. The bath is full enough. You’ll spill it, or cool it down.” He continues to burble softly into her hair: silly, soothing, meaningless nonsense. Beckett remains silent and still. She might have stopped crying, but without turning her round he can’t be sure of it, and he doesn’t want to do that. Well. He does. But it really wouldn’t be a good idea to have her straddling him right now.

“I got up to have a shower,” he says instead. On an unhappy noise, he adds, “Bath is good too, but I want to be clean. I’ll be back. Pass the soap, please?”

Soap appears. Castle extracts himself from the bath, now a little cool, and switches on the shower, which is hot. He showers swiftly, swathes a large towel around himself, and discovers that Beckett has vacated the bath and disappeared. A crumpled towel on the rail suggests a return to dryness, which he hopes also means a return to bed, where shrouding darkness might allow both cuddles and confidences.

Beckett is indeed buried within the bed, though in the brief gleam of the bathroom light before Castle switches it off it appears that her eyes remain open. Castle tucks himself into bed and then
tucks himself around Beckett, who, while clean and smelling rather disconcertingly of his soap, is rigid-limbed and not soft and sleepy at all.

“You’re thinking too loud.”

“Yeah. Sorry.” She forcibly tries to relax, which is not precisely successful. Still, she’s against him, even if he does feel as if he’s holding a sun-warmed marble statue.

“I’m trying to stop thinking and go to sleep.” That doesn’t sound much like conversation will occur. Castle relieves his disappointment by placing tiny kisses on the back of her neck. She shivers, but it doesn’t feel anything like desire. He wraps her closer to warm her chilled soul. It takes several minutes for her truly to ease, and more than that to drop into sleep, whence Castle rapidly follows her, his arm remaining close about her body.

Beckett wakes still enveloped in Castle and consequently finds herself part-broiled – the man is never chilly – and part-roasted. She extracts a leg from the comforter and hopes that if the extraction cools the blood within her leg that same cooled blood will circulate and cool the rest of her; mainly because she doesn’t want to extract herself from Castle’s sleeping grip. She is beautifully nestled in a large cosy frame in a large cosy bed in a large yet cosy home.

Uh?

She can’t have thought that already. She just can’t. She barely made it here. She nearly turned round and fled straight to her own home again. Has she really just thought of here as a home? That’s insane. That’s – too fast. Too fast and covering too much up. She’s made that mistake in spades already. Until she can face the whole of the family that belongs here, in here, that’s a thought that’s a long way ahead of where she is.

But it’s a good thought. It’s good to have a goal.
“What’s wrong? You keep checking your watch and jumping at every noise.” Castle says, late on Sunday afternoon. They’ve spent the day in a haze of togetherness and a long walk out through Central Park, but now Beckett is openly edgy. Suddenly he catches on. “You’re worried about Mother and Alexis coming home, aren’t you?”

Beckett shrinks away from him, and nods. “Yeah.”

“They’ll be home about eight,” he notes, heart already beginning to sink, and sure enough he’s guessed right.

“I ought to be going.”

He knew this would happen. He had known it right from moment one. But it still hurts. Beckett picks up on it instantly.

“I can’t,” she says. “I just can’t do it.” She stands up and goes through to the bedroom to pick up her already-packed bag, then returns. “I’d better go home now. See you at the precinct?”

“You don’t have to go yet.”

“I can’t do it, Castle. I’m not ready.” She pauses. “You said you wouldn’t push me. I said I wouldn’t hide what I was feeling. I’m telling you that I can’t do this now. I’m trying,” she says painedly.

“I know. I guess I just thought – it’s all going so well, and maybe… I didn’t want to push you, Beckett. Come here.” He rises and reaches for her, and draws her back to him, stroking her head down into his shoulder and tucking her close: her flat shoes leaving her the perfect height to lean his cheek on her hair. He couldn’t say that he isn’t disappointed, but he has to remember how far she’s already come. He’d never expected her to visit his loft this weekend, and yet she’s here; she’s forced herself through two brunches with his family, and two sessions with her father. He shouldn’t grab for more, and he definitely shouldn’t be hurt that she can’t yet give more. He snuggles her in, and kisses her head gently, and doesn’t push further. “Okay,” he says. “I’ll be there tomorrow.” He kisses her much harder, really not wanting her to leave at all, and lets go of her very reluctantly.

He watches as she leaves, and hears the door close with some distress.

Beckett is also in some distress as she trails home. She’s angry with herself that she still can’t face Castle’s family in Castle’s home, and she’s just a little angry with Castle for making it obvious that this upsets him. She knows it upsets him, and she’s trying really hard to cure it. She doesn’t need any more reminders. She makes herself tea, not coffee, and tries not to be so ridiculously upset that he’s upset with her.

Halfway down the camomile tea, she remembers something Dr Burke had said: your upset has equal value to that of your father, or Mr Castle, or any other person. She’s allowed to be upset, and she’s allowed to be upset even if that upsets Castle. Of course, the opposite must then also be allowed: that he can be upset even if that upsets her. And he was upset, and it has upset her…

And that’s okay. As long as they don’t let it fester.

She finishes her tea, and takes out her upset on a perfectly innocent cushion. It makes her feel
better. Not so the cushion, which is now rather ragged.

Back in his loft, looking at the empty space where Beckett had been nicely snuggled into him, Castle is upset that she had felt she had to go. He knows why she did. But he’d really, really – stupidly – hoped that having got so far she’d be able to take that one last step. It had been everything he’d wanted: Beckett in his loft, and arms, and bed. Just like it should be. Just like he wants it to be. It’s been as addictive as heroin, and he wants his next fix, but he can’t get it. They’d parted on a downbeat note, though: he’d been upset and that had upset Beckett and he’s still upset and he guesses Beckett is too. As long as she’s not still upset with him…

He’s meandering through useless thoughts and more useless attempts to write, heavily cut with procrastination and computer games, when a commotion at the door, considerably earlier than he had expected, indicates that his mother and daughter have returned. He goes to find out how their weekend had gone.

“Isn’t Katherine here?”

“No.”

“Detective Beckett was here?”

“Why not?” his mother asks. “The whole point was to get her here. She was supposed to stay.”

“Mother, it’s all a little more complicated than that.” He remembers Alexis is present and stops that sentence short. Unfortunately, he doesn’t stop talking. “She was here for dinner last night.” Had he been looking at Alexis, rather than his mother, he might have seen an expression of extreme disappointment hemmed with temper. “She has gone home. We’re fine. Don’t meddle.”

“I suppose it’s progress,” his mother mutters.

“Detective Beckett came for dinner while we were away?” Alexis asks, with an edge on her voice. “She hasn’t come since she came with her dad and she came when we weren’t here?”

Oh, shit, Castle thinks, and curses his mother’s inability to keep her mouth shut in front of Alexis.

“What’s going on with you and Detective Beckett, Dad? I thought you were” – she falters a little, and blushes an unbecoming scarlet which clashes violently with her hair – “getting together. How can you be getting together if she’s avoiding us?” There is an unpleasant note in her voice.

“Thank you, Mother,” Castle grits out bitterly, “for your lack of discretion.” He turns to Alexis. “Detective Beckett and her father have had some issues, and she’s trying to deal with them. Seeing a normal family – you and me,” he says acidly, and glares at his mother, “is currently very hurtful. That’s why she’s only come out for brunch with all of us, rather than coming here. She’s getting there. Do not” – he looks very straight at Alexis – “say anything or do anything about it. It really won’t help. If you want her to come here” – Alexis nods – “then don’t try to force it. Okay, pumpkin?”

Alexis stays silent for a moment. “Oh,” she says, but her tone has moved to thoughtful not angry, and then disappears upstairs with her bags. Regrettably, his mother does not disappear and is looking particularly self-satisfied at having opened a conversation. Castle’s rather fragile mood starts to fragment.

“Exactly what do you think you were doing, Mother? I told you not to interfere, and the first thing you do when you get home – early – from doing something helpful for once is open your mouth and let Alexis in on the whole problem. How’s it going to help if Alexis thinks Beckett won’t come
because of her, huh? You’re just lucky that Alexis has more empathy than you do, because you very nearly messed up the chance of Beckett and Alexis getting along.” He’s infuriated. “Beckett’s issues are private, and now I’ve had to tell both of you.” He stalks out of the main room, and shuts his study door very firmly behind him. He has no desire at all to see his mother for several hours. Or weeks. It’s just as well that Alexis hasn’t taken umbrage – as she so easily, and seeing all the mess from an outsider’s point of view, could have. He gives thanks for his wonderful, emotionally astute daughter and turns to his laptop and the ever soothing sales figures and on-line reviews.

At least, they should be. Castle has an unpleasantly nagging sense that he ought to let Beckett know about this latest disaster. Certainly he needs to do so before she suggests another desensitising brunch, which at the rate matters relating to his family had been progressing, is quite likely to involve next weekend. He also doesn’t feel that keeping it a secret is likely to bring him health, wealth and happiness. Very reluctantly, he picks up his phone.

“Beckett.” She sounds… um… emotional.

“Are you okay?” he asks, instead of jumping in to the next problem caused by his family. Well, his mother.

“Fine.” There’s a pause. “Er… mostly fine.” There’s another pause, which Castle doesn’t break into. He has the sense that there is more. “I was a bit upset but it’s okay now but I think I’ve broken my cushion,” she rushes out.

“How do you break a cushion?” Castle asks, completely intrigued by the completely irrelevant. “Um… I hit it a few times.”

Ah. Maybe he should suggest a punch bag. His butterfly mind finally catches up to the important piece of the sentences. “You were upset?” And you’re saying so? What fresh hell is this, he thinks, trepidatiously. “A bit. I’m allowed to be upset. Dr Burke said so.” There’s a strange mixture of defiance and uncertainty in her voice. “Just as long as we make it right. You’re allowed to be upset too.”

“Okay,” Castle says slowly, frantically trying to process this whole new complication – or maybe not. She’s just said – he thinks – that they can get upset with each other without it being a total disaster as long as they make it right. “Okay, so you’re upset because I was pushy?”

“No, I’m upset because me not staying made you upset but I can’t stay and I’m trying but you’re still upset with me because I didn’t.”

Castle takes some seconds to untangle that, in which time a sniff is evident down the line. “It’s okay you’re upset, Beckett. It’s okay I’m upset, too – but I’m not upset with you, I’m upset with the situation. I hate it that you’re not able just to come over when you want – when I want, but that’s not your fault. I know you’re trying. I know it takes a while. I just hate waiting.” When I want you here so much.

“Patience isn’t a virtue you normally display,” Beckett snarks, sniffing again. “Patience is very over-rated. Except in be” –

“Shut up, Castle.”

“That’s not what you said last night either,” he singsongs provocatively. The tenor of her silence
speaks volumes. *Painful* volumes. Being de Sade’s victim is *not* his preference. “Okay, shutting up now.”

There is another pause.

“Are we good?” Beckett asks shakily.

“Yes. We’re good. But…”

“But?”

“Promise not to kill me?”

“Yeah. Probably.”

“That’s disturbingly indefinite.”

“Spill it, Castle.”

“Mother got home and promptly asked why you weren’t still there in front of Alexis,” he blurts out. “So I had to tell Alexis you and your dad were having some issues and seeing her and me together didn’t help because otherwise she’d think it was her and then everything would really be totally screwed.” Silence. “Beckett?”

“Is that it? Is that all you told her?”

“Yeah.”

“Why? Why not tell her more of the truth?”

“Not mine to tell,” Castle says simply. There’s more of the impenetrable silence.

“Oh,” she says at last. “But don’t they want to know?”

“Oh yes,” Castle agrees. “Definitely. That’s not the point, though. They want to know but it’s up to you. They don’t have a right.”

“Oh.”

“Up to you, what you want known. Same as it always has been.”

“Oh. Okay then.”

That seems to be that. He’d have expected more, and more vociferous, commentary from Beckett, but there isn’t.

“Are we good?” he asks, just as she had.

“Yep. We’re good. See you tomorrow?”

“Sure. Till tomorrow.”

Castle cuts the call feeling somewhat relieved. They’re okay. They’ve talked about difficult subjects and they’re still okay. No storming off, no *assumptions* about what they each mean, no subtext like briars in which they tangle and tear each other. They’re good.

If only his damn mother would keep her sticky beak *out*, it would all be very good indeed.
There is a diffident tap on his study door, followed by a diffident Alexis peeking round it.

“Dad?”

“Yes, pumpkin?”

“What’s wrong with Detective Beckett and her dad?”

“I thought I asked you not to say anything?”

“I didn’t think you meant to you,” Alexis droops.

“It’s not for me to tell Detective Beckett’s business. Not even to family. Don’t worry about it. Everything’s going to be fine, if we just wait.”

“You’re telling me to wait? Who are you and what have you done with Dad?”

Castle makes a horrible face at his daughter and advances upon her with awful gestures and fearsome aspect. Alexis shrieks happily and runs for it, Castle following.

When he catches her at the foot of the stairs, giggling like a much younger child, he hugs her, because after all he can’t imagine ever being at odds with her in the way that Beckett is with her father; and then says firmly, “No meddling, Alexis.”

“Okay, Dad,” comes meekly back.

“Now, you’ve got school tomorrow. Be off with you, daughter!” She scampers upstairs, not noticeably quashed.

“Are you going to talk about it, darling?”

“No, Mother, I am not,” Castle says through gritted teeth. “What happened to ‘I would never interfere’? I don’t need you ‘helping’.” The quotation marks are audible. Martha bristles.

“You’re not managing very well by yourself, kiddo. It’s been months and she hasn’t come here. You need some help, and so does dear Katherine. I’m sure if I were just to talk to her everything could be sorted out in a heartbeat.”

Castle loses the remnants of his frayed temper at his mother’s over-simplistic prescription.

“Whatever you think, Mother, you are not a shrink. Leave Beckett alone. Leave us alone. Or just leave. Right now, I don’t care which. I thought you’d started to realise that it was all more complicated when you suggested having a weekend away, and then I really thought you’d got it at brunch, but suddenly you’re back to nagging and pushing, and you came back deliberately earlier than you told me, so you clearly haven’t understood anything.” He glares furiously.

“Well, really!” Martha emits. “Just because you aren’t getting what you want, you’re taking it out on me. Hardly attractive, Richard.”

“I” – Castle starts, and stops, takes a breath, and realises what is going on. His voice becomes cold. “My life is private. If you can’t understand that, the dictionary is right there. Stop trying to trap me into admissions to satisfy your curiosity. You have no right to know. I’m not twelve any more. Beckett’s issues are also private, and please understand very clearly, Mother, that if you do anything to make them worse then it will be you who will be leaving. Do you understand me? I will not tolerate you spoiling this. You – despite me telling you to keep out and explaining some of it – have no idea of the damage you can do to Beckett, and if you don’t stop pushing you’ll ruin
everything. If you do that then you will be gone. This is the last warning you’ll get. Butt out.”

Martha is sitting, shocked and open mouthed, on the couch. Castle has never, ever, laid the law down to his mother: he’s always just gone along with her and let her have her own way. Family first, family always, family before everything. But suddenly it’s not his mother before Beckett. Alexis before Beckett, without a doubt or hesitation. But not his mother: in this surge of primitive protectiveness of both Beckett and his chance of happiness.

His mother exits before anything more can be said, which is fortunate, because any further argument from her could easily have prompted ultimatums. (Ultimata, he wonders?, and knows it’s to distract himself.) Why can’t she just leave it alone? He’s sure that she’s only doing so because she wants the best for him, but she’s not helping. It occurs to him, annoyedingly, that it’s the equivalent of all Beckett’s friends asking him about everything: she doesn’t talk and they worry; he doesn’t tell his family every last detail and they worry. Or, in his mother’s case, pry.

He goes back to his study, and fumes pointlessly. He’d really, really thought that his mother had got it. He really had. And now it’s all back to square one, with the added complication that now Alexis has been dragged in, which he’d really wanted to avoid. He’d really, really hoped to keep Alexis out of it. Why couldn’t his mother just stay out of it? She’d come up with a brilliant idea, and now she’s ruined it all. Bitterly, he wonders whether she’d planned to walk in on them, and more bitterly thinks that Beckett’s early escape might have been the only thing preventing it. Seems like Beckett had guessed right, or her innate cynicism had kicked in. He fumes pointlessly some more, and doesn’t find a good way to relieve his feelings that doesn’t involve primal scream therapy. At this rate, he’ll need to consult Dr Burke himself. There’s a really nasty thought.

He fusses and frets and fulminates and fumes for the rest of an overlong evening, not emerging from his study for any reason. Anger has swallowed any thought of hunger, and he has glasses and whisky by him. He pours only one, though. A hangover will not improve Monday, and he suspects that he will want both the gym and an early start on the bullpen – for him, anyway. He can work out his annoyance on the rowing machine and then avoid his mother by being gone long before she’ll waken. He really does not want to see her until he’s sure that he won’t do something stupidly irrevocable: even if he’s very, very angry with her he does love her and he would, he realises, calmer now, be very sorry if they stayed at odds.

Still, it’s about time his mother learned that she shouldn’t poke into every aspect of his life. It’s about time he stopped letting her, too. He needs some boundaries. He thinks of some of the more intimate moments of the weekend and flushes at the thought of being – er – interrupted. Or worse, critiqued. His mother has no shame and no embarrassment. If Beckett were really to come here, he’d need some way to ensure privacy. A lock would possibly help. Or maybe two.

He spends some time Googling for locks – and frosted glass backing for the bookshelves between his study and bedroom, about which he has never before been concerned. Then he goes to bed, late and still somewhat annoyed, and dreams inchoately annoyed and embarrassing nightmares about accepting a Pulitzer naked in front of everyone he knows.
It’s clear that Beckett’s team is back on the rota. They’re first up for a seedy little homicide in a seedy little SRO, where it looks like it’s going to be a long, boring slog to find the perpetrator. The victim doesn’t have a lot to recommend him, either: dirt under his nails, a distinct lack of razor use, and quite nastily smelly. Not all of the unpleasant smell is due to his death, probable cause of which is the massive dent in his skull. It appears that he did have brains. Most of them are on the pillow.

There is nothing obvious to point to why Brent Selbright – astonishingly, he had a drivers’ licence – should be lying with his head smashed open in a seedy SRO, unfortunately. There is no evidence that he was a CIA spy, as theorised by Castle to general ridicule; nor that he was dealing drugs – Espo’s more sensible suggestion. Nothing for it but to leave CSU to sweep the scene and Lanie to take him back to her morgue. Just as they’re departing, Lanie squawks.

“Oh boy. Oh boy oh boy.”

Beckett spins on her heel and is back in a flash. Flash is the right word. Lanie’s pulled the covers down to bag and tag him, and – well, let’s just say he’d clearly been enjoying himself, up till he got dead. He’s quite impressive. Not compared to Castle, but still, not short measure. The boys come bouncing up and stop short, staring.

“Poor bastard,” Ryan says. “All worked up and then kaboom, dead.”

“Yeah. At least he was happy, though.”

“A little respect for the dead man?” Beckett says coolly. The boys subside. Castle says nothing. CIA spy theories or not, he’s been a tad quiet this morning and his eyes aren’t precisely bright. While Lanie bags up the corpse, muttering about tox screens all the way, Beckett leads Castle back to her cruiser to get back to the precinct and, no doubt, get the next murder that comes up as well. This one isn’t going to be quick, and nothing’s going to happen until they get prints, tox, autopsy results in general, and run a whole lot of searches. How fortunate that Ryan and Espo were invented.

“You okay, Castle?” she starts, almost as soon as he’s in the car.

“Yeah.”

“Try again. I’ve heard more convincing lies from guys we’ve caught red-handed. What’s wrong?”

“Mother,” he says bleakly. “She just keeps pushing and pushing and I lost my temper with her and now I feel guilty.”

Beckett deduces that Martha had carried on probing after Castle’s confession to her, Beckett. This is a very undesirable complication. But Castle had lost his temper with his mother? That’s – unexpected. And worrying.

“Why do you feel guilty?” she asks. What can he possibly have said?

“Um…” He colours to the roots of his hair and looks out the window. “I told her if she did anything to mess us up I’d never forgive her.”

Beckett is pretty sure that Castle isn’t being entirely accurate, but it’s no doubt close enough, and
he’s clearly unhappy so it’ll do. She’s only just finished that thought when the meaning of what he’s just said lands on her unprepared head rather in the manner of a cartoon anvil landing on Wile E. Coyote. She just about manages not to swerve the car.

“Huh?” she emits. “You’d never do that. You forgive just about everything. You just couldn’t do that.”

“I – you what?”

“Remember what I said yesterday? I had a right to be upset but so did you?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, you got upset with your mother. You must have had a good reason. ‘S not like you to lose your temper.”

“She was prying into us, Beckett.”

“And you didn’t tell her anything. Just like you didn’t tell Lanie, or the boys, or anyone else. So why worry? I know you won’t spill secrets.” She puts a consoling hand on his knee, and pats. Castle has relapsed into silence again, and clearly doesn’t want to say more. “C’mon, Castle. Let’s go solve some murders to take your mind off it. We might have prints from that guy on Friday. Bullpen coffee and doughnuts.”

“Bullpen coffee? When I have provided you with the last word in exquisite coffee machines?” he declaims magniloquently. “I am appalled, Detective. Appalled.”

Beckett smiles secretly at the success of calling into question the standard of coffee which they’ll be drinking and pulls up neatly at the Twelfth. “Stop being appalled and apply your dextrous caffeinating skills instead.”

“So you admit I have skills?”

“When it comes to coffee, sure.”

“Only coffee? I was under the impression that you admired my many other skills and my dexterity.”

Beckett times her answer very carefully to avoid flapping ears. “We could compare skills,” she says in a low, husky voice that promises seduction. Castle nearly trips on the step. “I’ll make your coffee and you make mine and we’ll see whose is better,” she adds, briskly. It’s rather spoilt by her snicker.

Castle smiles suavely. “Okay.” Suavity alters to predatory. “And later on we can talk about dexterity.”

“Talk?” says Beckett, innocently. “Really? Okay then. You can bring the coffee.” She whisks into the elevator before he can retaliate. The elevator, regrettably – from Castle’s point of view – also contains a number of other cops, which prevents him retaliating at once. Revenge, he consoles himself, is a dish best served cold.

Cold it will have to be. Mr Selbright may need to wait, but Montgomery’s put the team back on the rota and it seems like this week is not starting at all in the spirit of forgiveness and redemption that, he feels, should accompany the run-up to Easter. There’s another mundane mugging gone wrong.
before lunchtime on Tuesday, which again requires them to request camera footage, wait for CSU, wait for the morgue – Perlmutter, so that’s another frustration – wait for searches… Castle hates waiting, and that’s all there is to do once Beckett’s taken him with her to inspect the next corpse. They did get Friday’s prints, but that’s just too damn easy and the perp was picked up and booked without the slightest difficulty. If only they were all like that. They’re still waiting for yesterday’s runs. Meanwhile Selbright languishes in the morgue.

On the other hand, she’s clearly happy to be back at full throttle. Right up till she realises it’s time to go to Dr Burke’s.

“End of shift, guys. I’m out of here. We’re not going to get anything more tonight.” It almost sounds normal. It would be normal, except that it’s Beckett saying it and both Ryan and Esposito respond as if they’d been slapped with a live shark, jaws open.

“Who are you?” Ryan asks the air at large.

“Gotta be a clone.”

“Can’t be a clone. A clone would be exactly like Beckett. Must be her twin – you know, the one who got the stop working at shift end gene.”


“Maybe she’s been kidnapped by aliens and this is the infected version,” Ryan says happily, but that’s a step too far for Espo.

“You been listening to Castle again, bro? That’s just dumb.”

Castle, who had previously been snickering happily, comes to a hard stop. “What’s dumb about that?” he asks aggrievedly. “Alien abduction’s been written about lots.”

“Yeah, in cheap magazines with dumb titles. UFO Truth? You gotta be kidding me.”

“It’s really interesting,” Castle says, “but Espo, how do you know about UFO Truth? Is there something you wanna share?”

“Ooohh,” sniggers Ryan. “You’ve been out UFO-gazing. Wait till that gets around.” Castle guffaws at the horrified, reddened, furious look on Espo’s face.

“Not cool, bro.” Espo tries to recover himself.

“UFO-gazing ain’t cool, no.”

Esposito growls impartially at the three – not three. Two. “Where’d Beckett go?”

“Uh?”

“What?”

Beckett is gone. Vanished. The three men look blankly at each other.

“How’d she do that?”

“Dunno.”
Castle knows why, but not how. She’d sneaked off when they were arguing, so as not to be late for Dr Burke. He’s marginally unimpressed, and wanders off somewhat disgruntled, right up until his phone buzzes with a text at about the point, so he calculates, that Beckett would be parking in front of Dr Burke’s office. *Had to go. Didn’t want the boys to notice. See you after? B.* That’s certainly better than nothing. He can’t decide if it’s good or bad that she doesn’t need him to be there. Good, because it means that she’s taking control of the sessions again. Bad, because he wants to be there to support her. But that should be good, because she can support herself.

It’s all too complicated. He’ll go and look for UFOs for a while, preferably with some liquid sustenance and something to eat. And then he’ll arrive at Beckett’s apartment at the usual time. He won’t be using his key, though. Not today. He’s just a little nervous that it might be overstepping, to use it so casually on an evening when she’ll be stressed.

Beckett arrives at Dr Burke’s having thought not at all about what she should – not *wants to* – discuss. In the elevator she thinks that maybe point one is Castle’s suggestion about Sorry games, if only to have the infinite pleasure of disconcerting Dr Burke; but more seriously she should talk about assessing her father’s honesty and possibly that she got upset with Castle – and he with her – but they got through it. By the time she’s thought all that she’s walking into the calm office and being taken straight through to Dr Burke. She wonders how he manages such timeliness, and then considers his fussily pedantic personality and concludes that no-one would run late for fear that they might be analysed some more. He might be brilliant, but it sure doesn’t make him likeable.

“Good evening, Detective Beckett.”

“Hey.”

“Will Mr Castle be attending?”

“No.”

Dr Burke raises his eyebrows, and considers Detective Beckett’s relative calm. “Then shall we begin? With what would you like to start?”

“I went to Castle’s for the weekend.”

Dr Burke is surprised, and allows it to show. That is to say, he allows his eyebrows to lift a fraction more rapidly than usual.

“His family was away.”

“That is still a significant step, Detective Beckett. Please tell me more about how this decision arose.”

“Castle said that his mother and daughter were going on a spa break” – Dr Burke is intrigued by the way in which Detective Beckett’s nose wrinkles in distaste at the thought of a spa break – “this weekend, and invited me.” She stops.

“I see,” Dr Burke says calmly. He is quite astonished. Of course, he does not display his surprise further. “At what point did Mr Castle advise you of this thought?”

“He invited me on Tuesday. After I finished up here.”

“Mmm?”
“But I didn’t accept then. I needed to think about it.”

“Very sensible. It was a major decision.”

“Yeah, well. Anyway. I agreed to try to go.”

“As I said, a major step forward.” Dr Burke steeples his fingers. “Please describe how you felt on arriving at Mr Castle’s apartment.”

Detective Beckett winces, and does not immediately respond. “I... nearly didn’t go in. I wanted to go home. Castle would have come to mine for the weekend.”

“Why were you so nervous? His family were not there.”

“It’s still a family home. Full of their life.”

“But you went in.”

“Yes.”

Dr Burke detects a slight colouration in her face, and concludes that Mr Castle had taken steps to reassure Detective Beckett.

“Mmm. And you stayed for the weekend.”

“Yes. But I left before his family got home.”

“A wise move,” Dr Burke says. “Incremental steps are more likely to provide a firm foundation.”

“Castle got upset that I had to go but I couldn’t stay. I was upset at the thought of staying.”

“How did you feel about that?”

“I was allowed to be upset,” Detective Beckett says unexpectedly. “You said I was.”

“Explain?”

“I was telling myself it was silly to be upset, and then I thought that was what the first therapist told me, and they were wrong about everything. So I was upset. And then Castle called and he was upset too but we’re good.”

“Mm-hm. Another sound step, Detective Beckett.” Dr Burke is impressed. Not that he shows it, of course, but he is very pleased that Detective Beckett has tried to act on one of her long ingrained issues. He is sure that she will have setbacks, but she has recognised the need to allow herself to act on her own feelings of discomfort and upset even if that caused upset to Mr Castle. She has, in fact, let her own feelings have equal weight to those of Mr Castle, rather than subordinating them. A major step forward.

“I still don’t know about Dad, though.”

Ah, thinks Dr Burke, the next issue has arrived just at the point he would have predicted. Detective Beckett is trying to deal with her father too quickly, again.

“What do you not know?”

“I can’t tell if he’s telling the truth or not, but I think it’s because I can’t be dispassionate. It’s not
work. If it was work it would be easy: I could be objective. But I can’t be. He… it still all hurts too much.”

“It would, in my view, be unwise to try to decide on the truth before you have started to consider ways in which you might heal your hurt; or indeed vice versa. The two matters run in parallel. Haste to solve one will be unhelpful without also dealing with the other.”

“Oh.”

Dr Burke steeples his fingers again, places them under his chin, and regards Detective Beckett straightly.

“Detective Beckett, you have tried to solve this issue once before, hastily. You have come here in order to avoid the same mistake. I have said before that resolving your relationship with your father will take time. You are making steady progress with Mr Castle’s family, wisely taking small increments which will produce a sound foundation. The same will be true of your other concerns.”

“So what do I do?”

“What do you think you should do?”

Detective Beckett makes a very annoyed noise and produces a glare which would reduce a lesser psychiatrist to rubble. Naturally, Dr Burke is unaffected. Detective Beckett must do her own thinking as to the next steps to take.

“Keep talking to my dad,” she says, after a significant pause and with a snap of irritation. “And to you.” Dr Burke would have been a little less irritated by that if Detective Beckett had made it a little less clear that the prospect was unwelcome. He reminds himself that a challenging patient is merely a challenge, not an insult, and regains his calm without a pause.

“Do you have any plan for your next meeting with your father?”

Detective Beckett’s eyes suddenly spark. Dr Burke acquires an unaccustomed feeling of impending dread, and returns it firmly to his id. Such fallaciously instinctive feelings have no place in the conscious or unconscious mind of a psychiatrist. For the first time, a session with Detective Beckett had been proceeding in a manner which any competent psychiatrist would recognise. Dr Burke should have realised that this unusual state of affairs was extremely unlikely to be sustained.

“The last time we were – I thought we were – really on good terms was Christmas, and a month or so after.”

“Why was that?”

It is clear that Detective Beckett had expected that question, and equally clear that she is not particularly happy with her answer.

“I bought Dad a game for Christmas. Castle knew a tiny, old-fashioned toy store and we found a board game called Sorry.”

Dr Burke is intrigued. He has not heard of this game; board games are not a pastime to which he is generally attracted. He finds the convolutions of the human mind far more interesting than the convolutions of pieces on a board: even the complexities of chess and Go do not inspire him.

“I knew Dad would like it.”
“How did you establish this?”

“Castle and the store owner made me play it. It was a mix of skill, tactics and luck. Just the sort of thing Dad always used to like. I did, too. I got him it and I got myself one as well.”

“And did he enjoy the new game?”

“He loved it. We played it on Christmas Day and…” Detective Beckett stops. Then she begins again, in a controlled, cool tone. “We had a good time.”

“Please expand?”

“It was – he was – just like he used to be.” She stops again.

“You are saying that your father behaved in ways which you had not seen since your mother died?”

“Yes.” The word is clipped off.

“Detective Beckett, you appear to me to be avoiding saying that your father behaved as if it was a normal family occasion.”

“Fine. It was like it was before Mom died. He was happy and he teased me about Castle and he hugged me, okay? I really thought it was all going right.”

“Mmm.”

“And then he said what he did and it all went wrong and now I can’t tell if he’s lying or not.”

“You have, however, noted that to establish the truth you need to continue to communicate with your father.”

Detective Beckett appears to recall herself to her original point. “Yes.”

“So, then, what is your plan for the next meeting, and when do you wish this to take place?”

“Friday.”

“And your plan?”

Detective Beckett takes a deep breath, and steels herself, producing a nasty smile. Dr Burke is not reassured.

“We’re all going to play Sorry. You too. And Castle. And Dad.”

“How fascinating,” Dr Burke says smoothly. “I shall very much enjoy learning about your game.”

Detective Beckett looks frustrated. She had, Dr Burke deduces, expected a different reaction: surprise, or possibly negation. He is surprised, but where Detective Beckett’s treatment is concerned, he is unwilling to rule out any method, no matter how far-fetched it may initially appear. Any method to ensure that Detective Beckett remains sufficiently engaged to make progress is worthy of exploration. This strategy, however, does not appear to Dr Burke to have emanated from Detective Beckett. It has the distinctively original mark of Mr Castle’s thinking. Dr Burke detests the slang phrase *left field*, which connotes the disreputability of left-handedness and is therefore to be deplored. Such an implication should not be conveyed under any circumstances. His own left-handedness has nothing whatsoever to do with this, naturally.
Detective Beckett mutters something blackly under her breath, which Dr Burke perfectly accurately assesses to contain thoughts of the order of you’ll lose.

“What do you hope to achieve by playing a game?”

“I’ll see how he behaves.”

Dr Burke waits. He does not believe that to be the entirety of Detective Beckett’s reasoning.

“It might make things easier.”

That sounds far more likely.

“Very well. Would you like me to advise your father of your desire that he should attend on Friday, and of the likelihood that we will play this game?”

“Yes.”

“Do you wish to structure the conversation which might take place whilst we are playing?”

“No. It’s Dad’s turn to start.”

“In that case, I consider that we are done for tonight. Goodnight, Detective.”

“Night.”
Not five minutes after Beckett arrives at her apartment she finds, entirely expectedly, Castle knocking on the door. He bounces in, casts an all-encompassing glance over her, and contents himself with a hug, at least until Beckett lifts her face from his shoulder, when he kisses her invitingly presented lips. One should never turn down opportunity.

“You okay?”

“S’pose,” Beckett grumps, stepping back with a sharply irritated click of heels.

“What’d he do to annoy you this time? Breathe?”

“I told him we’d all be playing Sorry on Friday and all he said was that that would be fascinating and he’d enjoy it. He didn’t even blink!” Beckett’s indignation is reaching ever higher pitches.

“He what?” Castle squawks. “How was he not even surprised? He’s not human, Beckett. He’s an AI from an Asimov novel. He must be. He’s from the future. If we tried to take a blood sample we’d get coolant fluid.”

“Time travel is a myth. The Three Laws of Robotics are fiction. Dr Burke – unfortunately – is human.”

“No, no. He must be an alien. No human could fail to be surprised at that. None. You wait and see. He’ll crack his skin and a huge green slimy plantazoid will emerge like the one in Little Shop of Horrors and it’ll eat the patients and the furniture and the building and the whole of Manhattan and” –

“Stop, Castle!” He does, and looks falsely wounded. “There are no aliens. Dr Burke will not turn into a carnivorous plant.”

“You wanted to turn him into a frog the other day,” Castle points out.

“I didn’t say I could, though.” There’s a pout from Castle. “I know the difference between fantasy and reality.”

“So do I,” Castle purrs darkly at her. “Fantasy is what I dream about doing with you. Reality is when I do it.”

Beckett’s mouth opens and shuts and doesn’t say anything. She is blushing violently, but her eyes are wide and dark and full of forbidden knowledge.

“Like this,” he growls, and reaches for her: large hands closing around her hips, drawing her in. “Whether it’s fantasy or reality, it always starts with you right here in my arms, close against me. Every single time. You, fitting exactly against me, curved and soft and melting in: knowing that you’re mine.” The furry velvet of his deep, possessive tone rubs across her nerves. He drops small kisses over her hair and slants her head to move down and nip her ear, then follow up with another tiny kiss.

“We didn’t get to talk about dexterity yesterday,” he murmurs. “I think we should explore it now.”

“Mmm?” It doesn’t sound like much of an objection.
“Mm, yes. There are so many forms of dexterity, Beckett. Hands are only the beginning.”

“How about lips,” suddenly-Kat purrs, and demonstrates slowly and thoroughly from his mouth, via his ear, and then down his neck.

“I see your lips and raise you tongue,” Castle growls, and takes her mouth without mercy, stripping open her button-down as he does and then proving the dexterity of mouth and tongue all the way down to small firm breasts, which causes his gorgeous Kat to demonstrate that dexterity comes with claws, currently biting into his shoulders.

“Raise you fingers,” she husks, and flicks open buttons to set her hands under his shirt and on to hot bare skin.

“Raise you fingers,” and he slips his hands down over her ass to pull her tight against him and straightens up to roll into her and walk her backwards to her bedroom, his fingers dancing over her rear as he does. “See? Dexterity.” The fingers venture into dangerously seductive territory, then retreat. They – dextrously – wander around as they please, unbuckling and untucking and undoing and then tip-tapping so gently that his Kat doesn’t realise her pants are barely staying on until they aren’t. Fortunately at that point they’re already at her bed, just as Castle had calculated. He pushes her gently backwards to fall on her fat pillows: her shirt billowing open and her pants discarded.

“Dexterity,” he says. “Mm.” And then he proceeds to prove dexterity of all areas, deftly evading all Kat’s efforts to prove her own until he needn’t worry about that because she’s lost all dexterity as a result of his. At least for a while, and then she proves her own talents and after that neither of them can so much as pronounce dexterity for quite some time.

Afterwards, Castle re-dressed and Kat clad in her silkily strokable kimono, they’re curled up together on the couch, contentedly quiet – well, Castle’s Kat is occasionally emitting a happy little humming noise; and Castle is occasionally talking without saying anything much at all. It’s more a gently warming stream of affectionate nothingness.

“Are you okay with Friday?” Beckett suddenly says.

“Uh? Friday?” Castle fumbles out, confused. “What about Friday?”

“Friday. Dr Burke. Sorry with Dad.”

“Oh. Yeah. No problem.” His inconsequent thoughts take over. “Bet we find that he’s good at it.”

“I hope not.” Clearly Beckett is hoping for Dr Burke’s crushing defeat. She doesn’t like him any better now than she did at the start, even if she accepts that his method is working. Thinking of which…

“You’ll like this, Beckett”

“What?”

“If Dr Burke gets too much, I’ll just tell him that he’s the basis of a character. That’s not going to make him happy.”

Beckett sniggers nastily. “No way.” She stops. “Is he?”

Castle simultaneously blushes and smirks smugly. “I haven’t decided. I’ve got some notes.”

Beckett’s snigger turns into an even nastier full-out laugh. “Can Nikki shoot him?” she asks
“Or maybe he could be the villain.”

“Or get eaten by lions.”

“Or fall into the Hudson.”

“Or be kidnapped by aliens.”

“Not aliens. That’s silly.” But Beckett’s smiling and happy and cheered up, albeit at the expense of the unlucky Dr Burke. “Anyway, I should have asked you about Friday.”

“Oh okay. I’d have offered.”

Beckett snuggles closer in. “Thanks, Castle,” she says, but there’s much more in her voice and expressive eyes than the words alone convey. Unexpectedly, she says, “Are you okay?”

“Me?”

“You. Yesterday you were a bit wound up about your mother.”

“Yeah,” Castle says heavily. “She just won’t leave well alone.”

“You’ve listened to enough woe from me. If you wanna… er… Anyway, ‘m here,” she trails off in a very small and embarrassed voice. Castle hugs her hard.

“It’s okay. I don’t wanna talk about her now. But maybe you should clear a closet so I can move in at short notice?”

Beckett takes the clear hint to leave it alone for now. “I don’t know, Castle. Where would I put all my shoes?” She laughs, and kisses him. “You’d need to build me a shoe rack to go under the bed.”

“Me? Woodworking? Oh no, Beckett. You can’t domesticate me like that.”

She pouts at him, bats her eyelashes, and says in a very insincere and sugary voice, “But sweetie, real men do DIY.”

Castle roars with laughter and then takes hard possession of her mouth. Beckett’s giggling (giggling!) so much that she doesn’t offer up the least resistance to his raid, and so he conquers without quarter until giggles are replaced by soft moans.

“Real men,” he growls in a gravelly baritone, “use their hands however they think fit. My hands are good at writing. And they’re good at you.” Said hands trace down from her nape to the opening of her kimono, and delve inside, to play wickedly with the curved, malleable contents. “You fit my hands perfectly,” he rasps, and demonstrates: her breast filling one large palm. He rubs a thumb over her nipple, and she gasps and grips his arm, squeezing firm muscle. “Just right for fondling.” He gives the last word a lubricious intonation that conveys slightly sleazy wickedness. She wriggles under the touch, and then indulges in some fondling of her own.

Regretfully, Castle detaches both himself and Beckett from each other, before he doesn’t go home at all.

“I’ve got to go,” he murmurs.

“Hmph.”

“Yeah, me too.”
Beckett does nothing to help him leave. In fact, she pulls his head back to hers.

“I really do need to go. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Night.” She stands and pads with him to the door, and he can’t resist a final kiss, plastering her to him and rolling his hips against her till she’s lax and breathing hard, till he’s almost ready to take her back to bed, or just to take her right here. If he does that he won’t leave. He has to leave. He just really, really doesn’t want to leave.

He wrenches himself out the door, and takes his uncomfortable self home. When he gets there, he is still wound up, but not so much that he doesn’t start to feel more than a few pinpricks of conscience that he’d shut Beckett down when she’d only been offering the same as he’s repeatedly given her: a space to talk. She’d been offering an unjudgmental ear, and he’d squashed it. He doesn’t, he realises, want to confess his irritation and annoyance with his mother – his parent – when she’s got so many issues with her own parent… but actually that’s just an evasion. He feels unhappy and guilty that he could have lost his temper so much with his mother that he actually threatened her with eviction. He ought to respect her as his parent, and all the effort she’s put in to keep their bodies and souls together when he was young. Except – she’s not exactly respecting him either.

It’s all too difficult for late at night. The only thing he can do is to push aside his own discomfort at admitting there are any flaws in his family life, and take up Beckett’s rather astonishing invitation, given the depth of her own problems – which should be all on which she needs to concentrate – to let her help him.

Behind him, Beckett takes her uncomfortable self to a tepid shower, and then to her cool sheets. Her dreams are confusing and nightmarishly unpleasant, and when she wakes in the small hours, disoriented and shocked, Castle isn’t there. She sighs unhappily, turns over, and disciplines herself back to sleep. In the morning, she’s still a little unsteady, and the more she tries to get past it, the more she realises that it’s because Castle wouldn’t tell her what’s wrong with him. She doesn’t like Castle being out of sorts: it disconcerts her; and not turning to her makes her feel a little second-best in this partnership; a little bit the weaker link. She doesn’t like that, either. Still, he hadn’t forced her to talk when she didn’t want to, so she should respect him in the same way. He’ll – as she had – talk when he’s ready. It had taken her months. She wonders if he’d had this same feeling of slightly second-bestness, and if he had, how much it might explain.

For the next couple of days, the bullpen is full of mundane murders and casually caused corpses. The team snaps into action, Castle does duty as chief coffee-concoctor and general helpmeet, since the only enjoyable part of the day is going to the crime scenes – that’s interesting, but then it’s all waiting for the lab, the prints, the camera footage – there isn’t even anyone to interview, nor grieving relatives to tell. This is no fun. On the other hand, the snap, snark and sparkle of Beckett and team at full forward momentum is fun, even if the corpses aren’t. So the remains of the week pass.

“Jim Beckett speaking.”

“Jim, this is Carter Burke.”

“Hello.” There is an entirely predictable note of alarm in Mr Beckett’s greeting.

“Your daughter requests that you attend her session on Friday,” Dr Burke says bluntly. Such bluntness is most likely to relieve Mr Beckett’s stress, rather than wasting time on pleasantries.
“Again?”

“Indeed.” There is a short silence.

“Why?”

“She is continuing to try to comprehend her own feelings and to understand her relationship with you.”

“You mean she can’t decide if I’m a manipulative liar who emotionally abused her or just a pathetic, unreliable lush,” Jim says bitterly.

“If she thought those to be her choices, Jim, as I have previously pointed out, she would not ask for you.” Dr Burke does not, quite, snap. Detective Beckett’s self-disgust is quite enough to have to cope with. He will not permit Mr Beckett to follow the same path. Genetics does not determine personality. Experience does, in his view, backed up by his own research.

“However, your daughter, no doubt as a consequence of her occupation, requires evidence and proof sufficient to satisfy her own doubts and alleviate her own long-held misconceptions and misgivings. She must prove to herself that you have forgiven her for leaving you.”

There is another silence, lasting slightly longer.

“Guess that’s me told,” Mr Beckett eventually says, ruefully. “It’s not about me, is it? It’s all about Katie. You’re wrong about one thing, though. She’s always been like that. Nothing to do with her job. Whether that’s nature or nurture I don’t know.”

“Mm. In any event, she wishes that you should be present on Friday. However, there are two matters of which you should be aware, beforehand.”

“Oh God,” Mr Beckett emits. “What now?”

“I believe these matters to be more positive than any earlier items.”

“They could hardly be worse, Carter. So far I’ve discovered that she thinks I abused her emotionally; that I told her to leave because she wasn’t Johanna; that her original therapist was criminally incompetent; and that’s without even starting on everything she said last time. She said she couldn’t grieve because I was such a mess and couldn’t support her. So I really don’t think we can get much worse.”

“This is very hard for you, but I assess that, with the assistance of your sponsor, you are coping.”

“I have to. If I don’t, I’ll certainly never see Katie again. At least this way there’s a chance.” Mr Beckett’s tone changes from unhappy to determined. “So what do I need to know this time?”

“Your daughter intends that we should all play a board game.”

“She what?”

Mr Beckett’s fierce intelligence comes to the fore.

“She wants us to play Sorry? Really?”

“Indeed. Your daughter, Mr Castle” –

“I bet. I just knew Rick would be in there somewhere.” –
“yourself and I are all to play. I have never played this game, and I expect it will be very interesting.”

“At least it’s not Monopoly. That always used to end in a fight. Katie doesn’t like losing.”

This does not surprise Dr Burke in the slightest.

“None of us did.” Nor does that.

“Why on earth does she want us to play Sorry?”

“She thinks that it might make discussions easier. She spoke fondly of playing this game at Christmas, and shortly thereafter.”

Dr Burke hears the sounds of Mr Beckett blowing his nose.

“Okay, that’s one surprise. What’s the other?”

“She wishes you to start the conversation.”

Dr Burke hears a strangled splutter. “Is everything all right?” he inquires hastily, into Mr Beckett’s coughing fit.

“She wants me to talk?” Mr Beckett splutters. “What about?”

“That is why we are talking now.” Dr Burke pauses. “If you were able to speak entirely freely with your daughter, what would you say to her?”

“I don’t know,” Mr Beckett says dispiritedly. “Nothing I’ve said so far’s made the slightest difference. I keep saying I’m sorry but she doesn’t believe me.”

Dr Burke changes tack. “We are to play a game which your daughter carefully selected as a Christmas gift for you and which, she has informed me, she had very much enjoyed playing with you both on Christmas day and for some time thereafter. Indeed, it appears that until the misunderstanding which caused a breach with you occurred, she had felt that it was the closest that you and she had been in many years. I therefore consider that it is very likely that the selection of this game is important, even though I also believe that the original idea to play it may have originated from Mr Castle.”

“Damn straight,” Mr Beckett agrees. “There’s no way Katie came up with that idea. So Rick’s still trying to fix things? That’s good to know.”

“Oh?”

“He’s totally on Katie’s side – as he should be. I wouldn’t think much of him if he wasn’t. But he’s a father too, so he can see both sides, even if he’s planted on the other one,” he says, rather wistfully. “He’s good for her. She can’t push him around. She needs someone who’ll stand up to her.”

Dr Burke is not sure that Mr Castle stands up to Detective Beckett, precisely. He would characterise it as letting her exhaust herself, and then presenting a route forward at a moment when it is most likely to be accepted. It is, in fact, an ability to absorb her moods, much as the sea absorbs a punch. He registers a momentary annoyance at his overly-descriptive thought. Really, Mr Castle’s ridiculously imprecise language is almost infectious.
“Be that as it may, Jim, though I do not disagree with your conclusions, it would be helpful to consider why your daughter might wish us all to play a game rather than simply talking.”

Dr Burke allows his comment to register, and waits patiently as Mr Beckett ponders the point.

“It was great, playing it at Christmas,” Mr Beckett eventually says. “Katie was really relaxed. Actually, looking at it now, I’d never seen her so relaxed. I teased her a bit about Rick, but mostly we played the game and, you know, Carter, we had fun. She even hugged me before she left. Properly, not some socially conventional gesture.” He pauses for further thought, and stays quiet for some few moments.

“Maybe she’s trying to take some of the stress out the situation?” he asks doubtfully. “If we’ve all got something else to think about, then it won’t be such an intense meeting?”

“That is certainly a possibility,” Dr Burke says with some emphasis on the indefinite article.

“You said she’d picked this game because it meant something to her,” Mr Beckett muses. “Um… maybe she’s hoping that it’ll remind her how we were then? Maybe,” he says more certainly, “maybe she’s hoping that it’ll show her what I really feel? That something about doing something – well, normal, sort of family thing – will help?”

“I strongly suspect so.”

Mr Beckett shrugs. “I guess we’ll find out. Usual time?”

“Yes. I look forward to it. I have never played this game, and I look forward to finding out how one does.”

“You’ll enjoy it. Good night, Carter.”

“Good night.”
As Friday progresses, Beckett is only too happy that there are plenty of murders to keep her occupied. She doesn’t want to think about the coming session, she doesn’t want to remember that Castle’s still playing his family-feud cards very close to his chest, and she really does not want to think about the nagging feeling that suggesting a game that up until now she had enjoyed, had been a very risky thing indeed. Still, she’s stuck with it. She sighs heavily.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“You’re imitating a tornado. Look, you’ve ruffled all your papers.”

“Nothing, okay?”

Castle is not noticeably punctured by the edge on her tone, but he does stop asking. A moment later, he wanders off, and wanders back with coffee for both of them.

“Thanks,” she manages, and frowns at the search results she’s just received. There’s nothing wrong with them, there just isn’t anything useful there.


“About time the lab delivered. Anything interesting?”

“Yeah. He’s got a history. He’s been picked up a few times for being a bit too free with his fists – usually around East 45th.”


“Yeah,” Esposito says bleakly. “No-one managed to make charges stick.” The expression of disgust on his face says it all.

“Someone made something stick.”

“Yeah, a baseball bat to his skull.”

“Okay, so what can we do? What’s CSU come up with?”

“Still running all those prints they found in the SRO. Nothin’ on the weapon yet. Lanie says it’s likely a baseball bat, from the shape, but the perp really whaled on him.”

“Any idea if it was a man or a woman?”

“Nah. Guy was lyin’ down, Lanie said, when he got bashed.”

Beckett hums thoughtfully. “Did CSU or Lanie check round his wrists or ankles for marks?”

Esposito looks oddly at her. “Huh?”

Castle suddenly grins. “Really, Beckett?” he says insinuatingly. “Something you wanna share?” She glares at him. He smiles sweetly, which changes to predatory when he’s sure Esposito’s
looking in another direction.

“No,” she says freezingly, though she has a strong suspicion that this conversation might be restarted later.

Esposito has gone back to his desk to make a call to Lanie. Shortly, he returns.

“Yeah, Lanie says there are very faint marks.” Beckett smiles smugly. “They’re on the report. She’s just about finished.”

“What happened? It’s taken her four days.”

“’s been busy, she says.” Beckett growls. “Lots of murders.” She growls again. “You’ll have it tonight.” There’s an indistinct mutter with overtones of severe annoyance. “Anyway, what’re you thinkin’?”

“Sounds like he picked up girls. Sounds like he liked a little kink, and probably a little chemical help. So when he’s all ready – someone took the opportunity to beat his head in. What do we know about who he went into the SRO with?”

Ryan bounds over. “Camera footage – only got that this morning,” he says hastily at Beckett’s fulminating look – “shows this girl with him.”

“Not much to go on there.”

“Nah. But lookee here. Two minutes later, this guy walks in.”

“Interesting. Does that look like a baseball bat to you, Espo?”

“Yeah. Does that look like a baseball bat to you, Ryan?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t I get asked?” Castle says plaintively.

“Nah. We all know you’ve never watched a baseball game.”

“I know what a baseball bat looks like, though. It looks like that.”

“Well done, Castle,” Beckett says insincerely. “Okay, so it’s an unknown guy with a baseball bat. Let’s try to run him down,” she says over Castle’s disgruntled noises.

“On it,” Ryan says first, and dashes off to get going.

“Okay, Espo, can we try and run down the girl?”

“On it.” He disappears. Beckett guesses that the friendly competition between Espo and Ryan as to which of them can find their suspect fastest is about to start, and on observing a shake of hands further guesses that there’s a bet on it.

“So, Beckett,” Castle says, eyes dancing, “why did you immediately think of restraints?”

“It was obvious. Especially as I spent time in Vice,” she says quellingly.

“That’s boring. I thought you might have had some more… direct experience.”
“That’s entirely inappropriate for the bullpen,” Beckett flashes back, and immediately realises the dreadful error she’s made.

“Okay. I’ll ask you again outside the precinct. In the meantime, I’ll just speculate.” He acquires an exceedingly provocative smile, which is entirely undiminished by Beckett’s dangerous growl. “Fantasise.”

The tone in which he says fantasise reminds Beckett quite forcefully and irresistibly of Castle’s words on Tuesday, since when they haven’t spent any private time together. Fantasy is what I dream about doing with you. Reality is when I do it. She can feel a blush rising in her cheeks. The hot, intent look in Castle’s darkening eyes does not cool it one iota. She ignores both the blush and Castle. She’s working, and erotic fantasies have no place in the bullpen. None.

Since Beckett is, after all, a detective, and since she is exceedingly good at discerning hidden, and not-so-hidden, motivations, it doesn’t take her very long to realise that Castle had been throwing out innuendo to distract her from her general worry and discomfort at the thought of the coming session with Dr Burke. On the other hand, it has worked. Every time she looks up Castle does or says something provocatively suggestive, and no matter how blackly she scowls at him or how fearsomely she glares, he carries on.

However, as the last dregs of the afternoon drain away towards evening, even Castle’s scorching suggestiveness fails to help. No matter how hard she concentrates on the evidence she does have – sadly lacking, and she can’t even complain at anyone because they’re all working as fast as they can in the labs and the slabs – there’s nothing more standing between her and Dr Burke – and her father. She starts to pack up. Castle taps her handcuffs, and smirks. She glares, and locks them in her desk. He pouts, theatrically, and then smiles knowingly at her. He doesn’t say a word. He doesn’t need to. It’s all in the predatory smile and the storm-dark eyes.

But it still doesn’t help.

She slips out without the boys noticing, Castle prowling out behind her. The elevator is already occupied, so there isn’t even the chance of a reassuring arm around her or a hand to hold. The cruiser is surrounded by other cop units, far too many of which are acquiring other cops with excellent observational skills and considerable curiosity, so she can’t do much about that. But when they’re ensconced in the car, Castle gently pats her knee, drops the forceful masculine sexuality and heat, and simply holds her hand for a second, till she pulls it away to start the engine.

At Dr Burke’s, Beckett removes a carrier bag containing, Castle surmises, her Sorry game from the trunk. She looks unhappily at the building, and this time, there being no reason not to, he snugs his arm around her waist and waits till she should move.

She takes a very deep breath, Castle tightens his arm briefly, and then she moves.

She doesn’t say a word, all the way up, but she clings to his hand as if it were her life preserver. She lets go only as they walk into Dr Burke’s reception. Once again, they are shown straight through into his office.

“Good evening, Detective Beckett, Mr Castle.”

“Hello.”

“Hey.”

Dr Burke winces at Mr Castle’s continued informality.
“I brought the game. Where’s Dad?”

“In a separate room, for now. Would you like to discuss anything before we begin?”

“No. Thank you.”

“Then I shall bring him in,” Dr Burke says smoothly.

Castle gently drops Beckett on to a couch, pulls a table in front of her, rearranges the chairs to his satisfaction, and then starts to set up the Sorry board.

“Do you want to shuffle, Beckett?”

“Yeah.” Her hands move mechanically to take the cards and begin to shuffle. She’s still shuffling when her father walks in, followed by Dr Burke.

“Ah,” says Dr Burke, with a reasonable similitude of enthusiasm, looking at the board, “we are ready to play. Perhaps someone would explain the rules to me?”

It is, naturally, Mr Castle who explains. Much to Dr Burke’s surprise, he is brief, lucid, and helpful. It does not seem to be a difficult game to grasp, although the element of luck is unwelcome. He is not fond of games of chance.

“I understand,” he says. “Shall we begin?”

There is little talk for the first few moments. Detective Beckett is first to start not just one, but two, of her little wooden men. They are really quite delicately carved, Dr Burke observes, just as he observes that Detective Beckett is failing to conceal her satisfaction at being in the lead. Mr Castle is obviously more competitive than had previously been apparent, and is exuding an impression that he is less than content with Detective Beckett’s success. This observation does not come as a complete surprise to Dr Burke, who had, some time ago, deduced that Mr Castle was unlikely to be as uncompetitive as he appeared. It would be surprising were Detective Beckett to spend substantial time with a person who was weak in any respect, let alone enter into a relationship with such.

Dr Burke is far more interested in Mr Beckett’s reaction to his daughter’s lead. It is a strange mixture of pride and competitiveness. He observes more closely. Mr Beckett draws a Sorry card. As yet, there has been no conversation of any importance, and certainly no indication that Mr Beckett is prepared to open one.

“Sorry, Katie,” he says, and promptly returns one of her little blue men to its home, placing his red one in its place. He is exhibiting a considerable degree of satisfaction.

“You don’t sound very sorry,” Detective Beckett says, a little crossly. Mr Beckett produces a gamin grin. Dr Burke watches this interchange with considerable satisfaction. The tones are quite normal. Of course, he does not expect this normality to last, but it is the first indication that he has had of the previous relationship. He allows a fractional degree of optimism to enter his mind.

“I’ve started!” Mr Castle bounces, as he draws a card – really, the man behaves as if he were still a child of six, not a grown adult. Both the Becketts roll their eyes. Dr Burke does not, although he considers it a very reasonable reaction.

“That just leaves you,” Detective Beckett says smugly. She and her father exchange glances, then flick away from each other: half-scared, half-embarrassed on Mr Beckett’s part; half-scared, half-angry on Detective Beckett’s. Mr Castle’s childishness is immediately belied by the assessing look in his eyes, and the swift run of his finger over Detective Beckett’s hand.
A few more cards are drawn, and each player starts another man, except Dr Burke. Dr Burke is quite surprised by his own feeling of relief and satisfaction when he is finally able to start one. He ignores his own wish that he should have drawn a Sorry card, in order to remove one of Mr Castle’s men. That is childish, and has no place in an adult’s mind-set. It is, however, very evident that Mr Castle is the most experienced player, although Dr Burke believes that if luck had favoured him, the tactics are not difficult to understand if one applies one’s intelligence.

On Mr Beckett’s next turn, he draws a Sorry card. Dr Burke can easily see that the correct tactical move is to remove Detective Beckett’s remaining man, which is very close to Mr Beckett’s Safety squares. However, Dr Burke is very surprised to note that Mr Beckett, after some seconds of consideration, hesitates significantly before he removes that man.

“Sorry, Katie,” Mr Beckett says. His tone is far more serious than would be appropriate for a children’s game. “There weren’t any other options.” Dr Burke believes that sentence to be freighted with meaning.

Detective Beckett had obviously not expected that. She looks at her father, who meets her eyes. “I couldn’t do anything else. Sometimes there aren’t any good choices in the situation you’re in. You just choose the least worst option.” Silence has shrouded the room: Dr Burke and Mr Castle do not break it.

“I put you in that position, Katie. Once I started drinking there were no good options for anyone except me – and I wasn’t ready to take the only good option. You hadn’t any good choices.”

Detective Beckett’s gaze is fixed upon her father. Dr Burke keeps close watch on both of them. He is faintly aware of Mr Castle, quiet and still, yet ready should he be required. Dr Burke spares Mr Castle a brief glance, and is satisfied by the intent, determined focus which he is displaying.

“Everything came from me drinking. I – you know. I couldn’t bear that she was gone and I couldn’t deal with how much it hurt. I just couldn’t get past my own pain, and whiskey kept it away. Stopped the pain. I don’t know what I did when I was drunk, I don’t remember any of it.”

“I do, though.”

“You kept trying to bring me back. I wouldn’t be brought, Katie. I wouldn’t be saved. You tried everything and I wouldn’t have it. You aren’t to blame for my decisions. That’s on me, and nobody else.”

It should be Dr Burke’s turn to draw. He has no intention of so doing. The conversation now taking place is far too important to interrupt with such frivolity.

“I get now that you thought you were protecting me, right from the beginning. First you tried by pouring all the booze away and trying to make me see what I was doing. You picked me up and tried to sober me up and stop me. You did everything, but as long as I knew you’d pick me up I would never have stopped. I’d never have stopped till I wanted to stop. Even after you stopped enabling” – Dr Burke has to struggle not to raise an eyebrow at the emphasis on the technical term, and hopes very strongly that Mr Beckett has judged that wording correctly – “me, I still couldn’t stop – didn’t want to stop. I don’t remember calling you.”

“I know. But you did. Over and over. Every time I thought maybe it would be different, maybe you’d be sober. You never were. You just wanted me to save you and I couldn’t save you any more. I couldn’t save you, I could only save myself.” Her voice breaks on a rising note. “I had to let you drown. I had to.”
Mr Castle is suddenly around Detective Beckett, cradling her into his shoulder. It is entirely evident that she is, if not actually weeping, very close to doing so.

“You did have to,” Mr Beckett says, very forcefully. “You should have done it earlier.” He takes a very deep breath. “Katie, it wasn’t your job to save me. Not then, not now, not ever.”

“Who else would?” she cries. “Was I supposed to let you die?”

“Yes!” Mr Beckett yells.

Everything stops.

“If that’s what it took, Katie.”

Dr Burke is then entirely unsurprised that Detective Beckett leaves the room at considerable speed, sheet white. Mr Beckett half-rises, clearly intending to follow, until Mr Castle prevents him.

“Don’t, Jim. Give her a few moments. She won’t thank you for going after her.” Mr Castle does not elucidate further. Dr Burke concludes that Detective Beckett has retired to the restroom and is, once more, suffering from stress induced severe nausea.

“She’s my daughter. What do you expect me to do? Leave her to it?”

Dr Burke hears Mr Beckett’s words with some trepidation. There is an unpleasantly combative note in his voice, directed towards Mr Castle.

“Yes, leave her to it,” Mr Castle says quietly. “She’ll be back in a few minutes. If not, I’ll go after her.”

“You? She’s my daughter. I’m the one who should be looking after her.”

Dr Burke’s nervousness increases as Mr Castle raises an exceedingly cynical eyebrow. Fortunately he says nothing, merely holds Mr Beckett’s gaze. Dr Burke detects the steel beneath the amiable exterior, and comprehends precisely the nature of Mr Castle’s relationship with Detective Beckett.

“Have it your way,” Mr Beckett says, eventually, defeated, and drops his eyes. “Katie likely won’t want to see me again tonight.”

“She wanted you here,” Mr Castle points out.

“So? She’s just gone running out the door again. She can’t listen to me and she doesn’t believe me anyway.”

“You’ve just told her she should have let you die. After she left you to it, she spent three years wondering if every call, every knock on the door was someone to tell her you had. Think about that, Jim. She said it, last time. Then you came back to her and she wanted to be a family because that meant someone loved her. She hoped it meant that you’d forgive her, but she’s never really believed that you could. She feels guilty about walking away and always has, and you’ve just told her she shouldn’t have wasted her time supporting you. At least, that’s how I heard it. Are you surprised she’s throwing up?”

Dr Burke would not have made those comments. However, Mr Castle’s bluntness does not appear to have been misplaced. Mr Beckett sits back down, heavily.

“It wasn’t her job to save me. It was mine.”
“Yeah, but she thought it was. Telling her that was a waste of time won’t help.”

“That wasn’t what I meant.”

“It’s what you said, though.”

“I meant that she shouldn’t try and save the unsaveable. She should have walked away long before.”

“Whatever. She thinks you just said seeing you was a waste of her time. Would you really rather you hadn’t seen her for the last five years?

“No! I love seeing her. I thought she liked seeing me. I didn’t know she was doing it out of duty.”

“Duty?” Dr Burke enquires.

“Protecting me.”

Dr Burke is irritated. Mr Beckett appears to have forgotten everything which Dr Burke had told him as well as the previous session’s insights with Detective Beckett.

“We have already had this discussion. I told you of your daughter’s feelings on seeing that you were sober again. Do you not believe me, or do you not believe her? And if you cannot believe in her words, despite all her actions to support and protect you, are you so surprised that she likewise cannot believe you?”

From the corner of his eye, Dr Burke can see Mr Castle wince at his acerbic tone.

“But she didn’t believe me,” Mr Beckett cries. “She didn’t believe in me.” Tears begin to puddle in his eyes.

“She did not believe you because, deep in alcohol, you told her you did not want her. When sober, you begged her not to leave. She could not reconcile that contradiction. She could not believe both at the same time, as they seemed to her to be entirely inconsistent. Her actions and words to you, however, have been perfectly consistent. She has unfailingly supported you for the reasons of which I made you aware at last Friday’s session. Your daughter’s issue, as I have pointed out on several occasions now, is that she cannot believe that you have forgiven her, and so she has worked harder and harder to try to earn that forgiveness, knowing all the time that she has hidden from you the truth of what you did and said. In doing so, believing that she was protecting you and believing that she was believing in your continued sobriety, she has buried her hurt and resentment at your words and actions. That is her fault. She should have told you the whole truth much earlier. Your inability to believe her words, however, falls entirely upon you.”

Dr Burke pauses. “Only you can decide what you believe. I suggest that you consider it now. Mr Castle, I suggest that you follow Detective Beckett. I consider that a recess is indicated, and further that you and she should perhaps have a short walk?”

Dr Burke is relieved to note that Mr Castle takes his implication without effort. He wishes to spend some time with Mr Beckett without any other person present.
The eye of your mind

Castle leaves Dr Burke to deal with Jim. Judging by the abrasive tone Dr Burke had taken, Castle thinks that Jim is about to hear a few home truths in the same take-no-prisoners way in which Dr Burke has frequently dealt with Castle’s Beckett. He doesn’t think that that particular talk will require any sort of an audience. Anyway, he has permission to find Beckett and take care of her, which care will definitely involve a short walk to the same coffee bar which they had visited the last time this had been necessary. Perhaps he can persuade Beckett to a calorific and soothing hot chocolate, rather than coffee?

He taps on the restroom door, hears nothing, taps again more loudly, and uncomfortably enters when there is no reply. “Beckett?” he says doubtfully.

“Need a minute.” That sounds disturbingly fragile.

“I’ll wait here.”

“Outside.”

And that’s not wholly reassuring either. However, he obediently leaves, and waits outside as directed. It takes a further minute or two before Beckett emerges, unpleasantly green-tinged and somehow crumpled and fragile. Heedless of the receptionist, who is very obviously ensuring that she is paying them no attention, Castle gathers her in and enfolds her completely for a few seconds, allowing her unobtrusively to sag and lean on him.

“We’ve been told to go for a walk, Beckett. I think Dr Burke wants to talk to your dad. Well, talk might be a bit optimistic. I think your dad is in for a bit of a telling-off.”

“Uh?” Not one word of that appears to have made it from Beckett’s ears to Beckett’s brain.

“C’mon. Dr Burke called recess. We’re going for a walk.”

“Why?” she says dully. “I don’t want to.”

“Because I say so,” Castle says cheerfully, and is further not reassured that his next exhalation is not caused by an elbow to his solar plexus. “You need a drink, and a break, and a hug, and I’m not hugging you in front of the receptionist. I’m scared of her. C’mon.” He wraps an arm round her waist and manoeuvres her out the door. It’s not quite manhandling. In the elevator, it’s quite definitely hugging. Beckett recovers a certain amount of composure and life on the short journey down, but unfortunately that also means that she’s recovered a certain amount of independent thought.

“Why are we going for a walk? And don’t tell me because you say so, or I’ll shoot you.”

“You can’t shoot me. You left your gun in the precinct. And your handcuffs, which I think was very unfair.”

“Shut up, Castle. Why are we going for a walk?” He doesn’t say anything. “Why are we going for a walk,” she says with irritation. He still doesn’t say a word. “Castle! Answer me.”

“You told me to shut up. So I did.” Beckett emits a formlessly enraged growl. “You did.” The growl intensifies. “You’re always complaining I don’t listen to you, and now you’re complaining that I did.” He looks at Beckett’s suffused face and decides to drop the annoying façade. “Okay.
We’re going for a walk because Dr Burke is reading your dad a lecture. He – Dr Burke – wants us out the way for a bit. Your dad’s temper was rising – he’s really very like you, you know – and Dr Burke was getting irritable. So I guess they’ve sent us out the way while the grown-ups talk.”

“I am a grown-up. You’re the child here.”

Castle watches Beckett work out the trap into which she’s just fallen.

“I’m not a child, Beckett.” He smiles suavely. “I’m all man.” Since there’s a handily quiet corner, he pulls her into it and pulls her right against him. “I can demonstrate,” he murmurs, and kisses her hard, “later.”

She leans against him, but it’s not really an invitation, more tiredness. “Where are we going?”

It’s clear to Castle that she only means right now. However, it seems like a good opportunity to both lay down a marker and provide some solid reassurance.

“Now? The nearest coffee bar. Later, your apartment. Long-term?” His arms come around her, and her head falls on to his shoulder. “Long-term, when this is all fixed, anywhere we want to go. We’ll work it out. Together, Beckett. That’s where we’ll be.” She sinks against him, as much relieved, he thinks, as romanced. He keeps one strong arm round her waist, and walks them both the short distance to the coffee bar, orders hot chocolate for Beckett and mocha for himself. He doesn’t think that adding more caffeine to an already over-tense Beckett is a good idea.

“What’s this?” she says.

“Hot chocolate. Cures all known miseries. Look, it’s even got marshmallows. And cream. Everything a good hot chocolate should have.” Beckett looks a little less tired, and takes a sip, carefully ensuring that the cream doesn’t land on her nose. This is very disappointing. She is astonishingly cute with a dab of cream on her nose. Castle keeps holding her, and waits for her to relax a little.

“What’s going on with Dad?” she asks, instead of relaxing.

“He’s mixed himself up,” Castle settles on the least inflammatory wording of which he can think. Telling Beckett any of what Jim said after she ran for the restroom won’t help anything. “Dr Burke’s about to straighten him out.”

“At least it’s not just me who has to put up with it.”

“I think he does it to everyone.”

Beckett takes a much larger slurp of her drink. “How could he say I should have let him die?” she asks very quietly. Castle moves on to high alert. “How could I ever let anyone die if I could save them?”

“You told me that you could only save yourself, Kate.” He uses her first name deliberately: a mark of the importance of the moment. “You told Julia Berowitz she could only save herself. Everyone has to save themselves, you said. You tried to save him till you were half-drowned yourself, and then you had to let him go.” He stops, breathes, hopes against hope that she’ll hear his next words as he means them. “How would it have helped for you to kill yourself? That wouldn’t have saved him either. If you were dead, he’d have drunk himself to death. Whatever he said when he was drunk, the thought of seeing you again was what eventually brought him back. He said he never blamed you. He wants your forgiveness.”
There is no answer. Beckett is staring into empty space, hands locked around her cup, utterly motionless. Castle buttons his lip through main force and leaves her to it. All she needs from him is to know that he’s there, and she knows that. He intends to stay in close physical contact with her until the session is over, and then beyond.

Dr Burke has infused a pot of tea for both himself and Mr Beckett, in an effort to allow them time to consider the position and return to calmness. He recalls that, initially, Detective Beckett’s apparently wilful blindness had irritated him, and that he had resolved to allow himself more time to uncover the issues before letting his feelings have free rein. Mr Beckett is almost as difficult as his daughter. His inability to choose his words carefully has led to this latest interruption. Dr Burke thinks, still irritably, that if Mr Beckett were to be this imprecise in his working life as a lawyer he would have been dismissed forthwith. He takes a sip of his tea, inhales the delicate scent, and undertakes a short meditative exercise to restore his normal imperturbability.

Mr Beckett, he notes, is not drinking his tea. On the contrary, he is gazing into the depths of the fine porcelain cup, apparently examining the pattern of the few tea leaves which have escaped the strainer. Dr Burke does not expect that an educated man will be seeking prophecy or divination, but it is entirely possible that he is seeking enlightenment.

“I didn’t mean that everything she did was wasted,” Mr Beckett says desolately. “I just meant that before I got dry she should have stepped away much earlier. Nothing she’s done since then was wasted.”

“Mmm?” hums Dr Burke, sympathetically. His tea has really been most restorative.

“I love seeing her. And then she bought me that game – really thought about what I’d like, even if it had been Rick’s idea she played it to make sure it would suit me before she got it. We played it a lot.”

“What do you think you need to do now?”

“If I knew that, don’t you think I’d be doing it?” Mr Beckett bites. “You think I like seeing my daughter look at me like she hates me or disappearing out the door like she just did? It’s not me who’s here for treatment, it’s her, but I don’t see her getting any better.”

“Are you suggesting that this session is no better than the first you attended?” Dr Burke says very coolly. “It appears, in my professional judgment, that there have been significant advances. Earlier in her treatment, your daughter had no intention of contacting you at all. Her sole purpose in continuing to attend was in order to further her relationship with Mr Castle and to remove any hindrance to her career. She now wishes to re-establish a relationship with you. Would you prefer” – Dr Burke’s tone is equally as biting as Mr Beckett’s – “that I ceased any effort to assist that?”

Mr Beckett finally drinks a mouthful of tea. His shoulders slump. “No. I’ve got no idea what to do, though.”

Dr Burke reminds himself that he is not, in fact, treating Mr Beckett, and therefore, no matter the natural inclination to encourage him to seek his own insights, it would not be improper to assist him to reach a sensible conclusion.

“Your daughter ran out because she understood you to say that she should have let you die, if necessary. However, not only had she spent two years trying to save you, unsuccessfully, she then proceeded to enter a profession whose guiding principle is Protect and Serve. The motto of the NYPD, too, is, I believe, Faithful unto Death.”
Mr Beckett acquires a facial hue of almost the same green-tinged whiteness as Dr Burke had seen his daughter display, some sessions earlier. Dr Burke concludes that realisation is dawning on him, but continues, intending to drive the message home.

“By suggesting that she should have allowed you to self-destruct, Detective Beckett is likely to have perceived that you have not only devalued her original actions, but that you have also failed to understand the core of both her personality and her chosen profession. In short, you have cast doubt on both her previous and current behaviour.” Dr Burke pauses. “Jim, on the very first occasion on which we met, I told you that it was unlikely that your relationship with your daughter would be as it was before your wife passed, and that it was inevitable that as your daughter grew to adulthood, your relationship would change. If we are to navigate a new relationship, you must cease to regard her as the little girl or teenager whom you knew, and begin to regard her as an independent adult who has made her own choices and is living her own life.”

“But she’s my daughter,” Mr Beckett emits woefully.

“She is. No-one seeing you together could doubt that. However, she is also, entirely separately, Detective Beckett, and she is also, again separately, in a relationship with Mr Castle.” The grimace which Mr Beckett forms does not hearten Dr Burke. “She has a life which does not depend on being your daughter, just as you have a life which does not depend upon being a parent.”

Mr Beckett drinks his tea, and appears to be pondering Dr Burke’s words. Whilst he cogitates, Dr Burke considers that he has, at most, a few moments more before he can expect Mr Castle to return with Detective Beckett. He trusts that Mr Castle has restored Detective Beckett to some serenity. He is bolstered in this hope by the relatively calm proceedings in the earlier part of the session.

“I told you, Jim, when we first met, that it is very hard to watch your child establish a much stronger relationship with another in place of the parent-child bond. However, this is a normal, natural occurrence. You have previously indicated that you like and respect Mr Castle, and, while he is quite naturally closest to your daughter, it seems to me that he likes and respects you in return. Please also consider whether you are allowing your natural regret at the change in your daughter’s life to affect your reactions to the point which is actually at issue: repairing the damage caused both while you were influenced by alcohol” –

“Drunk.” –

“and by your inadvertent words a few weeks ago.”

Mr Beckett relapses into silence and thought once more. Dr Burke listens carefully for the sound of Detective Beckett returning: however, there is no indication that this is, as yet, occurring.

“Kate,” Castle says tentatively, when she’s most of the way down her drink and still silent and motionless, “c’n I tell you what I think your dad meant?”

“Why not?” she says bleakly. “Might as well try. Nothing else is helping.” She shivers, slightly. “I hoped that we’d be able to have a normal conversation, but he said I should have let him die, and never tried at all.”

Castle holds her tighter. “After you went out the room” – might as well start tactfully – “he said that what he meant was that he was unsaveable. Then. I think he meant that he wishes you hadn’t destroyed your life then trying to save him.” There’s an unintelligible noise from Beckett. “Then he said he loved seeing you – he meant after he got dry.” He stops.
“Uh?”

“I think what you heard wasn’t what your dad thought he said.”

“Oh.”

“I think half his problem is that he thinks he’s saying one thing and you think he’s saying another.”

“What am I supposed to do? I can’t read his mind,” Beckett says bitterly.

“Um…”

“What?” she snaps. “Just spit it out, Castle. We aren’t getting anywhere so it really doesn’t matter whether I like it or not.”

“You asked, okay? So you’re not allowed to shoot me.”

“No gun, remember?”

“No killing me in any way at all.”

“Just get on with it.”

“Okay. Erm… I think you’re hearing everything the way you think your dad would hear you if you were him but knew what you felt.”

“That makes no sense.”

“You always assume that he meant the worst, most hurtful thing. I think you do that because you think he should be angry or hurt by you, because you would be if you were him, so you assume that he is and then you hear what he says through that idea and whenever his wording is sloppy you hear it as him – er – trying to get back at you.”

Beckett goes back to clinging to her cup and absolute silence. Castle supposes that this is better than a free fight, shouting, and walking out. Marginally.

The silence extends and extends until it’s like over-stretched elastic, ready to snap. Castle doesn’t take his arm from Beckett, though he’s pretty certain she doesn’t know it’s still there and wouldn’t notice if it was withdrawn.

“Let’s go back,” she eventually says. She doesn’t say a single, solitary word about Castle’s commentary.

When they achieve Dr Burke’s floor, Beckett approaches the receptionist, says something very quietly, and then turns to Castle. “I want to talk to Dr Burke on my own. Will you…” she trails off.

“Sure. I’ve got a pen and my notebook.”

He can’t decide whether he should be heartened or terrified, and ends up both, in a split-personality sort of way, as he watches the receptionist show Beckett into a different room, and then tap on Dr Burke’s door to advise him.

Dr Burke is somewhat surprised to be informed by his receptionist that Detective Beckett wants to talk to him alone. However, given the contrast between her general dislike of opening a conversation and her request, he will certainly not delay. Mr Beckett appears to be continuing to
consider Dr Burke’s earlier words, and will not suffer should he, Dr Burke, not be there. He so informs Mr Beckett, and exits the room to another, soothingly light green, room.

Detective Beckett is sitting on the couch, still somewhat pale, still wearing her jacket. Despite Dr Burke’s carefully calibrated office temperature, presently a perfectly respectable 70 degrees, she appears pinched and cold.

“You wished to see me alone?”

“Yes. Castle said something.” Detective Beckett breathes slowly and deeply.

“Mm?” Dr Burke acquires a feeling of considerable uncertainty. Mr Castle has, in general, taken exactly the right course of action, albeit with one substantial mistake, but he is not qualified to meddle in extremely difficult and complex psychiatry. Dr Burke hopes very strongly that Mr Castle’s instincts have led him correctly. Further complications are extraordinarily undesirable. There have been quite enough of those for any psychiatrist’s lifetime. Dr Burke has but one life. He does not wish to spend the remainder of it treating Detective Beckett, professionally interesting as that might be.

“He said that I was hearing Dad through how I would feel about me if I were Dad,” she blurts out in one hasty sentence, and stops, looking down at her twisted hands.

Dr Burke converts that sentence into one which possesses rather more lucidity and certainly more precision of language. It appears that Mr Castle has, indeed, been led correctly by his instincts and, more crucially, he also appears to have succeeded in ensuring that Detective Beckett is considering this concept. That same concept had also occurred to Dr Burke during the previous session, but he had not intended to introduce it until Tuesday’s session, when Mr Beckett would be absent. Mr Castle has brought it into consideration somewhat before Dr Burke would have preferred, but that is not fatal, merely somewhat difficult.

“How do you interpret that?” he asks gently.

“I don’t know.” It is not quite a snap, nor yet is it defeated. “I don’t get what he means.”

Dr Burke is not particularly reassured by Detective Beckett’s lack of understanding. She has not previously been slow of thought. He observes her closely and decides that she is both tired and drained. He wishes that Mr Castle had kept his intelligent deductions to himself.

“Let us try to analyse it, then. Mr Castle, I believe, is implying that you are expecting your father to behave and react as you would if you were in the same position.”

“Uh?”

“If you were in your father’s position, what would you think?”

Detective Beckett begins to think. At least, Dr Burke assumes that she is thinking. The way in which her face contorts indicates that her thoughts are not entirely comforting.

“I shall confirm that your father is coping, and then return.”
Dr Burke pauses in his reception area. Mr Castle is there, meditatively chewing the end of his pen and contemplating his notebook. He is remarkably peaceful, considering the roiling emotions in the rooms around him.

“Is everything okay?” he asks.

“Both Mr Beckett and Detective Beckett are considering different points of view.”

“Oh.”

“Your insight was correct, Mr Castle, but I could have wished that you had not revealed it tonight.”

“Huh?”

“I had been planning to discuss that point of view at the next session, when Mr Beckett was not here.” Dr Burke does not mention that he expects that Mr Castle would not have been there either. “Instead, I now have to contend with Detective Beckett trying to understand her father’s point of view at the same time as he is trying to comprehend hers. It is undesirable to have to manage both at once.” Mr Castle nods, once. He does not look particularly penitent. “The next time you have an insight, I should be grateful if you would discuss it with me first, so that we can agree the best way forward to ensure that my attention to Detective Beckett is not divided.”

“Oh. Okay.”

Dr Burke sighs. “Mr Castle, Detective Beckett’s case is complex.”

“You don’t say.”

“Therefore introducing random factors is, to say the least, unhelpful. Please do not make this more difficult than it already is.”

Finally, Mr Castle appears to have appreciated the point which Dr Burke is making.

“Okay,” he says, more agreeably.

“Detective Beckett is considering your point. I must attend to Mr Beckett, for a short time. There is little time left in this session.”

Dr Burke returns to the room containing Mr Beckett.

“Would you like some more tea, Jim?”

“No. Thank you,” Mr Beckett adds, after a noticeable pause. “I get what you say, Carter. But I’ve missed out on so much and she’s never really told me anything about her life since… It’s always been smiles and sunshine, but thinking about it there’s never been anything tangible. I barely knew about her last boyfriend – certainly never met him. It’s only since she met Rick that she’s let me know anything, and that hasn’t exactly been much. She talks to him, though.”

“You need to separate the matters which require reconciliation from the matters which are normal and expected. What do you believe requires reconciliation?”

“The same things that there were the first time.”
“Mm?”

“She thinks she abandoned me. That I haven’t forgiven her. That I don’t want to be a family. Or that I do want to be a family just as long as she keeps saying how high every time I say jump.”

“Indeed. That is an accurate summary.”

“But I’ve told her I don’t think that. I’ve told her I don’t blame her, that I want to be a family. I just want her to be happy again.” He hunches into himself. “Why doesn’t she believe me?”

Dr Burke waits. Mr Beckett remains silent.

“I suggest that the question of why your daughter does not believe you is one upon which you should think further. I must return to her. Before I do, I should appreciate your views on whether you would wish to continue the game tonight? I shall ask your daughter the same question.”

Mr Beckett shrugs, dispiritedly. “If Katie wants to. I don’t see what good it does, but if she thinks it helps…” He trails off.

“I will return momentarily.”

Dr Burke returns to the other room, noticing in passing that Mr Castle has ceased to chew his pen and is scribbling rapidly. His handwriting is atrocious.

“Detective Beckett?”

“Yeah?”

“Have you been able to arrive at any further thoughts on Mr Castle’s suggestion?”

“If I’d walked away from me…” Dr Burke follows her thought, although he cannot help thinking that many patients would be far better off if they did walk away from themselves, leaving their troubles behind them. “If I’d walked away from me when I needed… oh. I’m thinking that he needed support. But I should know that it wasn’t support. It was enabling. Al-Anon were really clear on that.”

“Indeed. An important realisation. Now, we have little time left, formally. You may end this session, continue to consider that realisation, and try to understand in the light of Mr Castle’s suggestion and that realisation, or we may continue the session between you and your father, or we may complete your game. We could, alternatively, combine the latter two.”

Detective Beckett considers the options, briefly. Dr Burke expects that she will choose the first option, and finds himself to be perfectly correct. It is Detective Beckett’s following words which are unexpected.

“Stop now,” she says. “But… but do you think that I could have the usual session on Tuesdays but one with Dad every Friday?”

“I have no objection. I suggest that you ask your father if he is also content with that?”

“Yes…”

Detective Beckett does not appear to be greatly enthusiastic about making her request. However, Dr Burke will not do so for her when he considers that she and her father need to improve their direct communications. Considerably more openness is required, and no opportunity to practice
should be neglected. Any step, no matter how small or unimportant it seems when compared to the major issues still outstanding, represents progress. Dr Burke believes in the value of continued small steps, and has been known to become quite voluble when it has been suggested that progress is only achieved in substantial leaps. In his experience, such leaps are only effective when founded on a number of seemingly trivial achievements.

Detective Beckett stands up and begins to make her way to the room in which her father is still present. Seeing her, Mr Castle falls into step beside her, providing her with an almost unnoticeable brush of fingers which nevertheless causes her to straighten and gain courage.

Mr Beckett startles as all three of them enter. Dr Burke observes that he seems old and defeated.

“I think we should stop now,” Detective Beckett says baldly. Mr Beckett sags unhappily. There is an uncomfortable pause. “But… Dad, can we do another session Friday? Or every Friday?” Detective Beckett has rushed that out as if she is afraid of rejection. The effect on Mr Beckett is, however, astonishing.

“You want to keep trying? Of course. Of course I will.” His previously dull eyes have brightened; there is emotion in his voice. He appears almost ready to embrace his daughter. She, however, does not appear to be embraceable. She is standing very close to Mr Castle, without, nevertheless, touching him.


She moves to the table and begins to put the Sorry game away. She is, Dr Burke observes, on the opposite side of the table from her father. He has no doubt that this is deliberate. He also has no doubt that Detective Beckett does not wish to deal with any more emotions or complexities than have become evident this evening. As a side issue, it is possible that she does not want to endure affection which she feels unable to reciprocate, and which lack of reciprocation will hurt her father. Therefore she has chosen an indirect method of avoidance.

“Would… Katie, would you bring the game again? Or I could.”

“Um… okay.”

Detective Beckett clears the last items into the box, with care.

“Good night,” she says generally, and leaves with despatch.

“Night,” Mr Castle adds, and leaves with equal speed.

Mr Beckett and Dr Burke remain.

“Are you sure this is progress?”

“Yes,” Dr Burke states. He is quite content that substantial progress is being made.

“Night, then. See you on Friday.”

“Good night.”

After everyone has left, Dr Burke rinses his teapot and cups, and considers with some satisfaction that tonight’s session, while apparently unproductive, has proceeded largely without major emotional upheavals and with a great deal of thinking on the part of both Becketts. Considering the events of the previous two sessions, this can be regarded as, in comparison, a stunning success.
Matters are still progressing in entirely the right direction. He almost looks forward to Tuesday. Almost.

“I would have won.”

“Huh?”

“I’d have won. If we’d finished the game.”

“You would not. I was winning.”

“No you weren’t. I was. Your dad had just Sorryed you.”

“So? I had had a man closer to Home than you did before that. I was winning.”

“If you say so. I’ve got a better thought, though.”

“What?”

“Dr Burke was losing.”

Beckett grins nastily. “That’s true.” She sounds very satisfied by that.

“Let’s go back to yours and celebrate the metaphorical demise of Dr Burke.”

“Okay.” Beckett yawns widely on the word.

“Takeout for you, sleepyhead.” She wakes up a little and growls dangerously. “Takeout for me, then, if you don’t want any.”

“I do. I’m hungry. Let’s have pizza.”

Castle taps at his phone and arranges for pizza. He also, remembering previous occasions, arranges for soda and ice-cream.

They arrive more or less coincident with the delivery. Castle sneakily pays when Beckett isn’t looking, affects an air of complete innocence when she regards him beadily, and declines to allow her any role in reimbursing him at all. This is not astonishingly popular.

The pizza, however, is astonishingly popular. Beckett inhales hers in practically no time at all, and is wiping her fingers while Castle is still contemplating his last two slices. She fixes him with a hurry-up glare until they are done, and is on her feet clearing the plates before he’s swallowed the last mouthful.

“What’s the hurry?”

“Ice-cream.”

“That’s my line.”

“So copyright it, if you think it’s yours.”

Castle pouts, and then comes over to the freezer to find out if Beckett is intending to share the ice-cream with him. Somewhat to his surprise, he finds that she is, although the ratio of ice-cream is approximately 80:20 in favour of Beckett. This division does not seem entirely fair. Challenging it
does not seem entirely sensible. He eats his miniscule portion with a considerable degree of pout (even if he has lots of ice-cream and toppings at home which he can eat at any time he likes) which is a considerable degree faked. Beckett is strung out, despite the snark, and ice-cream will help. Still, no need to let her know that he’s noticed. Far better to pout, and better yet to steal a few kisses.

He tries. Beckett threatens him with the spoon, which approaches far too close to his knuckles for comfort. He essays another raid with his spoon, and is further threatened. Her hand follows his away from the bowl, and he swoops in and steals a mouthful.

“That’s mine!” Beckett squawks.

“You’re mine,” Castle says smoothly, takes advantage of her indignation to remove spoon and bowl from her hands and put them down elsewhere, and then turns her into him and kisses her firmly. Happily, kissing her swallows her objection. Even more happily, she’s instantly responsive, melting into him and curving in and generally ending up right where she should be: right there in his embrace.

Some very pleasurable kissing later, Beckett has migrated into his lap and has snuggled into him in a pleasingly familiar and affectionate way. On the other hand, she is now leaning on his shoulder and not kissing him any more, which is familiar but not pleasing. It means she’s thinking over the session. At least she’s cuddled in close.

“At least Dad recognises I had no good choices,” she says, out of the blue. “I guess that means he sort of understands where I was.”

“Yeah,” Castle says carefully. He thinks that Jim understands precisely where Beckett was, but Beckett has to work her way to that. When she does, she’ll – probably – understand that if Jim understands then he is also sincere when he said she wasn’t to blame.

“That fits with Dr Burke saying – everyone saying – it was right to walk away.”

Castle does not cheer. He wants to, but he manages not to. That’s a huge nearly-stride forward. Now if she’ll only take the next logical step…

She doesn’t.

“How could he think that I’d just leave him to die? I’d already lost Mom. Why can’t he see that I couldn’t lose him too?” She takes a quick breath. “It’s my job to protect people. Why doesn’t he see that that meant him too? Means” – the accent on the present tense is very audible – “him too.” Another breath. She’s tensing up right there in his arms. “Everyone else sees it.”

Castle pets reassuringly, drawing little patterns on her arm, and declines to comment. In particular, he does not say he’s still stuck seeing you as a nineteen year old, even though he is pretty certain from Jim’s behaviour that he is treating Castle like his daughter’s early boyfriends (again: that’s really getting old) and therefore that he may well be failing to realise that she’s all grown up. Dr Burke’s words to him about keeping his insights to himself had stung a little, but he can’t fault their sense. Unfortunately. He really does dislike Dr Burke’s incessant correctness, and especially his incessant cleverness. A putative character is already in his head, and the more he sees of Dr Burke the more he thinks that it would be ample and well-justified revenge to turn him into a full-blown character. Dr Burke will, naturally, receive a copy of that book, with a very personal dedication. He smiles ferally at the thought, and relapses into inspiration.

Beckett continues to contemplate under his petting. She doesn’t get any more tense, but she isn’t
“On Tuesday I need to talk about why Dad doesn’t see that I needed to protect him. And about what you said, about thinking he’d react like I would. I still don’t get that properly.”

“You’re too tired,” Castle points out, prompted by her gaping yawn. “Think about it when you’re not so tired.” He plops a kiss on the top of her head. “Bedtime.”

“Is that an offer?”

Castle smiles. “Only if you want it to be.”

Beckett yawns again. Castle wraps her in a lot more closely and tips her face up.

“You’re half asleep already. It would be very unflattering if you fell asleep. I’d never recover from the humiliation.”

“Till the next day,” Beckett attempts to snark. It doesn’t really come off.

“I’m not taking the chance. Bedtime, Beckett. I’ll tuck you in and kiss you goodnight, if you like.”

“I’m not a toddler.”

Castle looks her up and down, appreciatively and with heat. “No, you are not,” he says, and traces an intricate pattern down her front. “I certainly wouldn’t be doing this” – his fingers wander rather more intimately – “with anyone who wasn’t totally adult.”

“I still don’t need tucked in.”

“Need? No. Want? Maybe.” He widens his eyes at her hopefully. “Don’t you?”

“I get the impression,” Beckett says very dryly, and considerably more wakefully, “that any tucking in is for your benefit not mine. In fact, being a detective and all, I detect that you are actually hoping for me to change into my nightwear, preferably somewhere you can watch.”

“Curses!” Castle cries theatrically. “My nefarious and dastardly plans are known.”

“Yep.”

He pouts, equally theatrically. “You are no fun.”

“Nope.”

“So can I tuck you in?”

Beckett looks at him with wide, amazed eyes. “After everything I just said you’re still asking?”

“Okay, I won’t. I’ll take my disappointed, devastated, dismal” –

“I know you’re a writer. You can stop alliterating now” –

“self home, and dive into despairing despond.”

She collapses into giggles. “No more alliteration. Why not think about what I actually said? Which did not, note, include a particular word.”

Castle pauses, and looks quizzically at her. “You didn’t say no, did you?”
Beckett quirks an eyebrow. “Work it out. You’re the one who’s supposed to be a writer.”

“I am a writer,” Castle says, offended.

“Pay some attention to the language, then.”

Castle mutters darkly to himself, thinks back over the conversation with total recall, and grins.

“You were just messing with me. That’s not nice, Beckett. I’ll need to deal with that. You should be nice to me.”

“You should listen.”

“I do listen. I listen to you gasping when I do this” – he draws a neat little circle around her breast – “and I listen to you moan when I do this” – he takes her mouth in one surging, conquering movement – “and I listen to you calling my name when we’re in bed and I’m teasing you.”

“And I listen to your crazy theories and incessant chatter in the precinct,” Beckett says with more snark than at any time since five p.m.

“Now you’re just being contrary.” Castle smirks, mischievously. “You were messing with me, anyway. So now I’ll just mess with you. Bedtime, Beckett, and I am definitely tucking you in.”

He shifts her off his lap, stands up, picks her up, still smirking.

“Why are you picking me up?”

“I want to. Proves my manly strength.”

Beckett makes a very unimpressed face. “Is that what you call it? I call it showing off.”

“But you like it. You like being swept up into my arms. It makes you feel cherished.”

Beckett is silenced. It does. She does like it. She curls her arms round Castle’s neck and leans into him as he conveys her to the bedroom. The next thing that happens is that she is placed – sitting, humph – on the bed.

“There. Now you need to get ready for bed.” Castle sits himself down on the stool at her dressing table and adopts an attitude of happy expectation.

“Tell me, Castle, have you heard the word *voyeur*?”

“Yes, and I think it’s entirely appropriate. Watching can be very enjoyable, if participation isn’t on offer.”

His voice has dropped into a furry baritone growl: heat banked below the words.

“You didn’t listen carefully.”

“What didn’t I listen to?” Castle asks.

“The words, wordsmith.”

Castle tries to rerun the conversation, again. What use is near-total recall if Beckett keeps sandbagging him? His recall is really *not* assisted by Beckett undoing her pants. Slowly, and with a wholly unnecessary sensual little smile. Her fingers are moving wickedly over the flash of dark
fabric beneath. He closes his eyes, which produces a cross noise, and reviews the previous conversation without the immense distraction of Beckett disrobing. Actually, without the immense distraction of Beckett.

Oh. Oh, oh, oh. She hadn’t actually declined his original offer, either. He’d declined his own offer. “Beckett,” he says dangerously. “Beckett, are you messing with me again? You don’t look tired to me any more.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Make your mind up, Castle. First you tell me I’m tired, now you tell me I’m not. You make me an offer, and then you retract it. You take me to bed, and then you sit on a chair six feet away.” She smirks nastily. “I guess I’d better just put myself to bed. Night, Castle.”

“Oh no. You don’t get to mess with me any more.” Castle stands up and prowls across the three steps to Beckett. “You’ve been messing with me for the last quarter hour. No more messing.” His hands close around her waist, and draw her up to standing and then against him. “Oh dear,” he points out insincerely. “Your pants seem to have fallen off.”

“And that had nothing to do with you pushing them, did it?”

Castle acquires a saintly mien. “No.” Saintly changes instantly to seductive, and he leans in very slowly to take her mouth with complete authority and considerable assertion. He lifts off. “But that had everything to do with you messing with me.”
Let me entertain you

Since she’s there, and her mouth is opening on something that’s sure to disconcert him – she’s done so for the last quarter-hour, anyway, so she’ll no doubt do it again – he bends his head to take control of her lips again, his hands at her waist tight enough to keep her close. “No more messing, Beckett.” One hand runs smoothly up her spine, the other smoothly over her ass. He kisses her again: exploring slowly, sensing her fight back to try to conquer him, but that’s not how they roll; he easily overcomes her campaign and takes total possession. His totally badass Beckett, his Kate, his softly melting, boneless Kat.

Beckett runs her hands into the soft short hair at Castle’s nape and holds him to her, slipping into the pool of sexuality where she can simply be Kat-who-doesn’t-need-to-stand-for-anyone and allow herself simply to be and enjoy. She grips him more tightly and presses into him, rolling her hips a little until the discarded pants get in the way. She kicks them off and away, and brings a leg up round him to be closer, to rub against the hard length and hot pressure and take what she needs while giving what he needs.

His earlier words float back through her mind: anywhere we want to go. Together, Beckett. That’s where we’ll be. Despite all her issues and difficulties and troubles and her father… She kisses him harder and surrenders to their joint desire, falling into his assertive masculinity without a single hesitation, and murmurs mine into his mouth. Her Castle, her place of safety, and her love.

She glides a hand round his jaw and down to try to release the fastenings of his shirt, and fails to find so much as a sliver of space for her fingers to fit into. She emits a disappointed mew, and feels Castle’s quick smile on her mouth.

“No, no. You’ve had your fun, and now I’m going to have mine. I’ll lead, Kat. Just relax and stand down and let me, now.”

She growls, but gently, and skims her hand down to his excellent ass, purely to prove that he can’t have it all his own way. Castle catches her wrist, and repatriates her naughty fingers to his shoulder. “Uh-uh. I’ve got this.” He nibbles under her earlobe, and pours syrup into her ear, dribbling it down her nerves. “Let go. I’ve got you.” His fingers play seductively and slither briefly and teasingly between her legs. She gasps, and arches against him, and her grip bites into his shoulders. He knows just how to play her body and he’s very keen to do it: to prove his virtuoso command of her reactions and pleasure. He can practice as much as he likes – ohhhhh. Definitely. She stops trying to assert herself and lets Castle assert himself, falling into everything he can and does do for her.

Her shirt is mysteriously off. Castle’s mouth is very unmysteriously exploring all the ways he can make her gasp and whimper simply by teasing at her breasts and sliding the fabric of her bra over proud nipples, dampening the fabric with his mouth and there are surely – ohhhh Castle – direct nerve connections from her breasts to her core and every single one – ohhhh – of them is in synaptic overdrive right now. She’s bent back over his arm despite there being a perfectly good bed right there but something about being held in that position and completely available to him is very, very erotic. She is reminded that Castle is, in fact, much stronger than she normally remembers, and right now all of that strength is encompassing her.

Her bra falls away, and Beckett is suddenly tumbled on to the bed with Castle following, the fabric of his pants rubbing slightly roughly between her legs, an arm over her, and propped up on his elbow to regard her with the dangerously predatory gaze that tells her that he’s in the mood to take. This is fine. She’s quite happily in the mood to give.
“Mine,” he growls, and after that there is no more talking. Castle possesses himself of her mouth ruthlessly, strips her panties in one swift move, and proceeds to leave her mindless and writhing: he’s just a little rough, a little forceful, and she gives herself completely over to the moment and the movement and simply him within her and around her and over her.

After, she turns into him and lies over his chest, breathing coming a little faster still: but with the sound of his heart under her cheek, holding him to her, or her to him.

“Could we do brunch again, Sunday?” she blurts out, feeling Castle startle under her. “My treat this time.” Castle tenses, and doesn’t relax. Silence descends heavily about Beckett, who, after a few seconds, tries to roll off. That had clearly been a dumb idea.

Rolling off doesn’t happen. Movement, in fact, does not happen. Including the necessary rib movement to allow breathing, which is a little disconcerting and shortly discomforting. She solves the latter problem with an elbow to Castle’s midriff, which allows her to suck in air.

“Sorry,” he says distractedly, having noticed that she is bluish-purple and wheezing.

“I’m told breathing is essential,” she snarks. “Maybe you could let me try it?”

“If you must,” Castle says, the lazy note in his voice belying the forceful grip around her. His arms loosen only just enough to allow unhindered breath. Beckett has another try at rolling away. “Stop it. Stay here.” She doesn’t say anything.

“You want to host brunch?”

“No, I didn’t think you meant here.” There is a pause. “Brunch, fine. But you don’t pay, I do.”

“No. My invitation. I pay.”

“I wanna pay. There’s three of us and only one of you.”

“No. I pay or no deal.”

“But…”

“No buts. Why are you so keen on paying?”

“Erghhhh…” Castle emits, which is less than explanatory or indeed helpful.

“Spill. You don’t get to say I don’t get to pay” –

“That rhymes, Beckett. You’ll be a writer one day – ooff?”


“I wanna pay,” Castle says again.

“Explain.” This voice would summon the Devil to explain himself. He’d be cringing as he did, too.

Castle has one, tiny, titchy problem here. He doesn’t have an explanation. He has nothing, except a vague feeling that Beckett should let him pay. He is very aware that this will not pass muster.
“I should,” he stutters. “It’s what I’m supposed to do.”

The Beckett eyebrow elevates. “Supposed?” she says glacially. Castle has never seen anyone project so much menace when naked and draped over him. Right now, her nakedness has no good effect on him at all. All his – er – assets have retreated in abject terror. He musters a modicum of nerve.

“Supposed,” he says firmly. “I’m your partner and that means if I want to pay for things I get to.”

“How does that follow?”

It doesn’t. Castle knows this. This is not fair. Beckett should be sex-hazed and sleepy, not wide-awake and outthinking him. He essays a stroke down her back.

“You can’t suborn me with sex.”

“Drugs? Rock-n-ro – ooofff!”

“You’re avoiding the issue. I have invited you and your family to brunch. That means I get the check. Capisce?”

Castle opens his mouth, receives the full force of a glare that would have levelled the Rockies from end to end, and shuts it again.

“Now, are you going to come or not?” Castle detects, however, considerable uncertainty, as opposed to the rock hard certainty of the previous statements.

“Of course. Is that why you’re trying to escape? You thought I wouldn’t?” He pats her backside, a little chidingly. “Silly Kat. Of course we will. Now stop running away from me.”

He pulls her up and kisses her. Annoyingly, Kat is now Beckett and declines to be kissed.

“And do you promise you won’t even try to pick up the tab?”

“But…”

“Promise. Or no brunch.”

There is no wiggle room in that statement. There is no wiggle from Beckett either, which is disappointing.

“Promise,” Castle says, very sulkily.

“I’ll let you know where it is. Ten on Sunday?”

“Okay.” He’s still sulky. He should be allowed to buy her things. He’s positive that’s in the job description. And if it isn’t, it should be. He humphs.

“Stop sulking. You’re not three.”

“No, I’m not. But you’re not being fair.”

“How am I not being fair? It’s my turn. You’re not being fair.”

“But I want to. You never let me do what I want.”
Beckett’s eyebrows hit her hair. “Seriously?”

Castle smirks. “Gotcha,” he says. Beckett emits a noise reminiscent of an angry tiger, and then another as she finds that being wrapped in also means that she can’t take revenge for that annoyance. Castle smirks more widely, and since she’s right there, kisses her too.

“Time I went home,” he points out.

“Yes.” Now Beckett sounds sulky.

“I’ll – we’ll – see you Sunday.”

“Yes.”

Castle inserts himself into his clothes, and then turns back to the bed. Beckett has inserted herself under the covers and a massive pile of pillows. He sits on the edge and disinters her from them so he can kiss her some more, before taking his leave. He’d almost swear he heard a very quiet love you as he departs, which is only fair, because that’s the last thing he’d whispered in her ear too.

On his solitary way home, in a late-night cab with a don’t-care driver whose don’t-careness extends to stop signals, give-way lines and speed limits, Castle fails to notice the several near-death experiences as he contemplates Beckett’s invitation. He’s still a little sulky that she won’t let him pay, but as he pulls his brain into gear that’s rapidly being displaced by the full ramifications of her words. She’s asked his family to brunch. The previous times, he’s asked her. Okay, so it’s not at her home, but still – she’s really trying, still, despite all the difficulties with her father: she’s still trying to progress both sides of the problem at once. Baby steps, but steps forward.

Beckett is pondering choices. She had been pondering the choice of brunch locations, but that dealt with in her usual efficient fashion and the location provided to Castle, who had answered with a simple okay with us, she is now pondering other choices.

Specifically, she is thinking over the choices she had had ten years ago, and for five years following; and more specifically, her father’s words. Once I started drinking there were no good options for anyone except me – and I wasn’t ready to take the only good option. You hadn’t any good choices. She could choose to try to pull him out of the swamp, or she could choose to walk away. Enable, or ignore. She’d tried both, and neither had worked, but there hadn’t been another choice until, five years gone, he’d done it himself. Then, she’d had another choice. Go to him, and hope; or ignore him further. She’d chosen to go to him, and – she remembers her own joy – he had been her Dad again. Dr Burke had told her how her father had felt – had said he’d felt: she was the only thing he had left to love. Her dad had said you came and it was as if the lights went back on.

Every iota of her considerable investigative and interrogative ability is telling her that her dad was speaking the absolute truth. Everything she knows of the infuriatingly brilliant Dr Burke tells her that he – arrogant, annoying asshole that he is – is telling her the absolute truth. And there is no question, not now, not ever, but that Castle is telling her the absolute truth.

All the truth is out there, if only she listens to it.

All the choices are hers.

But here and now, it’s a simple pair of choices. Listen, or not. Forgive, or not.

She’s already chosen to listen. Now she needs to choose whether to forgive. It doesn’t mean, she
knows, that she will be able to do so soon, or easily. That’s not the point. The point is the decision.

Two decisions. To forgive herself, and to forgive her father.

The first is very easy. The answer to the first is yes. Always and for ever. Because she finally has a reason to try, and it’s not her father.

The second is not so easy. Saints might find it so, but she is not a saint. So much pain to forgive, so many broken promises and so many ways he broke her heart, and broke her. She’s not that naïve nineteen year-old, now, nor yet the twenty-four year old who thought that everything would be okay because her dad got dry. She’s not the girl who needed him to love her, either.

And yet. Forgiveness is not a commitment to anything more. More may come, or it may not, but that’s a decision for another day. She has a sudden impulse to invite her father to brunch, but doesn’t act on it. Small steps, carefully taken. Adding the strain of her father’s presence to the massive strain of seeing Castle with his family is not sensible, tomorrow. It’s best, for now, that their meetings are moderated. Before she takes any irrevocable steps, or puts herself in a position where everything could rapidly fall apart – before she watches Castle’s family swallow up her father and leave her behind because she can’t keep up, not yet – she needs a firm foundation.

She doesn’t yet have a firm foundation. All she has is a decision to make. One last choice.

And thinking that, her decision is already made. To try to forgive: herself, and her father. No more – and no less.

Sunday morning, at nine forty-five, Beckett is ensconced in the café she’d chosen for brunch – nothing like Balthazar, but she doesn’t have an unlimited budget either – and is downing her second double espresso. Not that she’s nervous. Oh no. She’s terrified. Mostly, she’s terrified of Martha. She is not at all reassured that Castle had lost it with his mother, though he hasn’t mentioned it since so either he’s patched it up or he’s ignoring the problem, but it doesn’t exactly give her the feeling that she will not be pecked at or chipped at or generally encouraged (ha! That’s one way of putting it) to appear at the loft. The caffeine really is not helping. Maybe she should add whiskey.

No. Never. Never ever. Alcohol is not a coping mechanism, and even thinking that shows that she was absolutely right not to add her father to the mix. She’s far too stressed already even without that. She orders a third double espresso, and peruses the menu with white knuckled grip.

A minute or so after ten a fluster of noise and kerfuffle indicates the arrival of the Castle Circus. Beckett blinks several times at the costume parade. Castle is tidy in his favourite blue, Alexis perfectly proper in normal teen dress. Martha – well. Eye-watering orange, which would probably guide ships every inch of the way from their leaving port in Ireland to sail to safe harbour in New York, decorated with green curlicues. Ow. Her eyes may be bleeding.

She’s so blinded by the costume – all it needs are sequins but if she looks hard and doesn’t go blind first she might spot some – that she stops being quite so nervous. She manages to stand and greet them, put on a semblance of good humour at Martha’s attempt to embrace her and splatter her cheek with theatrical air kisses, and ignore her following comments as Castle discreetly does not do the same. Beckett does not do social kissing. It’s not a cop thing. It would be utterly ridiculous if they all hugged and kissed every time they met each other. Ugh. On the other hand, Espo’s face if it were ever suggested…

The humour of that thought carries her through Martha’s effusive greetings, Alexis’s teen
bounciness (at least in that, she is quite definitely her father’s child) and Castle’s rather more
disguised salutations; and even on into discussions about everyone’s brunch orders, and the actual
ordering of the brunches.

Castle keeps conversation light, unstressful, and well away from any subjects such as families,
therapy, visits to the loft, and indeed anything deep and meaningful. It’s just a shame that Martha
fails utterly to pick up the hint.

“It was so sad that we missed you at the weekend,” she starts. Castle winces. Alexis casts a
bewildered look from her father to her grandmother, opens her mouth, and then winces and shuts it
hurriedly, with an even more bewildered look at her father, who is trying to speak. Martha talks
right over him. “It would have been lovely to see you, darling.”

“It was a brief visit,” Beckett says. So it was, compared to, say, her visit to Kiev, which had lasted
three months. Castle presses against her knee, unseen. “I had to get home to be ready for work.
Castle kindly made me dinner.”

“Oh,” Martha says. “There do seem to have been a lot of murders recently. You shouldn’t skip
meals, Katherine.”

“I don’t,” Beckett says, with the beginnings of an edge to her tone. “Castle cooks well, so I was
quite happy to eat his cooking rather than mine.”

“I think Beckett can take care of herself, Mother. She’s managed it this long.”

“It’s nice to have someone looking after you.”

Beckett tenses.

“I wouldn’t know,” Castle says. “I spend my time looking after you. I provide a home, food, wine
– you raid my best wine constantly – all the comforts you need.”

Beckett watches with interest as Martha pales slightly and rapidly changes the subject, which
remains on topics of general interest such as incompetent politicians, Hollywood scandals and the
iniquities of Martha’s newest co-stars and directors in her off off-Broadway play.

Beckett settles the check, explains generically that it’s her turn seeing as she’s been invited twice
and she was given dinner last week, closes her ears to Martha’s commentary on letting men pay for
one’s meals and waves everyone goodbye with a huge sigh of relief that she only just manages to
keep covered until they’re out of earshot.

She strongly suspects that she will receive a call from Castle, who is unlikely to be in a good mood,
within the hour. She also strongly suspects, from Martha’s reaction to a perfectly ordinary
comment, that Castle’s loss of temper the other day had involved a flat statement to his mother
reminding her that the loft is his and that she lives there on his sufferance. Suffer being the right
root word, at this point.

Anyway. She made it. Another small step. She even leapt the Martha maelstrom. It’s working.
The hall of fame

Castle contains his annoyance until they are all back in the loft, when, in default of murdering his mother forthwith, he retires to his study and closes the door firmly. Five seconds later he reopens it on a scene of absolute mayhem at full volume between his mother and Alexis.

“Dad told us not to force anything,” Alexis is yelling, “in case Detective Beckett was upset and wouldn’t come here any more. You just waded in.”

Martha flushes, and tosses her head.

“Nonsense, sweetie. I was just making sure that Katherine takes care of herself. After all, she doesn’t have a mother to do it for her.”

“Nor do I,” Alexis points out, still very loudly. “Dad manages for all of us.”

“But you do have your father. Katherine doesn’t. Everyone needs someone to give them advice.”

“Dad told you not to meddle and you are. You insisted that we left the spa early. You were trying to interrupt. That would have been so totally embarrassing if she’d been here but she wasn’t because she only came for dinner.”

“Darling, I only want your father to” –

“I like Detective Beckett and I don’t want her not to come here. If you mess that up I’ll never forgive you,” Alexis screeches, and dashes upstairs.

“Are you quite finished?” Castle asks bitingly.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with her. I ask a perfectly innocent question over brunch and Alexis treats me as if I’m the Inquisition.” Martha radiates offended saintliness.

“You were trying to interfere. Why exactly did you leave the spa earlier than you had told me you would?”

Castle’s tone of delicate enquiry could have cut steel. His mother blushes, and departs without a word more. Castle returns to his study and indulges himself in a fit of temper and shooting of many evil minions until he can trust himself not to make stupid decisions – opening discussions with his mother being high up the list of stupid decisions he could make right now.

On the other hand, at least Alexis is on his side, and the side of common sense. That’s a huge relief. No matter what he had thought, after his mother’s embarrassing revelations in front of her last Sunday, it’s good to see that she’s okay with Beckett and that she understands (as far as is necessary) the difficulties. He shoots a few more evil minions, for good measure, and then picks up the phone.

Beckett finds that she had been wrong. Castle has not called her within the hour. It took him three minutes over an hour. (Not that she was counting, of course. That would be creepy.) On the other hand, she’s done a little more thinking, and mostly what she thinks is that she needs to confirm her thinking with someone who thinks more like a cop than a writer. So she thinks. The solution is obvious. A drink with O’Leary, for at least some of which Castle need not – should not – be present.
It occurs to her that she would once have called Lanie. That’s still not entirely fixed, either. In unvoiced apology, she decides that she should also have a drink with her. But first, O’Leary. She taps out a text, before she can change her mind. Then she follows up with one to Lanie.

She’s just finished when the phone rings.

“Beckett.”

“It’s me.”

“I know,” Beckett says smugly.

“You okay?”

“Yep. You?”

“Surviving,” Castle says dryly, “but can I count on you to bust me out of jail?”

“Why?”

“If I have to deal with my mother any more, one of us will be dead and I don’t intend it to be me.”

“I thought you’d threatened her with eviction?”

“How did you know that? I never told you that! Have you bugged me, Beckett?”

“Detective. It was fairly obvious. No, I have not bugged you. This is not a movie.”

“Oh.” It sounds disappointed.

“If you want, I’ll microchip you. Like a pet dog. Or give you a barcode tattoo.”

Castle snorts indignantly. “I am not a pet. Or a possession.”

“Gotcha,” Beckett says evilly, and changes tack now that Castle’s restored to some equilibrium. “Everything’s fine. We got through. I got through. It was easier.”

She can hear Castle’s relieved noise without difficulty.

“It’s getting easier?”

“Yeah.” She has a thought. “Look, um, don’t make any plans for next Sunday morning, okay?”

“Why not?”

“Just don’t, okay?”

“That’s not fair, Beckett. I wanna know what you’re plotting.”

“I haven’t decided yet. Please?”

Castle stops asking questions. There’s a tinge of tension developing in Beckett’s voice. “Okay.”

“Second up, I’m trying to get O’Leary out for a drink tomorrow. D’you want to come along?”

“Sure. I love O’Leary.” He stops on Beckett’s snicker. “Platonically, Beckett. Take your mind out of the gutter. Straight after work?”
“Um… could you give us an hour or so first?”

“Uh?”

“Um…” She sounds very uncertain. “Um… I need to talk to him. Cop to cop. Privately.”

Castle stops. Beckett talking to O’Leary privately? But… cop to cop. His mind goes from first to sixth in rather less than half a second, which is far better than he’s ever managed in the Ferrari. Ah. Ah yes. Evidence. Facts not emotions.

“Sure. I’ll get a drink with Ryan and Espo. Or with Pete,” he says enthusiastically. “Maybe O’Leary would introduce me to Pete.”

“You can ask him.” She pauses. “Thanks. For not asking.”

“Any time. Till tomorrow.”

“You sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

“See you tomorrow.”

“Till tomorrow,” Castle says again.

He sits back in his study and wonders very intensely what Beckett’s thought had been. Keep Sunday morning free? That could mean nearly anything, but what it clearly isn’t is a family invitation to brunch. His curiosity rages, made worse because he can’t do anything about it.

Beckett’s sort-of-if-she-squints idea is that if this week goes well, by which she really means Friday with her father and the Sorry game going well, she might invite her father out to brunch with Castle. She’ll discuss it with Dr Burke on Tuesday, and see how that goes. She doesn’t feel at all comfortable with the idea, but then she’s been uncomfortable, to put it very, very mildly, since this whole mess began.

She parks the whole business and goes for a very long run, following up with a long and complicated set of asanas which require her total concentration. After all of that, it’s dinner time, and after that, there is a long, hot bath. Then she disciplines her mind to sleep, and finally achieves it, not without considerable contemplation of how much nicer it would be if she could simply be curled into Castle.

But she’s getting there. She really is. And hopefully tomorrow night she’ll see O’Leary and things will be clearer.

There are no results on the prints from Brett Selbright, yet, so Beckett indulges herself in harassing the lab until they tell her to get lost – or something like that, expressed a tad more forcefully – and then muttering darkly to herself over the crime scene reports for the other murders. Today is clearly shaping up to involve vast quantities of extremely slow and tedious data matching.

Today does. Castle rolls in at closer to eleven than ten, fortunately bearing coffee and more fortunately pastries, takes one look at Beckett’s bored and frustrated face and leaves it on her desk to sink in before he essays anything that might annoy her, such as saying Good morning or breathing. He wanders off to talk to the boys about more interesting matters, such as computer
games and other like pursuits. Poker begins to feature in the conversation, as does beer, and the desirability of a beer at the end of the day. The boys become enthusiastic.

Beckett’s phone cheeps, being O’Leary agreeing to a drink. At Molloys, naturally. He’ll turn into a leprechaun if he doesn’t stop with the Irish bars, she thinks mischievously, though he’ll be the biggest damn leprechaun in Fairyland. He’s off shift at six. So’s she. Arrangements are made accordingly: whoever gets there first gets the drinks in.

Mid-afternoon, Beckett is considering whether to harass the lab some more, when prints arrive. Running them through the system produces several names, all of whom have been pulled in for – er – nocturnal activities of the more athletic variety, either participating or organising.

Except for one set. Now, this is very interesting. These prints do not come from some lowlife pimp or hooker. These prints come from a clean cut cop, one Sergeant Joleon Carter, currently instructing at the Academy. How very odd. At least he’ll be easy to find.

“Castle!”

“Yeah?”

“Field trip. Want to come along?”

“Yes. Right behind you.”

Castle looks forward immensely to seeing the Academy. It’s never figured in the bullpen chit-chat, and Beckett’s barely mentioned it except in the context of her graduation and her mingled relief and hurt that her father didn’t show up. It’s going to be very interesting, he thinks. Hard upon that thought, comes another: that Beckett may not feel the same way. Joining the Academy might have been an escape, but that might as easily mean another trigger for her ridiculously heavy load of guilt.

“What happens at the Academy?”

“You learn to be a cop. Self-defence, rules, regulations, how to investigate, evidence procedure. All that. Fitness. Tactical training.”

“Okay. Will your instructors still be there?”

“Why?” Beckett asks very suspiciously.

“Might be interesting to see how Rookie Beckett did at the Academy.”

Castle is astonished to see colour rising through Beckett’s sharp cheekbones.

“Beckett?”

“Nothing.”

“What aren’t you telling me?”

“Nothing. Well, actually, lots of things, but right now nothing.”

“Don’t belieeeeeeve yooooouuu.”

Beckett lifts one shoulder in a shrug and leaves it turned to him. Castle concludes that she isn’t going to talk. He wonders about the blush. Somehow he doesn’t think that over-driven, over-
intense Beckett was bottom of the class. O’Leary and Ryan had each said that she’d made Detective faster than anyone. Surely she’s not embarrassed about her achievements?

Castle’s suspicions harden into certainty when the Academy staff practically stand to attention as Beckett greets them. This does not seem normal. She hustles him past the display cabinets as she enquires about Carter, which also does not seem normal. Carter, it transpires, is giving a class. Beckett is swept up by another Sergeant, and Castle slides off to return to the display cabinets.

All blushes are explained. It might as well be renamed the Beckett trophy cabinet. If he had named the subject, it looks like she’d won it. Graduated top, with a margin that would be ridiculous if it weren’t real. If he’d written that, he’d have been laughed out of the libraries. He does some quick mental arithmetic, and then checks it on his fingers. Ah. Right. Over-compensating. Over-compensating for walking away? No, before that. But even then, still trying to be the best in the hope that her father would realise that she was there, be proud of her, stop drinking. Even after she walked away, she must still have been trying. Oh, Beckett. Oh, Kate. No wonder she never mentions it. No graduation photo on display in her apartment: no record of her achievements, or trophies. Nothing. Nothing in that bare, joyless apartment, with its indeterminate, abstract pictures and clean, sparse décor; nothing on her desk at work; nothing to remind her of that time.

It’s appalling to Castle that Beckett can’t bear to be reminded of her stunning success. He can’t imagine not celebrating Alexis’s achievements, holds his own close to his heart and displays not only his rejection letters but also the acceptance, the first million-seller letter, the awards; all in his office. Not in his living room, but there where, on the occasions he is tired, or upset, or worried, or blocked, he can remind himself that he is a success. He can’t get his head round the idea that she would want to forget her success, though he supposes that she wants to forget all of those five years.

He slithers back to the Sergeant’s office before his absence is noticed. The Sergeant is chatting to Beckett about the Twelfth, which detours into a technical discussion about phone evidence and call tracing, in more detail than Castle is ever likely to need. It’s interesting, but it wouldn’t make good writing. He ponders until Joleon Carter arrives.

Sergeant Carter is a tall mixed-race man with bright, intelligent eyes and an impressive record.

“How so?”

“We got called to a homicide in an SRO: the Comfort Hotel on East 27th Street.”

“Yeah? Been there a bit.”

“How so?”

“We thought we’d change it up a bit for some of the recruits. Give them a more realistic scenario. So we got this guy who needed to do a whole bunch of community service hours for beatin’ up on...
street-life – not enough evidence to put him away, and we used him. Selbright, he was called…” Sergeant Carter’s voice trails away. “Aw, shit. He’s your corpse, isn’t he?”

“Yes. Sorry, Sergeant. You just lost your training exercise.”

“Guess that explains why you’re here. My prints must’ve been all over that room.”

“Yep. It was a bit of a change from the rest. Lowlives and street people – and you.” Beckett smiles at the Sergeant. “So, when did you last use him?”

“Sunday afternoon, week ago. Boy, did he bitch about that. I don’t know what he thought he was gonna do, seeing as he had no other job and nothing to do. We finished up around about six. The recruits did pretty good, though – all had their gloves, most of ‘em found the evidence – we’d planted some white powder and a training gun – and we took ‘em all back to Gramercy and counted ‘em in. Wouldn’t want to lose one.” He smiles, nastily. “After all, they’d got their homework to do too.”

Beckett smiles equally nastily. “I remember that.” She looks a tad embarrassed. “Sorry to ask you, Sergeant, but can I have your whereabouts Sunday after six through to Monday noon?”

“That when he got dead? Sure. Wouldn’t expect you not to ask. I’d tear my recruits a new one for missing that just because it’s another cop. C’mon to the office and I’ll get you a copy of my schedule. I stayed on site till around nine, back here at six. Went home to Queens in between – I’ll give you my car registration and you can track it through the street cams, if you need to.”

“Pleasure to deal with a professional,” Beckett grins.

“Likewise, Detective.” Sergeant Carter pauses for a second. “Don’t suppose you’d like to come by a time, tell the rookies what it was like for you?”

Castle watches Beckett’s under-table fist clench. Her face and voice are completely unstressed. “I’d need to check with my Captain,” she says. “Let me ask him.”

“Okay. It’d be good if you could. We always need new examples.”

Beckett suddenly snickers. “You know, Sergeant, I’m still in touch with Detective O’Leary” –

“The Mountain?”

“Yeah, him. Seeing him tonight, as a matter of fact. Do you want me to ask him?”

“He was a bit of a one-off too, wasn’t he?” the Sergeant grins. “Yeah. That’d be fun. Please ask him to check with his Captain.”

“Will do.”

“Right. Let’s go get you your evidence. Can’t have a respectable Sergeant Instructor being hauled in.”

Everyone traipses along to the office and collects all the evidence. Castle and Beckett leave on a cloud of contentment, which becomes even more content when they return to the bullpen and find that tox has arrived. Selbright was dosed up on a rather interesting concoction which had included a substantial proportion of Viagra.

Sergeant Carter’s alibi checks out, not that Beckett had ever thought he was a real possibility.
While she and Castle have been out, the boys have been working through the various street lives whose prints came up, and have managed to interview quite a number of them. Espo’s commentary on the attributes of some of the women was not required, though she’ll let it pass because it’s reduced the possibilities quite a lot. If only the lab hadn’t been so backed up they’d have got here days ago. Still, they now have some leads. She’ll just follow up the cocktail of chemicals.

By the end of the afternoon the cocktail of chemicals has led her – or rather Ryan, who has the contacts in Narcotics – to one of the lowlives whose prints were in the SRO. How very convenient. A focused hour of interrogation by herself and Ryan later, in which the drug-dealing – ooops, alleged drug-dealing – lowlife is reduced to shivering terror and spills his guts in very satisfying style, they have a new lead. Uniforms are sent out to locate it, but they aren’t having much luck. That might, of course, be because it’s pouring with rain and even lowlives have some standards – not getting drenched seems to be one of them. Still, that’s what uniforms are for.

She makes sure that her phone is fully charged so that when the lead is located she’ll know about it and can come back – not if it’s ten p.m., unfortunately: she’s not allowed to interrogate lowlives late at night – or start early, and then decamps quietly for Molloy’s. Behind her she can hear Castle distracting the boys with thoughts of beer.


“Not bad. Murder doesn’t go slow.”

“Yeah?”

Beckett fills him in on the current case.

“The Academy’s using it for live-action training?”

“Would’ve been better than all that role-play.”

“True.”

“Oh, they asked me about going back to show them what a real cop looks like, so I said I’d have to ask Montgomery” – she smirks, though O’Leary raises an eyebrow – “and then I volunteered you.”

O’Leary spits out his beer. “You did what? Beckett, what have I ever done to you?”

“Arrested me.”

“You’re not still holding a grudge, are you?”

She smirks. “I said I’d tell you they were looking, and then it was up to you to ask your boss.”

O’Leary breathes in a tornado of relief and exhales a hurricane. “You were up at the Academy?”

“Yeah.”

“They still got you plastered all over the trophies?”

“Didn’t look.” That’s bitten off short, and O’Leary notices.

“Iffen it were me,” he drawls –

“Drop the hayseed. You’ve never been to the Midwest in your life.” –
“Iffen it were me,” he grins, “I’d be down there every week polishin’ them. You tellin’ me you’re still top of the leaderboard?”

“Like I said, I didn’t look.”

O’Leary casts her a glance that it’s fortunate she doesn’t see, and makes a small mental note to mention this to Castle, at a conveniently Beckettless moment. His beer empties, and another takes its place. “Why’d you want to see me? An’ where’s your boyfriend? Don’t you think he’ll be a bit upset that you’re cuddlin’ up to me?”

“N ope. He knows I’m here. He’s coming a bit later – couldn’t resist your charm and wit, or something like that. Personally, I think it’s just that he’s never met a Bigfoot before.”

“Wash yo’ mouth out, butterfly,” O’Leary drawls, slightly ruined by his wide grin.

“Back at you, flower-eater.”

“Now, why’d you wanna see me?”

Beckett looks at her soda. “I needed a drink with a pal.”

O’Leary lets the silence stretch as widely as his shoulders. “You got Castle. An’ that ME of yours, if you’re still talkin’.”

“We are. Seeing her Thursday.”

“You’re not sayin’ why me.”

“Castle’s all about emotions and feelings and leaps of intuition,” Beckett manages to emit. “You do facts and evidence. He’s not a detective and he doesn’t think like us. I need a reality check, and he’s not it.”
“I think you need to explain that a bit better. Somewheres between your mouth an’ my ears I think it lost some meanin’.” Beckett says nothing. “Beckett, c’mon. Only reason I c’n think of that you’re wanting to see me is that you wanna check your thinkin’ ‘bout your dad, like you did the other week.”

“Yeah,” Beckett drags out, extremely reluctantly. “Did I tell you I hate you being a good detective?” she grumps.

“You love me really.”

“Nah. I leave that to Pete.”

“So what d’you want to check?”

“I don’t know.”

“That’s helpful.”

Beckett wrinkles her nose at O’Leary, who smiles his iceberg-sized smile in return.

“I talked to Dad a couple of times. With the shrink there. Dad says he doesn’t remember anything and I had no good choices till he stopped drinking. He says I should have left him to die, if that was what it took.”

O’Leary whistles. “Ouch.”

“He says seeing me after he got dry was the best thing in the world. He says he never meant he didn’t want to be a family. He was matchmaking.”

O’Leary sniggers, in a bass rumble that vibrates the floor, and then laughs, which wobbles the windows. Beckett glares, which has no discernible effect on anything. “So what’s your problem?”

“I don’t know if he’s telling the truth. I think he is. But I can’t work it out. I’m too involved. I want it to be the truth, but I wanted that last time too.” She looks full at O’Leary’s mass, eyes suspiciously bright. “I need a reality check, and you know the story. I don’t wanna explain it. I don’t wanna talk about it either, but I gotta sort it all out. It’s getting to both of us.”

O’Leary pats her shoulder, carefully. “Yeah. So what’s changed from three weeks ago? Three weeks ago you didn’t believe any of that.”

“It all seems to fit together.” She lays out the facts. O’Leary hums, much in the manner of an elephant-sized bumble bee, and asks a few pertinent questions. Another beer happens, and another soda. He rumbles to himself, and asks some more pertinent questions. Finally he stops.

“Seems pretty simple to me, Beckett.”

“That’s nice,” she snips, but there’s a disturbingly emotional edge to it.

“You’re just too close.” She growls. “Cool it. See, you’re all worked up about it. It all sounds pretty consistent – screwed up, but consistent – to me. I don’t think he could have lied to you for five years, so let’s start there. No matter how much you wanted him to stay dry, you’d never have missed him bein’ inconsistent like that. I bet you’d noticed. I bet you were hypersensitive” –
“Ten dollar words? Do you want to be a writer or something?” – O’Leary ignores that, magnificently –

to anything that wasn’t normal. So I guess there wasn’t anything that wasn’t normal, ‘cause you’da spotted it, no matter how much you wanted it all to be right again. An’ then he went an’ said somethin’ totally dumb, an’ I guess there was more goin’ on than that, an’ you took it totally the wrong way. So I guess you need to work out why you keep takin’ him totally the wrong way.” O’Leary pauses for breath. “An’ I can’t help you with that.” He grins, looking over Beckett’s head. “But here’s your boyfriend, right on time.”

Castle swoops in and plumps himself down next to Beckett. “Beers?” he asks, and summons a pair of bottles on O’Leary’s nod. Following that, and since this is O’Leary, he unashamedly and obviously slings his arm round Beckett, ignores O’Leary’s amused grin and quirked hedge-aka-eye-brow, ignores equally Beckett’s unamused grumpy noise, and makes himself comfortable. All of this is merely a cover for providing Beckett with the support her evident tension needs.

“You finished swapping knitting patterns?” he asks happily, and is jointly punched in the shoulder. O’Leary pulls his punch – obviously, since Castle is still sitting on his seat and does not have a broken collarbone. Beckett might have pulled hers, but Castle doesn’t think so.

“I can’t knit,” she says, with some pride.

“I can,” O’Leary says. “Cept those tiny little toothpicks tend to break.”

Castle sniggers. Even Beckett raises a grin.

“Let’s get some chips or something to eat. I need to soak up the beer,” Castle says, and goes off to investigate.

“You okay now?”

“Helped. Let’s leave it.”

“Okay. But… pals, huh?”

“Pals, O’Leary.”

“So, I hear you’re arrestin’ instructors from the Academy now,” O’Leary says to Castle, who snorts and shakes his head. “What’d you think of the place?”

Castle considers. “For somewhere that turns out New York’s Finest, it’s a bit run down, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. They’re planning a new one out in Queens, but I guess we won’t see that for a few years. Anyways, why should the rookies get somewhere pretty when we didn’t?”

“How does it work?” Castle asks, intrigued and having been unwilling to ask Beckett much after her ignoring of the display cabinet. O’Leary expounds, at length, and with a wealth of stories of mischief-making after lights-out.

“Didn’t you do any of that, Beckett?” O’Leary eventually asks.

“No. I think after you lot they tightened up.” But there’s a slight awkwardness to the reply, and a slight hunching of her shoulders. A moment later she excuses herself.

“She never even looked at the display cabinet,” Castle says. “Her name’s all over it – everything,
just about – and she walked past like it wasn’t there.”

“Yeah.”

“They want her to go back and talk to the recruits – tell them what it’s like when you’re out there, I guess. She volunteered you, you know.”

“She said. Don’t guess she’s gonna do it.”

“No. She’ll manoeuvre Montgomery into saying she can’t.”

“She ain’t ready.”

“Nope.”

“What about her dad?”

“They’re both hurting. I just hope the shrink can get them through before one of them decides that it’s not worth the pain any more.”

“Amen to that,” O’Leary says pontifically, and upends his bottle as the chips arrive.

The rest of the evening passes in good humour, stories of pranks and the early days of Officer O’Leary, wheeled out (possibly by an Amtrak engine, Castle thinks) every time they wanted someone who looked intimidating; a few stories of Beckett’s early days, though not many, and eventually dissolution in a cloud of beer.

Tuesday is not enlivened by the interrogation of the majority of the remains of the lowlives, nor by the bringing in of the pusher, who, after Ryan and Beckett have finished with him, is taken away by Narcotics, whose satisfied smiles seem to indicate that something has gone right. Nor is it enlivened by Montgomery summoning Beckett, shortly after lunchtime.

“Beckett,” he says seriously, “How are things going?”

“Fine, sir.”

“Good. I notice you’re still going to therapy.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good.”

“Sir.” She tries to think of a deflection, and fails.

“You let me know if anything is wrong, okay?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Dismissed.”

Montgomery frowns gently as she leaves. There’s nothing he can do but make sure that Beckett knows he’s watching. Still, backed up lab notwithstanding – surely the city should be able to staff and fund it better – she’s a lot happier now. He peers out into the bullpen, and observes Castle in his accustomed position next to Beckett’s desk. He’s clearly theorising wildly. He’s also about three feet closer than he used to be. Frown is replaced by smug smile. Best idea he’d ever had, that.
“Hello.”

“Good evening, Detective Beckett. What would you like to discuss today?”

“Two things. The choices I had, and what Castle said about hearing what Dad says as if I were him.”

It appears that Detective Beckett is no more capable of expressing that concept in accurate English than she had been on Friday.

“With which would you prefer to start?”

“Neither.”

“So there is a third matter that you wish to discuss?”

“Not exactly.” Dr Burke adopts a manner of actively listening, radiating gentle encouragement. Thinking is to be encouraged, and talking about it more so. In Detective Beckett’s case, any talking is to be encouraged. “I did some thinking. I think Dad’s telling the truth. I think he just put it badly. Everyone else – Castle, O’Leary, you – thinks he’s probably telling the absolute truth. I’m still not sure. I think that’s because I’m too close to see it. If it was a case, I’d be sure. But it isn’t.”

Were Dr Burke prone to revealing his thoughts and emotions, which he is not, his jaw would be approaching the floor. Detective Beckett has made the major breakthrough for which he has been hoping for some time: she has, despite her words of doubt, accepted that her father is telling the truth.

“But… but he keeps putting things badly. He made me think that he wanted a different family. Then he said I should have left him to die. What was the point of it all if he doesn’t get that I couldn’t leave him to die till I worked out that I couldn’t save anyone but myself?”

“I believe that you have arrived at your second issue. Let us try to express it more clearly. Perhaps you could consider it as if it were to be insight into a witness?”

Detective Beckett’s expression first clears, and then becomes one of intense thought.

“Castle said,” she muses, “that I was hearing what I thought Dad would hear if I were him and knew what I felt.”

“Mmm?”

“I think what he meant was…” she stops to find the correct words… “if I was in Dad’s shoes, I’d be so hurt by what I did that I would never believe me again. So I expect that he’s as hurt as that and is – was? – saying it. But he isn’t. I think he isn’t.”

“You are saying that if you were in your father’s position, you would resent being abandoned, and you would be unable to consider yourself a family again in consequence?”

“Yes. Exactly like that.”

“Is not that exactly the feeling which you expressed to me as being your own position?”

Detective Beckett emits a most peculiar noise. Dr Burke really cannot describe it. No doubt Mr Castle’s literary bent would be able to oblige, but there is no necessity for such frivolity. On reflection, literary is quite possibly the wrong word, although naturally Dr Burke will not make
such a judgement without reading one of Mr Castle’s novels first. Presently, however, his schedule does not permit such a digression into popular culture. He sees no need to alter his schedule.

“You what now?”

“You have, at various points, intimated to me that you felt that your father had abandoned you for, firstly, alcohol; and then, although you have now altered your opinion, for Mr Castle’s family. It appears to me that you may be projecting your entirely understandable emotions on to your father. This is not uncommon.”

Detective Beckett stares at Dr Burke. He condescends to explain further. “You are assuming that your father will react as you would. That is the simplest way to explain the position. However, it is very unlikely that he would do so. Firstly, he recognises that the first fault was his. You will recall that in our second joint session he told you that he knew that he had abandoned you for whiskey, long before you stopped enabling him.”

Dr Burke pauses, in order that Detective Beckett may process the first point: that she must realise that her father’s experiences are not hers, and that therefore they will never react in the same fashion. It is simply not possible for her to comprehend the experiences of an in-remission alcoholic, nor, he hopes, will she ever experience it for herself. He considers it extremely unlikely, although he strongly suspects that that is because Detective Beckett is worryingly close to being a workaholic. Still, Mr Castle is dealing with that issue in a perfectly manageable way. Distraction.

Dr Burke is perfectly well aware that Mr Castle does not like him, and is equally well aware that this is because Mr Castle is really quite ridiculously protective of Detective Beckett. Dr Burke is perfectly content with that position, since he finds that his methods rarely result in his being liked. Not for him the grateful testimonials and letters which surgeons or paediatricians might receive and which they thoroughly deserve. Dr Burke is quite satisfied to know that his patients will never need to see him again, and that they are healed of their mental wounds. Testimonials are unnecessary: his professional reputation remains unmatched. The opinion of his colleagues is far more important than that of his patients.

Detective Beckett appears to be thinking furiously.

“You’re saying,” she eventually emits, “that he wouldn’t react like I would. That it’s different for him… oh. Because he’s an alcoholic.”

“Exactly so.”

“Because he’s been through something that I never have.”

“Indeed.”

“So…” – there is an extremely protracted silence – “I shouldn’t second guess him.”

“Indeed,” Dr Burke says again, mildly, and does not indicate his enormous relief that Detective Beckett has turned some intelligence upon her relationship with her father.

“He doesn’t see it like I do. Like I would.” She considers the thought some more. “If he’s telling the truth… he sees it all as he got what’s left of the family back. He doesn’t see that anything he says or does could be taken to mean anything else.”

“So whereas you see it…”

“I couldn’t have forgiven him walking away from me when I needed him.”
“But you have already identified that it was not need, but enabling.”

Detective Beckett thinks some more. “So what you’re saying is… that I’m not seeing the right pattern. He sees it through” – she searches for a word – “the lens of being an alcoholic. I don’t. I’m looking at it like it was just Mom dying. But it isn’t. It’s not about Mom dying – well, it is sort of but that’s not the real problem. It’s about him having been an alcoholic” – Dr Burke notices most particularly that Detective Beckett has changed the tense in which she refers to her father’s disease from present to past – “so he sees everything through that and I don’t.”

Dr Burke is delighted. Detective Beckett’s ferocious intelligence has led her to an important conclusion.

“Exactly so, Detective Beckett. Now, would you like to consider how that important realisation might lead you to misinterpret your father’s rather loose phrasing?”

Dr Burke observes Detective Beckett’s dangerous half-smile, and recognises it as likely to be that which she develops on the trail of a criminal. It appears that today’s session has been pivotal, and they are not yet half-way through the allotted time.

“I think… I think that I keep thinking that because I resent him abandoning me, he thinks the same way, deep down. Just like I squashed it all down for all that time, so did he. But he knows that I had a good reason, and he knows that he didn’t. So it’s different. But he didn’t know that I was still” – she stops. Dr Burke waits – “hurting,” she eventually says, “because I never told him, so he thought we were all good and never thought that I might see it differently.”

“Carry on,” Dr Burke encourages.

“It’s just what Castle said. What he thinks he’s said isn’t what I hear. He thought he was encouraging us to mix with Castle’s family.” She acquires a slightly more forceful aspect. “Though I don’t think he should be matchmaking.” She relaxes again, insofar as Detective Beckett is ever relaxed in Dr Burke’s room. “I thought he wanted a different family.”

“In the light of our discussion this evening, can you now explain why you interpreted his words in that manner?”

“Because I would have wanted a better family that wasn’t secretly unhappy with me all the time. I couldn’t believe he’d forgiven me because I hadn’t forgiven him.” Her face crumples. “I thought I had right up till I had to deal with Castle and his family. It was just me I thought I hadn’t forgiven.”

Dr Burke passes the box of Kleenex, and waits patiently while Detective Beckett blows her nose.

“It is very fortunate that you met Mr Castle,” he opines. Detective Beckett’s look of utter bewilderment is most amusing. “While your life may have seemed satisfying, and your career has provided, and continues to provide, you with considerable success” – Dr Burke wonders why that should make Detective Beckett wince – “eventually you would have come into contact with another case similar to that of the Berowitzes, and eventually you would have had to deal with a close and loving family. At that point, whenever it arose, these issues would have surfaced, and under circumstances where you did not have the unquestioning support of Mr Castle, you would have found it far harder to resolve them.”

Detective Beckett’s look of utter bewilderment has altered to utter astonishment. Dr Burke emits a small, prim tut.
“Come now, Detective. You cannot fail to admit that Mr Castle has been a significant help to you.”

Eventually Detective Beckett finds her voice. “I thought you didn’t like Castle,” she says rather faintly.

“On the contrary. Mr Castle has been extremely helpful and I value his insights. I believe you are projecting Mr Castle’s feelings on to me. Of course, his annoyance stems from his desire to protect you. It is entirely understandable and indeed laudable.”

Detective Beckett is wordless.

“Let us return to your two issues. You said, at the start of this session, that you wanted to discuss choices and Mr Castle’s insight. We have discussed Mr Castle’s insight. Do you wish to continue on that topic, or turn to choices?”

“Choices. I want to think about the other stuff some more.”

“Choices it shall be, then. Please expand.”

“Dad said he wasn’t ready to take the only good option, so I had no good choices. I could kill myself enabling him, or I could kill myself with guilt when I stopped. Only I could save myself,” she says with bitter emphasis. “Except I didn’t, really. I stopped enabling him, and he saved himself, but I didn’t. Then I chose to go see him, once he was dry.” She stops. “We’ve been through this.”

“Repetition may be helpful. It is certainly not wasted time.”

“I thought I had Dad back. He looked like he loved me. Not some ghost copy of Mom. Anyway. I tried so hard to forgive him but I never really managed it. So I just tried harder and harder. So now I’m down to two choices: whether to forgive him and whether to forgive myself.”

“Mmm?”

“The second isn’t a choice. I have to. I just don’t know how.”

“We can discuss that, at a convenient time. You have made significant progress today towards that goal.”

“The first one… well. I need to try to forgive Dad. Maybe the joint sessions here will help. I thought maybe if I invited him to brunch on Sunday? Something normal. But not at home. I don’t want him at home yet, and I don’t want to be at his. It’s too… it’s too obvious when I want to leave.”

“You say try to forgive,” Dr Burke notes. “Could you expand on that, please?” He will not, yet, address the idea of brunch.

“I can’t decide now if I can or not. It’s too soon. I want to, but that isn’t the same thing, and… well, it all hurt so much and it’s not fixed and…”

“And?”

“I don’t know if I can.”
“Does it matter if you cannot?”

Detective Beckett gapes at Dr Burke. “Of course it does!”

“Why?”

Detective Beckett emits another peculiarly strangulated noise.

“Detective Beckett,” Dr Burke says, managing patience, and after a noticeable pause in proceedings, “please tell me your age.”

“What? Twenty-nine. What’s that got to do with anything?”

“And you are successful and respected in your profession?”

“Yes.”

“And you are in a serious relationship with Mr Castle?”

“If you don’t count that I can’t face his family in his home, yes. So what?”

“So you are a mature adult” – Dr Burke feels that this is a reasonable statement, despite many proofs to the contrary – “in which case, whether you wish a relationship with your father or not is up to you. There is no real reason to have one, unless you wish it. You are not dependent on him, are you?”

“No, but he’s my Dad.”

“That is true. However, once you are an adult, you have the choice whether to maintain a relationship with him or not. You are not dependent on him for support: financial or emotional. Therefore you need not, after due consideration, forgive him, and you need not blame yourself or feel in any way guilty for that decision. However, you must think very carefully over a sustained period about which is the right choice to make.”

“But if I don’t forgive my dad I won’t be able to sort out Castle’s family.”

“That is not quite correct. If you do not come to terms with a revised relationship with your father, whatever that relationship may be or indeed if there is no relationship at all, then you will not be able to deal with Mr Castle’s family.”

Detective Beckett continues to stare at Dr Burke as if he had developed coloured spots. She emits some more strangulated noises. Dr Burke changes tack.

“Detective Beckett,” he says sharply, to cut through her stunned state. “Please explain to me your recent dealings with your acquaintance, Medical Examiner Parrish, with Detective O’Leary, and with Mr Castle; in each case since Mr Castle arrived at the Twelfth Precinct.”

“What on earth has that to do with anything?”

“That is what you are here to uncover. Please undertake the exercise.”

“Lanie… Lanie and I’ve been friends a long time. Met at college. But then she started getting in my
face about everything and telling me I was doing everything wrong. We fell out. I didn’t need that.”

“Mm?”

“Castle, O’Leary, Ryan and Espo forced an, um, intervention session. We patched it up. I’m seeing her Thursday,” Detective Beckett adds.

“Mm. And Detective O’Leary?”

“Met him when I was a rookie. He arrested me,” Detective Beckett says blandly. Dr Burke raises a surprised eyebrow. “I was on a Vice op. He bought the cover.” Ah. Much is explained. “Anyway, we got to be good pals. Worked together for a while.”

“And more recently?”

“I went to collect David Berowitz – the drunk – from Central Park Precinct. Castle tagged along.”

Ah yes. Dr Burke remembers Mr Castle mentioning that occasion. “O’Leary was there. I hadn’t seen him for a while, but he was pretty pleased to see me. He and Castle hit it off – O’Leary was messing with Castle, which was pretty funny – and I think they’ve seen each other a couple more times than I know about.”

Dr Burke thinks that this is almost certainly the case, and admires Detective Beckett’s ability to deduce events from almost no information at all. If she would only apply her deductive skills a little more logically to her own situation, matters would progress a great deal more easily. Not, however, more rapidly. In Detective Beckett’s case, more haste would certainly produce less speed.

“Three weeks ago, there had been a quarrel between yourself and both Mr Castle and Detective O’Leary” –

“How did you know that?”

“Deduction,” says Dr Burke, as blandly as Detective Beckett had said arrested a moment ago – “How did that arise?”

“O’Leary was pushing on the sore points. He never did that. He was always just there when he thought I needed him. I never asked him, he just showed up. This time he was pushing.”

“And Mr Castle? You have, I am aware from him, had a number of disagreements, but for our present purposes the earliest one will suffice.”

“He thought I didn’t care about Dad. He didn’t get it. He thought I’d abandoned Dad.”

“Given your unstinting support for your father, that must have been very painful.”

“Yes,” Detective Beckett says shortly.

“Thank you. Now, I should like you to consider the common factor in each of these breaches.”

There is a short silence.

“They each opened up something I didn’t want to open,” Detective Beckett says reluctantly.

“Mm. In brief, they hurt you.”

“Suppose so.”
“And your reaction to being hurt?”

Detective Beckett cringes. “Stop seeing them.”

“Indeed,” says Dr Burke, without the slightest hint of any condemnation. “As the old saying would have it, a burnt child fears the fire.” Detective Beckett makes a face at the adage, but does not protest. Obviously, she can see the evident correctness of the sequence of events. “I expect that you have used the technique in other, similar situations. We need not repeat those: it will add nothing to the point.” He observes Detective Beckett’s look of relief with sympathy. Increasing her discomfort will not assist.

“Please consider your recent reaction to your father.”

Realisation dawns.

“He hurt me. So I stopped seeing him.”

“Indeed. Therefore, you need to consider carefully whether you believe that he will not hurt you further, before making any decisions on the nature of your continuing relationship, if any.”

“But I can only do that if I see him.”

“Indeed,” Dr Burke says again. “You may, as you have already indicated, see him here, in a joint session. You suggested that you would continue to bring your game, in order to produce a feeling of normality. You may also wish to undertake other activities with him: you mentioned brunch?”

“Yeah. With Castle.” Detective Beckett makes a face. “He can referee.”

Dr Burke considers that a short discussion with Mr Castle during Friday’s session might be profitable. Referee implies a worryingly confrontational meeting.

“I see no disadvantage to planning such an outing,” he says calmly. “It will certainly assist your thinking, if you wish to do it, but it will not in any way be harmful if you do not. I would counsel against undertaking this brunch if Mr Castle cannot be present, however. The presence of a supportive third party may not, in the end, be required, but should be available if needed.”

“Huh,” Detective Beckett says, thoughtfully. Rather more briskly, she then consults her watch. “Time’s up. I’ll see you on Friday. Good night, Dr Burke.”

“Good night.”

“That was weird,” Beckett says from somewhere under Castle’s chin.

“What was weird? And why are you hiding down there?”

“I’m comfy. I’m not hiding.”

Castle is not entirely convinced of this. Beckett has been quiet and thoughtful since he showed up, though for once not in any way distressed. That in itself would set his curiosity twitching, but she’ll talk when she’s ready and pushing, as he has so painfully discovered, does not improve the conversation.

“About Sunday.”

“Yeah?” Oooohhh. Maybe one itch of curiosity will be scratched.
“I think I’m going to invite Dad for brunch. Same place as last week. Er – will you come too?”

Beckett sounds ridiculously uncertain. Of course, that may be because it’s set fair to be an uncomfortable way to spend a Sunday morning. On the other hand, brunches with his family haven’t exactly been the feather-bed comfort he and especially Beckett might have liked.

“Oh okay.”

Beckett immediately snuggles in more tightly. Castle automatically curls his arm more tightly. He doesn’t even have to think about that any more, it just happens. Pavlovian reflex, or something like that, which is fine as long as Beckett retains a similarly Pavlovian reflex to snuggle in.

“Tonight’s session was weird.”

“Mmm?”

“Don’t do that.”

“What?”

“Make that mmm noise. Dr Burke does it all the time.”

Castle does not wish to resemble Dr Burke in any way. He abruptly changes his mode of speech.

“How was it weird?”

“We got through a lot. A few things made sense.”

Castle very much wants to ask what, Beckett? He just stops himself humming mmm again.

“What you said on Friday made more sense. I don’t think like an alcoholic. I think like the relative of an alcoholic. So Dad says something and I think he means something else.” Castle draws a supportive little pattern down her arm and up again. “He said he valued your help.”

Castle chokes, splutters, wheezes and practically faints in shock. “Okay, that’s the weird bit covered.”

“Yeah,” Beckett says feelingly. “That was seriously weird.”

“I still don’t like him,” Castle says rather childishly.

“He knows that too. He said so.” Castle splutters some more. “He said you were projecting your own feelings on to him. He was really big on projection. You, me… Ugh.” Castle remains speechless. “The other weird thing was that he said it didn’t matter if I forgave Dad or not, so long as I came to terms with it.”

A noise that sounds something like er-glurp exits Castle’s throat. Dr Burke said what?

“He said that I just needed to come to terms with whatever the decision was and then I’d be able to deal with your family.”

The same noise extracts itself from Castle’s throat again and hovers in the air. He is truly shocked. Strangely, Beckett doesn’t seem to be quite so shocked. Then again, she’s had an hour or so to consider it. Fortunately, he is unable to vocalise any thoughts at all before he’s had a chance to think about them, on account of his throat being full of non-verbal noises.
“It’s like he gave me permission not to forgive Dad. I want to, but if I can’t he’s made me see that doesn’t make me the world’s worst daughter.”

“But you want to.”

“Yeah. I want to. But if I can’t... There’s still things I can do. I can still sort out how I feel about your family, and deal with that.”

Castle draws another little pattern up and down her arm. He’s not sure how he feels about this. Logically, which is not his preferred mode of operation, it makes sense, though he’d like to think about it. Emotionally, he doesn’t like it at all. He needs to work that through, though, because this is absolutely not about him. Something floats back through his head. Dr Burke had said you are hoping for a happy ending. Temper your hopes. Sometimes the best that you can hope for is a different pattern of interaction. Oh. He hadn’t liked it then and he doesn’t like it now. There must be a reason behind that, but he needs time and – well, space – to work it out. Fortunately Beckett appears to have relapsed into thought again, and while she is still comfortably tucked against him, there hasn’t been a hint of a romantic interlude since she kissed him (very thoroughly) when he got here. Just as well. He’s not feeling at all romantic right now: in fact, he’s feeling very, very uncomfortable and he needs to work out why. The last thing they need right now is some self-made disaster.

Beckett yawns widely, and Castle realises that it’s after ten. Time he went home. He says so, and follows up with a leisurely, but less than passionately possessive, kiss. Beckett quirks an eyebrow.

“Tired, Beckett. Dealing with Mother wears me down.”

Beckett pats him reassuringly. “I’ll clear a closet, if you want?”

“What, and disturb the coat collection? I couldn’t do that.”

“It’s okay. The coats will share the bed with me. You can have the closet.” She smirks evilly, and Castle kisses her a good deal less tentatively.

“Not likely. The coats won’t kiss you.”

“Guess not,” Beckett says mischievously. Castle growls, and kisses her again on his way to the door, a little desperately.

He thinks all the way home, but at the end of the cab ride he’s no more enlightened as to the reason for his discomfort than he was at the beginning. He wanders into his study, pours himself a drink, balances his feet on his desk and continues to ponder his unexpected qualms.

Well, that was the plan. Right up till his mother barges in, destroying the chance of quiet, peaceful thought.

“Oh, Richard darling.” That is not a good start. That frequently precedes commentary such as about my Saks account, or my off-off-off Broadway production, or I’m having a little party. On reflection, that start indicates some new disaster. Or as his mother would have it: a good idea. Only in her mind. “I had an idea.” He knew it. Oh, God. “I think that we should” – that would be the Royal we, then, because it surely isn’t including Castle or Alexis – “have brunch here on Sunday, and invite Katherine and her father.”

“Sorry, Mother,” Castle says with considerable relief at having an excuse which will not lead to an argument. “I’ve already got something planned for Sunday morning.”
“Oh?” Martha asks inquisitively. “What would that be?”

“None of your business,” Castle says, almost humorously.

“Have fun, darling.”

Castle would be a lot happier if his mother hadn’t waltzed out with an expression of considerable nosiness. No doubt he can expect an inquisition later. He can, however, prevent brunches or anything else happening in his loft, until everyone is okay with it.

He returns to pondering the problem of his considerable discomfort with the idea that Beckett might not be able to forgive her father. Dr Burke’s words sting now as they had when first spoken. But of course he wants a happy ending. All the loose ends tied up tightly, all the plot twists resolved, he and his Beckett set to live happily ever after. It was all falling into place. It’s up to her: it’s always been up to her, so why does this irk him?

The whiskey level falls in small sips, the clock ticks on in small seconds, and Castle continues to try to find the roots of his unhappiness. Finally, his tired gaze falls on a picture of himself and a very small Alexis, holding hands, and light finally dawns, far too late for his sleeping habits. Family first, family before everything. He’d known this, months ago. He’s hardwired to protect and love his family, small as it is. Even at her most annoying (and she is currently intensely annoying) he would never leave his mother in any unhappiness or difficulty.

But Beckett might yet cut ties with her father. Lose her family – choose to lose her family. And he has a real, if previously unrealised, issue with that. So first off, he absolutely needs to work out what his problem is, because he’s spent weeks telling her that it doesn’t matter, that he’ll be there whatever, that if she splits with her father she’s still got him. But now it’s come to the point, and he’s jibbing, and he doesn’t know why.

Oh. He does know why. It’s right there in the picture in front of him. If Beckett can cut ties with her father, then, however remote the possibility, Alexis might cut ties with him, and that thought scares the shit out of him. The idea that his little family might fall apart cuts him to the core. Primitive, atavistic that may be, but it hits right at the centre of his soul. First his mother, and then he, had done everything to hold them together, even if everything else fell apart around them.

Okay, he’s worked out the problem. He doesn’t have an answer, but at least he knows what the issue actually is. He’s not sure how he deals with it if Beckett doesn’t want…

No. That’s not right. It’s got nothing to do with want. Only she can save herself. And contrariwise, she can’t and couldn’t save her father. She had to walk away once to save herself… and now she might have to do it again because she simply cannot cope with the pain. That’s not want. She wants to forgive – she’s just terrified that she can’t. If she simply didn’t want, then she wouldn’t be the woman he loves.

His first instinct is not to say a word about this. It’s his problem, not hers. She’s doing her therapy, and she doesn’t need more complications. He takes himself off to bed, half wishing she were there, half glad she isn’t, and tosses and turns through part-remembered nightmare and twisted sheets.

In the morning, logy, thick-headed and very much inclined not to emerge from his bed at all, Castle clings to a strong coffee and some rather solid bagels (had he not stored them correctly? Or is it just that nothing is quite right this morning?) and manages to answer precisely nothing with any sense. Fortunately this is sufficiently common that no-one bats an eyelid: assuming (Castle does not correct them) that he was writing very late. Alexis is shooed off to school, his mother disappears to her own pursuits without, thankfully, raising questions, and Castle returns to his study with a vague
feeling of disquiet and another large cup of coffee, adopting the same pose as late last night.

Eventually, he realises that his disquiet is all down to not telling Beckett how he feels. All their problems have come from – well, mostly her – not telling the other how they feel. It would be a particularly dumb idea to start down that road himself. He remembers, suddenly, his odd and unpleasant feeling of second-bestness back when this all began. He shouldn’t inflict that on Beckett, even if she never knows it. It also occurs to him that he’s never quite told her how intrusive his mother is being, even if the not-quite-jokes about clearing a closet must have clued her in. She’s never asked, though – given him the space he’s tried to give her, until he’s ready to talk.

Urgh. He doesn’t want to talk, but they can’t go into Friday with this unresolved. That means tonight, because Beckett mentioned she was going out with Lanie tomorrow, and then it’s Friday. Urgh. He drains his coffee, texts Alexis, and rather than going straight to the precinct, goes to the gym to work out his considerable frustration on a rowing machine and then the weights. As a consequence, he doesn’t reach the Twelfth till well after ten, going on eleven, and appears to have missed Esposito and Beckett tag-teaming a ravaged bottle blonde hooker on the subject of Brett Selbright. That is not a good start.

The rest of the day is taken up with proof, more witnesses, and finally a confession. It’s very boring, comparatively. Brett Selbright had been set up by the bottle blonde hooker and beaten to death by her pimp. Ugh. Sordid, sleazy and nasty.

And, of course, now he needs to talk to Beckett. Today is not improving.
The first thing Beckett thinks about on Wednesday morning is Castle’s slightly discomforting, slightly distant thoughtfulness. It gives her the same feeling of marginal second-bestness as it had a week ago. She reminds herself forcibly that he’ll talk when he’s ready, and then reminds herself further that treating one’s partner as if they were a suspect or recalcitrant witness is dumb.

That established, her next thought is that she has to call her dad. This is also an unpleasant thought. She’s only doing it because she knows she has to try – really try, so that she can come to terms with whatever the outcome eventually is – and because she is not now and never will be a coward. Not calling would be chicken-hearted, and she can’t bear to see that in her mirror. She quietly disappears to the back stairs when the boys aren’t there – she’s sent them off to deal with some more street-walking witnesses, though she’s reserved the blonde they’d seen on the CCTV for herself – and dials.

“Katie? Is everything okay?”

“I’m fine, Dad. Um… Dad, would you like to go for brunch on Sunday morning?”

There is a shocked silence. “Really?”

“With Castle and me.”

“Yes. Yes. Where, when?”

“Essex,” Beckett says decisively, “at 11, soon as they open. 120 Essex Street. I’ll make a reservation.”

“Okay. Er… I’m really glad you called.”

“See you Friday, Dad.”

“Okay. Bye.”

Phew. Done. She’s aware that she cut the call rather short, but there’s only so much she can take at once, and she’s done the really hard bit. She strides back into the bullpen to find that Castle is not there but the blonde hooker is in Interrogation, smiles very nastily and summons Esposito. Intimidation and interrogation. Just what she needs to improve the day.

The hooker is reduced to a small smear of terrified babbling in a remarkably short time. Normally they’re as tough as rawhide, but this one’s a little younger and not quite as hardened, despite the ravaged appearance. She gives up the name of her companion, who is also her pimp. Ugh. Nasty, brutish and sordid. Beckett does not have any sympathy for the corpse at all, but she has to do her job.

The rest of the day is taken up with arresting the pimp, the girl as accessory (though she’ll try for a plea deal because Selbright had beaten her up) and the consequent paperwork. Castle, showing up later than usual and admitting to a lengthy gym session, does not help with one single solitary sheet of the paperwork, which occupies the rest of the day.

At the end of the day Castle’s increasing tension, which has expressed itself in fidgeting, turns into words.
“Beckett, we need to talk.”

She looks absolutely shocked. Oh. That was a stupid way to put that. “Not like that. Really not like that.” Her face relaxes somewhat.

“What about?”

“Not here. Let me,” he says theatrically, “treat you to the delights of a gourmet dinner” –

“Remy’s it is, then” –

“Yes. Let’s go.”

Even when they’re installed at Remy’s with fries, burgers, and drinks of choice all in front of them, it’s very noticeable that Castle is fidgety, unhappy, and notably reluctant to start talking. After not noticeably long, Beckett gets rather bored of that.

“Okay, Castle, spill. What’s up? You look like someone stole your candy bar.”

Castle still doesn’t answer for a moment. Beckett considers, and with only a moderate degree of reluctance rejects, interrogating him until he starts to talk.

“It’s Mother,” he finally emits. “Well, it’s Mother and it’s what you said last night about not being able to forgive your father and I really find that hard to handle and we need to talk about it before Friday and you’re seeing Lanie tomorrow and so we have to talk about it now and” –

“Stop. Slow down. Start with your mother.” Mother is easiest. The second comment has opened a pit in her gut. Castle and his family. Castle who famously has no father and is absolutely the best father he can be, great father, dutiful and loving son, oh Christ. She can see all this starting to fall apart exactly where she thought it would, months ago, regardless of him saying really not like that. She braces herself, and doesn’t speak. If she does, she’ll panic and it will all go wrong instantly. She’d – they’d – agreed they might make mistakes, but they’d try to mend them. So just listen, Kate, rather than taking it wrongly when it hasn’t even been said.

“Mother,” Castle says with considerable bitterness and venom, “is still plotting. You were right to leave when you did. They came back two hours early. Alexis was furious with her,” he says unexpectedly. “They never row, but Alexis was yelling so loud you could have heard it at Central Park. Anyway. Mother’s so convinced that if she only puts you and your dad in the loft with all of us it’ll all be fine straight away that she can’t get her head out her ass.”

Beckett goggles. She’s never heard Castle criticise his mother like that.

“She’s planning something now. I don’t know what it is but I know she’s machinating. If she could use a computer I’d worry, but she’s still trying to progress past the technicalities of an ATM. But she’s going to try something, no matter how much I tell her to butt out and leave it alone. It’s going to be disastrous,” he says heavily. “Either she’ll spring something on us – interrupt something and expect it all to be happy families and the Waltons” – Beckett makes a disbelieving noise, and stays otherwise quiet – “or she’ll try to give you advice. She thinks she can stand in for your mother.”

“She thinks what?” Beckett says, appalled and furious in one instant. “No way. No freaking way. If she tries that your mother or not she will regret it. I don’t want another mother. I don’t want someone I barely know trying to interfere. Don’t we have enough problems with my daddy issues” – the edge on that cuts the air – “and the fact I can’t sit in your home with your family? I can’t stand Dr Burke but at least he knows what he’s doing.” She runs out of infuriated breath, and drops her head into her hands. “Why can’t we just find a deserted island somewhere?” arrives, rather
muffled and with a disturbing note of angry misery.

“I wish we could,” Castle agrees. “I’m trying to rein my mother in.”

“I know.”

“But that’s only one thing.”

Beckett’s stock of courage starts to exit her mind by way of the hole in her stomach. That really doesn’t sound good.

“I know it’s not about me” – oh God – “and I don’t have the right to have an opinion, but I was…” please just get on with it, Castle “…really upset that you might not be able to forgive your father.” Here we go. I knew it. My fucking family issues, ruining everything. She doesn’t look up. “It took me ages to sort it out, last night and this morning.” Beckett can’t bear to hear this. “You know how much my family means to me.” Don’t I just. “Even if Mother is currently doing her best to annoy me.” I know this. Just get on with it. “And I wanted it all to work out” – You’re breaking up with me, aren’t you? Just hurry up. No point dragging it out – “so that you got the same. Happy ever after.” A tear puddles and runs down her nose. Since her head is still in her hands, Castle can’t see it. Some dignity left. “Dr Burke told me I shouldn’t hope for that, that it might be that the best outcome was a different interaction. But I really hoped it would all work out. And then you said you might not be able to forgive your father.” I knew it. My Dad ruins another chance. Some more tears drip. “And I’ve spent most of the night trying to work out why that bothers me. I wasn’t going to tell you about it, but every time we haven’t talked it’s all gone horribly wrong and I didn’t want that to happen because I really don’t want to mess this up” – wait, what? – “so I decided I had to tell you about it and Beckett have you actually heard a single word I’ve said in the last five minutes?”

Beckett finds that her hands are being detached from her face and her chin tipped up.

“Why are you crying? Don’t cry, Beckett. Stop it. You can’t cry in Remy’s. We’ll be banned. Sweetheart, stop crying.”

Castle sounds almost as panicked by the thought of being banned from Remy’s as by the relatively uncommon sight of Beckett crying in public.

“What’s wrong? Kate” – he puts his hands round her face and strokes her cheeks gently where the tears have run – “talk to me. What did I say?” Beckett sniffs, blows her nose, and doesn’t answer. She doesn’t exactly want to admit what she’d been thinking. “Okay, so as I was saying, I was thinking about it all night and I think it bothered me in case Alexis didn’t want to be a family any more but then I thought that it’s not that you don’t want to it’s that your father’s hurt you so often and so much that you just can’t stand up under it any more. Which is totally different from not wanting to. But it took ages to work it out and please will you stop sniffling and talk to me because I’m really worried about you now?”

“I thought…” Beckett stops, and blows her nose again. “You kept saying that you had wanted everything to work out.”

“Uh?”

“It sounded like you meant it wasn’t working out. Us. Me. All because of Dad. Again,” she adds bitterly, and buries her face in a napkin.

“No. We’re fine. Aren’t we?” Castle adds hastily.
“Mphm,” Beckett snuffles into the napkin, which is beginning to disintegrate in her twisting fingers. Castle removes it from her hands and puts a clean one into them. She snuffles a little further.

“C’mon. Stop crying. We’re fine.” Beckett presses her cheeks a little further into his hands. Fortunately this booth is somewhat screened from the general population of Remy’s, which as ever is quite likely to include a number of vaguely familiar cops. Any minute now – in fact right now, as she straightens up, dabs her eyes and recovers herself – Beckett will remember that.

“Fine?” she says, soggily.

“Yep. Just fine.” If they weren’t in public, he’d kiss her, assertively, and show her just how fine they are. “We’re fine. And now that you’ve stopped sniffing, can I finish talking to you?”

“Not here. Let’s get a doggy bag and go home to mine. I don’t wanna do this here.”

Twenty minutes later they’re gathering up plates and warming up the food in Beckett’s apartment.

“So why’d you want to be here?”

“You finish first. Then... we need to talk about how I feel.” Castle goes pale. “Not about you. I told you. That hasn’t changed.” He relaxes, and reaches for her, as if to reassure himself that she’s still there, still his. She slips a little closer. “Finish, Castle. Let’s get it all out there.”

“Okay. So it took me all night to work out that wanting to forgive your father might not be enough to do it. But that won’t be for lack of wanting or trying – I mean, you’ve even invited him to brunch. But it really scared me because what if Alexis ever felt like that? I’ve always thought that nothing could ever break that bond and then you said what if I can’t forgive him and Dr Burke sort of gave you permission not to feel bad about it if you couldn’t and I’m not sure I could ever get over it if Alexis ever couldn’t forgive me.”

“Except you’re not an alcoholic, are you?” Beckett says sharply. “That’s where this all began. Mom died and Dad drowned himself in a whiskey bottle. Sure you said you did some dumb things, but you didn’t end up like he did. You said that even when you and Gina weren’t working out you tried to shield Alexis. My dad never even tried.” She stops. “I get where you’re at. Maybe that’s where I need to start, because it’s all two ends of one thing.”

She takes a bite of burger, chases it with a handful of fries and a slug of milkshake; looks at her hands, looks at Castle.

“I don’t think I told you why I can’t face seeing you and your family in the loft.” Castle shakes his head. He doesn’t remember her ever setting it out, though he’d guessed most of it. “Even the first time, before we went Christmas shopping. Just seeing you with Alexis. It was how Mom and Dad used to be with me. How Dad was. Your Christmas decorations. We had those. Two little wooden trees that they’d made: one each. Some that I’d made in grade school. I don’t know what happened to them. I guess they got lost, or thrown away, or spoil.” Her voice falters. “But yours were all still there: proudly on the tree, like they mattered to you. Ours didn’t matter to Dad. Not once the whiskey took over.”

Castle slides closer to her on the couch and wraps a consolatory arm around her shoulders.

“You were so proud of Alexis and so interested and everything that Dad stopped being. I couldn’t watch it. I still don’t know if I can. She matters to you. I didn’t matter to Dad. Only Mom did.” She stops, breathing shallowly. “Everything I used to have and didn’t. Don’t. I was jealous.” She tugs
herself away. “I am jealous,” she says. Condemnation shadows her tone. “Dad took all that away from me and every time I saw you and your daughter I was reminded of it. Even when we’re out at brunch now I’m reminded. But it wasn’t your fault or Alexis’s fault or anyone’s fault but mine. So I don’t want to come, because it’s not your fault and my issues aren’t your family’s problem.”

She stands up, moves to the table next to the window and picks up her little bird, cradling it, staring out, back to him. Her shoulders are tight and hunched, and Castle is quite sure she’s trying not to cry. No wonder she wanted to be out of Remy’s. He prowls up behind her and stands, arms crossed around her from behind.

“It’s okay. Stand down. I’ve got you.” She’s rigid and unhappy. “I’d worked it out, a long time ago. I’m still here. I’m glad you told me, but it doesn’t change anything. We’re past that. You need to work it out, but it doesn’t affect us.”

She turns in his grip and buries her face in his shoulder, shoulders convulsing. “How can you find it so easy to forgive?” she sobs. “I can’t. You seem to be able to get past everything: excuse it or forgive it or understand it and I can’t be sure I can forgive my own father but you can deal with everything.” Her words dissolve in her pain.

“Except I’m not an alcoholic, am I?” Castle parrots her words from earlier, in the same sharp tone. She tenses. “That’s the whole point here. It’s not the same. I’m not trying to forgive the almost unforgivable. I’m not putting Alexis through the hell you went through.”

“Dr Burke said it – he was right again,” she adds acidly, “that I wasn’t seeing the right pattern. I wasn’t looking at it through the lens of an alcoholic.”

“Right. And it’s the same now. I’m not seeing it that way. So I can forgive, because I’m not in your shoes, and I shouldn’t worry about Alexis, because she isn’t in your shoes either and I am not your father.” He takes a breath, and holds her more tightly. It feels like he’s holding her up: as if she’d slump like his sandcastle when the water hit it if he didn’t. Crunch time. “You don’t need my approval for any decision you make. No matter what we are to each other, in the end it’s up to you. You want to forgive, and that’s enough for me. Anything else is a bonus. Sure I wanted the happy ending – because a happy ending would be what you want. But it might not happen. Dr Burke – he was right yet again,” Castle inserts as acidly as Beckett had, “said that I shouldn’t hope for the happy ending, but the best we could get in the circumstances. Sounds like he’s said something that means much the same to you.”

He walks them both back over to the couch and sits them down in front of their neglected dinners. Neither of them take so much as a fry or sip of their drinks. Beckett is still crying quietly and unstoppably. Castle sniffs and blinks hard, and tucks her head into his shoulder so that he can lean into her hair and try to control himself.

“You’re enough for me, Kate. Whatever happens, we’ll work it out. You’ll make it to the loft, but it doesn’t matter how long it takes. We’ve got all the time in the world.” He pauses, and nuzzles into her dark hair. “Stop crying, sweetheart. It’ll all be okay.”

Beckett tries to pull her soggy self together, and succeeds in limiting her misery to damp sniffs and damp Kleenex. She’s still cosseted close against Castle’s chest, but she curls her arms around him in an effort to give back some of the strength and comfort he’s providing to her. They stay like that for some time, long after their dinner is cold and congealing, simply clinging to each other against the flood of catharsis and truth; the exhaustion of emotion. No words are spoken. Truth is out there, and it takes time to digest, even where it is welcomed and necessary. Still, Castle had said it. They have all the time they need. Unspoken but implicit: he’ll wait, and not push, and let her take the time she needs to mend this, however long that may be. She hugs him harder, and presses her
face into his neck.

“I wish I could come back with you,” she murmurs.

“I wish I could stay here with you,” Castle rumbles back.

She brings her hands up round his face, feeling the slight roughness of end-of-day stubble, and pulls his head down to kiss him, softly at first, then much harder as he gives back in kind. Finally she rises, followed by Castle, to lead him not to her bedroom but the door. Otherwise she’ll never be able to let go of him. It’s hard enough as it is, and she’s perilously close to clinging before she drops her hands away from him and allows him to leave.

But again – they’ve both been upset, though not exactly with each other, they’ve both been angry, though again not exactly with each other, and they’re still standing, coruscating honesty notwithstanding, together.

Beckett draws herself a scaldingly soothing bath, and descends into its comfort to lessen her lack of comforting Castle.

Castle wrenches himself out of Beckett’s building and into a cab home with considerable regret for the leaving and none at all for the truth they’ve told each other. He’d meant it: however long it should take her, he will wait it out. She’s still working for it – for them; she’s still trying to make this all right, to make it all work. He descends into the chilly comfort of his wide bed, which doesn’t really lessen the lack of warming Beckett.
An analyst's care

Thursday is all paperwork and hassling labs, Lanie's and legworkers, otherwise known as uniforms. Beckett-flavoured cases are thin on the ground, though not so mundane muggings-leading-to-murder or domestics-leading-to-death. The team complains to each other that murderers have no class or style these days, Castle shows up for long enough to discover it’s all paperwork and promptly leaves again, and nothing whatsoever of any interest happens at all. Come six pm Beckett is jonesing to burn every sheet of the vast quantities of ridiculous forms, and is consequently utterly delighted when Lanie calls her with a meeting point which involves the very civilised surrounds of Matilda’s in less than half an hour.

A nice easy evening with Lanie is just what she needs: food that isn’t a burger or takeout, maybe a small glass of wine, no deep and meaningful conversations and absolutely no therapy.

“Well?” Lanie asks meaningfully, two sips into her lurid pink cocktail.

“Well what?” Beckett asks, a certain flavour of dangerousness tainting her question.

“Well, you and Writer Boy, girlfriend! What else?”

Beckett wrinkles her nose at Lanie and then buries it in her glass. The tiny amount of white wine she actually ingests bears no relation at all to the length of time she keeps the glass tilted up. “You might have been asking about cases, or the weather, or yoga, or my running times.”

“Kate…” Lanie says warningly, “why would I want to talk about any of those when we could talk about men?”

“Men? Have you found a boyfriend you haven’t mentioned? Come to think of it, Esposito’s been looking pretty happy lately…”

Lanie spits her wine out. “That gun-toting meathead? The one who doesn’t know Merlot from an M-16? What do you think I am?”

“Cute,” Beckett says wickedly. “I saw you wiggling your hips all the way out last time you came by the precinct.”

“You shouldn’t be watching my hips. You should be watching your boy’s,” Lanie says. “Anyway, I’d rather have that gay mountain of yours than that macho idiot.”

“O’Leary’s amazing, but he won’t be ditching Pete for you. Wouldn’t ditch him for Castle, either – did I tell you about that?” Beckett snickers evilly, and relates the tale. “So O’Leary pulled his usual trick of smothering me and Castle gave him the stink-eye” –

“Ooohhhh,” Lanie interjects salaciously –

“Shut up – so O’Leary started hitting on Castle and it took him a few minutes to realise. You should have seen his face.” Beckett snickers some more, joined by Lanie’s evil snurk.


“Yes?” Beckett says blandly.

“Details, girl, details.”
“Nope,” Beckett says, not blandly at all.

“No?” Lanie wails. “Not even one little titbit?”

“Nope,” Beckett says, with a firm inflection that means not a hope in hell, Lanie.

“But you are dating him, aren’t you?”

Beckett says nothing. Her blush says everything.

“You are!” Lanie squawk-squeals. “I knew it, I knew it! ‘Bout time!”

“Smugness is not attractive,” Beckett says dryly.

“Told you so.”

“Nor’s that.”

“Don’t care. Told you so.”

Lanie knocks back her luminous pink cocktail – Beckett is sure it wasn’t on the menu but Lanie had talked the bartender into it – or leaned forward so he got a good view down her front, more like – and squeaks happily.

The rest of the evening is fairly calm, though Beckett has to fend off a certain amount of not-particularly-subtle efforts to find out if Castle’s reputation is justified. They pack up at the close of their meal quite content with each other. Back to normal, in fact.

“Good evening, Detective Beckett, Mr Castle. Your father should be here imminently. Would you like to set your game up now?”

“Hey. Sure.”

Dr Burke takes advantage of Detective Beckett’s arrangement of the game to indicate to Mr Castle that he would like a word with him at some convenient moment. Mr Castle looks briefly worried, then confused, then clears his expression when Dr Burke adds a few words of reassurance. All of this is encapsulated in the short moments which Detective Beckett takes to place the small men correctly. Dr Burke believes in the efficiency of a well-organised mind, which assists him to achieve the results which he does. As he finishes, Mr Beckett appears, and the game begins.

It appears to Dr Burke that Detective Beckett is trying to make amicable conversation. She enquires about her father’s work, and tells an interesting tale of a recent case. Dr Burke is sure, however, that she has censored some of the more gruesome details. Still, it seems to have involved rather more intelligence to solve than Dr Burke had thought normal for the sordid business of homicide, and the involvement of the university and cutting-edge research is certainly interesting. The game progresses smoothly. Dr Burke is more successful than the previous occasion, though Mr Castle appears to be winning. Still, it is a moderately interesting game, and anything which makes the interactions between Detective Beckett and Mr Beckett less painful is still to be welcomed.

“I thought about what you said,” Detective Beckett says to her father. “You were right. Till you chose a good option, I didn’t have any.”

Mr Beckett blinks, very hard, and draws in a deep, painful breath. “I’m sorry, Katie.”
“I know. I know you don’t remember any of what you said. I’m trying to work through it.”

“I don’t… whatever you need.” Mr Beckett blinks again, and changes the subject with a very sharp swerve. “I’m really looking forward to brunch. I have to say, though, that I’m surprisingly popular this weekend.”

“How so?” Detective Beckett asks.

Mr Beckett grins a gamine grin which Dr Burke considers gives him a close resemblance to his daughter. “Well, yesterday I got a call from your mother, Rick, suggesting I come to brunch.”

“What?” arrives in ear-blowing stereo volume from both Detective Beckett and Mr Castle. Dr Burke is also wholly confused by this development. Everyone appears to be confused. Mr Beckett also appears to have been deafened.

“So,” Detective Beckett says in clear, confusion-cutting tones, “what did you say?”

“Oh, well, I was a bit surprised, because you’d said that Rick was coming on Sunday, so I explained to Martha. She apologised for being a bit late with her invitation, and hoped I’d have a good time.” Mr Beckett appears to become aware that Mr Castle has turned an unbecoming shade of suffused purple.

“My mother called you? Tell me you didn’t tell her where we were going.” Dr Burke hears with some trepidation the note of absolute fury in Mr Castle’s voice.

“Oh, well, I was a bit surprised, because you’d said that Rick was coming on Sunday, so I explained to Martha. She apologised for being a bit late with her invitation, and hoped I’d have a good time.” Mr Beckett appears to become aware that Mr Castle has turned an unbecoming shade of suffused purple.

“My mother called you? Tell me you didn’t tell her where we were going.” Dr Burke hears with some trepidation the note of absolute fury in Mr Castle’s voice.

“My mother called you? Tell me you didn’t tell her where we were going.” Dr Burke hears with some trepidation the note of absolute fury in Mr Castle’s voice.

“No,” Mr Castle says. “She’ll turn up.”

“Uninvited. I didn’t invite her for very good reasons. Alexis isn’t invited either.” Detective Beckett takes a slow, chilly breath. “I’m not ready for all of you together.”

“I believe that,” says Mr Beckett. “Oh, I do believe that.” Dr Burke observes a considerable similarity of expression and tone which has arisen between the faces and comments of both Becketts. Mr Beckett does not appear to be impressed by Mrs Rodgers’ (Dr Burke recollects with his usual precision that she does not share a name with Mr Castle) misleading of him. “Rick,” he says, as coldly as his daughter, “what precisely is your mother doing?”

“No,” Mr Castle says. “She’ll turn up.”

“I believe that,” says Mr Beckett. “Oh, I do believe that.” Dr Burke observes a considerable similarity of expression and tone which has arisen between the faces and comments of both Becketts. Mr Beckett does not appear to be impressed by Mrs Rodgers’ (Dr Burke recollects with his usual precision that she does not share a name with Mr Castle) misleading of him. “Rick,” he says, as coldly as his daughter, “what precisely is your mother doing?”

“Dad, this is not Castle’s fault.”

“I know that. However, since it’s his mother who seems to have taken it upon herself to interfere, he can start the explanations.”
“You are not going to bully Castle.”

“You’re my daughter and I’m not having his mother messing this up.”

“That’s not his fault. He’s told her to butt out.”

“It hasn’t worked, has it?”

“He threatened to evict her if she didn’t stop. What do you suggest he does, shoots her?”

“If he can’t keep you safe I don’t think” –

“Keep me safe?” Detective Beckett yells. “I do the keeping safe around here. You don’t have the right to say that. He’s the one who’s got my back.”

“I can fight my own battles,” Castle bellows, in order to be heard over the Beckett family row which has suddenly developed. “And I can deal with my mother, too. Both of you be quiet!”

Dr Burke raises an impressed eyebrow at both Mr Castle’s bravery and his volume. Both Becketts are reduced to silence.

“Okay. My mother appears to have decided to interfere. I’ll deal with her. Jim, you told her where brunch was?”

“Yes.”

“Well, let’s go somewhere else, then. Jim, you pick. If I pick my mother will know where, she already knows Beckett’s preference, but she won’t know yours.” He takes a deep breath.

Dr Burke interjects before anyone else can speak. “That was exceedingly interesting,” he says calmly. Every eye turns to him, every jaw dropped. “Jim, can you remember the last time you and your daughter had such a disagreement?”

Mr Beckett thinks. Mr Castle acquires a look of happy realisation which indicates that he is following Dr Burke’s line of thought. Detective Beckett continues to appear glacially furious. Words are clearly roiling behind her compressed lips.

“Not since I got dry,” Mr Beckett says, eventually, and then realises what he’s said.

“Precisely,” says Dr Burke, a little dryly. “It may have come about in an exceedingly unexpected way, but I consider that there has been an important occurrence. Detective Beckett, since your father became sober you have endeavoured not to disturb him with any disagreement, is that not correct?”

“You didn’t even get mad with him when he suckered you about Schickoff and Schultz,” Mr Castle says. “Anyone else wasting your time like that you’d have eaten alive. Like eating those live octopuses in South Korea that I saw on a travel programme…”

“I do not think that the consumption of live octopi” –

“Octopuses. Or octopodes. It’s not octopi. Everyone thinks it should be but actually it’s not” – Dr Burke observes both Becketts rolling their eyes in synchronised irritation at the diversion.

“or the etymology of the plural form is relevant to the current discussion.” Dr Burke favours Mr Castle with a stare designed to reduce him to a proper sense of the importance of the main point, without irrelevant digressions. Though why would anyone wish to ingest a live octopus? Surely it
would wriggle, and endeavour to escape? He condemns himself for being drawn in by Mr Castle’s insanity, but cannot repress his shudder at the gastronomic atrocity.

“The important point here,” Dr Burke continues with emphasis, “is that Detective Beckett and you, Jim, have disagreed. It does not appear to me that either of you is dismayed or unduly disturbed by this occurrence. I surmise, therefore, that it is perfectly possible for you to inform your father of the truth of your feelings or events without your father being put at risk. Is this not the case?” He turns to Jim.

“Sure it is. I’m not that fragile any more, Katie. I’d rather hear the truth – though I don’t want to go back to how you were at sixteen, always arguing.”

“I’m twenty-nine. It’s not up to you what I do.”

“I’m still your father” –

“And I’m all grown up.”

“Enough,” Dr Burke says. “Jim, Detective Beckett is indeed an independent adult. Detective Beckett, I can assure you from personal experience that parenthood and concern for one’s child’s happiness does not cease when they turn twenty-one.”

“You have children?” Detective Beckett says with unflattering amazement.

“Yes.”

Detective Beckett and Mr Castle exchange astonished glances. Dr Burke and Mr Beckett exchange the amused glances of the elder statesmen confronted by the young and callow.

“Shall we return to the game for the few minutes which remain, or should you determine a new location for your Sunday brunch?”

“We’d better agree a new place now.” Mr Beckett thinks for a few seconds. “Let’s go to Kitchenette, at 1272 Amsterdam. It’s a bit basic, but” – he smiles gently, with a tiny hint of blush – “I like that it’s not too formal or pretentious. I’ll call them as soon as we’re done here. Ten suit?”

“Don’t tell anyone,” Castle says bitterly.

“For sure. You didn’t explain why your mother was so keen on knowing where we were, Rick.”

“That’s simple. She was going to interrupt.”

“You said that. You didn’t say why.”

“I can answer that,” Detective Beckett says very coldly and very angrily. “Castle’s mother thinks she can provide me with motherly advice which will sort all this out. If she tries it,” she continues over Mr Beckett’s disbelievingly appalled spluttering, “she’ll find out that I don’t need or want another mother. I’ve still got one parent and I wasn’t planning on finding a substitute.”

Mr Beckett gasps. “Katie… d’you mean that?”

Detective Beckett stops in her enraged tracks. Mr Castle moves up beside her and slips his arm around her: there if she needs him. There is a stunned silence, which Dr Burke observes with considerable interest.

“I… I… I don’t know where we are yet. But I’m damn sure I don’t want someone else butting in
and trying to be a replacement. No-one’s a replacement.” Detective Beckett reaches for Mr Castle’s hand and clutches it tightly. “I’m trying, Dad.”

“That’s all I need to know.”

“I think,” Dr Burke says with some satisfaction, “that we are finished for the day. This has been a most productive session. Mr Castle, if you would remain for one moment in order that I may give you a word of advice relating to your mother?”

“Yes. Beckett, is that okay?”

“Yeah. See you Sunday, Dad.” She colours very slightly. “Looking forward to it.”

“Me too. See you then.”

Mr Beckett departs, the set of his back some way more relaxed than Dr Burke has previously seen it. Detective Beckett gives him a moment, while she tidies away her game, and then leaves the room.

“Mr Castle, I had intended to discuss with you the problems you might encounter between Detective and Mr Beckett on Sunday: Detective Beckett’s comment that you were to referee having given me some cause for concern that the brunch might be painfully confrontational. However, after this evening’s session I am far less concerned about such an occurrence. I believe that we have made very substantial progress over the last two weeks and you have been an important contributor. That said, I am extremely concerned about your mother’s attempts to intervene. I need not tell you how delicately poised the position is at present.”

“No. But I can’t seem to keep my mother’s nose out.”

“Hm. Do you think that if she knew more she would intervene less? That is to say, would a discussion with me, assuming that Detective Beckett gave permission, be helpful?”

“No. A little knowledge is a dangerous thing,” Mr Castle quotes acerbically.

“Hm. That is certainly unhelpful. At this point, all I can say is that I shall be available to you if you wish to discuss any thoughts you may have, and of course I will remain available to Detective Beckett at any time.”

“We might need you as a character witness. Beckett made it perfectly clear that she wouldn’t tolerate my mother trying to mother her, and Beckett is pretty terrifying in full flow.”

“Indeed. However I am certain that I would assist in supporting a provocation defence,” Dr Burke says dryly. Mr Castle manages an appreciative grin. “Howsoever that may be, I cannot have Detective Beckett’s treatment damaged by ill-informed intervention. Please do your best to keep your mother away from Detective Beckett until after Sunday, and preferably after next Tuesday.” Mr Castle’s eyebrows lift. “Should Sunday pass off peacefully, and next Tuesday’s session consolidate all our gains, then I shall be much less concerned about Detective Beckett’s resilience and ability to surmount the emotional upheavals which an attempt to mother her might produce.”

“In other words,” Mr Castle says aridly, “she won’t be falling to bits after she’s reduced my mother to a small pile of dust.”

“Precisely. I see we understand each other perfectly. I shall see you next Friday, Mr Castle, but as I have said, if you need anything before then, please do not hesitate to contact me.”
Mr Castle departs, with thanks. Dr Burke seats himself behind his desk and contemplates with considerable professional pleasure the events of the last four sessions. He will, naturally, consider the value of the extraordinarily flexible approach which he has been forced to take as a result of the considerable difficulties caused by the incompetence of the previous therapist, whose disciplinary panel will be convened in the next week, and at which Dr Burke will be invited to comment. He will do so in excoriating detail. He is also already contemplating the papers which he will be able to write as a result of the experience. He is certain that no-one has ever mixed elements of couples’ counselling, joint sessions, play therapy and abuse therapy with the more standard elements of counselling the child of an alcoholic. Of course, he is also certain that nobody else has ever had to. That is why he is unquestionably the premier psychiatrist in New York.

“You okay?”

“Yeah. But I’m going to murder my mother.”

“Does that mean I have to get in line?”

“Yeah. Anyway, you’re not allowed to murder my mother, you’ve got to break me out of jail after I’m arrested.”

Beckett stretches marginally and takes his hand. “C’mon. Let’s go back to mine. Decompress.”

“That what you call it?”

Beckett smiles seductively up at him. “Yep. You need a bit of – hmmm – decompression.” Her thumb slides over his hand, soothingly. “That was… surprisingly okay, for Dad and me.”

“Yeah,” Castle says heavily. “It would all have been great if it weren’t for Hurricane Martha making landfall on Manhattan.”

Beckett grips his hand more tightly and then releases him to unlock the car. “Let’s go.”

The ride is short and silent. Castle is squashing down his rage and a considerable desire to go home and reduce his mother to nothing. On balance, he’d better go with Beckett. Otherwise there will be global thermonuclear family war.
Beckett is barely inside the door before her coat is removed from her and unceremoniously dumped. Castle doesn’t wait to close the door before he’s crashed on to her lips and crushed her into him. Since she has been expecting something fairly similar since she stepped out the car, she is not surprised. She kicks her door shut as she opens under Castle’s assault and surrenders to his possession without a single hesitation. He’s hard, forceful and a little rough: wholly in charge and not inclined to brook any resistance to his absolute need to take her mouth. The power of his possession leaves her reeling: sends her soft and melting into muscular masculinity. She’s not frightened by his forcefulness: never scared by his strength, or the bulk that covers and envelops her; it’s simply Castle who loves her and who she loves in return; Castle who’s the stability and strength she never sought and never knew she needed. Castle who found Kat and lets Beckett stand down.

Castle who needs soft, open Kat right now. She gives way completely and lets him take her mouth as he pleases, wholly open to his plundering; wholly in the moment with him. It’s not as if he hasn’t been there to give her exactly what she needs, and in fact, he may need this more than she right now, but she needs it too.

His hand presses her into him: wide span covering most of her back; the other knotted in her hair and holding her head slanted for total access to her ready mouth: his arousal hard against her and his earlier rage all diverted and converted into raging heat and desire. **His** Kat in **his** arms under **his** mouth and against **his** body. The hand over her back slides down over her rear, then rises beneath her now-untucked shirt to scald his palm print into her skin. Her fingers run into the soft short hair of his nape: not preventing him from any movement he wishes. He lifts from her lips to pull her head back and open her throat to his determined kiss, moving down to the pulse beating frantically, only just stopping himself nipping and sucking and leaving a mark to prove his possession, his right. Not there. Not somewhere anyone could see, and draw conclusions. But elsewhere… unseen.

He rips her soft t-shirt off over her head and lets it fall where it may, roughly suckling her breasts, nipping through fabric and then stripping the simple bra to leave her naked to him above the waist, bent backwards to give him freedom to plunder, ravage, raid and conquer: to force the gasps and moans and sounds of pleasure from her; to grip with hard hands on satin-smooth skin, to take her and have her and keep her – **his**.

He doesn’t stop kissing her as he walks her to the bedroom, doesn’t stop holding her hard against him, doesn’t loosen the firm grip on waist and neck: she doesn’t stop the heated responsiveness that drives him up, to drive her up. He moulds and palms, still a little hard and rough; pushes her down on to the bed and strips the rest of her clothing. She tries to pull him down to her: one long leg curling around his waist and tugging, but he won’t be tugged: it’s all in his gift and he will touch and tease and play and take as he pleases.

Not a single word has passed between them since the front door opened. Breath falls heavy on the air: harsh noises of need and want and desire, the sounds of flesh on flesh and finally of culmination.

Castle doesn’t let go of his Kat, who isn’t letting go of him. That had very little to do with love, and much to do with anger and hurt – from both of them, against the whole situation. Raw need and anger is explosive, but now that the explosion has passed, they’re still both locked together. He strokes her back, she pets his shoulder; her head tucked into his neck, breathing him in as he breathes in the scent of her hair; legs tangled. The quiet becomes peaceful.
“We need to talk about my mother,” Castle eventually, reluctantly, says.

“Yeah.” Beckett is equally unenthusiastic.

“Burke asked me if he could help.”

“Oh.”

“I don’t think so. Even if you said he could explain to her – and I’m not asking you to – she’d just take it as a challenge. Succeed where the top shrink failed.”

“Top shrink?”

“Didn’t you know? I looked him up. He might be the biggest pain in the ass since Vlad practised impalement, but he’s the best there is.”

“Doesn’t make me like him,” Beckett says unkindly.

“You don’t have to. I don’t have to. But he’s the best. So I guess we just have to put up with the attitude.”

Beckett considers that. There is a brief aura of sulkiness.

“You’re right.”

“Uh?”

“Telling your mother anything more won’t help.”

“No. Anyway, he suggested that I keep her away from you till after Tuesday’s session. He seems to think everything’s going pretty well.”

“Really?”

“Really really. I think so too. If we can deal with Mother. Got any good ideas?”

“Is locking her up in Holding out of the question?”

“Not necessarily,” Castle says gloomily. “Maybe I could bribe Ryan to take her to the theatre? He does that sometimes.”

“Yeah, with women around his own age and the hope of getting lucky.”

“I do not need that picture in my head.”

“Which one?”

“Ryan and Mother.”

“Eurgh. Nor did I.”

“Like the octopuses.”

“I don’t want to know about the octopuses.”

“It was a bit disgusting. It was still wriggling. And the presenter ate it alive and just said ‘That was an experience’ totally deadpan.”

“Okaaaayyy. No octopuses.” He sighs. “I’d rather think about the octopuses than my mother, though.”

“Surely I can avoid her?”

“You can. I have to go home. Alexis – who’s not asking any questions and is being really mature about this – oh, she was yelling that she liked you at Mother” – Beckett makes a strangulated *er-glurp-what?* noise into Castle’s neck, which sounds like he imagines a choking vampire might – “needs me there.”

“Yep.” Beckett sounds more than a little wistful.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologise,” she says forcefully. “Don’t ever apologise to me because you’re a good father. None of this is your fault. Just because my dad fell apart on me doesn’t mean you have to apologise for being better. Just *don’t.*” She collapses inward against him.

Castle pets mechanically, until she recovers. His neck is suspiciously damp, but he doesn’t comment on that.

“So what do we do about your mother?”

“Hide. Or emigrate.”

“I’ve got a better plan. Don’t you have some pal somewhere who could call her for an audition – in LA?”

“No, unfortunately. Maybe I should cultivate some.”

“So what are we going to do?”

“I don’t know. If she keeps pushing I’m going to do something that I’ll regret ten seconds later, but it’ll be too late. I can’t stay out the loft all the time, and I don’t see why I should. It’s *my* home, and I’m not disrupting Alexis because of Mother.”

“We only have to get through the next four days. Surely we can manage that?”

Castle doesn’t say anything. Beckett nuzzles at his neck, and then drops a tiny, undemanding kiss there. He continues to say nothing, breath falling heavily on the air. He’s devoid of good ideas, and the ideas he does have are all illegal or immoral. Sending his mother to a spa (again) won’t work – he can’t *make* her go without kidnapping her; he can’t have her arrested because crimes against fashion don’t give grounds; he can’t have her committed because despite all best efforts she is not actually insane. Though he might be, shortly.

“I don’t know,” he says unhappily, and pulls her closer. “I just don’t know.”

“Unless…” Beckett says very doubtfully, “…unless…”

“Unless what?”

“If Dad told them the truth? Well, some of it. A bit. Enough for them to understand or, in your mother’s case, just step back. Without me being there.”
“Uh?”

“If Dad gave them a sort-of-bowdlerised” –

“Love the words.”

“Focus – version of the truth. Not the whole story. Just… enough.” She sounds utterly uncertain. Castle strokes up and down her slim back.

“That’s… that might actually work. Like when he talked to Mrs Berowitz.”

“She didn’t listen.”

“No,” says Castle, stopped for a moment. “But Alexis will, and it might just be enough because Mother adores her and if Alexis really lays into Mother it might just work.”

“You think it might work?”

“I don’t really know. But we don’t have any other ideas, and we can manage till Sunday – it’s only tomorrow – and ask your dad then. He was pretty cross.”

“Maybe run it by Dr Burke on Tuesday, if Dad’s okay with it.”

Castle becomes diverted. “How on earth did she find out his number? As far as I know Mother can’t even switch on a computer.”

“Alexis was asking him about being a lawyer. He probably said who he’s with. She would” – but Castle cuts her off.

“If Mother is dragging Alexis into this I am not having it. I think I need to have a chat with Alexis – I’m not angry with her, but I need to warn her that Mother’s overstepping and not to get drawn in. Ugh,” he adds.

“Yeah.” There is silence.

“Um…” Beckett says after a while. “Maybe after Tuesday… maybe we can start thinking about other steps. If Sunday goes well. Sometime. Take another step. But not here. I can’t do here. Out somewhere.”

Castle does not entirely follow. A number of key words seem to be missing. Such as what other things might be. And where they might take place, and who might be involved. He waits, to see if anything is clearer.

“Yeah?” he says hopefully after a moment or two. “What were you thinking?”

“If it’s all still okay after next week, maybe the next thing is for you and me and Dad and Alexis to have a meal somewhere? Try to move it along another step? But not with your mother. I can’t – I don’t think I can deal with her trying to mother me or second-guess Dr Burke. I’ll lose it and walk out and it’ll all be a disaster. We’ll be back to square one.”

“You really wanna do that?” He’s dumbfounded. That’s… well, huge. Even somewhere that isn’t one of their apartments, that’s huge.

“Yeah… maybe. Let’s see.” She still sounds totally uncertain, and she’s trying to wriggle away. Castle is not having that. He tugs gently. “Come back.”
Beckett cuddles back down into his shoulder and slings an arm over the other side. “Let’s not think about it any more,” she murmurs.

“What should we think about?”

“No thinking. I’m tired of thinking.”

“Are you?” Castle purrs darkly. He’s tired of thinking too. He’d like to do some touching and feeling, with no thought required at all. His hand wanders down her spine and lands up on a curved rear, which wiggles and presses into him.

“Mmmm.”

“Good. So’m I.”

He pulls her up from his shoulder and kisses her. Or she kisses him. Or maybe they both kiss each other. Whatever. Her hands are round his face, cradling him; his roam seductively over her, slipping into damp arousal and finding heated response. She squirms over him, quite deliberately rubbing against each hard inch: he’s holding her too close for her naughty hands to slide down but that hasn’t stopped her doing what she can, and what she can do is an awful lot. She’s open across him and his fingers have complete freedom and she’s hot and wet and slippery and his as he takes her with his hand and feels her tight around his fingers, small inner muscles already quivering; she’s raiding his mouth but then he rolls them and rises over her and thrusts home just once and stops. He simply wants to feel her, as close as they can possibly be: mouths and bodies joined and entwined: two made one flesh. She bites firm long fingers into his back: pulls him close and arches to him and they start to move in harmony and then there’s only them.

After a long time of cuddling together and a sensual joint shower later, Castle realises that he has to go home. He leaves on a slow, leisurely and loving kiss: the final thing he wanted in order to calm his ruffled soul and roiled temper; and slips into his loft and bedroom without disturbing a single mote of dust.

Castle doesn’t exactly want to have this discussion with Alexis. However, he has to. However again, he certainly doesn’t have to have it in the loft, and in fact on mature reflection it would be far better to go out to a café for breakfast without the risk of any interruptions.

He locates Alexis, still a touch sleepy and dishevelled, and informs her that he thinks a father-daughter bonding breakfast would be an excellent plan. A few moments later, they’re wandering into Amelia’s, neatly early and therefore missing the Saturday morning rush.

“What’s this about, Dad?”

Castle takes a draught of his coffee before answering.

“Did Grams talk to you about Detective Beckett’s father?”

“Oh, yes. She liked him. She said he was cultured and mature. She asked me to look up his phone number for her” – that explains a lot – “as she thought he’d like to know about her off-Broadway show.”

“I see.”

“She’s not trying to hit on him, is she?”
“Alexis!”

“What, Dad? Grams is” – she blushes – “indiscriminate.”

“You shouldn’t be saying that.”

“I totally hope she isn’t hitting on Mr Beckett. That would be embarrassing.”

“No. She wasn’t.”

Castle’s heavily annoyed tone registers with Alexis.

“Dad, what’s going on?”

“Grams is interfering with Detective Beckett.”

“I know that.”

“She and her father are having brunch on Sunday, for the first time in a while. Grams wanted Mr Beckett’s number to find out where they were having brunch on Sunday and interrupt it.”

“What! That’s totally out of order. She lied to me!”

Alexis, teen-like, appears far more offended that she has been lied to than the mayhem that would have ensued had his mother turned up at the brunch.

“I need you to keep Grams out of trouble. If she upsets Detective Beckett then Beckett’s likely to be very angry with her, and I don’t think Grams understands just how bad that would be for her. So, pumpkin, I want you to be very careful about what you tell Grams for the next few days.”

“She’s being sneaky, you mean. She’s not being fair.”

“She means well,” Castle says rather weakly.

“If she messes up I’ll never forgive her,” Alexis declares very over-dramatically. “I like Detective Beckett. I want to see her again.”

“If you just wait and let her deal with everything in her own time I’m sure you will.”

“Promise?”

“I can’t make promises for someone else, pumpkin. You know that.”

“Mom,” says Alexis bitterly.

“Yeah. Well. I can’t make promises for Detective Beckett. I told you as much as I could about what’s going on. She’s trying. This brunch is part of that. Don’t interfere, please? She knows what she’s doing. I’m trusting you to behave better than Grams is.”

“I won’t,” comes indignantly. “But I wish it wasn’t happening. It’s not like I mind you being out more than you’re in, but if she could just come here…”

“It’s not that she doesn’t like you.” Castle says, before this can turn into Doesn’t she like me, why not and other unhelpful teen reactions. “Half the reason she’s really trying is because this has nothing to do with you, and she doesn’t want it to spill over to you. She wasn’t ever unhappy with you. She’s been unhappy with me, but we’re fine now.”
“Try to keep it that way, Dad.”

Castle regards Alexis very paternally. “My business, Alexis.” She looks pathetically at him, by which he has painfully learned not to be swayed. “Cute, but no cigar.”

“Smoking is bad for you,” Alexis says very sanctimoniously, and then dissolves in giggles. “Worth a try. I didn’t expect it to work. Can I have some more pancakes, Dad?”

Castle growls in a fearsomely threatening manner which has not the slightest effect on Alexis at all, and then orders more pancakes and coffee. Conversation turns to ways of staying out of the way of Martha, and from there to Alexis deciding to go off to a friend’s for the day and Castle starting to look up distractions and diversions.

Of course, the best distraction or diversion would be going to Beckett’s apartment and arranging a day out with Beckett, or indeed a day in with Beckett. In meaning in bed. However, he’ll see her tomorrow. So maybe a little space, rather than suffocating her. He consults his phone for a while after Alexis has bounced off and finds an exhibition that (one) looks interesting and (two) is right at the other end of Manhattan. The Cloisters will do just nicely, and he’ll even get the slow train to waste some more time.

The Pictures Generation is indeed interesting, though Castle isn’t sure he can make it last all day. Still, if he has a snack in the café, and wanders round the museum itself, by the time he gets home it’ll be dinner time and his mother will not be able to do any more damage before tomorrow.

Probably.

Beckett spends Saturday domestically tidying, cleaning and shopping. None of these tedious chores require assistance, nor would any half-way sane person wish to assist. Not, at any rate, if they wished the bed to remain neat and clothes to remain in closets or on persons. It doesn’t stop her thinking about Castle, but she’ll see him tomorrow, and she has a slight feeling that they do need some time apart occasionally. Not too much, but some. Eventually she settles down with a book and occupies herself until dinner and then, later, bedtime. Along the way, however, she plots the next in her now-a-series of seductive Georgian dinners and frets about the Sunday brunch to come.

Maybe if she simply talks about ordinary things. The news. Maybe not sordid murders, but the use of a community service order to train recruits. Her dad would have appreciated that, once upon a time. Whether he’s been to the theatre or exhibitions. How his work is going. That sort of thing. Ordinary family gossip. And if all else fails Castle can talk about his writing – which come to think of it she’s not heard anything at all about. Hm. She probably ought to know a bit about what he’s saying about her. Especially given that comment about using first O’Leary and then Dr Burke. Hm. Hmmmmm.

She falls asleep thinking of the interesting possibilities for O’Leary to arrest Dr Burke. All ridiculous, but it makes her smile. Just as well, since her sleep is fractured, limited, and unrestful.
Castle arrives home, discovers that Alexis is also home and his mother is (thankfully) not, and repairs to his study to consider what he will say to his mother when she makes an appearance. Now that he is not quite incandescently angry (merely blazing), he can see that he has to say something before the morning. He’d said he could fight his own battles (but he’d been metaphorically open-mouthed at Beckett’s instant defence of him on Friday) and he’d said he’d deal with his mother. So now he has to do it. After some very hard and unpleasant thinking, not a little scenario modelling and a belt of neat whiskey, he decides that the only thing to do is to let his mother know that all of Jim, Beckett, Alexis and he himself are aware of what she has tried to do, and that everyone, Alexis included, is quite deeply disappointed by her actions. In other words, blunt truth.

Ugh.

He has another slug of whiskey. It doesn’t help.

Some time later he hears the front door open and close, and with a sinking feeling in his stomach he emerges from the study.

“Mother.”

“Good evening, Richard,” she carols.

“No, Mother, it is not.”

She looks very confused, and then worried. “Have you had an argument with Katherine? Darling, you really must be more careful with her.”

“Mother, why did you call Beckett’s father to invite him to brunch? Then when he told you he couldn’t because he was already seeing Beckett, why did you grill him about all the details of what was happening on Sunday morning?”

Martha colours unbecomingly. Splotches of scarlet mar her cheeks. “You wouldn’t tell me, and it was clear that you were going along. Your secretiveness is very unattractive.”

“Did it occur to you that I didn’t want you to know?”

“Pish-tush. How anti-social.”

“Stop that. Beckett invited her father and me. Nobody else. I seem to remember you telling me endlessly when I was younger that if I hadn’t been invited I shouldn’t push in. Although that was when you were invited out. Maybe that makes it different?”

His mother opens and shuts her mouth.

“And you lied to Alexis.” Castle’s tone is frigid. “She’s not happy about that. I’m not happy about that. I thought I could trust you with her. Was I wrong?”

“No. It was just a little fib.”

“That’s not how Alexis sees it. I’ll let her tell you how she feels.”

“But Richard…”
“But nothing. I’ve told you several times, stop interfering. You have no idea what is going on. You should be happy that Jim asked me about it, because if you had interrupted tomorrow’s brunch Jim and Beckett wouldn’t have left enough of you to play Yorick’s skull in Hamlet.”

Martha sniffs sadly. Castle is entirely unmoved. His mother is an excellent actress and he is dead certain she is acting now.

“Mother, you have to lay off. You can’t help, and you’re not helping. All you’re doing is causing stress to everyone. If you feel a sudden need to be maternal, take up knitting or bake some cookies.” He stops and thinks about that. “Don’t bake cookies. I don’t want to be poisoned. Just don’t interfere. Beckett doesn’t need or want anyone to be maternal. She doesn’t want a replacement for her own mother, and if you try it, don’t blame me if she takes it badly. I won’t be sympathetic.”

Martha sniffs again. “I’m only trying to help, as any kind-hearted person would do. However, I know when I’m not wanted.”

Castle manages not to say if only that were true to Martha’s offended – but thankfully departing – back. He’s retreating to the comforts of his study and possibly a series of destructively violent computer games – so good for relieving tension, though Beckett would be a far better and much more pleasant solution – when there is a very loud noise from upstairs. It seems that Alexis has noticed Martha coming home.

Castle briefly considers going upstairs to referee. Then he listens to the tone of the discussion. Well. Screaming row, at full teen pitch and volume. It can probably be heard in Connecticut, or maybe Canada. He quietly retreats to his study, closes the door, and puts on some very expensive noise-blocking headphones and a soothing soundtrack.

Some while later he peels one off his ear, notes that there is silence, and in a stunning example of discretion being the better part of valour (or, equally accurately, cowardice being the way to remain living) does not emerge to survey the potential wreckage at all. That can wait until tomorrow. After brunch. If he survives that, and if Beckett survives that, he can worry about his mother. Beckett’s well-being is considerably more important than his mother’s, right now, and if she needs him post-brunch, well, that’s where he’ll be. He has no worries about Alexis, who, from the occasional noises that had made their way through the music, had been in full command of the histrionic high ground.

He puts himself to bed without wishing more than five times that Beckett were there beside him. Eventually he falls asleep, to be woken by the screech of his alarm and the knowledge that he needs to be right up at Kitchenette, far too close to the other end of Manhattan, in fairly short order. Still, he will look smooth, suave and adult. He needn’t be nervous of Jim. He’s met Jim a number of times now, and nervousness is simply silly. His stomach, however, does not agree: it roils and churns all the way uptown.

Jim is already at Kitchenette. Beckett is not.

“Hey.”


“Please.” Castle looks at Jim, who appears far too brightly happy and mischievous for his peace of mind. “I spoke to Mother,” he says grimly. “I don’t think it’s going to have any effect at all. I’ve told her what I think and what I want, but she isn’t listening. She just wants to prove she’s right.”
“Hm. Not really helpful, Rick.” Jim’s happy mischief has dissolved.

“I know that. But if Mother tries it, all that’s going to happen is that Beckett – Kate – will take her apart.”

“Hm,” Jim hums again. “Might be interesting – from a safe distance.” He has the same martial light in his eye as his daughter would. “I can’t say I’d stop her. I don’t think I need to help.”

“Did I say I would stop her?” Castle says, irked. “I just don’t want to pick up the pieces afterwards. Beck-Kate isn’t quite somewhere she wouldn’t be upset by it.”

“Hmmm.” Jim fixes Castle with an extraordinarily Beckett-variety glare. Clearly that was inherited. “You better be taking care of Katie.”

“I can take care of myself, Dad.”

Jim and Castle both jump.

“Katie!”

“Beckett!”

Both of them look small-boy guilty. Beckett sees it with some sardonic amusement.

“Hello,” she says. They both squirm. She smirks, and sits down. A menu appears in front of her. Castle wonders if Jim feels as caught out as he, and decides that from his slightly worried expression, indeed Jim does. Everyone orders, possibly to avoid any embarrassing questions. Beckett takes a little pity on the men, and starts down her plan of nice, ordinary, social conversation.

“We had an interesting twist to a case last week, Dad.”

“Mhm?” Her father sounds intrigued. “All your cases seem to have a twist. What’s this one?”

“It looked pretty basic – a nasty piece of work got dead in an SRO.”

“Doesn’t sound like your sort of case at all.”

“No, but there haven’t been any weird ones for a week or two. So we got this one, and a whole lot of other uninteresting pop-and-drops too.”

“So what happened?”

“It got a bit more interesting when we found a senior cop’s prints all over the room…” Beckett trails the bait under her father’s nose.

“Really?” Jim says, fascinated.

“Mhm. Turns out that they were using this guy as a training exercise – like for community service. I wish they’d done that when I was there. I hated the role-plays.”

“Role-plays?” Jim asks. Castle notices that he is very slightly tense, and wonders.

“One of us, or an instructor, got to be the witness or suspect. The others practised the work.”

“I’d like to hear about it, sometime,” Jim says wistfully. Castle barely breathes. Beckett doesn’t
say anything, for a second.

“Well. Yeah. Anyway. Thought you’d be interested in this new community service option.”

“Yes. Pretty creative.” But Castle hears a little dullness in Jim’s voice, and a little constraint in Beckett’s, and wishes she’d said something different: let Jim in just a little. “We don’t do anything that interesting to train our rookies.”

“They made them search the room, and search out the evidence. Teach them to do it properly, so it stands up in court and they don’t contaminate it.”

“Would they let me do it?” Castle asks hopefully.

“No. You’re too old to join the Academy, so you can’t.”

“Might be a fun team bonding exercise,” Jim says. “Like those evening Murder Mystery dinners.”

“I don’t think the instructors would have time to take groups of attorneys round. It’s pretty full on for them too.”

“Is it?” Castle asks, hoping that if he asks Beckett will open up just a little about the Academy and Jim will cheer up.

“Yeah. Barely time to sleep, if you want to fit everything in.” Castle is just hoping his tactic has worked when… “No time to go to the theatre or exhibitions or anything. I went to the Paris/New York design exhibition a few weeks ago. It was good. Did you see it?” It’s awkward, and everyone knows it. There’s an uncomfortable hitch in conversation, only broken when the food starts to arrive.

The technical business of eating and drinking covers the uncomfortable silence. Beckett has retreated into herself. Jim looks like he wants to say something but doesn’t know how. Castle has no idea where to start and is worried that anything that isn’t a platitude will cause some unsuspected mayhem. So far the only good thing about this brunch is that there has been polite social conversation and no fighting. It’s all horrendously brittle.

“Er… Dad?” Beckett says, very uncertainly, having polished off her pancakes.

“Yes?”

“Um… about Castle’s mother?” She swallows, and looks as if she’d rather be anywhere but at the table, saying anything but the words which she has just emitted.

“Yes?” Jim says warily.

“Do-you-think-you-telling-her-some-of-it-would-help?” Beckett blurs out without a breath. “If Dr Burke thought it wouldn’t mess things up?”

Jim chokes and splutters and requires napkins and pats on the back. This all makes it slightly difficult for Castle to simultaneously stop Beckett disappearing out the door and not stopping accelerating till she reaches San Francisco. He manages to grab her wrist before she rises. She looks unhappily at him.

“It’ll be okay,” Castle murmurs. “Don’t go yet. Give him a moment. Please?” The pulling away stops. Castle puts his arm round her comfortingly, which also means that Beckett can’t escape. Since she hasn’t noticed that yet, he certainly won’t tell her.
“Are you asking me for help?” Jim eventually squeaks out, through a gurgle of choking coughing.

“Yes,” Castle answers extremely quickly, before Beckett gets her mouth open. “We are. It was Be-Kate’s idea, too.”

“It was?”

Castle nods. Beckett is stock still and, he thinks, hiding absolute terror under a completely frozen face. “We thought” – he hesitates, but Beckett’s still absolutely silent – “that since absolutely nothing else including an interview with” –

“The Vampire,” Beckett suddenly interjects –

“Dr Burke,” Castle says, and doesn’t manage to suppress the snigger which interrupts it, “would work, the last resort was for you to tell my interfering mother a little – no more than you wanted to or nothing at all if you don’t want to – about it so she just backs the fuck off.”

Oh. He didn’t mean to lose his temper like that. Jim is regarding him very strangely, as is Beckett. This stereo stare of twin Becketts is really very disconcerting. He’d thought that Beckett was very like her mother, but the more he sees her with her father, the more alike they seem to be, right down to the glares and the eye-rolls.

“Sorry,” he says, more calmly. Beckett and Jim exchange glances. When Beckett looks away from her father, Jim favours Castle with a rakingly interrogative stare which pays particular attention to the way in which his arm is still around Beckett. Castle returns it very coolly and ignores the re-acquired roilings in his stomach. Beckett is all grown up (oh, so finely grown up) and has chosen to be with him, so it’s utterly ridiculous and unnecessary for Jim to give him the father-to-boyfriend hard look. He keeps his arm precisely where it is.

“So, Katie, you thought I might talk to Rick’s mother. Why do you think she would listen to me if she isn’t going to listen to Dr Burke?”

“I don’t.”

Jim crumples.

“I don’t think she’ll listen to anyone at all, but you’re the only one who can tell her the hard truth. If she doesn’t listen, it’s on her.”

Jim uncrumples somewhat. “You’re asking me to help?”

“Yes,” Beckett says. She doesn’t sound convinced that she’s doing the right thing at all. “If Dr Burke thinks it might help.

“And if he does?”

“Will you… do the same as you did to Julia Berowitz?” It’s forced out in a rush. “But I won’t be there. I don’t want to hear it all again.”

Castle hears I can’t hear it all again, rather than I don’t want to, and wishes fruitlessly that Beckett had said that. Jim looks hurt, and grey, and crumpled. Beckett, unfortunately, is only looking down at her empty plate.

“You wouldn’t be there?” Jim asks. There is a very uncomfortable, protracted silence.
“No.”

Castle winces. He knows that Beckett’s tense and on the edge; he knows why Beckett ran out of the Julia meeting; he knows that Beckett can’t stand to hear it again – but Jim doesn’t know any of that and Jim is looking very hurt and not a little angry.

“No.”

Beckett,” Castle lies, “you’ve got a smudge on your nose.”

“What?”

“Yep. Have you been sweeping chimneys?”

“Don’t be dumb. Of course not.”

“Looks like you have.”

Beckett does exactly what Castle had hoped, and decamps forthwith for the restroom to check.

“What smudge?” Jim says.

“No smudge. I wanted her out the way. You were about to say I won’t talk to Martha if you won’t come, and that’ll all go horribly wrong. She doesn’t mean don’t want. After Julia, she actually can’t sit through it again. Not without another meltdown, anyway. So don’t put an ultimatum in front of her because she’ll take it.” Jim stares at him. “Look, we don’t have time for the explanation. Maybe we can deal with it later or Friday or get Dr Burke to walk you through it. Just for God’s sake don’t make a fight out of this now.”

“There was no smudge, Castle!” Beckett growls very crossly, returning far too soon. “Haven’t you grown out of dumb games and pranks?”

He smiles seraphically. “If I’d actually thought you’d fall for it rather than look for a mirror in your purse…”

“I’m not some bimbo who keeps a mirror in her purse.”

“Reflection in your shield? Or your Glock?”

“If I had my gun with me I’d shoot you with it right now.” She sits down in a hail of harrumphs.

“If you two squabbling children have finished,” Jim says, which earns him twin scowls, “then if Carter” – scowls change to confusion – “Dr Burke – says it’s a good idea then I’ll talk to Martha.” Beckett misses the profoundly thankful glance that Castle throws at Jim. That had been near-disastrous. He, Castle, needs a word or several with Dr Burke, though. He – Dr Burke – needs to know that Jim wants to know about his daughter’s achievements while he was sodden drunk, and further needs to know that Beckett doesn’t like talking about any of that time. He downs a substantial gulp of coffee. Keeping all the plates spinning is increasingly troublesome. He consoles himself with the old adage about mysteries: that when everything is at its most complex, least understandable and most frustrating worst, it’s on the cusp of resolution.

“Thanks, Dad.” Beckett sounds very relieved. Jim casts her a look of some concern, and is clearly adding up the last few moments with the awkward shift in topic when he’d asked about the Academy. He’s not liking the conclusion he’s coming to, either, that’s for sure. Castle just hopes that Jim will have the sense not to open his mouth on the subject. “I’ll talk to Dr Burke on Tuesday and let you know.”
“Okay.” Jim hesitates. Castle acquires a feeling of well-justified dread. “Um, would you like to come for dinner – both of you – some time?” Stop pushing, Jim. Please, for God’s sake stop while you’re ahead. Or at least not behind.

There is another brittle, uncomfortable silence.

“Sometime,” Beckett says, with a crystalline edge, and breathes in. “Sometime.”

“Okay.” But Jim sounds dulled, again.

“What did you think of the relaxation of the Cuban restrictions?” Beckett asks, in another forced and awkward conversational swerve. This time her father plays along, and conversation stays firmly on current affairs through another round of coffees and Beckett winning out over both her father and Castle to settle the check. This does not make her universally popular, and in fact both men unite in disgust. Beckett smirks and radiates smug satisfaction.

It lasts until she’s said goodbye to her father, failed to hug him, and stood awkwardly (there has been an awful lot of awkward this morning) as they both didn’t manage to negotiate the tricky business of bidding farewell.

“I’m glad that’s over,” she says, coming close to Castle. “It was much worse than I thought it would be.”

They turn for home. Castle flags a cab. He doesn’t think the coming discussion will be improved by the subway, and in a cab he can cuddle her close if – when – required.

“We just couldn’t connect,” she says, after a silence. “He kept hitting the sore points. Why’s he want to know about the Academy now? I don’t want to talk about it. He wasn’t interested then, and I don’t wanna remember now.”

They’re almost at Beckett’s, so Castle can delay answering that until he’s paid the cab and they’re inside again.

“He doesn’t need to know. It’s done. It doesn’t matter any more. The Academy’s not relevant once you’re on the beat.”

“I think…” Castle stops.

“What?”

“I think he wants to catch up.”

“Catch up?”

“On what he missed.”

“It’s past. He missed it. There aren’t any do-overs.”

“He’s trying to connect. He doesn’t know that you don’t want to remember it.” Castle bites his tongue on why don’t you want to remember? He knows why. Pushing it won’t help. Nor will saying I looked at the trophy cabinet. You won everything. And you hide it because all it does is remind you of that time rather than how amazing you are. “He wants to be fatherly. He knows he missed it. He’s trying to fix it.”

“He can’t fix it. It’s past. He wasn’t there.”
Castle hears the rising note in her voice and wraps her in. She’s kicked her shoes off, and sunk. “C’mere. Leave the past alone. You can’t change the past, nor can your dad.” He pauses. “You can change how you react to it, though.”

“Can I?” she says bitterly. “I’m not doing so well so far, am I?”

“Yes. Compared to a month ago? You’re doing great. But remember what you said the other day? You’re not looking at it as an alcoholic. You’re looking at it as an alcoholic’s daughter.”

“Uh?”

“He’s realising how much he missed, and he wants to know what he missed. You’re thinking how much it hurt that he missed it, and you don’t want anything to re-open that.”

Beckett doesn’t say anything. Castle tucks her in a little more securely, and progresses them towards the kitchen. He considers that coffee is indicated. More coffee. Coffee and cossetting and comfort and then, just maybe, conclusions. It’s very clear to him that Jim wants to discover – and quite possibly celebrate – all the successes that he missed; that Jim wants to fill in the parental gap that he caused. Saying this will provoke mayhem.

“You know, you say it wasn’t good, but that’s the first time you and your dad have been together without Dr Burke and nothing dreadful happened at all.” He reaches round her and flicks the kettle on.

“It was horrible. I couldn’t talk to him, he couldn’t talk to me.”

“But you did it. You sat there and tried. He tried, too. It’s a start.”
A word in your ear

Beckett doesn’t say anything, again. The kettle boils. Suddenly she buries her face in Castle’s shoulder. He can see and feel the small shudders that ought to indicate tears but, from the lack of dampness, don’t. It becomes borne upon him that Beckett had been expecting, or more likely desperately hoping for, something much more profound to happen this morning than a socially brittle non-conversation. He rests against the counter and cossets her in: petting her back softly.

“I thought it would be easier,” she mutters. “I thought we’d be able to… I’d be able to talk to him. I couldn’t. I couldn’t say anything.” She drags in air. “I thought it would make things better but it didn’t make anything better at all.” Pause. “I knew it wasn’t going right. I just kept hurting him.” Her voice drops away, almost to nothing. “Maybe I should just call it quits.”

“Don’t do that. Just… don’t, okay. Just because it wasn’t a movie moment doesn’t mean it was a failure. Didn’t Dr Burke tell you it took time?” Castle pulls her face out of his shoulder and forces her to look him in the eye. “This isn’t a movie or an episode of Frasier. It takes time. There aren’t Hallmark moments, just little steps. Stop trying to hurry it.”

“Like you know so much about it?” Beckett says acidly. Castle merely looks at her. She drops her eyes.

“I might not like Dr Burke, but I listen to him.” He sets her back from him, hands on her shoulders, thumbs pushing her chin up so that she has to look at him. Her whole body is radiating miserable disappointment. “He keeps saying that it takes time. You want it all to be right straight away, because you never, ever let anything stop you. You go full speed at everything and that’s fine when you’re solving murders – and it’s very fine when it’s me – but it won’t work here.”

“I need it to work.” Beckett is slumped and unhappy as he continues to hold her a little away from him. “I need it to be right.”

“So do it right,” Castle says, exasperated. “Stop trying to force it. You can’t force feelings. Take the time you need. So it was uncomfortable today. He hit sore spots and you tried to cover it up and it hurt him too. Neither of you were happy. But Beckett, the first time at Dr Burke’s it was a total car crash. This time you didn’t even need a mediator.”

He pulls her back to tuck against him once more.

“I wanted it to go well,” she whispers, tears lurking behind her voice, “and then it didn’t and I couldn’t fix it.”

Castle simply holds her close in his embrace. He’s sure there’s more to this than simply I thought it would work out, but he’s not sure that Beckett knows what that more might be. After Dr Burke’s commentary on the timing of brilliant insights, he’s also not particularly keen on speculating aloud, lest it ruin some master plan about which he is, courtesy of Dr Burke, unaware. With considerable acerbity, he makes a mental note to contact Dr Burke in the morning. This is all tied up with the Academy and not wanting to think about that period and then not wanting to talk about it and then not letting Jim know anything. Well, Dr Burke can just put his brilliant brain to use. Castle will simply do what only he can do, and take care of his Beckett.

He flicks the kettle back on, and turns them round so that Beckett’s caught between his big body and the counter, and he can reach mugs, French press, and coffee without letting her go. It’s a little awkward, making coffee around unmoving Beckett, but he’s managing.
The French press filled, Castle realises that he has to move. However, being blessed with only two hands, he cannot move himself, Beckett and the coffee all at once. “C’mon, Beckett. Coffee,” he entices. She doesn’t move. Castle decides that moving Beckett first is the best option, and therefore walks her over to the couch without brooking any resistance, sits her down on it nestled into a corner which will hold her up, and when he returns with the coffee she hasn’t moved an inch.

He snuggles her in, which doesn’t improve anything about her but makes him happier, pours both mugs of coffee and pushes one under her nose. She inhales, wrinkles her nose and – what? He needs to call 911. She’s not taken the cup.


She turns back into his shoulder, ignoring the coffee, and presses right in. Castle curls his arm much more tightly around her, only laments his coffee briefly, and then swings her legs up and her into his lap and ignores the small noises that mean that shortly there are very likely to be mascara smudges on his previously clean shirt. (unless she’s wearing a waterproof formula. She’d said she did, but it hadn’t been very waterproof previously.) She needs to be tucked in and snuggled close and held tight and he’ll just drop little kisses on her head and – oh, perfect – he can reach his coffee too.

It takes him most of the coffee cup, and many nuzzles into her hair, to realise that she’s as sleep. Sleeping, the pale skin is branded by the dark circles divided by her black lashes. Castle concludes that she didn’t sleep much last night, drains his coffee, sighs, picks her up, and takes her through to her bedroom to tuck her into bed, still fully clothed.

He goes back into the main room, scribbles a note which he then leaves firmly anchored to her nightstand, and quietly leaves. The note awaits Beckett when she rouses. Call me when you’re awake. Love, C. He had thought very hard about staying, but he is entirely unsure that he can avoid saying or doing anything precipitative if he does. He thought very hard about the extra word in the signoff, too. But he does, and he wants to say it. Write it.

“Hi, Dad,” Alexis chirps, looking as if she’s about to go out. “Everything okay?”

“Yes. It’s all fine. Where’s Grams?”

“Oh, she went out.”

Good, Castle thinks. “Okay.”

“I’m going to a movie with Loretta.”

“Okay, but be back for dinner, yeah?”

“Sure, Dad. See you later.”

Alexis bounces off. Castle gets himself a cold drink and wanders into his study to think. Mostly what he’s thinking is that he needs to call Jim, but that is emphatically not a fun thought. Unfortunately, it’s the one that’s nagging at his conscience. He’d cut Jim off pretty hard with no explanation, and that’s not the way to get on with your girlfriend’s father. He puts it off for a few more minutes, until he really can’t stand his own procrastinating any more.

“Jim? It’s Rick Castle.”

“Rick? Is Katie okay?”
“Yes,” Castle says – which he would have said even if she’d not been fine. “She’s fine. I – er – wanted to talk to you about shutting you down about seeing my family. I’m sorry about that, but I didn’t have much time to explain before Beckett got back.”

“Mm?” Jim says, not sounding particularly happy or receptive. “Don’t you think I know how to deal with my daughter?” The strong implication is I know best. “I don’t need you to tell me.”

“Don’t you?” Castle asks, already annoyed. Jim hasn’t exactly managed it well since Castle’s met him. “Because if you don’t why were you forcing her into a corner? That was never going to end well. I thought you wanted this fixed?”

“I do. More than you do. Just because you’re dating her doesn’t give you any rights.”

“That’s up to her. Not you. I’m not having that fight with you because it’s not your fight to have. Now do you want to know what was going on or are you going to keep trying to butt heads over something that isn’t your call?”

“I just want to look after her,” Jim says, after a significant and rather hostile pause. “She’s still my daughter and whatever you think about it I’m the one who brought her up.” Castle very badly wants to say and you’re also the one who screwed her up, so shut up and listen to me. He doesn’t. Just. He’ll add this to the list of matters to discuss with Dr Burke, though. He really does not need a fight with Jim.

“Look, Beckett invited you to brunch to try to start patching things up, okay? But you didn’t know that asking her about the Academy would hit a sore spot, and after that you were going to try to force her to meet my family again. She’d have said no, and more importantly she’d have been even less keen to patch things up than she was a month ago because she’d think you weren’t getting where she’s at. Which you aren’t,” Castle adds irritatedly, “because you don’t know the half of it.”

“And you do?” Jim says, equally irked.

“Seeing as it’s me she’s actually talking to every time it’s too much, yeah, sure I do. I didn’t see much talking this morning, and I’m trying to help that. Not that you seem to want helped.”

There is another significant, and only marginally less hostile, pause. As previously, Castle pushing back very hard has stopped Jim’s aggressively parental stance in its verbal tracks. Shame it doesn’t seem to have stopped the mental tracks. It belatedly occurs to Castle that Jim is at least as unkeen as Beckett on being reminded of his, Jim’s, failures; and every time that Castle stands up for Beckett it’s hurting Jim. Jim, in fact, is not only suffering his little girl being all grown up, he’s being reminded every minute that he missed it all and, since Jim is not stupid, he’s realising that he’s missed his chance to be Beckett’s dad; that he’s not going to be the one she turns to. It’s another shock to an already over-shocked system. Even so, Castle isn’t really inclined to soften the blow. He is not prepared to be treated like an over-sexed, callow high-school senior, when he isn’t.

“I could really get to dislike you, Rick,” Jim eventually grits out. “But whatever you’re about to say, I guess I need to hear.”

“I was at the Academy with Be-Kate when she needed to interview the instructor about the guy they were using for training. They’ve got an awards cabinet there. Must go back to the day they built the place. You name it, she’s won it. She graduated top by miles.”

“Really?” There is a very so-what’s that got to do with this conversation? flavour to the word. “Top?” But that’s pure parental pride.
“Yeah. And she hustled me past it so I wouldn’t see. She doesn’t have a photo of the passing-out ceremony anywhere. She’s never mentioned any of it. Everything I know about her career someone else told me. I don’t know how you got your photo of her?” –

“She gave me it after I’d been dry a year or so.”

Castle suddenly suspects that the photo Jim has might be the only one in existence. Beckett’s wording had been rather ambiguous about which graduation photo she didn’t look at. She certainly doesn’t have either on display at hers.

“– okay, well, anyway. She has never, ever mentioned anything about the Academy or her career to me. She won’t go back there and talk to the classes, though they want her to. She just doesn’t want to think about anything that coincides with the five years before you got dry. And now you want to hear about it. You want to know how successful she was, but all she thinks is that she failed you by walking away – and I know what you’re trying to say,” he says over Jim, “that she didn’t. But she doesn’t believe that.”

“But… but… So you say.” Translation: I don’t believe you, Rick.

“She doesn’t. And trying to make her won’t help. Trying to push her faster than she’ll go won’t work. She’ll stop dead and none of Dr Burke, you or me will be able to make it change, because she won’t listen. She’s asked you – you – to do something for her, and she really struggled to ask you anything because” – he stops, one word too late.

“Because I let her down so many times?” Jim bites. “Who d’you think you are saying that?”

“Because she’s spent five years protecting you from every breath of wind and keeping you away from anything to do with her that might upset you!” Castle snaps back, infuriated. “She never wanted to ask you to talk to Julia because she thought it would upset you. She forced herself to ask you to talk to my interfering mother because she hoped it would help fix it, but she didn’t want to because she thought it would be too much. She doesn’t want to hear it again because every time you tell it, it rips her apart to remember that she walked away. And you were about to tell her that you’d only do it if she were there, weren’t you? You were going to insist she sat through it even though you know how she was with Julia. So I stopped you, and now you’re getting pissed at me because I stopped it becoming a complete disaster and the pair of you yelling at each other again?”

He stops, and brings his rising voice under control. “I really don’t know why I’m bothering trying to stop you screwing it up. You think you know what you’re doing, so go right ahead and do it your way. You’re so hung up on treating me like I’m her first ever boyfriend that you’re not listening. Well, it’s up to Beckett who she wants to date. But I’ve had enough of trying to help you when it’s pretty obvious that you have a problem with me. I’ve got enough to deal with thanks to my own mother. So make your own mistakes. I’m out.”

Castle swipes the phone off in a fine temper and ignores it (after checking that it isn’t his Beckett) when it starts to ring again. He’s fed up of mediating and he is totally sick of Jim picking a fight with him. He doesn’t owe Jim anything at all and he’s got enough to deal with at home. Jim can just stew. He’s done with trying to fix it for Jim. Jim can fix it for himself.

Castle’s bad temper carries him through the next two hours, three ignored calls from Jim, another soda and two full chapters of anger fuelled and excellent writing. About that point, he realises that he hasn’t heard from Beckett, either, which does not improve his mood one whit. If she’s still sleeping, then she’s been upset and not sleeping and she should have said to him. If she’s not and she hasn’t rung then that’s just not on. He goes back to anger fuelled writing and is halfway down the next chapter when his phone rings again. This time it’s his Beckett, which stops his bad temper
“Hey, Castle.”

Beckett had woken, considerably confused by being fully dressed and in bed. Castle’s note doesn’t make anything clearer. Call when she’s awake? What happened? She pulls her scattered thoughts together, peers her eyes open and works out that her disturbed night had caught up with her. Oh. This is moderately pathetic. Right. Pull yourself together, Kate.

She goes to take a shower and change. Sleeping in clothes is not a good idea, and the skirt will need dry cleaned. Once she’s done that, she calls Castle.

“Beckett. You’re awake.”

“Yep. Just woke up. Thanks for the note. I didn’t mean to fall asleep on you.”

“Always happy for you to sleep with me,” Castle purrs.

“Narcophilia?” Beckett snarks.

“It’s so hot that you know that. But actually I prefer you awake and participating.”

Beckett is very glad that this is not a video call. She can feel the heat in her cheeks. She also prefers to be awake to participate.

“You wanted me to call when I woke up?”

“Yeah. You… well, you were a bit upset and I just wanted to know that you were okay.”

“Thanks,” Beckett says, with considerable feeling. “I think I need to work through this morning. Think over what you said. Maybe I’ll go for a run. That usually helps.”

“I could come back?”

“It’s three o’clock already. Won’t you have to turn round and go home again?”

“Oh. Yeah. Didn’t realise what time it was.”

Beckett hears a hint of constraint in Castle’s voice.

“Is something wrong?” she asks curiously.

“I was writing.”

“Okay, and?”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s something you aren’t telling me. Are you okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Mm,” Beckett says, sceptically, and then, “okay. See you in the precinct, unless a body drops?”

“Sure. Till tomorrow, Beckett.”
“See you.”

Beckett is convinced something is wrong, but can’t think what. If it’s his family, he’ll get round to talking about it when he’s ready. Not interrogating had been the right decision last time, and it’ll be right this time. To assuage her burning curiosity, she goes out for her run, which leaves her more relaxed, very sweaty, and some way soothed. With her muscles stretched, she can see that maybe expecting it all to go right straight away was far too much. It’s just that she’d hoped, child-like, that it would be enough: that overcoming her resentment to try to do something nice, normal and usual would break the mould of careful, brittle conversation about nothing important at all.

But it hadn’t been enough, just like she hadn’t been enough, just like she isn’t enough. She hasn’t been enough for her father for ten years.

She’s enough for Castle, though. She clings to that thought. She’s always enough for Castle. He’s enough for her too, and he’s why she started doing this, and why she’s still doing it, and why she will do it right. If she can’t manage her father after she’s really thought and therapized (is that a word? she wonders) and tried, then he’ll be okay with that. More importantly, she’ll be okay with that.

Sometimes, there are no good options. All you can do is make the best of the options you’ve got. So she’ll try.
What we talkin' about?

Castle waits until a civilised and decorous eight-fifty-five a.m., and then calls Dr Burke. Rather surprisingly, the receptionist puts him straight through.

“Good morning, Mr Castle.”

“Hello. I need to talk to you.”

“Yes? Is something wrong with Detective Beckett?”

“No, not really. No more than usual. It’s her father. Jim.”

“Mr Beckett? Did yesterday’s brunch meeting not go well?”

“Um… I’d better start at the beginning.”

Dr Burke thinks that starting at the beginning would be profoundly helpful, which Mr Castle’s commentary so far has not been. However, if Detective Beckett is not discomforted, the present issue can undoubtedly be overcome.

“Please do.”

“We had brunch. Jim hit a couple of sore spots. He asked Beckett about the Academy, and she brushed him off and shut it down. Awkward. Jim was hurt. Then Beckett asked him if he’d talk to my mother” –

“Whose idea was that?”

“Beckett’s. She’s going to discuss it with you tomorrow before anyone does anything.”

Dr Burke is intensely relieved by that statement.

“Anyway. She asked him, but then she said she wouldn’t sit through it again. Jim was really hurt, on top of the earlier problem. So he was winding up to insist that he’d only do it if Beckett was there, and I just knew that would be a total disaster, so I told her she had a smudge on her nose and she ran off to check” – Mr Castle sounds quite proud of his resourcefulness – “and I told Jim to back off. So he did.”

So far, so normal, Dr Burke thinks. He does not really understand why Mr Castle has rung. “Mm?” he emits, hoping for something that will justify this use of his valuable time.

“Anyway, the rest of brunch was pretty awkward. Beckett wouldn’t give Jim any sort of an in, and then he asked us over for a meal and she stalled that too. So it wasn’t exactly a success, but they didn’t fight. It was all very careful.” Mr Castle pauses for breath. Dr Burke is still entirely unsure as to why Mr Castle has rung. “When we got home, Beckett was really upset. I think she expected it to make everything a lot better, but it didn’t really, and she was disappointed in herself. So you need to know that. I was thinking, but I thought I’d better not say any of it to her in case it affected your grand plan” – Mr Castle is acerbic – “in some way you haven’t explained.”

“And what were your thoughts?”

“Well. First off, Beckett was at the Academy after she walked away. She was top. Top of everything, pretty much. They practically saluted when she walked in. She ought to be their poster
child. But she hustled me past it all so I couldn’t see it. Actually, so she couldn’t see it. And I think
that actually all it does is remind her that she – she thinks – failed her father, whatever success she
had. So she doesn’t like talking about it at all. Just like she never talks about how she got where
she is. She made it faster than anyone, pretty much, and never says anything. So her dad asking
about it hit her where it hurts and I don’t think she’s mentioned this to you because there’s so much
to deal with.”

“Mm,” Dr Burke says in heartfelt agreement. However, this is normal, usual, and perfectly in line
with the rest of Detective Beckett’s treatment. It is very useful to know before tomorrow’s session.
None of it, however, appears to be the implied issue relating to Mr Beckett.

“I – er – felt a little guilty that I’d shut Jim down like that, so after I got home I called him to
explain why. He got really riled up, and kept on about how he knew how to deal with his daughter,
which is total crap because if he did he wouldn’t keep making dumb statements that upset her, and
treated me like some half-baked teen boyfriend, and anyway he lost his temper and I lost mine and
I’ve told him he can make his own damn mistakes with Beckett because I’m out. I never had any
brief for him, it was only about what Beckett wanted, and she’s got permission from you never to
see him again if this doesn’t all work out. So I’ve pretty much had it with him, and you likely need
to know that, because I guess it’ll all blow up again Friday.”

Oh, dear, Dr Burke thinks. Mr Beckett has really acted most unhelpfully. Mr Castle had been very
supportive of Mr Beckett, and now Mr Beckett, no doubt through his inability to deal with his
daughter’s maturity, has left Mr Castle aggrieved and in no mood to assist him. It is quite possible,
it occurs to Dr Burke, that Mr Beckett is jealous that his daughter has turned to Mr Castle to
provide her with the love and stability which she needs.

“I think he’s trying to be a parent but he’s getting it all wrong. He wants to know what he’s missed,
but until Beckett believes he never didn’t love her she’s not going to want to talk about any of it.”
Mr Castle makes an aggrivated noise. “I wanted it fixed because Beckett wanted it fixed, but I’m
not sure that’s the best thing any more. If he can’t even be careful of what he’s saying at your
place, he’s not taking it seriously.”

Mr Castle sounds completely exasperated. Dr Burke considers that he may have reason, and further
that Mr Castle’s strength and stability has led all of them to overlook the possibility that Mr Castle
is also under considerable strain. Some reassurance seems both justified and indicated.

“I am grateful that you told me. I am in agreement with your conclusions as to Detective Beckett’s
reasons for ignoring her successes, and I think that not mentioning it to her was the correct course
of action. Tell me, Mr Castle, have you considered training as a psychiatrist? I think that you
exhibit many of the traits that are required.”

Mr Castle splutters wordlessly. He does not sound as flattered as he should do. It is by no means
everyone who would be a good psychiatrist.

“I also believe that you are correct about Mr Beckett. I will endeavour to speak to him separately. I
am sure that he is having considerable difficulty adjusting to Detective Beckett’s trust in you, when
he wishes to re-establish his position as her parent.”

“He wants her to look at him like Alexis looks at me. It’s not going to happen, though. She’s grown
up.”

Mr Castle sounds quite unhappy about that. It occurs to Dr Burke that Mr Castle must be under
some stress as he hopes that his own relationship with his daughter does not disintegrate as this one
has.
"Mr Castle, is there anything you wish to discuss from your own perspective? You have unstintingly supported Detective Beckett, but that is a substantial commitment. You are welcome to contact me if there are matters which are troubling you, even if they are not directly related to Detective Beckett’s treatment. Your feelings are important too."

There is a surprised silence. Dr Burke concludes that Mr Castle had not considered his own situation and sources of stress.

“It’s fine.”

Dr Burke does not press. Such would be counterproductive. “Are there any other insights of which I should be aware?”

“No. Not that I’ve noticed. Isn’t that enough?”

“Yes, indeed. However, you have a remarkable facility for observation, which has been extremely helpful. Tomorrow’s session with Detective Beckett will be made much easier thereby.” Dr Burke has a further thought. “How did Mr Beckett react to your irritation?”

“He tried to call back a few times. I didn’t take the calls.”

“Mm. No doubt that was wise. Does Detective Beckett know any of this?”

“Not unless she’s spoken to Jim. I didn’t tell her. She’ll probably interrogate me today. She knows something’s up.”

“You have my sympathy,” Dr Burke says dryly. “It appears to me that Detective Beckett might be a ferocious interrogator.”

“Yep. Anyway, I need to go. I said I’d be at the precinct this morning. Bye.”

“Goodbye. I shall most likely see you on Friday.”

Dr Burke considers the ramifications of this latest twist in the Beckett tale. Mr Beckett needs recalled to the reality of a daughter of twenty-nine, not nineteen, and the ever-increasing certainty of a son-in-law of forty. Mr Beckett cannot behave as if that relationship is a teen romance, since it clearly is not. Dr Burke resorts to a delicately soothing pot of tea, and contemplates his next moves.

Dr Burke is quite clear that he need not approach Mr Beckett until after tomorrow’s session with Detective Beckett, unless Mr Beckett should himself make contact. However, he will need to meet with him. It is quite profoundly unhelpful that Mr Beckett should try to progress matters further or faster than Detective Beckett would wish. Dr Burke is perfectly aware of the likelihood that issuing ultimatums to Detective Beckett will be counterproductive. Surely Mr Beckett must have known this: if nothing else, from her teenage years? He sighs heavily. Really, these Becketts are very troublesome. Just as Detective Beckett is finally reaching important conclusions and progressing well, her father fails to guard his tongue and, worse, through hurt pride and jealousy, forces a quite unnecessary breach with Mr Castle, who remains the key source of support for Detective Beckett and who is coping with quite enough stress without Mr Beckett increasing it.

Dr Burke sighs again. He had hoped that all this was on the point of resolution. Detective Beckett’s case is on the point of resolution. Unfortunately, he can see a need to deal with Mr Beckett. He makes another pot of tea, and allows himself a consolatory chocolate cookie.

Castle arrives at the Twelfth in a less than happy mood, and is only slightly soothed by Beckett’s
appreciation of his coffee offering. There’s no interesting case: it’s all the same pop-and-drops that hadn’t been intriguing last week, and to be honest the only reason he’s here and not at home is that he doesn’t want to have another row with his mother when he’s already fragile.

Beckett sneaks a look at Castle from under her lashes and determines pretty quickly that he is feeling upset – still – which he doesn’t want to talk about. Despite her burning desire to haul him into Interrogation and find out what is wrong, she manages not to unleash her inner Torquemada. Just. She ponders while dealing with the tedious business of cross-matching phone records, and remembers something.

“Castle?”

“Yeah?” He looks up from his phone. Surely now Beckett’s going to interrogate him as if she were the Inquisition?

“I need some shooting practice. Do you want another go at the range? We can take Espo and Ryan if you want, too, and finish up after with a beer.”

Wow. That was absolutely not what he expected. He brightens up. “Can we have a competition?”

Castle appears to Beckett to have had a sudden thought. “Remember our last bet?” he says, voice dropping to a fur-lined growl and dripping with sexuality. “You lost. You promised me another Georgian meal and you haven’t paid up yet.” His eyes sparkle. “Double up?” His smile is openly predatory and wriggles from her optic nerves all the way down to some very different nerves.

“Okay.” If she wins, she’ll think of a suitable prize. If she loses, well, she likes cooking for Castle and she certainly likes the aftermath. Actually, heads she wins, tails she wins. She really likes those odds. Castle smiles lazily. It seems he likes those odds too. He’s totally cheered up, which is a relief. “Straight after shift end. Shall we invite the boys?”

“Nah. I want you all to myself when I win.”

“You mean you don’t want to share my khachapuri?”

“That too.” The lazy smile acquires an edge of wicked suggestiveness. Beckett declines to enquire further.

“Oh, just us.” She gives him a smile which darkens his eyes and tenses his fingers, and then drops her gaze down his body, which is pleasingly reactive. “But I’ll win.”

“You think? We’ll see about that.”

The day passes by without any great breakthroughs or indeed any new, Beckett-flavoured cases. The grinding grunt-work of policing is all that there is. Castle, however, is quite happy. Beckett’s thought up a way of cheering him up, which he wouldn’t have thought of or been able to suggest, and when he wins, he’ll have an even better way of being cheered up, which might involve eating but may not involve Georgian food. He even tops his high score on his current favourite time-wasting game.

“Right. Ten shots, best aggregate score wins.”

“Okay. When I win, we’ll agree dates for the meals you’re going to cook.

“When I win, I’ll have twenty-four hours to think up my two prizes,” Beckett scoffs.
Castle smiles in an offensively superior fashion.

“You’re not going to win, so you won’t need the time.”

Beckett growls. “You wait. Every time you brag that you’ll win my prizes get more elaborate.”

“Oh, Detective Beckett. Such misplaced confidence. Just you wait.” He smirks wickedly. “After all, I wasn’t far behind you last time.”

Beckett is nevertheless quietly confident that she will win. Castle was a surprisingly good shot, but she’s the one who’s qualified – and retested regularly. She’ll need to think up a good prize – actually, one has just popped right into her head. Castle can take her back to the Hamptons. That would be just perfect. Really, really perfect. Every time they’ve gone it’s made everything so much better. She smiles brilliantly, and then she has an even better idea, which is that if she loses she’ll cook these Georgian meals in Castle’s oversize Hamptons kitchen. They can take all the ingredients with them. She is utterly delighted with her own cleverness. In fact, she could have that as a prize whether she wins or loses. Perfect. Utterly perfect. She even bounces, just a tiny bit. This causes Castle to look first deeply suspicious and then deeply worried. Beckett does not do anything to alleviate either. After all, she’s now come up with a way to ensure that she wins, whether or not she scores highest.

They file into separate booths and don ear defenders. Beckett sights carefully, and shoots her ten rounds cleanly. She’s certainly trying to win. She doesn’t like losing, and even if this is a win-win bet she does not feel like caving in, even if it would make Castle very happy.

It would only make Castle happy for as long as it took him to realise she’d thrown the game. After that, he’d be very unhappy, with cause. Winning is no fun if you’re allowed to win. It’s only fun if you win fairly. So she’s shot her best, and if she wins – well, they’ll both win. Not that she’ll tell Castle that quite yet. She’ll let him wonder. Anticipate. He might even try to persuade her thoughts out of her. Mmmmm.

After only a small number of veiled accusations that neither of them can be trusted to add the scores accurately, the range master is asked to do so. He takes his time. Beckett and Castle both smile, each sure that they have won.

“And the winner is…” says the range master, in the manner of the referee in the ring at a world championship belt boxing match, including irritating pause, “…Detective Beckett.”

“What?” blurts Castle.

“Told you so,” smirks Beckett.

“What were the scores?”

“Detective Beckett was one point better than you.”


Castle mutters darkly into his chest. He doesn’t look happy that she won.


“Is that your prize?”
“No,” she smirks. Her smirk is carefully calculated to say *I know what my prize is and I’m not telling you yet.* “We’ll go Dutch.” Not that Castle ever lets her pay without a serious fight, like for Sunday brunch. She’s going to resort to nefarious means, soon. Hiding his wallet, perhaps. In the Robbery evidence locker.

“Okay. But you have to tell me what you want for your prize.”

“Prizes. Two prizes. Double or quits, remember? It was your idea.”

“Stop being triumphalist, Beckett. It’s not nice.”

“Like you wouldn’t be if you had won? Which you didn’t.” She smirks again.

“If *I’d* won, we’d be working out dates for two excellent Georgian meals. You don’t even know what you want.”

“Yes, I do.”

“What?”

“Wait and see.”

“Beckett, that’s *mean.* Stop teasing me.”


“I could stoke your feelings.” She bites her lower lip. Castle draws a sharp breath, and catches her into his arm as they walk down towards Buenos Aires.

“Now I’ve got you. What’s the prize you want? Trip to the Moon? Designer” – he pauses, and she glares – “dresses?” She was sure he was going to say lingerie. The glare must have worked. “Dinner at Nobu?”

“None of the above. You’ll have to wait and see.” She smiles mischievously. “I will tell you that I’m going to enjoy it immensely.”

“But will *I* enjoy it?” Castle whines.

“I don’t know. Wait and see.”

“If you say wait and see once more I’ll… I’ll… well, you’ll be waiting too. Though I can guarantee you’ll enjoy it. The wait, that is.”

Beckett smirks some more as they near the restaurant. Perfect. They’ll have dinner, she’ll invite him back for coffee, and all she’ll need to do is say *wait and see* again. Her smirk alters to an angelically happy smile. This does not appear to reassure Castle. However, nestling closer into his encircling arm does. Win-win. What an excellent evening this has turned out to be.

Dinner is also excellent. Castle tries very hard to weasel the nature of her prize out of her, but she deflects and diverts and when that seems not to be working resorts to sliding her foot up and down his leg. That certainly does work. It also nearly killed him when he choked on his wine, but a hard pat on the back solved the problem.

“Want to come back for coffee, Castle?”
“Will you tell me what the prize is going to be? I need to know if I have to fund a Moon visit.”

“What if I wanted you to kidnap Dr Burke?”

“You won’t.”

“I might.”

“You won’t because that would be illegal and you’re still a cop.”

Beckett grumps and grumbles and groused.

“So what’s the prize?”

She leads them out the door. “Wait and see.”

Castle leans down and growls darkly into her ear. “You’ll tell me. You’ll be waiting” – he gives that a filthy emphasis which squiggles down every erogenous zone and every sensitised nerve she possesses – “to be able to tell me.”

Beckett merely smiles in a satisfied fashion. Her smile continues all the way to the car, all the way home – especially when Castle’s wide palm plants itself on her knee and remains there – and all the way up to her apartment. She is still smiling when the door shuts behind them.
Castle takes his jacket off and tidily hangs it up, divests Beckett of hers and does the same, and then waits a beat. He knows she’s expecting him to pounce, but she’s been teasing him for a while and he’s going to prove that sauce for the Castle gander is sauce for the Beckett goose. (He congratulates himself on the correct gendering of that phrase.)

As he had expected (and hoped) Beckett hesitates slightly, and then steps out of her shoes and wanders toward the kitchen and the coffee. Castle pads after her. There is a certain aura of confuddlement about her, which is just what he wants. There is, of course, also a certain aura of irritation that she hasn’t got her own way, but he’s pretty sure that will dissipate in due course. More accurately, he’ll dissipate it.

He leans on the counter and watches the production of coffee without comment, though he appreciates the effect on her profile of the slight stretch to reach everything. It shows up very nicely the curves of her cleavage and indeed some slight excitement as her button-down pulls a little. He forces himself not to reach out and touch. Instead he just admires, running a heated gaze over her, which even though she isn’t turned to him he knows that she feels.

He congratulates himself on the correct gendering of that phrase.

Coffee, Beckett and Castle all arrive at the couch simultaneously. Correctly concocted caffeine achieved, Castle allows himself to sling an arm around Beckett, whose aura of irritated confuddlement has not changed, and nestles her in to his side.

“Are you going to tell me what you want for a prize?”

“How’d you know if I’ve decided yet?”

“You’ve got that I-know-something-you-don’t-know look. You’ve had it all day. And you said you had, earlier. So you’re just being mean not telling me.” Beckett makes a happy noise and snuggles in. “That’s not an answer.” More snuggle. “Snuggling up to me will not stop me wanting an answer.” Snuggle stops. It’s replaced by a nuzzle into his neck. “I said before, you can’t suborn me with seduction.” Nuzzle stops. It’s replaced by a dirty wet kiss and lick all the way up the vein in his neck to the nerve at his ear.

“Really?” she purrs wickedly into said ear. “You seem pretty suborned and seduced to me.” Her hand is proving her point. It’s found hard evidence of how seduced he is. “Besides, it’s you who’s complaining.” Her hand goes for a little more seduction. Her mouth nips his ear, and circles the shell. Castle’s arm tightens around her. His brain had very little to do with that. He’d had a plan. He still has a plan. It’s just very, very difficult to remember his plan when Beckett is quite definitely seducing him with a completely different plan. The key points float back into his fuzzy brain. Seduce Beckett. Seduce Beckett till she’ll tell him everything just so he doesn’t stop any more. Yes. That was the plan. Definitely.

It’s just very, very difficult when Beckett’s being flirtatious and mischievous and downright naughtily feline. It takes all his brain cells and turns them to kitty-kibble. Which thought finally recalls him to his plan for dealing with this very definite Kat. All he has to do now is stop her stealing his mind for long enough for him to steal hers.

Since Kat is all snuggled up to him, she clearly won’t mind if he simply lifts her into his lap – so he does – and snuggles her back in – so he does that – and embarks on the exceedingly pleasurable pastime of kissing her for a while – so he does that too, and sure enough objections do not happen. They don’t happen when he delicately and surreptitiously embarks on the buttons of her shirt,
either, mainly because his Kat is none too delicately and certainly not surreptitiously halfway down opening not just the buttons of his shirt but also the buckle of his belt. She was almost as relaxed as in the Hamptons, which is seriously hopeful.

His plan is racing out of his head almost as fast as her fingers are racing down his shirt. In absolute desperation (and lust) he flicks open the buttons rat-a-tat-tat and shoves her shirt down her arms, which traps them and removes her hands approximately a tenth of a second before doing so would have left him gravely injured if not mutilated.

“There,” he says smoothly. “Now, where was I? Oh, yes. Prizes.” He smiles lazily. “If you won’t say what you want, I’ll just do what I want. I’m sure you’ll like it.” The smile turns dangerous. “You always do. I know what you like.” He smirks. “Me.” He kisses her hard before the infuriated riposte can exit her throat. “So I’m going to do things I know you like.” He takes her mouth again, pulling her round so that she’s straddling him and then taking off the tangled shirt and replacing it with one hand around her slim wrists, behind her and pressing her close, and one cradling her skull, supporting her into his searching mouth. “That’s better.” He nibbles round her jawline. “Perfectly positioned.”

“I’m not a doll,” Beckett snarks, slightly spoilt by a gasp and wriggle.

Castle teases the nerve at her ear. “Nope,” he murmurs, and presses her further in. “Definitely not. I’d say you’re all woman.” He drops into the sex-soaked semi-growl that seduces her ears as surely as it does her body. “All woman and all mine.” He lets go of her wrists, and keeps that arm around her as he stands up, pulls her back against him so he can roll hips into her and enjoy the answering movement. Beckett has fallen neatly into feline and feminine Kat-ness: responsive and happy and very clearly enjoying herself. She’s melted into his grasp in a thoroughly provocative fashion, and anyone who ever thought that feminine might equal weak was totally, utterly wrong. There’s nothing weak about his Kat, or his Beckett, but that doesn’t stop her sometimes being softly feminine behind her own door.

In which case, it’s time for him to be pleasantly assertively masculine. Well. To continue being pleasantly assertively masculine. Starting with the removal of the entirely unnecessary pants that Beckett is still wearing. Those fall to her feet with an enticing swish. He lifts her slightly, and hey presto, they’re gone. Since his shirt is mysteriously fully open, it seems entirely unfair and unreasonable not to tuck Beckett against his chest, and then it seems entirely unfair and unreasonable not to tip her face up and possess himself of her mouth: to explore and search out and conquer, and once he’s begun that there’s only one way to continue.

He hoists her up and carries her the short distance to her bedroom, where he can simply lay her out and have his wicked way with her. At least, he’ll have his wicked way when she stops using her wicked wiles on him. If she wiggles against him like that again, the wicked ways and wiles will be against the wall. He applies a little strength so she can’t wiggle any more, being too tightly against him, and carries on with the plan.

By the bed, he doesn’t yet spread her out over it. Instead, he keeps her pressed tightly against him with a firm hand planted across her neat ass, so that she knows exactly how aroused he is, how much he wants her: the force of his need grinding into the open soft heat where she equally wants and needs him. He takes hard possession of her mouth once more: insisting on surrender, invading and then owning; till the soft noises begin and the tips of her breasts are hard where they’re rubbing against his chest. Her hands are plucking at his pants, trying to slide between their bodies and undo them.

“In a minute,” he murmurs into her avid lips. “Wait a minute.” He moves across her jaw to flirt
with the nerves at her ear and then slants her head to open the curve of her neck to him and carries on down.

Beckett has slipped into the tide of arousal that she’s been watching rise since before dinner without so much as a whisper of protest. She wants her forceful, possessive, assertive Castle and here he is, currently teasing the cut of her collarbones and holding her so that her head has dropped back and her heated centre is pressed right against his hard length. There’s a looseness around her ribs where he must have unfastened her bra: he draws it off her and perforce that takes her hands away from his broad body and leaves her depending on his grip to keep her balanced.

And then he lowers her to her bed and leaves her legs dangling over the side and stands between them, simply looking: hot, midnight dark blue eyes raking her form and scorching her skin; firing her blood and flicking all her synaptic switches to full on. She reaches for him, but he’s not where he should be: somehow just a fraction too far, still gazing.

“You’re beautiful,” he says reverently, and the heat in his eyes isn’t only searing lust, but far more, far deeper. He drops to his knees, and his hands curve around her waist; hers meet his shoulders. “You’re just so beautiful.” His voice is falling down the register all the time, deeper and deeper, tugging her down with it. His mouth is planted against the base of her sternum and it’s vibrating through her, dark and dangerous: reverence has moved over to make way for sheer sexuality.

A kiss follows the vibrations, then a swift, unsatisfying flick to each side, tantalising and teasing by turn. She tries to curve towards his delicate touch, to bring him where she wants, but large hands hold her in place, weight prevents her turning or arching, and she’s left with no option but to wait for him to show her what he plans.

“Let’s do some things you like,” he rumbles. It’s not a suggestion. It’s not asking for her input, either. She emits a querying little sound. It’s not quite a whimper, or a whine. He shouldn’t be talking when he should be using his mouth entirely differently. “You’ll need to wait and see what they all are.” Ah. Castle wasn’t entirely joking about that. Oh well. It’s hardly a problem if he wants to play. She stretches bonelessly and rubs across him, delighted to be stroked and perfectly ready to be played with.

He smiles against her skin, and then lifts his head to move his hands upward from her waist. His thumbs flirt wickedly with the curves of her breasts as his fingers slither higher until each breast is cupped in one hand and his naughty thumbs are sliding to and fro over ever-tauter nipples. She mews, a little pleading, pushing up into his touch. “You like this,” he murmurs, doing it again, massaging sex into her skin with every stroke. “But you’ll like this more,” and he palms her, rolling, tiny little pinches which tease without stinging. She does like it more, and sighs out pleasure. She loves it when he does this. She squirms against him, moving to the rhythm of his ministrations but unable to press any other areas into him. The sigh shifts to whimper. She wants more, but Castle isn’t giving her anything more: simply the seducing, drugging pattern of his hands that doesn’t slow or speed, doesn’t change, doesn’t alter at all but is bringing her up and up. He’s pillowed his chin on her stomach so he can watch her reactions, smiling lazily. Her hands clutch in his hair.

“You really like that. But you’ll like the next bit even more,” he eventually says. By that time she’s stopped saying anything, in favour of noises. “On the other hand, you were mean to me. Want to tell me what your prize is?”

So that’s his game. She knew that. She did. She’d just lost sight of it through the fog of arousal. She gathers her voice and some game. “Don’t you want to have some fun too?” One of her hands wanders down his chest and finds taut pectorals and hard nipples for it to play with. The other
tightens on his shoulder to pull him closer. He allows himself to be pulled, shuffling inward, and she rises slightly to kiss him. He takes full advantage, hands coming around her face and lifting her to sitting: wrapping her in for a change of pace signalled by the slow, deep kisses. It doesn’t last.

“I am having fun,” he husks into her ear. “I love it when you’re totally responsive to everything I do. Let’s do some more. We could do lots more, but you won’t tell me what you want for a prize, so I’ll just decide what I want to do and do it, till you do tell me.”

“Is that a threat?” Beckett breathes, twisting the words around her mouth till they escape on a hot slither. “‘Cause I don’t think it’s going to work.”

“Why, I might think that was a challenge.”

“Really?”

“Mmm. Yes. Are you challenging me?”

“Would I do that?” She nips his ear.

“You might. Just like I might take you up on it. If you were challenging me.”

She nibbles at his earlobe again, and slides a hand down between them to find him. Castle lets her, for a moment – it feels so good, oh god do that some more – and then gently removes her, trickling his hand between her legs just for an instant to find damp fabric and heat: she lifts to his touch and mews again when he withdraws it.

“Something you like?” Mew turns to growl. “You could have it. You know, if you weren’t keeping secrets.”

Beckett considers just telling him. Then she considers how good she feels right now. Then she considers how much better she might feel if she lets this play out and Castle just keeps on trying to – er – persuade words out of her. She’s sure words will happen. They just might not be the ones he wants. She makes her decision.

“Make me,” she dares him.

“Make you stop keeping secrets?” He suddenly looks very big, very male and very dangerous. His voice trickles into her ears. “So it is a challenge. I like challenges. Game on.”

He drops her down on to her back and then pins her hands by her ears as he plunders her mouth once more. This time, when he’s finished taking her mouth, he moves straight down to take one proud nipple into his mouth and start on persuasion. It doesn’t take long for gasps to become whimpers to become soft moaning; it takes less time for the same to happen when he gives due attention to the other side.

“What’s your secret, Kat?”

“Not telling,” she breathes.

Castle likes this game – and Kat has clearly signalled that this is the way she’d like to play today. He trails a hot, wet line down her cleavage, and then wanders his fingers over her stomach, stopping to investigate her navel. She squeaks, and wriggles.

“What’s your secret?” He tickles her navel again, pins her legs to the bed to stop her escaping and dances fingers over some extremely sensitive nerves round her middle. She wriggles a lot more.
“Stop it!”

“Tell me your secret.” He tickles again.

This was emphatically not the plan. He was supposed to extract it from her with sex, not tickling. This isn’t fair.

“Won’t,” she says crossly, and even folds her arms, which land on Castle’s head.

“Won’t? You mean I can’t tickle it out of you?”

“No. Stop it!” she squeaks on a high-pitched note.

Castle smiles evilly.

“Not what you wanted?”

There is a growl that promises death.

“Were you expecting something different?”

“I’m not telling you anything if you keep tickling me,” Beckett says, sounding like a sulky child. “I hate being tickled.” She tries to turn over. Castle doesn’t think that was the plan at all, and stops her.

“No escaping. If you won’t succumb to tickling, then I guess I’ll just have to try something else.”

That’s more like it, thinks Beckett. She stops her futile efforts to turn away from him. Futile, because there is a very firm grip around her hips and a solid weight still leaning over her.

“But I enjoyed tickling you. You wriggle so delightfully. Almost as good as when I do this…” and he rises up away from her and draws one hard finger through her centre. “See? I think I’ll do it again,” and he does, and she writhes. He manoeuvres his other hand to remove his shirt, which is easy, and his pants, which are not so easy. “Now,” he rasps, “let’s both get comfy.”

Castle slides her fully on to the bed, arranges himself beside her, slips a hand under her neck and consciously adopts a wholly predatory demeanour. “Tell me your secret,” he commands.

“No.”

He catches both hands and imprisons them in the hand by her shoulder. “No?”

“No.”

The other hand wanders over her chest and plays once more, while he bends and kisses her until she softens again, stops playing at resistance, stops her play-sulks and arches and curves to him, opening to his avidity and giving back plenitude. His fingers draw little patterns, and his mouth follows, and she begins to breathe harder, move more demandingly. A swift stroke dances downward, traces the edge of her panties, slips beneath, teases the sensitive flesh and makes her whimper and buck against him, his thigh pushing her legs apart for access.

“Tell me your secret,” he purrs.

“No…” she whispers, but it’s sounding less convincing by the instant. He smiles ferally and strokes more firmly, circling the knot of nerves, coaxing sexy noises from her and then stealing them with more hard kisses, working her up and still holding her wrists so she can’t retaliate,
everything in his gift. She moans and tries to turn into him, to rub over the coarse hair of his leg and take what she wants.

“Something you want? Tell me your secret.”

“Castle…”

He slips fingers into her: in, out till her muscles are fluttering and she’s close, and “Tell me your secret.”

“If – ohhh – I don’t?”

“I can keep this up all night. I can keep you like this all night, just petting my Kat. Or you could tell me your secret.”

Kat smiles naughtily up at him. “Could I? What’ll you do if I tell?”

Castle peels her panties off one-handed, wrestles himself out of his boxers and moves over her, settling between her legs. “What would you like me to do?”

He’s let go of her hands, and she digs nails into his flanks. “Inside me. Now.”

“Tell me your secret.” He slides against her, hinting at what she could have. “You’ve had your fun.”

“Mmm,” she hums. “Stop teasing me.”

“Stop teasing me, then.” He slides again, and she sighs at the sensation.

“Ohhh-kay. After – ohhhhh now please.”

“Promise?”

“Promise. Now.”

Castle releases his own control and lets desire take over and take his Beckett-Kat in one surging, fluid motion: she arches hips to him and brings him impossibly deep and then there’s only her heat and her movement and her and tempestuous release for both.
“So what’s your prize, then?” Castle rumbles lazily; comfortably snuggling a very feline, boneless Kat into the crook of his arm and his chest.

“Prizes,” she corrects. “Two of them.”

“Okay, but what are they?”

“I want to go back to the Hamptons.”

There is total silence next to her. Finally, “You mean that?” It comes out as a strangled squeak-growl.

“No, I meant *I want a pair of garden gnomes* and somehow it came out as *I want to go back to the Hamptons*. Of course I meant it. And if we took the right things with us I could show you how to cook Georgian food.”

“You wanna go back to the Hamptons?”

“Yeah.”

“And you’ll show me how you cook Georgian food?”

“If you want.”

“Sure I want. I love cooking.” He pulls her unresisting form over him and cuddles her hopefully. She *wants* to go back to the Hamptons. Every time they’ve been there it’s been a success: they’ve made – no, she’s made – real steps forward.

He looks at the clock. It’s not even half past nine yet. Plenty of time for whatever they want to do. Right now, staying cuddled up together and possibly planning a suitable weekend for a third Hamptons trip sounds good.

Of course, that’s when his phone rings. Beckett, who appears to be programmed to answer a ringing phone without thought or volition intervening, and who is in a slightly better position to move, automatically locates it, glances down at the screen, acquires a look of extreme surprise and passes it to Castle, who makes a noise of considerable distaste and declines the call.

“Why is my dad calling you?”

Oh, God. Here goes with the interrogation. And since he *was* – he certainly isn’t now – all happy and sex-hazed and lazily content with an equally lazy, hazy Kat-Beckett, he can’t think of a good answer except, “Er…”

It is not fair that Beckett can snap her mind back into place this quickly.

“That why something was off?”

“Uh…”

“What’s going on?”

And it’s entirely unfair of her to use that tone on him when he simply can’t disobey it, even if she
is all snuggled over him and naked and cuddling him.

“Uh…”

“C’mon. What’s up?” And another leap of ferocious detective intelligence. “What happened while I was… out the room… on Friday a week ago?”

Castle gives up. He’s not going to be able to resist the interrogation for much longer and, truthfully, he doesn’t want to. He remembers, suddenly, how Beckett had gone in to bat for him against her father about his mother’s interference; how she’d listened to him but never pushed; how he’s listened to her and tried to be there for her… It finally dawns on him that while he’s supported her to the limit, it’s time he understood that she wants to do the same for him.

“Okay. But… look, just listen, okay, because I don’t get this either.”

“ ‘Kay.” She props herself up and slides an arm under his neck, not letting go of him, but so she can see his face.

“Okay,” Castle says again. “Friday last, when you – er – left, your dad wanted to go straight after you. Um… I knew where you’d gone and I knew you wouldn’t want that so I told him not to and he – er – got a bit uptight about it and a bit cross with me.”

“Mm?” Beckett says, clearly sure that there was a little more nuance than that.

“He said that he should go after you, not me. I didn’t agree.”

“Oh.” There’s a half-beat pause. “Good.” Another half-beat. “I wouldn’t have wanted Dad. Just you.” Her free hand grips on his side, and he reaches over to match it with a soft placement of his on her hip.

“Anyway. I didn’t mind him yelling about Mother because she’s so far over the line she’d beat Usain Bolt to the hundred metre finish, but as you got to brunch he was putting the hard word on me about taking care of you” – Beckett makes a very peculiar noise, composed of memory, irritation, ire and not a little hmm-that-might-be-nice – “which you didn’t seem to appreciate, and then you suggested that you wouldn’t be there if he spoke to Mother and I knew he was about to say he wouldn’t do it if you didn’t go so I” –

“lied about the smudge.”

“ – well, yes, but I didn’t know how you’d take it if I said it in front of you with your dad there– anyway, so I told him not to give you ultimatums and maybe we could deal with it later with Dr Burke or something, and he backed off.”

“Good,” Beckett says, wearily. “I could see it coming too, but…”

“Yeah. So – anyway, it worked, and then you fell asleep on me, which is really seriously unflattering, and I went home. But I felt a bit guilty that I’d just shut your dad down completely and not had a chance to say why and it’s really not a good idea to be on the outs with your in-laws” –

“What did you just say?” Beckett squawks. *Oh shit.* Not for the first time, Castle’s mouth has run considerably ahead of his brain and sense. “*In-laws?*” She takes a deep, panicky breath. “*In-laws?* Did we get married and I didn’t *notice*?”

“Shorthand,” Castle says hurriedly. “Shorter than *girlfriend’s father.* We didn’t get married when
you weren’t looking. How would I manage that? But... d’you have to sound quite so horrified? I mean, I thought you liked me.” He smirks smugly up at her, desperately trying to get this into a place where it can be a joke, brought back to where it should be, and where he doesn’t blurt out I want to marry you, how about right now?

“I do like you,” Beckett says, with a wicked grin, and then much more seriously, “But I can’t deal with thoughts like that when everything else is still so mixed up.” She falls on to his shoulder. “It’s still such a mess.”

Castle’s arms come round her. “It’s less of a mess than it was, Kate. Stop worrying now. We don’t need to hurry” – but I want to, I want to, I want to have you permanently– “let’s just enjoy where we are. If I get my words wrong” –

“Thought you were a writer?” –

“I am, but you don’t get edits in real life – if I get my words wrong just don’t run, okay?”

She’s tight against him, almost clinging. “I’ll try,” emerges from his shoulder.

There is a short pause while they pull themselves together, punctuated by some mutually soothing and asexual petting.

“So, back to Dad. You said you felt guilty about shutting Dad down. Then?”

“Well, I called him, ‘cause I thought I ought to explain. He was irritated practically before I started, and then he lost his temper and – er – I lost mine.” He stops there.

“And?”

“And I told him that if he had a problem with me I’d had enough of him and he could make his own mistakes. And I haven’t taken his calls since.”

“Mm.” Beckett wriggles into a better position, and leans up on her elbows to scrutinise him. “And you thought I’d worry about that?”

“Er – yes?”

“No. If Dad’s stupid enough to think I’m still sixteen and to pick a fight with you then that’s his lookout. I’m not getting into it.”

Castle makes a strangulated noise that emerges as gleep at Beckett’s matter of fact tone. “You don’t mind?” he emits.

“Well, I’d rather you got on, if only because one set of daddy issues is enough, and you’ve got enough problems with your mom, but if it comes to a choice, well...” she stops and blushes darkly, “well, it’s not him.”

Castle hauls her back down on to his mouth and kisses her desperately, frantically. He’d made his stand some time ago, but to hear it from Beckett... it’s everything. They’ll be everything they want to be. He gives her all the passion and power of which he’s capable: rolls them over without ever leaving her mouth and she gives and he takes and he gives and she takes and it’s only them, always and only and forever them.

They end up nestled together in perfect close harmony, Beckett’s head on his shoulder, his nuzzled into her hair. Just like it should be. Just like it will be. Because now he is perfectly certain that
“Good evening, Detective Beckett.”

“Hey.”

Dr Burke smiles professionally. “How did your brunch progress?”

Detective Beckett produces an expression which does not fill Dr Burke with confidence. “Not well.” She sits down. “In fact, pretty badly.”

“Oh? In what way?”

Detective Beckett ignores that. “And Dad’s picked a fight with Castle, too. Ugh,” she says.

“I am aware of the issues between your father and Mr Castle. Let us leave that for a moment, and concentrate on your brunch, as that will probably assist in explaining your father’s behaviour.”

“Okay. So Dad and Castle were already there when I arrived, and Dad told Castle he hoped he was taking care of me, so I said I could take care of myself and they both jumped.” Detective Beckett snickers. Dr Burke smiles too. He can imagine the scene.

“I’d thought that maybe if we could just manage a nice brunch with conversation – nothing heavy. I didn’t want heavy – it would all ease things off a bit. Leave the difficult stuff for here and just do something normal. So I told Dad about one of the weirder cases because I thought – I was pretty sure – he’d find it interesting.” Detective Beckett clearly takes some pity on Dr Burke’s look of interest. “Lowlife found dead in an SRO, but there were prints from an Academy instructor all over the room. Not what you expect.”

“Indeed not.”

“Turned out they were using the lowlife to train the rookies. I thought Dad would find it interesting,” she says again.

“It sounds as if it is a very interesting technique. Very much more realistic than any role-play would be.”

“For sure,” Detective Beckett says with considerable emphasis. “Role-play is a pain.” She appears to realise that she has agreed with Dr Burke on a matter, and looks quite surprised by that occurrence.

“Anyway. He wanted to hear about the Academy, and I couldn’t deal with it. And he was hurt. And I changed the conversation and that was awkward because we all knew why and it didn’t get any better after that.” She pauses, briefly. “I managed to ask him about whether he’d speak to Castle’s mom, and that went wrong because I said I didn’t want to hear his story again but I meant I couldn’t sit through it especially with Martha trying to pretend she could take Mom’s place. She can’t. Never. And that hurt Dad too but I couldn’t explain and Dad was winding up to force the issue and I can’t deal with that either so Castle managed to get us through that. We need to talk about whether that’s a good idea or not this evening.”

“Certainly. We can discuss that in a few moments.” Dr Burke is relieved that Mr Castle had forewarned him of this plan. Choking is unprofessional and detrimental to continued good health. “Was there anything else?”
“Dad invited us to dinner.”

“Mm?”

“I stalled. Everything else had gone so badly and I just didn’t want to do it again. So I switched the conversation and everything was just so awkward and it was a total disaster and I really thought that we could make things better but it just all got worse and worse and worse. I was hoping that the next thing would be Dad and Alexis and Castle and me having dinner but even brunch with Dad was so awful that I don’t think I can.”

“Was there anything else?”

“Isn’t that enough? It was a disaster.”

“Was it?” Dr Burke looks coolly at Detective Beckett. “You did not argue, did you?”

“No…”

“You did not set out deliberately to hurt your father?”

“No!”

“There was awkwardness, but no loss of composure on either part?”

“Yes.”

“In that case, it cannot be described as a disaster. Let us explore the points where such awkwardness arose. The first was when your father wanted to hear about the Academy. Please tell me about the Academy?”

“Police Academy,” says Detective Beckett with a sardonic twist of lips. “Nothing like the movies.” Dr Burke fails to appreciate the reference. He is not aware of any such cinematography. “They train us to be cops.”

“Ah. And this training is difficult?”

“Yes. They push you all the way, and then further. Always testing your limits.”

Dr Burke draws his bow at a venture, although he is relatively sure of his ground. “Were you successful at the Academy?”

“I graduated.” That is very clipped. Dr Burke detects an evasion.

“But there must have been class positions. What was yours?”

“Top,” Detective Beckett says, with no pride and much bitterness.

“First place? That is an achievement of which to be proud.”

“Why? I hadn’t anything else to do. Dad was drowning on his own. I couldn’t pull him out it. So what if I was top? It didn’t help anything. Everyone thought I was so good, all the instructors, everyone. They didn’t know I’d screwed over my dad ‘cause I couldn’t cope with him. If they’d known that they’d have thought about me differently. I didn’t deserve what they said. I was just leaving him to drown, and I could justify it because I was working my ass off. I didn’t have time. You have to live there, so I couldn’t go see him. Rules. It was a perfect excuse. No-one could query it. I never needed to tell anyone that Officer Beckett’s father was a washed-up drunk with an arrest
record as long as my arm. Never needed to tell anyone about him.”

Detective Beckett draws in a long, harsh breath.

“It worked so well I did the same thing in uniform. Worked my ass off and no-one ever knew the rest. If I was working I didn’t have time to think. Or remember anything. All I had to do was keep working, follow orders, keep working. If I worked hard enough, I was too tired to think about it.”

“I see. You appear to be telling me that your success was built on your failure to support your father.”

Detective Beckett reverts to the stunned, pallid unhappiness of certain earlier sessions.

“Detective, would you have worked any less hard had your father been sober?”

She simply stares at him, blindsided by the thought. Dr Burke says nothing further for a moment, allowing the concept to register.

“Or would you simply have taken more joy in your successes?”

Detective Beckett does not respond.

“Let us leave that point, then. We may return to it when you are ready.” He pauses. “Would you excuse me for a moment?”

Dr Burke exits his room swiftly, and instructs his receptionist to telephone Mr Castle, and to ask that he will present himself at the treatment rooms at the conclusion of Detective Beckett’s session in order to escort her home. Dr Burke is already convinced that today’s session, while it will undoubtedly be productive, will leave Detective Beckett significantly stressed.

“I am sorry. Let us continue. You asked your father to explain something of the circumstances to Mr Castle’s mother, but you felt that you would be unable to be present when he did.”

“Yeah,” Detective Beckett says acidly. “It went so well with Julia that I couldn’t stand the pleasure twice.”

“I do not find it surprising or worthy of censure that you would not wish either to repeat that experience or indeed to undertake a similar experience with a woman who has not, to date, respected your boundaries.” Detective Beckett raises an eyebrow at Dr Burke’s acerbic tone. “My counsel would have been that you should not attend, regardless. I do not think that it would assist. That discussion might be helpful: your presence at it would not be. I will discuss it with your father, if you wish?”

“Okay.”

“Had your father issued the ultimatum which you believe that he was planning, what would you have done?”

“Refused. I couldn’t do it.”

“Good.” Detective Beckett looks extremely surprised. “You will remember that much earlier in your treatment we spoke about your tendency to put the requests of others above your own comfort. You have, for the second time, overcome that tendency. This is very pleasing progress.”

“Oh.”
“Now, your third point of discomfort was your father’s invitation to dinner. However, you said that you were considering an invitation of your own, to both your father and Mr Castle’s daughter, for dinner. Why did your father’s invitation produce such awkwardness when it appears to have matched what you wished for?”

Detective Beckett considers that question for a substantial length of time.

“It was all going so badly it was just one more thing I couldn’t handle. He was pushing all the time for more information, more contact, just more everything and I’m not ready. He can’t just snap back into being a parent when he hasn’t been for all this time.” Realisation blossoms across her face. “That’s why he’s got in Castle’s face. He’s trying to be a father but I’m not fifteen any more and I don’t need him interfering in my life. He’s got no right – he wouldn’t have it even if he hadn’t been a drunk – to interfere. I’m an adult, and he just doesn’t seem to get it where Castle’s concerned.”

“Exactly so. Your father is, in fact, committing the same error as you did in your previous therapy: trying to speed up matters which will take time. He is doing it for good reasons, but he is in error. Leave him to me. In the meantime, how do you intend to deal with this rift between your father and Mr Castle?”

Detective Beckett regards him with a gaze that indicates that she questions Dr Burke’s sanity. His sanity is not in question. Detective Beckett’s priorities are.

“Castle’s been there for me since this all began. Dad – hasn’t. I’m still not sure that he is. If Dad can’t get his head round Castle that’s his problem, not mine.”

“Good. Again, you are giving your feelings equal weight to those of others.” Dr Burke pauses. “So, to summarise at this stage, brunch was very awkward, but not disastrous. Your father is attempting to push your relationship faster than you wish for, but you have avoided allowing him so to do. You have taken on board the lessons of previous sessions as to allowing your feelings to have validity. All in all, very encouraging.” He steeps his fingers. “I should like to discuss the desirability and timing of a further step, before we return to the question of your time at the Academy and as a new police officer.” Dr Burke does not give Detective Beckett a chance to object. “How do you envisage the next step?”

“I was going to see if Castle and me and Dad and Alexis could have dinner. Somewhere. See if I could manage Dad with them, better than last time. But I’m not sure it’ll work now. Dad’s winding up Castle and I can’t face another meal full of awkward moments especially if they’re butting heads.” She makes a face. “But I want to try to move this on. I wanna be able to go to Castle’s.”

“A worthy goal. I suggest that you try to agree a tentative date with Mr Castle, but do not mention this to your father or his daughter until after Friday’s session.”

Detective Beckett seems amenable to that proposition. By Friday, Dr Burke will have had a conversation with Mr Beckett, and will be able to provide sage advice.

“Now, I would like to return to the Academy, as you have had a chance to think over my points. To recap: you have said that your success was only a result of abandoning your father, and I have asked you to consider whether you would have worked any less hard had he been sober. What have you concluded, so far?”
“It’s the wrong question.” Dr Burke raises an eyebrow. A defensive answer such as Detective Beckett has just given normally indicates that the question asked had been precisely the right question.

“Mm?”

“If Dad hadn’t been drunk I’d have stayed at Stanford and been a lawyer. I’d never have gone to the Academy at all. So it wouldn’t have happened.”

“Mm. How hard were you working at Stanford?”

“Pretty hard, but I had time to have fun. See friends. Have hobbies. Then I transferred.”

“And then?”

“I tried. I’d been in a musical theatre group, but I had to quit that. I never had time for anything because of Dad.”

“And then you joined the Academy?”

“Yes.”

“Where you worked extremely hard.”

“Yes. There was nothing else to do. And if I was that tired I wasn’t worrying or feeling guilty or listening to him say how much he wanted Mom back. I was too tired for anything.”

“So you worked harder than at Stanford.”

“Guess so.”

“Mm. Detective Beckett, which came first, your father’s alcohol addiction or your entry to the Academy?”

Detective Beckett gapes at him. “What? You know that.”

“Answer the question, please.”

“Dad’s alcoholism.”

“Mm. Now please consider that more carefully.”

Detective Beckett scowls, but does so. There are a few seconds of silence.

“He started it.”

“Perhaps you would expand that?”

“He was an alcoholic first. So then I came back and then I went to the Academy and worked so I didn’t have to think about it. So? That’s what I said.”

“Mm. Yes, you did. Now let us consider the hypothetical situation where you had gone to the
Academy but your father had not been an alcoholic. Would you have worked less hard?”

There is another pause while Detective Beckett considers. “Maybe not. It was full on.”

“I imagine it was. Tell me, were you used to success before the Academy?”

“Yes,” Detective Beckett says, colouring uncomfortably. Dr Burke knows that she was. He has read her history and her file, as is required and for which he has the necessary consents. It appears that Detective Beckett had rarely failed at anything, and Stanford is not a college into which it is easy to gain entry.

“So you have, then, always worked hard to achieve the results which you desired?”

“Ye-es,” she says slowly.

“How does that differ from the hard work which you undertook at the Academy?” Dr Burke wishes to show Detective Beckett that the difference is not in the intensity of her work, nor in her results, but in her emotional state surrounding that period of her life. He waits for her to comprehend.

“At the Academy it was a way of getting away from Dad.”

“But you had previously been at Stanford.”

“That was different.”

“Explain how it was different. The result was the same: you were away from your family.”

There is another protracted period of consideration. Eventually, and with an expression which strongly suggests considerable dislike for the conclusion which she has reached, Detective Beckett reluctantly produces words.

“When I went to Stanford everyone was happy. We all celebrated. Mom and Dad were delighted. I wasn’t escaping from anything, I was growing up and being independent. When I went to the Academy I wanted to do it, but I was getting away from all the problems at home. I was running away. It wasn’t happy at all. I was already trying to ditch Dad.”

“I recall to you your father’s own words, of the second joint session. ‘I’d abandoned you long before that for whiskey,’ he said. Please keep those words, and the understanding you have gained from them, in mind as you consider the current point.”

“You’re saying,” Detective Beckett emits slowly, “that I’m confusing cause and effect. That he fell into the bottle and abandoned me \textit{before} I started to try to pull away from him.”

“Yes.”

“So all the time I thought I was breaking us up we were already broken?”

“Indeed.”

“So I was miserable and guilty and working too hard to solve something I couldn’t solve like that?”

“Yes. So now, please articulate why your success at the Academy does not give you the same pleasure as your successes prior to returning to New York.”

“Because I felt guilty all the time for abandoning Dad even though I was still hauling him out the tank and cleaning him up but I didn’t have to live with it any more.”
“Quite so. Now, continue.”

“But… but I shouldn’t have felt guilty because it was never my fault,” Detective Beckett blurs out, and promptly buries her face in a Kleenex.

At that apposite moment Dr Burke’s excellent receptionist informs him unobtrusively that Mr Castle has arrived, and is instructed to show him straight in.

As previously, Mr Castle takes one look at Detective Beckett, casts Dr Burke a familiarly fulminating not-again scowl, sits down next to her and takes her into his arms. Dr Burke finds it necessary to remove himself for a few moments, in order to allow tempers and emotions to calm down. The session had officially ended, in any event.

When he returns Detective Beckett is indeed calmer, and Mr Castle no longer appears irate. Communication appears to have occurred.

“Let me summarise the session, Detective. I will speak to your father about a possible meeting with Mr Castle’s mother, and his other issues. You and Mr Castle should consider possible dates for a dinner of both of you, Mr Castle’s daughter and your father; but not advise the other participants until after we have conducted Friday’s session and determined an appropriate time. You will consider the extent to which your feelings about your father affected and continue to affect your feelings about your time at the Academy. I shall see you on Friday.”

“Okay,” Detective Beckett says shakily. “Good night.”

“How are you here?”

“Um… I got a call from Burke’s receptionist suggesting that it would be a good idea if I was here when you finished. So here I am.” He cuddles her into the crook of his arm.

“Thanks. Let’s go home.”

“You wanna talk about it?”

“No. I’ll think about it all later. Or tomorrow. Sometime. Not now.”

The drive back to Beckett’s apartment is quiet. Castle’s hand lies undemandingly on her knee, but he doesn’t ask anything and she doesn’t talk. Dinner passes without meaningful conversation, too. Thinking is clearly happening. Snuggled up on the couch – Beckett is surprisingly snuggly, and Castle concludes perfectly accurately that she wants to be cossetted and not questioned – eventually she opens her mouth.

“Can we go to the Hamptons soon? Soon as I can square some leave with Montgomery?”

“Sure. Maybe… maybe we could go to the Hamptons at the same time as your dad talks to Mother? He could go to the loft and there’d be no chance of interference. Um… would you mind if Alexis was there too? It might help if she heard it – and she might keep Mother under control.”

“Up to you. If it happens at all.”

“Uh?”

“Dr Burke is going to talk to Dad.”

“Oh. Um. Right. You think it won’t go well?”
“I don’t know. But I don’t think Dr Burke is happy about where Dad’s at.”

I don’t think so either, Castle thinks very privately. I think that Jim is in for trouble, whether it’s obvious or not.

“Well, we can leave it to Dr Burke. It’s his job, not ours. When do you think you can talk to Montgomery?”

“Tomorrow? He made such a fuss about me taking leave a few weeks ago he can hardly complain now. But I’d need to move one of the sessions – oh, no. I wouldn’t. We could just go for a weekend and I’d just need to request leave so I wasn’t on shift.”

“Yeah. I’d need to be around for Alexis at school.”

“Guess so.” She inhales, a slight scratch to the breath. “My parents would have been the same.”

Castle doesn’t quite know what to say. There’s a hint of upset, but she’s not backed away from the need for him to look after his family. He compromises by providing some non-specific comforting cossetting.

“Anyway. If we can sort out a date I can pick up all the things we need to teach you to cook.”

“I can cook.”

“You can’t cook Georgian food, though. Don’t worry, I’ll teach you.” She smiles mischievously. “I’m sure you’ll enjoy being taught.”

“I’m a very good student,” Castle oozes, “when I’m interested.”

Beckett nestles closer. “Good. I’m a very good teacher.” She kisses his neck, and on his slight movement, brings his lips down to hers.

The next little while passes very predictably and very pleasurably, until Castle remembers that he has to go home and Beckett remembers that it’s early shift tomorrow. Separation is becoming increasingly difficult, even without the physical distractions.

Dr Burke is reasonably pleased with Detective Beckett’s progress. She is making the right decisions and turning her thoughts in the right direction. He is decidedly displeased with Mr Beckett’s behaviour. He had not involved Mr Beckett in this process in order that he should derail it. He was involved in order to allow Detective Beckett to unravel her misconceptions about how she felt.

Dr Burke ponders. His entirely natural irritation must not be allowed to affect the way in which he deals with Mr Beckett. After a few instants of focused thought, he remembers that he had first established a bond with Mr Beckett by allowing him to share in his, Dr Burke’s, difficulties with his eldest daughter, and how he had found it very difficult to accept that she was growing into an adult whose life would be spent with another. That is where he will begin, he decides. He will allow that thought to be considered over the course of his morning, and if it still appears sensible after consideration and after lunch, he will contact Mr Beckett.

Lunchtime arrives, and over his nutritionally balanced and flavoursome salad, Dr Burke re-examines the way in which he intends to approach Mr Beckett, and finds it, as he expected, meritorious. He has not a single flutter of discomfort as he reaches for his telephone. Once he has found a course of action to be the best, he undertakes it. Doubts are fruitless once proper
consideration has been given to one’s deeds.

“Jim Beckett.”

“Jim, it is Carter Burke. I wished to discuss Friday’s forthcoming session with you before it begins. I understand that brunch progressed without a major hitch, and that Detective Beckett has suggested that you speak to Mr Castle’s mother. I consider that we might profitably consider how best to stop Mrs Rodgers from damaging your daughter’s recovery.”

Dr Burke believes that for this call, appealing to Mr Beckett’s desire to ensure his daughter recovers will be best. Time enough to untangle the remainder when he is in Dr Burke’s treatment room.

“Yes. Okay. That would likely be best. When’s good?”

“I have a space this evening. Would six-thirty suit?”

“That works. I’ll see you later. Um…”

“Yes, Jim?”

“I didn’t think Sunday went so good.”

“Mm?”

“Every time I wanted to ask something she didn’t… she shut it off. I don’t know why she wanted brunch if she didn’t want to talk to me.”

“Let us discuss that this evening. However, rest assured that I consider that the mere fact of your brunch, without Detective Beckett wishing for my presence to mediate your meetings, is a considerable step forward. You are both to be commended for attempting it.”

“Hm,” Mr Beckett emits sceptically. “Okay. See you later.”

“Good bye.”

Dr Burke returns to his afternoon list moderately heartened. He had had a very slight worry that Mr Beckett might have applied his irritation with Mr Castle to him. That has been dissipated. He deals expertly with his patients throughout the afternoon and, none being as complex as the Beckett case, completes his list in perfectly satisfied good humour.

“Ah, Jim. Good evening. Would you like a cup of tea? I was preparing one for myself, having finished my client list.”

Dr Burke is quite consciously establishing a meeting of equals, after work, who have had the same challenges and labours with difficult situations.

“Hello. Could I have coffee, please?”

“Certainly. How do you take it?”

“Cream, no sugar, thank you.”

Mr Beckett is already slightly more relaxed than when he entered. As he would expect, Dr Burke’s strategy is successful. The arrangement of chairs is carefully designed to hint at two friends talking. Dr Burke reminds himself that, regardless of his inclinations, he is not treating Mr Beckett
except insofar as it becomes a subsidiary part of his treatment of Detective Beckett.

“Would you like to tell me about brunch? Of course your daughter has told me how she feels about it, but it would be useful to have your view so that we can discuss the collective outcome.”

“It was difficult. I really thought that she wanted to have a proper talk. Not just social platitudes and how work was going. I thought that inviting me to brunch rather than here was a big step. Like we used to be, before… But she didn’t want to tell me anything. Why she bothered I don’t know. I guess I was expecting too much from her. After all, she’s got Rick to talk to now.”

Dr Burke shows no surprise at the bitterness of the final sentence.

“You were disappointed with the brunch. What were you expecting to happen?”

“I thought it meant she wanted to be family again.”

“I see. Tell me, Jim, what do you mean by being family in this context? You are a family. Your daughter is remarkably like you in temperament and gesture: no-one could doubt your relationship.”

“Tell me things. I wanted – I hoped – that I’d learn something about what she’d done, but every time I asked a question she brushed me off. I bet Rick knows it all. I was interested, and she just didn’t want to say anything. As if I didn’t have any right to know. I’m her dad, I’m supposed to be interested.” He drops his eyes. “I missed so much, and I never realised, and I never asked or got the chance to ask. I hoped we’d be able to – I hoped she’d fill in some of the gaps.”

“So you are disappointed that she did not talk openly about the past?”

“I guess.”

“Let us leave that for a moment, and consider the next point. Detective Beckett asked you if you would tell your story to Mrs Rodgers, to stop – she hopes – Mrs Rodgers interfering further.”

“Yes.”

“In fact, she wanted your help.”

“I guess.”

“How did you react to that?”

“I said I would, of course.” Dr Burke quirks an eyebrow. “Okay. Katie said that she wouldn’t be there. She didn’t want to hear it all again.” He shrinks into himself. “… didn’t like that. I thought she should be there.” Dr Burke makes a gently encouraging sound. “Rick packed her off and told me not to push it.” Mr Beckett does not seem grateful. This is unsurprising. “So I backed off and said I would if you thought it was an idea.”

“I think it will not hurt, and may well help, with careful management. Your daughter clearly thinks that you can help her with this situation, and asked you to do so.”

“Rick said it was Katie’s idea.”

“Do you not consider that a major improvement in her view of you? She believes that you can help, and furthermore has not ignored your ability to assist because she believes she should protect you from any discomfort. Previously, neither would have been true.”
“Oh,” Mr Beckett manages, weakly. It is perfectly obvious that this has not in any way occurred to him.

“It is quite a compliment to you. Mrs Rodgers is, shall we say, less than susceptible to stopping. Quite the Juggernaut, in fact. Yet your daughter believes that you might help.”

“No. She doesn’t. She even said she didn’t think Martha would listen to me.”

“That is not quite the same thing. I have to say, I am inclined to agree with your daughter’s conclusion, but even so, Jim, your daughter still wanted your help to try to solve a problem which neither she nor Mr Castle can solve by themselves.”

“Oh,” Mr Beckett repeats.

“If that had been the only matter achieved from your brunch, I would still consider it a major success. However, it was not. You have said that your daughter did not discuss any of her history with you, and that this has disappointed you. Her view of the same meeting is that she wanted to avoid difficult subjects, which she would rather deal with here, so that you could re-establish common ground. It appears that you had very different expectations, which is not unusual. It may not surprise you to know that she also believes that the brunch was not successful, largely because she felt herself unable to respond adequately to your enquiries.”

“She can’t talk to me, her Dad? But she tells Rick everything. How come she can talk to him and not to me? I watched her grow up, go to school, to college… I was there – how does he think he knows her better than me?”

“Has he been wrong?” Dr Burke enquires delicately.

“No. But that’s not the point. She’s my daughter.”

“I had thought that you approved of Mr Castle?”

“I do. But not when he’s pushing me out the way with Katie and thinking and saying he knows better than me.”

“You have just said that he has not been wrong. Does that not suggest that he knows your daughter well?”

“He wasn’t there” – Mr Beckett suddenly stops. “I wasn’t there. That was why I wanted to hear about it. I wasn’t there.” Dr Burke breathes a sigh of relief. Mr Beckett’s next words prove that to be premature. “But neither was Rick. So how does he think he knows best?”

“Jim,” Dr Burke says patiently, “do you remember our first conversation? We discussed how it feels to watch your children grow up and forge other bonds; which mean more to them than their bonds with their parents.”

“You’re saying that my Katie is in love with that playboy who’s ten years too old for her and spends his life on page six and the gossip columns? He’ll ditch her next week and I’ll have to pick up the pieces.”

Dr Burke, most unusually, loses his famously almost-endless patience. “Jim, that is utterly ridiculous. Mr Castle has done more than anyone else to ensure that your daughter attends therapy and re-establishes a relationship with you. You appear to have completely ignored this fact, and it will be no surprise to me at all if Mr Castle were to be deeply angered by your remarks. In that context, in my many years of practice I have rarely, if ever, seen a bond as strong as that between
your daughter and Mr Castle. If I were you, I would reflect upon the idea that if you try to force a choice between yourself and Mr Castle upon your daughter, you will lose. Mr Castle has, until now, been your strongest supporter, but I cannot imagine that he will continue to be so if you persist in this ill-founded and childish jealousy. I trust that you have not said any of this to him?"

Dr Burke already knows what Mr Beckett has said to Mr Castle, but he is sufficiently angry with Mr Beckett’s behaviour and lack of understanding that he believes that only stern measures will recall him to adult actions. Mr Beckett appears extremely likely to explode at any moment. Really, he is quite uncannily similar to his daughter.

“I told him exactly how I felt,” Mr Beckett yells. “And then the damn man hung up on me! And now he doesn’t even take my calls.”

“Why on earth should he?” Dr Burke enquires. “You have made it clear you do not value his insights. No doubt” – that is delicately edged – “he has taken the hint.”

“I was trying to apologise!”
Hard to say I'm sorry

“You were?” Having committed the cardinal sin of losing his own temper, Dr Burke resolves to use his weakness to his own advantage, and infuses his tone with considerable disbelief.

“Yes. I didn’t mean to say any of it to Rick. I know he’s good for Katie, but I was so upset that the brunch went wrong and then he came over like he knew so much and… well, I just lost it.”

Detective Beckett’s own irascible temper is, it would appear, honestly come by. However, if Mr Beckett is trying to apologise then there is yet a way to rescue him from his own utter stupidity. It seems, too, that the loss of Dr Burke’s own patience has brought this opening. He will reflect on this unusual, and indeed seldom to be employed, strategy at a later time. He thinks fondly of the pleasure that a cup of tea will bring him, after he has disposed of Mr Beckett.

“You wish to apologise.”

“Yeah. But Rick won’t take my calls. I could try Katie, I suppose.”

“I do not think that would be sensible. At this stage, she will not appreciate being put in the middle. However” – Mr Beckett looks desperately hopeful – “as yet Friday’s session remains as previously arranged. You may make your apologies then.” Mr Beckett looks mutinous. “It is the best thing. Mr Castle is unlikely to take your calls, so you will have to make your amends in person. Since Mr Castle appears to find it relatively easy to forgive – he has, after all, done so with your daughter under considerable provocation – I am sure that he will not make difficulties.”

Dr Burke will ensure that Mr Castle will not make difficulties, by preparing the ground carefully. Prior planning prevents poor performance. Profane additions to that statement are entirely unnecessary.

“Jim, your daughter is an adult. She is in a relationship with Mr Castle, who is also an adult. It is entirely normal that you should worry about her, but it is likewise entirely normal that she is forming different bonds. Hard as it is” – Dr Burke lets memory show in his face – “you have to accept this. Treating two adults as if they were dating teenagers will not bring harmony.” He smiles suddenly, allowing his professional demeanour to dissipate. “However, Mr Castle has a stable home, and is extremely rich. Your daughter will want for nothing.”

Mr Beckett chokes on the dregs of his coffee, and Dr Burke smiles more widely. “Carter, that’s… that’s irrelevant. I just want her to be happy. If Rick makes her happy…”

“Exactly so.”

“Did you get your leave?”

Beckett droops, and regards Castle with a miserable demeanour.

“You didn’t? I thought it was a dead cert? Why not? Do I need to call a friend?” Castle droops miserably too. “I was really looking forward to the Hamptons.”

“Good. I’m free from shift end on Friday till shift start on Monday,” Beckett says cheerfully.

“You… you….”
“Gotcha,” she smirks. Castle growls dangerously at her, and does not appear amused.

“Mean. Very mean. I’ll set O’Leary on you.”

“O’Leary’s my pal. Won’t work.”

“Bet?”

Beckett regards him with amazement. “Sure. Dinner at Remy’s. Candy from a baby,” she says, pityingly. Castle wanders off to the break room. Two minutes later her phone rings.

“Beckett.”

“Beckett,” rumble the bass tones of O’Leary, “why’re you being mean to my good friend Castle?”

“What the hell?”

“You’re being mean to Castle,” he repeats. “That ain’t nice, butterfly. Go an’ play nicely.” He rings off.

“Looks like dinner’s on you,” Castle says smugly.

“Not if I shoot you first.”


Beckett’s growls have barely diminished by the time they’re leaving for Remy’s. Castle’s smirks are similarly undiminished. O’Leary is already there when they arrive, and Beckett makes a beeline to berate his unapologetic head.

“I thought you were on my side, O’Leary! Where do you get off siding with Castle? Cops stick together.”

“Aw, butterfly,” O’Leary says with a grin that would annoy armies, before the gleam from his teeth blinded them. “The poor man needs some support.” Castle’s incipient grin slides off his face. “Men have to stick together. Besides which, he’s nice to me. He’s put me in a book.” O’Leary sounds utterly delighted by being a character in a book. Beckett concludes that he has run mad.

“What’cha doin’, Beckett?”

“Taking your temperature.”

“Huh?”

“You’ve gone mad. Must be a fever. No-one in the world wants to be a book character.”

“Hey!” Castle says indignantly. “It’s only you who doesn’t want to be a book character. Everyone else loves it.”

“Dr Burke won’t,” Beckett points out, maliciously.

“He doesn’t count. He isn’t human. We agreed that, Beckett. He’s an alien.”

“Dr Burke?” O’Leary rumbles. “Who’s he?”
“Don’t you remember? He’s the pain in the ass shrink I have to see.”

“Mm.” O’Leary looks dangerously thoughtful as he takes a long pull at his beer. Beckett would swear that she saw the bottom of the glass bottle move inward as he does. “Doesn’t seem to have stopped you being mean to Castle.” Beckett growls at him. “Okay, I’ll stop messin’ with you. But” – O’Leary straightens up from where he’s been protecting himself from the potential wrath of Beckett – “are you doin’ any better with your dad?”


O’Leary’s caterpillar eyebrows take a many-legged walk around his forehead. “Awkward how?”

“We got nothing to talk about. He wants to know everything he missed. Wants to be a parent.”

“Yeah?”

“Bit late. I’m not sixteen any more. We need to work out some sort of adult relationship. I just don’t know what it looks like.” She sighs. “It won’t look good if he doesn’t lay off Castle.”

O’Leary looks at Castle. “What’cha been doin’ to Beckett’s dad? You got to have your girlfriend’s dad on side.”

Castle grimaces. “Yeah, well. I don’t know what’s up with him and right now I don’t care. What with my mother and Beckett’s father it’s tempting just to dump them both on a desert island – with a six-monthly boat service and no phones.”

“Hmmm,” O’Leary vibrates the table, “are you sure that’s a good plan? Seems to me like they might get a bit friendly.”

Castle and Beckett look identically horrified and disgusted. “No way!” they shriek in tandem.

O’Leary sniggers evilly. “Got you both good. An’ you deserve it.”

“What?”

“Why?”

“You” – he looks at Beckett – “for bein’ nasty to Castle, an’ you” – he turns to Castle – “for siccing me on my pal. ‘Nother beer? Food?”

“Any more of that and you’ll be dinner,” Beckett growls.

“Awww. Don’t’cha love me any more?”

Beckett humphs. Fortunately, a server appears to take orders for food before mayhem and possibly murder can follow.

“So you’re doin’ okay?”

“Getting there.”

“How’s that mini ME pal?”

“She’s good. We’re good.”

“Good,” O’Leary says, and smiles widely. Shortly thereafter a burger that must originally have
been made from a giraffe disappears in two bites, along with a barrel-load of fries and a couple more beers.


“What’s with your mom, Castle?” O’Leary asks.

“Wants to be Beckett’s mom too,” Castle says laconically, “and isn’t listening to me telling her to butt out.”

“You guys make life really complicated,” O’Leary says wonderingly. “‘S amazing your brains haven’t exploded. Why don’t you just simplify it?”

“Oh? D’you think we aren’t trying? How do you suggest we simplify it?”

O’Leary grins widely. “Well,” he drawls, “I’d start by running off to a desert island an’ eloping. An’ then I’d stay there.”

“Thanks for that really helpful suggestion,” Castle says sarcastically. “What do you think I should do with my teen daughter? Buy her an apartment and tell her to live on her own? Like hell.”

“Naw. But it don’t seem to me that either of you’ve got a handle on where this is goin’. Beckett here is takin’ steps to work out stuff with her dad, but aside from tellin’ your mom to butt out, what’re you doin’ about her?”

“Dad’s going to talk to her, and Alexis” – O’Leary raises a brow – “Castle’s daughter. It might not look like it, but we’re doing things to move this along. We had brunch with Dad Sunday, and we’re seeing him at therapy every week. If Castle’s mom won’t listen to Dad” –

“Then if she can’t stop interfering, she’ll be living elsewhere. Which I’ll probably be funding, seeing as off-off-Broadway doesn’t pay.”

“She know that?”

“I think I’ll probably need to tell her again,” says Castle, which both Beckett and O’Leary recognise is not exactly an answer.

“Anyway,” Beckett says not quite impatiently, “we’re trying to sort it. If people would just let us get on with it, without trying to interfere, it’d help.”

O’Leary regards them both with amusement. “Okay then. Beer simplifies everything. Let’s have another.”

And so they do, though Beckett sticks to soda.

“O’Leary might have a point,” Castle says, on the way home.

“Um?”

“Maybe we are making all this too complicated. We’ve got so caught up in all the different people that we’ve forgotten the main point.”

“You might have. I haven’t. Sort my past out so I can deal with meeting your family in your home without freaking out. That’s always been the point.”
“Yes, but then it got complicated with your dad making dumb comments and my mother trying to interfere and joint sessions and Sorry games. So he’s got a point.”

“Huh.” Beckett doesn’t sound particularly convinced.

“Well, the Hamptons cleared things up before, so maybe it’ll do it again,” Castle says hopefully.

“Huh,” she says again.

“We can see how Friday goes, and work everything else out when we’re out there.”

“Okay,” she says very decisively. “Let’s do that.” She changes the subject. “When are we going to get the ingredients?”

“Tomorrow? Friday? Is there anything you can’t get in the Hamptons?”

“Khachapuri.”

“Does it keep?”

“If I lock it away,” she says, and smirks. “Otherwise I might eat it.”

“That wouldn’t be fair.”

“I’d enjoy it.”

“I enjoy this,” Castle says, bored of talking when he has a Beckett on his knee, and leans down to kiss her, which rapidly turns into an approach to second base, which is readily rounded so that he can push towards third, which is readily achieved, ending up in a home run. So to speak. He’s not sure that naked snuggling is a feature of baseball. Certainly not the games he’s seen on TV.

He texts Alexis, finds that his mother is home, and informs her that he won’t be back till breakfast time. Then he turns back to the exceedingly pleasurable and far too unusual pastime of sharing bedtime routines, and then to the real goal, snuggling down together and tucking himself in with his Beckett without needing to leave.

She’s asleep in seconds. Castle is not. Castle, in fact, is quite consciously not trying to fall asleep, so that he can think. Well. Enjoy being together, doing something which he hopes, dreams and now really believes will, in time, become normal: that is going to bed together to fall asleep together – with or (less pleasantly) without lovemaking. Not, now, sex. He lays an arm gently over sound asleep Beckett, and luxuriates for a moment, or five, or ten. Then he switches his brain back on, and considers.

He is still very annoyed with Jim, and not really in any mood to try and fix that. However, he needs to sort out Jim talking to his mother and Alexis. If he primes Alexis properly, she can say all the things that he cannot. Arranging it is not a pleasant prospect. On the other hand, Beckett seems to have made a lot of personal progress, Sunday’s awkward brunch notwithstanding. Maybe if he and Beckett agree a potential dinner date, then after Friday they can consider what to do about firming it up.

He abruptly wishes he hadn’t used those words, given his proximity to Beckett, who (in sleep, anyway) appears to require a teddy-bear with which to snuggle and is therefore snuggled as close to him as possible. If she got any nearer, she’d be quite literally under his skin. And of course, they’re going out to the Hamptons at the weekend. He thinks that he can rely on his mother to be at the loft, but if not – he’s called in all the sleepover favours he can already – he’ll get one of the
colleges he’s used before to stay.

Anyway. Dinner with part of the families. Maybe. Hamptons. Definitely. And O’Leary’s odd commentary about simplifying matters. Beckett had been pretty sure of her ground, though – and maybe she’s right, maybe she’s more focused, because she’s certainly some way closer to sorting her mess out. He, on the other hand, isn’t.

He ponders, curled around Beckett protectively, arm over her middle, nose almost in her hair: her soft scent surrounding him. What’s his real issue here? Jim? Not really. Jim will either come round or he won’t, but Beckett’s made her choice and it’s him, Castle. So that’s not his problem to fix. He can let that go. So what else? Beckett can’t yet come to the loft. That’s always been her problem to fix, and she is. He can let that go, too. Beckett not being able to forgive her father? Definitely not his problem. He waves that one off too. Alexis? Nope, not at all a problem. Possibly a solution. That just leaves one thing. His mother. Absolutely a problem, and one he’s been hoping will resolve itself. He’d thought – hoped? – that she’d stop pushing herself into this mess, at every stage. Instead she’s done exactly the reverse: heard what he’s said and ignored it; tried to be Beckett’s mother when Beckett doesn’t want a mother at all (and Castle gets that, he really does: Beckett would regard any other woman trying to be her mother as a betrayal of her own mother.); trying to solve a problem of which Dr Burke, personality defects and all still a brilliant psychiatrist, is well in control and which is well on the way to a managed solution. What Castle doesn’t get, is why? His mother, while histrionic, dramatic, and occasionally over-emotional (usually after too much liquor) is not normally either stupid or unkind. At the moment, she’s being both.

Simplify, O’Leary had said. Simplify. Castle supposes that from O’Leary’s thirty-thousand foot view, for which he doesn’t need a plane, pretty much everything looks simple. Well, try it, Rick, because nothing else is working. Point one, does he need to understand why his mother is behaving so insanely right now? Is that actually something he needs to care about? Well, yes, because she lives in the loft and he wants Beckett to come to the loft and if his mother is going to behave badly she won’t.

Simplify. Does his mother have to live in the loft? It’s always worked before, but it’s beginning not to work now. She needs somewhere to live, though. He can’t – could never, ever – leave her homeless, or even struggling in any way at all. So short of finding – and funding – a new place, she’s staying.

Oh. He realises with some shame and not a little unhappiness that if Beckett were to come to the loft regularly – if she were to come and live there, which is what he’d really, really like – that he doesn’t want his mother living there too. He’d always be just a little on edge, just a little worried about her overhearing, or intruding – she’s not scrupled to barge into his study or bedroom over the last few years, and while he’s pretty sure she wouldn’t if Beckett were there too it’s not a chance he wants to take. Alexis recognises his privacy – and he hers, though within sensible parental limits – which makes that a non-issue.

He grimaces horribly into the night. This is very unpleasant. His mother did so much to keep them housed and whole, when he was young. She turned up on his doorstep in need years ago, and has helped with Alexis since. He doesn’t want to recognise this change. But… he can see that if she can’t step back in this, she might not step back for other things, and he has no wish to be sharing his private life with his mother when he doesn’t want to.

He will need to summon all his courage and remove his filters (such as they are) and have a very detailed and specific discussion with his mother. In the end, though, much as he loves her, the choice – as O’Leary might say – is simple. Play by his rules, or leave. Of course he’ll fund her new
place, if new place there be.

He lies there, and despite the presence of Beckett beside him, spooned into him, he’s miserable.

“Wanna talk about it?” rises sleepily from the soft form under his arm.

“You’re asleep,” Castle says, rather senselessly.

“No, I’m awake. I’ve been asleep. You haven’t. And you sound unhappy, so, wanna talk, or wanna snuggle in?”

“Snuggle,” Castle says, rather pathetically. Beckett turns over within his clasp, pushes him gently down on to his back, and sprawls across him, tucking her head into his neck and ensuring that an arm and a leg are across him.

“There.” She wiggles just enough to get comfortable, and then settles down. Castle’s arms close around her, but it’s not the usual firm embrace, keeping her secure. She tightens her own grip to make up for his lassitude. Perhaps he needs security of his own. She clamps down on the need to ask him again what’s wrong. He’d told her in his own good time last time: he’ll do the same when he’s ready now. She hugs him more closely, and for once the normal physical reaction to her is absent. This worries her, not because she wants to act on it – she’s tired, and half-asleep, and comfortable right where and how she is – but because it means he’s seriously upset.

Beckett lashes her brain into wakefulness and some semblance of deduction, and when the gears grind begins to think. What’s he been upset about? Well, her father. Not surprising, and on Friday she intends to have a discussion with her father. (It doesn’t occur to her that she hasn’t had a single qualm about raising hell over her father’s head and then raining it down, all on behalf of Castle.) But surely that hasn’t left him this defeated? He knows where she stands, and it’s with him. He knows that.

Doesn’t he?

“Castle?”

“Yeah?”

“You know if it’s between you and my dad it’s you, yeah?”

“I know.” His arms tighten, momentarily, then fall lax again. He doesn’t say anything more. Eventually the soft sound of his tiny snores rises, and Beckett begins to breathe more deeply, more slowly, and then slides back into slumber, wrapped over her Castle, keeping him safe until he should wake, whispering I love you into his dreams.
Castle wakes to his softly trilling alarm, which he’d carefully set to go off before Beckett’s blaring klaxon delivers a sonic shock to his bones. Beckett is no longer sprawled over him, but tucked into his side, an arm still around his midriff. He has to get up: he has to go home for breakfast.

He has to think.

But in the night an idea has come to him. Dr Burke had offered him the option to discuss matters which are troubling you – he can hear the fussily precise tone, the formal grammar – and while he is no fonder of Dr Burke than he has been at any time in this whole confused and complicated mess, he is leading Beckett expertly out of her fog and so he ought to be able to deal with Castle’s much simpler issue. The thought makes him wince, but deep down in his gut the twisting eases.

He snuggles up to Beckett a little more definitively and nuzzles at her neck to breathe in her sleep-soaked scent. He’ll have a delicate chat with Alexis after he’s had a discussion with Dr Burke, he decides.

At which point the alarm screeches through the silence and Beckett slaps it off without looking while making an ugh noise. That’s followed by Castle making an ugh noise as she unwraps herself and sits up. Well, slumps up, resembling a half-shut pocket knife more than the brisk Detective. Beckett, Castle thinks, not for the first time, is absolutely not a morning person. He wonders why she starts so early if she hates it so much, and then realises that it’s just another form of coping, or punishment, that she doesn’t have a family; just been another way to bury herself in work to bury her pain.

She emerges, now approximately ninety percent alive as opposed to ten.

“I’ve got to get back for breakfast,” Castle notes.

“Okay. Lock up if you’re last out,” Beckett says casually, as if they did this every other day. Castle gapes.

“Oh…” he squeaks out. His throat seems constricted. “See you later?”

“Well, if a body drops I’ll call you. If not, up to you because it’ll be all those pop-n-drops or basic murders and we all know how much you love boredom.” But she’s turned to look full at him as she pulls on her pants and the look in her eyes says but I’d love to see you. Castle takes the few strides to her and kisses her hard.

“Got a couple of things to do at home, but I’ll drop by after that,” he says happily. “Or if not, I’ll call. We need to try to set a date for dinner, even if we don’t tell the others yet. And a place,” he suddenly thinks. “If we went somewhere reasonably nice, it might keep everyone” –

“You mean Dad, don’t you?”

“Er… – anyway, it might keep everyone calmer."

“I guess so. You choose,” she says, shrugging on her jacket. She reaches up, pulls his head down and kisses him just as hard. “It’ll all work out,” she says, in a very strange echo of Castle’s usual optimism. “I really think it’s going to be okay.” And she’s gone.
Castle dashes through dressing, locks up and hurtles home, since he’s spent too long watching Beckett dress to leave himself time to become his suave, sophisticated self. He’ll do that after breakfast. It does mean that he is placidly cooking pancakes when Alexis bounces down the stairs, has a very pleasant family breakfast with her, and attains suave sophistication at the earliest possible moment. He feels the need to be at his best when talking to Dr Burke on his own account, where if he were simply an adjunct to Beckett he wouldn’t care.

Rather nervously, he rings Dr Burke’s practice, and asks the efficient receptionist if Dr Burke would have a space for him. There is a short tapping, and, surprisingly, an appointment is available at eleven. Castle accepts and then proceeds to drink far too much coffee and shoot far too many evil minions until it’s time to go.

Dr Burke is mildly surprised that Mr Castle wishes to see him for himself, rather than to convey the next issue in Detective Beckett’s treatment. He had not, to date, received any impression that Mr Castle needed or desired his help. Mr Castle, in fact, has been the one stable constant in the complex interconnection of issues between Detective Beckett, Mr Beckett, and Mr Castle’s family.

Dr Burke’s eyebrows rise slightly. Mr Castle had been extremely angry with his mother last Friday. Is it possible that he wishes to discuss that situation? He has freely discussed his views of Mr Beckett, with which Dr Burke still has some sympathy, but he has said little about his interactions with his mother. Dr Burke considers, after due reflection, that Mrs Rodgers is displaying a more extreme, and certainly less helpful, version of Mr Castle’s saviour complex. Unfortunately her method of expressing it is very unlikely to succeed.

It is, however, extremely fortunate that Dr Burke had instructed his receptionist that any of those people involved in the Beckett situation requesting an appointment should be provided with one at the earliest opportunity, and had ensured that his normally free sessions remained so. He prefers to have an empty session in the middle of both morning and afternoon, for emergencies. It is also convenient that he will be able, he recalls, to prime Mr Castle adequately for Friday’s session and Mr Beckett’s apologies. He turns to his first patient, and thinks no more of Mr Castle or the Beckett situation until one minute before eleven.

Mr Castle is prompt. “Good morning,” Dr Burke opens.

“Hey.” Mr Castle appears quite uncomfortable. Dr Burke has some sympathy.

“I am glad that you called. You will remember that I had undertaken to speak to Mr Beckett about a meeting with your mother, and I have done so. He has agreed to do so and, more importantly, understands why Detective Beckett should not and will not be present.”

“Good. We’re going to the Hamptons.” Mr Castle seizes upon the diversion. “Jim could go to the loft then. I think Alexis – my daughter – should hear the story too. Apart from anything else, she’s pretty keen on Beckett and she’s already had a couple of rows with Mother about it.”

“I do not see any disadvantage to that proposal. Similarly, I see many advantages to taking Detective Beckett to the Hamptons. It has previously been very helpful to her, and I expect that will continue. However” – Dr Burke steeps his fingers under his chin – “I have also spoken to Mr Beckett about his interaction with you. I believe he has been returned to his senses. He says” – Dr Burke speaks over Mr Castle’s unconvinced noise – “that he has been trying to call you to apologise, but that you will not take the calls. I consider that perfectly reasonable.”

Mr Castle’s incipient protest is silenced.
“There is no reason whatsoever that you should be subjected, as you thought was likely, to unpleasantness. However, Mr Beckett knows that his comments were unjustified, and does wish to apologise. If you wish to accept his apologies, then he will make them in person on Friday. If not – and it is entirely your decision: you have no obligation to Mr Beckett whatsoever – then I will so inform him.”

Dr Burke observes the play of expressions over Mr Castle’s face, and says nothing further. Mr Castle has a great capacity for forgiveness, but he has been heavily tried. Eventually he speaks.

“I can’t say I particularly want to see Jim Friday, but Beckett’s so much better that I’ll do it. If he really means his apologies, I’ll accept them. As she said, one set of daddy issues is enough in this mess.”

Dr Burke nods in acknowledgement. “That, Mr Castle, brings me to asking why you have requested an appointment today. Previously, if there has been a matter which you wished to draw to my attention, you have simply called. Is there something more serious or something particular to you which you wish to discuss privately?”

Mr Castle makes a ridiculously childish face. It appears that he is displeased that he has been so easily found out. When he begins to talk, however, it appears that he is displeased by a different matter.

“You know that Mother is being difficult about backing off.” Dr Burke nods sympathetically. Mr Castle, being talkative and stable, does not need more direct input, such as is required to treat Detective Beckett. “Well, I was thinking. I’ve told her to stop, and she isn’t. I’ve suggested that she remember I’m the one who gives her a home, and it hasn’t made a difference. I told her that if she carried on I wouldn’t have the slightest sympathy if Beckett laid into her, and even that didn’t register.”

Dr Burke thinks that suicidal stupidity in the face of Detective Beckett is an inherited trait. Saying so is unlikely to be sensible. “Mmm?” he hums encouragingly.

“So I think I have to lay it out in words of one syllable.”

“Lay what out?”

“Back right off or move out,” Mr Castle says bluntly, and with considerable decisiveness.

“How have you come to that conclusion?”

Mr Castle squirms and cringes. “Er… if she won’t back off now, she won’t respect boundaries when Beckett moves in. It doesn’t matter if she barges in now, but…” he stops, in a flurry of embarrassed blushes.

“I understand,” Dr Burke says smoothly. “It could be very stressful if you were not sure that your privacy were to be properly respected.” He does not comment on Mr Castle’s confidence that Detective Beckett will be moving in. There has seemed little doubt of that for some weeks. Dr Burke does hope that Mr Castle and Detective Beckett do not try to rush matters, however. There are still some significantly volatile elements surrounding them.

“But I’d fund wherever she lived,” Mr Castle adds quickly.

“Indeed.” Dr Burke pauses. “Why?”

“When I was small, Mother did everything she could to make sure we had a home and food. That I
got to school and got books. We… didn’t have a lot. I couldn’t leave her to struggle now, when she
did so much for me. And it’s not like I can’t afford it, anyway. I’d barely notice, but it would make
a huge difference to her.”

“Mm. So what is the issue which you wish to discuss?”

“Is it the right thing to do?”

“I see. Let us examine the reasons why it should either be, or should not be, the correct decision.
Please list the reasons you think that it might be the wrong decision first. Take your time to ensure
you have considered everything.”

Mr Castle contemplates his fingernails for a short period. Astonishingly, he is not fidgeting.

“Um, well, because it’s her home too. She looked after me, and now I can look after her. We’ve
never had this sort of disagreement before. She left me and Gina alone. Alexis loves her – hell, I
love her.”

“So, in summary, you do not wish to uproot a loved relative from a place in which they have found
stability.”

“I suppose so.”

“Very well. Now, what are the reasons that this might be the right decision?”

There is a very pained silence. “I guess I don’t trust her to leave Beckett alone. I want Beckett to
move in – only when we’re both ready, but still – and she and Mother won’t mix while Mother’s
like this. So if I don’t move Mother out, Beckett won’t move in. But that just seems selfish. We’ve
always been a family and we’ve always held ourselves together. I don’t want to break that.”

Mr Castle sounds rather plaintive. Dr Burke can readily understand his dilemma. His emotions
have transferred from his mother to Detective Beckett, just as Detective Beckett has transferred
from her father to Mr Castle. How pleasingly symmetrical. Also, how pleasingly simple.

“You appear to me to be saying that you would feel guilty about removing your mother from your
loft in order to replace her in your life with Detective Beckett. Mr Castle, you have listened, I have
no doubt, to Detective Beckett’s worries about her father. Could you summarise for me, please, the
root of Detective Beckett’s issues?”

“Huh?” Mr Castle emits. “Why… Okay then. Beckett felt so guilty about abandoning her dad that
she overcompensated… by – Oh. I see. But it’s nothing like that.”

“Certainly it is not as extreme. However, you are falling into the same errors, on a considerably
lesser scale. It is not selfish to wish to be happy, nor is it selfish to wish to arrange matters so that
happiness eventuates. What would be selfish, in your position, might be to ask your mother to leave
without assisting her in finding a new apartment. It is certainly not selfish, and in fact is quite
generous, to pay for it in full. A contribution would certainly not be unusual. You will still be
supporting your family, and it is normal in our society for even the closest of families to live in
separate accommodation to allow for generational change.”

“Urgh?”

That is really not an intelligent contribution. Dr Burke continues.

“It is not the duty of a child to prop up a dysfunctional relationship with his or her parents. To date”
Dr Burke speaks over Mr Castle’s argumentative noise – “you have not had a dysfunctional relationship. Unconventional, possibly, but not dysfunctional. Now, however, if you cannot persuade your mother to see reason and step back, it may become dysfunctional. You have identified the potential problem early enough to solve it before it becomes damaging – are you certain that you do not wish to take up psychiatry?”

Mr Castle shakes his head very firmly.

“How unfortunate,” Dr Burke sighs. “In any event, you have the opportunity to solve this, and in my view it is perfectly reasonable to ask your mother to respect the boundaries which Detective Beckett is trying to set. If she then does not, it is reasonable to find an alternative arrangement which does not damage either of you.”

“You think?”

“I think that you would rapidly come to resent your mother, as Detective Beckett has unknowingly resented her father, if she did not respect the privacy you and Detective Beckett have requested. I assume, Mr Castle, that you do not wish to follow the path of the Becketts in this regard?”

“No way.”

“Good. So, what do you now intend to do?”

“Well, it’s already Thursday. So I’m going to see what happens tomorrow with Beckett and her dad here – we might even manage to finish a game of Sorry – then when her dad goes we’ll discuss whether dinner with Alexis, Jim, Beckett and me is a good plan, and then after Jim’s spoken to Mother and Alexis, which I really hope he can manage this weekend, I’ll have to talk to Mother.”

“That sounds extremely logical and sensible.” Dr Burke only realises that his voice has carried a hint of surprise when Mr Castle replies.

“If you’re writing mystery books you learn how to plan pretty fast. Otherwise they’re unreadable.”

Dr Burke blinks. “I suppose so,” he says. He has never thought about it before. He supposes, now the thought has been brought to him, that he plans his psychiatry books very carefully. He had simply not considered that the same might be true of fiction writing. He recovers his poise. “Are you content that we have addressed the issue adequately? We may continue if you so wish: there is still time available.”

“No, I think we’re done. Till tomorrow, anyway.” A tiny grimace twists Mr Castle’s lips. “Another round of the battling Becketts. I should syndicate it. It’d make a fortune.”

A small laugh escapes Dr Burke before he can prevent it. Mr Castle grins mischievously. “I do not recommend it, Mr Castle. I consider that Detective Beckett might take it very ill. This seems to me to be a situation devoutly to be avoided.”

Mr Castle grins more widely.

“It would be. Still, it would be fun. Till she shot me.” He stands, still smiling happily. “See you tomorrow.”

“Goodbye, Mr Castle.”

That, Dr Burke reflects, was remarkably simple. Mr Castle merely needed a small amount of reassurance. He had already done the necessary thinking and reasoning. How nice to meet one
person involved in the Beckett situation who is logical and intelligent before Dr Burke has begun.

There is, of course, one consideration of which Mr Castle has not thought. It is entirely possible that his mother is scared of being evicted, and is, unconsciously, trying to become important to Detective Beckett in order that Detective Beckett will assist her in staying. This is certain to fail.

Beckett is bored. There are no nice new Beckett-flavoured cases, there is only the slow seep of information on the old and not-Beckett-flavoured ones. She has spent the morning matching up data, which is not a job that she enjoys, unless it produces a lead. The boys are being... well, childish, and unhelpful.

And of course Castle hasn’t arrived, so although she’s had decent coffee from the break room machine she hasn’t had her coffee. Consequently, she is both bored and in a bad mood, even though she knows perfectly well that Castle had said he had things to do. Still, she’d like him here. He’d stop her being bored.

Fortunately, at that point, just as she is considering standing in the centre of the bullpen and screaming loudly, Castle shows up. He even has her coffee. If it weren’t the bullpen, she’d kiss him. Instead she checks unobtrusively that the boys aren’t looking and then favours him with a toe-curving smile and bite of her lip. His eyes go from blue to midnight in one instant, and his return smile promises wicked seduction.

Then the boys notice him and wicked seduction drops away before they notice.

“Castle,” they say happily.

“Why so late, bro? Oversleep?”

“Too many parties?”

“Writing all night, more like,” Castle says blandly.

“Playing shoot-em-ups, more like,” Beckett says snarkily, and when the boys aren’t looking drops an eyelid. She drains her coffee – that’s so much better – and returns, reinvigorated, to the tedious cross-checking of lists.

“Wanna go to Remy’s at lunch?” Castle asks, unexpectedly.

“Okay. Means that I’ll need to get khachapuris tomorrow lunchtime, or tonight, though.”

“Yeah, sure. Um... we need to talk about Mother. Before tomorrow night.”

“Okay.” Beckett looks at her watch. “Ten minutes to finish this up, then we’ll go. Want to help?”

“No. It’s all paperwork and you know I hate paperwork. I’ll just sit here quietly” – Beckett splutters with mocking laughter – “and wait. I won’t disturb you at all.” She chokes on her splutters as she tries to keep them quiet. His tone drops down an octave and around forty decibels. “I’ll do that later. All weekend.” Her splutter turns to scarlet flush, and she glares. Castle smirks at her.
Remy’s is quiet, for a change. It doesn’t stop Castle steering them to the most remote booth in the least occupied (read: empty, thinks Beckett) corner, somewhat peremptorily summoning a server, ordering for both of them without any reference to her at all, which he never does, with considerable despatch only leavened by politeness and a thousand watt smile which is entirely put on. It works on the perky server, though. She bounces perkily off, quite happy.

Beckett regards Castle extremely suspiciously. “Okay, what’s up?”

“I went to see Burke this morning.”


“Not your dad. My mother.”

“Huh?”

“You know she won’t back off. Well, last night I was thinking.” Beckett puts two and two together to reach an entirely accurate four, but lets him continue without interruption. “O’Leary said simplify. So I did, and where I got to was that if Mother can’t back off she’ll have to move out.”

Beckett’s jaw metaphorically hits the table for a second time, hard enough that it might be broken. “You’ll move your mother out?” she squeaks. “Why?”

Castle’s face turns bright scarlet, and he drops his eyes. “Um… well… er…”

“Spit it out.”

“Um… if you come to the loft I don’t want Mother interrupting or making you uncomfortable and if she doesn’t start respecting what I or you say now she won’t then so this is really the only chance I’ve got to tell her so and make it stick. Or not,” he finishes, depressedly.

“So why Dr Burke?”

“See if I’d missed anything.”

Beckett fixes him with a pinpoint sharp glare.

“Okay. I felt guilty, okay, even though I’d make sure she had somewhere else nice to live and pay for it. I thought he’d be the best person to sort me out. After all, it’s affecting you too.”

Beckett considers. “Guilty?”

“She looked after me when we didn’t have much. Anything. I feel I should look after her now – she made so many sacrifices.”

“Mm,” Beckett hums, and pats his hand, swiftly withdrawn as the food arrives. She hasn’t commented on his ordering for her, and she doesn’t intend to – today. If he does it again, words may be had. She considers very briefly while the food is put down, sips her milkshake meditatively, and decides. “That’s exactly how I thought about Dad. Except I was so focused on family and you’re focused on helping, but it’s the same thing. Isn’t it?”

“That’s what Burke said,” Castle agrees. “He dressed it up, but that’s it.”
“He’s been right so far,” Beckett says rather jaundicedly. He may be brilliant but she still really
does not appreciate his style. “He’s likely right this time.” Her mouth twists a little.

“Yeah,” says Castle, equally acid. “So anyway, I’m going to leave it till after the weekend. I’m
going to tell Mother that your dad will call her Friday night, after the session – however it goes.
Unless you shoot him, of course?”

“Wasn’t planning to,” Beckett points out laconically, and munches her lunch. “We need to – well, I
need to get back. You coming, Castle?”

“Yeah, for a bit. You can tell me where to get that cheese bread” –

“Khachapuri” –

“and I’ll get some. How many do I need? I mean, three for you, but…”
Beckett growls, without any malice behind it. “Get six. I can freeze them.”

“No no no. If anyone’s going to freeze them, it’s me.”

“Who knows how to cook Georgian?”

“You,” Castle says sulkily.

“So who’s getting the spare khachapuri?”

Castle pouts, bats his eyes, produces his best puppy-dog face, and makes no impression
whatsoever on Beckett’s granite hard resolve to keep her khachapuri.

“You are,” he eventually grudges.

“Now we’ve got that sorted, c’mon. Back to phone records. Ugh.”

Round about four o’clock Castle wanders off. Nothing interesting has occurred since lunchtime.
Nothing interesting was looking as if it would happen for the rest of the day, and he really needs to
talk to his mother. She should be awake, and she is unlikely to have departed for the evening. He
trails home without any enthusiasm at all.

His non-enthusiasm is further diminished when he finds his mother already embarking on a Bloody
Mary.

“A little early, Mother?”

“Nonsense. It’s never too early for a little drink.”

Castle refrains from commenting with some difficulty.

“I’m taking Beckett to the Hamptons for the weekend, Mother. Will you be here for Alexis, or do I
need to arrange something else?”

“I shall be here,” his mother says.

“Good. Now, Jim Beckett would like to see you and Alexis. He seems to think” – Castle is not so
much shading the truth as reversing it – “it would be a nice idea to see you both. If you don’t want
to, he can talk to Alexis. They liked each other.”
Martha preens a little, clearly believing that her personality has claimed another conquest.

“That sounds delightful, darling. Shall I call him?”

“No, he’s busy. He’ll call you tomorrow night.”

Martha, fortunately, asks nothing more, being more interested in her Bloody Mary than in her son. Castle decamps upstairs to talk to Alexis, who might be a little more receptive.

“Dad? What’s up?”

“I want to talk to you.” Castle shuts the door quietly.

“Okay,” Alexis says happily, putting her pen down on her notes. “Why?”

“I’m taking Detective Beckett up to the Hamptons for the weekend.”

“Good,” Alexis says firmly. “She’ll like it there.”

Castle doesn’t so much as flicker an eyelash to indicate that Beckett has already liked it there. Lots.

“While we’re there, Mr Beckett would like to see you and Grams.”

“Why?” Alexis asks, very suspiciously. “What are you plotting, Dad?”

“You remember I said that they were having some difficulties, and that’s why they haven’t been back? Mr Beckett wants to talk to you and Grams about some of the reasons – his reasons. Detective Beckett would be very upset if she were here, so she won’t be. Grams needs to hear this so that she stops trying to interfere.” He pauses, and decides to trust Alexis with a lot more. “Grams is trying to mother Detective Beckett. That’s not going to work. She doesn’t want a replacement mother and if Grams keeps trying there’s likely to be a spectacular blow-up. Grams isn’t going to win that fight, and I’m not going to stop it.”

“You won’t defend Grams?”

“No.” Castle is very firm. “Grams has been asked to back off several times, and if she doesn’t listen after she’s heard Mr Beckett, then she’ll have to take her own licks. I’ve told her it wouldn’t be a good idea, I’ve asked her not to interfere, and so have you. It’s up to her now.”

Alexis is quiet for a short space. “Okay, Dad. If this sorts things out so Detective Beckett comes back, I’ll help. I like her.”

“She likes you, pumpkin. If she didn’t she wouldn’t bother trying to fix this.”

He notices Alexis’s slight look of confusion.

“Okay, now for the hard bit. Mr Beckett had some trouble with alcohol.”

“I guessed. He only drank soda.”

Castle boggles a little, and considers enrolling Alexis at Quantico.

“Er – okay. Anyway, Detective Beckett had to pick up the pieces for quite a while, and she finds it a bit difficult because we’re a bit like they used to be when she was your age, and then they weren’t, because of the drinking.”
“Okay,” Alexis says slowly, a little confused.

“So, Mr Beckett’s going to explain a bit to Grams about his history, which explains why trying to push Beckett to come here isn’t a good plan, but if you can, I’d like you to keep Grams on the history and ask any questions you want to as well. I really, really want Grams to understand that everyone’s already trying to fix this and she doesn’t need to get involved.”

Alexis stares at him for a while with a very strange expression on her face. “Dad, are you treating me like an adult or something?”

“Don’t I always?”

“No, even if you do let me parent you. You usually try to keep difficult things away from me. You always try to keep your girlfriends away from me. So what’s different this time?”

“Er…” Castle entirely fails to find a good answer, and changes the subject. “You’ll understand better after the weekend. Even if Grams doesn’t, you listen carefully to Mr Beckett. After that, we’ll continue this discussion.”

“Okay,” Alexis says amiably, already turning back to her homework. “But I think you should hang on to Detective Beckett. I like her. She’s real.”

“Thanks,” he says, hugging her.

“Good evening, Detective Beckett, Mr Castle.”

“Hey,” both say in tandem.

“Your father is not here yet.” Dr Burke states. “I have spoken to him, and he wishes to apologise to Mr Castle. We shall see how that transpires. Mr Castle, are you still content that he should speak to your family?”

“Yeah.” Mr Castle does not sound happy about it.

“Good. Now, Detective Beckett, I think that you and your father should consider discussing your different views of what was to be achieved by Sunday’s brunch. In that way, further steps might be less awkward. It is always helpful if both parties have the same view of the outcome to be achieved.”

Detective Beckett elevates an eyebrow. “You don’t say,” she drawls. Dr Burke raises his own eyebrows at her. She shrugs, but drops her eyes, embarrassed. “Okay. If he’s going to apologise properly to Castle… then okay.”

“Is there anything else you wish to discuss?”

“Dinner,” Detective Beckett says.

“That would be the dinner between your families?”

“Yes. I want to wait till later in the session and see how we’ve gone.”

“Very well. Will you set up your game, or do you not think it necessary?”

“Set up. It makes it easier.”
Detective Beckett does so, and just as she places the last man Mr Beckett is shown in.

“Hey, Dad.”

“Jim,” Mr Castle says rather stiffly.

“Good evening.”

“Hello,” Mr Beckett says. He sounds slightly nervous.

“Er… excuse me a moment,” Detective Beckett says. Dr Burke suddenly understands what she is doing, and approves. “Too much coffee.” She disappears briskly out the door.

“Um…” Mr Beckett says, “um… Rick… I’m sorry about the other day. I was just so wound up about Katie blocking everything and – er – I shouldn’t have taken it out on you. It’s not you. I’m sorry.”

There is a very tiny pause.

“Accepted,” Mr Castle says, still a little coolly.

Detective Beckett reappears, flicks a quick glance round all three men, receives a short nod from Dr Burke and a smile from Mr Castle, followed by a weaker one from Mr Beckett, and sits down at the table. She has, once more, taken blue.

“Still always blue, Katie?”

“I like it,” she says, unoffended. Mr Beckett relaxes slightly.

A few rounds are played. Dr Burke is quite delighted, although he conceals it, to start a man early on, and then to be able to send a man of Mr Beckett’s back to its Home. He is beginning to enjoy this game.

Detective Beckett pounces on a man of her father’s without compunction. “Sorry, Dad.” She hesitates. “I didn’t want to talk about anything… difficult at brunch. I just wanted something normal.”

“But… well, I missed so much and I wanted to know about a bit of your life I missed.”

Detective Beckett stares at her father. “Didn’t you listen to me in here, three weeks ago? Didn’t you hear what I said about graduation?” she says unhappily. “What part of you weren’t there and you know what, I was relieved, and then I felt guilty about it didn’t you hear? How can you think I want to go back over that time? I don’t want to remember any of it because all I remember is you being drunk and me feeling guilty that I wasn’t dealing with it. You don’t get do-overs. You missed it. Telling you about the Academy doesn’t change that.”

“So I don’t get to congratulate you on success now even if I didn’t then? It doesn’t matter what I do to make amends, you don’t want to share any of the good things that happened while I was drunk? Okay, I should never have fallen into the bottle, and no, there aren’t do-overs, but how do we ever get back to normal if every time I ask you about something you just shut me out? I want to do normal things, like congratulating you and hearing about your life and” –

“Stop pushing, Dad. It’s not you who gets to set how this goes. It’s me. I’ll go as fast as I’m ready for, and you need to respect that. If I want to leave the heavy stuff for in here and have nice, sociable brunches where we don’t unload emotions all over the table then that’s what I’ll do. All
the past is heavy stuff, right now, and I don’t want to get into this without Dr Burke right there. I’m trying to make this better. Are you sure you are? After all, you’re butting heads with Castle. Do you really want this fixed?”

Dr Burke steps in, before a serious breach develops. “I think a short time-out is indicated. Mr Beckett, if you would come with me? Detective Beckett, if you would stay here with Mr Castle.” He escorts Mr Beckett out and into another room.

“Jim,” Dr Burke says, “I appreciate that your daughter’s words have hurt you, but she does have a point. Trying to force the pace of reconciliation will not help, and as you are seeing, may hinder. I counsel you to reflect on that for a moment, while I deal with your daughter.”

Dr Burke steps out, and takes a moment or so to calm himself. It will not help if he informs Mr Beckett that Detective Beckett need not preserve a relationship with her father. It is, however, very tempting. Temptation should be resisted, when it is merely a mask for relieving one’s irritation.

“Detective Beckett, would you explain to me how you feel about your father right now?”

“I want him to stop pushing. He just keeps on trying to do things that I’m not ready for and I feel like I have to go further than I want to because otherwise he’ll be hurt and then I remember that I’ve a right to do this my way but I still feel guilty about saying no to him and can’t he just stop?” She draws in a very harsh breath. “If he can’t stop pushing there’s no way I can sit through a dinner with him and Alexis. He’ll see it as his reward for pushing and push harder, and I can’t do that. He has to back off. And leave Castle alone.”

“I entirely agree. Let me go and speak to him for a few moments.”

As Dr Burke leaves he hears the deep rumble of Mr Castle consoling Detective Beckett. He returns to the soothingly green-tinted room in which Mr Beckett is sitting.

“Jim, let me explain.”

“Why can’t Katie explain?”

“Because the two of you are not yet communicating effectively,” Dr Burke states flatly. “She hears your comments through her own hurt and you hear hers through yours. Therefore I mediate between you. Translate, if you will.”

“Oh.”

“For example, your brunch. She wanted to be normal and light. You wanted to delve into the history and success you missed. That, to her, brings only pain and unhappy memories, where it would make you feel that you understood more of her life. She closed down that avenue, and you felt rejected. Is that not accurate?”

“Ye-es,” drags out Mr Beckett.

“We are all trying to heal your daughter’s hurts. If we can do that, yours will follow. However, no matter how much you wish to help heal her, trying to hurry the process will fail. Her description of how you are behaving is that you are pushing her to do things that she is not ready for, and making her feel guilty that she cannot do them and must say no to you. I know that you only wish to help. She is yet to be convinced. You must slow down. It has been difficult enough to slow your daughter down: I do not wish her to repeat her mistakes of the previous therapy.” Dr Burke changes tack. “She wishes to mend the breach between you, but not at any price. Please, Jim, take a step back. Let her make the first moves, and then respond. It will answer far better than anything else
Dr Burke stands up. “Take a few moments. There is coffee in the pot, should you wish some. When you are ready, simply return.”

Dr Burke exits, to return to Detective Beckett’s room. He notes without surprise that Mr Castle’s arm is protectively around her shoulders, and only slides off slowly, without embarrassment.

“Your father is taking a few minutes to consider. In that time, please would you consider whether, if he can rein in his attempts to try to force the pace, you would still consider inviting him, together with Miss Castle, to dinner. You need not answer now.”

Dr Burke sits down and contemplates the Sorry board with some satisfaction. He appears to be winning, although the game is at such an early stage it would be foolish to expect it to continue.

After a few moments, Mr Beckett sidles in, rather sheepishly. Detective Beckett looks up.

“It’s your go, Dad,” she says, remarkably mildly. It sounds, to Dr Burke’s experienced ear, as if she is trying to bring this back to normality.

“Okay.” Mr Beckett sits down, and draws. It’s a four. He looks crossly at it, and moves four squares backwards, which helps him not at all. “I… didn’t mean to upset you, Katie. I just want this fixed. But… it’s up to you.”

“Okay. I… I know you want to know, but I’m not ready to talk about it. If I was, I would.” She draws an eleven, considers the board, and exchanges her man with one of Mr Castle’s, simultaneously thereby improving her position immensely while providing Mr Castle with only a very small advantage. “I’m trying. Just let me do it in my own time. I want you to talk to Castle’s family, because it’s the only thing I can think of that might help.” She stops. “It’s your go, Castle.”

Play continues without anything of importance being said for another few rounds. Dr Burke notes with pleasure that he is still proceeding quite satisfactorily, in both the game and with this session. Detective Beckett has, quite deliberately, reaffirmed to her father that he has a place in her life. Her father has backed off. Matters are moving smoothly in precisely the direction Dr Burke would wish.

The game is not complete when the allotted hour of Detective Beckett’s session is up. Detective Beckett is winning, slightly surprisingly, a short head in front of Mr Castle. Dr Burke is not far behind that. Mr Beckett is a long way off. Detective Beckett regards the board. Then she regards her father, very obviously steels herself, and speaks.

“Dad, I’d like for you, me, Castle and Alexis to have dinner.”

“Sure, Katie.”

“But.”

Mr Beckett’s face falls.

“I want to know how your talk with them goes first.”

“And for God’s sake don’t mention it to either my mother or Alexis yet,” Castle adds. “We really don’t want Mother there.”

Detective Beckett frowns Mr Castle into silence. “And if you promise not to raise anything…"
difficult, and if you stop sniping at Castle. I just want this to be easy.”

“Okay. Yes. Whatever you need, Katie.”

Dr Burke smiles very satisfiedly as the door closes behind his patients.
“Let’s go, Beckett,” Castle bounces.

“Wait a moment.” She turns to her father. “Will you call Martha and Alexis tonight? Please?”

Castle can hear the slight air of desperation and hope behind her normal tones. He just hopes that Jim can too.

“Sure,” Jim says. “But… are you sure you want this?”

“I just want it all fixed. If this helps, great. If not, no loss.”

Castle doesn’t say anything. He really doesn’t want to bring up the ultimatum to his mother which he is worried that he will have to issue. It’s not something Jim needs to know about. Simplify. Keep all the various issues separate. Especially, keep his mommy issues and her daddy issues separate. Conveniently, Jim leaves, apparently perfectly satisfied with his Katie needing his help.

“Can we go now?” he bounces. “I wanna get going. You promised to teach me” – he pauses wickedly – “about cooking. C’mon.” He takes her wrist and tows her to the elevator, rather faster than Beckett’s feet want to go, so that she stumbles and gives him the perfect excuse to wrap his arm around her waist. She growls. Castle smirks, and tightens his arm so that she’s firmly tucked against him. “There. That’s better. Right where you should be.” There is another growl. Castle is not convinced by it, and holds on, all the way down, and all the way to the car – his car – and until he lets go of Beckett so that she can get into the car. A few moments later they’re progressing towards the Midtown Tunnel.

“When do you think we should have this dinner?” Beckett says, out of the blue.

“Soon? Stop it hanging over us?”

“Mm.”

“I thought you wanted to hear how this weekend went?”

“You mean we won’t simply see the mushroom cloud?”

“Which one?”

“Good point.”

There is a worried pause.

“I did prime Alexis to try to keep things on topic.”

“Mm.”

Another worried pause. This one develops into a more prolonged and very thoughtful silence, which lasts some way into the Expressway.

“Er-um,” Beckett emits, “um, er, um.”

“Not very informative, Beckett. Words?”
“If Dad won’t back off could you make sure your mother wasn’t there and we could have dinner with Alexis at yours?” Beckett blurts out in one run-on breath.

Castle nearly swerves the car. “Urg?” he says, barely recovering. “What? Already? It’s barely a week since you said you couldn’t do it.”

“I don’t know if I can.” There is a long, tense pause. “But I have to keep trying. There’s so many different threads here, and if one isn’t working I need to pull another. I can’t stop trying. If I do I might never get started again.” She sniffs. “I just want not to have to. Everything just leads to another problem. I try to deal with Dad and he starts pushing and fighting with you. Your mother wants to push out my mom like she thinks that’ll fix things but she’s not helping. Dr Burke’s just a world-class pain in the ass. And I’m still so freaking jealous that Alexis gets the good dad and I don’t.”

“So why d’you want to push for dinner? Sounds like you’re not really ready, and we agreed you wouldn’t do anything you weren’t ready for. Why now? It’s up to you, but I don’t want this to crash and burn.”

“Because everything else isn’t going right. It’s the last chance to make something in this whole freaking mess go right. And if Dad’s talked to them, she’ll maybe understand it.” She sniffs again. “She shouldn’t have to understand it.”

“We don’t have to do this. We – you – don’t have to do this now.”

“I do. I was going to have a dinner with Alexis and Dad. Somewhere in Manhattan. Alexis in your loft – it’s the same stress level, and I’ve got to deal with it sometime.” Castle hears desperation. “I can’t stop going forward or I’ll fall over backwards.

“But Dr Burke said not to hurry it.”

“I’m…” She stops. “I want it fixed, Castle. I want to come to the loft. I can’t expect you to put up with all this crap for ever.”

“Stop. Just stop. I’m not going round that curve. I said it was up to you and we’d take as long as it took and I am not rerunning that argument every time you think you’ve had a setback. And I’m not pulling over here when we’re less than an hour from home and I can deal with it there.”

“Deal with it?”

“Yeah, deal with it. And with you. When are you going to start believing me?” Castle flicks a glance at the speedometer, whistles softly, and drops the speed by at least twenty miles per hour before he meets a traffic cop. The state Beckett’s in, he’ll be arrested for kidnapping.

“I do believe you. You believe you. But we can’t stay stuck here for ever and it’s just going round in useless circles and I’m tired of it.” Her voice falls. “I’m so tired of all of it and it’s always me who has to fix it.”

She turns away and stares out of the car window into the dark verges of the road. Castle doesn’t say anything more. He will deal with this nonsense when they’re safely home. Just because she’s been able to solve all the recent murders in double-quick time, she’s thinking that she should solve this faster. Oh, God. Here they go again.

Maybe not. Because two weeks or so ago they disagreed and the world didn’t end. So maybe they can have this discussion and the world won’t end then either. He checks his mirrors, sees no cops, and puts his foot back down. He spends the rest of the journey obsessively checking around him
while he comprehensively destroys the speed limit. He doesn’t want a ticket, but he does want to
arrive in the shortest possible time. Letting this sudden desperation fester is not going to help
anyone, least of all him.

They reach the dark mass of his house, the wind rustling the grass and the waves lapping on the
sand, rather sooner than they should have. Beckett hasn’t noticed the speed. Beckett hasn’t noticed
that they’ve arrived. Beckett hasn’t noticed anything in the last fifty miles plus. Beckett, in fact, is
completely lost in her own screwed up head. Castle rounds the car, opens the passenger door,
unclicks her seatbelt, draws her out and walks her to the door.

Beckett knows she’s lost in her own head. She’s desperately trying to work out why she’s suddenly
so defeated and tired, why she’s pushing herself when she knows she shouldn’t, why she has this
burning need to move it all forward and fix it and just be done. When Castle draws her out of the
car she barely notices, until he stops at the door.

“Traditions are important,” he murmurs as he unlocks it, and picks her up. It flips her out of the
unseeing state she’s in.

“What?”

“Traditions are important,” Castle repeats patiently. “You come here, I carry you in. Tradition.”

“It’s been twice. That’s not a tradition.”

“Three times,” Castle says annoyingly, and cuddles her in to make the point that this is the third.
Beckett subsides, mainly because he’s put her back on her own feet. “Now, it’s too late for you to
teach me to cook, but I got Joe to leave the fridge stocked and he got that pie you liked so much.”

“And broccoli?”

“No broccoli. Broccoli is not food. Broccoli is poison.”

“That’s ridiculous. It’s full of nutrition.”

“I don’t like it. So we’re not having it,” Castle grumps, just like a toddler. Beckett rolls her eyes,
just like an adult. Castle sees it with some relief, since it means that she’s come out of her head,
which means that – over dinner: he is starving – they can have a discussion. “C’mon. Dinner.”

Dinner is swiftly put together. Beckett declines wine in favour of water, though Castle doesn’t. She
makes a moderately good meal, though tension is griping her gut and Castle’s curiously assessing
gaze isn’t doing anything for her digestion.

“Why are you so upset by today’s session?” Castle opens bluntly.

“Because it never freaking ends,” Beckett replies bitterly. “All I wanted was to be able to deal with
drunks on the job and your family. What I got was a whole set of issues uncovered and not one
single one of them is anywhere close to fixed. They don’t get fixed, they just multiply. My dad.
Your mom. Your loft. Your daughter.”

“I don’t agree. You’re speaking to your dad again.”

“Yeah. We’re right back to exactly where we were six months ago. We don’t talk about anything
important and I can’t tell him anything about the past. Only difference is that there’s been a lot of
hard words and pain. And now he asks questions that I don’t wanna answer. It’s not an
improvement,” she adds acidly.
“You had to say the hard truth. If you didn’t break it down you wouldn’t have any sort of base to build on. You’re trying to build a whole city before you’ve even got the foundations of the first house dug. Before, though, you never said no to him and you never had any difficult conversations and you sure never shouted at him. You’ve done all of that in the last few weeks. How’s that not progress?”

“How’s not being able to go to my own father’s apartment or invite him to mine fixing it?”

“That’s not what I asked. You’re evading. You’re upset and miserable so everything looks worse than it is. C’mere.” He doesn’t wait for her to move, simply wraps himself around her. “Didn’t you say you were allowed to be upset?”

“I’m tired of it. I’m sick of having to fix it. Only you can save yourself,” she spits. “Sometimes it would be easier to drown.”

Castle contemplates Beckett very carefully. That had sounded very defeatist in a very non-Beckett way. He had thought that today’s session had gone quite well, and none of this had been apparent earlier.

“Why didn’t you say any of this to Dr Burke?”

“Didn’t think of it. It’s all hanging off Dad talking to your family and there are so many ways that could go wrong and I hate that they’re going to know about it because they’ll just think that it’s stupid and juvenile and pathetic and petty and selfish.”

Castle translates that to mean they won’t like me, and suddenly understands. With a remarkable influx of thought before mouth opening, he doesn’t say anything immediately. Instead, he takes a different track.

“You know we’re a bit of an unconventional family,” he opens. Beckett’s miserably insecure state does not prevent her noise of vehement agreement. “When I was small, Mother was a single mom when it wasn’t exactly acceptable anywhere, and we were trailing round every small town in the country so she could work. It… often wasn’t pretty. She got a lot of flak. Had to lie down under a lot of comments. I’m pretty sure she had to do some things she’d rather not have done. I’m dead certain I saw a lot of things a small child shouldn’t. Theatre’s really not a nice place, offstage.”

“Mm,” Beckett says, uninvitingly.

“My point is, that you do what you have to do to survive. You make your choices – Mother didn’t have to have me – and then you do the best you can in the situation. And if someone else judges that – well, they weren’t there, and they aren’t you, and anyway you never know what you would do till you’re actually there. There’s no point in maybes and might-have-beens and what-ifs, because – you said it – the past’s past. You don’t get do-overs. It’s nobody’s business but yours and once you’re cool with what you’ve done everyone else’s opinion – even mine – is just noise.”

Castle stops for breath. Beckett is simply stopped. If any of that has struck home, he’ll be happy. He thinks of one more thing.

“We’ve all got skeletons in my family. Well, maybe not Alexis. Yet. But Mother could restock a cemetery and… well, I’m not exactly squeaky clean myself.” Then he forcibly clamps his mouth shut and stops. To avoid saying anything more, he nibbles some more of the pie. Beckett appears to be thinking. He shouldn’t do anything to spoil that. She’s munching on another slice of game pie too. He stays around her, and stays quiet.
After a while, she stops munching. “Is there dessert?” she asks, in lieu of any more serious matters.

“Ice-cream.”

“Could I get some, please?”

“Sure.”

Ice-cream appears, and is consumed. Serious talking does not appear. Serious thinking does appear, and continues. In default of conversation, coffee appears, and shortly disappears. Beckett stays wrapped into Castle, now on the couch, and doesn’t move away.

“You okay?” he eventually asks.

“Maybe.”

That is not a terribly useful answer. On the other hand, it’s truthful, which is a good start. They haven’t had a fight, which is better, and she’s eaten, which is even better than that. He snuggles her in rather more comprehensively, and realises it’s after ten.

“Bedtime. Sleep on it. Or preferably sleep on me.”

Beckett looks up and rolls her eyes. “I prefer pillows.”

“Really? You spend a lot of time sleeping with your head on my chest. I think you like me much better than your pillows.” He smiles very smugly. “C’mom. My ruggedly muscular chest is at your disposal. As is my” –

“Shut up, Castle.”

“But my rugged mascu” –

“Shut up.”

Castle pouts, calculates the angles, and relieves the pout by kissing Beckett. He lifts off. “That sort of shutting up?” He kisses her again. “Or that sort?”

“Not shutting me – ohhh.”

“You were saying?” But he kisses her some more, before she can reply, and pulls her up, and doesn’t let go of her till he plops her down on his bed.

“I’ll get your bag.”

“I could do that.”

“You could, but I want to and I’m nearer the door. Just let me. You don’t really want to get up, do you?”

She doesn’t. Settled on the bed, she really doesn’t want to move. Maybe… she should just let him steer her. Sleep on it, as he’s suggested. Not demanded, or ordered, or even asserted. Just… suggested. Up to her. Always, always up to her. She shakes her head.

As Castle goes to pick the bags up, he can hear her kicking off her shoes, sliding out her pants, lying back on the pillows. Well, he’s here, and she’s here, and they have all weekend, and since Beckett’s going to be Kat who likes cooking and will show him how to cook all that lovely
delicious Georgian food, they won’t need to go out if they don’t want to, which means that they
don’t even need to get dressed if they don’t want to. Despite Beckett’s defeatism, his spirits rise.
They rise even further, in tandem with more corporeal areas, as he remembers that tonight nobody
has to go anywhere and when he wakes up Beckett will still be right there.

He bounces back into the bedroom bedizened with bags to find Beckett propped up on the pillows
with her eyes barely open, and wearing barely anything. (well, a shirt, panties, and presumably a
bra, but none of those are much of a hindrance and her glorious legs are elegantly on display)

“Bedtime, Beckett. Here’s your stuff.” He bends over to open her small case and starts to ruffle
through it. “Ow!” A pillow has just hit his backside.

“Stop peeping, Tom.”

“You’re not unpacking it, so I can.”

“You didn’t wait for me to unpack. You didn’t even wait for me to say thanks, in fact. Stop
peeking.”

“But I wanna know,” Castle whines.

“Don’t you want a surprise?” Beckett purrs.

“Oooohhh.” Castle smirks. “But are you sure you’ll be awake to surprise me? You’re practically
asleep. I told you, I don’t do narcophilia. It wouldn’t be any fun.” He leers.

Beckett heaves herself off the bed and staggers to her bag. Movement is not actually what she
wants to do right now, but she needs to cleanse her makeup and brush her teeth. Brushing her hair
would also be desirable but she’s almost too tired to do it. Castle, still leering happily, somehow
manages to be in the right place to take her bag and steer her subtly to the bathroom, after which he
tactfully withdraws.

Beckett emerges wrapped in her kimono. This is unfair to Castle. He pouts hopefully, and receives
only a yawn. He aims for the bathroom in his turn, knowing that when he returns she’ll be buried
under the covers and possibly asleep. Emotion, not for the first time, may well have tired her out.

When he returns her long lashes are indeed pillowed on her pale cheeks. She is not, however,
buried under the covers though she does seem to be asleep. Since she is not buried under the
covers, Castle has a perfect view of a very minimalist midnight blue babydoll and matching
 panties, which do nothing at all to conceal her beautiful legs, excellent curves, and gorgeous
body. Of course, he would much rather that the minimal nightwear were spread across the floor,
rather like her kimono, and he would certainly prefer that she were cuddling him, not a pillow, but
he’s pretty sure that if he spoons round her she’ll snuggle up perfectly, asleep or not.

He indulges in a very thorough examination of his beautiful Beckett, beautifully in his bed, and
then a very careful examination of how he might manoeuvre her under the covers without waking
her. She’ll be cold if she sleeps on top of them, and he’ll be cold if he sleeps on top of them to
cuddle in and keep her warm. He considers, and then folds back the cover on his side of their bed –
yes, their bed, he thinks – as far as he can manage without it covering Beckett; slides on to the bed
himself, runs his arms round Beckett without quite ripping off the flimsy babydoll fabric, and
when she sleepily murmurs something and snuggles into him, he’s managed to roll her on to him
and then under the cover even with those astonishingly long legs getting in the way. Perfect.

He nestles his nose into her neck, drops a rather wistful little peck-kiss on the top of her shoulder,
tucks her tightly in so he can hold her close, and falls into sleep as fast as Beckett had.
Beckett wakes in the night, finding herself loosely attached to Castle, and rather surprisingly not overheated. She turns over, and regains his hand, limp in deep sleep. It’s – odd – for his fingers not to be in motion, to close around hers and to fidget, or to stroke gently, or simply to lend her his strength. His hands are never still, except here in deep sleep and deeper night. She holds his hand, and takes comfort and strength from it, lying still and quiet in the darkness.

Here, the dark is not sad, but soothing, soft breathing and warmth beside her providing safety. Surrounded by him, refreshed by sleep, she can think clearly. The meltdown in the car is suddenly mystifying. It’s not about one route being blocked so she’s flailing round for anything else, it’s about progressing all the routes together. She needs to move everything forward, in little steps. And it is moving forward. She fought with her Dad and the world didn’t fall apart. She said no to him, and to Castle, and the world didn’t end. She can – if she needs to, though she really hopes that she does not need to – reduce Martha to a small pile of scrapped sequins – and the world still won’t implode.

So she had a momentary meltdown, a small shake. She’s allowed. It doesn’t mean it’s all falling apart. It just means she was tired, and more upset by her father than she had realised, and not quite ready to take fights with her father in her stride. Besides, she’d said that she didn’t need a substitute parent – she’s got one. Mm. Hmm. Normal disagreements and difficulties don’t mean that it’s all going horribly wrong. That just means that she should accept that sometimes she’ll be unreasonably upset over something small, that sometimes she’ll be angry, that sometimes it’ll all spill over.

But whatever she will be, Castle will be there, clearing her vision at home the way he does on a case. He’d very carefully made the point – how did he know? – that his family won’t look sidelong at her for her actions; and then that she should simply own her decisions and deeds, and move on. Others weren’t there, and weren’t her, and therefore don’t have the right to judge. As long as she is sure, under the excellently irritating Dr Burke’s guidance, that she had done what was right for her – it’s nobody’s business but hers.

And if it’s nobody’s business but hers, then she can stand on that and push back against people pushing her faster, farther, than she wants to go.

She smiles into the darkness, takes a tighter grip on Castle’s hand, and slides back into peaceful sleep.

She wakes in the morning refreshed, calm, and, after a short diversion to the bathroom, curled happily into the immense mound of pillows on the one side and the firm bulk of Castle on the other. He’s nice and warm. She is not, as a consequence of her diversion. She plants her cold toes firmly on his nice warm legs. There is a sleepy rumble of complaint and a rearrangement so that she’s spooned in and her toes are no longer planted. That’s okay. They’re warm now. She wiggles slightly to be completely comfortable and closes her eyes again: safe, soothed, and securely held.

Some considerable time later, Castle wakes, slowly, savouring every last second of his slow rousing with Beckett right there, right where she should be, and peacefully asleep: totally comfortable in his bed and his arms. Today is already a really good day. Even if there were to be a hurricane next minute, this is a really good day. He takes a tiny break, returns to exactly the same position, luxuriates in the feeling and then settles back to think. He is a touch worried about Beckett’s misery last evening, and more worried about her defeatism. It’s not like her. He didn’t think that insecurity about being liked was a major part of the Beckett psyche either… oh. But…
when she’d tried to drive him away, way back when, she’d done it by showing him the bits of her personality she’d thought no-one could like. He wonders, vaguely, if she’s done that before.

Anyway, it’s now a moot point, because she’s waking up. Her eyelashes flutter, there’s a slow, boneless stretch and rub against him; a curl into herself again which presses her bottom into him. He is instantly aroused.

“Mmm. Are you pleased to see me?”

“Oh, so much,” Castle murmurs, stroking a velvet voice down her veins. “Shall I show you?”

Beckett shifts to lie on her back, opens sultry eyes and reaches for him. “Mmm,” she hums. “Or I could show you?”

“Let’s show each other,” Castle decides, and descends on her opening lips. Her hands lock round his neck, and he settles into the receptive cradle of her hips as his own palms likewise cradle his face. Their movements are slow, and gentle, and mutually giving: afterwards they simply lie together, perfectly content.

Over a late breakfast, served, this late April day, outside, in a nook shielded from the wind and attracting bright sunshine, Beckett appears to Castle to be far happier than yesterday. She’s looking out over the ocean, eyes far away, far beyond the horizon. He slips fingers over her still hand, but doesn’t disturb her by speaking. He idly wonders what might be going on at home.

“Grams, stop it,” Alexis says, for the fifteenth time. “Mr Beckett isn’t coming for life coaching. Stop second-guessing what he’s here for. He wanted to see us.”

“Sweetie, surely you don’t believe that? If he’d only wanted to see us, your father and Katherine would both be here. It’s perfectly obvious that there’s more to this.”

“Why can’t you just leave Dad and Detective Beckett alone?”

“Because they need a little help. They’re just not addressing their issues.”

“And you think interfering is going to help?”

“Well, nothing else is.”

Alexis looks astonishingly sceptical. “Grams, what do you think is going to happen if you do interrupt something Dad’s arranged with Detective Beckett?”

“Nothing but good. If everyone simply got together and talked it out it would all be fixed in no time. Especially if we all had a glass or two of wine.”

Alexis doesn’t point out that Mr Beckett doesn’t drink. She doesn’t think that her Grams is listening.

“Anyway, sweetie, Mr Beckett is coming round at seven.”

“Coming round?”

“Yes. After all, he’s been here before, and he should get used to coming. Then we’ll all be here, including Katherine.”

“Will we?”
“That’s why we need to fix this. Do keep up, Alexis. Don’t you want your dad to be happy again?”

“I totally do. But…”

“It’s clear Katherine makes him happy, and you like her, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“So obviously she should move in.”

“And you’ll be right there to give her advice?”

“Yes.”

“Grams, I don’t think Detective Beckett wants advice.”

“Nonsense. Every girl needs an older woman in her life.”

Alexis feels ill. Tonight is clearly going to be an epic fail. She wonders if it would be rude to call her dad and get Mr Beckett’s phone number. Maybe they could have a nice dinner somewhere else. But her dad had asked her to try to make Grams see… this is going to be totally horrible.

“I need to go do my English homework,” she says, and escapes. This will be totally, epically, disastrous. Alexis has never wanted to be that teen sneaking alcohol into her room and drinking it, but suddenly she sees the appeal.

“What’ll we do today?”

“I could teach you to cook.”

“Will that take all day?”

“No.”

“Sandcastles? I love building sandcastles.”

“You cheated last time,” Beckett points out.

“You cheated too.”

“Didn’t. I just used basic engineering. Still, maybe not sandcastles. I’m not sure you could take losing again. Let’s go for a walk, have lunch, and then start cooking after that.”

“Okay.”

Castle finds their coats, courteously holds Beckett’s for her to slide into, and locks up behind them. They walk down to the beach, and turn along towards the rocks.

“You’re happy this morning,” Castle says tentatively.

“Yep. Did some thinking.”

“When? Did you sneak out of bed again? Were you having sneaky midnight feasts without me?”

“No. Just thinking. I didn’t get up.”
“Mm?” Castle hums, and insinuates his arm around her waist. In return, she slips her hand into his back pocket, and bumps hips.

“I was too tired yesterday to see it. Dad pushing upset me, but it’s okay to be upset. I just forgot that for a while. I’m…” she pauses “… not used to arguing with Dad.”

Castle cuddles her in tighter.

“Anyway. It’s not that everything’s going backwards. It’s that I need to keep all of them going forwards. So I’ve moved Dad forwards even if it doesn’t feel like it at all. I’ve moved me forward. So now I need to try to move the next thing to catch up.”

“Alexis is a thing?”

“You’re the wordsmith,” Beckett grumps. “I’m the cop. Anyway. I need to pull that forward to match up with everything else, so even if Dad’s being a pain – to either of us – I need to try to fix seeing you and Alexis together. If it’s with Dad, it needs to be out. If it’s not, because he won’t stop pushing, then maybe at the loft. If your mother isn’t there.”

“I don’t know,” Castle says bleakly. “If she got in your face, you could deal with her. It might solve a lot of problems if you got all Detective Beckett on her.”

“I’m not looking for another fight. I got enough of those.”

“But you’re so hot when you’re angry,” Castle oozes, “oof! Don’t do that!” He stops walking, and turns her into him. “So what changed?”

Beckett shrugs. “ ‘S all easier, here.”

“Easier?”

“Easier to see. Clearer out here. I was so used to not fighting with Dad because I thought upsetting him would send him back to the bottle. So when I did… anyway, I did, and it didn’t, but it’s still a hard habit to break.”

“You were upset because you fought with your dad?”

“Yeah. Silly, isn’t it?”

“You’ve fixed it now.” Castle grins, and catches her hands. “Silly Kat,” he murmurs mischievously. “Chasing your tail.” Grin has changed to very evil smirk. “I’ll chase your tail instead.” He imprisons her two slim wrists in one broad grip and brings that hand sliding down over her rear. “There. Caught you.” He bends his head the few inches that it takes, cups her neck with his free hand, and takes leisurely possession of her mouth, opening on imprecations. Imprecations turn to quiet little purrs, which he steals from her lips and swallows.

“So d’you still want dinner with your dad and Alexis?”

“Yeah, but only if Dad stops pushing me. I don’t want a family fight in front of your daughter.”

She grins, though there’s a twisted edge to it. “Don’t want to scare her off straight away.”

Castle kisses her brow.

“And if Dad does keep pushing, well, I think we should try dinner at yours.”

“Without Mother.”
“Yeah. Shooting people across the dinner table is not recommended by Emily Post.”

Castle snickers. “I certainly wouldn’t want to host a dinner at which etiquette was injured.”

“I notice you haven’t mentioned that you don’t want your mother injured,” Beckett says dryly.

Castle simply kisses her again, softly, then with more force. “Okay. Let’s see how it all goes.”

“Okay.” There’s a brief pause. “Lunch?”

“Yeah. And then you have to show me how to cook all these delicious dishes.”

“I bet you licked the cake-mix spoon when you were small.”

“No. Mother can’t cook.”

“What? You’ve never licked the scrapings from the bowl?”

“Of course I have. But only from my cooking. Then Alexis cried dibs.”

“That’s no fun. I always used to get to scrape the bowl” – she suddenly drops her head on to his shoulder. His arms automatically close round her. There is a small sniff.

“‘S okay, Kate.”

“It’s not Mom. It’s… one time Mom was out and so Dad thought he’d try, but when I got the scrapings they were horrible. I still don’t know what he did to the cake mix but he threw it in the trash.” She sniffs again. “It was our secret.”

Castle sees more than he thinks Beckett knows. Mostly, what he sees is Beckett beginning to remember that she and her father have a history that isn’t rooted in alcohol and pain, though it’s still tinged with hurt at the abrupt change. A little bit, what he sees is that she isn’t automatically recoiling from his memory of a small Alexis doing what a small Kate had done.

“Let’s go make lunch, without ruining it, and then do our cooking. But I get dibs on any cake scrapings,” he says provocatively.

“That’s not fair. I want them.”

“I said first.”

“I’m teaching you. I won the bet. I get them.”

“They weren’t part of the bet,” Castle says indignantly. “Mine.”

They squabble happily all the way back to the house, by which time the only solution seems to be to make two batches of cookies: one each, and that they each get to scrape the other’s mixing bowl. This is generally agreed to be fair.

The afternoon passes off surprisingly peacefully. Castle, being a good cook and extremely interested in any form of delicious food, is attentive and enthusiastic. Beckett is happy, relaxed, and comfortable. They move around the large kitchen in harmonious patterns, and by the late afternoon everything is prepared for a delectable dinner later on. Looking at the quantities, they mutually and regretfully decide that cookie-baking can wait till another time. That settled, they curl up on the couch with, in Beckett’s case, a book, and in Castle’s, his laptop, and while away the time contentedly together doing nothing in particular. Simply being there is enough.
“Hi, Mr Beckett.”

“Hello, Alexis. Nice to see you again.”

“Jim, how lovely to see you,” Martha swishes down the stairs in dramatic style. “I’m so glad you’ve come. Alexis, sweetie, do pour Jim a drink.”

“Soda, please.”

“Not wine?”

“No, thank you. I don’t drink.”

Martha raises an eyebrow, but doesn’t – to Alexis’s considerable relief – comment. She produces glasses and two sodas.

“Grams, what would you like?”

“I shall have a glass of wine. Dinner will be a few moments.”

“You cook?” Mr Beckett asks. Alexis stifles a laugh.

“Grams doesn’t cook, Dad does all of that. We ordered in. It’s safer that way.”

It’s Mr Beckett’s turn to raise an eyebrow, but not – again to Alexis’s considerable relief – comment. She notices that he looks nervous. She also notices that her Grams seems to be entirely oblivious to the nervousness and is not asking any questions about Mr Beckett’s history. Alexis concludes that her dad has not told Grams what this is all about, and cringes. This is going to be totally awful.

“I’m really glad you’ve come,” Grams says again. “I do wish Katherine had come too. She hasn’t been here since the last time you were here, no matter how much we invite her. She does work terribly hard, but I’m sure she could manage to come occasionally. Richard, of course, is no help at all.”

Alexis peeks at Mr Beckett, and is entirely not reassured by his expression.

“I just want them to be happy,” Grams continues, “but if Katherine never comes here I don’t see how she or Richard think they’re going to work it out. Anyone would think that she doesn’t want to be with us.”

“I’m sure she’ll get here when she has time,” Mr Beckett says, through what Alexis is sure are totally gritted teeth. “She seems very happy with Rick.”

“Well, of course she is. I just wish that he’d bring her here. I’m sure whatever is wrong could all be sorted out if she’d just let me give her a bit of advice and we all had a nice family dinner together.”

Alexis winces.

“Why do you think that Katie needs advice from you? She can ask me.” Mr Beckett says, very precisely. Grams obviously hears the danger in his tone. Before everything can go totally wrong, the oven beeps.

“Ah, dinner. Alexis, come and help me set it out.”
Alexis throws a *can-we-get-out-of-here* glance at Mr Beckett, who returns it with a paternal smile and slight smoothing of his face. Plates and dinner arrive on the table. Everyone sits down. There is a very short, uncomfortable pause.

“I guess Rick didn’t tell you why he and Katie thought I should see you without them,” Mr Beckett says, rather coolly. Alexis grips her hands together under the table.

“This was Richard’s idea?” Grams says. “Why would he ask you to come rather than simply talking to me?”

Alexis catches Mr Beckett’s eye. Both of them are thinking *because you haven’t listened to him.* Complete understanding passes between them.

“Because Dad keeps trying to talk to you and you keep ignoring what he’s saying,” Alexis says. Grams colours up. “You keep trying to, like, interfere and he keeps asking you to leave it and you won’t.”

Mr Beckett closes his open mouth.

“So just listen, Grams, because Dad really wants this all to work out but if you carry on then it’s all going to go totally wrong and it’ll be your fault. He’s told you and told you not to interfere and I don’t get why you’re sneaking round him to try. Why don’t you just let them work it out?”

“Sweetie, you’re too young to understand.”

“No, I’m not. I understand perfectly. It’s you who won’t.”

Mr Beckett coughs in a mild, attention getting fashion. “As I was saying, this was Rick and Katie’s idea. They asked me to explain a little bit of history to you, Martha. For some reason” – that is slightly edged, Alexis notices, and twines her hands closer into each other – “they thought that you might hear me out.” He takes a couple of mouthfuls of his pasta.

“Well, of course,” Grams says, and tosses her head. “I’m completely open minded.”

“You mean you think everyone should be totally unfiltered,” Alexis says. “We talk about everything but not everyone does. Lots of my friends don’t say anything to their family.”

Mr Beckett coughs again, and Alexis remembers what her dad had said. “Sorry, Mr Beckett,” she mumbles.

“I’m an alcoholic,” Mr Beckett says evenly. “I started after my wife was murdered. For the avoidance of doubt, that would be Katie’s mother. Everything reminded me of my wife, even my work. She was an attorney too. I was a mess, and I don’t remember any of it after the first months. Katie used to pick me up and clean me up and take me home. Till she stopped. I hurt her too badly, and she couldn’t save me.” He eats a little more, and drinks his soda.

“She left you to it?” Grams says, horrified. “How could she?”

“She was *enabling* me. It wasn’t till she stopped that I had a hope of coming out of it. It was the only thing that worked.”

Grams does not look convinced. But Alexis begins to see why Detective Beckett didn’t want to come here. Dad had always tried to keep her away from the seedy underside of the publishing world, and he’d hardly ever let her see him drunk. Detective Beckett and her dad… not so much.
“How old was she?” Alexis asks.

“Nineteen, when Johanna died.”

Alexis winces. That’s not much older than she is. She thinks about how she’d feel if Grams died, and shivers. Even if it weren’t Grams, her mother isn’t much of a mother, but at least she’s alive. If Dad died, though… she’d be totally wiped out. Detective Beckett must have been really, really devastated, and it sounds like her dad wasn’t there for her. If her own mom, or Grams, died, Dad would be right there with her. She’d really need him there.

“I did a lot of things I didn’t know I did, and it hurt Katie really badly. We’re getting through it, but it takes time.” Mr Beckett scrapes up the last of his dinner. “I miss my wife every day. I guess Katie misses her mom too. I don’t guess anyone would ever be able to replace her, for either of us.”

Alexis is totally sure that has a meaning that she’s just not getting. Grams has a little line of colour above her cheeks, so whatever it is, it’s hit home.

“Well!” Grams huffs. Mr Beckett looks at her mildly. “It’s very brave of you to tell me this, but I don’t really see that it explains why Richard won’t bring Katherine here.”

“Grams, stop pretending to be dumb. You totally know why.” Alexis has suddenly got it. “You keep wanting to give Detective Beckett advice and she doesn’t want you to. Mr Beckett just said that she misses her mom. You’re just upsetting her.”

“Katie supported me all the time. She’s been there for me, even when I wasn’t there for her.” Alexis blinks as a whole raft of matters fall into place in her head. Alexis can always rely absolutely on her Dad to be there whatever happens. Detective Beckett – can’t.

“I still don’t see” –

“Wake up! It hurts her to see us all happy families. Why aren’t you listening?”

Mr Beckett coughs again, painfully. “I’ve said my piece,” he notes. “Thank you for dinner.”

“You’re leaving?” Alexis says, though she knows that he’s exposed enough, and more will simply start a fight.

“I think you and your grandmother are about to have a discussion I don’t want to hear,” Mr Beckett says to her, and smiles mischievously, though Alexis thinks it’s covering pain. “Time I went home.” He stands. “Martha, nice to see you again. Do let me know when your next production is opening.”

Alexis doesn’t get why that makes Grams blush unpleasantly, either, for a moment. Then she realises.
“Well, really! How rude of Richard!”

“What do you mean?”

“How dare he drag Jim into this? He seemed such a nice, cultured man the last time he came to dinner. Richard must have completely misrepresented the position to him for him to react like that.”

“Really? You’re totally unreal. You’ve been trying to interfere and interrupt, and Mr Beckett just told you why you shouldn’t. Weren’t you listening? He said that Detective Beckett didn’t want someone else trying to be like her mom. And you’re just playing dumb about what he said. He knows you tried to get round him by lying about wanting to invite him to your opening and so do I. He doesn’t want you to mess up whatever’s going on. He’s trying to sort things out and if that was me and Dad I’d hate it if someone else got in the middle of it, especially if they didn’t have any right.”

“Your father is my son, sweetie. I have every right. When you have children, you’ll understand that you’d do anything for them.”

“You’re upsetting him. Where does that fit in? Or do you get to upset him because you’re his mom?”

“Darling, it’s for his own good. He’ll be so much happier if Katherine comes here, and if we just all got together here, even by a teeny subterfuge, it’ll all happen quite naturally.”

Alexis loses her temper. “You’re not making it happen! The more you get in their faces the less likely it is she’ll ever come here! Why won’t you see you’re making it worse, not better? I want Dad to be happy just as much as you do but Detective Beckett’s never going to come here while you keep on like this. Why do you think you know best? You don’t know anything about what she thinks but Dad does, so why don’t you leave him to it?”

“Sweetie” –

“Don’t sweetie me, Grams! Just stop interfering. Just because you do life coaching for idiots who couldn’t find their ass with both hands” –

“Alexis!” –

“and who could be sorted out faster if you slapped them, you think you can cure ten years of alcoholic parent? You’re not a psychiatrist. Just let Dad and Detective Beckett sort it themselves. And don’t lie to me again! If you screw this up I’ll never, ever forgive you. You’re ruining our lives!”

Alexis runs out of breath, glares furiously at Grams, and dashes upstairs, slamming her door pointedly. Why can’t her Grams just butt out? Dad’s doing just fine by himself, and she sees exactly why Detective Beckett won’t come here.

“That was delicious,” Beckett says happily, stuffed with Georgian food washed down with Georgian wine.
“Mmm. C’mere.” Castle reaches lazily for her, and draws her in. “I want my dessert.” He smiles sleepily, and leans in slowly. “Mine,” he purrs darkly. “My Kat. Come here and be stroked.” She doesn’t seem to have much of a choice, since he’s trapped her in his arms, on his lap. He positions her to be perfectly accessible to his mouth and hands, and, when she’s angled to his complete satisfaction, produces a thoroughly predatory expression of total male desire, and invades her mouth. He tastes of shashlik and sweet, heavy wine. It’s intoxicating, and she’s very ready to drink it down. He’s undertaking leisurely, assertive exploration: sure that she’ll open for him, as she has; sure that she’ll let his tongue take her as she’ll let his body take her, as she will; simply sure of her as she is sure of him.

His firm hand slides down, caressing her jaw, flirting with her neck, palming the curves under the silky t-shirt and finding stiff points; dropping further to untuck the top from the band of the full skirt which has swished so enticingly all evening. She’d changed, before dinner. He loves her kick-ass garb at work, and he loves equally this softer form of dress, when she’s obviously relaxed and comfortable.

Of course, it has some other advantages. Having untucked her t-shirt, his wicked fingers wander down, pause playfully on her leg, and then draw erotic patterns which slowly slide the soft fabric of her skirt higher. His delightfully receptive Kat mews under his hard kiss, and melts into him. He nibbles teasingly around her jawline and round to tantalise the nerve under her ear which always makes her wriggle and squirm. Squirming means that her skirt rides up and his palm meets the warm, firm muscle of her thigh which deserves stroked. He smoothly slides over the satiny skin and she breathes a little deeper and runs her hands inside his opened shirt: a touch of the edge of her nails to fire him up.

His fingers meet the thin lace edging her panties, and skate over the soft material. She moves against his hand, his fingers measured and slow, wholly in control: he lays her out so that he can leave, oh so briefly, the damp heat and push her t-shirt up and off, over her head, and leave her in a wholly seductive – ohhhh, she knows exactly what he likes – crimson lace bra, almost see-through in its delicate tracery of pattern. He bends his head to lick a lasciviously wet stripe from clavicles straight down into her cleavage: his hand returning to cup her and his thumb pressing over the hard bud of nerve endings; she retaliates with evil, elegant grip sliding down his torso and finding hard thick arousal beneath.

Suddenly it’s not a game, no more teasing: he traps her hands in one of his and kisses her hard and deep and passionate, suddenly he’s wholly taken the lead and she surrenders to his mouth and his fingers taking her higher. She curves into his hand, fights for control of the kiss and is happy to lose the battle, snaps her hands free and hauls his head to hers, locking around his neck. He might be stronger, but she’s no weakling.

“Something you want? Someone you want?”

“You want me,” Beckett says smugly.

“And you want me, just as much,” Castle says, equally smugly. “So why, Detective, when there is a very large bed in my bedroom, are we still heavy petting on the couch?”

“Because you think you’re still seventeen?” Beckett snarks, pushes him away, escapes his grasp and makes it a whole four steps before he catches her.

“I assure you that no seventeen year old could make you feel like I will,” Castle rasps dangerously, capturing her before she can attain the bedroom. Beckett quirks an eyebrow at him, which turns to dark-eyed, slumberous desire as her skirt pools around her bare feet without her hands touching it. They can’t, being locked in Castle’s wide span and held against his chin, where he is currently
sucking one finger with a filthy twining of tongue and an expression which says just you wait. His other hand is stroking over her panty-clad rear, with further forays into terrifyingly intimate territory. She’s pulled closer and closer, tattooed against his firm body and then opening against him to roll her heat over his hard weight. His palm keeps her tightly against him.

When he’s had his fill of grinding into the cradle of her hips, he lifts her so that she wraps legs around his waist and hands around his neck and carries her to drop her on her back in his bed where he simply falls over her: big, dangerous and wholly possessive.

“My Kat,” is all he says, and seizes her mouth. She’s ripping his shirt open as he does, barely leaving the buttons attached, shoves him back hard and whips the shirt off his shoulders as he’s forced to kneel up for the half-second it takes him to recover and repossess her lips. It doesn’t stop her attacking his belt and pants, forcing them down till he kicks them off. He recaptures her hands, pins them to the pillow by her head, and settles heavily between her legs, weight mostly on his elbows. All the while Beckett is fighting him for control of the kiss and trying to flip him over, but he’s as fired up as she is and he’s not giving up his dominance without a fight.

He switches up to be a little rougher, a fraction more forceful: to use the strength he knows she likes and, when she’s still trying to force his surrender, to lock her wrists above her head and start to reduce her to a melting, desperate mess.

“I’m no teen,” he growls, and nips her collarbone. “I’m a grown man.”

“So I notice,” Beckett purrs, and arches against his growth. “All grown up.”

“So are you,” he replies, as his lips move downward over some very grown up curves, and pause to explore them properly. She mews as he sucks and licks, and gasps when he adds a tiny bite: sharp sting swiftly soothed. She’s so responsive when he plays with her breasts: it’s so easy to arouse her and to fire her up, to make her soft, yielding Kat who’s happy and playful and loving and all his. He slips the dampened fabric of her bra from side to side, soft friction over her nipples, delicate seduction. He’s still trapping her hands, ensuring that the only person in the lead here is him. Quite-definitely-Kat is quite evidently happy with that. Something about the sexy little noises she’s emitting, and the flex of her lithe, beautiful body tells him that.

He lets go of her wrists and slithers down her form, kissing and nibbling as he goes, returning to undo her bra and slide it off, playing just a little more because he really cannot resist; and then slips back south.

“You liked that,” he rasps, “and you’re going to like this too. Strictly for grown-ups.”

Kat purrs, vibrating deep in her throat, as Castle licks a wet line over her stomach, down past her navel, over the pretty panties and through the centre of the fabric. She bucks and cries out under the erotic lash of his tongue, and he presses her hips back to the sheets, to continue whipping her on. He loves her taste; he loves the slick sensation of her skin against his mouth and tongue; he loves driving her wild and wanton and screaming his name; and that’s what he’s doing.

He doesn’t slip her panties off till she’s desperate: soaked and slippery; resettles at her core and she locks her legs around his back; her hands knotted in the sheets; wide open to him. He thrusts with his tongue and runs a pen-calloused thumb across her and she comes on a scream.

He slides back up the bed and, by the time she’s opened her eyes, is holding her in such a way that the next move is hers to make. She squirms across him so that he’s caught: trapped in her slick heat.
“Got you,” she says possessively.

“I thought I’d got you.”

“Nope. Mine.” She flops over him. “See?”

Castle rolls them over and pins her down again. “Mine.”

“That has no logic.”

“Yes, it does. You draped yourself on top of me and claimed that gave you ownership. So now I’m on top of you – and it feels really good – so I get ownership.”

Beckett makes a determined effort to flip them over again. Since Castle is using his considerably greater weight to stop her, and was prepared for her action, she fails.

“Mine,” he says very smugly. “See?” Beckett humphs. “You started it.” More humph. He shifts a little. Humph shifts to something a little more like ooohhh. Another tiny shift later, there’s a definite change of tone, and a determined wiggle. He wiggles a little in turn, and she moans very softly. “My Kat. All mine.”

“Prove it,” she purrs softly, and he thrusts once, hard, fills her completely, and couples it with a potent overpowering of her soft mouth.

And then there’s nothing but them.

“I need a shower.”

“Mmmm. I need to wash your back.”

“I’ve been washing my own back for a long time.”

“But it’s much nicer when I do it, isn’t it?” Castle’s palm rubs down her spine, and leaves excited little tingles as it goes. Beckett hums happily, and curves into the touch. He massages gently up and down her back, and listens to the contented sounds.

“Will you keep doing that in the shower?”

“Could do. If you were nice to me.”

“Nice to you how?” she husks.

“I’m sure you can think of a way.”

“Been visiting seedy clubs? That line came straight out of Vice.”

“I liked it,” Castle growls, and backs it up with a string of kisses down each vertebra, ending with a neat nip on her slim backside.

“No, you like what I might think up.”

“That too. But right now, I’d like it if we thought about it in the shower.”

Castle bounces off the bed, tugs Beckett into his arms, and swoops her off into the bathroom and the immense shower. Once there, he stands her up and turns the shower on. Fairly shortly, there is
a mutual massaging of shower gel into each other’s skin; soft strokes and firmer touches, moving surreptitiously towards more intimate areas and then sliding away, reapproaching and sliding away, finally returning for slow, gliding grip and teasing thrusts. And then her hands move to his shoulders and his to hoist her up and hold her balanced against the shower wall and push slowly into her and feel and hear and see her pleasure rise and crest around him and then he takes his too.

Afterwards, when they’re dry again, Kat smiles sleepily, and puts on the same teeny-tiny babydoll that she’d had last night. Castle’s eyes flare, and he gathers her in. He’s simply there: big and muscular; her support as she – now – can be his. Somehow, some way, they fit together: each what the other needs. Two opposites, wholly attracted. She steps closer, and wraps her arms around him: petting him as he’s so often soothed her. They collapse on to the bed together, wriggle messily under the covers without actually losing contact with each other, and meet up again in the middle of the bed, warm, safe and perfectly content. Beckett nestles into the haven of Castle’s arm around her, her head on his chest and her arm over him; Castle tightens his clasp and buries his nose in her hair.

“We should do this more often,” he rumbles.

“I don’t get that much leave.”

“Not coming here – though that would be nice – just going to sleep together.”

“Mmm,” Beckett hums agreeably. “Mhm.” She nestles a little further. “Like it,” she mumbles sleepily, and then, “I’ll get there.” Her eyes drift shut, her mind quiet.

“I know,” Castle mumbles in sleepy turn. Shortly his grip loosens as he falls into slumber to the sound of Beckett’s soft breathing and her warmth over him.

Beckett wakes up not quite wrapped in and not quite detached. Perfectly positioned not to be broiled, in fact. However, being unbroiled, she could now usefully be quite a lot closer. That arranged, she wiggles hopefully and, despite the fact that Castle has not actually opened his eyes and is still snoring softly, elicits a very pleasant response. Perfect. She rubs a little more, and still without opening his eyes but with a definite lack of snore Castle cages her in his arms, spread over him, and pulls her down to be firmly kissed. She infers remarkably rapidly that he’s very pleased to wake up with her. Very pleased. Pleased swiftly turns into mutual pleasure turns into cuddled-up post-coital closeness.

“I like it here,” Beckett murmurs.

“Here as in my bed, or here as in the Hamptons?”

“Both,” she answers, and curls against him to point at least one moral.

“I like it too, but we can’t stay here for ever.”

There is a tiny, disappointed growl. “I know. I don’t really want to, but… sometimes it’s just easier to see when you’re somewhere else.”

“Thought you’d done your thinking?”

“Yes. But I still need to work out whether we do dinner with Dad and Alexis or whether we do it with Alexis at yours and how you make your mother stay away.”

“Short of shooting her?”
“It’s an option.”

“Get in line,” Castle says, with only a hint of an edge. Beckett snickers. “I’ll think of a way if I have to. Maybe your dad’s straightened up his thinking by now.” He ponders for a second. “I wonder how it all went.”

Beckett groans. “I wasn’t thinking about that. I was nice and warm and comfy and now you’ve spoiled it.” She flumps unhappily on to the pillows and away from Castle, who doesn’t appreciate it.

“Come back. I wanna be nice and warm and comfy and that means you here.” He tugs, and she is perforce returned. “We’ll work it out. Let’s see what happens” – he pauses – “tomorrow. C’mon. Breakfast.”

“Let go, then.”

“Why?”

“You said breakfast.”

“Mmmm. I did, didn’t I? I didn’t mean bagels, though.” His voice is deep and wicked as he draws her up his body to his mouth. “I meant you.”

Breakfast in bed is thoroughly satisfactory, on both parts. It is followed by breakfast in the kitchen, which is less physical but more nutritious.

Unfortunately, on looking out of the window, the weather is not playing nice. It’s raining, and it’s cold. Walks along the beach are not indicated. Castle bounces off to put the fire on instead.

“A lovely real fire, Beckett, to keep us cosy. We can watch a movie or read or write – well, I can write and you can read” –

“Who’s doing the ‘arithmetics?”

Castle guffaws, swings her round and up and kisses her soundly, and plops her down again. “You can. I don’t like math.”

“Okay. My arithmetic tells me that we have ten hours left.”

Castle makes a face. “I don’t like your arithmetic,” he pouts. “I’ve got a better idea. Be an astrophysicist.”

“Huh?”

“That way you can invent time slips and we can stay here as long as we like and go back to the right time when we’re done.”

“I think you’ve been reading too much Harry Potter. There are no such things as Time Turners.”

Castle pouts some more, which is cute. Beckett resists any urge to kiss it, however. If he once gets the idea that he can disarm her by pouting she’ll never be able to stop him doing all sorts of insane things. She manages a roll of the eyes, instead. It takes her considerable effort.

“Let’s watch a movie.”

They find a generic action movie and snuggle down to watch it. That takes them till lunchtime, for
which they picnic on cold game pie and reheated Georgian leftovers. The rain continues to pour down, depressingly. Another action movie is located.

“Let’s work out where to go for dinner if Dad behaves himself,” Beckett says, half way through another set piece faked fight.

“Um…” Castle says doubtfully. He has lots of ideas, but only if he’s paying. He thinks that only a reasonably smart restaurant will keep Jim in moderate check, and those run expensive. He also doesn’t want to say this. Beckett has been notably unkeen on letting him pay for meals lately, which is simply not fair because he likes buying her meals just like he likes giving everyone presents. He’d like to give her other things. Jewellery. Specifically, a ring. But that’s not for now. He hopes, though, that it’s a lot closer than he’d thought a month or so ago.

“I thought you knew every restaurant in Manhattan?”

“I do.” He pouts. “You won’t let me pay, though.”

“We’re back to this? We’ll go Dutch. Okay?”

Castle doesn’t think that’s okay at all, but it’s the best deal he’s likely to get. “Okay,” he grouses. “But I still think you’re being unreasonable.” Beckett glares. “O-kay. Dutch.”

A short argument later an Italian restaurant called Po has been selected. Apparently it has very discreet waiting staff and good food. Both may be required.
The afternoon passes in peaceful togetherness, punctuated by a small amount of relaxed making out, every time the movie gets boring, or the fire pops, or the continuous rain hits the window, or they feel like it. Well, relatively small. They do manage to confine their exertions to making out, with a small amount of passing second base. Well, relatively small. And they only ended up in bed once, which is very restrained, Castle thinks. It really could not be said that they’re acting like two hormone-driven teenagers. They aren’t teenagers.

He loves this quiet closeness just as much as the passionate lovemaking, however. His life is loud: played out previously in dramatics and histrionics – his mother and Meredith both – in celebrity parties and the snapping of the paparazzi; in the noise and bustle and formulaic chatter of signings and readings. Now it’s loud with sirens and command and the hubbub of the bullpen. He’s only been quiet with a baby Alexis and when he’s writing. Beckett, whether Kate or Kat or Beckett, and outside the precinct, is quiet. Her apartment is muted, her life solitary. Albeit her reasons are intensely painful, even now that she’s emerging from her tight-wrapped agonies she remains a still centre in a noisy world.

No wonder she inspires him still. At first, it had simply been the shock of novelty: her command persona, her alpha nature and the sheer lust he had felt on first seeing her: the contradiction of the public facets of her personality with her wrapped-tight secrecy. Now, though, she brings him a space of quiet, and he hadn’t even realised till now, till he’s cuddled up with her doing nothing in particular in no particular hurry. He can feel his story forming in his head, but it’s not yet ready to arrive in his fingers. Later, it will be there. Later.

He becomes aware that Beckett-very-much-soft-Kat is humming contentedly and somewhat tunelessly to herself. He looks down at the dark head, planted firmly on his shoulder, and affectionately drops a kiss on its top. She curls in a little more.

“I’m glad we came here,” she says. “Everything’s clearer.”

“Yeah. You’re happier.”

“It’s easier to see what’s wrong when I’m not in the middle of it. When there’s no-one pushing at me.” She stretches an arm around his midriff. “You don’t push. ‘S important. You let me have time to think.” She stays quiet for an instant. “Like seeing that I was upset because I’m not used to arguing with Dad. It’s normal. To argue, I mean. It’s okay. So now I think we – the four of us – should have dinner, maybe Thursday? That way I’ve got Tuesday to talk to Dr Burke about it and I’ll see him on Friday if it all goes wrong. No gap for it to get worse.”

“Okay,” Castle agrees.

“But…”

“But?”

“We need to know how their” – no need to specify – “talk went down.”

“Yeah, and?”

“How are we” – there’s emphasis on that we – “going to deal with your mother?”

“Let’s see if anything your dad said has sunk in. If it has, then it’ll be easier. If not” – his mouth
twists – “well, you don’t need my permission to go all Detective Beckett on her, but if it helps you’ve not just got mine but Alexis’s too. I’ve told Mother that if she upsets you I won’t be protecting her.”

Beckett boggles at him. “Huh?”

“I’ve told her not to interfere several times. Maybe she’ll listen to your dad. Maybe not, but if she doesn’t then it’s on her own head. I get exactly why you don’t want her trying to mother you.” He breathes. “Anyway. If she can’t back off then she’ll be moving out.”

There is an embarrassed pause. “Besides,” Castle says very uncertainly, “er… if you were to move in sometime – when you were ready – I don’t want her there.”

Beckett boggles even more, completely wordless.

“Kate?”

“Move in?” she eventually squeaks. “Move in?”

Move in? She’d thought that inlaws was a slip of the tongue… no, she hadn’t. She’d just pushed it out of her mind because so many things aren’t right or fixed yet. But…

“I’m not trying to push you. I don’t mean now, or next week, or even next year. Just…” he runs down.

Beckett recovers her voice. “I don’t not want to,” she says, to a profound sigh of relief. “I just – look, it’s… let’s take this one step at a time, huh? I’ve got to fix seeing you and Alexis together, okay? If I can do that, then I can think about more. I want to come to the loft, and stay over, and… I want to. All of it. But if we” – Castle hears that we with considerable hopefulness – “move too fast it’s going to crash.” She takes a few slow, shallow breaths. “It’s… it’s a goal, okay? My goal.”

“That’s enough for me.” He kisses the top of her head, gently. Then he smirks evilly. “I don’t want you to be under any misapprehensions about my intentions, Beckett. They’re all wicked.”

“Are they?” she husks, only too glad to change the mood from serious to sexy. “You want to have your wicked way with me?”

“Oh, yes. You can’t resist my wicked ways.”

She doesn’t. He doesn’t resist hers, either.

“Richard. You’re home.”

“Stating the obvious, Mother?”

“I want to talk to you. How could you mislead Jim Beckett into thinking that he needed to talk to me rather than you doing it yourself?”

“There was no misleading at all. You haven’t listened to me, so I asked Jim to talk to you. Did you bother listening to him?”

“No, she didn’t.”

“Alexis?”
“Alexis!”

“Grams told Mr Beckett that she was sure all we needed was a nice dinner and her giving Detective Beckett advice.” Castle winces. He can imagine exactly how that went down. Badly. “She didn’t listen to anything he said. She thinks that she can do anything because you’re her son.”

Castle turns a cold glare on his mother. “Is that true?”

Martha tosses her head defiantly. “Of course I’d do anything to make you happy.”

“Except, it seems, what I ask you to do,” he says icily.

“But it’s not working. Katherine won’t come here” –

“Why didn’t you listen to Mr Beckett?” Alexis yells. “She’s hurt by seeing a proper family! Why do you want her to be upset? If I don’t care that she’s upset when she sees me and Dad” – “Dad and me” – Castle automatically interjects, which is completely ignored –

“together, why are you bothered?” Alexis gives her grandmother a searing stare. “Oh,” she says suddenly. “I totally get it. You want her to be upset so you can step in and be her mother.” Alexis’s face scrunches up in disgust. “She doesn’t want a mother.”

“Is that it, Mother? You’re so fixated on your idea that Beckett needs some motherly advice from you that you won’t listen to anyone else?”

“She’s not getting sensible advice from anyone else. If she was, she’d” – But Castle has heard enough.

“Beckett is getting professional help. Yours is not required. You wouldn’t listen to me and you haven’t listened to Jim. Listen now. If you don’t drop this, you will have to move out. I will help you find a new apartment and I’ll pay for it, but you won’t be living here any more. Please believe that I mean this. If I have to find you an apartment myself, I will. I’m not having this discussion with you again. Either respect Beckett’s privacy, and mine, or leave. There are no other options.”

Martha looks at Castle, and then at Alexis, clearly expecting an argument. “I agree with Dad. You’re not helping. If you won’t leave Dad alone, what’ll you be like if I bring someone home?”

Castle chokes, fortunately unseen.

“I don’t want you poking into my boyfriends like you’re doing with Detective Beckett. It’s – disrespectful. Dad gives you a home and you totally don’t respect him. If you’re going to be like this all the time and you put Detective Beckett off coming here like you have already then it doesn’t matter how much we love you it’s not going to work out.”

“Sweetie” –

“I told you not to sweetie me! I’m not a kid any more.”

Castle chokes again, equally unnoticed.

“Just butt out, Grams! Leave us alone and stop butting in and interfering and trying to interrupt Dad and Detective Beckett. You’re ruining everything and you won’t listen to any of us! You totally need to wake up!”

Alexis finishes on an earsplitting shriek of pure rage and stamps back upstairs. Her bedroom door
slams. Castle speaks before his mother can.

“You’re not going to split Alexis and me on this. She has a point. I don’t think I can trust you not to walk in on me – you don’t seem to worry about walking into my office or my bedroom whenever you feel like it, whether I want privacy or not – and so I don’t think you’ll respect Alexis’s privacy either. Regardless of Beckett’s position, I’m not having you upsetting Alexis. So you need to do some hard thinking, Mother, because any more overstepping and you will be out.”

Castle stalks into his office and closes its door very sharply.

“Katie? Is something wrong?”

“No, I just wanted to know how it went with Martha and Alexis.” She hears a deep sigh. “Not so good?”

“Well, Alexis gets it.”

“Oh.”

“I didn’t say anything about you, though. Just that I hurt you. Martha’s a bit pushy, though.”

“Yeah.”

“She seems to think she can give you advice.”

“You knew that.”

“I didn’t know how stubborn she was about it. How does she think she’s qualified to help?”

“She’s not.”

“No wonder Rick was so angry. I’m surprised he hasn’t murdered her.”

“Don’t you try it. I don’t want to have to arrest you.”

“I guess that would be a bit tricky.”

Beckett snickers. “Yeah.” She sobers. “So?”

“So I said my piece, and then I left. Looked like they were about to have a fight, and I didn’t want to watch that.”

Beckett sighs heavily. “Dammit,” she says, and nothing more for a moment. Then… “Um… Dad?”

“Yes?”

“We thought that the four of us could have dinner at Po on Thursday.”

“You want to? I thought…”

“I wanna give it a go. You called Castle’s family. My turn. Just… let’s keep the heavy stuff for Dr Burke, okay?”

“Okay. You’ll tell me what time?”

“Er… seven?”
“Okay. Seven, at Po.”

“One last thing, Dad?”

“Yes?”

“I’m paying. Well, our half.”

“But…”

“No buts. Me.”

Her father growls, and grumbles, and eventually assents.

“Okay, Katie. But it’s me next time.”

“Okay. Night, Dad. See you Thursday.”

It’s not until she puts the phone down that she realises that she’s had a normal conversation with her dad for the first time in months, or possibly years. Albeit it was short, they managed it. She thinks rather sardonically that they’re united against the Martha juggernaut.

Her phone beeps.

“Beckett.”

“It’s me.”

“Hey, Castle. You only just left.”

“Yeah. I spoke to Mother. Well. I spoke and Alexis yelled. Sounds like Saturday didn’t go so well.”

“I just talked to Dad. He likes Alexis. Your mom… not so much any more.”

“Yeah,” Castle says heavily. “Me too. I just told her that if she couldn’t butt out she’d have to move out.”

Beckett whistles. “You okay?” she asks.

“I don’t know.”

“Wanna come back over?” It’s out before she thinks about it.

“I can’t.” He sounds regretful.

“Okay. Um… I told Dad about dinner on Thursday. I said seven.”

“Yeah? At Po?”

“Yep. He didn’t like it when I said I was paying our half.”

“Don’t blame him,” Castle says teasingly. “You should let me pay for all of it.”

“We had this argument and I already won. We’re going Dutch.”

“You are distressingly independent, Miss Beckett,” Castle says pompously. Beckett sniggers.
“Most unbecoming.”

“You do know that this is the twenty-first century?”

“Yes, but I don’t like it.”

“If it was 1909 I’d have a chaperone.”

“Okay, I like it.”

Beckett sniggers evilly. “I bet. A chaperone would really cramp your style.”

“A hundred years ago I wouldn’t have a phone either. So I couldn’t talk to you.”

“Oh?”

“I couldn’t,” Castle says lazily, “tell you just how sexy that fragment of fabric you called nightwear was. How long your legs looked. How it draped gently over your breasts and barely hid a thing. I couldn’t tell you how hot you are when you’re laid out across my bed with that come-on look in your eyes.”

She makes a soft noise.

“I couldn’t tell you how you watch me when I’m above you, how your eyes are deep and dark and endless, how you feel around me, quivering and then exploding and the look on your face when I take you there…”

Another little noise.

“Could I?” he says mischievously.

Beckett growls.

“That’s not nice. Don’t growl at me,” he says reproachfully. His tone returns to mischief. “You shouldn’t bark if you’re not prepared to bite.”

“You like it when I bite,” Beckett points out in a sultry purr that goes straight to his groin.

“You like it when I do lots of things,” Castle smirks.

“So do you. But you can’t come over, so I can’t do them.”

Castle humphs, and just manages not to say this is why you should move in. From the sudden change in the quality of the silence, he thinks that Beckett might have heard it anyway.

“I’m trying,” she says. “I want to.”

“I know. We’re getting there.” He consciously lightens the tone. “I’m not getting frilly pillows, though.”

“Frilly pillows?”

“Don’t women like frilly things?” he says provocatively.

“Have you ever seen me with anything frilly?” Beckett says very ominously.

“No, but you won’t let me look through your drawers so how would I know?”
There is a none-too muffled squawk of annoyance. Castle snickers happily.

“I do not have frills,” Beckett says, awfully.

“Awwww” –

“And if you produce any, I will make you eat them. At gunpoint, if necessary. Frills and furbelows” –

“So hot” –

“are for people with nothing better to do.”

“I can think of plenty of better things to do in bed than play with frilly pillows,” Castle points out, and adds very quickly over Beckett’s intimidating growl, “and on that note, Detective, good night. Till tomorrow.”

Beckett is left growling at a dead line. She occupies herself contemplating ways to wreak revenge on Castle tomorrow, all the way through bedtime.

Castle puts the phone down with considerably happier demeanour, and betakes himself to bed smiling.

Beckett regards her desk, full of mundane or cold or both cases, with disfavour, scrunches up her nose at them, and goes to make some coffee. While it’s brewing, she decides that the only way to deal with the day is to go hard at the boring cases and try to make them go away. That’ll leave the team free for something more interesting instead.

So that’s what they do. By ten, Lanie is refusing to take any more calls on the grounds that police harassment is getting to a ridiculous level. By ten-thirty, the lab won’t answer the phone at all, and its voicemail is full too. By eleven, the techs have locked the door against them and even the lure of proper coffee won’t extract them.

Beckett sits at her desk and huffs crossly. Everyone’s hiding from her, which is not fair. All she wanted to do was get the boring cases shut, and none of the support functions are coughing up the information she needs. Ryan and Esposito regard her trepidatiously and try to avoid her beady eye. Being poisoned by ME Parrish isn’t on their to-do list for the day, and she’s told them that one more call and they’ll have strychnine in their soup. Beckett, who is much nearer, has told them that she wants results and if she doesn’t get them there will be bullets.

Bullets from Beckett or poison from Parrish. Their lives are going to be miserable whatever happens. Fortunately, just before they are forced to choose between the methods of being murdered, Castle wanders in, looking hopeful.

“Any nice murders?” he asks generally.

“Not a one,” Ryan grumps. “Unless it’s mine.”

“Uh? Why are you going to be murdered?”

“If we don’t get results, Beckett’s goin’ to shoot us. If we hassle Lanie again, she’ll poison us,” Espo says bitterly.

“Oh.”
“Can’t you take Beckett out for lunch or something?” Ryan bleats plaintively. “I don’t wanna be dead.”

Castle looks at Espo, who’s nodding. He doesn’t want to be dead either.

“What don’t you spar with her? Surely she’s not still grounded for that?”

Espo acquires a very calculating look, cut with a rather nasty smile. “Don’t think she is.” He turns around. “Hey, Beckett?”

“Yeah? You got results?”

“Nah.” She scowls. “Your boy here thinks you need some sparring practice.”

Castle cringes. “I didn’t say that. I thought it might keep you occupied while the results turn up.” This statement does not noticeably alleviate the scowl.

“C’mon, Beckett. Bet I can put you down five times before Castle makes it up the stairs.”

“Hey! I’m fit,” Castle wails.

But they’re already halfway up the stairs. Castle and Ryan exchange glances, and follow, rapidly. They might miss something, otherwise. No time to get popcorn, sadly.

Sparring is as fast as ever – faster, in Beckett’s case, but she and Espo have it well under control. It’s a thing of beauty, and even Ryan is glued to the spectacle. Maybe that’s why no-one notices Montgomery until he speaks.

“Very nice, Detectives.” Everyone jumps.

“Sir!” they say.

“I hope you’re practising for the inter-precinct competition?”

“Yessir.” This is always the right answer, accurate or not.

“Good. I don’t remember clearing you for sparring, Beckett?”

“You did, sir, but this is the first time since. My wrist was better two weeks ago,” she says quickly.

“Okay. But both of you be careful. I’ve put a bundle on you, and I’ll be very upset if you do something that means you wash out before you’ve even started.” He pads out as softly as he came. Behind him, everyone slumps in relief.

Half a second later, Beckett sweeps Espo’s feet away because he wasn’t paying attention, and is quite unreasonably triumphant to have suckereded him. Triumph is removed very swiftly as Espo dumps her on the mat three times in three minutes. The final time, she stays down, breathing hard. Castle flicks a look at Espo, but he doesn’t seem concerned, so Castle doesn’t go over to her. After a second or two, she sits up and smiles.

“Good one. We should do this again some time.”

“Not for a coupla days. You need a rest in between.”

“Wednesday, then. And you’re going down.”
Espo laughs. “No way, Beckett.”

She grins. “I’ll try, anyway.”

A phone rings from the locker room. Everyone dashes for it.

“Beckett.” Pause. “Okay. On our way.” The phone is swiped off. “We got a body. Ten to clean up, then we’ll get going.”

Castle and Ryan hightail it down to the bullpen to get themselves together. Espo reaches them in five minutes, Beckett, mysteriously perfectly groomed again, in eight. Castle has no idea how she managed that. Magic?

“Okay. Body drop at Seward Park Tennis Courts, off Essex Street. Let’s move.”
When they all turn up at the tennis courts just off Essex Street, CSU are already sweeping the scene and there are several intrepid tennis players complaining bitterly about the loss of their booked courts. Respect for the dead seems to be secondary to their exercise regime, though looking at the sculpted coaches – male and female – and the rather unsculpted players, Beckett thinks that tennis is possibly not the only exercise that’s in demand. Whether non-tennis is on offer is an entirely different matter.

“Where’s the vic?” Ryan asks.

“Round there,” answers a CSU man.

Round there is behind the courts and a rather ugly brick building, in the trees. It’s not very well hidden, but it’s enough to explain why no-one spotted it till now.

“Hey, Lanie. What’ve you got for me today?”

“White male, GSW to the chest.”

“Anything else?”

“Not yet. Looked pretty fit, though. Died a while ago. I’m betting late afternoon yesterday.”

Beckett examines the body. “What’s the chances he’s a tennis coach?” she wonders generally. “Track suit, muscled wrists, sweat bands.”

“Callouses on the hands, too,” Lanie notes. “Pretty likely, I’d say.”

Castle wanders over to inspect the dead man. He frowns.

“What’s up, Castle?”

“He looks familiar. Can’t place him, though.”

Esposito, gloved up, delicately searches the victim’s inside pockets and carefully extracts a wallet. “Vance Lingham,” he announces.

Castle groans. “Of course.”

“Care to share with the class?”

“He is a tennis coach.” Beckett looks very smug. “Top end. Er” – his ears suddenly turn pink – “I had a few sessions with him.”

“You did? When?”

“A year or so ago.”

There is general relaxation at not having to investigate one of their own straight off the bat. As it were.

“You can play tennis?” Ryan asks, amazed.
“Yeah.”

“So can I, but hitting balls won’t solve this murder,” Beckett says. “Unless it would speed you up?” The three men wince in sync, and get back to the case.

Scene evaluated, Lanie whisks the corpse away and promises results as fast as she can. Apparently she’d been bored by all the mundane murders too. On reflection, her enthusiasm for a new corpse is just a little disconcerting. The others return to the bullpen and start on the databases, picking apart the life of Vance Lingham, pro tennis coach. Beckett’s murder board is swiftly decorated with his picture, the start of a time-line, and a number of thoughts.

“Where did you get coaching from Lingham?” she suddenly says. “I don’t see you on the Seward courts. More like a smart club.”

Castle grins. “It was,” he says happily. They look at him expectantly. “I was invited to the Racquet and Tennis Club, so I thought I’d better smarten up a bit. So I looked around, and Lingham offered coaching uptown, at the Manhattan Central Racquet Club.”

“That’s where we’ll start, then. Let’s see if he was still coaching there.” She thinks for a microsecond. “Castle, how would you like some more coaching?” He grins evilly. “Tennis coaching.”

“How boring. Okay.” He taps on his phone to bring up the number.

“You kept it?”

“You never know when you might want someone to play with balls with you.” Beckett’s cheekbones flare. “Tennis balls, Detective. What else would I possibly mean?” Her ferocious growl would rend armies limb from limb.

“Hey, Rick Castle. I was thinking about some more tennis lessons.”

“Yeah, exactly. Does Vance Lingham still teach? He was good last time.”

“Yeah? Great. I’ll be there later to talk about schedules.”

“Thanks. Bye.”

He snaps the phone off with a satisfied look. “Lingham’s still on the books. They’re expecting him for the evening sessions.”

“They’re going to be disappointed,” Beckett notes. “Especially when they get us instead. Field trip, Castle. Let’s go.”

“What about us?” Ryan whines.

“Bank records, phone records, street cam footage… you know the drill. You don’t need to be told.”

“But you get to do the fun bit.”

“Can you play tennis?”

“No.”

“Well then.”
She’s in the elevator before Ryan works out that that actually has nothing to do with solving the case, smirking happily as the strains of Beckett! are faintly heard.

“I didn’t know you could play tennis,” Castle says as they get going.

“High school.”

“We could have a game or two.”

“This you trying to get revenge for the shooting? You’ve had lessons and played in the last year. I haven’t seen a court for over ten. How’s that going to work?”

“I’ll be gentle with you, Beckett.”

“No.”

“I can be rough if you want,” he rasps.

“No, I am not playing tennis with you,” she says, colouring.

“That’s okay. We can play other games.”

Beckett’s face colours further. “Can we focus on the dead man?”

“Sure,” Castle says happily.

“Good.”

“I’ll focus on you later.”

The courts are exactly what Beckett expects, given that Castle has played there: discreet, luxurious, and undoubtedly expensive. The receptionist, who looks as if she works out five times daily and reapplies her make-up six, assesses Castle to be very rich and very sexy in one comprehensive glance, ignores Beckett – clearly defining her as Castle’s arm-candy of the day – and switches on the charm, in truckloads.

“Welcome back, Mr Castle. What can we do for you today?” Her sugary tones make it pretty clear what she’d like to do.

Beckett has already had enough. “Detective Beckett of the Twelfth Precinct,” she raps out. “We’d like to talk to the club manager.”

The receptionist is instantly flustered. “Why?” she stutters. “We didn’t call the police.”

“Just call him.”

She does. The club manager is not impressed.

“Jodi, what’s the matter?” he says sharply. “I told you I wasn’t free.”

“It’s the police, Max.”

“Cops?”

“Detective Beckett. Homicide.”

“What?”
“We need to talk to you about a homicide,” Beckett says very clearly. The manager appears to realise that the presence of a Homicide detective in his reception area is unlikely to impress his clients, and gestures them inward, to a small, neat office.

“There hasn’t been any trouble here,” he says defensively. “No murders.”

“Did I say it was here? I want to talk to you about Vance Lingham.”

“Vance? Vance is dead?”

“Yes,” Beckett says very bluntly. “So tell me everything about his work here. What was his schedule? Did he have favourite clients? Did anyone have a problem with him?”

“He usually did evenings. From six. I’ll get you a copy of the schedule.”

Beckett thaws her fearsome aspect slightly at this evidence of co-operativeness.

“All the coaches have their own client list. They don’t normally swap around, just if one of them’s away or out injured. They aren’t supposed to poach.”

“Do they?” Castle inquires.

“There has been some complaining.”

“Mm. Who was complaining about whom?”

Castle murmurs happily over the use of whom. Beckett ignores him.

“Jace and Bryan.” Beckett pins him with a look. “They said Vance was poaching.”

“I’ll want to speak to them.”

“They’ve gone for the day.”

“I’ll need his client list.”

“I can’t give you that unless you have a warrant.”

Beckett makes an annoyed face. “I’ll get one. What else can you tell me? When did you last see Vance?”

“Seven last night. I finished and handed over to the late manager. Vance was on Court One, giving a lesson. We can give you footage if you get your warrant,” he says helpfully.

“Okay, thanks. Anyone except the coaches who had a problem with Vance?” The manager’s eyes flick away and back again. “There was someone, wasn’t there?” Max looks hunted. “I’ll be back with a warrant. If it was a client, I’ll find out. If it wasn’t, you’d better tell me now.”

“I can’t,” Max wails.

“Thank you.”

They depart, and Beckett mutters all the way back to the precinct, all the way through a warrant request, and then very blackly indeed as she finds it won’t be back until tomorrow.

“What have you got?” she says to Ryan and Espo.
“Whole lotta nothin’, and the techs won’t talk to us. Locked the door again.”

Beckett makes a very angry sound, which attracts Montgomery’s attention. He emerges from his office.

“Where have you got to?”

“Waiting for a warrant for the club records, waiting for techs to give us anything.” Her e-mails. “That’s the ME’s report.”

“Next of kin?”

“Still trying to track it down, sir,” Espo says. “Nothing obvious.”

Montgomery considers. Shift ended well over an hour ago, but they are pursuing a hot trail. “Okay,” he says. “Carry on. But all of you get some sleep tonight.”

Around nine there’s nothing more to be done, and they decamp.

“Want a ride, Castle?” Beckett asks, purely for form’s sake since she’s intending to take him home.

“Sure.” He pads out behind her. “Want some dinner?” he asks, as they’re entering the cruiser.

“Huh?”

“Dinner. A meal eaten at the end of the day.”

“Very funny. No, I’ll get something at home.”


Much to Castle’s surprise, Beckett leans across and kisses him. “Night,” she says to his stunned face.

“Oh no.” He slides back into the car, tugs her back over towards him and kisses her slowly, deeply, and comprehensively. “That’s how you say goodnight.”

He smirks all the way upstairs. His mother is not present, which is excellent.

“Alexis? Pumpkin?”

“Yes, Dad?” Alexis comes downstairs. “I was doing my homework.”

“How have I raised a daughter that thinks homework more important than anything else?”

“Good grades are important, Dad.”

Castle, whose grades in the first year of high school were at best indifferent, ignores the argument he’s never going to win.

“I want to talk to you while Grams is out.”

“Yes?”

“You heard Mr Beckett on Saturday. Do you want to ask me anything?”
“No. I think I’ve got it. He hurt Detective Beckett ‘cause he was drunk and they’re trying to work it out. Her mom was killed and she doesn’t want anyone trying to be a new one.”

“That’s right. Okay. So, we’ve had brunch with Detective Beckett a few times, but now she wants to have dinner with you and me, and her dad.”

Alexis’s face lights up. “Really? That’s totally awesome. I thought…”

“Not here, though.”

Alexis droops just a little. “Oh,” she says disappointedly, and then recovers. “So we’ll go out?”

“Yes. Po, on Thursday at seven. We’ve been there before.”

“Okay.”

“It’s a big step, pumpkin. I know you want her to come back here, but that’s for another day. It was her idea for all of us to go out, too.”

Alexis brightens up instantly. “It was? Awesome.”

Castle declines to comment on the paucity of descriptors in his daughter’s vocabulary.

“Don’t say anything to Grams, okay?”

“I get it. She’ll interrupt and spoil it and I don’t want her there anyway.”

“A Alexis!”

“I don’t,” Alexis states mutinously. “She’s not helping and I like Detective Beckett and she makes you happy and I don’t want Grams spoiling our life.”

“You’ve never been unhappy with her before.”

“She never interfered before. If she’s like this now she’ll be totally awful when I bring someone home and you’ll be bad enough without that” –

“I thought I was the cool Dad?”

“Every time I mention bringing someone home,” Alexis says pityingly, “you choke. You’ll be totally terrible.”

“Oh,” Castle says, deflated.

“Anyway, you’re supposed to be like that. Only not too much. But Grams’ll interrupt, and ask embarrassing questions, and it’ll all be an epic failure and it’ll be her fault.”

“She loves you. She’s just expressive.”

“I love her, but that doesn’t mean I want her commenting if I’ve got a boyfriend. You know she totally would. Just like she’s commenting on Detective Beckett. She’d be, like, walking into my bedroom just like she walks in now” –

“You are not having boys in your bedroom!” Castle squawks.

“See, you’re totally not cool Dad any more.”
“That’s not the point. The point” –

“...you want us to have dinner without anyone interrupting.”

“Well... yes.”

“Okay.”

And that, it seems, is that.

Alexis squared away, Castle takes himself to his laptop where, courtesy of the weekend and the new case, story pours out through his fingers without a pause, long into the night.

He is woken by his phone.

“Rick Castle,” he yawns.

“Castle, you wanna be in on seeing the next of kin?”

“Urgh? Wha' time's it?”

“Ten.”

“Awready?” he slurs.

“Are you still asleep?”

“Yeah...”

“Oh. Okay.”

Castle pulls a couple of neurons together. “Next of kin?”

“Yes.”

“Where? Meet you there?”

Beckett gives him the address, and Castle finds a few more neurons which, once connected, pull him through a lightning-fast shower, shave, and departure, still tasting toothpaste and finger-combing his hair in the cab.

Beckett is waiting for him at the bottom of an elegant block on the Upper East Side.

“It’s his sister, Venetia Lingham,” she says, at his bemused look. “Vance lived in Brooklyn.”

They go up. Castle assesses the building as very expensive, and wonders what the sister does.

“Ms Lingham?”

“Yes?” She’s a very elegant, cool blonde: tall, slim, and stylish. Castle looks from her to Beckett and detects some considerable similarities in type, if not in colouring.

“I’m sorry to tell you that your brother has been killed.”

“You’re wrong.”
“I’m sorry for your loss,” Beckett says. Her tone convinces Ms Lingham of her sincerity, and the woman’s face contorts. She turns away and reaches for a Kleenex.

“What happened?”

“Vance was found shot earlier today.”


“Yes…?” says Beckett, sympathetically. Inside she’s thinking they all say that.

“He was a really good tennis coach. Everyone wanted him. But he wouldn’t take on anyone who was with one of the others. He was fair.”

Beckett is automatically sceptical. “Did he have any girlfriends?”

“Or boyfriends?” Castle adds. He doesn’t receive the icy glare he was expecting.

“Girlfriends. No-one serious.” Under Beckett’s inquiring eye, she colours delicately along her cut cheekbones. “I think some of them were from the club.” Beckett swiftly kicks Castle before he says something decidedly indelicate. He’s thinking it, she can tell.

“His clients?”

“I think so. Some of them were friends of mine.”

“What do you do?”

“I’m a senior account exec at Elegance PR.”

Castle nods in recognition. “Pretty high-end,” he says.

“Yes,” she says, and then takes a good look at Castle. “You’re Richard Castle!”

“That’s me.”

Beckett watches with considerable, concealed, and sardonic amusement as Venetia spots a potential new client, and instantly goes in for the kill. So to speak. Though if Castle’s existing PR rep – what’s her name? She can’t remember, if she ever knew – had appeared at that precise moment, she wouldn’t be so sure that it were a figure of speech. She prods Castle’s expensively shod foot, catches his eye for an instant, and makes a slight gesture meaning you take this one. Castle, thank God, picks up the cue straight away.

“I really admire your books,” she starts.

“Thank you,” Castle says, putting on the megawatt smile. Beckett sits back to enjoy the show. “You know, I’ve been wondering how best to promote my new series” – what? Series? He never mentioned a series. She’s so busy imitating a terrified mouse and trying not to squeak out loud that she misses the next sentence and has to try to infer it from the context.

“So, you must work very hard, with such an impressive list?”

“Oh, sure. I was even out all Sunday: there was an afternoon tea for one of our clients at the Chatwal, and then at night a promotional party at the Waldorf.”
Beckett admires the way that alibi was elicited. That’s going to be very easy to check.

“When do you get time for family?”

“Oh, we don’t see each other that often, maybe a couple of times a month. I’m so busy and Vance works evenings so there’s not a lot of time.”

“He worked evenings too? You’re both really driven. I’ve always respected people who do that. It’s a real plus point.”

“Oh, yes. But…”

“But?” Castle asks softly.

“I don’t know. There was something… I just thought that he was doing something else as well.”

“A second job?”

“Maybe. I really don’t know.”

Castle turns the conversation back to Venetia’s work, and her PR firm, for a few moments, until Beckett closes it down and they leave.

“Nice work, Castle. We can check that easily. Though…”

“Yes?”

“It’s not that far to the Central Club from the Chatwal.”

“You don’t suspect his sister?”

“I suspect everyone.”

“Even me?”

“Not you. I know exactly where you were on Sunday afternoon.”

“So do I,” Castle purrs darkly. “I was in my bed, with you. Specifically, I was” –

“Shut up.”

“That’s not what you said when I” –

“Shut up.”

“It’s not what you’ll say when I do it again, either.”

“Castle! Shut up or I will shoot you.”

Castle pouts all the way back to the bullpen.

“What do we got?” Beckett asks, which changes pout to a pained expression.

“Bank, phone, footage.”

Beckett smiles delightedly. “Great. What does it tell us?”
“Monthly paychecks, but about ten months ago he started getting regular deposits from somewhere else too. We’re chasing that down.”

“Good.”

“Phone records show that every month he had a set of regular calls. We’re tracing the numbers. Footage isn’t helpful.”

“Okay. ME’s report says window for time of death is between five and eight p.m. Sunday. He was shot twice in the chest with a .38. No results on tox, no illegal drugs, no alcohol. He’d taken some painkillers. Lanie thinks he had” –

“Tennis elbow,” Castle says, and snorts.

“Epicondylitis.”

“Like I said. Tennis elbow.”

They continue pulling the evidence they do have apart, all afternoon. Beckett declines to interview Jace or Bryan until she has some facts, so facts they seek. The board becomes decorated. At five-thirty, Castle nudges Beckett, who grumps at him. She wants her warrant, and she still doesn’t have it.

“Don’t you have to go?”

“Go? Go where?”

“Dr Burke.”

“Oh, hell. Yes. Dammit.”

She casts a very quick glance round. Castle distracts the boys, and she escapes. Of course they notice, but not for a good ten minutes.

“Where’s Beckett?”

“Had an appointment,” Castle says non-committally. “Guess it’s with her doctor, since she didn’t explain.”

The boys are only moderately unhappy with that, and it’s rapidly agreed that beer and fries will soothe their unhappiness – once they’ve got a bit further with their investigations. They put their backs into it, but the lack of response on the frequently-called numbers prevents anything further being discovered, and soon enough frustration sends them all bar-ward, where copious amounts of beer leave them slightly less discontented.

“So what’s with Beckett that she needs a doctor?” Ryan asks.

“No idea,” Castle says. It’s not exactly a lie. He doesn’t know of any reason she needs a doctor.

“You take care of her, you hear?” Esposito menaces.

“She takes care of herself. I’m not babying her, that’ll get me shot. You try it. Anyway, she’s okay. You noticed it same as Montgomery. It’s not like it was a few weeks ago, is it?”

“No.”
“She needed her team and she needed to patch it up with Lanie and it’s okay now.” There is a distinct hint of *so don’t ask anything more.*

“Yeah.”

They all drink to that.
Beckett reaches Dr Burke’s office approximately one minute ahead of the scheduled time, and consequently is rather flustered when she arrives. Dr Burke regards her with a touch of concern.

“Good evening, Detective Beckett. Has there been a problem?”

“Hey. No, no problem. Just a live case.”

“Oh?” asks Dr Burke.

Detective Beckett is clearly off her guard, and Dr Burke finds himself to be interested in how a new case affects her.

“Tennis coach, from Manhattan Central Racquet Club. He was shot Sunday.”

Dr Burke’s professional calm is completely destroyed. “Who was it?” he enquires, shocked. He practices there every week, as part of his well-balanced exercise programme. Detective Beckett’s eyes skewer him.

“Did you play tennis there?”

“Yes.”

“Who was your coach?”

“Jace. Jace Atkiss.”

“When were you last there?”

“Thursday, early morning.”

Dr Burke is completely overwhelmed by Detective Beckett’s switch from patient to interrogating detective, and the shock of a homicide which has cut very close to home. He does not like this at all. Homicide should not intrude on his well-ordered life, and none of his acquaintances deserve to be murdered.

“What has happened?” he asks, not having recovered any composure at all. “I do hope that it was not Jace who has been killed?”

“No.” Dr Burke finds himself astonishingly relieved by that news. “It was another employee of the club. Dr Burke, it would be very helpful if you would answer some questions about the club and Jace. We can do it here, or you can visit the precinct – as a witness,” Detective Beckett adds. Dr Burke is suddenly very glad that the victim was not his coach. He has a very strong suspicion that if it had been, he would already be on his way to Detective Beckett’s precinct and an interrogation room.

“Of course,” he says, recovering some composure, though his fingers steeple and unsteeple repeatedly. This is really most disconcerting. The different aspect which Detective Beckett displays when on detective business is quite upsettingly unnerving. “However, I would prefer if we conducted our session as normal, and then I will be happy to do anything within my power to assist.”

Detective Beckett considers that for a moment. From her expression, Dr Burke gleams the
impression that she would prefer to pursue her case. However, and much to his hidden amazement, she settles back in her chair. “Okay. We’ll do that,” she says decisively. “When can I interview you?”

Dr Burke calls up his calendar. “If you were happy to attend here, I would be available before nine tomorrow morning. Would an hour suffice?”

“Yes. I’ll be here at eight. Thank you.”

Dr Burke would, were he given to such expression, let out a sigh of relief as Detective Beckett’s ferocity in pursuit of evidence is repressed. He calms himself swiftly.

“That intriguing digression aside, Detective, what would you like to discuss this evening?”

“I said before that I was thinking of a dinner with us, Dad and Alexis.”

“Mm?”

“We’ve booked it,” Detective Beckett says baldly, “on Thursday.” Dr Burke elevates a patrician eyebrow. “I think – I talked to Dad about how his talk to Castle’s mother went, and we were okay, and he agreed we’d leave the heavy stuff for here, and so…”

“That does indeed sound promising.”

“Anyway, I thought that if we did it Thursday then if anything went wrong I’d be here Friday.”

“Very wise.”

Detective Beckett flashes Dr Burke a look that makes him very glad he had never been coached by anyone other than Jace. Piercing scarcely captures the full weight.

“I was upset with Dad on Friday. But I worked out why. I’m not used to arguing with Dad, and I guess I was worried that he’d relapse, which is dumb because he hasn’t any time since he got dry, and it all got tangled up. I think I was scared that when Dad talked to Castle’s family they’d” – she searches out an appropriate word – “despise me.”

“Mm?”

“For leaving Dad.”

“And?”

“Castle said it was nobody’s business but mine, and if I was cool with it everything else was just noise.”

“Mm,” Dr Burke emits. Mr Castle really should take up psychiatry. It is most depressing that he will not. Dr Burke’s fingers twitch slightly, towards his desk drawer. Within it is the curriculum vitae of a potential new psychiatrist to join this practice. Mr Castle has more innate understanding, although obviously far less technical knowledge, than the – exceptionally highly qualified – candidate. Really, such a waste of talent is most unfortunate. “Did you consider that concept?”

“Yes.”

“Mm?”
“If I’m happy with my decisions, then no-one else matters. I’m here to come to terms with my actions. So I can do this dinner, because no-one else was where I was and they don’t have the right to judge.”

Dr Burke smiles. “Quite correct, Detective Beckett. Once you have accepted your actions, and come to terms with what you had to do, then no other opinion is of importance. Now, should we discuss those actions in the light of your substantial progress with your father over the last weeks?”

“Okay. But – I don’t want Dad butting heads with Castle. Dad needs to back off and not behave like I’m still sixteen.”

“I will deal with that. You need not worry about that relationship.” Detective Beckett appears partly relieved, partly sceptical.

“If Dad isn’t going to behave nicely to Castle, then he won’t be seeing me either. He needs to get that.”

“I will deal with your father,” Dr Burke says again, consciously infusing his tone with firm reassurance. Detective Beckett should concentrate on her own relationships with her father, not those of Mr Castle.

“Okay.”

“Now, let us return to the beginning. You originally attended in order that you would be able to deal with alcoholics whom you might encounter in the course of your work, and to be able to deal with Mr Castle’s family on home ground, as it were. Quite swiftly, it became apparent that in order to achieve both goals, you would need to address your long buried issues with your father. The root of each issue turned out to be your father’s abandonment of you, followed by your failure to recognise that action while bearing substantial guilt over your decision to cease to enable your father, which you regarded as abandoning him.”

Detective Beckett nods, slowly and thoughtfully.

“How do you currently regard the position?”

“I don’t think I’d have a problem if I ran across an alcoholic at work. I don’t think I’d make the same mistake as I did with Julia, offering help.”

“Mm?”

“I shouldn’t offer help. I’d throw myself back down the same rabbit hole if I did. Montgomery would bench me, too.”

“Montgomery?”

“My boss.”

Ah. This Montgomery person has clearly assessed an appropriate response.

“To summarise, if you came into contact with an alcoholic, you would limit your dealings with them to the minimum necessary in order to conduct your job properly.”

“Yes.”

“Very well. I consider that we can leave that aspect of your treatment behind. It appears that it has
become irrelevant. Now, about your father.”

“That’s harder. I wasted years because of him, and I can’t stop feeling guilty and angry just like that now it’s out there. It’s not going to be like it was. Okay, maybe if I’d had a better therapist I’d have realised my mistakes before I spent all that time on him, but I can’t change that now. I can’t look at him the same way as I did when I was a child. I’ve spent too long supporting him to think that he can support me. But…”

“But?”

“If we work at it, we can probably get along. If I can stop resenting what happened. We’re still a family, even if we fight. He’s still my dad, even if he’s not the one I turn to” – Detective Beckett stops, and her cheeks blaze. Dr Burke waits, “when I need someone,” she finishes in a rush.

Dr Burke picks out the important words from that statement. “You are still a family. How do you interpret your own statement?”

“That whether I forgive him or not, I can’t change that he’s my dad.” She stops, and backtracks. “No: whether or not I forgive him doesn’t change that he’s my dad. The two things aren’t connected.”

“Mm,” Dr Burke emits. He notices most particularly that Detective Beckett has not said that she has forgiven her father, and deduces that she has not. She had also mentioned, only a short time ago, that she still feels angry and guilty. However, she considers that they are a family. This is a sizeable concession, and may, in time, lead to forgiveness.

“I don’t feel guilty about fighting with him on Friday,” Detective Beckett adds.

“Why not?”

“I’m allowed to say no. That’s all I was doing. Saying no. I don’t need to feel guilty about that. It’s not the same as leaving him to drown.”

“No. Indeed it is not. However, you appear to have missed out one aspect of this complex issue.”

Detective Beckett raises an eyebrow at him. “Oh?” she says. Dr Burke notes her considerably more forceful demeanour and tone since he had admitted to attending the Racquet Club, and concludes with perfect accuracy that he is finally seeing the day-to-day Detective Beckett. Her outstanding professional reputation is thereby set in its proper context. Mr Castle’s immediate attraction is also explained fully. Of course, Dr Burke is entirely unintimidated by this change.

“You have not mentioned the need for you to forgive yourself,” he states.

Detective Beckett regards him coolly. Dr Burke regards her equally coolly.

“No,” she says eventually.

“Mm?”

“I already said it. If I come to terms with my actions, then it’s nobody’s business but mine.”

“But until you have come to terms with your actions, will you have forgiven yourself?”

Detective Beckett is stymied. There is a protracted silence. “No,” she growls.

“So, how do you consider that you will forgive yourself?”
There is another protracted silence. Dr Burke calculates that at this stage of the session, silence has outweighed conversation. This does not concern him, as, in this session, silence denotes thought, not resistance or refusal to engage. Such an improvement from the early sessions. He congratulates himself on the efficacy of his methods, and waits with exemplary patience until Detective Beckett should have considered his question in appropriate depth.

“Unpick the reasons for the guilt and anger,” Detective Beckett says, slowly, “and then understand why they aren’t appropriate – or why they’re no longer appropriate.”

“Indeed. Would you like to start there?” Dr Burke wishes for Detective Beckett to build on Mr Castle’s words, and then to apply them to her own situation in a more measured and logical manner than has yet been apparent.

“We’ve been through this,” Detective Beckett says, with some irritation.

“Indeed,” says Dr Burke once more. Such a useful word, to convey more emphasis than a simple Yes. “We have discussed these concepts and your feelings on more than one occasion. Yet just as you will take statements from different witnesses, and interview the same witness more than once, in order to build up the complete picture of your investigation, so we must revisit your feelings in the light of new concepts, events, and the way in which your relationship with your father might be affected or is being affected by each realisation. Therefore, Detective Beckett, we must return to your feelings and actions from the beginning of your father’s alcoholism. You need not, however, go into the detail of his actions again, but need only concentrate on the emotions which you experienced, and the reasons why you experienced them, at the time.”

“Right back to the beginning?” Detective Beckett says unhappily, and emits a noise which closely resembles ugh.

“Yes.”

Detective Beckett makes a very childish face. Dr Burke does not consider that this improves her looks in any way.

“Okay. I said before that all the arrangements fell on me. I wanted time and space to grieve, and to remember Mom. I didn’t get it. I was angry about that, first. But Dad was so devastated, that it felt unfair to be angry with him, somehow.”

“Mm. Did you, at the time, think that you had a right to be angry with him?”

“I guess… maybe not. Not as angry as I was. He was hurting too. I didn’t want to hurt him more.”

“In fact, you wanted to protect him.”

“Oh. I guess so.” Realisation falls over Detective Beckett’s face. “Even then?”

“Let us digress for a moment. Would you tell me why you chose pre-law for your original major at Stanford?”

Detective Beckett takes a moment of her own to collect her thoughts in order to answer. Dr Burke, of course, has a purpose to his point. He will be very interested to observe the point in time at which Detective Beckett understands that purpose, and expects that much will become clearer to her – it is perfectly pellucid to him, naturally – when she does.

“I – oh.”
That took considerably less time than expected, Dr Burke thinks, pleasantly surprised.

“I wanted to make a difference. I wanted to make justice happen for people.” She looks Dr Burke straight in the eye. “I wanted to protect people. That’s what you want me to see. Right from the beginning.” Misery rolls through her face. “That’s what Mom did. She got justice for the little guys.” She reasserts some control. “It… I… it was all about protecting people, right from the very start, before any of this.”

“Quite.”

“So…” Detective Beckett drags out, “I was hardwired to protect anyway? Is that what you’re saying?”

Dr Burke wordlessly invites her to answer her own question.

“You are.” Dr Burke waits for the rest of Detective Beckett’s deductions to arrive. “Okay… so if I was already inclined to be protective, it got more so?”

“Yes. There is a well-researched line of thought which suggests quite strongly that under conditions of severe stress, such as you experienced, the individual will default to actions which correspond to their natural mode of operation. In your case, you were decisive – you have already told me this – and you were also protective. Tell me, when you are solving homicides, what is your motivation?”

“Justice,” Detective Beckett says without hesitation. “Giving those left behind justice and closure.”

“And how do you behave when the case is more than usually stressful?”

Detective Beckett looks a touch uncomfortable. “I take charge,” she says, with a rim of colour to her cheekbones. “Make things happen.”

Dr Burke had thought as much. He is quite content to find himself correct, as usual. “What do you deduce from this conversation?”

“Mom’s death” – Dr Burke notices that she does not say murder – “was stressful. So when Dad fell apart, that made it even more stressful, and I just… well, took charge. It all fitted. Taking charge and not yelling at Dad protected him, too.”

“Very good. Now, consider your feelings of anger in the light of that.”

“Um… I guess I felt that if I was angry with him I wasn’t protecting him?”

Detective Beckett sounds rather doubtful of her conclusions. However, they are entirely accurate.

“That would not be an unreasonable conclusion,” Dr Burke says mildly. “Then, if that were the case…” he stops, and allows his cessation to invite Detective Beckett to continue.

“If,” she says slowly, considering each word, “I felt I wasn’t protecting him, and – like you said – I was defaulting to being protective, then… I might feel guilty because I wasn’t protecting him?”

“Indeed so.” Dr Burke looks at the clock. “We have only a few moments left. We can continue, if you wish, but we have made considerable progress this evening and I think it might be more helpful if you had some time to consider these realisations and conclusions before we do. In any event, I shall see you tomorrow at eight, when it will be your turn to interview me.” Dr Burke smiles, rather forcibly. “I am sure that will prove most interesting for both of us.”
Beckett goes home, still thoughtfully. On arriving, she fills the kettle and puts two mugs out: French press at the ready. Not more than ten minutes later, the door sounds and, as expected, Castle arrives. She looks up, smiles happily, and hugs him. Or is hugged. Or something.

“Coffee?” she asks, into his shoulder.

“Yes, please.”

Castle pads after Beckett to the kitchen, noting that her walk is confident, her posture comfortable, and the atmosphere calm. Clearly tonight’s session has not been distressing, or has not been significantly upsetting.

Once they’re settled down, Beckett grins widely. “Guess what?”

“What?”

“No, you have to guess. But you’ll never guess this.”

“So why ask?”

“Because even your most insane theory won’t guess this one. C’mon. Guess.”

Castle scrutinises Beckett’s widely grinning face, and considers. “Dr Burke is going to write a sloppy romance novel in an effort to compete with me.”

“Nope. Egotistical much?”

“I am a best-selling writer. Dr Burke is a psychiatrist.”

“Guess again.”

“You saw a UFO on the way home? No – Dr Burke saw a UFO.”

“Nope.” Beckett laughs. “But you’d never forgive me if I did and you didn’t. Last chance.”

“O’Leary turned into a Bigfoot and terrorised New York?”

“No. Though those are all spectacularly insane theories.” She pauses, Castle harrumphs, and waits hopefully.

“C’mon, Beckett. Tell me.”

“Tomorrow morning, at eight” – Castle mutters darkly – “we are interviewing a witness.”

“Uh? So? Why is this relevant? That’s not worthy of one of my brilliant inspirational theories.”

“Because our witness is Dr Burke.”

Castle spits his coffee all over his shirt, the table, and his hand, and then chokes. “What? We’re interviewing Burke?” He stops choking and starts to laugh. “You’re kidding. You have got to be kidding me. What’s Burke got to do with our victim?”

“Burke attends the club, and is coached by one of the others. Jace, to be precise. I think he must go regularly.” Castle makes a disbelieving noise. “Anyway, we could use some up to date information on how the club operates, and some low-down on Jace. It might be interesting to know if Burke wanted to swap to our boy, or if our boy approached him. And if nothing else” – she smirks evilly
“it’ll be nice to have him on the end of my questions rather than vice versa.”

“Oh, yes. I don’t even have to pay to watch the show.”

“No. You’re going to be part of it. Don’t you want to play?”

“Yes,” Castle says, in a deep, velvet, growly baritone. “But I want to play with you now. You’ve been toying with me.”

“Towering? You don’t look much like a toy to me.” She slips a hand around his back, untucking his shirt and stroking the skin beneath. “If you are a toy, there’s no way to replace the batteries,” she snickers.

“I don’t need batteries,” Castle rasps, in a gravelly tone that leaves her skin prickling. “I just need you.” He falls upon her, ravenously.
Beckett is perfectly happy for Castle to raid and ravage as he pleases, but arousing as that is, she wants to play too. She loves his assertive blend of sexuality, but she’s feeling mischievous and she’s just a little inclined to show him that sheer strength isn’t the only game in town. Sneakiness is just as useful. Now if she could simply pull her mind out from the fog of excitement for long enough to work out the angles…

She twists, tugs his arm out from under him and flips them so that she’s on top, smirking down at his surprised face, and trapping both his hands by his head. He gives her plaintive puppy dog eyes.

“What was that for?” he asks, aggrieved.

“I felt like it,” Beckett says lightly.

Castle’s plaintive look sublimates faster than dry ice under a spotlight, replaced by wicked male intent.

“Did you?”

Possibly taking action that could be seen as a challenge was not the cleverest thing Beckett could have done this evening. On the other hand, maybe it was. Her top appears to have mysteriously vanished. She appears to be sitting astride Castle, which is producing delightful pressure in some very sensitive areas. Shortly she is not sitting astride Castle. She is sprawled on top of him, and her pants have mysteriously vanished too.

“You’re still on top,” he drawls dangerously. “Just what you wanted.”

She might be on top of him, but it is entirely unreasonable that he escaped her grip so easily and that he’s managed to undress her one-handed because she’s the one whose hands are now caught. Castle is an overgrown bully. And for someone who says he doesn’t spar in case he damages his fingers (though she’d be deeply upset if he damaged his fingers: she very much enjoys his fingers), he’s suspiciously good at self-defence and Beckett-wrangling.

“You seem to have lost rather a lot of clothes, though,” he adds. His hand roams over the skin which had previously been covered by clothes. Then it roams over the lower curves that are still just about covered by thin silk, pressing gently: moulding and palming. The delightful pressure is still there. “I like you like this.”

“Mmm?”

“Mostly not-dressed, and curved against me.” He moves slightly. “Though I like you even better under me.” He flips them without any effort at all, and without spilling them off the couch. Beckett pouts.

“That’s not fair,” she says, looking up at him.
“I thought it was. Now I’m on top.”

“You think?”

Castle shifts, and settles hard weight insinuatingly between her thighs. Beckett draws her lip through her teeth, and then laves her tongue across the sting. His eyes flare hot and dark at the provocative gesture.

“I don’t think, I know.” He settles a little more weight on her. “You’re stuck.” She nibbles her lip again. Castle dips his head and kisses it better. She nips at his lip – and it all explodes in a hurry. He falls off the couch on to his feet, hauls her up and then sweeps her up into his arms, hustles to the bedroom and drops her on the bed, flicks his pants off in one swift, determined movement and falls over her, shirt still on.

“You’re still stuck,” he says lazily. “Stuck with me.”

Beneath him, Beckett blinks. That’s another casual assumption of their permanence. He’s doing that – by accident? By design? – more and more. She likes it. It gives her reassurance and enfolds her in strength.

And that piece of very un-Beckett sappiness over, she reaches up, hauls his head down, kisses him passionately, and takes full advantage of his instant, instinctive response to remove his shirt, embark on his boxers, and reduce him to raw physical masculinity with no thought involved at all.

“Mine,” she murmurs sleepy into his shoulder, and holds him tightly. He is, of course, cuddling her. Right from the very start Castle has always wanted to cuddle, afterwards.

“My too,” he replies, and kisses her hair. There is quiet contentment for a time.

Castle is reluctantly dressing to leave, watched by Beckett, who is unashamedly surveying him with an appreciative gaze.

“So I’ll see you just before eight, at Dr Burke’s office.” The appreciative gaze has turned to the hunter’s long-distance stare. “This is going to be fun.”

“You want revenge,” Castle grins.

“I want evidence. Facts. Much as I’d like it if he was involved, I don’t think he is. So I get the benefit of his thinking without all the pain. And I get to grill him.”

Castle prowls back to the bed and takes her mouth in farewell. His bad-ass Beckett is going to enjoy herself tomorrow, and so is he.

At two precise minutes before eight, Castle arrives at Dr Burke’s offices and is entirely unsurprised to find Beckett already there. He hands her the cup of coffee, and just as normal, at any early morning meeting, she takes a long draining draught and switches on.

“Let’s do this,” she grins. Castle’s answering grin has fewer fangs but just as much amusement. Neither grin fades at all until they are entering Dr Burke’s room.

“Good morning, Detective Beckett, Mr Castle.”

“Good morning,” Detective Beckett says formally. Dr Burke observes that she is wholly composed, and exhibiting a considerable aura of command presence. She is, in fact, quite
consciously in control of the room and the meeting. Dr Burke admires the shift of personality, and notes that this is, as he had discussed with her, her natural mode of operation.

“Hey,” Mr Castle says. Dr Burke notes with interest that he is positioned slightly behind Detective Beckett: in a supporting role, not the guardian placement which has been displayed in all of their other meetings. It appears that in a professional context the relationships between Mr Castle and Detective Beckett are on a very different footing, in which she is the leader and motivating force, and Mr Castle follows. In non-professional contexts, that is, if not entirely reversed, certainly substantially altered. How interesting. Mr Castle’s distressing informality, however, is wholly unaltered. How disappointing.

“Please sit down.”

“Thank you. Dr Burke, you told me yesterday that you attend the Manhattan Central Racquet Club, and that your coach is Jace Atkiss. You have said that you will assist us in our investigations and have agreed to answer questions. Correct?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Could you tell us about how the club operates, please, and how you use it?”

Dr Burke would have liked to ask Detective Beckett a number of questions about the case, starting with who the unfortunate victim might be, but he reminds himself sternly that he does not appreciate amateurs questioning his methods, and therefore he must extend the same courtesy to others.

“I attend once a week, early in the morning. It is usually quite quiet at that time. I have a two hour session. Usually my lesson is on a Thursday, from seven until nine.”

“Do you always use the same coach?”

“Yes, if possible. I find that familiarity with my strengths and weaknesses improves the efficiency of the lesson for both of us. If Jace were absent for any reason, I would, of course, request an alternative.”

“How do you book?”

“I arrange the lessons at the earliest possible time. I normally block book for the following three months.”

“And when you first joined?”

“I was given a selection of possible coaches, and offered a trial with each. I tried out four, and found that Jace was the most compatible.”

“Thank you. Are you a good tennis player?”

Dr Burke is relatively proficient. He is invariably in the top quartile of the competitions for his age group, although he rarely wins. If he were to play more often, he expects that he would win more often.

“Reasonably,” he admits, and explains.

“So you do quite well,” Detective Beckett says. So far, her questioning has been logical and simple. Mr Castle has not said anything, but his assessing gaze has told its own tale. Detective
Beckett has not so much as glanced at Mr Castle: her entire attention has been focused on Dr Burke. The scrutiny is intense, but not hostile.

“How do the coaches interact?”

Dr Burke remembers that Detective Beckett had said that it was one of Jace’s colleagues who had died. It must, therefore, be another coach, or she would not be asking about their interactions.

“I have only seen them together rarely. Jace appeared to be friendly with the others: he exchanged greetings. In the locker room, they compared notes, and often they would talk about competitions. I did not observe any conflicts, except once.”

“Once? When was that?”

“The week before last, after my session on Thursday morning.”

“So that would be around 8.45 a.m.?”

“Indeed. Jace was speaking to Bryan. They were both quite emotional.”

“They were upset, or angry?”

“Angry. However, not with each other. It seemed that they were angry with one Vance, whom I assumed to be another coach. It appeared to me that they believed that Vance was attempting to take away their clients.”

“Why did that get them angry?”

“I believe that the coaches are remunerated based on the numbers of clients which they teach.”

“I think that’s right,” Mr Castle says. “Vance told me that he was glad I’d turned up because he had lost a couple lately, and he could do with the replacement income.”

Dr Burke manages not to splutter. Mr Castle is a member of the Manhattan Central Club?”

“That was a year ago, and temporary, Castle. You can’t have done much for his ongoing income.” Mr Castle smirks. Dr Burke merely experiences a feeling of intense relief. The notion that he might encounter Mr Castle during his tennis lessons is really quite unpleasant. Detective Beckett is pinning Mr Castle with a glare. “But we’ll talk about why you couldn’t tell us that yesterday, along with anything else you know. Don’t tell me you didn’t grill Vance like a burger.”

“It’s research, Beckett. Everything’s useful.”

Dr Burke coughs. Detective Beckett refocuses, immediately.

“Did Vance ever approach you to change coach?”

“No, never.”

“What were Jace and Bryan saying about Vance?”

Dr Burke casts his mind back to the scene, and visualises it with precision. He had been towards the back of the locker room, and not visible.

“It is probable that neither man could see me. I was in a secluded corner. I dislike changing in full view. They were quite near the door. Jace said that he thought that Vance had targeted several of
his female clients. Bryan agreed that he had lost clients, and added that he had thought the same. They were exercised by this apparent strategy, directed at both of them, and then as they discussed it further, fuelled each other’s anger. By the time they left, they were both quite determined to confront Vance at the earliest opportunity and to – I quote – teach him a lesson.”

Dr Burke looks distressedly at Detective Beckett. “I assumed that to be the natural annoyance of younger, fit men. I see from your expression that this Vance is the victim. I do hope that neither Jace or Bryan proves to be the perpetrator.”

“It’s far too early to say. I won’t be telling them that I’ve spoken to you, though.” Detective Beckett smiles, very professionally. “Is there anything else you can think of?” Dr Burke considers that to sound as much like a threat as a request for further information.

“No. If something should occur to me, I will let you know. I presume I should advise you at once if that happens?”

“Yes, please. We may need to ask you further questions, but that’s it for now. Thank you for your time, Dr Burke.”

“You are welcome.”

Dr Burke courteously rises to escort Detective Beckett and Mr Castle out, and on returning to his office prepares a pot of tea with some despatch. He feels the need to ingest a revivifier, and is deeply relieved that he has done nothing of which to be in the least ashamed, still less anything which might be criminal. Although Detective Beckett has been wholly professional, and had not shown in one single glance or gesture that she was deeply pleased to be on the other side of the table (Dr Burke is, however, quite certain that she was), nor had she adopted a hostile approach, it had still been a considerably unnerving experience. He had thought that Detective Beckett would be a ferocious interrogator. He is now quite convinced of it.

Of course, Dr Burke thinks as he drinks his delicate tea, he should be extremely proud of himself. If that is Detective Beckett’s normal demeanour and behaviour, it is quite extraordinary that he has brought her as far through her treatment as he has. It is, in fact, quite extraordinary that she has accepted his methods. If she had not been so very much in need of assistance, he doubts that it would ever have happened.

“Spill. Everything you can remember and everything you know about the Central Club and their coaches. Ryan will interrogate you.”

Ooops. Beckett is genuinely annoyed with him. “Won’t you?”

“No. You don’t deserve a treat at all. You’ve been following me around for nine months and it didn’t occur to you that we might want to know that?”

“Um… I wasn’t thinking straight after you” –

“Not an excuse.”

“Yes it is. You fried my brains.”

Beckett makes an indeterminately furious noise, and orders Ryan to rip everything Castle knows out of his head, stat. If his eyeballs and brains leave his head at the same time, that’s okay, apparently. It’s not okay with Castle, but saying so won’t improve his chances of kisses later on. Although losing eyeballs and brains wouldn’t either… On balance, it might be an idea to stay very
quiet, until Beckett is happier.

There is a happily predatory noise from Beckett’s desk as Ryan runs through everything Castle can remember.

“Finally!” she emits. “Got my warrant. Right. Finish up, Ryan, you’re taking longer than a mute monkey to get anything out of Castle. I can’t imagine he’s suddenly lost his voice, so what’s the hold up?”

“Nothing. ‘Cept Castle can’t stop talking.”

Castle squawks indignantly. “You said tell me everything. So I did.”

“I didn’t need to know the brand of shower gel you used, or your hair products.”

“I see,” Beckett says slowly. “Insolent obedience, as practised by grade-schoolers everywhere?”

Castle grins. “Just trying to do what you told me, Beckett. You’re always complaining I don’t do what you tell me, and now you’re complaining when I do. What’s a man supposed to do?” In the course of three sentences, he’s standing so that Ryan can’t see his face, which is sporting an interestingly possessive and hot expression, swiftly wiped. He knows what he’s supposed to do. It might not be what Beckett thinks he’s supposed to do, but that’s her problem. Well, it won’t be a problem. It never is.

They get down to the cruiser before Castle opens his mouth again. “Where are we going?”

“Back to the club, to get footage, client lists, and anything else I want. Is there anything else I should know before we get there?”

“Not about the case,” he says. Beckett fixes him with an interrogative stare. “One other thing, though.”

“What?”

“You’re unbelievably hot when you’re angry with me.” He leans over and kisses her briefly, but deeply. Beckett splutters, and can’t find a single word to retaliate. Castle slides into the passenger side, and smirks happily all the way to the Central Club. Beckett’s tide of dark mutterings bothers him not at all.

“Get your manager, please,” Beckett says to the same receptionist as last time. This time, she doesn’t bother giving Castle the once-over or indeed the come-on. She cringes slightly, and obeys.

“Max,” Beckett states. He nods. There’s more than a hint of a cower, too. “I have a warrant.”

Max slumps. “Okay.”

“I want everything on this warrant as fast as you can.”


“Okay.”

“We’ll wait. While we’re waiting, I’d like to talk to Jace or Bryan. Are they here?”

“Jace is. He’s on break. Bryan’s coaching.”
“I want to see him.” Beckett is implacable.

“But…”

“Now. Or I can take him downtown, which will really screw with your schedule.”

“Okay,” Max wails.

Jace appears within two minutes. He’s tall, ripped, and has artfully messy blond hair which Beckett thinks has been equally artfully highlighted.

“Jace Atkiss?”

“Yes,” he smiles. It’s very charming. Jace is clearly very aware of just how attractive he is. Unfortunately, Beckett is immune to practised charm. She even manages to resist Castle’s very sincere charm, some of the time. Jace needs a few lessons before he manages the mind-and-body melting effect which Castle produces without effort on every woman (and probably a few men) he meets, from baby Callie to, no doubt, great-grandmothers.

Beckett looks very coolly at Jace, who stops preening, somewhat confused by the failure of his studied sexuality. “We’re investigating the murder of Vance Lingham.”

Jace goes white. Now, is that horrified surprise or horrified terror of being caught?

“We have a warrant for all the camera footage, and the client lists. So, anything you wanna tell me before I start asking questions?”

Jace looks utterly terrified. Beckett smiles like a stiletto and watches him crumble in front of her.

“I hated Vance,” he says. “He came on like he was Roger Federer and the rest of us were public court players.”

Beckett recalls where Lingham had been found. Hmmm. Was that a signal, or making an example of him? She abruptly decides to leave alibi questions until later, when they’ve reviewed footage.

“He was no better than any of us. He wasn’t that great of a player, and he didn’t put in the hours. We all know why that was, though.”

“Mm?”

“He was doing escort work on the side. Afternoon tea parties, lunches, that sort of thing.”

Castle pokes Beckett’s foot. She makes a not-now gesture without even looking at him. She remembers what Venetia had said too.

“You were overheard bitching about him to Bryan, last week,” she says.

“Damn right I was. He was trying to poach every woman from twenty to eighty from my list. Same for Bryan. So I went to tell him to stay the hell away from my clients or I’d have him banned.”

“When was that?”

“Saturday. I do daytimes, and he only did evenings. We only overlapped on a Saturday.”

“Hm,” says Beckett, an edge to her sound. “You sure you weren’t angry because he was taking your chance of escort work? Banned from where, and by whom?”

“When do you finish?”

“Four,” he says hopelessly.

“I’ll expect you at the Twelfth Precinct at four-thirty. If you don’t show, I’ll have you brought in.”

“I’ll show. Don’t do that. I’d be fired.”


“Right. Let’s get Bryan in here.” The knife blade of her smile glints.
Pretty boys and pretty girls

Bryan is also tall and ripped, but dark-haired and dark-eyed. Lingham had been pretty good-looking too. Beckett spots a theme, and makes a mental note to run through the photos of all the coaches. She’ll try this ever-more-likely theory out on Castle, when they’re on the way back.

“Vance Lingham was murdered Sunday,” she says baldly.

“What?” Bryan is as white as Jace had been. “That’s… You don’t suspect me? It wasn’t me. I wasn’t here on Sunday.”

Beckett doesn’t mention where Vance had been found.

“I know you were angry with him for poaching clients.”

“How…” Beckett simply holds his eyes. “Yeah, but I wouldn’t kill him for it.”

“Where were you Sunday?” Beckett’s mixing it up. Bryan will tell Jace that he was asked for his alibi, and Jace will wonder why he wasn’t. He’ll be even more nervous then.

Bryan acquires a hunted expression: his eyes flickering round the small office. He doesn’t find any help there. Beckett allows the tense, terrifying silence to stretch out, projecting intimidation, until the sweat beads on Bryan’s brow.

“Where were you?” she grates. Bryan cringes. His fingers are shaking.

“I was with a friend.”

“Name.” It’s an order.

“Lita.”

“Full name. Address. Number. We’ll be talking to her.”

“You can’t.”

Beckett pins him to the chair with her glare.

“I can.”

“No, you can’t. Her husband” –

“Let’s talk about that,” Beckett says coldly, concealing her triumph that her theory is growing roots.

“She’s married. She doesn’t want her husband to know.”

“We’ll be discreet.”

Bryan spills. Under Beckett’s supervision, he calls Lita, after which Beckett requests her to present herself at the Twelfth as soon as possible, on pain of being picked up. Which, Beckett points out, would not be discreet.

Now that she’s sown the seeds of divide and conquer between Bryan and Jace, it’s time to get back
to the bullpen. Bryan is required to attend at the precinct at four-thirty as well. Ryan and Espo can take one, she and Castle will take the other. Judging by this morning, they will both be utterly terrified by then, and they’ll rat on each other as fast as they can.

“I have a theory,” she says mischievously as they get into the car.

“That’s my line!”

“So copyright it. I still have a theory.”

“It’s my job to come up with theories. You’re making me redundant, Beckett. What will I do if I’m not producing theories?”

“Well, you might write a bit more,” she says, “or you might make me more coffee, or” – her hand slithers over his knee – “you might just be useful in lots of other ways.” Her fingers flicker and her hand pulls away. “Though I don’t think you’ll stop throwing out insane theories just because I’ve thought up one theory of my own.”

Castle pouts.

“Don’t you want to hear my theory?” Beckett asks.

“Guess so,” he grumps.

“I think that all of those coaches were offering benefits on the side.” She smirks.

Castle gasps, and his eyes light up. “Beckett, that’s almost worthy of my theories.”

“Except that I have some grounds for mine.”

“Aww, that’s not how it works. Don’t spoil your theory with logic and facts.” He humphs. “I thought I was finally rubbing off on you.”

“Nope.” He opens his mouth. “Shut up, Castle.” He closes it on a very inappropriate remark.

“You think a high end tennis club was running an escort ring?”

“It’s the logical conclusion if they were all doing it. Look at them. All three men were gorgeous.” Castle humphs again. “Stop that. Fishing for compliments isn’t polite. I bet when we find the rest of their photos we’ll find that all the coaches were seriously pretty. We’ll need to talk to all of them.”

By the time they’ve parked at the Twelfth and reached the bullpen, footage from the club’s CCTV has reached Ryan, client lists have reached Espo, and everyone is very, very keen on Beckett’s theory. Possibly this is because Ryan and Espo call dibs on interviewing all the female coaches, as soon as they get a glimpse of the photos.

At four-thirty, Jace and Bryan turn up. Together. Beckett discerns that they have talked to each other, and is very satisfied that her plan has worked.

“Ryan, Espo, you take Bryan. Push him hard about who was running this ring.” The boys smile nastily. “We’ll take Jace. Starting with finding out what his alibi was.”

Jace, having been left to consider the forbidding walls of Interrogation One for a few moments, is not a happy gym bunny at all. In fact, he’s in just the sort of nervous, scared state that Beckett likes her victims – whoops, witnesses or suspects: he’s both – to be in.
“I wasn’t there on Sunday,” he starts, before they’ve even sat down. “I wasn’t!”

“You weren’t where?”

“I wasn’t at the club. I was with Manda.”

Manda is on the client list. Manda is an extremely beautiful twenty-something married to a seventy-something whose main advantage is that he is very rich. Manda lives in the East Village. The client list had been very comprehensive. Lita, on the other hand, had lived in Greenwich Village. Still very plausible, but not as convenient.

“Really?”

“Yes. She wanted a plus-one for a social event. So she booked me.”

“Booked you? I thought you were a tennis coach.”

Jace turns even whiter. Clearly he hadn’t meant to admit that. Beckett goes for the jugular.

“So, Jace, you were running a little game on the side, you and Bryan? Escort services? Bored women? Did Vance want in on your little game, or was he better at it than you? Is that why you killed him? Lost your temper because he was better with the girls?” She’s taunting. “He was a little older. More experienced. Able to show them a better time. You’re still a bit young. Stamina, but maybe not the skill?”

“I’m fucking good at it!” Jace explodes. “I never had any problems till that bastard started on my clients. He wasn’t allowed to poach. That was the rules. Everyone has their favourites. He wasn’t even part of it. Like he was such a frigging saint. No-one’s that honest.”

Once started, Jace can’t stop. It all comes pouring out. What does not come pouring out, unfortunately, is anything at all that might break his alibi, or Bryan’s. They’ll have to find a new way round that. They’ll also have to find out what was really going on, because on comparing notes with Ryan and Espo, who had got much the same story from Bryan by taking a man-to-man God-I-wish-I-got-that-many-hot-women route, it’s fairly clear that neither Jace or Bryan could have been running the ring. It’s also fairly clear that most of the other coaches were in on it. Someone has been making a hell of a lot of money out of this.

They set up all the bank account searches, now that they’ve got hard evidence to ask for them, and phone record requests, and leave that to the overnight techs. All that done, they fall out of the precinct and disperse to their various homes. It is, after all, well after nine.

“Ride home, Castle?”

“Sure.” He hops into the cruiser. Today’s been Beckett at her full-on bad-ass, hard-ass best. “Dinner first?” he asks as the door shuts.

“Okay. Takeout?”

“Thai.” He taps, and orders.

“Thanks.” She yawns widely, and then smiles viciously. “This one’s all breaking open, isn’t it? Should be done tomorrow.”

“It better be. Remember we’re all going out for dinner?”
From the sudden slump of her shoulders, Castle infers that Beckett had forgotten in the thrill of chasing down a nice new murderer.

“It’ll be okay,” he reassures. “No-one’s told Mother, and Alexis is keen to see you. She likes you. She might grill you about work, but she won’t be intrusive.”

“I’ve still got to see her with you, though. How it should be.”

“We can postpone.”

“No,” Beckett says very quickly. “No postponements. I can do this. I just forgot about it. I’ll be fine.”

“Okay.” He takes her hand as they go up to her apartment. The takeout is hard upon their heels, which is convenient. He’s hungry.

So, it seems, is Beckett, who is demolishing her meal in short order and with perfect decorum, even with chopsticks. Far too quickly dinner is done, though it does give him the opportunity to put his arm round her and snuggle her in.

“Time I went to bed.”

“Really?”

“We’ll be starting early tomorrow.”

“I guess I’d better kiss you goodnight, then.”

“Guess so,” she murmurs, and turns her face up for him to land on her lips: as soft as a butterfly settling, because she’s tired and he has to go and all of it needs to stay lightly loving and accepting of reality.

But tomorrow night they will take another step – she will take another step – towards the future they’ve only talked about in hints and subtext and mistaken words and hopes. He’s sure she sees and wants it too, but he can’t hurry it, can’t push the pace. She has to heal in her time, not in his, but if he could he’d wave a wand and seal each wound and free her to come forward to him.

He lifts away, and puts his coat on. She rises to walk him the few steps to the door, softly touching his hand, and then rises to her toes to kiss him goodbye.

“Till tomorrow, love,” he murmurs.

“Love you too.”

By lunchtime all the evidential ducks are neatly in a row.

“Shall we?” Beckett extends a crooked arm to Castle, with a wicked smile.

“My pleasure, Detective.”

“Why can’t we go get him?” Ryan complains.

“My idea, my theory, my suspect. I’m getting him.” She swings off to the elevator, happy ferocity in every movement. Castle ambles after her.
“Max Warnam, you are under arrest for the murder of Vance Lingham.”

He takes off like a scalded cat, right into Castle, who *oofs* as the breath flies out of him but has the instinctive sense to smother him in a bear hug. By the time Max has realised, Beckett’s got the cuffs on him.

“How did you do it, Max?”

“How?”

His small eyes run around the room, and then run over Beckett, obviously assessing her for compliance with his looks policy. She stares back icily.

“You killed Vance Lingham. Why?”

“Prove it.”

“Oh, that’s no trouble. We’ve found your gun, matched the ballistics, and tied up the payments you were making to him from your account to his. We’ve even got the calls that he made to you, and you to him. We’ve got you wrapped up like a parcel, Max: there’s no need for you to confess, because you’re going down for Murder One anyway. I was just interested, but it doesn’t make any difference.”

She stands up, and moves to the door. “Have a nice life in prison, Max.”

“I was provoked!”

“Oh?” Beckett turns back slightly. “How?”

“He was blackmailing me. Threatened to tell the club owners if I didn’t pay him off. I lost my temper and shot him. See? Provocation.”

“Thanks for the confession. It won’t shorten your sentence, though. You lured him down to the Seward Park tennis courts, and then shot him. That’s not provocation” –

“It’s premeditation,” Castle says. “You’re all washed up, Max.”

They leave on his desperately pleading excuses.

“All wrapped up,” Beckett says with satisfaction.

“Well done, Detective.”

“Sir.”

“Nicely in time for shift end, too. The paperwork will wait till tomorrow. Off you go. Take an early exit.”

“Sir.”

Montgomery oozes off, radiating smugness. Beckett, who likes paperwork as little as anyone, takes instant and full advantage of the permission and has her desk cleared in seconds flat.

“Let’s go, before anything else happens.” She’s already hammering the call button for the elevator.

“Pressing it more doesn’t make it come quicker,” Castle points out.
“Really?” Beckett murmurs, just loud enough for him to hear. “It works on you.”

He nearly kills himself choking. She did not just say that, did she? She did. And the smirking witch is looking at him from the elevator as if he’s turned into a dribbling idiot. Well, she’ll find out that she can’t say things like that and then carry on as if nothing happened.

“Ready for dinner?” she asks, and his plans for revenge of the most enjoyable sort are all destroyed.

“Yes.” He reaches for her hand. Her fingers are cold, and it belatedly occurs to him that her filthily provocative comment was masking her sheer fright at the thought of the approaching meeting. He wraps his own warm palm around her chill, and doesn’t comment, staying in contact all the way to Broome Street.

“See you at seven,” she says briskly.

“Okay.”

Beckett goes home to a scalding shower – she’d like a bath, but she might never emerge from it – to try to infuse warmth into her cold skin and flesh. She is very, very worried about this evening. It’s not only that her father and Castle have been butting heads, though that’s not helpful; it’s that she is completely unsure how she can manage to watch Alexis’s dealings with her father when her own are so very, very different.

She dresses carefully: pretty underwear that is both comfortable and sexy, reminding her that she’s not a teen any more; that she is an independent adult who is not dependent on her father or her father’s approval; and over it a soft shirt that drapes about her with semi-casual navy pants. She leaves her gun and shield locked away safely, and leaves in good time. Her gut writhes unhappily, all the way to Po.

Castle had showered and changed, ensured he was smart but not too formal, assured Alexis that she looked just fine as she was and reminded her that Detective Beckett had suggested this dinner. Alexis is, in fact, quite nervous.

“Grams doesn’t know, does she?” she asks, plaintively.

“No, pumpkin. She doesn’t. Don’t worry.”

Castle himself is far more worried about meeting Jim again. Apology or not, Jim isn’t making anyone’s life easier, and were it not for the fact that Jim’s pig-headedness had directly led to Beckett’s confirmation that he, Castle, came first with her he would still be seriously annoyed with him.

They get a cab over to Po. Castle is sure that he’ll need a drink, and he’s never going to get behind the wheel after that. They’re first there.

Beckett arrives a moment later. Castle stands to greet her, thinks something that amounts to the hell with it, and smudges a kiss across her mouth. It stuns her, which is very pleasing. She sits down a little more heavily than she normally would, without her usual grace. Alexis is regarding him very knowingly, and doesn’t look nervous at any more.

“Hey, Alexis,” Beckett manages, with only a very small wobble on the words.

“Hi, Detective Beckett. Thanks for inviting me.”
“You’re welcome. Have you been here before?”

“Oh yes. We used to come here when I was small.”

“I don’t think the menu’s the same, though,” Castle interjects.

“I hope not,” Alexis says. “I don’t want alphabet spaghetti now.”

Conversation continues for a few moments, largely carried by Castle, who skates over any awkwardness. Shortly Jim arrives, a little out of breath and full of apologies.

“Sorry, Katie. I just couldn’t get a client off the phone.”

“Sounds like my agent,” Castle says dryly. “She never gets off the phone either.”

“That’s because you don’t listen till she’s said it ten times.”

Castle raises brows mildly disapprovingly at Alexis. “Sorry, Dad,” she mumbles. Beckett and her father exchange a look. It appears to Castle that a similar interaction may have been part of the Beckett household.

They manage to cover the hitches and hesitations by discussion of the menu and drinks, although it’s all terribly, horribly careful: each sentence considered before it’s said. Still, Jim isn’t pushing and he is polite to Castle – though he’s clearly much happier talking to Alexis, who is still grilling him into boot-leather on the subject of law – Beckett is sitting next to Castle and gradually relaxing as her father doesn’t do anything untoward, aided by Castle’s warm palm on her knee and some care on his part not to be too adoringly parental. This time, so far at least, she’s managing to watch her father relate to Alexis and understand that it’s not a replacement for her, not a replacement family. He’s looking at Alexis with detached, amused fondness, but it’s not a depth of emotion that should worry Beckett. Appetisers arrive and everyone digs in.

Beckett becomes aware that, now that her hyper-alertness has diminished, Castle is also rather more wired than normal.

“What’s up?” she murmurs, under the cover of general noise.

“I just can’t help worrying that Mother will show up.”

“How? She can’t call every restaurant in Manhattan hoping to find you: she’d still be on the phone next Christmas.” She pats his knee reassuringly. “Let’s just enjoy dinner. It’s all going okay right now. Don’t jinx it.”

Amazingly, dinner continues to progress well. It couldn’t quite be said that their table exuded relaxed sociability, but it’s sailing on an even emotional keel. Beckett can cope with this. Another step forward. Another major step forward. Their two families have met, and while it’s still uncomfortable to watch Castle with Alexis, it’s not the jagged-edged bite on her soul that it had been four to five months ago. If only they could guarantee Martha’s absence… she might even manage dinner at the loft. Or – or maybe if she primed her dad properly they could have dinner at his next time? She can’t quite stretch her stride far enough to make the next step to be dinner at hers, but the halfway house of her father’s place… that could be an option. She turns her mind back to the conversation.

Castle is surveying matters from the back of his mind and applying considerable analytical ability to what he’s seeing. He’s always been good at people and motivations, when he puts his mind to it, and the last few months have honed his talent to a razor’s edge. He just hopes that he doesn’t cut
himself or anyone else on the sharpness.

He contemplates, grounded by his palm on Beckett’s knee, her hand over his. Alexis and Jim are establishing a fairly good connection: his wonderful daughter genuinely interested in Jim’s profession (at least being an attorney would be safe, if boring) and his bred-in-the-bone support for the Yankees. Conversation is, therefore, light and continuous. Jim is not pushing on any difficult subjects, and so Beckett is almost relaxed, compared with any other time he’s seen her with her father. And his mother has not, like the Wicked Witch, appeared to spoil the party. Castle relaxes, and enjoys his dinner.

Right up till Alexis opens her mouth.

“Detective Beckett, if your mom and dad were both lawyers, why did you want to be a detective?”

There is a half-beat silence. Castle internally curses. Jim’s mouth has tightened. Beckett bites down on her lip, and her hand over Castle’s has gripped hard enough to crush his metacarpals. Alexis looks uncertainly at each adult in turn: knowing she’s mis-stepped, but not at all sure how. Castle is about to divert the subject when Beckett, astonishingly, speaks.

“When I went to Stanford” –

“You were at Stanford? Will you tell me about it?”

“Sometime,” Beckett says quietly, as if it were a promise for the future. “At Stanford, I started in pre-law.”

Castle and Jim stay absolutely silent. Castle turns his palm upward and closes fingers around Beckett’s cold, tense grip.

“At first I thought I wanted to be a lawyer. I didn’t know what sort – Mom was criminal justice, Dad does commercial law.”

“Anti-trust, Katie.”

“Pedant,” she says, automatically and almost affectionately, and her fingers relax a fraction.

“Anyway. After I’ – there’s a tiny hitch – “transferred to NYU” – fortunately Jim doesn’t choose to embellish that with hard truth about why she transferred – “I carried on, but I found I wanted to be out hunting down the criminals, not prosecuting them afterwards. More active involvement.”

“You were always one for direct action, Katie.”

“So I became a cop instead. It was right for me.”


Yeah, Castle thinks, and it totally avoided any difficult subjects. He flicks a surreptitious glance at Jim, who is looking piercingly at his daughter, with a strong underlay of finally I’m starting to hear some of your history. Jim’s expression suddenly changes to a smile.

“Rick, if I were you I really wouldn’t encourage Alexis to become a cop.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s pretty scary to have a daughter who shoots better than me,” Jim says happily.
“Though I do wish I could roll her and her Glock out at difficult negotiations. I’d come out ahead every time. Actually, all I’d need would be her glare.”

“Dad!” Beckett complains.

Jim snickers. “Shall we have dessert?”
“Good evening, darlings.”

“Hi, Grams.”

“Mother.”

“Where have you been?”

“Oh, family dinner,” says Alexis combatively, as Castle watches the abyss open in front of them: why is Alexis picking this fight now? He knows that she’s doing this completely deliberately and now he can’t stop her, or the looming argument. “We’ve been out with Detective Beckett and her dad.”

“How nice, sweetie,” Martha says in a tone which indicates to both Castles that she doesn’t think it nice at all. “You can tell me about it tomorrow. Isn’t it your bedtime? School tomorrow.”

Castle considers the benefits of dematerialising. His mother never worries about domestic matters such as sensible bedtimes. Her words indicate that he is about to be demolished. Well, his mother might think so, but he is not inclined to lie down under her imprecations.

Alexis disappears upstairs. Martha turns to Castle, eyes alight with offended fury.

“Was there a reason you didn’t tell me about the family dinner? Am I not family?”

“Yes, there was. Beckett invited Alexis and me. No-one else. She’s setting the pace of how she deals with all of us. Since you’ve heard the story, or as much of it as you need to, you should understand why.”

Martha is stopped in her tracks by the blunt answer. She resorts to hurt offence and pained looks.

“I understand that she just doesn’t understand what an ordinary family is like, which is hardly surprising given what happened. All the more reason for her to see us all together, surely? It can only help her get back on good terms with her father. As soon as that’s fixed, she’ll be able to come here as often as she likes. Isn’t that what you want?”

“Yes, but you can’t fix it for her. She’s got to do it. She’s taking it slowly because that’s what feels right for her. I told you she was getting professional help, so let it be.”

“Well, if she’s getting professional help, then… It’s not very effective.”

“Mother, just back off. Beckett doesn’t need mothered, analysed or picked at. She certainly doesn’t need you questioning her. She’ll do this in her own time. If I’m happy with that, you’ve no right to be upset. Stop trying to force her to be family. She’s not our family, she’s got her own.”

“She’ll need to get used to us if she’s going to be our family.”

Castle boggles for an instant. “Mother, that’s none of your business.”

“I’m not blind, Richard. You’re head over heels in love with her and if you were sure she felt the same you’d be in Van Cleef’s tomorrow.”

“How I feel or Beckett feels isn’t your business either. But for the sake of this argument, even if
Beckett and I got married tomorrow that still wouldn’t give you any right to force her into putting up with your intrusiveness and meddling. You are not her mother and you’re not going to upset her by trying to be. This discussion is over.”

Martha stalks off, offence in every line of her posture. Castle sighs heavily, and takes himself to bed. Maybe tomorrow she’ll have calmed down.

“Good evening, Detective Beckett. Mr Castle.”

“Hey,” they say in tandem.

Dr Burke observes both closely. There is no evidence of tension, nor of conflict, in Detective Beckett. He recalls, naturally, that there had been a dinner the previous night between Mr Castle and his daughter and Detective Beckett and her father. It appears that the dinner has proceeded without incident. Although Dr Burke had expected such, it is helpful to have his expectations met. Where Detective Beckett is concerned, Dr Burke’s legitimate expectations are just as likely to be confounded as to be met. Most disconcerting.

“Was your dinner satisfactory?”

“Yes,” Detective Beckett replies. “It went well. Even… even when Alexis asked why I was a cop when my parents were both lawyers.”

This is most pleasing. “Before your father arrives, how did you feel on this occasion when seeing Mr Castle with his daughter?”

Detective Beckett casts a quick, uncomfortable glance at Mr Castle, who rumbles comfortingly, “You didn’t shoot either of us…” and smirks.

“It was – bearable. Not comfortable, but it wasn’t like it was at Christmas-time.”

“Very good. That was, I believe, the best that we could hope for. I would not have expected you to be comfortable, and had you said that you were I would not have accepted it as true.”

Castle wonders why Dr Burke couldn’t just say you would have lied. His pomposity, though, makes him an excellent character foil in his, Castle’s, newest book. No-one else talks like that. Quite possibly no-one else in the entire world talks like that. It’ll be original, that’s for sure.

“I think we may count this as a considerable success. Now, you may consolidate your position by maintaining this new status quo, or you may continue taking measured steps forward. Neither is in any way detrimental: which you choose will not affect the ultimate outcome. Many people require a short space of consolidation before continuing.”

“Let’s talk about it when Dad gets here. I have an idea, but it depends on him too.”

Mr Castle regards Detective Beckett very strangely. It appears that this idea has not been discussed with him. However, Detective Beckett remains entirely unstressed and unconcerned. Dr Burke concludes that she has given her idea appropriate consideration. He decides not to spoil her surprise by informing her that he deduces that she wishes to have a further dinner, most probably at her father’s apartment. Besides which, he wishes to observe Mr Castle’s reactions. Mr Castle is infinitesimally less relaxed than he has normally been, and Dr Burke considers that he may have had another argument with his mother. Perhaps a short discussion will be required. It is, after all, necessary to Detective Beckett’s well-being that Mr Castle’s mother should be contained.
“Certainly. Your father, though, has informed me that he is running some twenty minutes behind schedule, owing to a late and urgent client consultation.” Dr Burke has some sympathy for Mr Beckett in this regard, although Dr Burke’s clients are rarely permitted to be so disorganised. Method, discipline and order are essential to the effective practice of psychiatry.

“Are we diverting ourselves with your game tonight?” he enquires.

“I didn’t bring it. I don’t think we need it.”

Dr Burke finds that he is really quite disappointed by that. He had enjoyed Detective Beckett’s game. He had also wished for another chance to win. He conceals both thoughts. He does not wish to be considered childish.

“Mr Castle, you appear to me to be somewhat less relaxed than on prior occasions. Is there anything which you wish to make known before we begin in earnest?”

Mr Castle looks grim, an expression which, unlike his protective anger, sits ill upon his face. “My mother was unhappy that we had dinner without her.”

“I didn’t invite her,” Detective Beckett points out. “That’s not on you.”

“Yeah. Well. I’m not sure she sees it that way. She still wants to play Mom to you.”

“Not happening,” Detective Beckett says with considerable force and authority. Her natural persona is extremely impressive. Dr Burke wonders if there is any situation which, once healed, she would be unable to manage, and concludes that such circumstances would be extraordinarily limited.

“I don’t know why she’s still on this kick. It’s just not like her,” Mr Castle says, rather pitifully. “I told her that if she couldn’t butt out she’d have to move out, and it’s not sinking in at all.”

“Let us all sit down comfortably,” Dr Burke says. “I have pondered the position of Mrs Rodgers, and I have some thoughts which it may be helpful for you to consider.”

Mr Castle raises a rather sceptical pair of eyebrows, but does not express his blatant disbelief. Everyone seats themselves comfortably.

“As I said, I have considered why Mrs Rodgers might wish to act as Detective Beckett’s surrogate mother figure. At first, I thought that it was simply a more overt version of your tendency to wish to act as a saviour figure.” Mr Castle winces slightly. “There is nothing inherently wrong in wishing to help people, Mr Castle, as long as you recognise that in the end it is up to the person whom you wish to save to decide on their actions and their fate. You cannot save those who do not wish to be saved.” Dr Burke smiles reassuringly. Mr Castle, after the unfortunate incident with Detective Beckett some six weeks ago, is very unlikely to make the same mistake again.

“However,” Dr Burke continues smoothly and authoritatively, “I now consider that there is another factor at play. Mr Castle, I believe it possible that your mother is, consciously or subconsciously, extremely nervous that you will require her to live elsewhere.”

“But all she has to do to avoid that is to stop shoving her way in and to leave Beckett alone.”

“Is that entirely true, Mr Castle? I had understood that if you and Detective Beckett were to wish to live together, you would wish your mother to move out.”

“Oh. Yes. Well.”
Dr Burke notes with interest Mr Castle’s flush and Detective Beckett’s heightened colour. He notes with more interest still that this is not a surprise to Detective Beckett.

“Based on your statements to your mother, she must now be aware that her continued tenure in your home is potentially limited. In brief, this scares her. I believe that it is entirely possible that she is trying to become sufficiently significant in Detective Beckett’s life that – so she believes – Detective Beckett would insist that she were allowed to stay. I also believe that your mother is entirely mistaken in that belief,” he says over the commotion his words have caused. “It is quite unusual for it to be the case that living with one’s parents-in-law, or potential parents-in-law, is harmonious.”

He pauses, until Mr Castle should have absorbed this idea.

“But I’d pay for it all,” Mr Castle says.

“Indeed. However, could you tell me for how long your mother has resided with you?”

“Um… about thirteen years.”

“That is quite a long time. In addition, your mother’s recent theatrical career has been only moderately successful, and it has been some time since she had a ‘hit’.” Dr Burke enunciates the quotation marks around the slang word. “In that time, you have consistently been extremely successful. It is entirely possible that she subconsciously feels that, were she to move out, she would lose the aura of success and publicity which naturally surrounds her when she is publicly known to be strongly associated with you.”

There is silence. Mr Castle appears bewildered. Detective Beckett appears thoughtful.

“In short, Mr Castle, your mother believes that her chances of regaining professional success will be much higher if she resides with you. She believes that your fame will attach to her.”

“Urg,” Mr Castle emits. Such a noise is entirely pointless.

“Take time to think about this concept, please. I expect that some reflection will be required.”

There is a knock on the door, and Mr Beckett enters.

“Sorry, everyone. Client crisis.”

“That’s okay, Dad. We’ve been dealing with Castle’s mother.”

Mr Beckett is obviously relieved by that. However, he makes no move to sit down.

“Er… Rick, before we start could I have a word?”

“Sure.”

“You may use the room next door, if you wish,” Dr Burke says. “We shall remain here.”

“Thanks.”

The two men take their leave. Dr Burke and Detective Beckett watch as the door closes behind them.

“I guess that’s Dad making amends to Castle,” Detective Beckett notes.
“I expect that it is. That must be something of a relief?”

“I don’t want Dad and Castle butting heads, but Castle knows which side I’m on. His.”

“I had expected that. I informed your father that if he forced you to choose, your choice would be Mr Castle.” Dr Burke smiles paternally. “I am very rarely wrong in such matters.” Detective Beckett forces herself not to make the scathing comment which Dr Burke is certain is on the tip of her tongue. A peaceful silence falls as they wait for Mr Castle and Mr Beckett to return.”

“Rick…”

“Mm?”

“I didn’t get a chance to talk to you alone last night. Erm… I’m sorry for what I’ve been like. I know you’re good for Katie. It’s just… you know all about what’s happened and I’m still in the dark and I really wish it had been different. Hearing you know better than me what would work – it just caught the raw edge and I got mad.”

“You already apologised. You don’t need to again.”

“Yes, but last night… she actually opened up a tiny bit. Makes me think that if I just wait, I’ll hear about it all. It might take a while…”

“Beckett’s not exactly chatty.”

Jim is diverted. “Why do you two call each other by your surnames? It’s really odd to hear.”

“Cop-speak,” Castle says.

“Huh?”

“They all call each other by their surnames. So when I went in to shadow them, that’s all I heard. And to write well it has to sound real, so I didn’t try to call her or any of the others anything else, and I got into the habit. She never called me anything else. I’m not sure she’s used my first name, ever.”

“I hope she’ll manage it for one day,” Jim says very softly to himself. “Just on one day.”

Castle flicks him a very penetrating glance and pretends not to have heard. That sounded very like Jim imagining one very particular occasion, and more, giving his blessing.

“I get it,” he says instead. “I’d be devastated if Alexis couldn’t or wouldn’t talk to me.”

“Yeah. I shouldn’t have got mad with you. I should have been happy that you’ve been there to stand with her. She won’t need it often – her mother never did, and she’s Johanna all over again – but when she does…” He trails off. “Anyway. I wanted to clear the air.”

Castle extends his hand. “It’s cleared. I’d have done the same.”

They shake.

“Now that we have all returned to normality, Detective Beckett, where would you like to begin tonight’s session?”
“I thought dinner went pretty well, Dad. It was easier.”

Mr Beckett nods. “Yes.” He clearly wishes to say more, but does not force the issue.

“So… I don’t want to go to Castle’s loft while his mother is still likely to hit sore spots, but… er… I wondered if we could – the four of us – have dinner at yours?”

Mr Beckett and Mr Castle acquire identically stunned expressions. Dr Burke experiences a warm glow of considerable satisfaction that he had, again, been perfectly correct in his surmises. It entirely compensates for the lack of the game of Sorry.

“Um… I don’t think I’m ready to do it at mine so I thought maybe yours would be a good compromise?”

Mr Beckett finally closes his mouth. Mr Castle is still displaying the mien of a stunned hog.

“Um… sure, Katie, if you don’t mind it being a little squashed around the table – and you’ll need to cook. I don’t cook that well.”

“I know that. Remember the cake scrapings?”

“Sure I do. I still don’t know what I did wrong.”

“Cake scrapings?” Dr Burke enquires.

“Katie’s mom was away, so we decided we’d make a cake. What were you, Bug” – Dr Burke blinks at the affectionate and completely unconscious use of the diminutive pet name – “six?”

“’Bout that.”

“Anyway, I don’t know what happened but I put it into the tin to bake and Katie got to scrape the bowl, like kids do” – Dr Burke suspects that Mr Beckett would not have minded scraping the bowl either – “and she took one fingerful and spat it out. It was vile. We had to bin the cake. We never told my wife.” Mr Beckett turns to his daughter. “I didn’t know you remembered that,” he says, reminiscence liquid in his voice, his eyes suspiciously bright.

“Yeah. After that, though, I’ll do the cooking. I might trust you to peel the potatoes, Dad.”

“I can do that.”

Dr Burke is extremely satisfied. The Becketts have shared a memory which clearly has meaning for both of them, and have found common ground thereby. Detective Beckett has taken a sensible approach to the next step. Matters are progressing in the proper fashion. Once again, his methods have been successful.

“When would this be?” he asks. “I would venture to suggest that you should leave a small gap before undertaking the next step, to allow your progress to continue.

“Next weekend?”

“Sounds good to me, Katie.”

“That’s fine with me. I’ll check with Alexis, make sure she doesn’t have something on with her friends.”

“Okay.”
“Our time is up. Is there anything more you wish to discuss?”

“Not tonight, thanks.” Detective Beckett smiles. “See you on Tuesday.” She stops suddenly. “I forgot to tell you, we caught the killer. Thank you for your assistance.”

“I am pleased to have helped. If you are permitted, perhaps on Tuesday you would tell me the story?”

Dr Burke is almost sure he hears Mr Castle mutter “That’s my line,” as he leaves.

The Becketts and Mr Castle depart in good humour with each other. Dr Burke turns to writing up his end-of-session notes, also in good humour. He has only one concern, and that is the position of Mr Castle’s mother in this situation. That continues to pose a significant problem, and is the single factor which is entirely beyond the control of any party. He has an unpleasant feeling of foreboding, but cannot identify any specific reason why he should feel so. Dr Burke firmly banishes it. Should there be a crisis, he is quite confident that Detective Beckett, Mr Beckett, or Mr Castle will turn to him; and he is entirely and properly confident that his professional skills will prove more than adequate to the task if, or when, required.

Dr Burke departs for home content that his unmatched abilities remain unmatched. On his way, however, he makes a small detour, and enters an old-fashioned store, to be greeted by a small, white-haired man in a distressingly patterned velvet smoking jacket and carpet slippers.

“Good evening,” the small man says, with old-fashioned formality. Dr Burke regards him with appreciation.

“Good evening,” he replies, courteously. “I believe that you stock a game known as Sorry?”

“Indeed I do. May I ask how you were directed to me?”

“I had noticed your label on the box of a game to which an acquaintance has introduced me.” The puckish man raises an eyebrow in query. “A Detective Beckett.”

“Ah, you are a friend of Miss Beckett and Richard. I am very pleased to make your acquaintance. My name is Julian Goodfellow. Please, sit down while I locate the game.”

Dr Burke leaves the small store, carrying a beautifully wrapped parcel which he intends to present to his wife, some considerable time after he had intended. Mr Goodfellow had proved to be a most interesting person. If that is the quality of Mr Castle’s friends, then he is a man of many facets. However, Dr Burke has still no interest in reading best-selling thrillers.
“That all went quite well,” Beckett says as they reach her block. The journey has passed in relative quiet.

“Yeah,” Castle says heavily. “Now we just need to sort my mother. Your dad’s on the right track, and though I guess it’ll be slow going, it feels like you and he are moving in the right direction.”

“I guess. I don’t guess it’s going to be quite like it used to be, though.”

“No, of course not. You’re all grown up, and he needs to adjust to that. But it sounds like you’re both adapting.”

Beckett parks neatly. “You wanna come up for coffee?”

“When do I ever not want to come up for… coffee?” Castle says, in a dirtily seductive tone.

Beckett shrugs, mischievously, and doesn’t bother to answer.

Coffee happens. Cuddling happens. Kisses happen, and after that, in the natural order of things, bed happens. They’re just as good together now as they have been at any previous point. In fact, Beckett thinks happily, better. She nestles in to her lovely warm Castle-pillow and is simply and uncomplicatedly content.

Castle does not feel content, however. He is tense, even now.

“What’s up?”

“I just have this awful feeling that Mother’s plotting something, and I can’t seem to stop her.” He pauses, and rolls over, unhappily. “But you might be able to. I didn’t want this to happen, but… if she does get in your face, whether I’m there or not, I promise” – it sounds so very childish, but Beckett appreciates the importance of the point – “that I won’t get mad no matter how you deal with it, as long as you don’t actually shoot her. I just don’t see any other way.” He turns away, and Beckett rolls him back to cuddle him in. “Everything else is fixed, or getting there. It’s just Mother. I don’t get it. She’s always been kind, even when she’s been meddling most, but this time she’s completely lost it.”

“I think,” Beckett says with extreme reluctance, “that Dr Burke might have been right.” She appears thoroughly aggrieved at having to agree with Dr Burke.

“Uh?”

“About her being scared of the future. Of having to move out.”

“But I’ll pay for all of it. I’d never leave her destitute.”

“Sounds like a Victorian workhouse term,” Beckett says sardonically, and hugs him harder when
that doesn’t raise a twitch of a smile. “I don’t think it’s about the money, though.”

“No? I don’t get it, then. She’s got all her own friends, she’s got a social life to kill for, and she knocked it out of the park on the last audition. Even if the show only ran for two weeks.”

“When did she last have a hit show?”

“Years ago. She gets the parts. I tease her, but she’s a good actor. It’s just the shows that are…”

“Crap?”

“Yeah.” Castle says bluntly. “Though I wouldn’t say so in front of her. Why she doesn’t turn her talent to auditioning for better shows…?”

“She’s scared,” Beckett says suddenly. “Scared that she’d be turned down.”


“Nope. It goes with what Dr Burke said.”

Castle lies back and ponders, Beckett comfortably curled into him with her head on his chest and an arm around him. She doesn’t ask him what he’s thinking about, no doubt lost in her own ponderings.

He doesn’t get how his mother can be insecure or scared. She’s always been confident, swashbuckled through their trials and tribulations of his early life, won her award and won her parts. She’s never been insecure at all. Martha Rodgers, frequently wrong but absolutely never in doubt. She exudes total confidence – about her own life and that of everyone around her. Always sure of what they should do; always ready with helpful (usually helpful. Sometimes helpful.) advice. Good advice. Right up until now. She’s got no reason at all to be insecure. It’s far more likely that she’s just got so used to being able to barge into his rooms and his loft and his mind and emotions that she’s still doing it, only louder. He’s always been open to her: even when her ex cleaned her out and she showed up in pieces on his doorstep he’d never have let her down or sent her elsewhere, even at his expense.

Oh.

Oh, oh, oh. The last time she’d been made to leave, she’d been left penniless, and he’d been her best and likely only hope. If he asks her to leave, which he is going to, even if he pays for everything (which he will) and makes her an allowance (which he already does, and wasn’t ever planning to stop) – she’s going to hark back to the last time. Come to think of it, she hasn’t gone for a star show since then either.

“You’re right.”

“Urhh?” Beckett mumbles to his collarbone. “Course I’m right. ‘M always right.”

Castle makes a noise of disagreement. She snickers sleepily. “Gotcha.”

“Right about my mother.”

Beckett wakes up in a hurry. Castle can tell this because of the elbow jabbing into his ribs as she sits up and leans over him.

“Huh?”
“She was screwed over by her ex. Evicted her, practically – I don’t quite know how he did it but she got left homeless – and cleaned out her bank accounts.”

Beckett’s eyes glow ferally. “We could do something about that…” she says.

“I did,” Castle says tightly. Beckett doesn’t ask anything more. He’s pretty sure she gets it.

“So, yeah, I bet she doesn’t admit it and she might not even know it but she’s scared and she’s trying to cling to what she’s got where she’s always been safe.” He relapses back on to the pillows. Beckett relapses back on to him, where she should be. She feels very stable and reassuring, against him. (He wonders briefly if this is how he feels to her, when she’s upset, and hopes so.)

“But that doesn’t mean she shouldn’t stop pushing. She doesn’t get a pass just because she’s scared. She doesn’t get to interfere or try and be your mom when you don’t want it. We can talk about it, and deal with it, but I’m not gonna live on eggshells wondering if she’ll just walk in on us any time.”

“Eurgh.”

“Yeah,” he says gloomily. “Definite mood-killer.”

Beckett snuggles back down. This is not a mood-killer. Oh no. Castle becomes happily aware that she is rather more over him than previously and that the pink tips of her breasts are introducing themselves to his pecs. Thinking about his mother can now wait. Doing things with or for or to Beckett cannot. He shifts his hips beneath her so that he’s pressing into her just where he likes it. From the slick rush of heat, she likes it too: stretching and rubbing against him from neck to thighs, a sexy purr spilling from her mouth as she kisses him.

“My Kat’s back,” he murmurs, and then rapidly rolls them so that he’s on top and she’s laughing up at him with a wicked little twist of her lips followed by an equally wicked little twist of her hips, against which Castle will never, ever, ever be proof.

There’s no talking, after that, but there is quite a lot of noise.

Beckett wakes in a nest of Castle-scented pillows and covers which are all that remains of a very satisfying evening. She stretches luxuriously and rises slowly, determining that she’ll go out for a nice long run, and then have lunch. The afternoon can take care of itself, for now. She doesn’t need to go anywhere, and sure, she’s on call this weekend but it’s a lovely morning and she’ll have her phone with her.

Her run leaves her feeling good, the shower after even better, and the silky sensation of moisturiser sinking into smooth skin still better than that. Beckett, in fact, thinks that life is just plain perfect this weekend.

She’s sipping a cup of herbal tea – a new one, that she thought she’d try, called Orange Pekoe: it smells very appealing and she’s had enough coffee for a few hours – when her door sounds, a short while before lunchtime. She’s a little confused. She’s not expecting anyone, though she wouldn’t at all object if it were Castle (oh no) or Lanie, or indeed O’Leary, though that’s unlikely. In fact, it’s pretty unlikely that anyone would turn up without texting or calling first. Momentarily, she goes into flat panic mode. Surely her father hasn’t failed now? She lunges for the door, adrenaline flooding through her, terror twisting her thoughts and gut.

It’s Martha. Beckett is instantly wary, and invites her in with cool, guarded civility. She would infinitely prefer not to, but there doesn’t seem any good option here and the looming discussion
had better not take place in the stairwell. The intrusion into her privacy sets her on edge immediately. Her pride stops her from evicting Martha even faster than that. She will not show any hint that she is unable to cope with Martha’s presence in her apartment.

“Hello,” Beckett says coldly, and lets Martha understand that this is Beckett’s space in which she is unwelcome. Martha is clearly expecting Beckett to ask questions. Beckett, however, has no intention of opening any discussion. She waits, allowing an impression of faint indifference to spread as the silence does. She is pretty certain that Castle knows absolutely nothing about this visit.

“I wanted to talk to you,” Martha says, “and since Richard has been preventing us spending any time together – he’s so precious about it, as if he can’t bear to share you with us – I thought that I would just drop in. After all, you’re practically family.” She smiles. Maternally.

Beckett’s hackles rise, but she remains cool and calm. This meeting is about to start going very badly downhill, of that she is perfectly sure. She will not put up with anyone at all trying to take her mother’s place.

“Mm?” she says, neutrally. It’s not precisely inviting.

“I know that you’ve got your father – such a lovely man, but I don’t think that Richard should have made him expose his past like that. It was quite unnecessary. Why, lots of my friends have been in rehab. Anyway, Katherine, no matter how close one is to one’s male relatives sometimes you just need an older woman to confide in. To give you some advice.”

Beckett regards Martha with a still-calm exterior covering raging fury from which, were it to be unleashed, Beelzebub, or any other Prince of Hell, would have run screaming.

“So I wanted to do that for you. I really do feel that you should come to the loft, darling. It would make Richard so much happier to know that you’d got over this worry. I can assure you we don’t bite,” Martha says with a stage laugh. “It would reassure Alexis, too. The poor girl looks up to you already and she’d be so disappointed if she had the idea that you don’t like her.”

Beckett’s face locks down, icy fury crystallising around her. The implicit lies and attempted manipulation are too much.

“So Castle doesn’t know you’re here,” she bites out. “I didn’t think he did.” She breathes very slowly: in, out; in, out. Intimidating, appalling silence stretches almost to breaking point.

“I will do anything to make my son happy. Anything. He and Alexis are my family. He really wants you to be able to come to the loft, and I’m quite sure that if we just talk about it we can find a way to make it all come out right. I’m sure that I can give you good advice, just like your mother would have if she was here.”

“If my mother were here,” Beckett says frigidly, “there would be nothing to talk about. Since she isn’t, however, let’s talk, then. You can start by explaining to me precisely the psychiatric qualifications which you have which will explain why you think you can help me.”

“Pish. I am eminently qualified to help. Formal qualifications aren’t necessary. My life coaching has been very successful for many people.”

“I see. So you are completely unqualified in psychiatry.” Beckett’s cool, decisive tones belong in the interrogation room. “Still, perhaps one of your parents was an alcoholic, so you have relevant and helpful experience.” She’s maintaining an enquiring, interested demeanour. It’s an alternative
“Experience isn’t relevant, as long as one has sufficient empathy.”

“I see,” Beckett says again. “So you haven’t experienced an alcoholic parent, either.” Her dead level voice doesn’t vary in tone or tempo. “Perhaps you’ve volunteered at an ACoA assistance program?” Martha looks blank. “So not that either.”

“No,” Martha says. “But, Katherine darling, you do need some friendly advice.”

“Do I? Maybe. But to sum up your position, you have no qualifications in psychiatry, you have no personal experience of parental alcoholism and you have no direct experience of working with the victims of alcoholism. I fail to see in what possible way I would benefit from receiving any advice from you.”

Martha’s over-confidence is starting to leak.

“So tell me,” Beckett enquires bitingly, “exactly what you do have that entitles you to try and advise me.”

“I’m a mother, darling.”

“That qualifies you for precisely nothing in this situation.”

“I can” – and Beckett loses it before that sentence, undoubtedly containing like your mother would, can be completed.

“No, you cannot. You are not my mother. You have no right to try to usurp her place. You barely know me. You are certainly not my family. That’s my dad. Only my dad. You’re so completely out of line I don’t even know where to start.” She hasn’t raised her voice, but every word slashes through the air; whiplashes against Martha’s paling face. “Your meddling is not required. Your uninvited presence in my home is not required.” Beckett checks her watch. “I will give you thirty minutes to contact Castle and inform him – truthfully – of this conversation. In thirty minutes I will call him myself. You will leave. Now.”

Martha’s remaining colour has drained, leaving her grey faced; two lines of bright scarlet limning her cheekbones with a flush of anger.

“I wanted to help you, and this is all the thanks I get?”

“You don’t want to help,” Beckett states judicially, glacially. “If you did, you’d have listened to Castle, or Alexis, or my dad. You’ve ignored all of it. You have lied about how Castle and Alexis feel. Listen to me now, very carefully.” Martha flinches. “I have been seeing a fully qualified psychiatrist. The best anywhere. You have no competence in this area. I don’t know or care why you think you do. I will credit you with good intentions. That is the only reason I did not throw you out immediately. Leave now, while you might still preserve your dignity. In thirty minutes I will call Castle.”

Beckett opens the front door, to which she had been moving as she spoke. “Good bye.”

Martha leaves, precipitately, stumbling as she hits the elevator.

Beckett shuts the door with dreadful gentleness behind her, collapses on to her couch, and sits frozenly, tears spilling down her face, unwiped. She hopes with all her heart that Castle had really meant what he said about backing her if she reduced his mother to a small pile of dust. She
continues to sit, and watches the clock.

Precisely thirty minutes later she taps out Castle’s number. She has to restart her dialling twice before her fingers will obey.

“Beckett!” Castle says. He doesn’t sound angry.

“Castle?” she manages, before her stress and adrenaline crash take over. “Please would you come over?”

“Sure,” he rumbles. “There shortly.”

Castle hears the loft door open and a whirlwind of tempestuous, furious, shamed misery entire. He wanders out of his office to discover the reason for this entirely unexpected storm.

It turns out to be his mother, high-coloured and in the grip of an emotional maelstrom.

“Mother, what’s wrong?” he asks, a deep feeling of dread sinking into his stomach. Surely she hasn’t…? She can’t possibly – can she?


“You went to see Beckett?” Oh God.

She really has been that stupid. “Why?” Why, oh why?

“She won’t come here. It’s upsetting Alexis and whatever you say, it can’t be making you happy either. She needs to know that.”

“What did you say to Beckett?” Castle asks very slowly and calmly, in order to avoid screaming in rage and then throttling his mother.

“Just that. And I offered her some advice.” Oh god oh god oh god. Oh, fuck. “And then she had the insolence” – his mother’s voice rises – “to tell me that I was completely unqualified and the only reason she was allowing” – her voice hits a pitch suitable for smashing glass – “me to leave with dignity was that she credited me with good intentions.”

“I see,” Castle says heavily. His lack of fulsome, or indeed any, support dawns on Martha.

“Don’t you care that she’s insulted me?”

“I care that you’ve done exactly what you were asked not to do. I care that you’ve lied to Beckett about how Alexis feels and how I feel to try and manipulate her into coming here before she’s ready.” He looks closely at his mother, who is an unpleasant shade of shamed red. “She called you on it, didn’t she?”

“I’m your mother” –

“You’re my mother. Not Beckett’s.”

“If you got married…”

“You still won’t be her mother. Every time you suggest that you’re dishonouring her own mother’s memory.”

At which exceedingly unhelpful point Alexis walks in. “What have you done, Grams?” she
“More to the point, Mother, why are you admitting to it?”

“Because she” – the tone indicates a much less pleasant word than she – “said that I had thirty minutes to tell you about it because she was going to call you then.”

Wow. Beckett must have been at full Force Twelve intimidation to achieve that and make it stick. That’s his badass Beckett.

“You went to see Detective Beckett?” Alexis yells, still at full teen screech-and-shriek mode. “You were told not to. Now she’ll never come here and it’ll all be your fault that I don’t have a role model.”

“But sweetie, I was trying to persuade her to come here. And she just wouldn’t listen to my advice.”

Alexis is listening with dropped jaw. “You’ve just ruined everything. You’ve ruined my life. How’m I going to find out what a real professional woman’s like when she’ll never come here ever because you can’t leave her alone? We were doing just fine without you. She even had dinner with us and now you’ve totally screwed up my life” –

“Alexis…” – Castle attempts.

“She has. And you’ve screwed up Dad’s life too all because you couldn’t just butt out. I hope you’re really happy, Grams. We’re not. I’m so totally never bringing any friends or boyfriends home ever again.”

“Enough, Alexis,” Castle says very firmly. “Quiet.”

“I won’t,” Alexis yells in total teen tantrum mode, which is another order of decibelic magnitude louder than screech-and-shriek. “You won’t tell her so I will. I thought she loved us but if she did she totally wouldn’t meddle and spoil everything.”

“Alexis,” Castle says, in a tone that would have stopped even Beckett in full kick-ass flow. “Go to your room and calm down, please. I’ll deal with this.” He flicks a glance at his watch. “Mother, either do the same or go out. This evening, we are going to discuss where you’re going to live from now on.”

Martha’s raging colour drains in one instant. “But…”

“I’m not discussing this now. I need time to think. Alone. Both of you, go.”

They don’t look at each other as they trail up the stairs. Castle makes for the safety of his office, and shuts the door firmly.

Not five seconds after he’s sat down, his phone rings and Beckett’s face comes up on the screen.
“Beckett!”

“Castle? Please would you come over?” He can clearly hear the distress and considerable uncertainty in her voice. Seems that dealing with his mother hasn’t exactly been easy for her.

“Sure,” he rumbles. “There shortly.” Going out has the massive advantage that he cannot be pursued by his mother or daughter. He tugs on a light jacket against any May breezes and is gone from the loft in seconds flat. He merely hopes that when he returns he doesn’t find his mother dead on the floor and Alexis standing over the corpse with a bloodstained kitchen knife. Murder is only fun in fiction.

Beckett opens the door and falls into him, massively upset and shuddering.

“There, there,” he murmurs into her hair. “’S okay.” The best solution seems to be to walk her to the couch and then cosset her into his lap. Then he’ll cosset some more. He has to admit that he is a tiny bit relieved that she is so upset with the situation. He’d be a lot more worried about the future if she could just shrug it off and not care. He sits them both down, nestles her close, and waits for the storm to subside. Strangely, there is a teapot and china cup on the table, still emitting a very delicate aroma.

It takes less time than he expects. She pulls herself together, drags her head from his shoulder, and looks at him with drenched eyes and not a little trepidation.

“I promised,” he points out. “It’s not like you went looking for her to start a fight.”

Beckett blinks hard, and scrabbles for a Kleenex with which to dab her eyes and blow her nose. “But…”

“She was warned. Over and over. I didn’t want a blow-up, but she wouldn’t listen,” Castle says frustratedly. He sags against the back of the couch. “I’ve told her that we’ll be discussing her living arrangements tonight.” Beckett hugs him, hard. “I don’t see any other way.”

“I don’t want dead men’s shoes,” she says, and it takes Castle a moment to work out what she means.

“It won’t be. Apart from anything else, Alexis got in on the act, and I’d swear she could be heard at Central Park. I think Mother’s finally achieved the almost impossible, and driven a wedge between herself and Alexis.” He sighs. “Alexis says she won’t bring anyone home now if Mother’s there, and while I really, really hope that was just the heat of the moment, it’s not looking so good. There’s no choice between Mother and Alexis. Never has been.” He sags further. Even his face droops, and then hardens again. “Mother is not going to screw up Alexis.”

Beckett hasn’t removed her arms from round him in any measure at all. “It’s up to you,” she says, and Castle hears the echo of his own words to her. “Just… maybe talk to Burke about it all first. Before you do anything that’ll hurt you later.”

Castle startles. “You – you – are suggesting I talk to Burke? Again?”

“Yeah, well,” Beckett mutters. “I never said he wasn’t a good shrink.”

If Castle hadn’t still been so angry with his mother, worried about Alexis’s entirely uncharacteristic
loss of temper and completely unconvincing of what to do, he’d probably have burst into laughter. Instead he huffs sarcastically.

“I didn’t. I just don’t like him.”

“I’d noticed,” Castle says dryly. “Even now, you still don’t like him.”

“I’d like him better if he ever acted human.”

“Fair point.”

Castle is beginning to recover himself. Beckett is still shaky, and her face pale. Even so, she’s still hugging him.

“Okay,” he says soothingly, and rearranges her limpet-like grip to show that he’s fine. “I got Mother’s version of events. It was missing quite a lot of detail. Wanna tell me yours?”

He has the distinct impression that the answer ought to be not particularly. There is an uncomfortable pause in proceedings. He pets softly, and doesn’t press. After a moment, Beckett emits a heavy sigh, and then recites the entire drama with nearly word-perfect accuracy though no emotion at all.

“Oh,” Castle says, very flatly, and then realises his mistake when Beckett first winces and then tries quite determinedly to escape his grip. “Not you. Mother. Stop running away,” he adds, and ensures that she can’t. “I told you I wouldn’t be mad, and I’m not. You’re more upset than I am. I’m upset with Mother. Stop wriggling. It’s very distracting,” he leers. He tightens his arms till she’s completely enfolded, drops a kiss on the top of her head, and allows them both a minute of close contact. Beckett stops shivering, and then, much to Castle’s relief, nestles back into him. A few more minutes pass by, broken by the inaudible sounds of mutual thinking.

“Oh,” Castle says eventually. “I’ll talk to Burke again. But whatever he says, Mother is leaving the loft. I’ll call a realtor later and start them looking.” He acquires a mildly distracted air. “I’d better speak to my investment adviser about paying for it.”

“Uh?”

“Well, property on Manhattan’s a pretty good investment, so I might as well buy her somewhere.” Beckett boggles at him. “What?”

“You’ll just – buy her somewhere?” she says faintly.

“Sure. Pick a good neighbourhood, and it’ll be a great investment.”

“Oh.”

Castle observes an unexpected degree of uncertainty curled up in his lap. “Something wrong?”

“No… Most of us just rent, Castle.”

Castle shrugs. He doesn’t see the point of paying a landlord when he could own the asset. “I’d rather own it,” he points out. There’s a rather disconcerted huffing noise emanating from under his chin, which he entirely fails to understand. He compromises by nuzzling the available area, being the top of Beckett’s bent head. “Besides which, if I owned it she could never be evicted. I wouldn’t ever do that. Much easier. More secure.”
“Mm.”

“Beckett, what’s wrong?”

There’s a silence.

“I don’t like remembering you’re rich,” she mutters. It’s Castle’s turn to boggle.

“What? What’s that got to do with anything? You never let me treat you to anything anyway,” he adds indignantly. “You should.” There is a completely unintelligible noise of disagreement.

“However, if it makes you happy, we can draw up a pre-nup.” That fetches her. There’s an infuriated squawk. “I wouldn’t want to lose my chance at custody of your DVD collection.”

“You keep your hands off my DVD collection!” Beckett screeches, looks up, and catches his wicked grin.

“Okay,” Castle says smoothly. “I’ll keep them on you instead. Stop being silly. I know you’re not a gold-digger. And you should still let me treat you more. I like treating you.” Smooth suavity turns to sophisticated sexuality. “Right now, you should let me treat you really, really well.” His hand tips up her chin, assertively. His mouth descends on her now-accessible mouth, likewise assertively. And his other hand investigates the possibilities that her t-shirt might come loose from her waistband, and on finding that it could, if properly encouraged, encourages it. Assertively.

All this assertion, unfortunately, isn’t quite applied rapidly enough to get ahead of Beckett’s brain, which suddenly catches up with the conversation.

“Pre-nup? Say what?”

“I don’t want one,” says Castle provocatively. “It’s you who’s protecting your DVD collection.”

“That is not what I mean. Why are we even talking about pre-nups?”

“I’m not, you are.”

“You started it.”

“Didn’t.”

“Did so. You said I should let you treat me and then you said if it made me happy we could draw up a pre-nup.”

“Did I?” Castle says innocently. “I don’t remember that. Anyway, if you’re talking about pre-nups I really feel that we should at least get engaged first, and you said you needed time to sort everything out. So I think you’re being a bit presumptuous, Detective.”

Beckett emits some wordlessly infuriated noises which make her sound like an enraged tiger. Or eagle. Or maybe a gryphon – no, that would be a lion-eagle mix. Maybe a dragon. He snickers happily above her head and makes sure that he’s taken a very tight hold of her hands. Then he kisses her helpfully opened mouth again. Assertively. The infuriated noises, now muffled, draw to a close. He kisses for long enough to ensure that they don’t begin again, and being convinced of that, releases her wrists and uses the free hand for some non-specific but arousing petting until they’ve both entirely forgotten about pre-nups, apartments, Castle’s wealth and Martha.

“I better go,” Castle murmurs disappointedly some time later. “I am so not looking forward to this evening.”
“You could come back, later.”

“Not tonight. I’m not leaving Alexis alone with Mother — or even with a babysitter. I don’t know what sort of disaster I’d come back to. A police record wouldn’t improve her college applications.”

“Guess not. She should stick to normal teen mischief. A tattoo, maybe.”

Castle growls dangerously. “She is not getting a tattoo.” Beckett shrugs, and grins at him. “She is not.”

“You wouldn’t know about it.”

“No tattoos,” he states definitively.

And having achieved her objective of diverting Castle’s attention from the deepening pool of depression towards which she was quite clear that he was aiming, Beckett saunters to the door with him, reaches up, and bestows an extremely leisurely kiss on him to console him on his travels home.

Castle gets halfway home before the effect of the kiss wears off and his toes uncurl. At that point he remembers that he needs to see the realtor, requests the cab to divert, and relapses into unpleasantly necessary thought.

Sadly, the realtor is still open. It should close at lunchtime on Saturdays. Even more sadly, he’s pounced upon by a smart Brooklyn brunette who is only too happy — especially when she finds that he’s a cash buyer — to show him a seemingly endless parade of smart, expensive apartments in smart, expensive locations. He has to promise that he will look through them all — but not now — before he’s allowed to escape.

And then, bedecked with leaflets for hi-spec apartments, he calls Dr Burke. He should have done that much earlier, but he far prefers Beckett’s brand of comfort to Burke’s. He might also be hoping that Burke has gone for the day, but he’s carefully not thinking that thought. Deep under his not-thought, he’s worried that Burke will make him see that he’s right. He doesn’t think that thought, either. He’s not-thinking a lot of not-thoughts, here and now.

“Dr Burke’s office.”

“It’s Rick Castle. Is Dr Burke there, please?”

“Of course. I’ll just connect you.”

All the not-thoughts become horribly real thoughts.

“Good afternoon, Mr Castle,” Dr Burke opens. “Do I deduce that your mother has involved herself again?”

“However did you guess?” Castle asks bitterly. “Yes.”

“I see. May I suggest you attend my office? If you wish, I shall arrange for coffee, and I have a supply of snacks if you would like that. I infer that you have not partaken of lunch.”

“Yes. Please. I’m only a few minutes away.”

“I shall see you in a short time. Do not worry, Mr Castle.”

Castle drags his mental weariness towards Dr Burke’s, and arrives, trailing an aura of depression,
to be greeted by the aroma of good coffee and a china plate containing an extremely luxurious brand of chocolate cookies.

Dr Burke observes Mr Castle’s surprise. “In times of high stress, Mr Castle, chocolate has been known to release endorphins and serotonin in the brain, which counteract stress and depressive tendencies. You appear to me to be under stress, and in need of a soothing cup of coffee. A cookie may also assist.” He smiles paternally down at Mr Castle, who has disposed himself in a chair without any of his usual verve. “I occasionally find that a cookie is a useful counterpoint to a stressful day.”

Mr Castle acquires an expression of extreme disbelief and surprise, but, astonishingly, fails to comment.

“Now, what has your mother done?”

“Mother,” says Mr Castle with acidic emphasis, “decided that it was a good idea to go and see Beckett earlier today.”

“Mm. I infer that this visit did not proceed well?”

“You could say that. You could equally well say that the San Francisco earthquake was a small sneeze.”

“I see.” Oh, dear. Mrs Rodgers has been very ill-advised. “Why do you not tell me the whole story, and then we shall discuss your reactions and feelings?” Dr Burke pours Mr Castle some more coffee, and moves the plate of cookies unobtrusively nearer to him.

“Mother went to see Beckett,” Mr Castle says again. “Her version is that she only wanted to offer Beckett some motherly advice so that she would come to the loft sooner. She claimed – to Beckett, who spots lies for a living – that Alexis and I were upset that she wouldn’t. Beckett flung her out and gave her thirty minutes to tell me the truth about it all.”

“Mm?”

“Alexis walked in on the story, completely lost her temper – she never does that, but she had all her teen tantrums in one very loud go – and said Mother had ruined her life and she was never bringing any friends home ever again.”

Dr Burke raises eyebrows. The row must have been quite spectacular.

“So I sent them both to their rooms to calm down, and told Mother we’d be discussing her living arrangements this evening. Then Beckett called, and she was upset, so I went over there and she told me her side of the story, and on the way back I went via the realtor and then I called you.”

“Mm. And were there material differences in the two stories?”

“Mother left a lot out, but it didn’t make any difference to the core of it. She was stupid, and arrogant, and Beckett called her on her lack of expertise, and on the lies about Alexis and me, and then threw her out with a few more choice words about allowing Mother to leave with dignity.”

Dr Burke winces. He can imagine the scene. He has experienced – fortunately only as an observer – quite enough of Detective Beckett’s ability to flay the object of her wrath with words and tone to understand that Mrs Rodgers had been left in no doubt whatsoever of her mistake.

“Beckett told me all of it.” Dr Burke winces again. “She wasn’t …gentle. I think she thought I’d
be mad with her, even though I said I wouldn’t be.”

“Were you?” Dr Burke enquires.

“No. I told Mother and told her. She just wouldn’t listen at all. I told her Beckett wouldn’t take it well and she just ignored me.”

“In other words, you have reached the end of your patience with the situation. Hardly surprising."

“No, I guess.”

“Please tell me how you feel about your mother’s actions.”

Mr Castle produces a very assessing gaze. “Are you head-shrinking me now?”

“In the pursuance of Detective Beckett’s recovery, yes.”

“Oh,” Mr Castle says, nonplussed by the plainly truthful answer. Dr Burke does not lie. It never answers. “Okay then. I… well, I was angry, and I was disappointed, and I just don’t understand how she’s being so dumb and unkind. She’s never been like that before.” Mr Castle sounds, despite his adult baritone, very like a child first discovering that his parents have flaws. “I mean, she’s been blunt, and she can be intrusive, but she’s never been unkind.”

“Mm. Do you think she means to be unkind?”

“No. That’s why I don’t get it. I thought if she knew she was then she’d stop, but nothing’s sinking in.”

“Mm. Tell me, Mr Castle, have you considered further the thought that your mother may be scared of the changes to her living arrangements?”

“Yes. Beckett said she thought you were right, and I thought about it, and…”

“Mm?” Dr Burke hums encouragingly.

“I didn’t tell you how Mother came to live with me. Us. She was married to another actor, and somehow he managed to clean out all her bank accounts and take possession of their apartment.” Dr Burke’s eyebrows rise. “I didn’t know till after, when she showed up on my doorstep absolutely devastated. So of course I took her in, and she could help with Alexis – it was good for Alexis to have her around – and it all worked out really well. It wasn’t always easy, exactly, but it worked out.” Mr Castle looks unhappily at Dr Burke. “I do love my mother,” he says, piteously. “I just don’t like her much right now. It’s always been family. That’s why I was so angry with Beckett at the beginning, because I thought she wasn’t looking after her family and I just couldn’t ever get my head round that idea. Family’s always come first, no matter what.”

“I have no doubt of your love for your family, including your mother,” Dr Burke says soothingly. “That does not preclude anger, annoyance, or even occasional dislike for their actions. Such is not at all unusual, and you are not a lesser person thereby. However, as I have said, you also deserve happiness. For the moment, let us return to the question of why your mother may be acting as she is.”

“Um… okay. So anyway, her ex cleaned her out. I had him dealt with,” Mr Castle says. “He’s rotting in a jail in LA. But when you said she might be scared, it didn’t sit right, and then when Beckett agreed with you” –
“A most unusual occurrence, no doubt?”

“Only admitting it. Eventually, she’s agreed with most of what you’ve said or done. She’s just not keen on saying so.”

“Mm,” emits Dr Burke, perfectly satisfied with that confirmation.

“So I thought about it, and I realised that she stopped going for big parts after that, too.”

“Too?”

“Well, I took her to my parties, because it cheered her up, and she enjoyed them – even more than I did, a lot of the time, though I wouldn’t like you to think I didn’t enjoy them – and she made a lot of contacts there but none of them were big names, though I suppose the big names were writers and so forth, not producers or directors. No-one’s wanted to film any of my books.” Dr Burke ignores that last sentence as entirely irrelevant to the problem at hand, and Mr Castle’s tone of disappointment as unnecessary.

“And?”

“Well, I wondered if maybe she’s so fixated on it because she’s still really insecure from what her ex did?”

“That is a very interesting conclusion, Mr Castle. Would you care to pursue it further?”

“Um…” Mr Castle says, “um…I guess that she’s still worried - I don’t think she’s realised it, though – about being left homeless because she was left homeless by someone she… oh… Someone she loved and that she thought loved her.”

Dr Burke wishes most fervently that Mr Castle was not so violently opposed even to the concept of undertaking psychiatric practice.

“And what does that lead you to conclude?”

“That she thinks it might happen again.” Mr Castle suddenly realises what he has said, and an expression of extreme anger suffuses his face. “How can she think that?” he says furiously. “How could she ever think that I would let that happen to her? She brought me up and she’s lived with us for thirteen years and she can think that I’d let her suffer?”

“I do not believe that she does think that,” Dr Burke reassures, with considerable emphasis on the think, “I would be astonished, in fact, if she were not utterly horrified if anyone said such to her. I do not, incidentally, recommend that you do. It would not answer. However, I do consider that, subconsciously, she is being driven by such a feeling.”

“But I wouldn’t,” Mr Castle says forcefully. “How does she not know that?”

“Mr Castle, have we not seen how ingrained behaviours and masked emotions can affect events and relationships in very unexpected ways? Your mother undoubtedly knows, intellectually, that you would never let her suffer. That is not the same as a long buried terror of being betrayed by one whom she loves.”

“I suppose I get that,” Mr Castle assents, still somewhat doubtfully.

“So on that basis, what do you conclude?”
“I guess she needs some sort of reassurance.” Mr Castle relapses into thought. Dr Burke does not distract him. Really, Mr Castle is so much easier to deal with than Detective – or Mr – Beckett. A man of much more equable temperament. Very refreshing. He has only eaten one of the cookies, too. In cases where cookies are required, most often they are all consumed. Dr Burke quietly makes more coffee, and prepares his own tea. Patience on Dr Burke’s part will serve Mr Castle best.
The coffee is received with absent and automatic thanks. Dr Burke pours his own tea. To his surprise, Mr Castle rouses from his thoughts. “Beckett had that tea,” he says. “I recognise the smell from earlier.” Dr Burke prevents himself choking by sheer force of will. Detective Beckett drinks delicate Chinese teas?

Mr Castle returns to his thoughts, sublimely unaware of Dr Burke’s astonishment. “That might work,” he mutters to himself, “or maybe…”. After a few moments of such murmurings, Mr Castle returns his attention to Dr Burke. “Okay,” he says definitively, “I think I can give Mother some solid comfort. I just need to work it out with my attorney.”

“Mm?”

“I was going to buy an apartment for Mother to live in anyway,” Mr Castle discloses casually. Dr Burke reflects that a best-selling writer will necessarily earn materially more than even the most able psychiatrist, and further reflects on the succour which his treatment provides to his patients, which lasts far longer than any book may do. In any event, he prefers his elegant Westchester home to any area of Manhattan. Manhattan is not, he finds, either peaceful or harmonious, and he prefers both in his home life.

“So all I have to do is make sure that I can’t evict her – well, unless she murders someone, I suppose.”

Dr Burke smiles. “A sensible precaution,” he says dryly. Mr Castle manages to raise a small, tight smile in return.

“But I still need to tell her tonight that she’ll be moving out.”

“All you can do, until you have spoken to your attorney, is to explain and reassure.”

“Ugh,” Mr Castle emits, gloomily. It is clear that the prospect is most unwelcome. Dr Burke considers that it is also likely to be loud, histrionic, and tearful. He has every sympathy with Mr Castle. However, no matter how great his sympathy, he will certainly not be offering to treat Mrs Rodgers, and should he be asked, he will decline.

“I cannot help you further with those discussions. However, might we spend a few moments discussing Detective Beckett’s reactions to your mother’s visit?”

“Okay.” Mr Castle pauses to assemble his thoughts. “She was really upset. Distraught. I don’t know what she expected me to say, but like I said, I’d told her I wouldn’t be mad with her no matter what.”

“Was Detective Beckett angry?”

“No. Not at all.”

“Would you have expected anger?”

“Yeah, sure. It’s not like she’s normally patient with people acting that dumb, and she’d pretty much taken Mother apart. So yes, I was expecting her still to be pretty wound up. But she wasn’t at all. She’d been crying. She was crying.”
“How did you regard this unusual reaction?”

“Er…” Mr Castle colours, “actually I was relieved.”

Dr Burke elevates an eyebrow in query.

“It meant that she – Beckett – wasn’t just brushing it off because it wasn’t important to her. It wasn’t just dealing with a stranger, like it was someone who’d never be involved in her life.” Mr Castle makes an irritated noise. “I’m not explaining this very well.”

Mr Castle is indeed not explaining this well at all. Most fortunately, he then pauses to collate his thoughts, which it is devoutly to be hoped will emerge in some better order than has been shown so far.

“She could only be upset if it mattered to her. So even if my mother was the biggest pain since decapitation – and some days I really wonder if decapitation might be a better option – it mattered that she’d upset her.”

“Hm. Is it not far more likely that Detective Beckett was upset that you would react badly to your mother’s distress?”

“Maybe?” Mr Castle sounds unconvinced. “But I’d have expected her to be mad too, if it were just that. And she wasn’t.”

“It may be worth confirming that with Detective Beckett herself. If nothing else, it will clarify how best to deal with their future interactions.”

“A foxhole and a flak jacket.”

Dr Burke is surprised into a laugh. “Let us hope not, Mr Castle. Matters are progressing very satisfactorily on many fronts, and your mother’s behaviour is merely a small and eminently manageable issue, in precisely the way that you have outlined.” Dr Burke pauses. “I am not treating you, except as pertains to Detective Beckett. However, my advice is that you should listen to your emotions as much as to logic. Your emotions and instincts have, as I have said before, served you well thus far.”


“I am glad to have been of assistance.”

Castle returns home, somewhat comforted by Dr Burke’s soothing approach, and repairs to his study to think, and to consider the leaflets. Thinking is interrupted by a diffident tap on the door, which must be Alexis.

“Yes?”

“Dad?”

“C’mere, pumpkin.”

Alexis enters, uncertainly. “I’m sorry about shouting at Grams,” she forces out.

“Don’t you think you should tell her that, not me?” Castle says gently.

“Did that.”
Of course she did, Castle thinks. Alexis always – almost always – behaves well.

“But Dad, what’s going to happen now?” Castle hugs her. “Well,” he starts, when Alexis’s eye falls on the leaflets.

“Oh. You really meant it.”

“I did.”

There’s a slight silence. “Good.” And then, “But…”

“I will buy Grams an apartment, and make sure that she’s safe in it. The only thing that will change is that she won’t be here all the time. Everything else will still be just as it was.”

“I knew you wouldn’t let her fend for herself,” Alexis says indignantly, “but Grams has been going on about being sent to the poorhouse and left destitute on the street and – you know how she gets. She’s being stupid and over-reacting. She’s so totally dumb about this.”

“It’s okay. I’ll deal with her.”

“Um…” Alexis peeps up at Castle even more uncertainly. “um, is Detective Beckett okay?”

“Yeah. She was a bit upset, but it’s okay now.” Castle thinks of something sure to cheer Alexis up. “We thought that it might be nice for all four of us to have dinner at Mr Beckett’s, next Saturday. Did you have any other plans?”

“No, just hanging out with Paige and the gang. Detective Beckett wants another dinner with us? Awesome!” Alexis bounces, restored to complete happiness.

“Let’s see how we go,” Castle cautions. “It’s still all rather fragile, but it would be another big step for Beckett.”

“Because it’s at her dad’s?” Alexis asks, perceptively.

“Yeah.” Castle leaves it at that. No point dragging up the difficulties, or mentioning that the suggestion of dinner at her dad’s was what broke Beckett from her dad in the first place. They’re not Alexis’s problem, or business.

“Okay.” Alexis has recovered all her normal joie de vivre. “Thanks, Dad.” She bestows a hug upon him, and departs.

Castle breathes a sigh of intense relief that at least one of his family is behaving sensibly, shuffles his leaflets into a neat pile, and braces himself for the incoming missile otherwise known as his mother. He’s pretty certain it’s already locked on and armed.

“Mother,” he says with resigned calm as the explosion arrives in his study.

“I am perfectly prepared to leave immediately. I won’t stay where I’m not wanted,” Martha declaims.

Castle declines the bait. “Sit down, and listen to me.”

“While you pronounce my fate?”

“Stop with the theatrics. This isn’t a stage and there’s no adoring audience.”
“I am well aware that love is lacking.”

“Mother, sit down and shut up,” Castle orders with considerable force and controlled fury.

“Don’t you take that tone with me, Richard.”

“Sit down.”

She does.

“Now, I don’t want to know what you thought you were doing earlier, but I told you that if you interfered again then that would be the end of it. So listen very carefully. I will buy you an apartment in Manhattan – here are some specs – and you will live there.”

“You’ll pay anything to get me out of here!”

“No, I’ll pay anything so that you have absolute security from eviction.” Martha is stopped in her histrionic tracks. “Despite your extremely insulting views on being left penniless and homeless, that was never going to happen. You will have exactly the same deal as you did here, except you’ll be living somewhere else.”

He looks straight at her. She’s shocked into silence.

“I don’t expect you to apologise because you never do. I do expect you to visit each of these apartments, decide which one you want to live in, and tell me, so I can instruct the attorney. If you don’t like any, then you have till the end of the week to find one you do like. If you try delaying, I’ll pick one for you. This situation is not continuing.”

He takes a harsh breath.

“I never wanted this to happen. I didn’t want to split us all up. But you obviously cared more about doing whatever you wanted and trying to prove you were right than about our family staying together.”

“But Richard” –

“Let me know which apartment you want by the end of the week. I expect I can make sure that it’s all completed by the end of the month.”

Castle stands up and walks out of his own room, picks up his jacket and leaves the loft. His mother doesn’t make a single sound as he goes, sitting slack-faced and staring at his back. The closing door thuds heavily in the silence.

Beckett opens her door to find a highly stressed Castle on the other side. She sums up the situation in one well-practised investigative glance, pulls him inside and into her arms, and kicks the door shut so she needn’t let go of him. Then she tows him to the couch, gently pushes him into sitting down, and keeps him within her arms until he should be ready to speak.

Gradually he eases very slightly, leans into her, and then, quite suddenly, hoists her firmly into his lap, puts her head on his shoulder, and buries his face in her hair; holding her tightly against him. Beckett gives him his own way without any protest, recognising that Castle simply needs someone who can be there only for him. Her turn to step up to the plate. She strokes his shoulder consolingly, curls in more definitively, and waits.
Much as she loves both Castle and being cuddled up with Castle, she does not love him being miserable. It’s not his natural state, and sitting with a miserable Castle is much like sitting in a raincloud. She strokes a little more, and essays a soothing murmur. That doesn’t exactly come naturally, either. She returns to simply hugging him, and doesn’t move at all.

Finally, he raises his head from hers. “Sorry, Beckett.”

“No need,” she says, rather than the disingenuous *what for*. “Come here.” She hugs him again, and plants a swift kiss on his lips. “Rough?”

“Ghastly. Mother at her most Grande Dame and theatrical. She’s still not sorry at all. So…”

“Mmm?”

“I handed her a bunch of apartment specs and told her to visit them all by the end of the week, or find another one she liked.” Beckett blinks. “I didn’t tell her I’d be taking her keys away when she moves out, either. I’ll always be happy to see her, but I don’t want her dropping in at – er – inconvenient moments.” She blinks again. Castle sure has laid down the law. “She’ll be in her own place as soon as I can manage it. I’ll go see my attorney on Monday.”

Beckett hugs him some more. However controlled his voice, his face and body tell a very different story. He’s massively tense: shoulders tight and knotted, face heavy and somehow older. All his usual bounce and cheer is missing, and his normally sparkling eyes are dull.

“‘S okay. Just stay here for a bit, with me.” She pets him a little, soothingly. “It’s fine. We’ll work it out.” Castle merely shrugs, his big body slumping.

“I guess,” he mutters. “I never wanted this to happen. She’s my family. She cared more about having her own way than staying as a family, though.”

Beckett hears the hitch and catch in his voice, and reaches for the Kleenex. It’s clear that however annoyed he was with Martha, actually having to take the step of asking her to leave has rocked his foundations. She doesn’t think he’d ever expected to have to do it. She knows this story, bone-deep: she knows how it feels to do the right thing and break your heart on it.

“I never wanted to walk away, but I had to. Sometimes, doing the right thing for all of you hurts worst.” He shrugs again. “You’re not abandoning her. You’re still supporting her, you’re still taking care of her. You weren’t enabling her. But it still hurts like a bitch because you’re a good man, Castle.” She stops. “And if you ever tell anyone that I said that you will hurt like a bitch.”

Castle manages a small snicker, though it doesn’t last.

“Anyway,” Beckett says awkwardly, “just stay here for a bit. We can get dinner later.”

Castle buries his face in her hair again, worryingly frantically. Beckett returns to the slightly unpractised petting that seems to soothe him, and mentally curses Martha to the Nine Circles of Hell, to be visited in order and for an extensive period. Seeing Castle like this, she rather wishes that she’d laid into Martha with a lot more venom: that she’d told her how badly she was hurting her son, the son that she claimed she’d do anything for. Anything except what would make him happy, it seems.

Anyway. Shooting Martha, while temporarily pleasing, is not a good plan. Cuddling Castle back into some semblance of serenity – happiness is too much to ask for, tonight – is a good plan, so that’s what she’ll do, at least until she needs to get them food, drink, or indeed requires a bathroom break. She snuggles in more closely, wraps herself round Castle so he’s sure she’s there, and closes
her eyes peacefully.

She is being slowly suffocated, or possibly broiled. Beckett cudgels her baked brain into life, or at least a state of undeadness that might lead to life later, and discovers that Castle is draped over her and is still asleep. Ah. Much becomes clear. They fell asleep, on her couch, and have rearranged themselves into positions not tremendously dissimilar from those that they might each adopt in bed. Where, however, there would be sufficient space that she would not be squashed.

She wriggles out from under Castle, who remains out cold as she does, and finds that it is now after eight, she is hungry and thirsty, and there is no food. She orders pizza, and ice cream, thinks about her empty fridge and adds soda. When the delivery boy raps on the door, Castle still hasn’t roused. She puts the pizza in the oven, the ice cream in the freezer, and the sodas in the fridge; and still he doesn’t wake. Unlike Castle’s trick with her, however, there is no way she can lift him off the couch and into bed. He’s going to have a really, really sore back when he does wake.

She regards him carefully, and decides, rather regretfully, that she’ll have to wake him up. First, she tries a mild wobble of his shoulder. That has no effect at all. Then she tries a considerably harder wobble. Still no results. She peers down at him, and suddenly smirks. It’s a bit cheesy, but… and if it works, it will definitely appeal to Castle’s fantastical mind. She kneels down by the couch, and kisses him firmly on the lips.

That works. In the sense that Castle instinctively wraps arms round her, mutters something that with a little translation becomes not time to get up, love, kiss me again, and doesn’t wait for her to obey before he kisses her instead. Conscious thought does not appear to have figured in any of those actions. However, in view of the appalling afternoon he’s had, and the considerable over-stress he’s suffered, Beckett is not inclined to deny him whatever he wants. (Within reason. She is not buying him a pony.)

The kiss is long, slow and very satisfyingly possessive. When it finally ends, Castle opens sleepy blue eyes, half-smiles, and then appears to realise that they are not in bed. Disappointment runs over his face, swiftly followed by unhappy memory.

“I fell asleep,” he says unnecessarily. “Ow,” as he stretches.

“Me too. I ordered dinner, if you want some.”

“I’d rather just have you,” he says, but the rumble of his stomach gives him the lie.

“After dinner. You can stay, if you want.” Her eyes say you can always stay, or possibly you can stay always.

He stretches again, and winces. “Not on that couch. Ow, my back.” Another slow stretch. “I’d better call Alexis first.”

Beckett retires to the kitchen to give him some privacy for the call, and busies herself with plates and glasses. She can hear a generally contented rumbling of Castle’s baritone in the background, and forcibly doesn’t listen at all. The general flavour is happier. After a few moments he wanders back to her, sniffs happily at the smell of pizza, and smiles.

“All okay. I can stay here tonight.”

“Got your permission slip, have you?” Beckett teases.

“Yep.”
He still, under the happier smile, looks tired, and stressed, and heavy-burdened. Beckett rapidly puts out pizza and soda, and then reaches for his hand and steers him back to the couch, where she can tuck him in. Try to tuck him in, anyway. He’s really too broad and tall to tuck into her, which is why she ends up tucked into him so often. Like now. Castle doesn’t seem to want to be tucked, he wants to do the tucking-in.

“You fit better there,” he says. “It’s comfy.” Whatever he wants, today. She wriggles a little to be perfectly aligned, and munches on her pizza. Castle’s pizza disappears in very short order, and then he fidgets impatiently until Beckett has finished hers. She shuffles the plates together, intending to tidy up, and finds that her standing up doesn’t seem to be on Castle’s to-do list today.

“Don’t,” he says. “Just stay there.” Beckett does. She hears, unspoken but very loud, I need you there. Here. I need to know you’re on my side. “I never wanted this,” he says again. “I wanted her to listen. But she thought she knew best when she didn’t know anything at all and it didn’t matter how much I told her, or anyone told her, she just wouldn’t see that she’s the one who’s broken it all up.”

Beckett emits an unformed, comforting, assenting noise.

“I don’t get how she didn’t see that.” His tone is dull; leaden. “She was making such a fuss about you coming to the loft; and she still pushes the point till it all blows up?”

Beckett has a sudden, truly horrible, thought. What if Martha had thought that – regardless of what Castle had said to her – when the chips were down Castle would choose family over her? What if she’d been counting on that? She clamps her lips firmly together and doesn’t allow a single hint of her thought to escape. She’ll keep that one for Dr Burke. Strictly for Dr Burke. Especially as it doesn’t quite feel right, unlike the insecurity idea.

Castle appears to have run down, temporarily.

“C’mon. Let’s tidy this up and I’ll make some coffee.”

“Okay.”
Castle trudges after Beckett, still deeply unhappy. At least Beckett isn’t enacting histrionic scenes, making demands, or doing anything other than listening to him and cuddling into him. Back to that quality of stillness; a safe haven, or the eye of the storm. Right now, he needs that. He recalls that he can stay, all night: slide into sleep alongside his Beckett and wake with her still there.

Suddenly he needs to hold her, catch her in and keep her: draw on her as he has let her, so often, draw from him. He spins her, and brings her close into him, burying his nose in her hair once more and pressing her ever closer till her muffled squeak tells him it’s too tight. He eases very slightly, but doesn’t let go: the scent of her hair, and simply her, soothing him. Somehow Beckett’s arms have sneaked around his waist and her hands are clasped behind him. She might be leaning in, but it’s he who is taking strength from her.

“I don’t want coffee,” he says. Beckett looks up, surprised. “I just want you.” And he takes her mouth without compunction: raids and ravages and possesses; desperate to find the reassurance that he needs, that there’s a new family possible if his mother’s blown his apart. He’s some way past assertive and tending to aggressive, but Beckett melts and flows and suddenly she’s his Kat: open and soft and always, only, the woman he loves and needs.

Her hands come up to slide round his neck, cupping his face, but he’s too far gone to be gentled: takes and captures and owns with no questions and no stopping. Her silky top flies over her head and lands who-knows-where; her pants puddle on the floor; he spins her round and traps her against the counter, still dominating her mouth. Her fingers bite into his shoulders and back; her tongue and lips fight back and suddenly it’s incendiary: his hands roaming everywhere, hard fingers finding soft heat and that fast he’s taken her in one hard thrust, pushing flimsy fabric frantically aside; fingers finding sensitive nerves and she’s whimpering into his mouth morphing into now Castle don’t stop Castle Castle! and he’s right there exploding with her.

After only a brief moment, he picks her up and carries her through to the bedroom, drops her on the bed, strips himself in swift, efficient movements and then denudes her, buries them both under the covers and continues to kiss her as if there’s nothing and no-one else on earth. He can’t get close enough, hold her tightly enough, or then be deep enough to quell his hurt and guilt and misery.

She stays close, afterwards, once they’re all cleaned up, lying across his chest and holding on to him, still not trying to talk. It’s all up to him: she’s simply his soft, strokable Kat, happy simply to let him lead and take everything, anything, he needs. He rearranges her to be spooned into him, where she can be pressed against him from neck to knee. She mumbles sleepily at him, and then speaks more clearly, “Love you.”

“Love you too,” he whispers as her lashes drop and her breathing evens out in sleep. After a long, heavy time, he follows her. Curled together with his Beckett-Kat, if there are dreams, they’re not nightmares.

Castle wakes to the soft breathing and occasional murmurs of still-somnolent Beckett, currently attached to his hand. He slides an arm gently over her, and snuggles back down. This morning, though his wounds are still raw and bitter-edged, there’s a certain distance that a good night’s sleep has brought. He bites down on the acid pain of being so fundamentally at odds with his mother, and tries not to fidget restlessly. He’s having second, then third, fourth and fifth thoughts about what he’s doing. They skitter round his head like lab rats on acid, chasing each other’s tails. He closes his eyes again, and goes back over everything that’s happened, everything he’s thought and said, and everything Dr Burke has said and drawn out of him.
Finally, he comes to only one conclusion. He’s done the right thing.

However much he loves his mother, however much he respects the sacrifices she made, he is still allowed his own life and his own boundaries. Being a parent doesn’t impose a responsibility on your child. As long as he ensures that she’s taken care of, that she need never be in want of anything, then he needn’t feel guilty.

It doesn’t stop it hurting, though. It really, really doesn’t.

Beckett’s still asleep next to him, under his arm. For a moment, as he looks at her, he has a brief flash of resentment and annoyance. If he’d never met her, or left her to it when he’d walked away in January, he’d still have all his family all together just as they had been.

Would he truly have preferred that? Short term liaisons with women who wanted ten minutes of fame and the paparazzi money shot on page six? Writer’s block and living off past glories?

No.

In the end, no. But it doesn’t stop it hurting.

He turns away, but leaves his hand in hers, hides his face in the pillow. He’d never wanted this.

Alexis cautiously comes downstairs on Saturday evening, fresh from her dad’s call, searching for a hot drink to soothe the tedium of studying her English text. She’d liked *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, when she’d seen it performed. Studying it and deconstructing it isn’t nearly as enjoyable. Totally not how a play should be done. She hunts down the hot chocolate and marshmallows, sneaks a couple to eat – her dad would disapprove: he’d have eaten lots – and is just about to go back to her study text when she notices her Grams swishing down the stairs.

Alexis stays quiet. She totally doesn’t like her Grams much right now, and she’s not in the mood for another round of Grams knows best. Grams makes straight for the wine, pours a large glass, downs it, refills it, downs half of that, and only then spots Alexis. The wine glass is filled further.

“Sweetie, what are you doing?”

“Hot chocolate,” Alexis says, briefly. There is an awkward pause. “I need to study.” She takes two steps toward the stairs.

“Why is Richard doing this?” her Grams says. “I was only trying to help.” Alexis bites her tongue, hard. “I never thought he’d do this.”

Tongue-biting fails to prevent the stream of words. “Dad *told* you what would happen. He *told* you not to interfere. You’re the only one who didn’t get it. He never wanted this to happen but you totally ignored him. You’re the one who’s messed up here and you *still* don’t get it. All you had to do was butt out.”

“All I wanted was Katherine to be part of our family.” Alexis bites her tongue again. “All together. It’s obvious they should be together.” Alexis becomes aware of a tremor in her Grams’ voice, which doesn’t sound as if it’s entirely the result of the wine. “How can Richard ever be happy with someone who won’t be part of the family?”

“She totally would have been, when she was ready!” Alexis yells. “If you’d just waited it would all have worked out. Why couldn’t you wait?”
There’s no answer.

“No-one wanted this to happen. Why did you do it?” Alexis has a sudden, horrible thought, and being fifteen not twenty-nine immediately lets it out of her mouth. “You were jealous that Dad’s in love with Detective Beckett. You thought he’d stop caring about you. You thought if you made him choose he’d side with you. That’s so totally wrong.”

“No!” Martha emits, horrified. “I thought Katherine would be on my side.”

“What?”

“If” – Martha’s voice falters as she looks at the sentence in front of her, all her confidence and theatricality gone – “she thought of me as a mother she’d make sure I didn’t have to move out.”

“What? How could you think Dad would make you move out?”

“He just has.”

“Yeah, after you deliberately ignored every single warning. Dad always carries through.”

“That was bringing you up. It’s different.”

Alexis stays quiet. If Grams hasn’t worked out that Dad always keeps his promises, she hasn’t been paying attention.

“Instead I’m being evicted.”

“You get to pick the apartment, Dad’s still going to give you your allowance, and you’re calling it evicted? You’re unreal, Grams. Most people would kill for that. If Dad did that for me when I’m in college I’d be delighted.” Alexis stops dead and allows her brain to catch up with the conversation so far. “Why didn’t you just tell him you were worried?” There’s no answer. “Why didn’t you tell him?” More silence. “Grams! Stop with the wine and talk.”

“Because he’s still a success and I’m a washed-up has-been actor.”

“You’re jealous of Dad?”

“I only get parts because they want to meet him.” The wine, Alexis deduces, has gone to Grams’ head already. On the other hand, what’s that quote of Dad’s? Oh yes, in vino veritas. “I know the shows won’t run, but those are the only parts anyone’ll give me. Theatre’s an unforgiving mistress, sweetie.”

“Why don’t you try for better parts?”

“Who’d choose me? No-one remembers Martha Rodgers.”

“You won awards. You” –

“Twenty years ago. That’s a lifetime.”

“That’s pathetic!” Alexis yells with all the confidence of a teen who’s never been turned down or knocked back, who’s never had a single failing grade. “You spent all your time telling me that I had to get out there and try, no matter what. Take your own advice, Grams! How’d you know that you wouldn’t get anything if you don’t even audition?”

“What would you know about it?”
“At least I know about not giving up and turning into an old woman!”

“How *dare* you speak to me like that?”

“It’s true. You’re just giving up.”

“I am not!” Martha says in high dudgeon.

“Yes you are. You won’t even choose an apartment, will you? Like you won’t even try for a better show. It’s pathetic. You might as well be eighty and in seniors’ housing.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about. I could get any part I wanted.”

“Really? You just said you couldn’t. Now you can?” Alexis adds a very sarcastic edge of disbelief, and watches her Grams explode in infuriated pride.

“Of course I can. Just watch me. And I’ll need my own space to rehearse in without anyone interrupting.”

“You could rehearse here. You always have before.”

“Here is detrimental to the artistic temperament. All that irritating tapping at keys, when it’s not game noises. I need peace and serenity. And I wouldn’t need to worry about bringing the cast round either. Your father can be very unreasonable about that.”

Alexis doesn’t say one single solitary word. Her on-the-fly plan has *totally* worked. Her dad would be proud of her improvised insanity. Grams has talked *herself* into moving out and trying for better parts. Epic win. Totally.

“I’ll want to see this place. We could decorate it. Bonding time.”

“Absolutely, sweetie. It’ll be fabulous. But isn’t it time for you to turn in? Tomorrow, see what you think about the apartments. You could come with me.”

“Sounds great, Grams. G’night.”

“Good night, darling.”

Alexis hears Martha drain the wine, and shortly thereafter hears her mount the stairs. She smirks happily. She’ll put up with a bit of apartment shopping to make this work out. She hugs her success to her, and thinks even more happily how proud her dad will be. For now, she’ll leave him with Detective Beckett and not interrupt. They deserve some alone time.

__________

Castle detects the small sounds of waking Beckett but doesn’t turn back to her. She stretches out, not releasing his hand, and then turns over to flip an arm across him.

“You’re awake,” she notes, and wriggles into him. “Are you okay?” she adds, as he doesn’t answer.

“It’s the right thing to do,” Castle says bitterly, “so why do I feel so totally *shit* about it?”

“Because setting limits *hurts*,” Beckett spits. “Trust me, I know.” She unfurls from him and leans up. “It’s not easy, or simple, or comfortable. It’s just that not doing it is far worse. You said it to me, no-one else is where you are, and they’re not you, and you do the best you can. It’s nobody’s business but yours. I don’t get to judge what you do just like you don’t get to judge me.”
She flops back into her pillows, without further comment but with her arm still in contact. Castle props himself up and blinks down at her. “Really?”

“Didn’t you mean it when you said it?” Beckett asks, in a delicately enquiring tone which was last heard echoing in Interrogation One.

“Yes… but Beckett, you can’t quote me back at me. That’s cheating.”

“I can if you need it. Listen to your own words.”

“But…”

“But nothing. If you don’t listen I’ll set Dr Burke on you tomorrow.”

“No!” Castle protests. “That’s not fair. I already talked to him – more than once. I don’t wanna do it again. My brain’s been washed.”

“Ugh. I did not need that image.”

“It’s true, though.” He regards her carefully, and his expression changes. “Why are we talking about Dr Burke? Why are we talking at all?”

“Because you’re unhappy.” She peeps through her lashes, colour sneaking along her cheekbones. “Don’t like you unhappy,” she mutters, barely audibly. Aww. Beckett’s being sappy. He should frame the moment. There won’t be another one for about six months. She’s also right. He can’t simply avoid his upset by burying himself in Beckett, whether that’s literal or metaphorical. He needs to face it.

“Yeah.” He lies down again, still gripping her hand. “I have to do this, but… what if it’s just a knee-jerk reaction? What if Alexis hates not having Mother around? She says she’s on my side but she’s a teen.”

“A sensible teen,” Beckett inserts.

“Still.”

“No. She’s fifteen, not five. She can go see your mother, can’t she? If you’re happy, she can have sleepovers there.”

Castle looks sceptical. “Depends on Mother’s friends and cast parties.” Beckett rolls her eyes. “No, some of them are… um… unreliable.”

“Why don’t you just talk to Alexis. Stop theorising and ask her.”

Castle supposes that it’s a practical suggestion. It also twitches a thread of memory in his mind. “Okay,” he says slowly. “But while we’re on the subject, what was upsetting you so much yesterday? It’s not like you haven’t dealt with unreasonable people before.”

“Uh?”

“You disposed of Mother, and then you were really upset. Why? I thought you’d still be mad with her.”

Beckett turns her head away from him. She would have turned the rest of her away too, except Castle anticipated that and has draped an arm over her stomach, the hand of which cups her cheek and turns her head back again.
“C’mon. Did you think I’d be mad?”

“Yeah…”

Castle can hear that there’s more lurking behind that, and waits. “Mm?” he rumbles softly.

“She came here,” Beckett blurts out. “I didn’t want anyone here till I was ready. My dad barely comes here.” She tries to escape again, into the covers.

Castle suddenly gets it. His mother has invaded Beckett’s private space: the space which she has resolutely protected from any of his and indeed her family, which she was and is entirely unready to share with anyone except him, and where she has consistently retreated for peace and protection. His mother, of course, wouldn’t have given it the slightest thought, and has wreaked destruction. No wonder Beckett had been so upset.

“How did she know I lived here? I never told her. Alexis didn’t know. Surely Dad wouldn’t have said?” She turns away again. “You wouldn’t have…” That’s not a question: merely a statement of absolute fact.

“No,” Castle states. “I wouldn’t. But does it matter how she found out? She shouldn’t have come at all, but she did.” He cossets her in. “I can guarantee she won’t be returning.” He forces a smile into his voice. “You scared seven bells out of her. That’s my badass Beckett.”

Just as he’d expected and hoped, the possessive word and tone brings her head up.

“Yours?”

“Yep. Mine. My Beckett and my Kat.” Strangely, he is not yet dead or maimed. He’ll buy a lottery ticket, later. He takes full advantage and manoeuvres her into a more comfortable position. Unsurprisingly, this involves spreading her over him. Equally unsurprisingly, the atmosphere is not sexual at all. Too much tension, too much stress. Too much pain. Beckett has curled into him and insinuated a hand around his shoulder, and so he returns the gesture with arms around her. For a while, there’s no more talking, just togetherness, and taking, or giving, reassurance.

“Dad, Dad, you’re home. I want to talk to you. You need to hear this.”

“Okay.” Castle leads Alexis into his office. “What’s going on?”

“Grams has decided that it’s all her idea that she’s moving out so she can audition and rehearse for better parts without us getting in the way,” Alexis says proudly.

Castle goggles at her. “Uh?” he says, intelligently.

Alexis bounces impatiently, giving herself a remarkable resemblance to her father. “I came down for hot chocolate because I was bored with A Midsummer Night’s Dream and Grams didn’t see me and drank about half a bottle of wine before she did. So she was, like, still complaining and it just came to me that I could totally fix this, well, her.”

“What did you do?”

“Er…” Alexis peeks up at him. “Promise you won’t be mad?”

“Did you use physical violence?”

“Dad! No!”
“Probably not, then.”

“Okay… Er… I was mad with her so… um… we had a bit of a row and then I said that she was turning into an old woman” – Castle winces – “and she lost her temper and then she said she could get any part she wanted and she’d prove it” – his eyes widen – “and she’d need her own space to rehearse and then I said I’d totally want to see it and we agreed I’d go to view the apartments with her and I think it’s all fixed now.”

Castle regards Alexis with considerable admiration, though he also notices some considerable evasions in her tale, chiefly regarding the row piece. He’ll get to those in a moment. “Wow,” he says. “Impressive, daughter of mine.” He grins at her. “How much of that was planned and how much a lucky break?”

Alexis wriggles. “Er… half?”

“You can’t possibly be my daughter. You planned half of it? What happened to unplanned brilliance?”

“That always gets you in trouble. Remember the police horse?”

“Unfair.”

“True, though.”

“Hm,” Castle says. “Nice work. Now,” he says with emphasis, “how about the bits you carefully left out?”

Alexis squirms.

“What happened in the ‘row’?”

“Er…” – another squirm. She rubs her foot up and down the back of her calf, always a tell. “Um… I said she was jealous and thought you’d choose her over Detective Beckett but she said that wasn’t true and she thought if she was her mother” – Castle sorts through the confusion of pronouns and just about follows – “she’d make sure Grams would stay” – dammit, Dr Burke strikes again – “and I think she’s jealous of you being a success and her not being.” Alexis runs out of breath.

“Okay,” Castle says slowly. “I see. Okay. You go apartment shopping with Grams, then, and make sure it’s not too far away. I’ll make sure it all works out.”

“I know that,” Alexis points out with a considerable helping of teen condescension for the stupidity of adults.

“Be off with you, then.”

Alexis departs surrounded by a glow of conscious virtue. Castle sits down, leans back in his chair and plants his feet directly in the centre of his desk. He has some considerable thinking to do.
Are you ready?

He starts with the good parts. Somehow, his wonderful daughter has managed, by hook, crook, luck and judgement, to talk his mother round to believing that a new apartment is all her own idea. That’s amazing. Even better, Alexis will steer her round all the possibilities, which leaves him with time (tomorrow) to talk to his financial adviser and attorney. He’d rather be shadowing Beckett, but if he gets this fixed then with a little luck Beckett will soon feel like arriving here.

The bad parts, though, are also legion. His mother clearly didn’t trust him to take care of her, which stings. He’s always taken care of her, as soon as he was successful, except while she was married to that fraudster. He has no idea why she would think he wouldn’t carry on. She’s jealous of him, which is equally biting. About the only bright spot is that she isn’t jealous of Beckett, though he knows who – and what – he’d bet on if she were.

He has a sudden memory of first O’Leary, drawling simplify at them; and then Dr Burke, repeating the three C’s. Didn’t cause, can’t control, can’t cure. Or, more simply still – not his problem. It’s something his mother will have to work through for herself. As he’d said to Beckett and she’d pushed back at him: you do the best you can and it’s nobody’s business to judge you.

Okay. It still stings. No doubt it will continue to sting for some time. But stings notwithstanding, it’s not his problem. He’s got what he wanted, and courtesy of his amazingly brilliant daughter, his mother has now come round to being happy about it. He realises that somewhere in the last few moments he’s registered the sound of the closing door, as his mother and Alexis go out.

He pads out, makes himself a very large mugful of excellent coffee, returns, and pulls his laptop towards him. He reads back the previous couple of chapters, to reacquaint himself with the story line he’s pursuing and continue smoothly. Words unroll in his head and flow out through his fingers. He sinks into his new Nikki-world and loses himself there.

Hours later, he emerges from extended creativity: hungry, thirsty and desperately in need of straightening his back and shoulders. Once he’s attended to the urgent necessity of flexing his spine, he realises that he hasn’t shaved either, deals with that, and then emerges from his office to find that it’s six p.m., and Alexis and his mother are planted firmly on the couch discussing two out of the fistful of apartments in a manner that indicates that it’s a straight choice between them.

“Dinner?”

“Ah, Richard darling.” Matters have clearly gone well. “I can’t decide between these two.” Castle looks down at two specs. “This one has more room, but this one’s better arranged for having impromptu rehearsals, and the piano would fit.”

“You’re taking the piano?”

“Well, of course. It’s not as if you ever play it.”

“That was relief, Mother. Please take the piano.”

“In that case, this one.”

His mother hands him one of the apartment specs. He flicks an eye down it and finds that it’s located in the East Village, which he should have expected. “Room for visitors?”

“Of course.”
“I might want to stay at Grams’,” Alexis says with a very knowing look. Castle bestows a paternal growl on her.

“Okay, Mother. I’ll start everything moving tomorrow. Now, dinner?”

Dinner is generally acknowledged to be a good idea, and not long thereafter, is being eaten in more harmony than has obtained in the Castle household for some weeks. Castle goes back to writing after dinner, and manages considerable productivity before he stops for the night. Tomorrow, he thinks, is going to be a busy day.

Castle calls his attorney as early as he can, and having secured an appointment scheduled for ten, then calls the realtor to make sure he gets the correct apartment. Having got this far, he doesn’t want some rich dilettante to steal it out from under his mother’s nose. (He entirely fails to see the irony in his dislike for rich dilettantes.) He’d rather be at the Twelfth, annoying Beckett in public and giving her the good news in private. He just hopes a body doesn’t drop in the next couple of hours.

Fortunately for Castle, it doesn’t. He has a short, efficient discussion with his attorney; an even shorter and more efficient discussion with his financial adviser, who tells him that he’s underweight in property and that this will be an excellent long-term investment, which Castle takes with a small pinch of salt; and then makes the realtor very, very happy. She’s even more happy when he says that he wants to have the deal done and a moving in date of before the end of the month. Cynically, he expects that the speed means that her commission will be calculated this month too. However, it’s done.

He bounces off to the Twelfth in a very school’s-out manner. Unfortunately, in the bullpen, school’s in. There is an atmosphere of diligence and high work rate, which is not notably diminished when he presents Beckett with her morning coffee.

“What’s going on?”

“1PP wants the cold cases reduced, again.”

“I didn’t think you’d got many.”

“No, but we need to take our share from the others. Same as last time – remember? Fresh eyes.” She gestures at the pile of folders on her desk. “Feel free to take a few, but try to keep the way out theories to a minimum.”

“Aw, you’re no fun.”

“Respect the dead, dude,” Esposito says from over his shoulder. “Murder ain’t no game.”

Castle raises his hands in placation. “Okay.” He lifts the top one. “What am I looking for?”

“Anything that might be a clue, or a new line of enquiry.” Beckett drains the coffee and sighs. “Never ends.”

“Are you allowed lunch break?”

“Yeah. I’ll need a break by then.”

“Good. Lemme buy you lunch.”
Beckett assesses Castle’s air of suppressed enthusiasm, and deduces that he must have made progress with his mother, but that he doesn’t want to discuss it under the interested ears of Ryan and Esposito. Since the boys are as bored with cold cases as she is, their ears will be more than usually interested, and she really does not want to discuss her private life with any of them.

Lunch time is reached without any major disasters or breakthroughs: simply the grind of police work. Some folders have possible new leads – very few – some are sufficiently old that lab techniques have moved on – also very few – but most have been properly investigated in the first place and there is simply nothing more to be done. However, it ticks the 1PP boxes, which keeps Montgomery happy, which means that the team is happy. Or at least they are not being subjected to one of Montgomery’s little chats, which are never productive of happiness.

“C’mon,” says Castle through a gaping yawn. “If I don’t get out of here I’ll turn into a dry pile of dust.”

“Thought I said no way-out theories?”

“That’s not a theory.”

“I don’t believe in premonitions either.”

Castle grins. “More like foresight?”

“Or clairvoyance.”


They wander out, Beckett fixing the boys with a hard stare which discourages them from following. Company is not required.

“So what happened?” she asks, before they’re even seated.

“Hurricane Alexis,” Castle says proudly.

“Huh?”

“Alexis laid into Mother, asked – yelled – if she was jealous of you” – Beckett startles – “she wasn’t, she thought you’d support her staying, just like Burke said – and then – God knows how – managed to talk her into believing that moving out would enhance her career and that it was the best thing for her.”

Castle surveys Beckett’s dropped jaw and gobsmacked look with considerable satisfaction, and lays his hand over hers, tucking his thumb underneath.

“Wow,” Beckett says, stunned.

“So I’ve seen my attorney and financial adviser and the realtor and it’ll all be done by the end of the month.”

Beckett makes a noise approximating to er-glurgh, followed by gleep. Castle grins smugly at her wordless state, and strokes his thumb insinuatingly over her palm.

“And then I’m changing the locks so you can come any time you like.” She gleeps again, sounding like a frazzled parakeet. “Cute noise, but are you going to use your words?”
She stares at him. He’s completely robbed her of all words and most thoughts. All she can think is already? She’s not ready to go there. Suddenly it’s all real and right here right now and she is absolutely not ready.

“Beckett? Kate? Kate, talk to me.”

She just stares, eyes wide. Castle thinks frantically, and fails to find a good explanation for what’s going on. About the only positive is that she hasn’t moved, either. She’s still sitting in stupefied silence when the server stops to take their order. She reels that off without thought or intonation and then goes back to her attempt at self-petrification.

“Kate, talk to me.”

“I… I…”

“Or at least eat your lunch so I know you aren’t going to faint on me.”

“I don’t faint!” she says crossly, shocked out her stupefaction.

“In that case, if you don’t want your fries I’ll have them,” he says, and sneaks a couple.

“Hey! Leave my fries alone.”

Castle raids another couple, purely to annoy Beckett and restore her to life. She tries to smack his fingers and misses. However, she does start to eat her lunch. Explanations are not forthcoming, but Castle will settle for her eating for now.

When she’s finished, nothing of any importance – indeed, nothing at all – has been said. Castle stands up. “C’mon, Beckett. Let’s have a nice walk to aid the digestion. We’ve still got a few minutes.” He pulls her up and walks out the door with her trailing behind him.

Tompkins Square Park is sunny and warm, and fairly shortly Castle’s taken his jacket off and is contemplating rolling up his sleeves. He doesn’t, mostly because that would entail detaching his arm from around Beckett, who has returned to being lost in some other world. He sits them down on a convenient bench in the full sunshine, tucks her in firmly, and then tips her chin up and kisses her briefly.

“What’s up?”

“I’m not ready.” Which means approximately nothing to Castle. “It’s too soon and I’m not ready. I need to talk to Burke.”

“Okay,” he says amiably. “You’ll see him tomorrow.” Under his amiability, his brain is whirring. He still doesn’t get what’s going on in Beckett’s brain, but pushing might well be the wrong idea. He cuddles her for a moment or two more, achieves no more answers than prior to lunch time, and then encourages her to return to the precinct.

Beckett mechanically works her way through cold case files for the rest of the afternoon, uncomfortably conscious that her reaction to Castle’s decisive actions is exactly not what she herself had expected and certainly not what Castle was expecting. She’d expected that she’d be relieved, and happy, and able to move forward with complete enthusiasm – or at least think seriously about it. Instead she’s terrified. Suddenly everything’s shifting under her: she’s losing the little footing she had in normality. She can sense Castle’s uncertainty as he sits by her desk, but she hasn’t a clue what to say to him. She wants this, but now that she can have it it’s all too soon.
At shift end she’s no further forward in cases or self-analysis. She glances at Castle, who is maintaining an expression of rather forced placidity.

“I’m sorry,” she says quietly while waiting for the elevator. “I… I don’t know what’s wrong.” The elevator arrives before any words do.

Castle sneaks an arm around her, which he is not allowed to do in the precinct but which he has managed to conceal in the packed elevator, and withdraws it before anyone spots his action. They take a few steps down the street towards her cruiser.

“Want a ride home?”

“Sure.” Maybe in the car she’ll find some words. Okay, so she’s not running, and she’s managed a few words of – well, not exactly explanation but at least that she doesn’t know what the problem is – but he’s worried. They’ve talked about his mother moving out, so he simply doesn’t get this sudden bump in the road.

“I don’t know what’s wrong,” she says, now sounding irritated and upset with herself in equal shares, as if she’d heard his thoughts. He doesn’t hear the familiar ring of irritated with Castle, or the much more worrying upset with Castle, and deduces that her lack of understanding needs to be considered, and more, considered alone. Astonishingly, given his deductions, her hand arrives on top of his. Very briefly, since it’s rush hour in Manhattan and both hands are generally required for driving, but still, it’s a reassurance.

“Think about it,” he rumbles as they approach his block. “Till tomorrow.”

“Night,” she says, and leans over to kiss him. Castle takes advantage, cups his hands round her face, and indulges in a leisurely and somewhat assertive farewell, designed to ensure that she’s left in no doubt of his bona fides. Well, wickedly naughty fides, whatever that translates to. He should have paid more attention in Latin class.

Beckett fails utterly to understand her ever-increasing discomfort, despite the addition of those well-known brain foods, ice cream and strong coffee. She spends the evening worrying at the sensation, and awakes unrefreshed and even more annoyed with herself. Her day full of cold case files and Castle’s attempts to hide his concern don’t do a single solitary thing to improve her mood, and for once she leaves for Dr Burke’s with relief, not annoyance or trepidation.

“Hey.”

“Good evening.”

“Castle’s mother is moving out, and I can’t cope with it,” Detective Beckett blurts out, to Dr Burke’s mild surprise. “I don’t get it. I want to go to the loft and as soon as it looks like it’s possible without Martha getting in the way I spook.”

“Why do you think you are ‘spooking’?”

“I don’t know. All I could think was I’m not ready for this. It’s pathetic,” she adds acidly.

“Hmm,” Dr Burke emits. This is not an unexpected hurdle. “Let us consider this carefully. You have been aware for some time that Mr Castle was intending to ask his mother to move out. What was his reasoning?”

Beckett ponders. “She was interfering. She wouldn’t respect his boundaries.”
Dr Burke waits, expectantly. “And?”

There is a long period of thought. “He said” – she falters – “if I were to move in – oh, hell.” Detective Beckett puts her head in her hands. It appears that she understands her current issue. “I didn’t realise that was what it was. It’s…I’m not ready.”

“Mm. Has Mr Castle pressured you to move in in any way?”

“No…”

“Has he ever suggested that you do anything for which you are not ready?”

“No…”

“So why do you suddenly feel as if you are being forced to an action which you do not wish to take?”

Detective Beckett considers some more. “I don’t know,” she finally says, with an edge of irritation.

“Very well. Let us leave that for a moment. Instead, please consider whether you wish to move in with Mr Castle at all.”

Detective Beckett stares blankly at Dr Burke. “You what now?”

“Do you wish to move in with Mr Castle?”

“Yes.” Detective Beckett could hardly be more definite.

“That is encouraging.”

It most certainly is. Dr Burke had little doubt of the answer, but there are occasionally complications which even he does not foresee.

“But not now.”

“That appears to me to be entirely reasonable.”

“Huh?”

“Detective Beckett,” Dr Burke says patiently, “Mr Castle is not asking you to move in immediately. In fact, he has not, by your own admission, asked you to do anything for which you are not ready. You have merely discussed a theoretical possibility, which may come to pass in future. Therefore it is entirely reasonable that you are unprepared for any move. In any case, such a change would be premature while you are still overcoming your previous issues with your father and Mr Castle’s family. I would, were I to be asked, counsel most strongly against such a move at this time.”

“But it felt like he was asking.”

“That is your interpretation.”

Detective Beckett relapses into silence again. Dr Burke hopes that she is applying a portion of intelligence to the issue. The matter, and the reasoning, is perfectly obvious, if only she would think clearly. Thinking clearly does not appear to be within Detective Beckett’s capability at this time, as the silence becomes protracted.
Detective Beckett, please consider why you might interpret Mr Castle’s words in this way.” At last, Detective Beckett applies her intelligence.

“I don’t want to upset him?” Dr Burke waits. “Um… I know he wants to and it’s the same as with Dad: feeling I ought to do something more but not wanting to and feeling guilty about that?”

“Precisely. Please expand upon that concept.”

Detective Beckett takes a moment to gather her thoughts. When she does speak, Dr Burke detects the same tones as she had used when questioning him, and concludes that she is applying her professional skill to assembling the points she wishes to consider. “I didn’t expect that Martha would agree to move out so quickly. I thought it would take much longer, and I’d have managed more than a couple of brunches and a dinner, all of them in public. Suddenly she’s not an issue, but I’m nowhere near fixed and… and it’s all down to me again. If Martha wasn’t moving out it wouldn’t just be me being the hold up.”

“Mm?”

“But – but like I said to Dad, I should go as fast as I’m ready for. It’s just… I wanna get there,” Detective Beckett says, somewhat pathetically. “It just takes so long and I feel like everyone’s waiting for me to catch up and they’re getting impatient.”

“Mm,” Dr Burke says again. “Recall, if you please, the approach you took to your original therapy.”

“Oh. No. I know it can’t go too fast.”

That is reassuring. Detective Beckett was on the verge of making the same mistake as she had previously. Fortunately, Dr Burke is a far better practitioner – indeed, he is a practitioner, which is not, now, the case with the former therapist – than that whom Detective Beckett had attended previously, and the danger has been averted.

“It seems to me,” Dr Burke pronounces judicially, “that the person who is pressuring you is yourself. Why are you doing so?”

“I want this done,” Detective Beckett says, clearly annoyed.

Dr Burke raises his eyebrows, and gives her a hard stare. “I do not believe that that is the only reason. Please consider your previous patterns of behaviour and indeed your earlier words.”

Detective Beckett produces a fearsome, but entirely ineffective, scowl. Since she also appears to be complying with the exercise, Dr Burke remains unruffled. Intemperate reactions are a normal part of a therapist’s daily lot. They are very rarely personal, and even if they were, are transient.

“You’re saying I’m feeling guilty about putting my feelings first, again.”

“Indeed. Now, why are you feeling guilty, especially since Mr Castle is quite content to wait for you?”

“Because it feels like he does all the compromising and I don’t give anything back.”

“Mm. Describe an instance of such compromising.”

“He packed his family off to a spa weekend.”
“Yes,” Dr Burke says slowly. “He did. And then, despite your considerable trepidation at the prospect, you spent the weekend in Mr Castle’s family – his emphasis is severe – ‘home.’ He pauses, to allow the point to sink in. “When you related that episode to me, you informed me that you did not want to go in, nor to stay. Yet you did go in, and you did stay. In these circumstances, that is a form of giving back, or, if you prefer, your contribution to the compromise.”

“Oh.”

“We have come to the end of tonight’s session. Before Friday, I should like you to consider each occasion on which you believe Mr Castle has compromised, and then consider your actions or lack of actions in response. It would be helpful if you were to send me your thoughts beforehand, though I appreciate that this may not be possible. We will discuss your conclusions at our next session, before your father arrives. Mr Castle need not be present. You might also consider why you are feeling this guilt now, when you have largely overcome that issue. I suggest, in the light of these matters, that it would not be appropriate to have a joint session with your father this week, and if you are in agreement with that course of action I shall so advise him, in a manner which ensures that he does not feel any concern. You and Mr Castle will be seeing him, you have said, on Saturday, with Miss Castle, at your father’s apartment. I do not foresee any damage to your progress, therefore.”

Dr Burke recalls Mr Castle’s description of his mother’s words to Detective Beckett. It is quite clear from where these feelings have been triggered. However, Detective Beckett must work that out for herself.

“Okay. Bye.”

“Good night.”

Dr Burke realises that he did not hear the story of the murdered tennis coach, and expends a few seconds in regretting the lapse of memory which prevented him asking. He makes a small note, for Friday. Following that, he contemplates Detective Beckett’s issues, and makes a further note, for later consideration. He hopes to ensure that the course which he believes to be most appropriate is still appropriate after a night’s clarifying rest. He does not wish to be precipitate.
Beckett avoids her homework all the way home. Well, she needs to concentrate on the road. Definitely. It’s not like the Manhattan streets are wide and empty. Then she needs to concentrate on her parking. The space is very small. Well, it is if you’re driving a truck. With a family-sized trailer.

Similarly, the route upward to her apartment requires concentration, in case she should trip on a previously unperceived ridge of flooring between the building door and the elevator, or the elevator and her own door. Courtesy of her attention, no such hindrance besets her, proving that her concentration was justified.

Once in her own apartment, however, Beckett is perfectly aware that there are no ridges, traffic, or indeed any matters of which to beware. Therefore she has no excuse to avoid her homework. Still, she would like a coffee, she needs to tidy up, it would be a nice idea to rearrange her shoes into colour order… When she reaches the last thought, she bites her lip and recognises that she’s being ridiculous. She makes the coffee, though.

She’s just about to press the plunger on the French press when there’s a knock on the door and she realises it’s Castle.

“Hey,” she says, rising up on her bare toes to kiss him. Castle is not at all averse to being kissed, and makes it clear by kissing her back enthusiastically. “Coffee? I was just making some.”

“Sure, thanks.” He follows her through, prowling contentedly at her heels, like a dangerous big cat currently inclined to playfulness. The kiss has removed most of his more intense worries, but he’d still like some more reassurance, and coffee with cuddling will certainly help.

It takes her a few moments to speak, but by now he’s adept at recognising a Beckett who will, eventually, force important words from her mouth; and he’s equally adept at creating the atmosphere in which she – many people, but it has been far more difficult to mould it to Beckett’s tight-wrapped silences so that they unfurled with him – might articulate her thinking.

“I worked it out,” she says, clipping off each word as if she doesn’t like them. “With Burke. Same old issue. You’d dealt with the only external obstacle and all that was left was my problems. It wasn’t even you. All me.”

“What wasn’t me?” Castle thinks. Though it’s good not to be blamed for whatever’s going on. He thinks about what Beckett has just said, idly drawing patterns on her upper arm. You’d dealt with the only external obstacle. To what? What obstacle… oh. His mother, of course. Okay, so think, Rick. He draws a small spiral, up and down, a double helix; up and down and round about. Moving too fast? She’d said I’m not ready on Monday, and again a moment ago. Not ready for what?

“I’ll get there,” she promises, weight falling in her words. “But I’m not ready to be there yet” – and it suddenly becomes clear. She’s not ready to come to the loft. She’s also not looking at him.

“I get it.”
“Do you?” There’s a bitter edge, directed firmly at herself. “All this time and nothing in the way except I still can’t come to your loft because I still can’t deal with your family. I want to…” She looks at him as if she thinks he might not believe her.

“Didn’t we have this discussion? We’re having dinner at your dad’s on Saturday, and you’ll take the next step when you’re ready. When you’re ready.” He assesses her mood. “And I bet Burke told you the same thing.” The subsonic growl emanating from Beckett tells him he’s right. “So just park it. Stop thinking for a while. You are dealing with my family, and we’re doing just fine with it.” He smirks nastily. “Anyway, I still haven’t invited you back again, so you can’t come. You still have to wait for an invitation. Manners, Miss Beckett.”

His humour doesn’t seem to be helping. “Stop fretting. It won’t help. Come here instead.” He hoists her up and plops her into his very receptive lap, where he can kiss her assertively and then pillow her head on his shoulder and keep her very close indeed. “There. It’s okay if you’re not ready. I’d much rather you got it right and came when you were ready instead of forcing it and it all going horribly wrong. It’s not a race.”

“It’s dumb. I should be happy that another thing’s out the way, and instead I’m scared.”

“You think I’m not?”

“Huh?”

“It’s all changing. I thought my family was all settled – weirdly, but settled. And then all this happened and suddenly my mother turns into every satirist’s dream smother-mother and Alexis discovers her inner teen tantrum mode and your dad starts trying to get protective like you were sixteen again and Burke dissects both our heads without anaesthetic every week. Well, mostly yours, but mine isn’t exactly unscathed either. O’Leary was right.”

“Uh?”

“We should run off to some uninhabited island and live there.”

“I wish. Why didn’t you say you were scared too? I thought – anyway, you don’t mess around, you just fix things. Like moving your mother out. I knew you were upset but then you just fixed it. You fix things,” she says again. “I’ve still not fixed anything.”

“I didn’t have much to fix.”

Castle stops. Anything further is unlikely to be helpful. “Why are we back to this anyway? I told you it’s up to you and we don’t need to worry about it. It’s not even a setback and you’re fretting. Stop fretting. It doesn’t suit you. You’ll get wrinkles. Let’s think about something else. What are you going to cook for Saturday night? Can you cook anything except Georgian?”

“Yes,” Beckett says offendedly. “I can. Lots of things.”

“What, then? I wanna know what dinner will be.”

“Wait and see.”

“Last time you said that I persuaded you to tell me.”

“Did you? I don’t remember that.”

“Really?” Castle purrs. “I don’t believe you. I think you remember exactly how I persuaded you. I
It’ll certainly be a better idea than blurting out of course I want you to move in and if you’d only say the word we could do that tomorrow after work. Not least because he knows that she wants to, but she’s scared of it all going wrong by moving too fast when nothing’s fixed. Which is perfectly reasonable, but frustrating. For both of them.

“Mm,” Beckett emits, which doesn’t sound exactly like heartfelt lust. In fact, she’s rather – well, undefined right now. He scraps the idea of indulging in some heated making out and/or bedsheets tangling, and sticks with cosseting for the moment. Anyway, she’s nicely curled around him and while she’s thinking – and she is – he can peacefully contemplate the next part of his book, which he does.

His reverie is broken by Beckett’s shift in position. She isn’t any more defined than earlier, and she doesn’t, on inspection, look any happier either.

“How can this mess be enough for you?” she says quietly. “You do everything and change your life around and put up with my dad and me no matter what, and I can’t give you anything back.” She tries to slide away. Castle doesn’t let her go. “I can’t even come to your loft. How can you not be upset by that? You have to be. And your daughter. What does she think of all this? How does she feel that I’m sleeping with her dad and then can’t even say hello to her without wincing? How can she not be unhappy about that?”

Castle hears the echo of his mother’s words, and mentally curses her. Beckett assuming another load of guilt and unhappiness is exactly what was not needed just as everything was getting better. Time for some blunt reminders. He is not going to help her wallow in unhappiness.

“Stop,” he says firmly. “You’re talking nonsense. Just because my” – he smothers the word idiot – “mother says something doesn’t mean it’s true. If I wasn’t happy I’d say so.” He swallows, and goes for it. “Or are you not happy, and looking for a way out?”

“No!” The instant of life falls away. “But I wouldn’t blame you if you were.”

“I’m not.” Castle gives her shoulders a shake. “Stop being so downright dumb. If I thought you were hurting Alexis I wouldn’t be here. Just like when you tried to use it to drive me away. It didn’t work then and it’s not working now. You can’t get rid of me.” He shakes her again, gently. “What’s all this really about? Everything was going right. For a change,” he adds bitterly.

Beckett makes another attempt to move away. “No, you don’t. You’re not running away. I’m not letting you.” He clasps her more tightly. “If you’re not looking for the exit then stay put and talk to me. Or don’t talk to me. But stay put. You know it’s always better when you’re with me.”

“Yeah, and what do you get out it?”

“You,” says Castle, simply. It stops Beckett in her miserable meanderings. He takes advantage of her silenced state. “What did Burke say to you to start this off?”

“He asked why I was feeling guilty about not being ready for…”

“Moving in,” Castle says. “Even though I haven’t asked you to.”

“I know that.”

“So? Why do you? I don’t see why you need to feel guilty about anything as long as we’re both happy. I’m happy – except when you start being miserable and getting into difficulties where there
aren’t any. That doesn’t make me happy at all, so you shouldn’t do it. So why’re you feeling guilty again?

“I said. You do all the fixing and compromising and making it work…”

“Really?” He places a hand on her forehead.

“What’re you doing?”

“Checking your temperature, since you’re obviously delirious.”

“What?”

“You went to fucking therapy, Beckett. How’s that not trying to fix things?” He’s annoyed, now. She’s being dumb. He’s more irritated because it really had all been going well until his mother had laid a guilt trip on Beckett. “You went to therapy and you’ve been working it out ever since. You’ve come out with the family, you’ve come to the loft, and you’ve agreed to a dinner at your father’s. So how are you not trying?” His voice has risen, “Stop listening to what other people think. It doesn’t matter. Especially when they’re wrong.”

He tips her face up, hard fingers enclosing her jaw, blue eyes flaring furiously. “We’re not going round this loop. You don’t need to feel guilty about any of this and I said I’d tell you if you were putting too much on me and I would but you’re not. So just stop it.” He closes his mouth by main force and drops his hand. Beckett is looking at him as if she’s never seen him before. As he watches her expression, he also notices that there’s liquid pooling, brimming in her eyes – an instant before she drops her head and turns away from his view, trying to escape him again.

“No.” He brings her back, sweeps his thumb gently across the fine skin below her eyes. “No crying. No guilt. Just us. Just you and me, here and now.” She buries her head in his shirt again.

“I wanted to be able to come to the loft and now that it’s real I can’t do it when it ought to be easier,” emerges.

“When you’re ready. Not when you think you ought to. Stop thinking about it. It’s not relevant. **This** is all that matters,” and he tugs her out of his shirt and kisses her, gently but with intent. “**We’ll** be fine. Nothing else matters. **Especially** not my mother’s stupid statements. She’s wrong.”

“See, you’re doing all the compromising and fixing.”

Castle emits a growl that would scare a silverback gorilla. “And last week it was you comforting me when I was upset and trying to fix that. This isn’t a one-way street. What does it take to get you to see that? Actually, the hell with that.” And he simply swoops in and takes her mouth with absolutely no compromising at all. If nothing else, she can’t deny her confidence in her own responses, whatever else she’s unsure of.

Astonishingly, it works. It might have been born of annoyed frustration, but assertive physicality has always cut straight through the other issues to remind them both of who they are together, and it’s doing so now. He tastes and takes and cradles the back of her skull to bring her close and keep her there and show her that there’s no doubt in his mind of where their future lies, and she accepts his lead just as she always has.

He stops, and tucks her into his arms again. “Let’s not think about it any more. Let’s just” – he smiles sleepily – “make each other very happy, right here.” and he kisses her again, with just as much intent but less force: encouraging her to slide into the soft, comforting Kat-ness that’ll ease her and please him. Her hands slip into his hair, thumbs cupping his face and scraping on the
shadow of beard beginning to appear around his chin; she curls in close and presses against him.

He stands up with her still in his arms (and he will suffer for doing that if he doesn’t up his gym time), and takes her through to her bedroom, but he sits down on the bed with her on his knee and doesn’t do anything other than take his time over possessing her mouth, loving the feel of her lips on his, her tongue arguing that he should let her win him over, her hands holding him in a little desperately, as if he’d run, or she might, without that tight grip.

“No leaving. Not ever leaving you, Beckett,” and that seems to be enough: she relaxes and melts and gives in, and then they’re lost.

“Your mother hit it square on. All the worries about not doing enough, like not caring enough about Dad, like I couldn’t be good enough. Just like I never felt I’d been good enough for Dad. After all, he’d have rather had the whiskey than me.”

“You’re still working through that one,” Castle says, but she doesn’t seem to hear it.

“And she came here. I thought I was safe here. Nothing to remind me.”

Castle thinks about the abstract pictures, the lack of photos, the neutral décor: only the bird and, now, the small red stone which he had given her to give a hint of personality; and wonders about that. There’s so little here, that maybe it can’t block the memories.

“What did Burke say about that?”

“We didn’t talk about it.”

“Yeah?”

“He told me to consider why all these feelings were happening now. And to consider when I think you’ve compromised and what I did. Or didn’t do. He’s really big on me considering. I’m so tired of thinking.”

“So don’t think, for a while. Snuggle up and do something else.”

“One-track mind.”

“Not at all. I was thinking of reciting classic American poetry. Hiawatha. It’s your mind that’s in the gutter. My intentions were completely pure.”

Beckett makes a rude and disbelieving noise. “This is pure?” she says, running a hand over his naked form and arriving at a firm indication of potential impurity.


“and pure pleasure,” as he rolls over and rises above her and employs pure wickedness to leave her soaked, squirming and then sated.

“I have to go. But… look, it’s okay. I’m not in any hurry. You don’t need to be. Just – trust me to tell you the truth about how I feel, huh? That hasn’t changed. Hang on to that when you’re doing all this considering. I’m not lying and I’m not leaving.” He bends down to plant a brief kiss on her lips, then leans his brow on her forehead. “I love you.”
She pulls him down and kisses him far more passionately. “Love you too.”

Surprisingly, she sleeps soundly. Her shower clears her head further, possibly because she’s not trying to think. She shoves all her difficult thoughts and considerations to the back of her brain to ferment – or possibly fester, she thinks with black humour – and determines to leave them till lunchtime when she’ll go for a walk (if no new body has dropped) and think it out while her feet are moving.

Her plans look as if they’ll be completely derailed when a new body drops almost as soon as she’s entered the bullpen, but a focused morning’s effort by the four of them leaves them waiting for all the usual searches, and having had no useful input from next of kin (an elderly uncle whose memory isn’t the best any more and whose eyesight is sufficiently poor that his spectacles are more like bottle-bottoms,) or the one friend they could track down, it’s another waiting game. And so lunchtime rolls around.

“Castle,” Beckett says quietly.

“Urg? Yeah?” She watches his brain emerge from whichever game he’s playing now.

“Could you have lunch with Ryan and Espo today?” He casts her a piercing look. “I want to think, and I need to do it on my own. I’m going to go over to Tompkins Square, walk around a bit, see what shakes out.”

“Bit like staring at your murder board?” Castle says.

“Exactly like, but I need to move.”

“Okay. As long as you call me if you get so upset you don’t want to come back?”

Ow. That’s pointed. And possibly justified, after last night.

“Okay.”

He smiles beautifully at her. “And then I’ll call O’Leary to go get you, because you’re less likely to shoot him than me.”

It’s another sunny day, and once Beckett has eaten her lunch and entered the park she folds her jacket over her arm so that she can enjoy it, turning her face up to the sunshine and wriggling her shoulders in the warmth. However, she doesn’t have any too much time, so she’d better start her thinking. *Considering.*

Despite the sting, she pulls out Martha’s words about Castle and Alexis’s feelings. They’d taken some time to sink in: deferred to the need to deal with Castle’s unhappiness, which had been far more immediate, and his dealing with her initial shock. But then they’d mixed themselves into her feeling that she should be able to move faster… ah. *Here’s* the evidential thread to pull; the cord that leads to motive. It’s so simple, in the bright sunlight: someone had once said it, she thinks irrelevantly: sunlight is the best disinfectant, electric light the most efficient policeman. She has no idea why she remembers that; however, the principle is what she needs. Drag out the poisoned needles of Martha’s careless, manipulative lies, and disentangle them from the long-standing weave of her own issues around not doing enough for her father, being unlovable because of her own behaviour in abandoning him, and then doing everything for him to prove – to him? To herself? – that she was worthy of love…
Spot the pattern, *Detective*. She’s perilously close to trying to prove to Castle that she’s worthy of being loved, by doing something she’s neither ready for, nor comfortable with. He’s not asking her to prove anything, though. Park that, because it feeds the thinking about compromising. Back to Martha’s words. Hitting her insecurity point-perfect in the bullseye. *It would make Richard so much happier…it would reassure Alexis too…he really wants you to be able to come to the loft.* It’s exactly how she thought about her father. He’d be so happy if she …came to dinner every week… showed him she still loves him…doesn’t resent him…forgave him. And so she thought she had, except she hadn’t, and it had taken Dr Burke to unpick that mess. And here she is, falling into old bad habits, because someone else tells her she ought to. Just like the first therapist had told her she ought to grow up and get over it. It’s as wrong now as it was then, for the same reason.

Incompetent interference. With, or without, good motives. But either way, it’s *wrong*. The first therapist was wrong and Martha is wrong and Beckett’s instincts are *right*. And no matter how much she’s in love, no matter how much she loves curling into Castle’s warm bulk and solid strength, no matter how good they are together – she is *not ready*.

She has a right to do this in her own good time.

But right now she’s on Montgomery’s time, and she’s got less than ten minutes to get her ass back into her desk chair. She skedaddles.
She hits her desk with seconds to spare, much to everyone’s amusement except hers.

“Hey, Beckett, what’s kept you? Is there a shoe sale at Saks that you had to get to?”

“Nah, can’t be that. No bags.”

“She could get them delivered.”

“No shopping, boys,” Beckett says firmly.

“No? So where’ve you been? You missed dim sum lunch. Gotta have a good reason for that.”

“Sure I do.”

“And?”

“That’s for me to know and you not to find out.”

“Beckett,” they whine. She rolls her eyes, and then glares in a way which is decidedly not humorous at all. The boys decide that they don’t need to know. They’d like to know, obviously, but not at the expense of their testicles. They might need those. They do notice that Castle is not whining right along with them, and being as they are hotshot detectives, they detect that he might well know what Beckett’s been doing all lunchtime. C’mon, it was dim sum. Beckett’s normally in there with the faster-than-light chopsticks, so there must be a really good reason for her to have missed out.

A small amount of discreet observation later tells Espo that Castle certainly knows what went down at lunchtime. He’s given Beckett one of those concerned glances that tell the experienced observer that he’s worried about her (that man has no poker face at all where Beckett’s concerned, which makes it deeply weird that he manages it all the rest of the time and especially when picking their pockets over the poker table), Beckett’s returned a small smile that equally clearly says later, and Castle’s relaxed completely.

“Hey,” Espo nudges Ryan. “You think Castle knows what’s up?”

“Sure he does. You think he’s gonna spill? I don’t.”

Espo considers. Castle has been notably silent on the subject of Beckett every time he’s been pushed. On the other hand, the team (which includes Castle) needs to be tight.

“Maybe not. I don’t want her goin’ off ill again, leavin’ us all the paperwork. We got a right to know that.”

“She doesn’t look ill.”

“So? Didn’t last time.”

“This is not a good plan, Espo,” Ryan says dispiritedly.

Beckett appears to be working through her cases the next time Castle goes to the break room. Espo had considered waiting for the next time he went to the restroom but then decided that that would simply be rude. A man’s time in the restroom is sacred and should proceed in silence.
“Yo.”

“Espo,” Castle returns, with a too-intelligent look in his eye. “No, I don’t know. No, I wouldn’t tell you if I did. Yes, everything is okay. Are we done now?” He turns back to finish off both coffees. Espo is quite sure that it’s against the guy code to be drawing pretty patterns in the foam. The thought takes his mind off the bright blade of Castle’s perception that’s just cut him off at the knees.

“Yeah. But…”

“It’s okay,” Castle says with emphasis. “Leave it. If you need to step in you’ll know, like with Lanie.”

Espo growls, agreeing but not particularly content, and retreats. Ryan regards his scowl without sympathy.

“Told you it was a bad plan.”

Espo’s scowl intensifies. Ryan retreats to the safety of screening camera footage.

“Espo bothering you?”

“No,” Castle says sunnily.

“Hm,” emerges with scepticism.

“Really no.” He smirks evilly. “I think I’m bothering him, though.”

“When I need a protection detail I’ll let him know. He can organise it from his walker because he’ll be eighty-five.”

Castle splutters out his coffee, and shortles. “Mean,” he says, eyes sparkling.

“I don’t need a nanny.”

“I’d like a night nurse, rather than a nanny,” Castle smirks evilly. “One who’d make sure I was comfortably tucked up in bed and” –

“treated for the flu?”

Castle pouts. “Not quite what I was envisaging. Goodnight kisses were more like it.”

Beckett smirks nastily right back at him, and then turns back to her cases, passing Castle the next folder.

“There. See if you can find anything useful in this one.”

“Does it have nurses?”

“No,” Beckett sighs. “No nurses.” She blinks. “I haven’t seen Lanie for a while.”

“Lanie’s not a nurse.”

“I know that.” Her voice says dumbass. “I wonder if she wants to go out sometime?” She looks at Castle’s mischievously crinkling eyes. “Women only.” He pouts again, and then drops it when she

He’s about to say something when Montgomery wanders absolutely not meaningfully out from his office, gazes around at some suddenly very obviously hard-working detectives, and wanders back in, radiating Captainly authority. The bullpen is very quiet for some time thereafter. Even Castle doesn’t talk, though that’s got more to do with his wonderings about what Beckett has worked out over lunchtime and why she isn’t finished yet than any ability to keep his mouth closed when Beckett is trying to concentrate.

Beckett doesn’t want to discuss her unfinished thoughts with anyone until she’s finished sorting them out for herself. Castle doesn’t look precisely reassured by her last words, but Montgomery’s piece of careful Captaining is a pretty clear signal that he’s noticed a certain lack of work being done. Since being carpeted by Montgomery is a stress factor she really doesn’t need, she provides an apologetic smile to Castle and puts her head down for the rest of the afternoon.

Beckett is entirely unsurprised that Castle follows her out with a determined-to-hitch-a-ride demeanour.

“Yes, you can catch a ride home,” she sighs. Castle simply grins.

“It’s my bounden duty,” he says pompously, “to ensure that you get home safely.”

“I am dropping you off. How’s that ensuring I get home safely?”

“Um…”

“What you really mean is am I okay? Yes. But I need to do some more thinking and – er” – she blushes – “you’re a distraction.”

“I sure hope so,” he leers cheerfully. “I could distract all the worries right out of your head.”

“Not tonight.”

She has to be firm about that. Because, yet again, she’d rather do almost anything, including amputating her own leg without anaesthetic, than finish the thinking she has to do. But she’s not a coward and she’s not an idiot and if she ever wants this fixed she has to do the thinking. And considering. Her lips twist at the lemon-bitter taste of that thought.

“Shooting Burke won’t solve anything,” Castle points out with feeling.

“I’d feel better,” Beckett replies automatically, and then, “How did you know I was thinking about Burke?”

“You looked like you’d bitten a lemon. It was obvious.”

“Okay, I won’t shoot him.” She pulls up. “See you tomorrow.”

“Till tomorrow.” She is entirely unsurprised when Castle brings her face to his and provides her with a kiss that tightens every muscle she possesses. “There,” he says with satisfaction. “Now you won’t forget me.”

“Like that’s possible in twenty-four hours? It takes a lot longer than that” –

“To forget perfection?”

“To move your ego out the way.”

“Mean. Very mean.” But his fingers are threading through hers: warm on her leg. “I’d better go and work on my self-esteem, since you’ve zeroed it.”

“Not possible. You’ll be bouncing in tomorrow just the same as ever.”

“No, not unless you make me feel better.”

Beckett rolls her eyes at him. She knows what’s coming.

“I want another kiss. To make up for you being mean.”

“What are you, six?”

“And then some. You owe me a kiss.”

He looks pleadingly at her, eyes wide and limpid and innocent. It’s entirely insincere, she knows he’s simply messing with her, and she still can’t resist leaning in and providing him with the kiss he wanted.

“There. Happy now?” But she can’t manage too much snark.

“Yep,” Castle says cheerily. “Till tomorrow.” He slides out the car before she can retaliate.

Beckett turns for home, and for once is grateful for every stop light. It can’t delay it for ever, though, and soon enough she’s home, making mac ‘n’ cheese and salad, and then tea (not coffee) while her thoughts run around her head. She supposes she’d better try to chase them down and corral them.

Okay. So at lunchtime she’d worked out that she’s got to avoid falling into the pattern of thinking the way someone else thinks she should. Okay. So if she’s worked out that she shouldn’t feel guilty about her own feelings and she should trust her instincts – why did she get so wound up about Martha’s words anyway? How could she have been so easily knocked over? It’s not like she’s stunningly fond of Martha, to say the least, and they barely know each other anyway. The only way that could hit her that hard is if it connects to something else, so she’d better find out what it was before someone else trips the issue – she really does not need a rerun of the mess she’d got herself into with the Berowitzes. She sips her tea.

Oh. If she was completely reconciled to what she’d done, she’d not be so easily overset. Ugh. That’s back to something she’d touched and backed off from: she hasn’t forgiven herself. That’s why she isn’t trusting her instincts, either.

None of which is anything to do with considering the compromises Castle’s made and what, if anything, she gave back in return, which is the homework she’s supposed to be doing. She has another sizeable mouthful of tea, and forcibly redirects her skittering thoughts to think back to all the times he’s compromised – in her view.

She draws a neat line down the middle of a sheet of paper, and starts to think. Half an hour of focused thought later, she has a bullet point list, very like she might have for a homicide, of the times she thinks that Castle’s made compromises. Dauntingly, it runs all the way down the left hand side. On the right hand side, she simply writes down exactly what she had, or hadn’t, done in response. Then she makes herself a very strong pot of coffee and takes out her emergency supply of chocolate. And then she reads it back, wincing at each line. It seems unbalanced, to her: the scales tilted and overweight on the left hand side. She adds a few points, folds it up, leaves it for now, and
takes herself, the half-pot that’s left of her coffee and her few fragments of remaining chocolate to curl up under her warm comforter and try to straighten out her head. She’s deep down chilled, despite the May warmth only now leaving the air. Her actions appear pathetically inadequate, compared with Castle’s.

On arriving home at the relatively early hour of six p.m., Castle takes refuge from a pile of interior design magazines and a lively discussion between his mother and daughter on the merits of a tiger-skin rug (fake, he assumes) in creating a Bohemian ambiance suitable for an award-winning actor by slipping unnoticed into his office. Behind him, the design argument rages without a single pause.

He’s happily logging into his favourite websites (the ones where all his fans congregate and adore him in fulsomely overstated terms, but it’s nice all the same) when his phone rings with an unfamiliar number.

“Rick Castle.”

“Mr Castle,” says a very familiar tone.

“Dr Burke? What – why – Beckett?”

“Detective Beckett is, to the best of my knowledge, perfectly well.”

Castle breathes out a long sigh of relief.

“I wish to ask you to undertake an exercise for me.”

“Yeah?” Castle drags out, suspiciously.

“I am relying on Detective Beckett’s permission to discuss her treatment with you, which she has not revoked. She has been asked to list the occasions on which she considers that you have compromised, and then list her actions, or lack of actions, in response. I wish you to undertake the same exercise, from your point of view.”

“I see,” Castle says slowly. “That explains quite a lot. She said you’d asked her to. I guess you want her to see that her view and mine don’t match up.”

“It would be true to say that I expect there to be some substantial differences,” Dr Burke says carefully. “Your mother’s visit has left Detective Beckett uncertain of her position, and has not assisted her in dealing with her own guilt relating to her actions towards her father.”

Castle growls. “You don’t say. Tell me something I didn’t know.”

“I suspect that is very little, where Detective Beckett is concerned,” Dr Burke responds dryly. “Will you be able to undertake the exercise?”

“Yes. What do you want me to do with it?”

“Please perform it in writing, and then supply it to me prior to Friday’s session, if you are able?”

“Okay.”

“Thank you. It may be most sensible for the initial portion of the session not to include you, so that Detective Beckett may consider your thoughts without being tempted to discuss them with you. That, of course, will be her decision, but I recommend that you have some means of occupying
yourself with you. Goodnight.”

“Bye.”

Castle regards his phone warily, in case a snake, or a frog, or a unicorn, might emerge from it next; any of which would be no more surprising than Dr Burke’s call. It puts Tuesday evening in perspective, he supposes, though he’d probably worked most of it out. Beckett thinking that she isn’t enough, again. He expects that Dr Burke is going to point out to her the differences between what she thinks and what he thinks in each circumstance. With some considerable amusement, he starts on his share of the game. On balance, as he works his way down the list of every time Beckett probably thinks he’s compromised – which is not at all the same as each time he thinks he’s compromised, which he marks with an asterisk, which asterisk appears considerably less often than one time in three – he thinks that in addition to not being present, he’ll absolutely not tell Beckett that he’s been asked to do this. Either she’ll argue that he shouldn’t do it, or she’ll want to see his list and then argue with his answers. Neither is conducive to his mental harmony. Much better to avoid the issue. It’s for his own good.

He snickers to himself, and carries on tapping at his list. He’ll e-mail it to Dr Burke, and it’s a lot faster to type it if he’s going to do that. Also, it might be legible. His handwriting is not.

Some time later, he finishes, saves the document for later review, and pads out to discover if the art of interior design has been sufficiently violated for one day. From the Titian stereo soundtrack, it appears that Jackson Pollock’s style met Caravaggio’s and they didn’t get on. He considers running off to find his own personal Botticelli Venus and then remembers that she wanted to think. He retreats, rapidly, before he is asked for an opinion, which will only get him in trouble.

Dr Burke considers Mr Castle’s list of compromises and actions, which had arrived early that morning under a short covering note explaining that the starred lines are the ones he believes to be compromises, but that he’d included all the actions that he thought Beckett would regard as compromises. Dr Burke laments once more the loss to psychiatry occasioned by Mr Castle’s early decision in his life to take up novel writing as he reads through the neatly organised list.

He compares it to Detective Beckett’s list, which had been dropped off at lunchtime. Hers is handwritten, but equally organised. It is however, much briefer in form. Each incident is described in the sparsest of terms. Interestingly, however, both lists cover exactly the same events. Of course, Mr Castle does not consider the majority of those events to amount to compromising on his part. Dr Burke is reminded that he had thought that Mr Castle simply absorbs Detective Beckett’s moods, without, in general, being overly affected by them, and then acts. Here is the proof of that thesis.

Dr Burke is intrigued by the breadth that Detective Beckett gives to the concept of compromise. It is no surprise to him that she considers perfectly ordinary give and take to be such, however, when she has for ten years measured every action against the unattainable paradigm of the perfect daughter. It is equally no surprise that her guilt is reasserting itself, when she appears to believe that so many actions require reciprocity. Dr Burke, on reading Mr Castle’s list, observes without any surprise whatsoever that Mr Castle considers Detective Beckett’s romantic inclinations to be ample reciprocity. Dr Burke is quite capable of interpreting the subtext, veiled as it is. He would hardly be the practitioner that he is could he not.

He contemplates both lists thoroughly, analysing them in the light of both personalities, and becomes distressingly aware that the next session will approach the field of relationship counselling. Of course, he is as competent in that field as in every other, but it is an area in which he has heretofore had very little interest, and he is not inclined to alter his outlook in anything more
than a temporary manner simply because one particularly complex case requires it.

A short time later Dr Burke’s analysis is complete. He completes his work by placing a brief call to Mr Castle, to remind him that he may be asked not to be present for some part of Friday’s session, and leaves his office to catch his train back to Westchester. Yesterday he had advised Mr Beckett that he need not attend on Friday, and had been pleasantly content that Mr Beckett had both understood and been heartened by the circumstances.

In Grand Central Station, Dr Burke discovers to his considerable irritation that he has left at his office both his copy of the New Republic and a discussion paper on the advantages and disadvantages of medication vis-à-vis more traditional methods of psychiatric treatment. He does not have time to return for them, as he endeavours never to miss having dinner with his wife. He is very grateful for their marriage, which has now lasted for thirty-five years for which they have enjoyed considerable happiness. He would, he muses, be quite devastated were he to lose her, although this is, he hopes, unlikely for many years to come.

He turns his mind away from the pleasant thought of an evening with his wife to the much less satisfactory issue that he now has nothing to read on the hour’s journey home. He had read the daily newspaper on his journey this morning, and there are no other periodicals in which he takes an interest which he has not already perused. His irritation increases. He has mere minutes before he will take up his place upon the platform, carefully assessed to ensure that he will exit with least difficulty at his stop. He cannot bear the thought of having no reading material. He resigns himself to the inevitable, and rapidly enters Hudson News. There, his eye lands on a book written by Mr Castle, which is prominently displayed in an ostentatiously self-promoting fashion. Dr Burke, already short of time, recalls his thought that he might better understand Mr Castle were he to attempt to read one of his novels, and reflects wearily that he might as well do so now, when he has no more important matter to which he might attend. The thought does not improve his mood. Wincing internally at the vagaries of so-called popular taste, to which the lurid cover art is undoubtedly intended to appeal, he pays and hurries to his train, concealing the cover of the novel as he sits down. With no expectation of any enjoyment at all, he opens it.

Sixty minutes later, he very nearly fails to notice that his station has been reached, and has to hurry off the train, flustered.
“Good evening, Detective Beckett. Mr Castle.”

“Hello.”

“Before we begin, Detective, I suggest that we undertake the first part of this session without Mr Castle present.”

“Why?” asks Detective Beckett, with a noticeable edge. It appears to Dr Burke that she has forgotten their discussion of Tuesday. With slight trepidation, he also concludes that she is not necessarily aware that Mr Castle has undertaken a mirrored exercise. He casts Mr Castle a glance, and observes that he is displaying minor signs of embarrassment.

“I think it best that we first discuss your views without Mr Castle’s commentary. You should endeavour to understand your own conclusions without contaminating them with the point of view of the other party.”


“Mr Castle, there is a room available in which you may occupy yourself. Let me direct you to it.”

Dr Burke ushers Mr Castle to a small, comfortable room. “Do I infer that you have not advised Detective Beckett that you have conducted the same exercise as she has?”

Mr Castle smiles gently. “Yes. I didn’t feel like arguing with her over every line. That’s your job.”

“It is indeed,” Dr Burke says smoothly, and observes Mr Castle’s air of very slight disappointment. Really, he has no idea why Mr Castle or Detective Beckett consider that they have any ability to surprise or irritate him. Even were they to do so, he would not allow them to realise it. “I will advise you when your contributions will be helpful.”

“Okay.”

Dr Burke returns to Detective Beckett.

“Please would you explain your overall view of your list?”

“Every time something goes wrong, Castle fixes it or compromises to work around me and all I do is weep or unload or lose it with him. I don’t give him anything back at all.”

“Mm.” Dr Burke steeples his fingers, and regards Detective Beckett. “Let us consider the detail of your list. You have mentioned seventeen occasions on which you consider Mr Castle has compromised. According to your list, you have only reciprocated on two occasions, and you have qualified both of those.”

“Sounds about right.”

“However, it is not, as you put it, right. Specifically, not only have you minimised the importance of your attendance at brunches and dinner with his family, but you have not mentioned your attendance at therapy, nor your clear statement that if you were to be forced to make a choice between your father and Mr Castle you would choose Mr Castle.” Dr Burke unlaces his fingers, and continues to regard Detective Beckett pointedly. “Do you not consider those to be actions you
have taken to progress your relationship with Mr Castle?”

Detective Beckett is, not for the first time, silent. Dr Burke presses his point.

“You also do not appear to have considered that less tangible actions may be, in the eyes of the recipient, as important as any other. You have entirely omitted any emotional reciprocation.” He raises a finger over Detective Beckett’s attempt at words. “I am in no way suggesting that sexual encounters are a form of payment for Mr Castle’s actions. It is entirely obvious that such is not the case, and were it to be so I would consider your relationship to be on a highly unstable footing with a considerable probability that it is, or would shortly become, abusive. That is not the case. However, in a normal relationship emotional support is an important component. You have consistently listed Mr Castle’s emotional support for you. You have consistently failed to mention whether you have provided emotional support to him. I should like you to consider your list again, and incorporate that concept, as well as your decision to attend therapy and your choice of Mr Castle over your father when they were in conflict. I shall leave you for a few moments to allow you solitude in which to do so.”

Dr Burke collects a copy of Detective Beckett’s list, carefully made earlier in the day, together with Mr Castle’s list, from his desk, and leaves Detective Beckett to contemplate only her own list. He taps on the door to the room which Mr Castle currently occupies and enters.

“Oh, hey,” Mr Castle says absently, staring at a sheaf of pages covered in an illegible scrawl, with circles, addenda, arrows and amendments randomly distributed. This is what Mr Castle had described as a plan? How extraordinary. It is quite chaotic. Mr Castle abruptly acquires an expression of enlightenment, circles a section of ink, and draws an arrow from it to another section. Having performed this action, he looks up with more intelligence and recognition.

“Mr Castle,” Dr Burke says with some acerbity, “I wish you to consider Detective Beckett’s list, and advise me of your initial impressions.”

Mr Castle takes the list, runs his eyes rapidly down it, blinks, runs his eyes rapidly down it for a second time, and hands it back with a twist of his lips.

“You have read it?”

“Yes.”

Dr Burke concludes that Mr Castle has trained in reading hieroglyphics, and also in speed reading.

“And your impressions?”

“Pretty much what I thought already. She thinks I’m doing things I don’t necessarily want to and she’s not enough for me.”

“Mm. Are you in agreement with that thesis?”

“No.” Mr Castle regards Dr Burke with a disturbingly penetrating gaze. “Which you know, so why are you asking me?”

“Confirmation,” Dr Burke says calmly. “It would not be unusual for feelings to change on undertaking such an exercise. People have, on occasion, discovered that their relationship is unbalanced to a significant extent.”

“Oh. Anyway, no.”
“Explain, then, why you consider the relationship to be balanced?”

“She came to therapy to sort out her issues with seeing my family and to be able to come to my home. That’s not a small thing.”

“Mm?”

“She was going to change her whole view of life so she had a proper relationship with me. She could just have given up, but she’s putting all this work in.”

“You have also changed your life, however. You have asked your mother to move out.”

“I think… I think that would have happened whatever.” Dr Burke quirks an eyebrow. “Whoever it was, I wouldn’t have put up with Mother swanning in and out my bedroom.”

“Mm.” Dr Burke changes the subject. “I shall shortly share your list with Detective Beckett.”

“Don’t worry, I brought the body armour. Wanna borrow it?”

“I do not think that that will be necessary,” Dr Burke says sardonically, and adds, “for me.”

“Gee, thanks,” Mr Castle says, equally sardonically.

“I will let you know when I consider you should join the discussion,” Dr Burke notes, and departs.

“I’m sure you will,” reaches his ears as the door closes behind him. Mr Castle’s tone sounds as if he thinks that Dr Burke will need support in dealing with Detective Beckett. How ridiculous. This is a necessary step for Detective Beckett to be relieved of her unwarranted guilt. Her relationship with Mr Castle is quite satisfactorily balanced: she merely needs to be reminded of it.

“Have you considered the further points, Detective?”

“Yes.”

“What has that shown you?”

Detective Beckett chews on her lip in an embarrassed fashion. “I don’t know,” she mutters. “It doesn’t seem like enough.” Dr Burke waits. He is used to waiting for Detective Beckett, who seems only to apply her intelligence in therapy when all other possible options have failed.

“Why not?”

“I needed fixed. Castle doesn’t need fixed.” Dr Burke is not wholly convinced of the truth of the second sentence. Mr Castle had needed a modicum of assistance with the question of his mother, though that had proved to be a minor, easily resolved issue.

“Mm.” How disappointing. Detective Beckett has failed to give equal weight to her support of Mr Castle, and her choice of him over her father in circumstances where she has been used to supporting her father unconditionally and at the expense of all aspects of her life.

“Detective Beckett, I requested Mr Castle to undertake the equivalent exercise, from his point of view. I think that it would be valuable to discuss his thoughts in conjunction with yours.” Detective Beckett fixes him with a hard stare, to which Dr Burke returns a calm visage and mild smile. “Sometimes, the perceptions of others may provide important insights.” He passes over Mr Castle’s neatly typed list. “You will observe that a few lines are marked with an asterisk. Those are
the only occasions on which Mr Castle believes that he has had to compromise.”

Detective Beckett reads down the list. “He’s written down all the same things I did.”

“Mr Castle informs me that he has written down all the occasions for which he believes that you will consider he has compromised. As I have just said, he considers there to have been compromise only on the occasions which he has indicated with an asterisk.”


“Compromise,” Dr Burke says pontifically, “is in the eye of the beholder. Mr Castle’s feelings are as valid, but no more valid, than are yours.”

“But he… I… All I ever do is weep all over him and need to be picked up again.”

“Hmm. While Mr Castle was concerned about his mother’s future residence, how did you behave?”

“Listened to him.” Detective Beckett colours very slightly.

“And, I infer, provided consolation.”

“Yes.”

“How does that differ from Mr Castle listening to you and providing consolation?”

Detective Beckett opens and closes her mouth, three times. From not one of those actions do words emerge. Dr Burke decides to change his tactics and approach the issue from the other direction.

“Detective Beckett, why are you now concerned that your relationship with Mr Castle is unbalanced? Most of what you have written concerns the normal give and take of a relationship, but you appear to believe that the support is all one way. You have not previously been concerned about this issue, correctly. What has taken place to alter your view?”

Detective Beckett finally acquires an expression of extreme enlightenment. “Martha,” she says acidly. Dr Burke internally rejoices, although he is sure that Detective Beckett’s reaction to Mr Castle’s mother does not encompass joy in any way.

“Please elucidate?”

“She hit every point. Tried to guilt trip me. It was just like how I thought I had to be with Dad.” Detective Beckett continues to explain for a moment or two.

For once, it appears that Detective Beckett has undertaken an exercise in focused thinking before Dr Burke has asked her to. Her reasoning is lucid and coherent. Dr Burke thinks with some satisfaction that she has learned, under his treatment, to apply her professional skills to her own issues.

“Indeed. Now, with that in mind, consider the question of your relationship with Mr Castle and your view that any form of support is a compromise requiring reciprocation.”

“Um… it’s not?” Dr Burke nods. “It’s another way of thinking that… that I won’t be loved if I don’t…” Detective Beckett trails off, but she has understood the key point.

“IIndeed. How do you consider that Mr Castle is likely to react to the suggestion that his feelings
for you depend on you behaving so?” Dr Burke is deliberately vague as to the meaning of behaving so.

“He never pushes me. He just says *up to you.*”

“That does not answer the question.”

Detective Beckett winces. “He’d be upset. But…”

“Do you believe that he would tell you if he were unhappy with the present position?”

“Ye-es.”

“Has he done so?”

“No-o. He was irritated that I thought that he was always the one fixing and compromising.”

Dr Burke can understand Mr Castle’s point of view. Detective Beckett is, once more, taking an unhelpfully absolutist view. She has reverted to bad habits, although Dr Burke considers that this is likely to be temporary and readily corrected. “Following your review of his version of events, and taking full account of the discussion we have had so far this evening, please consider the reasons why you might currently be taking the position which you have outlined regarding who is, or is not, compromising, and to what extent those are justified.”

A full five minutes, which have contained no words, later, Dr Burke is beginning to wish that it was not unprofessional to turn to another patient’s records whilst the immediate patient is present. A further three minutes after that, his wish has turned to an almost insurmountable desire to read his discussion paper once more. He refuses to succumb, however. Surely Detective Beckett must be able to draw the correct conclusions by now?

Dr Burke has been hard put to it not to speak or turn to another file by the time Detective Beckett ceases to think. Dr Burke assumes that she has been thinking, although he had been under the impression that she was capable of doing so with rather more despatch than she has shown this evening.

“I get it,” she says. Dr Burke is only too glad of that. It is long past time that Detective Beckett “gets it”. He merely hopes that she has “got” the correct conclusion.

“Martha triggered all the old reactions. I just didn’t string it all together. I knew she’d tripped all the same feelings about not doing enough, or doing things for someone else because I *ought to,* but I didn’t see that I didn’t think I was doing enough because I’m still feeling guilty about not doing enough for Dad even though I did more than enough.”

“Indeed.” Thankfully, Detective Beckett has connected each disparate thought to arrive at a logical result. “I think that it would be helpful if Mr Castle joined us, in order to explain why he believes that your efforts are quite sufficient.”

Shortly Dr Burke has, with some difficulty, removed Mr Castle from his focus on his writing, which is not the reason for him being here, and with a certain sensation of removing a small child from an imaginary game in which the child is deeply engrossed, insisted that he return to Dr Burke’s room.

“Detective Beckett, as you have seen, there are substantial differences between the matters you consider to be compromises and those which Mr Castle so considers. Mr Castle, please explain why you do not consider most of these areas to constitute a compromise?” Dr Burke has an
unwarranted sensation of amusement at Mr Castle’s startlement.

Before he answers, Mr Castle slides an arm around Detective Beckett, who moves slightly towards him. Dr Burke is not at all certain that either of them had any conscious input into those actions.

“It’s just normal.” He blushes slightly. “Beckett listens to me, I listen to her. It’s mutual. Arguments happen.”

“And the actual compromises?”

“Beckett decided to go to therapy long before I did anything. She made the first move.”

“Dad suckered you into dinner.”

“That wasn’t you. And you went, even though you hated every single minute of it. You’re not responsible for your dad’s bright ideas.”

“You keep running after me.”

“You came to the Hamptons. And to the loft. And you still haven’t got an answer to the fact that you came to therapy so you could deal with my family long before I did anything except comfort you. So I think it’s about even.” Mr Castle smiles in a rather sidelong fashion. “Besides which, you didn’t shoot my mother and you didn’t let me shoot her either. Definitely evens. Otherwise I might be in Rikers.”

“It’s not a joke,” Detective Beckett snaps. Mr Castle straightens up.

“No, it’s not, but you’re so far off beam that if I don’t make a joke I’ll start to cry. I keep telling you that I’m not in a hurry, I keep telling you that it’s up to you, and as soon as my mother tells you I’m unhappy you start to believe it instead of believing me.”

Dr Burke steps in before the looming fight can begin. “Why would you take Mrs Rodgers’ words to heart rather than the frequently-expressed sentiments of Mr Castle?”

“I explained that,” Detective Beckett says angrily.

“Indeed. Now explain it to Mr Castle, who was not present.”

Detective Beckett deflates. Mr Castle, without appearing to alter his position, becomes more protective.

“Because it hit all the same things as dealing with Dad did,” she mutters, colouring ashamedly. “Not doing enough for someone…” From his expression, which is quite dismayingly smug, Mr Castle has completed that sentence entirely accurately. Naturally, he has also tightened his embrace of Detective Beckett.

“You do quite enough for me,” can only just be heard by Dr Burke, whose hearing is excellent. He is, however, content not to hear the next words, which from Detective Beckett’s suddenly flaming cheeks are sure to have been most inappropriate. Mr Castle’s voice returns to normal. “Anyway, you’ve worked it out now. You can deal with it.”

“We shall continue this topic on Tuesday,” Dr Burke notes. “We are almost at the end of the session.” He is displeased to detect a slightly hopeful note in his own voice.

“You wanted to know what happened on the murder case,” Detective Beckett says. Dr Burke infers
that she has both heard and correctly interpreted his tone, and represses a slight coloration of his cheeks with difficulty. “They were running an escort ring, via the manager. Vance tried a little gentle blackmail” – her voice is sardonic – “and the manager dispensed with his services in a pretty permanent way.”

“Oh,” Dr Burke emits, unimpressed by this unpleasant series of events.

“Your input was helpful,” Detective Beckett continues. Dr Burke is most surprised to acquire a sense of satisfaction at her words. “The manager will be indicted for first degree murder.”

“Thank you.”

“Night, Dr Burke.”

Mr Castle has wrapped his arm back around Detective Beckett almost before they have exited the treatment room. How very pleasing.

Dr Burke tidies away his papers and ensures that he has placed a sufficient quantity of reading material for his journey within easy reach. This does not include Mr Castle’s book. He has already completed that. The next in the series is at home, where it is unlikely to be misplaced.
Food, magical food, glorious food

Beckett is quiet and thoughtful on the way home, with a flavouring of shamefaced unhappiness which Castle is pretty sure is directed entirely at herself.

“Aren’t you going to invite me for coffee?” he says plaintively shortly before she has to decide which home she’s aiming for. She flicks a quick glance at him, from which he determines that she is more than a little nervous that he is going to push her into conversation.

“Okay.”

The cruiser swoops through the streets and lands neatly in a cramped space around the corner from her building. Castle bounces out, waits politely and then collects his Beckett as she locks the car: pulling her close and mischievously nuzzling into her hair and nibbling her ear in foreshadowing of what he intends very shortly. There is a tiny sigh, and a miniscule snuggle. The feeling of shamefaced unhappiness dissipates. Castle relaxes, and rests his large hand neatly over the jut of a hipbone. Conveniently, this allows his thumb to stroke her waist, all the way to her door, and inside, where he takes her jacket off, which conveniently allows him to stroke down her back, which causes her to emit a contented – yes, purr – and curve into his hand.

Shortly, they are comfortably cuddled up, with coffee, with Beckett’s head on his shoulder and his arm back around her shoulders, where it is pleasantly possible to pet undemandingly, or play with her hair, and simply persuade her into Kat-ishness. It doesn’t take much effort.

“Better now?”

“Mmmm,” Kat hums. “I get it.”

“I promised I’d tell you if you were asking too much,” Castle says, a touch reproachfully. “I would, you know.” He pouts, and widens his eyes appealingly. “You should believe me.” He bats his eyelashes at her, and she snickers. “I’m hurt. You should console me.”

“I made you coffee,” she says, in a tone which makes it clear she knows that isn’t what he means, and smiles invitingly.

“It’s a start,” he says, and smiles lazily. His arm slides over her shoulder so that his hand is now sketching randomly over her collarbone, tip-tapping below it and up again. “But I want my Kat. It’s well known that petting a Kat makes you feel better.”

“Evidence?” she snarks.

“Empirical evidence. I always feel better after I’ve spent time petting my Kat.”

He lifts her legs over his lap, and demonstrates petting by stroking down them. Then he demonstrates by stroking back up them again.

“There,” she says. “You must feel better now.”

“Not yet.”

He strokes down the length of her legs. The reason for lifting her slightly becomes obvious, as the stroke takes her pants with it.
“What are you doing?”

“What?” Castle says suavely, and runs his hand all the way up again, stopping it high on her bared thigh. There is an indrawn breath. “Kats always seem to like being petted, too.”

“Do they?” his Kat asks in a sultry tone. “They don’t” – the tips of her nails rest at the open neck of his shirt – “object?” There is a soft scratch downwards as his shirt opens. His fingers tighten.

“No. They enjoy it too much.”

“Mmmr?”

“Properly done, petting attends to all the right areas. Uses just the right amount of pressure. Varies between soft and hard, depending on how the Kat might be responding. Of course, it’s obvious if you’re doing it right – ooohh” – she’s applied a little pressure – “because they purr. Like you do.”

“Do I?” but her silky tone is finished with a definite purr as his fingers dance a fraction higher on her leg and glide lower below her collarbone. It’s sweet reply to her hint of claws over his chest, but he can’t resist leaning in to take her mouth for his own as well. She’s so soft under his lips: a hint of a mew when he explores; a soft noise of assent when he nips on her lower lip; a small whine when he stops.

Her hands are delicately exploring under his shirt, guerrilla raiding at his belt and retreating: teasing and playful and naughtily arousing: some way, somehow, she’s happy to be Kat and purr under his touch; curve into his petting, and ensure that he’s as heated as she. He slips along the edge of her button-down, opening up until it hangs loose, then returns his hand to curve around her arm and turn her towards him.

About that point he realises that he is completely undone. Literally so. While he has been ensuring that his Kat is beautifully only half-clad, she has been ensuring that she has completely unfettered access to him, of which she is now taking considerable advantage. He makes a sound in his throat that would have been a groan, had it escaped, and retaliates by dropping his head to her breast and taking the hard point into his mouth. He hears her quiet whimper with pleasure, and circles his tongue around her areola so she’ll do it again. She does. He uses his mouth more deliberately, lapping and then suckling: pressure of lips and then a harder force from teeth; soothing from a tender tongue. Her hand moves insinuatingly around him.

“I like this,” he growls deeply. “I like you all soft and giving and mine.” His hand slips over her leg to trace gently along the line of her panties. “I like you caught in my arms and curved against me and as close as you can be.” He kisses the arc of her breast. “I like you purring and mewing and moaning.” His fingers slip under the fabric of her panties, and she lifts her hips into the touch. “I like it when you run your hands over me – oh! – just like that.” He plays a little through the damp heat, circling over exquisitely sensitive nerves. “But I like all of it much better in bed.” He stops. “Let’s go to bed.”

“Why? I’m happy right here.”

“You’ll be even happier in bed.” He smiles a heavy-lidded, lazy, sensual smile, and licks his lips. “More room.” He stands her up, before she can argue any more. Her hand wasn’t giving him the impression that she doesn’t want to play: she was just being mischievous. In more ways than one. He rises and pulls her in, encouraging her to flow over him and rub against him. His palm envelops the swell of her slim ass, and then he lifts her up to lock legs around his waist and takes her to bed.

He slides the shirt from her shoulders as soon as he puts her on her feet again, which move she
copies, and then raises the stakes by pushing down his pants. He grins. “Patience. We’ll get there.” There is the start of a growl, which he deals with by the simple method of kissing her deeply and undoing the catch of her pretty lace bra as he does. She presses into his chest and the heat rises between and around them: skin to skin; stretches up to kiss him back and doing so slithers over every inch of his torso. It ignites him.

Her panties hit the floor; her back hits the coverlet; and Castle falls on her. He just wants her. He hasn’t been able to do more than kiss her, far too briefly, since Tuesday, and he’s as addicted to her as she is now to him. She opens around him and he settles above her, nibbling down through her clavicles and cleavage to the planes of her stomach and then, with a gravelly rumble of delight, lower. He adores turning her to a melted mess, and this does it for her every single time: his hands around her hips to hold her for his avid mouth, the scent of her body, the sheen of her arousal flooding around his fingers, his tongue and lips drinking her down.

Of course, it’s not entirely unselfish. Seeing her completely overwhelmed really, really does it for him. Knowing that he can do this to her trips a whole series of primitive male instincts, starting with sheer lust and finishing with absolute possession, for ever. He tries to keep them under control, most of the time, but here in bed, with his Kat soft and yielding and utterly his, they take over. He settles to his pleasure, and hers: delicate flickers of tongue, gently wicked strokes of fingers, until she’s completely his; and then harder touches, taking her with mouth and hand and sending her higher and higher, writhing and then bucking, moaning and finally screaming out his name.

He wriggles up the bed to keep her firmly against him. “I feel so much better now,” he murmurs. “I told you that petting my Kat makes me feel better.”

“I’ll buy you a kitten,” his Kat says naughtily.

“Wouldn’t be my Kat, though. So it wouldn’t work.” He pulls her right over his chest. “It’s got to be the right Kat. This one.” He slides, once, twice, and then thrusts home. “My one.”

“I feel better too,” she hums, and puts her head on his chest, over his heart. Her eyes drift shut as her hand slides into his.

“Good.” He squints down his chest at her closed eyes, the lashes sweeping her creamy skin. “I have to get home.”


“Okay,” Castle agrees, and slides out from under her without noticeably rousing her. “Tomorrow.”

“Hey, Dad,” Beckett says as Jim opens his door, quite early on Saturday morning. She is bearing two stuffed-full shopping bags.

“Katie,” he says happily, and reaches out to hug her. She steps into his embrace, and hugs him back with barely a hitch. Neither hug is exactly unconstrained, but they’re much warmer than at any time since Christmas Day. “What’ve you brought?”

“We-ell,” she says with a sparkle of mischief, “I thought this would be the perfect opportunity to introduce you to the best Georgian cuisine” – Jim almost represses a groan – “but I didn’t manage to persuade you to like it any time in the last five years so I didn’t waste my money.”

“Phew,” Jim says. “I’m sure it’s really good, but no matter how I try I just can’t get along with it.”
“So I decided to play it safe.”

Jim looks interestingly hopeful. “Yes? What’d you choose?”

“We’re going to fix slow cooked pork, dauphinoise potatoes, sliced cooked apple, and spinach.”

“Sounds great. I can peel the potatoes.”

“You can slice them, too, and even peel and slice the apples. I’m not letting you near the cooking, though.” She’s unloading food into his kitchen as she’s talking, along with a collection of cooking dishes.

“Haven’t you forgotten something, Katie?”

“Huh?”

“What about dessert?”

“I thought” – she smirks at him – “that I’d get that cake mix” – Jim splutters and hoots with laughter – “but then I thought I’d better not poison Alexis.”

“Hey!” Jim emits in mock-indignation. “What about not poisoning me? Or Rick?”

“Alexis is cute…” Beckett ripostes.

Jim sighs. “Taking the mickey out of your dear ol’ dad. I’m doomed.” Beckett laughs, and any slight remnant of tension between them dissolves.

“I got the ingredients for a cheesecake,” she says, with a wide smile. “Blueberry.”

“Wonderful. Whipped cream?”

“Yes, Dad. But won’t you think of your arteries?”


“I’ll blame you for the collapse of dinner, the stock market and world peace,” Beckett flips at him.

“Well, if it’s a matter of the stock market, I guess I’d better get peeling.”

“Let me get the pork started first. It’s got to cook practically all day, so it needs to start now. We can do the rest later on, this afternoon.” She flicks the oven on to start heating, then briskly assembles a chopping board, pile of bagged spices and already minced roasted garlic and lemon zest, and starts on measuring ingredients for the rub.

“When’d you do the garlic?”

“I woke up early,” Beckett says, “so instead of going for a run I did it then, and the lemon zest. It didn’t take long.”

Jim stares at the back of his daughter’s head. Katie’s putting a lot of effort into this. “Okay,” he says. “So d’you need me to do anything now?”

“Let me measure everything out, then can you mix it really well – don’t drop it” –

“I wouldn’t,” Jim says easily. “I’m not that old and infirm.” –
“while I make sure the meat’s trimmed.” Her hands are still efficiently measuring out dry spices and then the garlic and lemon zest into a medium-size bowl. “There.” She hands him the bowl and a spoon, and begins to slice the excess fat from the pork. After a few minutes, she’s done.

“Okay, let’s have the rub.” Watched by Jim, she massages it thickly into the meat, covering every inch of it, using every crumb. “Right. Into the oven we go.” She puts the meat into a roasting tin, puts it in the oven, and sets the timer for 8 hours. “That’ll be done just about six. Shall we tell them to come over just after?”

“Sure. Now what?”

“I don’t think we need to peel potatoes or apples till after lunch.” The equipment she’s already used is hitting the sink. “If I clean this up – you can dry” –

“I hate drying.”

“I hate it more, and I cooked so I get to choose – then I’ll make the cheesecake and then it’s got all afternoon to chill. Should take us up to lunchtime.”

“We could go get a pizza,” Jim suggests, a fractional flavour of uncertainty in his voice.

“Okay,” Beckett says. Somehow, the discipline of cooking, sharing a kitchen with her father but with something that both of them can talk about and work together on without needing to go near a single sensitive topic, is leaving her almost relaxed. “After lunch, we could play Sorry? I’m looking forward to beating you.”

“Sure, Katie,” Jim says with feeling. “That’d be really fun. But I’m going to beat you.”

“In your dreams, Dad.”

She washes up. Jim, grumbling under his breath, dries.

The cheesecake base doesn’t take her very long, and when she pops it into the second oven she clears up as efficiently as earlier. Jim keeps on grumbling sotto voce about having to dry, which Beckett ignores quite happily in favour of starting on mixing the filling while the base cools.

Cheesecake baking, kitchen tidy, spices back in Beckett’s carry bag, and the vegetables in the fridge for now, Beckett stretches lavishly. “There.” She looks hopeful. “Is there any coffee, Dad?”

“You haven’t had coffee?”

“I did. It was just a long time ago.”

“Better get you some more.”

Jim makes them both coffee, and marvels very, very privately at how well matters are going. He is unutterably relieved and happy that his daughter is so at ease with him: even if it’s only temporary he thinks that she’s made huge progress, very suddenly. He hopes with all his might that they are moving firmly to a better place. He also wonders how much of this has been prompted by Martha Rodgers’ behaviour. Me against my brother, my brother and me against the rest, in fact. Hmmm. Jim’s sunny mood acquires a slightly tarnished edge.

Coffee in hand, Beckett perches on her father’s plump armchair and appreciates the aroma of slowly cooking pork.
“You’ve planned a really good dinner,” Jim ventures cautiously.


“Apart from that Georgian stuff, I didn’t know you could cook.” He takes a very tentative step on to the thin ice of their past.

“I don’t have much time to cook, but sometimes it’s relaxing, if I’m not in a hurry.” Beckett’s answer is almost equally tentative. Both of them can sense the fragility of the surface over which they’re skating.

“Um… your mother used to have a slow cooker, so she could just throw it in and it’d be done when she got home,” Jim says very carefully, and hopes that the tension he feels isn’t the ice cracking under his feet.

There is a slight but significant pause. Beckett surveys her father very sharply, and finds in his tight face both biting memory and desperate plea.

“I thought about that,” she says, and her father’s face sags in sudden relief at disaster avoided; a potential span of bridge built, “but the hours are so random that even then I’d ruin more than I ate.”

“Fair point,” Jim concedes. He has a sudden thought, to take them back to firm ground. “Did I hear you telling Dr Burke that he’d helped you solve a case?”

“Oh, yes, that.” Beckett grins, displaying a distinctly predatory edge. “I got to interrogate him.”

“Turning tables, eh? Bet you enjoyed that.”

“Mmm,” she says happily. “I sure did.”

“He wasn’t a suspect, though – was he?”

“No. A tennis coach up at that smart club in Midtown – the Manhattan Central Racquet Club?” Jim nods, recognising the name. “was shot, but down at the Seward public courts, so that’s why we got it. Anyway, it turns out that Dr Burke plays at the Central, so I shook him down for all the information he could give me.” Her feral smile glints.

Jim grins at her. “And?”

“Okay, so it’s certainly not a story suitable for dinner if Alexis is there, so…” she pauses, and quirks a smile.

“Katie…” Jim says ominously. She smirks at him.

“All the coaches were stunning, like they’d been picked from a model catalogue. I was suspicious already, and then one of them admitted to escorting” – Jim gasps – “and to cut the story short, it turned out that the manager was running an escort service off the books.”

“Wow. And?”

“Oh, he did it. We got him all tied up. No way he’ll walk.”

“You get some real interesting cases. That chemist, escort rings…”

“We get all the weird ones. The boss likes it that way. Anyway, pop-and-drops are boring.”
“You always did hate being bored.”

“Yep. Still do.”

At that convenient point the oven timer beeps loudly to indicate that the cheesecake is done. Beckett takes her coffee with her as she extracts the dessert so that it can cool, inspects it carefully while draining her cup and pronounces herself satisfied.

“If we went for lunch now, and didn’t take too long, when we got back it could go in to the fridge to chill.”

“Sounds like a plan to me.”

Father and daughter exhibit exactly the same pizza-inhaling tendencies, drain their sodas, and speed back to Jim’s apartment in double-quick time in order to have time for their Sorry game before dealing with the next stage of Beckett’s culinary masterpieces. Beckett wins. Jim grumbles. She hands him the bag of potatoes triumphantly.

“Okay, you start on the potatoes, and I’ll do the final topping for dessert.”

Jim eventually unearths a peeler from his cupboard and begins. Beckett, having finished the topping long before he’s halfway through, starts on coring the apples.

“C’mon, Dad, speed up.”

“You sound just like your mother,” Jim says without thought, and then drops the potato he’s holding into the sink with a splash when Beckett gasps. There is a gaping silence.

Beckett makes an immense effort to force out words. “I thought you’d slowed up with age,” she manages. “Maybe I should make you practice. Hire you out to a fries-making factory.”

It’s not very funny. But it works for just long enough. Jim squeezes out a brittle effort at a laugh. “I don’t think fries need anti-trust advice.”

Beckett takes a breath, and another, and cores an apple with just a little more force than is really necessary. Jim peels the maltreated potato with venom. The scrapes echo in the uncomfortable silence.

“Did she really tell you that?” Beckett asks in a very small, tight voice, after a moment.

“All the time.”

There is a small, tight silence, matching the small, tight words. “Pass me the ones you’ve done, and I’ll slice them,” Beckett says, still exerting tight control of her voice. Jim complies. An instant later the sound of fast, sharp slicing begins. Jim keeps peeling.
Beckett pours her cream and milk into a saucepan and starts to peel and chop yet more garlic. The knife echoes coldly on the board.

“It’s not Hallowe’en,” Jim says, trying to break the still taut atmosphere.

“You don’t need to keep the vampires away. How much garlic are we having in this meal?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Dad. You’re as bad as Castle. I’ll have to keep you two apart if you’re going to pick up his ideas and swap supernatural silliness.” She neatly dices the garlic cloves, adds them to the liquid, thinks for a second and adds ground pepper and a pinch of salt. “That can start simmering. Are you done with the potatoes?”

“Yes. Pass the apples.”

“Okay.”

It’s all very cautious, again. The conversational ice crackles and chips under the weight of their history. The chop of the sharp knife through the white flesh of each peeled apple slices each instant. Beckett lays them in a dish, sprinkles a few cloves through them, and covers it with cling film. “Keeps them from browning. Even for a few minutes, it’s worth it.”

She turns to the sauce for the potatoes, and slides the slices of tuber into the simmering mix.

“Three minutes,” she says. “Tell me when time’s up.”

Jim checks his watch. “Okay. Why do I need to?”

“Because I’m grating cheese to go on the top, and I like a lot of cheese on top.” She rubs the block of Gruyere over the grater, grating it very finely with considerable attention to detail. Conversation flags, again. The pile of grated cheese rises. Jim’s mood does not.

“Time’s up,” Jim says into the silent kitchen. Beckett delicately lifts the par-boiled potato slices into another flat-bottomed dish, pours the sauce through a strainer over them, and then spreads the cheese evenly: micrometrically levelled.

“Okay, let’s get these in the oven,” she says, as levelly as the cheese is spread, and slides both potatoes and apples on to a higher shelf. She sets the spinach in a microwaveable dish, ready to be lightly wilted.

“Looks like we’re just about ready,” Jim says. “Let’s clean up. I’m washing,” he adds very quickly.

“What?”

“I told you, I hate drying.”

“I remember it was always Mom drying up, too,” Beckett says, extremely tentatively.

“Yes. She didn’t mind drying,” Jim replies, equally careful. The ice below them holds, creakily. “I wasn’t allowed to do anything complicated, like actually cooking, but I could wash up.”

“Cake mix,” Beckett says, and achieves a snicker, with some effort.
“That’s unfair, young lady,” Jim says, with massive parental dignity which achieves nothing – except to lighten the mood, which is in much need of lightening. Each sentence has the potential to smash the fragile détente and thin covering over which they are tiptoeing.

“Okay, we’re done till they arrive. The spinach will only take two minutes, and we’ve got rolls and butter to put out.”

“Hadn’t we better set the table?”

“You can do that.”

“Thanks, Katie,” Jim grumps.

“I cooked. You make the table look pretty.”

Jim does as he’s told. As he sets out cutlery and glasses, he realises that this is the first time in over ten years that he and Katie have spent the whole day together, except for their lacerating anniversary on each January 9. Even at Christmas, they don’t spend the full day together, because Katie takes a shift. Okay, so it’s been fragile at times, and they’ve both been as cautious as if they were walking on the crust over hot lava, but there hasn’t been that biting tension that there’s been at Carter Burke’s; there hasn’t been what, looking back, he now recognises as a constraint on Katie’s part, a hesitation. On balance, he thinks, he’d rather start from here. Now that he knows what the other options are, oh yes, he’d rather start from here.

He puts the last item in place, twitches a wrinkle out of the tablecloth, and hopes with the same level of intensity which he applies to staying sober that tonight will go well.

Hard upon the heels of the thought, the doorbell rings, and Castle and Alexis have arrived. Alexis is holding a bunch of flowers. Castle, rather more attuned to the Beckett preferences, has a box of chocolates.

“Rick, Alexis, come on in. Nice to see you.”

“Thank you for inviting us, Mr Beckett,” Alexis says, and sniffs hopefully. “That smells amazing. What is it?”

“I’ll let Katie tell you. She cooked it all.”

“Slow roast pork, potatoes, apples, spinach. Blueberry cheesecake for dessert,” Beckett says, emerging from the kitchen with a bright smile for Alexis and a softer smile for Castle. She doesn’t expect Castle to take three steps towards her and dust a kiss across her mouth. From the mixed look of surprise and approval on the faces of both her father and Alexis, neither did they.

Soft drinks arrive, to no-one’s surprise or comment, and Jim is allowed to carve the meat. Only just, of course, and only because he takes possession of the carving knife before Beckett can.

“Sit down, everyone,” Jim says hospitably. “Now, tell me how much you want…”

They tuck in. For a few moments, there is no conversation at all, as the excellence of the food is properly appreciated, but that done, discussion begins. Alexis diverts Jim’s attention, and Castle is free to concentrate on Beckett.

“How long did this all take?” he asks, impressed.

“The pork took eight hours in the oven, the rest was really simple.”
Castle calculates. “So you’ve been here all day?”

“Yep. And I beat Dad at Sorry, too,” she says smugly.

“I heard that, Katie.”

“What’s Sorry?” Alexis asks. Jim immediately embarks on a long explanation.

“All day?” Castle repeats. He does not say And one of you isn’t dead, crying, or emigrating? “Two people shared a kitchen all day and you haven’t quarrelled? Wow. Whenever anyone shares a kitchen with me we disagree in seconds flat.”

“That’s because of the s’morlettes, Dad,” Alexis puts in.

“The what?” Beckett and Jim ask simultaneously.

“You know Dad’s a really good cook” – Castle preens – “but sometimes he gets a little carried away. S’morlettes is like a s’more omelette.”

“Uh… you eat this?” Jim queries, appalled by the thought.

“Oh no,” Alexis says. “I won’t touch it. It’s revolting.”

“It sounds it,” Jim says, scrunching his nose in disgust. Castle looks from Jim to Beckett and notes the resemblance of the twin nasal scrunches.

“It’s delicious,” Castle tries. Everyone else makes disbelieving noises. “It is!” His attempts to convince fall on stony ground. He humphs, and concedes defeat. “Anyway, that’s not the point. You’ve been cooking all day?”

“No, we got lunch at a pizza place and then played Sorry.”

“Oh, yeah. You said.”

Castle assesses Beckett as unobtrusively as possible, and takes the same approach to Jim. Beckett isn’t exactly tense, but she certainly isn’t relaxed either. Jim, however, is much lighter than he has previously been when around his daughter, since their previous relationship shattered.

“Detective Beckett,” Alexis asks, a short time later, “would you, like, tell me a bit about Stanford?” Tension snaps into place. Alexis doesn’t notice. “Like, how you got in, and entry requirements, and stuff?” There is an easing down. Jim’s eyes are bright with interest. Castle slides an unseen hand on to Beckett’s knee, and removes it again.

“Okay. Um…”

Castle detects with considerable interest that Beckett is thoroughly embarrassed, and with more interest that Jim is exhibiting enormous parental pride.

“Katie was a straight-A student at Stuyvesant,” Jim breaks in. “Valedictorian.”

Castle’s jaw drops. Alexis’s face is the epitome of hero-worshipping admiration. Beckett is blushing fiercely and metaphorically trying to hide under the table.

“Really?” Alexis squeaks. Castle is still trying to get his head round what he’s heard. He knew Beckett was intelligent, but that… well. Wow. “That’s amazing,” she breathes. “I’d be so proud to be valedictorian. Is that how good you have to be?”
“I’m sure it helped. Generally, I think you need to be looking at a 4.0 GPA, and aiming for a really high SAT score.” She pauses. “It’s a great university, but it’s pretty competitive. You’d need to be really sure you wanted to go there.” She smiles, without Alexis noticing the effort she makes. “I’d go visit it. Sometimes you get a gut feeling about places, even though they’re great on paper.”

“But did you enjoy it?” Alexis persists.

“Yes.”

“So why did you transfer?”

Jim turns pale. He hadn’t exactly dwelt on that subject when at Castle’s loft. Katie is clearly trying frantically to think of something to say.

“She transferred because of me,” he grits out. Rather too late for everyone’s comfort, Alexis gets it. Being only just fifteen, though, she doesn’t have the first idea of how to fix the situation she’s unwittingly provoked. She is massively uncomfortable and, in fact, close to tears at her mistake.

“I’m sorry,” she falters. “I didn’t mean… I totally didn’t…”

“Shh, pumpkin,” Castle rumbles quietly. “No-one thinks you did. Just shh now.”

Jim is tight-faced, staring down at the remains of his dinner. Castle puts his broad palm back over Beckett’s knee, not quite gripping; looks at her set face, and despairs.

“One of the things I did wrong,” Jim says to Alexis, “was made my daughter think she had to transfer back here to look after me. It should never have been her job to take care of me. But she did. I… wasn’t grateful enough, then. It wasn’t until recently that I realised…”

Castle finishes that sentence with how much she sacrificed, and tries not to show his wince.

“She saved me,” Jim divulges, speaking only to Alexis, as if he were unaware of any others; striving to explain to her. “If she hadn’t… but then I had to save myself, too. You can only ever save yourself. No-one else can do it for you, or make you do it. In the end, it’s your choice to sink or swim. It’s up to you, and then you have to keep doing it for yourself, every day of your life: you have to make the choice all over again. And then…” he pauses, and pain radiates from him as he turns his gaze to his plate, “you have to hope that you can be forgiven for all the hurt you caused.”

“Or,” says Beckett in a voice like cracked glass, “you have to try to forgive yourself for walking away even if it’s the only thing you can do to save yourself.” She doesn’t touch her liquid eyes.

“Sometimes, you have to choose to let someone drown, if they would take you down with them. Sometimes, you even survive the choice.”

Jim raises his eyes from his plate and meets his daughter’s gaze. Absolute silence envelops the table: the suffocating weight of emotion smothering any words that might be said. All Castle can think is she hasn’t run yet, she hasn’t run yet. The last time there had been such raw emotion around her had been at Julia Berowitz’s apartment.

“Let’s have dessert,” she says. “Dad, you clear the plates.”

Castle has seen, and indeed heard, more expression from a Victorian porcelain doll. He wants, more than almost anything, to take Alexis home and get out of the claustrophobic atmosphere. He can’t. He won’t let Beckett down like that. Either Beckett.

His Beckett walks into the kitchen. Jim Beckett collects up plates, knives and forks. His face is
wrinkled and sagging.

“Mr Beckett, I’m really sorry,” Alexis manages.

“It’s not you. It was a perfectly reasonable question. You couldn’t have known.” He forces an upward quirk of lips. “Don’t blame yourself for things that aren’t your fault.” He follows Beckett’s path to the kitchen. The door shuts behind him. Alexis gives Castle a white-faced, miserable look. “Dad, can’t we…”

“No. That would make everything much worse. It wasn’t you, pumpkin. But now we have to see it through.”

“I don’t like being an adult if it’s like this,” Alexis says pathetically. Castle hugs her. Now isn’t exactly a great time to tell her that being an adult means dealing with situations like this.

Behind the shut door, Beckett is mechanically taking out dessert plates for the cheesecake and trying to hold on to her composure. She is failing.

“Katie?” Her father puts down the dishes he’s carrying. “Bug, it wasn’t on you,” and despite her height and self-contained adulthood, he hugs her as if she were still his little girl, tears in his eyes as her shoulders quiver. “It was never on you. You did the right thing. You know that, Bug. You just have to believe it.” He holds her for a second more, steels himself. “Do you want Rick to come through?”

“Not yet,” she whispers, “Dad.”

Jim clasps her tighter, remembering when she was small and leant on him in the same way, and lets his tears pool, unblotted. For the first time in years he’s consoling and supporting her. He pats her shoulder, and keeps his mouth very firmly shut.

A very short while after that, Beckett straightens up, wipes her eyes, passes her father a sheet of kitchen towel without commenting on either set of stained cheeks, smiles rather damply but without constraint, and then passes him the plates.

“We’d better take them the dessert. Who knows what they’ll do if they don’t get their sugar fix?”

Jim frowns thoughtfully. “Hm. Let’s not find out.” He exits with his pile of plates, on top of which Beckett has placed a large knife, which is wobbling dangerously.

Castle looks at Jim’s imminent danger, and plucks the wobbling knife off the top of the wobbling plates. He sweeps his glance across Jim’s face, detects the remnants of very strong emotion not quite covered by enormous relief, and looks across the room in time to note (and hide his reaction to noting) Beckett’s lack of eyeliner and artificially calm visage.

“Dessert?”

“Oooohhh yes please,” Alexis says, sounding very like her father.

Jim doles out dessert, to vocal approval, and dinner progresses with no new awkwardnesses. However, the evening is not prolonged. To be fair, it is not, as Castle reflects, cut untimely short either; however, though since he can’t take Beckett home (and her cruiser is out front anyway) he’ll be calling her later on, and if he’s not happy with how she sounds, he’ll be over there. Which is rather too overprotective and smothering, but he can’t help it. Not right now. But that’s his problem to solve, not Beckett’s.
“Can we help tidy up?” he asks.

“No, it’s good. Everything goes in my dishwasher,” Jim says, “and it’s mostly in there already. It’ll only take me five minutes to finish up.”

“All my things are packed up: I only need to take them down.”

“I’ll carry them,” Castle says chivalrously.

Beckett glances at Castle and then back to her father. “Do you need anything, Dad?”

“Not tonight,” and somehow Castle thinks there’s more to the words than the obvious.

“Okay. Guess it’s my bedtime too.” She steps forward and hugs her father, lingering for just an instant longer than good familial manners would indicate. Castle shakes Jim’s hand, and Alexis follows suit.

No doubt in deference to Alexis’s presence, Castle doesn’t sling an arm round Beckett. Given that he’d picked up her bags in one hand, she has no doubt that winding arms around her had been his first thought. They attain the sidewalk without incident: Castle lifts her cooking equipment into the trunk for her, and then, after Alexis has slightly awkwardly shaken Beckett’s hand (it had looked like she was going to hug her, and then Alexis had clearly thought that hugs might be the wrong thing, or too familiar, or just plain awkward. Beckett is grateful that she had stepped back. Hugs from Alexis are…too much, tonight), provides a brief embrace and another dusted kiss, equivalent to the one at the start of the evening.

“I’ll call you later,” he says. Beckett flicks up her eyebrows but doesn’t say anything. His voice drops to exclude Alexis, already four steps away. “Please?”

“Sure,” she says, a little questioning.

“Okay then.” He dusts another kiss across her mouth, and follows Alexis to a cab-heavy corner. Beckett starts her cruiser and is shortly gone.

She’s been home for about half an hour when Castle calls: time to wash, to change into sleep tee and a warm robe, and to make herself a well-doctored coffee with plenty of spices and creamer. Now that she’s alone, she’s slipping down the stress waterfall: a little shaky, a little upset, a little chilled. The coffee helps, but her emotions are raw and bleeding still. Rather too much truth laid out over the dinner table, for her father and her to feed from.

“Beckett.”

“Hey,” Castle says bouncily. “I said I’d call. Make sure you didn’t get kidnapped by a crazed cheesecake addict.”

Beckett snorts. “From my official unit? With automatically locking doors?” she humphs at him. “And anyway, I left Dad the remains of the cheesecake. There wasn’t much left.”

“It was great,” Castle says, distracted. “Share the recipe?”

“Okay.”

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” Beckett can hear the sceptical silence on the line. “I am. It just got a bit heavy. It’s
okay.” Scepticism increases. “We didn’t fight.” And decreases again.

“Want me to come round?”

“Not now. Maybe tomorrow. I’ll call you, okay?”

“Okay. But if you don’t, I’ll set O’Leary on you again.” Beckett detects Castle being deliberately provocative, and growls. “What? He’s got the body armour. I don’t.”

“Stop subverting my friend.”

“But you won’t let me come over and subvert you, Beckett,” Castle says plaintively. “I’ve got to get my fun somehow.”

She growls again. “You can come tomorrow – don’t say anything.”

“Aww, you are no fun at all” –

“for coffee. About eleven. And I am not inviting O’Leary just so you can mess with him.”

“Aww,” Castle emits again.

“No,” she says very definitely. There is a disgruntled mumf noise. “Sulking is childish.”


“Night.”

She does feel better. Warmer, both inside and out, and cheered to know that Castle has her back as unobtrusively as ever. She finishes her coffee, doesn’t dwell on the emotional outpourings of the evening, has a lovely hot bath with lots of lovely scented bubbles, and goes to bed relatively content. She’ll think about everything that happened in the morning.
No place I'd rather be

Beckett does not wake early, or easily. In fact, her first reaction to a tentative quiver of her eyelids is to shut them very firmly and slide back into cotton-wool slumber. Half an hour later she vaguely considers opening them again, and rejects it. She’s warm, cozy and comfortable, and she doesn’t see much need to change that right now. She drifts in and out of sleep for a little while, until finally the out begins to exceed the in by a large enough margin to indicate the need for coffee.

She pads out in bare feet to her kitchen and switches on the kettle on autopilot. The hissing as it heats kick starts her brain and she decides on her special reserve supply of top-notch Ethiopian, only brought out when she absolutely feels that she needs or deserves it. She sniffs the aroma from the bag with delight: inhaling deeply, and smiles. She is going to enjoy this.

She does enjoy it. Every tiny sip. She enjoys her pastry too, and reflects that buying herself some French patisserie when she purchased the ingredients for Saturday had been an excellent plan. Settled down and contented, with still more than an hour before Castle might show up, she thinks back over yesterday and Alexis’s unwitting trigger question.

Truth to tell, she and her dad had already been pretty emotionally fragile before the collective Castles descended. The day had gone well – she had certainly expected to be unable to spend the afternoon with him, and had been astonished not only to be asked, but to be able to accept with relative ease – but that doesn’t mean it hadn’t been very, very stressful, even if they hadn’t noticed the level of emotional tension.

Alexis had asked a perfectly reasonable question, so it would be completely unreasonable to be upset with her. She herself had wanted to keep everything private, so it would be just as unreasonable to be annoyed that Castle hadn’t primed his daughter better. And her dad had already bared his scars to Martha and Alexis, so asking for more would also be unreasonable. Everything is so very, very reasonable.

And they didn’t fight. They cried, a little. They hugged, rather more. It was… it was shared pain, not antagonistic pain and anger. Quite, quite different. Possibly, even, a good thing.

She thinks about that for a while. Shared pain, just as there had been the shared fragments of memory, stiletto-sharp and piercing – but shared. She had thought about this, before, with Dr Burke, but not reached this point. Then again, that had been two weeks ago, and – oh. Part of what she’d thought then was at least partially wrong. She’d thought I’ve spent too long supporting him to think that he can support me. But last night – that hadn’t been entirely true. She’d said, at Dr Burke’s, He’s still my dad, even if he’s not the one I turn to, but last night she’d simply wanted her dad. He’d offered her Castle, but… they’re still a family. Nothing has changed the fact that he is still her dad.

Slowly, and not a little painfully, fuelled by coffee, she thinks it through. Yes, the fault was her father’s in the first place. He’s accepted that, long since: tried to make his amends and reach over the gaping crevasse. She… had tried too: been let down and then, thinking the fault was hers, tried to hide the fault in their relationship rather than trying to understand it. Now, they both understand.

Now, yesterday, they shared their understanding of their shared pain.

Maybe, now, that’s the breakthrough that they needed: not at Dr Burke’s but at her father’s apartment; the breakthrough not the shared family meal and watching, without agony, the Castle family relationships but a hug in a kitchen; tears dried on kitchen towel. Dr Burke, she thinks
sardonically, will find that very mundane.

Oh. Oh. She had watched the Castle father-daughter relationship without pain. Okay, so maybe that’s because it had been swallowed by the other issue… but maybe not. Just maybe, not.

She quite deliberately revisits every moment of the previous day. Here in the fresh sunlight of a May morning; in the calm, unthreatening abstract softness of her apartment; she can do that. When she’s done, though she has certainly winced a few times, and then a few times more, just as when she had forced herself to look around Castle’s loft and absorb its family atmosphere: the photos and the knick-knacks, she can see that she had been far less tense – if not relaxed – with Alexis’s relationship with her father than the previous time. Progress. Actual, tangible, definite progress.

More, there has been actual, tangible, definite progress with her own father, even before Alexis’s naïve and triggering question. Which, it occurs to her, might have been the reason why she was less stressed about the Castle-Alexis axis – oh, Kate. Get your head in the game, Kate, she admonishes herself. Dr Burke had told her that, way back. You will be unable to forgive your father until you forgive yourself, I also do not consider that you will be able to forgive yourself until you have established for yourself your father’s feelings. And then later: If you do not come to terms with a revised relationship with your father, whatever that relationship may be or indeed if there is no relationship at all, then you will not be able to deal with Mr Castle’s family.

So. Easier with her own father, easier with Castle’s fatherly aspects.

She tries to take another mouthful of coffee, and discovers that it’s finished. She wanders back to the kitchen to make more, still thinking in the clear morning light, streaming through her large windows. She takes it to the table where her little stone bird stands jauntily, the smooth red quartz beside it, puts the pot and mug down beside them, carefully, each on a mat, and stares out, a serene half-smile creeping on to her face, into the bright day, the cheerful sunshine, the people bustling through the streets below in bright summer clothes.

Her contented reverie is interrupted by a knock on the door, at which point she remembers that Castle is coming over – is here, in fact – and she is still in a very sloppy sleep tee, panties and not a stitch else.

She doesn’t have much choice about opening the door – and anyway, why is she even worried, it’s not like Castle hasn’t seen her in considerably less – so she keeps herself carefully out of view of casual passers-by and opens it wide. Castle bounces in, wide awake and full of the joys of life and sunny days, tidily closes the door and then stands looking at her, mouth agape and eyes twinkling merrily.

“Cute,” he says happily. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you this messily casual.” Beckett scrunches her nose up at him, and humphs. “I like you all messy and cute.” He takes a stride. “C’mere,” he says, completely pointlessly since he’s already secured her, and kisses her: first affectionately and then, with barely a pause, much harder and very possessively. “I really like it.” His hands wander under the sloppy tee and slide up her back. “Oh, yes. Perfect.” One hand slithers round to her front, and investigates. “Perfect for petting,” he murmurs, and then falls to kissing her again: sure and slow with hand and mouth. She sighs softly into the kiss and flows against him, letting him balance her.

They move slowly to the couch, as delicate as a dance, Castle’s broad hand and strong forearm around her waist, the other now buried in the hair at the back of her head. He sits and pulls her down after him, her smooth, bare legs swung across his lap in exactly the right alignment for stroking, her torso half-supported in the corner of the furnishing, and gives himself up to kissing for a while, interspersed with some not-quite-wholly seductive petting. He wants to have his Kat
firmly established, before any conversations about the previous night take place.

Before Castle does, however, Beckett, much softer but not as far towards Kat as he might have wanted, pulls back from his mouth. Her arms remain around him, which is some consolation. He rumbles wordlessly in disappointment.

“Stop it,” she says briskly. He whines again. “We could start this conversation with ‘We need to talk’,” she says with an evil smirk. This time he emits an offended noise. “Now that I’ve got your attention…”

“Yeah?”

“I know you want to talk about last night, so let’s get it over with.”

“Urgh?” says Castle, who had not expected Beckett to take the initiative. Not when it comes to talking, at least.

“I’m not upset with Alexis.”

Castle manages not to say Thank God for that. He had spent some considerable portion of the cab ride home trying to reassure Alexis that Beckett wouldn’t hate her for ever and that she hadn’t completely screwed up.

“So I think maybe we should all go for pizza or something simple this week – with Dad if you want, but we don’t need him there – just to prove it?” Beckett sounds remarkably uncertain.

“Yes, sure,” is all Castle says about that, for now.

“Okay,” Beckett says decisively, putting a period to that aspect of the conversation. “Dad and I are okay. I think.”

“You said that last night, too.”

“So? I think it’s true. We spent the whole day together and okay there were some sticky moments but we got through.” She pauses, and leans into him. “We shared it.”

Castle tries to process that. He’s not at all sure what Beckett means, either by shared or indeed it. “Mm?” he hums, in default of saying something dumb.

“Memories,” she murmurs. “Maybe even the start of forgiveness.” That last is even quieter, but Castle still hears it clearly, and inwardly rejoices. Her voice rises to its normal pitch. “I guess I’ll have to talk about it with Burke.” She doesn’t exactly sound enthused. “He was right, again. Huh.”

Conversation appears to have closed. Beckett wriggles herself into a much better alignment, which also – Castle does not mention this – gives him an excellent view down the neck of her t-shirt, and nestles in.

“Anything else you want to talk about?”

“No.” She wriggles a little more, and settles down. “Just be here.”

He can certainly do that. There are not many places he’d rather be. There is a serene interval, while they both muse on various matters.

“Now what?” Castle eventually asks.
“Hm. More coffee. I should get myself together. I’m supposed to be on call, and it’s just lucky that nothing’s dropped yet.” Castle makes another disappointed noise, which has very little noticeable effect on Beckett. “Do you mind making the coffee – there’s a packet of Ethiopian on the counter – while I get decent?”

“Can’t you stay indecent?” Castle queries provocatively.

“No. I am not turning up to a crime scene in my nightwear.”

“Ow!” is Castle’s next noise. Clearly his unverbalised thought of *but it would be so sexy* had either popped out his mouth or – more likely – been written on his face.

Beckett slithers off the couch and his knee and departs for her bedroom, closing the door firmly. Castle throws her retreating form a regretful look and seeks consolation in the kettle and coffeepot. Naturally, Beckett’s phone does not ring at any stage before he reluctantly leaves for home. His only bonus is an enthusiastic make-out session, and even that remains relatively suitable for general viewing.

Just as Beckett is beginning to think about dinner, Dispatch calls. She laments her empty stomach for a moment, and then hurries to the door, Glock and shield in place. She’s dialling Castle as she goes.

“Rick Castle,” he answers, and then, “Beckett! Have we got a body?”

“We do. Meet you behind La Mama Experimental Theatre Club.”

“Oh boy,” he says enthusiastically. “There before you!”

He cuts the call before Beckett can. Fortunately she’s attained the driver’s seat of her car and can get going. It’s always annoying when he beats her to the scene.

The corpse is in full stage make-up, wigged and gowned. Besides that, it appears to be a mid-twenties woman. Until she is cleaned off, which in the face of Lanie’s protective growling will not happen until she arrives in the morgue, it is rather hard to decide on any other notable feature. Naturally, there is no wallet or driver’s licence in her costume, which is absolutely no help at all. She appears to have been stabbed, though Lanie won’t be definitive.

The four of them enter through the stage door in the alley behind the theatre, leaving a precautionary uniform on each door into the alley, sending a group round to the front to cover anyone trying to sneak out of those exits, and letting CSU happily do their thing around the whole area. Esposito’s eyes are flicking here, there and everywhere: a little tense at the evidently unfamiliar setting. Beckett rapidly concludes that he was never a theatre kid. This is entirely unsurprising. She tries to picture Esposito in a theatre at any age and fails. Ryan, of course, is trotting round after Castle, who is entirely confident and probably knows the backstage area of every theatre north of Alabama by heart. Possibly the stage area, too.

Beckett, courtesy of her musical theatre society experience (albeit that was ten years ago), is relatively familiar with the layout of a theatre. She strides through the backstage corridors and rapidly finds herself front of house. It appears that a rehearsal is, or was, in progress.

“Where the hell is Cali?” a relatively normally (for theatre) clad man, clearly the director, is yelling. “That was her cue! If she can’t pick up her cues what the hell is the point of having her?”

“What was the cue?” Beckett enquires, in clear, cool tones which cut straight through the chaos. It
is entirely unclear to her what the production or indeed the role might have been from the set and actors in front of her.

The director emits a disgusted noise. “Who the fuck are you?”

“Detective Kate Beckett. What was the cue?”

“What would it mean to you anyway, cop? We are following in the great tradition of Thespis.”


“Ill met by moonlight, proud Titania,” the director declaims disdainfully, obviously writing her off as an only semi-educated thug.

“What, jealous Oberon!” Beckett returns. “Now, who are you?”

“I’m the director and where the fuck is Cali?”


“Respect, Castle!”

“What the hell?” the director says again.

“Your Titania has been murdered,” Beckett says, without finding it in herself to soften that statement at all.

The assembled company immediately displays enough histrionic overacting to fill every one of Broadway’s theatres – unfortunately, only for one night, as the quality is sadly lacking. Despite her current dislike for and differences with Martha, Beckett can’t help thinking that, given that she had won an award, she’d be likely to act this bunch so far off the stage they’d be into the gods.

“Silence!” she yells, and receives it instantly. The director opens his mouth, catches Beckett’s vicious glare, and shuts it again. “Right. I need all your names, contact details and your role in this production. You! Director. You come with me. The rest of you, line up over there. Ryan, Espo, get listing. Nobody leaves till I clear it. Castle, with me.”

Beckett leads the director to the back of the stalls. “Sit down,” she says briskly. “Name?”

“Carl Caterham. I’m the director of this production. We open in two weeks. I don’t have time for this.”

“You don’t have a Titania for your Midsummer Night’s Dream either, so you’ve got bigger problems than talking to me,” she points out.

Beckett is already tired of this pretentious piece of bogus artistic integrity. He’s dressed, now she’s close enough to notice details, in velvet jacket, floppy bow tie, Prohibition-era pants and spats. His dark hair is greased back, and he has a goatee. None of this endears him to Beckett in any way at all. She is also entirely irritated that he seemed to think that being a cop means that she has no literary knowledge at all.

“What would you know about it?”

“Plenty. But even if I didn’t, allow me,” Beckett says very sarcastically, “to introduce you to my expert civilian consultant, Richard Castle. Son,” she says nastily, “of renowned actress Martha
Rodgers.

The director looks as if she’d punched him out. “M…M… Martha Rodgers? The Martha Rodgers? You” – he regards Beckett as if she’d sprouted two heads each wearing a dozen Emmys on a hat – have met Martha Rodgers?”

Oh, shit. How did she get the biggest Martha Rodgers fan in all fifty states? Well, she has. And now she’s going to use it. If only Castle doesn’t say anything, she can pull this off. She can act. She’s going to act. Right now.

“Not only have I met her on several occasions, but she has been to my apartment,” Beckett pronounces. She can feel Castle trying not to splutter. She just hopes that’s with laughter.

“I…I don’t know what to say,” the director stammers, overcome with awe. “I… I would be so honoured to meet Mrs Rodgers. Humbled. She’s a legend.” Castle’s shudders are becoming rather too persistent to be ignored. “And you’re her son?” Carl seizes Castle’s hand and pumps it vigorously. Fortunately he’s too star-struck to notice Castle wiping it fastidiously on his pants as soon as he lets go. It’s Beckett’s turn to try not to splutter, quite definitely with laughter. “Would you…”

“That would be entirely inappropriate while our investigation is ongoing, except under strictly controlled circumstances,” Beckett interjects.

“As Detective Beckett says,” Castle agrees, suavely. “However, as soon as she permits it, I could ask my mother.”

Oh, thank the small gods of detecting that Castle has a brain and can pick up his cues. Unlike their corpse. Time to switch this up.

“Okay, Carl,” Beckett begins, best intimidating stare at full wattage. Carl cringes slightly. “Tell me about this production.”

Carl puffs up again, until he meets Beckett’s eyes. “It’s a completely new take. We’re focusing on how the Oberon-Titania dynamic represents the patriarchal hierarchy of sexual dominance and women’s subjugation in a male-dominated society and zeitgeist, with all other relationships being male-male to show that sexuality has no place in the theatre and also refer back to the original intentions of the Bard where all actors” –

“Were male,” Beckett says, boredly.

“Yes,” Carl says rather sulkily. He doesn’t appear to appreciate Beckett’s knowledge. “Anyway. We open in less than two weeks.”

“You said that. So, who’s Cali?”

“Calista Corday.”

“And now her real name, not her stage name.” She taps her pen, meaningfully.

“Betty Warden.”

“How’d you choose her for the lead female role?”

Unwittingly, she’s hit the nuclear launch button. Carl ignites: theatrical gestures and oratorical declaiming in full front-of-stage flow.
“I did not choose her,” he enunciates. “She was thrust upon me. Sponsors,” he spits out. “My artistic vision made to give place to mere lucre. I had chosen Lee Kraven as the embodiment of my vision of a powerful woman reduced in scope by a masculine realpolitik” –

“Who were the sponsors, and what was Betty Warden’s relationship to them?”

“The Carriblanes. You know?” he asks, looking at Castle.


“She was their protégé. It was their one condition. I’d have walked, but” –

“But you need some credits on your resume.”

“Yes.”

“What happened to Lee?”

“Understudy,” Carl pinches out of tight lips.

“I guess you’ve got your replacement, then.” Carl goes pale. “Ready made.”
Where the bee sucks

Carl, intimidated by both Beckett and the overshadowing, if virtual, presence of Martha Rodgers, is released to join his colleagues in the stalls area. Ryan and Esposito have managed to list everyone. There is a significant volume of angry declamation and posturing, which is being silenced in a circle radiating outward from Carl and being replaced by awed whispering and open stares at Castle. Just before he’s mobbed by fans of his mother, Beckett walks on to the stage in front of them.

“Listen up,” she says, and every word is precise, perfect and audible at the back of the theatre. Every eye snaps to her and doesn’t shift.

“We have all your details. Thank you for your co-operation. I would like you to co-operate one last time to help us understand this tragic event” – Castle thinks that might be laying it on too thickly, but it seems to work – “I want you to reperform the actions you were all taking for when you were rehearsing about an hour before Cali missed her cue.” She catches every eye. “Go to!” she says, and exits stage left.

“How much acting have you done?” Castle says, incredulously.

“I told you I’d done a bit of musical theatre.”

He stays quiet. Stage presence or command presence, she’d displayed it in spades. He feels story roiling in his head, and knows that he won’t be sleeping tonight. The actors swirl around him, rearranging themselves. Ryan, Espo, Beckett and he arrange themselves in the front row. Castle gets his phone out, and starts to take photos. The rest follow suit, until Beckett says, “Let’s video it, guys,” and herself rises to move to a different area of the stalls to film at a different angle. Ryan picks up the idea and goes in the opposite direction. The actors continue to drift around. Beckett gives it another ten seconds and then claps her hands. “Places!” she orders. Amazingly, the use of a familiar term works.

The actors shuffle into the places they’re admitting to having been in over the critical time. Beckett doesn’t expect much from this, but with the videos it might produce something. Carl starts, Castle tries very hard not to wince from moment one, and comprehensively fails. By the time Beckett calls time, he’s shuddering, even though he’s a veteran of vile productions.

“That was horrible,” he says, as soon as they’re out of earshot.

“Yeah,” Beckett says, not really listening. “Right. I want to interview the key actors who were offstage.” She glances around, and then at her watch. “Hmm. It’s getting late, and we’ve got the videos, but no results from Lanie yet. I think we’ll do a brief run through now, let them all sweat a little overnight and bring them in for a full interview tomorrow. We’ll start with the old guy. Ryan, Espo, who do you want, and what’s my guy’s name?”

“Tim Derren.”

The boys look around. No-one is particularly attractive. “Guess we’ll start on him.” They gesture to a younger man and go off to cut him out of the herd to tell him when to show up. She and Castle collect the older man, who on marginally closer acquaintance appears to be in his mid-fifties.

“Mr Derren.”

He turns round. Up close, he looks much older: sixty-something. Broken veins infest his cheeks,
not quite concealed by the stage make-up; his eyelids droop slightly; there are bags below them. Beckett develops a feeling of dreadful recognition, which is almost immediately confirmed when he speaks.

“Yes?” he says. A faint trace of liquor wafts past Beckett.

“We’d like you to talk to us tomorrow morning about the play. Your part was?”

“Egeus.”

Castle nods intelligently.

“Can we see you at ten, please?”

“Yes. That should be possible,” Mr Derren pronounces, with very careful diction.

“Thanks.”

Beckett takes his address, and lines up the rest of her interviewees for tomorrow with brisk efficiency; Ryan and Esposito do the same, and fairly shortly they ensure that the theatre is cleared, seal the doors, and depart.

“Can you come back for a bit, Castle?” Beckett says.

“Sure. Do we need food, drink, ice-cream? Or is this merely a ploy to make use of my handsome body.”

Beckett snorts, and then pauses before starting the car. “No,” she says, and nothing more.

“No? I’m deeply distressed. Sent into a slough of despond.”

“You’re a very unlikely pilgrim.” Beckett sniggers, catching the reference without effort.

Castle pout-smirks appreciatively at the riposte. “I’m hurt. All my struggles and travails” –

“I thought it was mostly your mother’s struggles and travails?”

“Stop destroying my lyric prose with your logic and honesty. Yes. Anyway, why are you asking me to come back with you?”

“I want to talk to you.”

Castle raises his eyebrows. “Is there something I should know?”

“Yes,” Beckett says incautiously, and follows up on hearing his gasp, “but not about you.”

“Phew.”

Beckett pats his knee, and then removes her hand to manoeuvre into her parking space.

“Okay, so what do you want to talk about?” Castle asks when they’re safely within Beckett’s apartment.

“Derren.”

“Yeah?”
“He’d been drinking. He might be an alcoholic.”

“And?”

“And Montgomery told me I couldn’t work any cases with an alcoholic.”

“Oh. When’d he say that?”

“Months ago,” Beckett says bleakly, “but he hasn’t rescinded it.” Her fingers tap on the couch, restless and distressed. “I have to tell him about this.”

“Why?”

“Because if I don’t and he finds out – like tomorrow morning when he reads the Dispatch report – he’ll bench me unpaid and there’ll be a black mark on my record. I don’t need that.”

“Oh. Right.” Castle hugs her. “But all you have to do is tell him. So what’s the real point here?”

Beckett taps her fingers some more. She can feel her shoulders stiffening. “I wanna ask Montgomery to leave me on this case, but I think he’ll only do that if he thinks you’ll tell him if I’m getting sucked in.”

“Ah-er…?” Castle says ambiguously. He is not at all sure where Beckett might be going with this.

“So I want you to tell him you will” – he squeaks in surprise – “but I want you to tell me first.” Her words start to tumble out. “As soon as you notice. Then I can step back and you can make sure I do and then when he asks you, you can say I’m dealing with it properly, ‘cause I will be. So he won’t bench me, and I’ll get to deal with it with a… a safety net.”

Castle thinks it through. He doesn’t see a downside. “Okay,” he agrees, slowly. “But…”

“But?”

“But you have to listen to me and not argue,” he says firmly. “If I say you’re getting too close you have to trust me to be right.” Beckett stares at him. “I’m not going to be your patsy, and I’m not going to cover up for you.” He stops talking, very quickly. Beckett’s eyes are so wide they might fall out, were it not for the almost-tangible ice holding them in.

“Did I ask you to?” she says, quietly. “Did I ask you to lie to Montgomery or cover up? Didn’t I just ask you to help me do it properly?”

“Er… no? Yes?”

“I was asking you because I thought you wouldn’t lie. To me or to Montgomery. But thanks for the flowers. I’ll take my own licks.” She starts to stand up. Castle tugs her back down.

“Don’t. Okay, that wasn’t the best way to put that.”

“You think?” She sounds chilled, and she might still be sitting down but she certainly isn’t sitting in the curl of his arm.

“But.” The silence grows no less chilling, or less silent for that matter. “You still have to agree to trust me to call it right. And Montgomery still has to agree to all of it.”

Beckett doesn’t say anything, for a moment. Then, “I’ll talk to him tomorrow.” Which is not, Castle notes, agreement to anything at all. Shit. “I don’t want to think about it any more.”
She breathes in, and out again. “Let’s look at the videos we took. See if there’s anything interesting.” It’s quite clearly a shut-out. Castle realises rather too late that she’d been expressing, in a rather oblique, ass-about-face way, complete trust in his ability to spot the problem and force her to deal with it. More, she’d been saying, also in a totally oblique and ass-about-face way, that she’d listen to him and trust his judgement, over her own.

And he just threw it right back in her face by suggesting to her she was using him as a way to lie to Montgomery. Way to go, Rick. He realises slowly that he’s not only really hurt her, but that she’s simply pushed it all away to concentrate on the case. Just like she had when her father hurt her. Just like she’d, so slowly, not been doing when anything hurt her.

She’s already pulling up the video on her own phone, concentrating very hard on the small screen, watching intently. Oh. Watching very intently through suspiciously gleaming eyes. And she still hasn’t moved one single inch closer to him. She watches her own video for a few seconds.

“Aren’t you going to watch yours?” she asks, completely calmly, as if Ryan or Espo was right there with them. Not a flicker of any other emotion escapes.

“No. I want to watch yours.”

“Okay.” She sets it back to the beginning and hands him the phone. “‘Scuse me.” He can’t argue with that. The bathroom door shuts. Shortly it reopens, and she returns to the room. Instead of sitting down, she wanders over to the window, and picks up her little bird, running her fingers over it. She doesn’t touch the small red quartz beside it.

“Aren’t you going to watch my video?” Castle asks.

“Not tonight. No point, if I’ll be off the case tomorrow. I only wanted to watch mine so that I could tell whoever takes over what I knew.”

Castle looks at her sharply. She sounds resigned to being dropped from the case. “Don’t you want to take it?” He’d have thought she’d fight to stay on, as it’s such a perfectly Beckett-flavoured case.

“Not my decision. It’s up to the Captain.” She changes the course of conversation with a swift swerve before he can repeat the question which she hasn’t actually answered. “It’s late. Have you seen enough? Ryan and Espo’ll want your thoughts. Probably.” She manages a perfectly Beckett-normal smirk. “Maybe not your theories.”

“But what about the case?,” Castle says with emphasis.

“Not up to me. No point thinking about it. I’ll know tomorrow.” He can only see her back, now, as she continues to stare out the window. “There’ll be something else soon enough.”

“But if I said I’d make sure you didn’t get drawn in…”

“It’s still up to Montgomery. There’s no point worrying now.” She glances at the clock, and turns back to the room. The shadows fall such that her face is half-shielded. “It’s after ten.”

“So?”

“So shift starts at eight. If I don’t get some sleep I’ll turn into a rutabaga.”

“No a pumpkin?”

“No. That’s Alexis, isn’t it?” She acquires a smile, at some considerable cost. “You’ll still be
calling her that when she’s sixty.”

“Most likely.”

Castle realises that he’s not going to get anything out of Beckett tonight that relates to the case, how she feels, or why she won’t just tell him she’s upset. Oh. He knows that. Because being upset never helped. Because being upset might have sent her father back to the bottle. Because being upset is childish and stupid and she should have grown out of it. Because she’s hurt and angry and showing either never helped. It simply drove people away. Asking for help never worked, because there wasn’t any, until he and Dr Burke arrived.

And old bad habits die very hard indeed.

Beckett has gone back to repetitive stroking of the little stone bird, which he now thinks is a displacement activity when she’s stressed and not alone. He stands up, not sure whether he intends to leave or to hold her.

“I thought you understood,” she says unexpectedly. “I thought you understood that I’d never short-change the job. It was that or ask to be taken off the case. So I’ll ask to be taken off the case.”

“Uh?” Castle is left utterly wordless.

“You don’t trust me to deal with it properly, so I can’t be on the case. Better not to be near temptation. I’ll tell Montgomery in the morning.”

“What? Don’t do that!”

“I’m obeying orders. You got a better plan?”

“Yeah, I do. You stop pretending you’re not upset ‘cause of what I said, and we have a grown-up discussion about it. I said I’d make sure…” –

“You don’t think I’d listen to you, so if you tell Montgomery I will you’ll be the one lying. I’m not going to take that risk.”

“Well, you sure aren’t listening now,” Castle snaps. “Maybe you’ll listen in the morning when you’ve had some sleep and realised how dumb you’re being.” He stops, and plays back the last few sentences. “You’re wrong,” he states flatly. “You think I don’t trust you on the job – no, you think I don’t trust you near an alcoholic. And you’re upset and angry with me and you’re just hiding it all because that’s what you always do. Did.”

“You just said it.”

Castle isn’t listening to that. “And because you think I believe that, you’re trusting my judgement and walking away from this case without even fighting for it. You wouldn’t even argue with me.” He’s still several feet away from her, not moving closer, still working out what it all means. He sits down again, leaving her still at the window, staring out into the Manhattan lights with her bird cradled in her hands.

She heard him say that he thought she would try to use him to cover up misconduct: disobedience to Montgomery’s diktat, but he didn’t mean it that way: he meant that he’d tell her straight and then not put up with any attempts to weasel round him. He didn’t mean that she’d ask him to lie, just that it wouldn’t be a matter for negotiation or discussion what he said – that he won’t let her wriggle out of the commitment. But even thinking that he doesn’t trust her to do the right thing; doesn’t believe that she’s – oh fuck – doesn’t believe that she’s made enough progress to do this:
even then, even so, because he’s said that, shown that – she’s accepted it. So she’s going to walk away from the case tomorrow morning and obey Montgomery’s months-ago order because she trusts his judgement, more than she trusts her own.

Oh. Oh oh oh. Oh, fuck. Because he doesn’t believe that she couldn’t handle it. He really, really doesn’t. It would have been another step to show her that she’d made progress. And he’s stopped her taking it.

“I don’t think you should step back from the case,” he says. “I think we should go with your first idea.”

“Why?” She still hasn’t turned round. There’s nothing in her voice.

“Because you need to try sometime.”

“And if I can’t do it?” Hanging unsaid in the air is you don’t think I can. “Someone won’t get justice if I screw up. Better to wait.” Till I’m ready joins the host of unspoken words. “Ryan and Espo can handle it.”

Castle hears the defeated resolve in her voice. She really is simply going to walk away from this case, and it’s going to tear her apart, but she’s decided that she’s doing the right thing and so she’ll do it at any cost to herself. Typical Beckett. Typical old bad dumb habit.

“Kate,” he says firmly. “Kate, you’re wrong. Sleep on it. Don’t go see Montgomery till I get in.” He breathes in sharply, hoping for the words to pause this for long enough to mend it properly. “We’ll both talk to him. I think you should do it.”

She doesn’t say anything at all.

“Say something.”

“So what’s changed your mind?” she says acidly, but he hears the withheld tears behind the bite. “A few minutes ago you thought I was prepared to lie to my Captain and ask you to do the same so that I could disobey his judgement on my fitness for this case. So I agreed not to work it. Now you say I should go back to Plan A despite you thinking I’d do that. Well, I won’t. I’m not ready and you know it. I don’t need coddling, I needed the truth. There’ll be more cases. You should help Ryan and Espo with this one. If nothing else, we should play the famous Martha Rodgers card as hard as possible.”

There is a miserable pause, in which Castle realises that he’s lost this argument. Unless –

“You’re wrong,” he says again. “And you’re not listening to me trying to tell you I was wrong. You’re trying to martyr yourself without thinking just on the basis of one dumb sentence from me. Just like you did for five years because one dumb therapist fucked you up. You always believe the worst of yourself on the basis of someone you think you can trust and you won’t listen when someone tries to correct themselves. It’s always your fault and you just go right ahead and do whatever you think will punish you most for not being perfect. Well, you’re wrong. I shouldn’t have implied you would ask me to lie and you shouldn’t just have accepted it without an argument.”

Her shoulders are hunched, but there’s a betraying tremor in them, and in her hand when she puts the bird down. She doesn’t pick up the quartz, arms folding across her chest defensively. She doesn’t speak, either.

“Think about it. You’re just falling back into the same old pattern and I won’t let you.” He changes
to soft persuasion. “You were going to drop it because you thought I knew best. Don’t drop it now. Let’s go see Montgomery together and stick by his decision. You don’t want to go down without a fight.”

He rises and takes the three strides to reach her and turn her to face him. She’s not crying. That’s sheer force of will, because there’s moisture puddled in her eyes and from her pinched, chilled face she’s holding in everything. He might have broken the one thing she could rely on: her ability to do her job.

“Kate, it’s up to you. Just… just please think about how you’re reacting right now. Don’t do anything till I get there tomorrow.”

He pulls her gently into him, and cossets softly, hoping that he’s got through to her. She’s still trembling, or shivering. She also hasn’t agreed to wait for him, or with his reversion to the original plan.

Beckett is still reeling from Castle’s initial, incautious statement that she’d want him to lie for her. That had been the last thing she wanted. She knows what the risk is here, and she’d thought he’d help her. And then he starts yelling because she actually listened to him and if he thinks she’s not ready then she probably isn’t and somehow it’s her fault for listening because he’s flipped his view a complete one-eighty?

But gradually she starts to think over what he had said. He’d been wrong to say it, he’d said. She’s taking a black-and-white view and then doing what she thought was right on the basis of only believing the worst possible statement. She can’t have it both ways. If she believes what he says, then she can’t only believe one sentence. She has to believe all of it. In which case… is she slipping into the old mindset? And if so, why now?

It’s at least partly the alcoholic. A sixty-ish man: it’s very close to home. But she’d told Dr Burke she thought she could do it, and she hadn’t lied. She thinks she hadn’t lied. So why’s she so spooked, why’s she so determined to believe Castle’s totally dumb statement when normally she’d have ground him into hamburger?

“Oh, fuck,” she says, and only realises she’d said it out loud when Castle starts and grabs her more tightly. “It’s not what you said. It’s about your mother. Again.”

“My mother?”
“Your mother. We’re going to have to involve her. You saw how they reacted.”

“Yeah. Very deflating.”

“You’ll survive,” Beckett flips back, more like herself than any time in the last hour and more.

“So what about my mother?”

“I’m going to have to deal with her. I… don’t want to.”

It is not at all surprising, given the last few weeks, that Beckett doesn’t want to deal with his mother. Castle doesn’t really want to deal with his mother, and if he were to be totally truthful, he would admit that he’d been a little disconcerted (to put it mildly) and jealous that suddenly he’d been secondary to her. That hasn’t been the case in thirteen years.

“That’s what was wrong,” she says, miserable and embarrassed. “I wanted a way out. And you gave me one so I stuck to it even though you backtracked.” Self-contempt leaks into her voice. “I’d have told myself I was doing the right thing because I was a coward. I didn’t even realise it wasn’t what I thought it was.”

“Hey, stop it. We’re not going there. You only worked it out a second ago. And” – he cringes – “I’m not exactly happy about it myself.”

Beckett softens into him, and links her hands behind his back. “We can suffer together,” she says, and nuzzles his neck comforting.

“Oh okay,” Castle says. “I’ll hold you to that.”

There is a not-entirely-comfortable pause, which gradually morphs into serenity.

“Are we good?” she says tentatively, into his shoulder.

“We’re good. I think,” Castle says even more tentatively, into her hair. “ ‘M sorry. You wouldn’t screw up the job by asking me to lie.”

“ ‘M sorry too. Shoulda known you wouldn’t mean that.”

There is a further quiet space while they both recover themselves, the end of which is signalled when Castle hugs her hard, incidentally lifting her off her feet. “Hug it out?”

“We have a choice?” Beckett smirks. “You already did it.”

“So I did,” Castle drawls. “And here you are.” He puts her back on her feet but doesn’t loosen his grip. “And here I am.”

Beckett wiggles. “So you are,” she agrees, and peeps upward through her lashes at him. Castle doesn’t bother trying to resist both her invitation and his desire and leans down to take her lips with his own.

“Friends?” Beckett says when he lifts off.

“Partners?” Castle replies.
“Lovers,” Beckett says definitively, and squeaks as Castle tightens his grip until she can barely breathe. “Air!” she struggles to emit. He rapidly loosens his arms – just enough for Beckett to draw a breath.

The loosening also gives him just enough play to untuck her shirt and sneak his hands under it, on to the smooth lines of her back. She’s still oddly chilled when he touches her, but she curves into the warmth of his palms and leans into his bulk and slides her own hands under his shirt. He squawks indignantly.

“Your hands are cold. Ugh!”

“Warm me up, then.” She wriggles closer. “You’re always warm.”

“I thought I was hot,” Castle says provocatively.

“I’d need to do some research,” Beckett murmurs, even more provocatively. “Find some evidence.” She undulates her hips. “Mm. Yes. That feels like some very firm evidence.”

“I think you should examine the evidence,” Castle purrs in a furry, seductive baritone which itself becomes part of the investigative narrative.

“Do you? What about you?”

He kisses her hard, and moves them to her bedroom and her bed, unhooking her bra under her shirt before sitting her on the edge.

“I thought I was examining evidence?” she queries.

“I need some more evidence too. You’re always telling me that we need facts and evidence.” His busy hands undo her top and pants and leave her in brief panties. “See, evidence,” he says, as he examines her erect nipples.

“Should you be – ohhhh – handling the evidence without gloves?”

“Not into rubber,” Castle smirks. “You lose so much delicacy of handling.” He smiles lazily. “And this evidence deserves very careful handling.” He plays a little more, cupping each small breast in turn to lift it to his mouth. Beckett mews softly and reaches out to uncover her own evidence.

Fairly shortly the evidence has been completely uncovered and carefully examined, and both of them are in total agreement that it’s time to put it to the test to make sure that it satisfactorily proves their case.

Castle, completely and unashamedly naked, leans up on an elbow and slowly surveys an equally naked and unashamed Beckett. He runs a leisurely hand over her, and stops on her stomach, fingers splayed from sternum to almost where she wants them. She arches into the touch, and extends her own span to take him in hand and slide daintily up and down, fingers light and teasing. Castle growls deep in his throat, and retaliates with tantalising, dipping touch that ripples through her nerves and soaks her core: desire potent between them. Movement becomes more intense, more frantic: heat builds and scorches until Castle drops on to his back, pulling Beckett over him and sliding home as she opens around him and then there’s proof positive that she’s his and he’s hers and everything is theirs in one explosive moment.

“I’ll be there at eight,” Castle murmurs softly as he kisses Beckett before he leaves, as she whispers I love you into his mouth. “Wait for me.”
Castle is in the bullpen promptly at quarter to eight, and finds Beckett surrounded by Ryan and Esposito and consequently appearing rather harassed.

“Ryan, you get all the videos together and start looking through them so we have an idea where everyone claims to have been. Espo, you get on to Lanie and see if she’s got any results yet. ToD would be a really good start.”

“She said less than an hour last night,” Espo points out.

“See if she’ll confirm. We need a timeline. Have we got address, next of kin, anything like that? You look that up, Ryan, you take her phone and strip it. What about cameras?”

“Already on it. It was dark, so we didn’t see it Sunday. It’s black, small, over the door. Caretaker told me first thing.”

“Okay.” She looks up. “Hey, Castle.”

“Yo,” Ryan and Espo say in tandem. “You’re early.”

“No inspiration,” Castle says easily. “ Couldn’t sleep, couldn’t write, thought I’d come by and prove I exist before ten.”

Twin disgusted noises arrive. So, Castle notices, does Montgomery, and from the tiny tension rising around Beckett’s shoulders, she has noticed too.

“Let’s do this,” she says.

“What’re you gonna do?”

“I’m going to tell Montgomery that it’s a bunch of actors and that we might need some” – she pauses and manufactures a smirk – “civilian assistance.”

“We got civilian assistance. Why’d you need to tell the Captain about Castle?”

“No. So I get to go and try and explain that we might need another part of Castle’s family to get involved.”

“Rather you than me, Beckett,” Espo says with emphasis. She makes a noise of definite assent, and stands.

A moment later Beckett, with Castle looming large behind her, is tapping on Montgomery’s open door.

“Sir, may I have a moment?” she asks stiffly.

“Sure, Beckett. C’mon in. Castle too?”

“Yessir.” She stands in front of his desk in formal stance. Castle leans on the door which he’s just closed.
“Well?” asks Montgomery. “What’s this about?” He glances sharply between them, and doesn’t notice any signs of conflict.

“We got a body last night. Down at the La Mama Experimental Theatre Club. One of the actors.”

Montgomery quirks an eyebrow at her. “And? Sounds right up your alley.”

Beckett swallows. “One of the suspects is a sixty-something alcoholic. Your orders are that I recuse myself from any case involving alcoholics.”

Montgomery waits a beat. Beckett appears to have run out of words. “Mm?”

“I wanna work this case, sir. I know you said I wasn’t to, but I have a proposal.”

“Lay it out, then.”

Montgomery had forgotten that particular order until Beckett reminded him. He’s relieved that she’s taken it so seriously. On the other hand, this is a case where Beckett and her team are ideally placed, not least because of Castle’s theatrical connections.

“If I worked it, Castle would tell you as soon as he thought that I wasn’t dealing with the alcoholic properly, and you could remove me,” she spills out in one unbroken stream.

Montgomery gapes at them both. That was the last thing he’d expected. Castle tattling on Beckett? “How do I know that Castle would do that?” he says forcefully. “He’s your partner. Most times, partners back their partner, not tattle on them.”

“This is backing me, sir. I’ve asked him to do it.”

Montgomery fixes Castle with a very straight, hard stare. “Castle?”

“It’s the only way for Beckett to work the case. And” – Beckett is going to kill him for this, but it’ll be worth it – “it seems like the actors respect my mother. So if Beckett and I are working the case, I can get my mother to co-operate much more easily.”

“That sounds to me like it might just be a threat,” Montgomery says coldly, noting that Beckett’s expression has shifted to appalled fury and making a small gesture to her to order her to stay silent.

“Not at all,” Castle says suavely. “I’m sure my mother would co-operate with the NYPD, whoever asked her. However, I know how to manage her idiosyncracies, so most likely it would be much more efficient.”

Beckett looks as if she’s about to explode. Montgomery admires Castle’s nerve, if not his intelligence or respect for Montgomery himself, and produces a blackly vicious scowl.

“Sounds like Castle here has it all worked out,” he says. Beckett’s equally black expression, firmly directed at Castle, is some consolation. “Detective Beckett.”

“Sir.”

“I will allow you to work this case.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“But.” She flinches. Montgomery smiles very nastily, straight past Beckett at Castle. “But Castle will provide me with a written report on each encounter you have with the alcoholic, at the end of
that day.” Montgomery alters his smile to seraphic as Castle’s face falls and Beckett just about manages to smother a snigger. “If he misses one, you’ll both be off the case. Mother or not.”

“I won’t,” Castle says, crestfallen. Beckett is still trying not to laugh.

“Beckett, dismissed. Castle, you stay here a moment.” It’s an order, and both of them take it as such. Beckett departs, snickering under her breath.

Montgomery looks at Castle, without any of his usual good humour. “I don’t care how good you are for Beckett or my solve stats, Castle, the next time you try to pull a trick like that you’re gone. Just because you’re not one of my detectives doesn’t mean you get to undermine my authority like you just tried to. You might say that wasn’t a threat but we both know it was, and so does Beckett. I don’t tolerate that in my precinct.”

Castle winces. Montgomery doesn’t back off a jot.

“I’m in command here. I can kick you to the kerb if I decide to. Now, git. And I’ll have your first report by five, since Beckett saw this drunk last night.”

Castle retires before he is summarily removed from the Twelfth, and contemplates thespanking he’s just received with considerable wincing. He’d definitely pushed that too far.

“Still alive?” Beckett asks with some sympathy.

“Probably,” Castle replies.

“There’s a reason he’s the Captain.”

“Yeah. Ow.”

“Let’s go solve this case. Take your mind off your pain.”

“Can’t I have a kiss better?” Castle whines.

“Not in the precinct. Or in view of the precinct. Or when we’re out investigating.”

“That’s not fair,” he whimpers pathetically, as he follows Beckett to the elevator. “I’ve been hurt and you won’t kiss me better.”

“I’m not the one who tried sandbagging the Captain. Not a good move, Castle. Not if you want to stay here.”

“I do.”

Beckett unlocks her car and gets in. “I want you to stick around too,” she mutters, and then very quickly adds, “at least till we’ve intimidated all these actors with your mother.”

“Awww,” Castle drawls, “you like me.”

Colour tints Beckett’s cheeks. She starts the car with an entirely unnecessary growl from the engine. Castle smirks. It’s the first time he’s felt almost comfortable since he left Montgomery’s office, though on that thought he winces again. He had been very thoroughly raked down.

“Tim Derren, Castle. Focus.”

“Why are we going to his apartment anyway? Why didn’t you bring him in?”
“I want him as easy as possible. And” – she hitches – “I want to see him on home ground. If he’s as much a drunk as I think he might be, then I want to see what he’s like first thing. If he’s that drunk, he probably wasn’t capable of stabbing anyone without leaving evidence everywhere.” She huffs. “I want the lab results.”

Before Castle can get himself into more trouble – more trouble before ten in the morning, which even for him is starting early (if he wasn’t still enjoying the night before, which he doesn’t do any more) – they are pulling up at the block.

Beckett knocks on the door. Not precisely to her surprise, there is no answer. She knocks much harder. They wait. There is a sound of shuffling through the thin, grimy walls, the click of a lock. There is no drawing back of bolts, or clink of chain. Nor is there a peephole. Beckett rapidly assesses Derren as not so much down on his luck as some miles below it. Castle is likewise exuding an air of extreme unimpressed-ness, coupled with a feeling of extreme discomfort. A quick peek at his face tells Beckett that this is a sight which has tripped a whole library of unpleasant memories. She slips fast fingers across his hand: a small acknowledgement and a slight reassurance. His fingers tip-tap on her palm in return as the door creaks open, and are swiftly removed.

Castle thinks bleakly that this down-at-heel walk up is unpleasantly similar to a considerable number with which he’d become acquainted in many down-at-heel areas of American cities and larger towns, right down to the faint but pungent scent of boiled cabbage and a hint of blocked drains and sewerage. The sight of Tim Derren, blinking, bleary and red-eyed, hunched and shamble-shuffling, yet attempting to carry off the moment in dapper blazer and dress pants; reminds him horribly of so many similar other scenes from his youth.

“Mr Derren,” Beckett says clearly, and Castle sees the same tightness in her shoulders that he senses in his own: a different take on muscle memory, “you agreed to be interviewed this morning.” His face slackens, and it’s clear he’s scrabbling for some mental hook to hang this event upon. “Callista Corday aka Betty Warren.” He pales at the recollection.

“Oh, yes, um, come in, Miss?”

“Detective Beckett, and my associate, Mr Castle. Martha Rodgers’ son,” she adds. She will use it, and she will not be fazed by it.

“Martha Rodgers,” Derren says reminiscently, as he leads them into a sparse, dingy room; only moderately tidy: script on the table, glasses left dirty by the sink, a plate, a bottle. “I remember watching her, twenty years ago. She was amazing. I don’t know why she sticks to such unpopular plays.” He gestures to them to sit down. The chairs do not appear to be filthy, nor is there obvious animal or plant life on them. “You don’t know how lucky you are.”

“Oh, I think I do,” Beckett says. Castle coughs. The double meaning is entirely lost on Derren, who sits down in an absent – or pickled – minded fashion.

“Mr Derren, could you tell me about Callista Corday?”

He does, with many wavering pauses for thought and repetitions. Summarised, it comes down to the victim being foisted upon the director as a condition of funding.

“And why they chose him as director I don’t know,” Derren spits. “He’s hopeless. All about his vision and not one of us understands it. Authenticity is one thing but this is ridiculous. Still,” he adds viciously, “it was worth it to see him try to deal with Cali. She wasn’t having any of his folderol.”
“Oh?” Beckett asks.

“He was always sniping. She’d do what he asked and then he’d tell her it was wrong. I think he wanted her out. No surprise there. Everyone knew he wanted her out, but nobody would fight for her.”

“Including you?” Castle queries.

“I didn’t care. I’m washed up, and I know it. Too much gin and too few parts.” Beckett winces, remembering her father’s low points. “Whatever Carl did I didn’t care.” Derren’s whole posture suggests a man with no remaining self-respect or dignity. “Kept me in booze and beans.” He staggers to his feet. “Nothing I can tell you.”

“Yes, there is,” Beckett says crisply. “I want to know where you were when Cali missed her cue.”


“Why?”

“I had a bottle. Keeps me on track. Just a little nip.”

“Can anyone confirm that?”

“Kane.”

“Kane?”

“Kane Travers. Plays Bottom. He covered for me. Carl didn’t know.”

“Okay.” Beckett makes a note. “We’ll talk to him. Thank you, Mr Derren. We might need to talk to you again.”

“Thank you.” He hesitates, and gazes blearily at Castle. “Um… remember me to Martha?”

“Er – okay,” Castle says.

They leave.

“Ugh,” is Castle’s first comment, as soon as they’ve left the building.

“Yeah,” Beckett agrees fervently. “Are you okay?”

“Me? Shouldn’t I be asking you that?”

“I asked first.”

Castle turns to her. “Yeah. I’m okay. Brought back some memories, is all.” Beckett slides an arm around his waist. “I’m not… we’ll never be like that again.” His own arm curls round Beckett. “Ewww,” he suddenly adds.

“What?”

“What if Derren had an affair with my mother? Eurgh. I did not need that thought. That’s horrible.”

“Could be worse,” Beckett puts in.
“How?”

“No one said it was easy. That’s a complication we don’t need.”

“Beckett!” Castle wails. “Stop. That’s even more horrible. Ugh, ugh, ugh.”

“Back to the precinct. I want the ME’s report, and you have paperwork.”

Castle whimpers unhappily, and then remembers that Beckett hasn’t answered his question. “Are you okay?”


Back at the precinct, a series of uninformative interviews have been reported by the canvassing team. Their collective videos are not particularly helpful, although Espo wins the day’s smartypants prize for pointing out that they should get each witness-suspect to watch them to tell them if it’s correct. It is universally agreed that since the team has already had the dubious pleasure of watching the show live, they should leave that to persons who would benefit from the expansion of their cultural horizons. With four identically nasty smirks, the persons are identified as uniformed officers. A suggestion by Castle that Montgomery might enjoy it is rapidly squashed by the three detectives on the perfectly reasonable grounds that they wish to enjoy continued life, and pay checks.

The ME’s report reveals the fact of the stabbing, a lack of any detailed anatomical knowledge by the killer, and some suggestions for the weapon. Also of possible note is that the victim had taken an anti-anxiety med. Lanie is apparently trying to trace the exact compound, but it’ll take a day or three. The lack of murderous knowledge is not exactly helpful, since Beckett does not expect actors to be students of anatomy. There are no prints.

“But they might have been in medical dramas,” Castle suggests hopefully, still thinking about the actors. “They’d be bound to pick up something.”

“Probably herpes,” Beckett says bitterly. “All they seem to do in medical series is have sex with each other.”

Castle guffaws, but then relapses into somewhat sulky silence as he realises that he has to spend some time preparing his report.

At four-fifty-five precisely, chosen because Montgomery is not in his office, he provides a report on both Sunday’s and today’s interviews. He leaves out the lacerating discussion that he and Beckett had had, but is entirely truthful, if floridly descriptive, about the rest. The report is left neatly on Montgomery’s in tray, where he will discover it without difficulty.
“Now what?”

“Huh?” Beckett asks, staring at her screen as if it might have some better information.

“Well,” Castle mumbles uncomfortably, “we need to work out how to use Mother.”

Beckett cringes at the thought, though she knows it has to be done. “Got any ideas?”

“I could take her to a rehearsal.”

“I want them to talk, not be terrorised.” She stops. “Why don’t you get her to watch Ryan’s mash-up of all four videos. Then take her to see a rehearsal.”

“Mm, might work.” He fidgets in his chair. “Um, why don’t I get her gossip on all the actors and the director and crew?”

“Sounds good.” Beckett smiles evilly. “Why don’t you take Ryan with you? He likes theatre. Espo and I will review the ME’s report, build a timeline, and try to work out who couldn’t have been on stage when she got stabbed.” She looks over. “Ryan, got a job for you.”

Both Ryan and Espo are right over. “What is it?” Ryan asks.

“You’re going to the theatre,” Beckett smirks.


“Later tonight. You and Castle are going to the theatre.” Ryan’s smile starts to slip. Castle doesn’t look stunningly enthused either. “But first,” she carries on, “you’re both going to go and show Castle’s mother your video compilation.”

“What?” Ryan wails. “First you make me go to the theatre with Castle rather than a date” –

“I thought you two were in a bromance?” Espo jibes.

“Not cool, bro. Not cool – and now I have to watch that video again? What did I do, Beckett? I’ll never do it again.”

“Enjoy,” Beckett smirks even more widely.

“But…”

“Off you go. Have fun.”

Ryan droops, and both men leave muttering blackly and continuously until the elevator doors cut them off.

“Okay, Espo. We get to build a timeline and try and apply some logic to the situation.”

Espo grins widely at her. “Sneaky. Very sneaky.”

“Yep.”

Espo stops grinning. “So why ain’t you goin’ with Castle? ‘S not like you to send him off with
Ryan. They’ll get into trouble, you know.”

Espo watches Beckett’s back tense and her visage smooth into a perfect poker face. “Castle’s mother is… unique. Castle’s best to handle her.”

His face reflects considerable scepticism. “If it affects the case, Beckett, you gotta tell me.”

“It doesn’t.”

“Okay,” he says slowly. “But if it does, you gotta say so.”

“It won’t.”

Espo’s honour satisfied, they turn to the ME’s report. Time of death was less than an hour before the corpse had been found. The timeline begins to take shape. A cast list is organised. Beckett walks Espo through the basics of the play, which does not impress him at all: he dismisses it as nonsense.

“People like this shit?”

“Yeah.”

“They’re crazy. What’s wrong with baseball?” And there in a nutshell is the Esposito doctrine.

“Tomorrow, we’ll start to interview the actors.”

“Shit. Do I have to put up with their crap all day?”

“Yes.”

“Why’m I with you, Castle?”

“Uh?”

“Why’s Beckett not here? You’re always following her. Why not now?” Castle says nothing. Ryan looks across from the driver’s seat. “It’s all connected, isn’t it?” He looks back at the road, and keeps talking. “What’s been up with Beckett for months. Why she’s gone at odd times. Her benching. That sparring match where she hurt her wrist. An’ now me coming with you to talk to your mom.” Castle continues to say nothing. “Okay, you won’t tell me anything. But she better be okay with you.”

“She is,” Castle says calmly, and leaves it at that. Ryan makes an indeterminately disgusted noise, and continues on the route to Broome Street.

“Is your mom going to be there?” he asks.

Neither of them had thought of that. Castle looks at the car clock.

“It’s before six, and after lunch. Most likely she’ll be there, drinking my best wine. If she’s not, we can have a beer and I’ll give her a call. C’mon up.”

Ryan stops just inside the door and whistles. “Impressive.” Then he remembers he’s a cop. “But a bit showy. Who’re you trying to impress?”

Castle snickers. “My agent. It annoys her. And my editor. Want a beer?”
“Sure. Just don’t tell Beckett – or Espo. He’ll be jealous. She’ll rip me a new one for drinking on duty.”

“You’re not on duty. It’s after shift end, and I’ve invited you to meet my mother to talk about the theatre,” Castle says happily. “See, sorted. I’ll just find her.”

“I am here, Richard,” Martha says. “Who is this?”

“Detective Kevin Ryan,” Ryan says, without waiting for Castle.

“I am Martha Rodgers,” she says grandly.

“Mother,” Castle starts, as Ryan takes in the vision that is Martha Rodgers, in lurid turquoise with cerise beading and fringes, “we want to talk to you about the theatre.”

“Oh? You need my expertise?”

“Yes,” Ryan says, commendably promptly considering that he is currently blinded by the dress. “We caught a case at La Mama yesterday, and we need the low-down on the actors and director. So Castle and Beckett thought of you right away.”

Martha preens. Castle’s face twists into an expression of reluctant admiration, directed at Ryan.

“When Beckett mentioned your name everyone was really impressed. They’d all heard of you. They all want to meet you.”

“Really?” Martha asks, puffing up.

“Yeah. Anyway, before we let them meet you – one of them’s a murderer, and we don’t like our expert consultants getting hurt – we wanted your take on the names.”

“Oh,” says Martha with pleasure at being an expert consultant. “But why didn’t Katherine come herself?” Castle winces. Ryan clocks it, but parks it for later.

“Because I go to the theatre a lot, and I wanted to meet you,” he says. It’s not precisely truthful, but it’s not exactly a downright lie.

“Well, what would you like to know?”

Ryan explains. Martha listens carefully, and Castle pours the drinks.

Drinks arranged, Castle sits quietly and ponders the difference in his mother from her usual flamboyantly over-stated personality. As she talks, Ryan taking neat notes, it dawns upon him that she is in possession of a great deal of information about the technical side of theatre as well as her own undoubted acting talents.

“Thank you,” Ryan says. “That’s really helpful. Now, we took a series of videos on our phones, and I stitched them together – of the rehearsal,” he adds, at Martha’s questioning look. “If Castle can set it up on his laptop, you could watch what they were doing.”

“Set it up, then, Richard. What am I looking for, Kevin darling?”

“We don’t know,” Ryan says, blushing beautifully at the endearment. “That’s why we need you. Our victim was playing Titania, but she was only killed less than an hour before we were called. We want you to look at the rehearsal and see if you spot anything odd.”
Castle messes with his laptop for a moment or two and finally manages to hook the video up to a TV screen. The feed comes up. Martha takes possession of the remote, but at first watches it right through without a pause. Castle winces just as often as he had when it was live. Martha is riveted to the screen. When it finishes, she sighs.

“Well, really! I see Carl hasn’t improved as a director in the slightest. That’s appalling direction. Quite, quite terrible. Those poor actors. Being murdered must practically have been a relief to your victim.”

“Mother!”

“Pish. You know what I mean, Richard. How did you manage to sit through this?”

“With difficulty,” Castle says.

“I’m glad to see my teaching wasn’t wasted.” She runs it back, and restarts, tutting.

Halfway through, she stops, goes back a couple of moments, and replays it. She frowns, and repeats.

“What is it, Mother?”

“That’s an odd place to pause the rehearsal. It would ruin the pacing and flow. I know Carl is a dreadful director” –

“He worships you” –

“but that’s basic. He’s not even doing anything in that space. If there had been an error… then again, since his vision is clearly entirely misconceived – or possibly miscommunicated – I wouldn’t be able to tell if someone made an error… Well. If there was an error, he hasn’t even corrected it.”

Castle and Ryan exchange a look. This sounds like a clue.

“Mother,” Castle grins, “how would you like to come to the La Mama theatre with us?”

“Better call Beckett and Esposito,” Ryan points out. “Otherwise… so not cool to be shot, man.”

“Good point. Mother, do you want to go find a coat?” Castle is already dialling.

“Beckett, it’s me.”

“Don’t criticise my grammar. Mother’s spotted something. No idea what. We’re taking her down to La Mama. Will you meet us there?”

Ryan observes Castle become serious, and his voice drops into a much softer, reassuring tone.

“Yeah. Don’t worry. You’re in charge.”

“No, I won’t be upset. But I don’t think it’s going to happen.”

“Yes, I’ll tell her. ‘S okay. See you there.”

Castle swipes off, notices Ryan’s interested observation, and fails entirely to explain the last part of the conversation. There is a certain look in Castle’s eye which discourages Ryan from asking any questions.
“Ryan, I’ll take Mother in my car. You need yours. I’ll see you at La Mama.”

“Okay,” Ryan says, slightly confused, and departs.

Martha swishes down the stairs, having added a not-quite-matching fuchsia wrap to her outfit. “Let us begone, Richard.”

“Dad? Where are you going?”

“New case, pumpkin. It’s in a theatre, and they’re all actors. Grams might be able to help.”

“Can I come? What play was it?”

“A Midsummer Night’s Dream.”

“That’s what I’m studying. Let me come too, pleeease. I’m so bored of looking at the words.”

Castle mentally casts up his eyes and hands to Heaven. “Okay. But you do exactly what the detectives tell you. Or me,” he hastily adds. “Go get what you need.” He turns to his mother. “Mother, do not upset Beckett in any way whatsoever. If you mention coming to the loft, or anything at all that isn’t related to the play and the crime, we’ll find a different expert.”

Thankfully, after the shenanigans and highly emotional temperatures and temperaments of the last week or so, and his giving and then enforcing his ultimatum to her, his mother seems to be listening. Then again, she’s still muttering under her breath about the director’s (in)artistic incompetence.

Martha mutters blackly all the way to the theatre, to Alexis’s ill-concealed amusement and Castle’s mild consternation. He is astonished by how seriously she is taking this.

When they get there, the rest of the team is waiting at the door. Beckett is, to Castle’s eye, showing very tiny signs of stress, but none of the others notice. She steps into the light.

“Alexis?”

“Alexis is studying the play, and asked to come. She won’t get in the way, will you?”

“No. Promise.”

“Okay. Go and sit out the way.” Beckett dismisses Alexis from her purview. “Mrs Rodgers,” she says extremely formally, to everyone’s surprise, “thank you for coming. Castle says you noticed an anomaly on the videos?”

“Yes,” Martha says, without bothering with pleasantries and, more interestingly, without trying to divert the conversation into matters relating to Beckett, her family, or her absorption into Castle’s family. “The direction is appalling, and there is no coherent vision or structure. But Carl paused the rehearsal at a very strange point.”

“What do we need to tell him to do?”

Castle watches with utter amazement as Beckett and his mother continue a conversation of two equivalent-weight professionals jointly doing a job. He’s so stunned he fails to follow the words.

“Okay,” Beckett says. “Let’s do this.” She strides into the theatre. Martha is barely behind. The men, and Alexis (who has stayed very quiet and out of Beckett’s sight until she’s allowed in to find somewhere to sit), follow.
Rehearsal is in chaotic progress. Lee Kraven is clearly already stepping up to the role of Titania. Beckett, wholly controlled and locked down, walks down the centre aisle, reaches midway, and pauses.

“All stop,” she announces in commanding tones that hit the back of the stage. Everyone does.

“Not again,” Carl bitches.

“Quiet.” He is.

“We’re going to go through the rehearsal from Sunday night again.”

“Why?” comes from several spots at once.

“Because I intend to watch it,” Martha comes in, right on cue, and makes her entrance.

Pandemonium ensues. The main flavour is *It’s Martha Rodgers!* In seconds the entire cast is surrounding her and all talking and fawning at once. Beckett slips backwards and, without apparently looking, finds Castle and reaches for his hand, unseen in the darker areas of the stalls. She is very reassured by his firm grip, and, since all attention is on Martha, leans back into him.

“You okay?” he asks.

“Guess so,” Beckett manages, stress fracturing each syllable. “I’d rather not be doing this.”

Castle’s hands slip on to her waist and briefly hug her in. “No-one would know,” he reassures. “And Mother’s behaving herself.”

“Yeah.” She leans against him for another second, then straightens up and moves several steps forward. “Everybody quiet!” Silence falls. Martha is swamped in bodies. “Right. You’re going to go through the rehearsal exactly as you did on Sunday. Take it from the top. Mrs Rodgers will watch. Places!”

She sneaks quietly all the way forward and taps Ryan and Espo on the shoulders. “Sit with Castle’s mom. Listen to everything she says. I’m going to be up in the circle. I want a better view of the whole thing. Alexis, you stay absolutely quiet, and you can take notes too if you like.”

Ryan casts her a dyspeptic and highly cynical glance. Beckett glares. Ryan subsides. She strides off to the circle, followed by Castle. They take seats in the centre of the front row.

“Why up here?”

“I want to see the way people move and where they move to. Better view,” she says again. Rather surprisingly, she takes his hand. Castle concludes that she also wants some very unobtrusive reassurance. She might have come through the earlier conversation, but her fingers are cold and he is perfectly well aware that she is locked down against considerable stress. He can hardly blame her. His mother may be behaving now but Martha Rodgers is – well, *unpredictable*. He is astonished that Beckett could even contemplate using her on a case, and is in awe of the focused and ruthless professionalism that Beckett is displaying. He has no doubt at all that every instant that his mother is in Beckett’s presence adds another turn of the screw to the ratchet of her discomfort. He lets go of her hand, snugs his arm around Beckett’s tight shoulders, and then takes her hand in his other and draws it gently across to his knee. There is a tiny easement next to him, and then Beckett’s focus is solely on the stage and surrounds.

Castle, who thinks that the production should have been strangled pre-birth, is far less interested in
As he watches, it becomes clear to him that she is restraining herself, (his mother? Exercising restraint? Is this a dream?) with some difficulty, from contradicting Carl at every turn. Her hands are moving and her posture shifting as the actors do. Several times she starts to hold up a hand, and brings it back to a tight clutch on her purse or wrap.

Finally his mother intervenes.

“Stop!” she announces. “That’s not right. Carl, the last time you stopped rehearsal there. What happened?”

Carl cringes. “I… something I ate.”

“Pah!” Martha emits. Carl looks devastated at disappointing his idol. He’s been casting her glances all the way through, hoping for approval, and the longer he hasn’t had any the more desperate his directing has become. “Take the pause, then.”

Up in the circle, Beckett is still completely focused. Castle recognises her stalking of the oddity, and marvels that she isn’t getting involved. He matches it up to her ability to let him take the lead when it was he who would get best results (baby Callie, and dumbass Donbass; Venetia Lingham) and concludes that whatever Beckett’s personal feelings, she is still terrifyingly able to subsume them into the hunt for justice for the victim and consequences for the killer. He hugs more tightly, and then eases off.

The pause occurs. Beckett stiffens. Not only has Carl left the room in the direction of the men’s restroom, but three others have vacated the stage too. One, as expected, is the hapless Derren. Also leaving are Kane Travers (Bottom) and Charles Wentway (Oberon). That’s the top four for her interview list tomorrow, then. Derren will repay a harder grilling, and the rest have some explaining to do. She lets the rest of the rehearsal play out, and watches with interest as Martha fidgets more and more, while Carl gets more and more nervous, which transmits itself to the cast. Cues are missed, lines mangled, and the nadir is reached when a stage left exit results in a collision and much profanity.

Beckett is about to intervene when Martha’s patience with poor stagecraft and directing expires, not with a whimper but with a theatrical flash-bang.

“Stop!” she declaims, and everyone freezes at her tone. “Are you actors or oak trees? You!” she points at Derren-Egeus. “I remember you from Pygmalion, twenty years ago. You used to be able to act. And you!” – Oberon-Wentway shudders at her glare. “You can do better.” She swishes magnificently to the front, Carl scuttling out of her way. She doesn’t spare him a single glance.

“Explain the concept to me,” she directs at the cast. Their words fall over each other to explain. “Really?” she says disbelievingly. “And this is how you expect to convey that? Hopeless,” she dismisses the last ninety minutes. “Utterly hopeless. We will return to the beginning. First scene!”

The cast rearranges itself into an attitude of terrorised compliance. Up in the circle, Castle is now as riveted as Beckett had been. He hasn’t seen his mother perform in anything good in twenty years, what with living his own life and then her troubles with her ex, and he’s never seen her direct. If he’d known thirteen years ago what he is watching now… he’d have funded her himself, if she’d allowed it.

Under Martha’s dictatorial gaze and completely confident, swashbuckling direction, matters are clarifying faster than suspensions in a centrifuge. Suddenly Castle realises where his mother’s total confidence and lack of doubt is best used, and determines that he will ensure, by hook, crook or
outright bribery, that she is directing plays within the next month. No wonder she isn’t picking at Beckett – she’s got a much larger stage to play with. This is what she should be doing; this is what she should have been doing all along. And somehow, over a corpse, she’s found her lost way again.

“No!” she orders. “Do it again.”

“I think we should go,” Beckett murmurs. “Your mother has matters well in hand, but this isn’t advancing my investigation any more. I wanna interview Travers, Derren, Wentway and Carl.” She smiles very edgily. “Doesn’t look like Carl’s got anything to do right now. We could take him with us.”

“Beckett, it’s after ten p.m. If you try and interrogate him now his lawyer’ll claim harassment.”

“Ugh,” Beckett says gloomily. “I know you’re right, but I want to move this along. First thing tomorrow, then.” She stands up and starts for the exit. “Derren last. Give him time to sober up.” She thinks. “No. Second to last. Carl last.”
“How did you talk Ryan into taking Mother and Alexis home?”

“Threatened him,” Beckett says laconically, as they comfortably sip their coffee on her couch.

“What with?”

“Watching it again.” She doesn’t need to specify what it is.

Castle sniggers. “Mean, Beckett. Very mean.”

“It meant you didn’t have to.”

“There is that,” Castle agrees, and slithers much closer. “Are you okay?” He thinks she’s still tense.

“Yeah. It’s done now. We’ve got what we needed.”

“It looks like the play did too.”

“Oh?” Beckett downs half her coffee in one go.

“Carl’s directing gig has finished. Mother’s taken over, whether it’s official or not.”

“Oh,” Beckett says, nonplussed by the apparent non-sequitur.

“Beckett, wake up! If Mother’s using her – er – talents on the stage and cast, she’ll completely forget about using them on you.”

“You think?” She doesn’t look convinced.

“Oh yes. Didn’t you see her? She’s in her element. This is what she should have been doing all along, not messing around with ‘life coaching’ and pseudo-psychiatry. All I have to do is make sure she sticks to the theatre. She just needs one break to get her confidence back, and I think this might be it.” He hugs her. “It’s you that’s done it.”

“Me? I didn’t do anything. I didn’t want her there at all.”

“But you got her there. Even if you didn’t want her, you knew it was best for the case.” He grins boyishly, ridiculously attractive, eyes crinkling happily. “Karma. Positive karma.”

“Karma’s a myth.”

“Whatever,” Castle says. “It’s all worked out. She’s got something new to get her teeth into, so she’ll leave you alone.” Another grin, turning lazy and sleepy and very, very sexy. “So you should relax.” He massages her shoulders, gently. “I could help you.”

“Mm?”

“Yes,” Castle drawls, pouring molasses syrup into her ears. “You’ll like it. Stop thinking now, and let me lead. You’ve been in charge all day. It’s really hot, but now it’s my turn.”

Beckett’s posture softens and she nestles into him. He leans down and kisses her, softly
demanding, searching along her lips to seek her opening for him, and then entering, raiding and taking and wholly possessive. His hands grip her, angling her head and opening her shoulders to give him free access, sure and assertive and so very, very male.

“All mine,” he murmurs hypnotically. “All soft and contented and mine.” His hands move, gently firm: a little forceful, a little commanding, a lot arousing. She curves into the strokes, and purrs in pleasure, pushing against his touch. He opens her button-down one handed, keeping her mouth to his, glides over the curves below and palms the mounds of her breasts. She reaches for him, rising up on to her knees so that he pulls her in to straddle him and be pressed against hard hot flesh; trying to open his shirt and being denied as her own leaves her shoulders; tightly held.

And then suddenly she’s turned and stretched out along the couch, pants gone and open to the heated, intent, blazing gaze that rakes across her body and fires every nerve: leaving her soaked and squirming against his wicked touch almost before his fingertips land.

“Mine,” Castle says, entirely certain, wholly masculine. “My Kat.” His hands roam over her and leave heat wherever they go.

“My Castle,” she points out, and pulls his head down to hers. For a moment, it works, and then he pulls back.

“Uh-uh.” He smiles lazily. “I’ve got plans for us. Lie back and enjoy it.”

“Not lie back and think of Manhattan?” she smirks.

“Absolutely not. You won’t be thinking of anything but me.”

“Very sure of yourself there – ohhhhh.”

“With good reason.” Castle’s voice slides over her and leaves her stroked without the need for touch, though touch has also been given. “You’re all wet.” His finger proves it, and then remains circling her until mew becomes moan becomes desperate repetition of his name as he kisses her deeply and takes the noises as she makes them and brings her home.

Next thing she knows she’s draped across his arms and then laid out across her bed, as boneless as the Kat he makes of her and as kittenishly satisfied with their play. She pets him, lazily seductive in her turn, long smooth strokes from the arc of his pectorals to the coarse hair arrowing down his stomach. He growls, dark in his throat: imprisons her hands in his to stop her and move down over her; teasing at her breasts, licking the hot wet line down further, below her navel, nipping at her hip. She arches to him, complaining that she wants to play with him as he’s playing with her, but it’s his time to lead, and he wants her drowned in sensation, mindlessly reacting. Then she can play, and no doubt he’ll be left brain-fried and melted too. But first, her.

He slides the thin fabric of her panties back and forth: delicate pressure to build erotic friction, and her hands clutch at his hair, try to force his head to her, but for all her fitness and disciplined strength she’s no match for him. He smiles dangerously against the satin skin of her thigh.

“Just let me start here,” he rasps, and rubs the shadow on his jawline over her. She squirms. Castle smiles more widely, spreads her wide, and settles into a comfortable position. He breathes over her, and she writhes. A butterfly kiss to one soft side, then to the other, another scrape of shadow over the creamy skin, and then one firm sweep of tongue across damp fabric means he has to hold her hips to do it again, and again, and once again. He peels her panties off, tantalisingly slowly, returns, and uses his lips and tongue and teeth, and adds fingers, to leave her a melted mess, lost in the feelings he induces and only, wholly, thinking of him. Well, thinking might be putting it too
high. He works her up and up till she’s lost all words, even his name, and only then takes her over.

When she recovers enough energy to open her eyes, Castle is idly drawing patterns on her stomach, half-cuddling her. She curls into him, stretches and rubs over him from clavicle to knee, then turns over, pushing him down into the pillows. Having had his own fun, Castle is perfectly happy to be turned into her toy for a while. Playful Beckett-Kat is always enjoyable. Playful naked Beckett-Kat is even better. He lets his fingers roam over his handful of Kat, who sighs happily and wriggles over him. Castle groans. Wriggles like that are totally unfair. He’s instantly aroused, ready for her, and she’s spread over him like a very sexy blanket.

He thinks about rolling them over and simply taking her, but before he can act on it she’s acted on him: slithering down his body wreaking erotic havoc as she goes and then – stopping, her chin on his stomach, looking up at him with a wicked, feline smile and a lascivious, leisurely lick of her lips which she follows up by an obscenely arousing suck of her finger. He’s painfully hard, and Kat lapping at him like that is really – ohhhhh – not helping at all. He can’t help his hands in her hair: desperately not pulling, as her hot lips and evil fingers leave him groaning and mindless and helplessly thrusting up against her, her name spilling from his mouth as she drives him to spilling into her mouth.

He has just enough strength left to pull her back up over his chest and clasp her to him: his Kat, his love as he is hers. His hands spread over the slimness of her back, ending their span at the flare of her hips: no longer seductive and erotic but warmly affectionate and loving. In a moment, in a moment they can play some more; in a moment they can be hot and intense again; in a moment they can be joined, two flesh made one. But here and now they’re two minds and emotions, made one.

“I love you,” he whispers.

“I love you too.”

Castle arrives in good time the next morning to join Beckett in Interrogation One, where Kane Travers is waiting. He’s a relatively thick-set man, with a face that suggests a little gentle ringwork in his teens. He’s also sweaty and nervous.

“Mrs Rodgers was amazing!” he opens. “I don’t know why you want to talk to me but I have to say that her direction was fabulous. Do you think she’ll keep me in the production?”

Oh, for God’s sake, Beckett thinks. He’s nervous about being fired, not about this interrogation.

“I have no idea,” she says coolly, “but if you don’t tell us everything she certainly won’t. Mrs Rodgers is assisting us to solve the murder” – she puts severe emphasis on the word, and Travers shudders – “of Callista Corday. That is her primary concern.”

“Sure,” Travers hurries out. “Anything you want to know.”

A few careful questions about the production and the “vision” later, Beckett moves on to her main line of interrogation.

“So, you left the stage for a few moments.”

“Yes.” Travers shifts uncomfortably in the chair.

“We know about Derren’s drinking,” Castle says.
“Okay, well, he kept a bottle in my things. That way Carl couldn’t see it. Carl only took Tim on because he was told to. The funders…” he trails off, but Beckett can read that cue. “Anyway. He needed a sip but I was there to make sure he didn’t overdo it.” Travers looks upset for a moment. “He didn’t, but… Well, I had to take it off him.”

Unseen under the table, Beckett feels Castle’s hand rest briefly on her knee. She ought to feel pain, and the stab of memory – and yes, she does, but it’s not the agonising, searing blade it had been. It’s… muted. A stage whisper, not a shout. She knows how Travers felt, but it’s allowing her to get into his head, not leaving her devastated.

“Yes?” she says, empathy lacing her voice, sympathy for Travers’ plight infusing the air.

“He wanted more. He said he needed another swig. I told him no, and then I took the bottle away.” He looks at her. “We’ve worked together a lot. He – we’re – good foils. He’s so patrician looking and I’m more of a rough diamond, so… anyway, I’ve been looking out for him. So I went out with him because I knew he needed it and if anyone spotted him in my bag they’d think the worst, and then I stayed with him and took it away like I said and we went back to the stage.”

“Okay. Is there anyone else who might have seen you two together?”

“I don’t know. I thought someone had gone past – no, two people, but I wasn’t really looking. I was concentrating on Tim.”

“Where were you?”

“Backstage. There aren’t dressing rooms in the rehearsal space, so my bag was in a space just off the corridor.”

“Can you draw me a picture?”

Beckett passes Travers a pad of paper and a pencil. He makes a few lines, then tears off the top sheet and starts again, sketching.

“Here’s the stage,” he says, and labels it with the exits. “We came off upstage left” – Beckett mentally ties that up with the videos and the re-run rehearsals, and nods approvingly – “and came along here so everything was out of the way of entrances and exits” – he hitches – “and, er, so it wasn’t too obvious that Tim needed a drink.”

“So what’s at the end of the corridor your bags were by?”

Travers draws a few more lines. “This door here is the back exit,” he says – and stops dead. “Oh, shit,” he says. “Whoever went past us… they could have gone out. They could have been the killer, or Cali, or anyone?”

His rough-hewn face crumples. “I never noticed them. It’s vital and I never noticed.”

“What was your relationship with Cali?” Beckett asked. The answer to this question had been in the original questioning by Ryan and Espo, on site, but she wants to hear it again.

“I didn’t really know her. Knew of her, but we hadn’t worked together. She was a better actor than Carl was letting her be.”

“Oh? How?”

“He was really pissed that he couldn’t have Lee. He didn’t want Cali and he made it pretty plain.
She did exactly what he said and then he said it was wrong – we all knew she’d done what he said. Made sure that she was upstaged by everyone, even the rude mechanicals, every scene.”

“Did anyone call him on it?”

Travers looks at her as if she’s crazy. “Call him?” he says on a rising note of astoundment. “Call out the director? That’s a short route to no work. It’s not like we’re Martha Rodgers.” He visibly calms himself down. “I don’t know if Cali said anything to him, or to the backers. If she did it wasn’t where anyone could hear it. That would have been round the cast in seconds.”

“Do you remember where Cali was when Carl stopped the scene?”

“No. I was concentrating on Tim. She wouldn’t have been on stage: she’s not in that scene. She’d have stayed out Carl’s way, for sure.”

“Anything else you can think of, Kane?” Beckett also taps Castle’s foot, in case he’s thought of anything.

“No.”

“If you do, call me.” She stands up. “Thanks for your help.”

Travers departs, a little happier than when he arrived.


“What’s up?”

He shepherds her out and to the break room before speaking. “That – what he said about Tim – are you okay?” He’s looking straight down into her face.

Beckett looks straight back at him, holding his eyes. “Yes. It’s not easy, but I’m not upset. I’m not going out after him like I did with Julia, either.”

Castle relaxes, and Beckett suddenly realises that he’s been tense since Travers mentioned Derren’s drinking. “Good,” he exhales. He turns to the machine and starts the coffee.

“It’s… okay. I’ll talk to Burke about it, but it’s okay. For now,” she adds.

They down their coffee in short order and prepare for Charles Wentway. This includes Castle being told to sketch – neatly, Castle! – the floorplan out again, so it’s not obvious that it was drawn by Travers. Beckett confesses to a complete lack of artistic and/or sketching ability in order to excuse herself from attempting the sketch.

Wentway is late. This is not a good start. When he arrives, it’s pretty clear that he objects to being summoned and he isn’t in a co-operative mood.

“Why am I here?” he opens, in a theatrically offended manner. “I’ve been through all this already.”

“Because Callista Corday was murdered,” Beckett says icily. “Why were you late?”

“Does it matter?”

Castle sits back to watch the show.
“The dead deserve respect. The victims deserve justice. You have a duty to assist and not obstruct justice. Why were you late?”

“I was learning my lines.”

“You open in far less than two weeks. You expect me to believe that a professional” – there’s a frosting of disbelief on the word – “doesn’t know his lines yet?”

“It was shorthand. The way Mrs Rodgers directed us last night made it all different. I needed to fit it all together.”

“And that was more important than a murder?” Beckett’s cutting tone stabs into him.

“I forgot the time.” Skewered on Beckett’s pointed stare, he backs down as he realises that Beckett is not intimidated. “I didn’t mean to. I liked Cali.” The arrogance drains out of his face. “She put up with a lot from Carl.”

“You went off stage,” Beckett says, “when Carl stopped the scene. Why?”

Wentway doesn’t answer for a second. Then, “I was annoyed. There was no reason to stop except that Carl was a power-hungry prick.” The venom in his voice causes Beckett to raise her eyebrows. “He had his vision, but he couldn’t articulate it except in general terms.” He turns to Castle. “You must know about theatre. You saw it. You saw how even one run-through with Mrs Rodgers worked when three months with Carl was still a disaster. We were going to be hung out to dry by the critics and we all knew it. He wouldn’t see it and we couldn’t make him see it. I’d never have seen a good role again.”

Beckett meets Castle’s intelligent eyes and exchanges the message I can see any one of them murdering Carl, but why Cali? She changes tack.

“Here’s a rough floorplan of the backstage area. Where did you go?”

Wentway peruses the sketch. “I came off downstage. Here.” Beckett puts a pencil within his reach, and he indicates with it. “Then I went round here, and into the backstage area.”

“Why not exit upstage?”

He colours. “Um… I didn’t want to run into Tim. I knew he was having a drink. I didn’t want to be involved.” Beckett raises her eyebrows. He hangs his head. “I’ve been there. I didn’t want to be tempted.”

“I get it,” Beckett says softly. “Carry on.”

“So I went round the front of stage. I went to the restroom – here” – he draws it on as she watches – “and then back up to the stalls where I wouldn’t run into Carl.”

“Oh?”

“Carl was coming out the restroom when I was nearly there.”

“Guess you didn’t want to see him, from what you just said,” Castle puts in. “It would be difficult to avoid him.”

“Yes. Anyway, he went off down here.” Wentway indicates again, drawing a light, wobbly line. “I don’t know where he went after that.”
“Where was Cali in all of this?”

“I don’t know. She hadn’t been on stage for this scene.” He thinks hard. “She might have gone into
the stalls, but I think I’d have seen her – you look out even though there’s no audience – so she
might have gone outside. She smoked, occasionally.”

“Tobacco or weed?” Beckett asks.

Wentway squirms. “I guess since she’s dead, it doesn’t matter. The occasional joint. If Carl was
really screwing her around.” Beckett waits. “I only saw it a couple of times. But if I had to guess
I’d say she’d gone out back of the theatre for a quick toke.”

Beckett mentally notes that to check the detail of the CSU sweep.

“Carl would have gone batshit if he’d known.”

“Oh?”

“He was so tight-laced about smoking and drugs and alcohol. God knows how he survived in
theatre.”

“God knows how he worships my mother,” Castle mutters. “She’s been half-pickled half the time
for thirteen years.” Beckett kicks him. “Ow!” Fortunately Wentway misses the aside.

“Is there anything else you can remember?”

“No,” he says unhappily. “You saw that we went through several scenes before we needed Cali
again, and then she missed her cue and you walked in and… here we are,” he says miserably.

“Okay. Thank you for your co-operation. If you think of anything else, call me.”

“Yes.” Wentway looks at Castle. “ Couldn’t you persuade your mother to take over? We’d all
appreciate it.”


“Please?”

Wentway exits. Castle lets out a long sigh. “How is my mother suddenly the saviour?”

“Good luck?”
Tim Derren is next up, and is obviously terrified by his repeat visit.


“New information has come to light,” Beckett says judicially. “We need to ask you a few further questions. Look at this sketch.” Derren attempts to focus through bloodshot, bleary eyes. He’s thoroughly hung-over, or possibly still drunk. “You were here, with Kane.”

“Yes,” he agrees. There’s a slur on the final consonant. Beckett tries very hard not to notice it.

“Kane says he thinks two people went past, but he doesn’t know who. Can you remember?” Derren looks terrified. “One was Cali,” he says. There is a silence. “I don’t know who the other was.”

“But you have an idea,” Castle says.

Derren’s eyes flick from side to side: scared spitless and desperate for a way out.

“C’mon, tell us. It’s only a theory. It might find Cali’s killer.”

“I don’t know, I tell you. All I saw was a flash of dark top.” Beckett makes a note. Her fingers are tight on her pen.

“Man or woman?” she asks, voice tightly controlled. She can do this. She is stronger than her memories and she has overcome her past and she can do this.

“I don’t know. I need a drink. Lemme have a drink.” Beckett makes a note. “I don’t know, I tell you. All I saw was a flash of dark top.” Beckett makes a note. Her fingers are tight on her pen.

“Man or woman?” she asks, voice tightly controlled. She can do this. She is stronger than her memories and she has overcome her past and she can do this.

“I don’t know. I need a drink. Lemme have a drink.”

“We don’t serve alcohol.” Black humour will get her through. “Only coffee.”

“I need a drink,” he whimpers. “I can’t remember without a drink.” His face is crumpled and worn, a bitter reminder of times past.

“As soon as you tell me whether it was a man or a woman, you can go.” There’s nothing more to be gained from him: pressuring him won’t give reliable info. She knows this, from other times and other places, questioning her father.

“Man. Definitely a man.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

Castle escorts Derren out. Beckett doesn’t move, caught in a wash of memory: her father, pleading with her not to empty the bottle down the sink: give it me, Katie, please give it me, I need a drink. She forces the memory away from the front of her mind. She isn’t responsible for Derren, or for her father. She stands up, and is back at her desk when Castle reappears.

“Got a minute?” she says, and doesn’t wait for an answer before leading him into the stairwell.

“What’s up?”

She steps into him, and puts her arms round his waist, leaning on his shoulder. “Need a minute.
Dad… Dad used to say that.” Castle’s arms come around her in turn.  
“What do you need?”  
“Just you. Just a minute.”  
“It’s not your dad.”  
“I know that,” she says, a little irritated, possibly with herself. “I just need to process it. Understand that it’s not Dad. I’m not responsible for Derren.” She pauses. “I’m not responsible for Dad. He is. It’s up to him.”  

Castle breathes a silent sigh of relief when she says that. He won’t need to tell her to back off. He won’t need to tell Montgomery to tell her to withdraw from the case. She’s handling it. She might need him – and he realises that she asked him, immediately she needed him, and though she’s already pulling herself together, just for that moment she knew that she needed something, needed him, and didn’t hesitate, as he hadn’t hesitated to go to her after that last fight with his mother. He drops a gentle peck on the top of her head, releases, and she steps back, looks up and smiles openly and beautifully.  

“Thanks,” she says, and then it all changes to ferocity. “Let’s go look at the CSU sweep results.”  
“What about Carl?”  
“He’s not in for another hour. I can delay him if I need to. I want to look at this sketch, and I want to see if anyone picked up her joint, and especially I want to know if there are any of Carl’s prints on the door or wall along this line here.” She gestures at the picture. “See? So if they didn’t sweep that corridor for prints they need to get back down there.”  

“You’re liking Carl, aren’t you?” Castle says happily.  
“Yeah, I am. But I don’t have motive yet. Smoking spliffs isn’t enough. It sounds like he was looking for an excuse to fire her.”  

“He couldn’t fire her, if the backers insisted.”  
“That’s a drastic way to change your cast.”  

“Mm, yes, but theatre’s pretty high-intensity emotionally. People do dumb things when they’re on stage, especially when they’re coming up to opening night.”  

“It still seems a bit of an over-reaction. There must be a better reason.”  

“Maybe,” Castle says doubtfully. Then he smiles. “Let’s go chase CSU. I love CSU.”  

“You just want to wear the little blue booties,” Beckett snarks, “and pretend you know about forensics.”  

“I do know about forensics. I researched lots of forensics for Storm,” Castle huffs.  

Okay, you get to read the report. I’ll call CSU.” Beckett hands the report over, and dials.  
She puts the phone down again, and growls. “Lab’s backed up again. They found the butt of the joint, but they’re waiting for the results. I’ve asked them to go over the corridor for prints. Anything in the report?”
“No. Nothing you didn’t know.”

“Let’s look at the sketch.” She pulls it towards her. Castle shuffles his chair round to look over it. “Derren and Travers were here. Cali went down, and then someone in a dark top.”

“Carl was wearing a navy jumper on Sunday,” Castle says innocently.

“Where’s that video?”


“Show me, and let’s get that footage. If we didn’t spot the camera, just maybe our killer didn’t either.”

“We’ll never be that lucky,” Ryan says gloomily, finding the right place in the video. “Here’s Carl.”

“Hm. Only man in a dark top.” Her expression turns feral. “Stacking up, isn’t it? I just wish I had a motive.” Fangs flash in her non-smile as she thinks. “Let’s bluff him.” Another flash of thought. “And we’re going to annoy him. Castle, how much do you remember about what your mother did last night? We’re going to use it to make him lose his temper, and maybe we’ll get some truth out him.”

“Okay,” Castle says happily. “Can I be bad cop?”

“No.” He mutters darkly. “But you can be bad expert if you like.”

“Really? You mean it?”

“Yes. But I get to be bad cop.”

“Bad cop and bad expert?”

“Yes.”

“Oohhhh.” Ryan wanders off, and Castle drops his voice into a sex-soaked baritone. “Can I play with the bad cop later?” Beckett glares.

“Not appropriate, Castle.”

“I’ll be very inappropriate, later.”

“Shut up.”

“You won’t be saying that later, either,” he smiles lazily. “You’ll want me to keep my mouth open.”

Beckett blushes and glares furiously. Castle decides on discretion, and retires well satisfied, with a highly provocative lick of his lips. Beckett retreats to the restroom to cool her heated cheeks, and returns her normal cool, collected self.

A few moments later they’re informed that Carl is back in Interrogation One. Beckett thanks the officer, and makes no move whatsoever to leave her chair. Carl is going to receive a few moments more to stew, become irritated and nervous, and basically be in no condition to resist when she starts to tear him apart. She looks at her watch. Plenty of time to shred him before she has to see Dr Burke. It’s not even lunchtime.
Castle fidgets and frets and fusses. He wants to start on Carl, if only because he’s hoping, in his most secret thoughts, that he can rile him sufficiently that he walks out on the play and his mother can take over. Discreditable as this thought might be, there is one small creditable part, which is that his mother needs something to do, and this is clearly something that would make her very happy. That creditable iota is, however, overwhelmed by the discreditable mountain of parts which tell him that it would also keep his mother far, far away from Beckett, and from him. From them.

“Can’t we go yet,” he asks for the fourth time.

“Yes, okay, now we can go. You have no patience.” His eyes crinkle wickedly. “Don’t even think that.”

“Think what?” he says innocently. Beckett emits an indeterminate, wordless snarl and stalks off, ignoring him.

Carl, stuck in Interrogation One without so much as a cup of water, is not happy.

“What’s this about?” he demands. “I answered everything. I need to get back to rehearsal. It starts at two.”

“Don’t worry,” Castle says. “Mother will take it for you, I’m sure. I’ll just give her a call.” He walks to the door, big and arrogant, phone already to his ear. “Yes, it’s me. Mother, do you want to take the next rehearsal? Good. You’re pretty popular with the cast. Okay. Starts at two. Thanks. See you at dinner time.” He turns back to his chair. “There. Rehearsal covered.”

“You can’t do that!” Carl cries. “Even if it’s Martha Rodgers, you can’t just take it away from me like that!”

“It’s only temporary,” Beckett notes. “Or should we make it permanent?” Carl is still reeling from that jab when she follows with an uppercut. “Why did you follow Cali out back of the theatre on Sunday?”

“I… I didn’t.”

“Lie,” Beckett states flatly. “We have witnesses.”

“Witnesses? There can’t be. I didn’t see” – he stops, a few words too late.

“So you did.”

“Looks like Mother’s got the director’s gig permanently,” Castle says casually.

“Don’t count your chickens,” Beckett says, equally casually. “Maybe Carl here’s got an explanation.”

At that fortuitous moment Ryan knocks and enters. “Detective Beckett, a moment?” he asks formally.

“Excuse me.” She follows Ryan out. “What’ve you got?” There’s something. He’s grinning so widely his face might split.

“CSU came through. Prints inside, and the butt with Cali’s DNA.”

“Good job. Anything else?”
Ryan preens. “Security camera over the door. Footage came through.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding. How did you manage that so fast?”

“I got hold of the caretaker yesterday morning like I said, and asked, and when he wouldn’t play I put a hurry-up on the warrant.”

“Great. And?”

Ryan smiles widely. “Your boy there did it. He’s on film.”

“That simple? Who said we were never that lucky?”

“Okay, me. Sometimes we do just get lucky.”

“You got to go to the theatre last night…” Beckett says evilly.


“Good job,” Beckett says again, very sincerely. “That’s cleared the afternoon nicely. As soon as we’ve got him into Booking, let’s get some lunch.”

She stalks back into Interrogation. “Carl Caterham, you are under arrest…” and very shortly he is being taken away.

“C’mon, lunchtime. I think I owe Ryan a burger, mimimum.”

“So what do we do with the afternoon?”

“Paperwork, Castle. Paperwork.”

“So I can go home, then?”

“No. You’ve got paperwork too, remember?”

“Uh?”

“Report for Montgomery.”

Castle grous and grumbles all the way to, and through, Remy’s till Espo threatens to choke him with his burger if he doesn’t shut up.

“You only have to do this once. We get to do it all the time. Stop bitchin’.” Espo stops, as a thought occurs to him. “Why d’you have to report to Montgomery anyway? You never did before.” He doesn’t miss Beckett’s sudden tension.

“He slapped me down about Mother,” Castle says easily, “and told me I had to do a report on the case for him every day.” He pouts. Espo notices Beckett’s relaxation, too. He doesn’t exactly believe Castle, but he doesn’t exactly think it’s a total lie either. Maybe Ryan’ll have some good ideas. He slips a sidelong glance at Beckett’s face, and decides not to ask. He returns to his burger and fries.

“I’m done,” Castle says happily, not very long after two-thirty. Beckett growls. Clearly she is not done. “I’ll give this to Montgomery and then I think I’m going to go by La Mama and see what Mother is doing to her victims.”
“Okay,” says Beckett, not looking up from her paperwork, at which she is scowling.

“And then I’m going to put a call into the Carriblanes and make sure Mother keeps the role.”

That fetches Beckett. She jerks her head up and then grins. “Good plan. Tell me how it goes later.”

“Later?”

“Tuesday. Dr Burke.”

“Oh. Yeah. Later, then.”

Castle departs via Montgomery’s office. Beckett returns to her paperwork. Shortly, Espo wanders by.

“Why’s Castle filing reports?”

“Tried to sandbag Montgomery about his mother consulting. Captain didn’t like it one bit. Castle got spanked and – worse – made to do paperwork.” She smirks. “Montgomery can be really inventive when he thinks about it.”

“Can I, Detective?” says Montgomery smoothly from behind her shoulder. “In what way?”

Beckett jumps. “Making Castle do paperwork, sir.”

“Mm.”

“We closed the case, sir,” she says hurriedly. Case closures always make her Captain happy.

“Good.” Montgomery pads off. Beckett breathes a sigh of relief, Ryan wanders back to his desk, and the paperwork progresses.

Five minutes later Montgomery reappears. “A word, Beckett?” It can’t be a carpeting. If it were, he’d address her as Detective Beckett. It’s still not reassuring.

“Sir,” she answers, and follows him to his office.

“Anything you want to tell me, Beckett?”

“Sir?” she replies, confused. She hasn’t done anything wrong that she knows about.

“How did you find dealing with this alcoholic?”

“It was okay. Not great, but okay. I didn’t try to get involved or help him.”

Montgomery regards her closely. “Castle’s report says you were a little upset straight after the interview.”

“Yessir. He said the same as my dad used to. It hit a sore spot.” She’s in for it. It’s all going to go wrong. And she invited it because she told Castle to tell Montgomery the absolute truth. Please don’t bench me.

“He also said you didn’t behave any differently in the interview with him than any of the others. Specifically, you didn’t try to help him.” He waits. Beckett waits. Montgomery gives up. This contest of interrogative wills could last all day. “If you should meet another alcoholic, you will take the same route. You will tell me beforehand, and Castle will report to me. It seems to have
worked out.” He twinkles mischievously at her heartfelt sigh of relief. “I’ll presume you can handle it unless you tell me otherwise. But I do have one further condition.”

“Sir?” she queries, nervous again.

“You teach Castle how to give a proper report. These are crap. He’s not writing novels now.”


“Dismissed.”

Beckett swings back to her desk and attacks the paperwork with vim and gusto, such that when she has to leave for Dr Burke’s office it is complete.

Castle slides into the La Mama theatre in which the cast are rehearsing and quietly takes a seat in the darkened circle. He is deeply interested in how his mother will react to taking the second rehearsal in two days. He’ll have even more pleasure in telling her that if she wants it, the Carriblanes are happy for her to take over. Admittedly, he’ll have to pay for the reprinting of all the programmes and posters if she does, but that’s chickenfeed – and a price worth paying if it gets her back in the game. He lurks in his seat and watches.

“Tim darling,” his mother says sweetly, “come back here.”

Tim scuttles back from his attempted skulk out the back of the stage. Kane Travers looks sidelong at him, and then full at Martha. From his expression, he’s realised that Martha has worked out Tim in a few minutes.

Castle watches for a little longer. His mother is totally focused and in charge, in a way he’s never seen her behave. It’s not the way Beckett does it: (thank God: that is a similarity he really would not appreciate) his mother believes in sugar rather than intimidation. At least as a first option.

She rearranges the cast until she’s satisfied, and then calls for another run through. Castle watches, astonished, as his mother manages to bring out the vision that Carl had monumentally failed to convey. In his mother’s hands, the almost-all male cast becomes a testosterone wall: Lee Raven’s female Titania trapped within it.

She takes another scene again, obviously not happy with the portrayal.

“No, no, no! Not like that. You’re intimidated, but you won’t show it. Like this.” Martha ascends the stage, and despite being approximately thirty-five years older than Lee, takes the part of Titania and demonstrates. Castle is riveted. His mother has still got it, in spades.

She finishes the run through, Castle looks at his watch, discovers to his horror that it’s almost seven p.m., and dashes down to the stage area.

“Darling!” Martha says enthusiastically. “Why didn’t you say you were here?”

“I didn’t want to interrupt your creative genius,” Castle says.

Martha regards him beadily, assessing the statement for sarcasm and finding none. “Thank you.”

“I wanted to talk to you, and since you’re obviously going to carry on all evening…”

“What is it?”
Castle draws her away from the cast and interested ears. “We caught the killer,” he says.

“Oh?”

“It was Carl.”

“Oh! But… the play opens in less than two weeks. It’ll have to be cancelled.”

“Well, maybe not.”

His mother’s face turns questioning.

“I spoke to the Carriblanes – the sponsors. If you wanted to direct, they’ll let everything go ahead. If you want it – it’s yours.”

For the first time in years Castle sees his mother utterly dumbfounded. She stands stock still, and then flings her arms around him.

“You mean that? They want me to take over?”

“Yes.”

“You didn’t” –

“I didn’t bribe them, I’m not replacing their sponsorship, and anyway it’s clear that the cast love you.”

“But what if” –

“Go for it, Mother. We believe in you.”

“But” –

“The cast believes in you. You can’t let them down.” He crosses his fingers that this will work.

“You really think I can” –

“I do. If anyone can, you can. I wouldn’t have sat through four hours of rehearsal if I wasn’t enjoying it. I certainly wouldn’t have done that for Carl.”

“Well, no, darling.” She draws herself up. “I shall do it,” she declaims. “My return to the stage starts here.”

Castle waits for another few moments as his mother announces to the cast that she is replacing Carl as director, effective immediately. The ecstatic reaction is very satisfying. The knowledge that this will keep her occupied full time for weeks is even better. He dabs at a slightly damp patch on his jacket and very quietly departs, the sounds of the resumed rehearsal trailing behind him.
“Good evening, Detective Beckett.”

“Hey.”

“We were intending to continue our discussion of compromises.”

“Oh. Yeah. Um… could we start with other things?”

“Certainly. What are they?”

“Um… the dinner at Dad’s and… er… I just finished a case with an alcoholic.”

Detective Beckett sounds a little uncertain. This does not surprise Dr Burke. One of these events would warrant a discussion. Both must surely have been quite discomfiting. “With which would you like to begin?”

“The case.”

“Mm.” Dr Burke steeples his fingers. “Pray tell me the circumstances.”

“An actor had been stabbed at La Mama,” Beckett says. “One of the other actors was an alcoholic. About the same age as Dad, but still functioning – and still drinking.”

“I see. How did you react to this?”

“Before we get to that,” Beckett says tightly, “it turned out that the director and cast were all rabid fans of Castle’s mother.”

“Goodness me,” Dr Burke says mildly, since some comment of surprise is clearly expected and warranted. How on earth did Detective Beckett manage to become involved in a case of that nature? “How did you deal with each of these aspects?”

“I managed the alcoholic,” Detective Beckett says with tight-wrapped pride. “Just like we talked about two weeks ago. I cleared it with Montgomery first, and then I dealt with him just like any other witness.”

“How did you convince Mr –

“Captain” –

“Captain Montgomery to allow you to work on this case?”

“Castle agreed to tell him if he thought I was going down the rabbit hole. I asked him to.”

Dr Burke thinks that there is a story behind that, but does not, yet, probe. The important matter is that Detective Beckett sought support from Mr Castle, although any of her colleagues would have sufficed, in order to have a second opinion of her behaviour. Having taken this sensible precautionary step, she then managed to deal with the person in question.

“Very good. Did you experience any discomfort while interviewing the witness?”

“Yes,” Detective Beckett admits uncomfortably. “He wanted a drink. It was just like Dad used to
“However, you did not provide him with one, did you?”

“No. I finished the interview and dismissed him.”

“Were you tempted to help him?”

“No. I hated seeing the similarities. I hated seeing him. I just wanted him gone.”

Dr Burke smiles. “Good.” Detective Beckett’s eyebrows rise. “That would be a normal reaction to someone who reminds you of a highly upsetting experience. I must remind you that you also concluded your interview, thus achieving the objective of your work, before doing so.” He steelevs his fingers under his chin, again. “Very pleasing.” He sits back in his own chair, and pauses for that to sink in.

“Now, you mentioned that the director and the cast were very impressed by Mrs Rodgers?”

“The director was a pompous ass,” Detective Beckett says with some feeling. Dr Burke reassures himself that he is not such a person. “He assumed I knew nothing.” She smiles very unpleasantly. “I capped his quote and then introduced Castle as Martha Rodgers’ son. He fell apart. He practically kissed my feet because I knew her.”

“That must have been disconcerting,” Dr Burke agrees.

“Yeah.” The unpleasantly predatory smile becomes wider. “But I used it. All I had to do was get her in there.”

“How” – Dr Burke manages not to add on earth, with a supreme effort of will – “did you succeed in that?” He has no doubt that Detective Beckett did succeed.

“It was the only way through.”

“What are you not revealing, Detective?” Dr Burke is certain, merely from the tone of her voice, that there is a considerable back story behind that sentence.

“I didn’t want to. I was going to ask Montgomery to take me off if Castle wouldn’t be my safety net. But it wasn’t about Castle not believing in me, it was because I’d have to deal with her.”

Dr Burke does not follow. There appears to be a substantial piece missing from the ridiculously truncated explanation Detective Beckett has just proffered.

“In what way did Mr Castle appear not to believe in you?”

“He said he wouldn’t cover up for me. I didn’t want him to cover up, I wanted him to tell me straight if I wasn’t coping.”

“How?”

“But that wasn’t what he meant. But it gave me a way out so I was just going to believe he meant it even though he started to backtrack right away. I was going to drop the case. Ask Montgomery to take me off it. I thought that Castle wouldn’t do it because he thought I wasn’t ready even though he didn’t say that and I didn’t even realise that it was about his mother and not about whether I could do it till we’d had the fight.”

Dr Burke makes a small note to remind him to enquire how Mr Castle had regarded this argument.
He asks instead about a matter of more interest, although he does not expect Detective Beckett to think so.

“How long did it take you to resolve your differences?”

Detective Beckett regards him curiously, clearly struggling not to ask what has that to do with anything?

“Not that long. But I would have put it down if I hadn’t realised because I thought he meant I wasn’t ready.”

“You were, in fact, compromising, both by resolving the argument swiftly and by being prepared to accept Mr Castle’s judgement in a matter of such significance,” Dr Burke says pointedly. Detective Beckett winces, and ignores the point for now. “That aside, explain your feelings about Mrs Rodgers in more detail, please, in the context of the case.”

Detective Beckett expands on her reasoning. “They were star-struck,” she says, with a faint flavour of – well. How extraordinarily odd. Dr Burke had expected contempt, but that is not the emotion he detects. It is almost professional respect. How very peculiar. Clearly there is more to this story than has been apparent until now.

“They were desperate to meet her. So we had to work out how to use her.”

“Mm,” says Dr Burke meditatively, leaning back and tapping his fingers together. “Why did you consider that you needed to involve an untrained civilian?”

“To solve the case,” Detective Beckett says in surprise, as if Dr Burke is devoid of intelligence. “Don’t forget that Castle is – technically – an untrained civilian, and he’s useful on all our cases.” Detective Beckett’s emphasis on the description does not incline Dr Burke to believe that she agrees with his words. Where Mr Castle is concerned, Dr Burke would be extremely surprised to learn that Detective Beckett is in anything other than violent disagreement with his words.

“You would be able to solve the case, however, without involving Mrs Rodgers.”

“Don’t be obtuse,” Detective Beckett snaps. Dr Burke raises his eyebrows at her tone. “Justice shouldn’t be delayed. Not using Martha would have meant that it took longer to solve the case. That’s not how we roll.”

Dr Burke notes that Detective Beckett’s dedication to her job easily overrides any other thoughts. No doubt that is why she had snapped at Mr Castle when it had become apparent that he had inadvertently withheld information about the murdered tennis coach.

“Why did you think that involving Mrs Rodgers would assist? Was it not far more likely, given your recent history with her, that she would take the opportunity to continue her efforts to insist that you attended events at the Castle household?”

“Yes,” Detective Beckett says baldly. “But it was a risk I had to take. Anyway, I sent Ryan with Castle to do the initial work. I didn’t go.” Her mouth twists. “I couldn’t go to the loft anyway. I wouldn’t have made it through the door with Martha there.”

“A perfectly reasonable decision.”

“Anyway, they were to get the low-down on all the actors and director, as much as Martha knew, and show her the combined video of the rehearsal and then take her to the theatre. So they did.” Detective Beckett shifts in her chair. “Espo and I met them at the theatre.”
“Mm?”

“I expected trouble. But… well… it was like she’d totally forgotten that she’d been pushing me. She was completely focused on the awfulness of the play. She didn’t mince her words about that. So we worked out what we needed to do, just like I would if I was dealing with a different branch of the NYPD, and did it.”

“How did you feel about that?”

“Pretty stressed,” Detective Beckett admits. Dr Burke translates that to mean that Detective Beckett had been extremely tense throughout the whole case. “But it worked. We identified the four most likely suspects and then tracked it all through.”

“Who was the culprit?” Dr Burke fails to prevent himself from asking. He really must curb this tendency toward morbid curiosity.

“The director.”

“I take it that the play will not go ahead, then?”

“You take it wrong,” Detective Beckett says sardonically.

“It will? But it has no director.”

“Oh,” says Detective Beckett with a very wry smile, “I think it probably does by now.” Dr Burke draws a blank as to the reasons for the smile. “Martha.”

“Mrs Rodgers?”

“Apparently” – Detective Beckett does not sound convinced – “so Castle thinks, if she’s got a theatre role she’ll leave me – us – alone. She was certainly pretty into it. Castle thought that he could make sure she stuck to the theatre, so I guess he’s made sure she got the gig.”

“Mm,” Dr Burke emits. “If you had not allowed Mrs Rodgers to play a part in the case, would she have been able to take over the directing of the play, assuming that she does in fact do so?”

Detective Beckett is stopped. “No,” she says eventually. “Castle said that. That if I hadn’t let her in it wouldn’t have happened.”

“I agree with Mr Castle.” Dr Burke smiles gently. “I consider that you have achieved a considerable step forward through this case, Detective Beckett. You have proved to yourself that you can perform your job even in circumstances where an alcoholic is involved, and it appears that you may have rid yourself of the problem of Mrs Rodgers’ focused attention. Most satisfactory.”

He leans forward, then back again. “Let us turn to the dinner with Mr and Miss Castle and your father.” He forcibly stops himself steepling his fingers. He has noticed that Detective Beckett has detected that habitual movement and he does not wish to develop a ‘tell’. “Did it take place?”

“Yes. Saturday.”

“Please describe the day.”

Detective Beckett does so. Dr Burke stops her before the arrival of the Castles. “You spent the day with your father?”

“Yes.”
“You have told me what you did. You have not told me how you felt at any point, nor have you mentioned any topics of conversation other than that related to preparing the meal.” Dr Burke fixes Detective Beckett with a piercing stare. “Please describe those aspects of the day.”

Detective Beckett does not appear to wish to do so. As ever, that indicates that there is a matter which should be brought into consideration.

“There were some mentions of Mom,” she says very reluctantly.

“I see.”

“It was all very careful. Fragile. Tiny little things.”

“Such as?”

“Mom had a slow cooker. I didn’t remember that. Or her telling Dad to hurry up with the washing up. I said that to him, and he said she always used to say that. Like I said. Little things.”

“Would it be correct to describe them as memories of times when the family was happy?”

“Yes.”

“How did you feel?”

“It was all fragile. As if one wrong word would collapse it all.”

“Did it?”

“No.”

“So both of you were taking considerable care to avoid unfortunate comments or actions?”

“Yes.”

“Is this not a considerable improvement on your encounters with your father in this office?”

“I guess so.”

“Let me summarise,” Dr Burke says smoothly, “and put this encounter in a different context. You spent a full day with your father, in a co-operative enterprise. The cookery, I infer, was successful, or you would have mentioned that there were practical difficulties.” Detective Beckett nods. “This is much longer than you have spent together in several weeks, at a minimum.”


Dr Burke shows no surprise. Indeed, he is not at all surprised. “To continue, although the day involved some care, and some moments of emotional tension, at no time did these result in an argument or hurtful words or conduct, from either person.”

“No-o,” Detective Beckett agrees slowly.

“Even those moments of recalled memory, although stressful and painful, did not cause a breach.”

“No,” Detective Beckett says more definitively. “We got through.”

“Do you consider that you would be able to repeat the exercise of spending a day with your
father?”

“Yes.”

There is no hesitation in that answer. Dr Burke is well satisfied, and leaves that aspect of tonight’s session to one side. Detective Beckett may thus consider the point at her leisure.

“Now, let us turn to the advent of the Castles and the dinner itself.”

“They liked the food,” Detective Beckett says, by way of introduction. Following her introduction, however, she stops. Her face twists. Eventually she re-establishes control and continues. “It was all going okay. Dad and Alexis get on, but that’s fine. It’s not like we were.”

“Elucidate, please. What is ‘not like we were’?”

“Dad talking to Alexis isn’t parental. It’s like he’s talking to one of his friends’s child. Or grandchild, more like.”

“I see.” Dr Burke does not comment on Detective Beckett’s view of the relative ages of her father and Miss Castle. He hopes for grandchildren of his own.

“It was all fine. Alexis wanted to know about Stanford, but I managed that okay. She wanted to know about entry, not about the courses or what it was like there.” Dr Burke notes with interest that Detective Beckett is blushing. He recalls from her file that she had achieved very highly at school. “Dad bigged me up a bit.” Dr Burke can imagine. That is the nature of proud fathers. “Anyway. That was okay. Mostly okay. But then she asked why I transferred.”

Dr Burke barely conceals his own wince. Detective Beckett does not manage to conceal hers in any respect whatsoever. She has subtly adopted a highly closed and defensive position.

“How did you respond?”

“I didn’t. Dad did. Alexis was distraught. It wasn’t her fault. It was such an obvious question…” Detective Beckett’s voice trails away. Dr Burke observes her hard-fought control, and simply waits.

“He told her the truth. All his mistakes. And I said sometimes you have to choose to let someone drown. Sometimes you even survive the choice.” Her tone is bleak and emotionless.

“What happened then?” Dr Burke asks, calmly.

“Nobody said anything. Then I went to fix dessert in the kitchen and Dad cleared the plates.” There is the hint of a sniff. “He said it wasn’t my fault. Just like when I was small.” Tears puddle. Detective Beckett buries her face in a Kleenex. “He hugged me just like he used to.” The Kleenex is replaced, and then replaced again.

“What was Mr Castle’s reaction to your upset?” Dr Burke hazards, after a moment or two to allow Detective Beckett to recover her composure.

“He wasn’t involved.”

Dr Burke is extremely surprised. He also experiences a stab of considerable annoyance that Mr Beckett has avoided Mr Castle’s overprotective anger whenever Detective Beckett is upset, while he, Dr Burke, has been subjected to it on more than one occasion. He breathes evenly and allows
his unwarranted annoyance to dissipate. Naturally, on objective examination of his feelings, this does not take long.

“Mr Castle was not involved?” he queries.

“It was just between Dad and me. It wasn’t… we weren’t arguing. It was *shared*. It hurt us both but we weren’t hurting each other. We just hugged and then dried up on a kitchen towel and had dessert and it was *okay*.”

“Mm,” Dr Burke hums, encouragingly. “What did you conclude from this episode?”

“We didn’t fight. It had been a really stressful day, even if we didn’t show it, and it – we – could have had another go-around like we’ve done here, but we didn’t. I think” – Detective Beckett looks somewhat uncertain – “we might have got to a better place. I – er – he supported me,” she rushes out. “I never thought… I thought that couldn’t happen. But it was about *our* family. I think… I think we got somewhere?”

“It certainly appears that you have made considerable progress with your father,” Dr Burke agrees. Indeed, it appears that there has been a significant breakthrough and shift in the relationship. Excellent. “As an adjunct to that, how did you feel about seeing Mr Castle with his daughter?”

“It was okay. Because it wasn’t like Dad was being swallowed up in them, it was easier. And because we were getting on better it was easier to see them.”

Dr Burke refrains from making any comment which might be construed to mean *Just as I told you*. Detective Beckett has reached that conclusion entirely on her own. Further emphasis upon it would be otiose, and undoubtedly counterproductive.

“What do you believe your next steps are?”

“I said to Castle that we – Alexis, him and me – should have dinner out, in case she’s worried I’m upset with her. Something casual. I think we shouldn’t make a fuss about it but just get used to it?”

“A sensible step. What else?”

“I need to go to the loft. When Alexis is there. And when I’m ready, when Martha is there. But not yet. I can’t face Martha yet.”

“But you feel ready to face Miss Castle?”

“Probably. Soon. Maybe even next week.”

Dr Burke ruminates for a short time. This is really very pleasing. His methods have been wholly successful, despite the need to adapt to the particular circumstances of this most complex of cases. He congratulates himself on his ability to have maintained both an open mind and considerable flexibility in an extremely trying situation. He reflects with equal pleasure that Detective Beckett now requires only the lightest of touches to review her issues, as she appears to have, at last, accepted that she must undertake the analysis required herself. She is now, clearly, doing so, and therefore Dr Burke need only provide very slight guidance and measured encouragement.

“That is also a reasonable attitude to adopt. Do you wish to have a joint session with your father on Friday?”

“No. I think… I’m going to see if he wants to have dinner on Sunday. Like we used to before… all this.”
Dr Burke nods judicially. “Another extremely positive step. I consider, Detective, that you will not require such frequent sessions in the very near future, unless you should so request. You may retain the Friday session this week if you so desire, but I suggest that you confirm whether you wish to attend much nearer the time. However, you should attend next Tuesday, and after that we may amend the schedule appropriately.”

Detective Beckett appears quite shocked by that statement, although Dr Burke is less than flattered by her immediately following expression of considerable delight and relief.

“I can step it down?” she says happily. “Really? That’s great.”

“You have made substantial progress. All is not entirely restored, but a substantial part of your treatment has come to fruition. Matters are progressing very satisfyingly. You may take considerable comfort from that. Of course,” Dr Burke feels it necessary to warn Detective Beckett, “there will be setbacks and arguments. However, you have the ability to detach from these and consider the underlying reasons as well as the obvious reasons, in order to come to a true assessment of the position and respond appropriately.”

“Oh,” Detective Beckett says weakly. “Okay then.”

“Tonight’s session is concluded, I believe. Please inform me on Friday whether you would like to attend; otherwise, I shall see you on Tuesday.” Dr Burke stands. “Goodnight, Detective Beckett.”

“Goodnight,” she says, and strides out, confidence in her posture and happiness in every movement.
Castle appears at Beckett’s door at his normal time, but appearing somewhat as if he has rushed.

“What’s the hurry?” she enquires.

“Thought I’d be late.”

“Late? We didn’t set a time. I’m not standing here with a stopwatch waiting for you to be half a second delayed.” She grins, and draws him inside. “Of course, the later you are, the less time we have for this…” and she rises up on her bare toes and kisses him in a leisurely, seductive fashion. “You wouldn’t want to rush, would you?” She kisses him again, until she’s content that his toes have curled, and then sashays off to the couch.

Well, she tries to sashay off to the couch. She even starts the sashay. She just doesn’t get very far. Castle, not inclined to be a toy today, is much more inclined to play with his toy, and he doesn’t want to have to chase it down or find it. Since his toy has come out of the toybox, she should stay where he wants her. He spins her neatly around and back into him, delivers a toe-curling kiss of his own which quite clearly asserts his ownership of her mouth, and then follows up with a firm, close hold till she softens and drapes against him, when he kisses her again, possessively. He’ll decide when they separate, and that’s not right now.

It’s not after they’ve reached the couch, either. Castle tugs Beckett down on to his knee, and encourages her to lean on his shoulder where she’s perfectly cuddly and kissable.

“Did the session go okay?”

“Yes,” Beckett says – and almost bounces happily on his knee, which is astonishing. Astonishment is explained in an instant. “I don’t need to go on Friday if I don’t think I need to. And on Tuesday we’ll think about revising the session schedule completely. Less Dr Burke!”


“Never mind his happiness, I’m happy.”

“That too. I’m happy as well,” he hums. “Everyone’s happy.”

“Why are you happy?” Beckett asks, happily sure that he’ll have a good – nay, happy – reason.

“Mother’s got the directing role,” Castle says with deep pleasure. “So she’ll be out the way. She’s never going to worry about us if she’s got a whole play to manage.”

“Worth being happy about,” Beckett agrees. She nestles in, and slips delicately dangerous fingers into the vee of his shirt. “I could make you even happier,” she purrs.

Castle rumbles wordlessly and contentedly, resembling a large and lazy lion. Beckett’s fingertips wander. Mysteriously, a button opens. Castle had absolutely nothing to do with it, but he’s quite happy for buttons bemusingly to open, shirts strangely to become untucked, pants peculiarly to fall away and leave only skin touching skin, smooth and silky on the one side, strong and a little roughened with hair on the other. Another contented rumble eventuates, shortly tending to a predatory bass-baritone growl. He’s still not inclined to be a toy, though he’s been content for Beckett to play as she pleases for the last few moments. He likes being petted just as much as Beckett does, as long as he can be assertively masculine later.
“I’m happy now,” he rasps. “Let’s go and both be very happy together.” Beckett wiggles against him.

“Aren’t you happy here?” she husks. “You feel pretty happy to me.”

“I’d be much happier if we were in your bed,” Castle mumbles insinuatingly. “So much more room to make you happy, which will make me happy, which will make us both happy.”

“What if I want to make you happy right here?” Beckett says, and applies her wickedly wandering fingers to show exactly what she means, coupled with a wickedly wanton tonguing of her lips.

Castle takes a deep breath. His voice lowers by another several tones. “You can get to that later. Right now, I’ve got a better plan.”

“Oh?” Beckett pouts, flickering her fingers once more. “Are you sure about that?”

Castle isn’t, under the erotic touches of her fingers. Shortly, he isn’t sure of his own name, or whether his limbs – apart from one very particular limb – are still attached to his body. Beckett is evil. She didn’t listen to him at all. She’s turned him into a groaning mess and while it was absolutely spectacular it was not fair that he didn’t get his own way first. And she’s smirking. Unfortunately looking at her lush lips and her satisfied face, atop her barely clad, kneeling, lissom body, is not doing anything at all for his ability to recover intelligence, thought or game. On the other hand, he doesn’t need intelligence, thought or game. All he needs to do is to give in to his instincts, which require none of those attributes but simply release.

So that’s what he does.

His instincts tell him to pick her up and kiss her till she whimpers; to convey her to her bedroom and drop her on her bed; to remove the tiny scraps of silk and lace that she’s still wearing; to rise over her and to take her in one smooth hard thrust and bring them both to climax. His instincts tell him to hold her hard to him, and then to turn her so that her back is to him and his hands are free to roam; to spread over small firm breasts and erect nipples and tease and play until she mews and moans and writhe in his clasp; to trail down between her legs and slip and slide and stroke in the slick wet heat until she’s mindless with desire and frantically moving; to drive her up all over again with fingers taking her and thumb rubbing her until he lets her explode once more.

And then his instincts tell him to cuddle her close and bury his nose in her hair and simply be together in the best of ways. So he does.

Castle wakes up cold and confused, although both of these unpleasantnesses are considerably ameliorated by the fact that he is still wrapped around his beautiful Beckett. She is not cold, and being asleep is probably not confused either. This doesn’t seem fair. He muses on that for a few seconds, and then suddenly remembers that he hadn’t meant to spend the night, hasn’t made any arrangements, and is now around – he scrabbles for his watch, oh God – three hours past curfew. Oh God oh God. Oh God. He should be home right now.

“Beckett,” he says, tapping her and then shaking her. “Beckett, wake up!”

“No.” She keeps her eyes firmly shut. “Not waking up. Come back.”

“I have to go home.”

“No. Don’t want you to.” She reaches out, still nine-tenths asleep, and tries to pull him back. “Stay here. You belong here. With me.” She tugs hard, and Castle, somewhat confused by the definite tone of the last sentences, falls back on to the bed with his pants half on and his shirt unbuttoned.
Beckett wraps herself over him without apparently needing to open eyes or engage brain. This is not helpful.

“I have to go home,” he says again. “Let go. I’ll see you later,” he adds, in the tone he’d use if offering a later reward-treat for good behaviour now to a small child. Beckett emits a sleep-soaked noise of considerable disgruntlement and flumps to the side. There is a mutter. On analysis, it might consist of don’t want you to go.

“I don’t want to go either, but I need to. I’ll bring you doughnuts,” he says persuasively.

“Bear claw. No-one else brings bear claws. Not allowed to.”

Castle decides he likes mostly-asleep-but-talking Beckett. “Not allowed to?”

“Only you get to. Special.” She snuggles under her comforter, until only her eyebrows are on view. “Tomorrow you’ll see,” which is completely meaningless, and then more definitively, “Coffee and bear claw. Love you.”

Castle finishes getting dressed to the soothing sound of Beckett’s deep, slumberous breathing. She’s very cute when she isn’t really awake. He dashes home, bribing the cab driver, and arriving to a dark and silent loft. There is a note in Alexis’s rounded handwriting on the desk in his study: Guess you’re with Detective Beckett. Good. Night, Dad. PS Grams happy. Talked non-stop about the play. Didn’t mention you or moving out once, except to say that the sooner she’s in her new place the sooner she can get going with the individual rehearsals, for small points after it opens.

Castle decides to leave that can of worms till the morning. He really doesn’t want to think about what individual rehearsal might mean. Ugh. He swiftly puts himself – well, back – to bed and is shortly asleep again, dreaming happily of his Beckett.

When Beckett wakes, she initially reaches for Castle, vaguely remembers him going home, huffs a little crossly that he isn’t there, and then, showered and therefore functional of mind, recalls that she’d thought that it would be good to have a casual pizza or similar with him and Alexis. She’ll talk to him about it later.

The bullpen is nicely quiet. Possibly this is because it’s nicely early. Beckett may not like the act of waking, or indeed of rising early, but she appreciates the space of quiet thinking time before the hubbub begins, and therefore puts up with it. She takes a package out of her purse, and leaves it on the desk, out of her way. Shortly, she is peacefully working through her to-do list.

Castle doesn’t show up till after ten. He is, however, bearing the usual bear claw and coffee. Beckett is suitably thankful. When he plumps down in his chair, he notices the package.

“What’s that?” He pokes it, hopefully. It squishes slightly.

“Open it and see,” Beckett says.

“It’s a present? For me?”

“No, for the bullpen ghost,” she snips. “Yes, for you.”


“No. Ponies are usually bigger,” Beckett points out dryly.
“What is it?”

“Open it and find out.”

Castle prods it again, first, just in case it does something unexpected, such as explode, or something interesting, such as make noises, or talk. It doesn’t. He starts to open it.

“Do you like it?” Beckett says, slightly anxiously, as Castle stares at it. He doesn’t answer. “Do you?”

“Uh? Urg. Um.”

Beckett turns back to her papers. Sense is obviously not something she will receive from Castle at present. He’s still squeaking gently and incoherently. She sneaks a peek under her lashes, to try to alleviate her disappointment in his lack of appreciation.

Oh. Oh. He’s actually not capable of speech. His eyes are bright with happiness and suspiciously close to moist. He’s simply staring at his present. Well. Two presents. A small – but slightly squishy – packet of Blue Mountain coffee – and a Georgian recipe book. It appears that she has achieved the impossible, and silenced him.

Finally he looks up from the two items. “I love them. You have to let me practice, though. You can’t come to dinner till I’ve learned to cook some of these. And then we’ll have the coffee.”

“It’s your coffee.”

“No, no. We’ll share it. I’m going to keep it till you come to the loft again and then we’ll both drink it. Better than champagne.”

“But it was for you,” Beckett says, nonplussed. It wasn’t for sharing, it was for Castle.

“And now that it’s mine, I want to share it with you.” He smiles like a child. “It’s my present so I can do what I want with it. You can’t tell me what to do with it.”

Beckett rolls her eyes in despair. Castle grins delightedly and starts to leaf through the recipes, occasionally emitting happy noises or smacking his lips.

Castle is quite overcome – in a manly sort of way, naturally – by his present. It’s so perfectly Beckett. Utterly practical and yet something he’ll love. No fussy frivolity or piece of pretty uselessness, no silliness, but accurately judged to make him smile and warm the depths of his heart. He hums happily and starts to look through the recipes, which are, of course, totally engrossing and look delicious. She’s shared this part of her life: indeed it had been the very first piece of her life she’d ever let him into that didn’t involve tears and hurt and alcoholics. She’d cooked him a Georgian meal and they’d been – she’d been – happy and relaxed and totally Kat for the first time ever out of bed… and now she’s showed him how to cook it when they were in the Hamptons a couple of weeks ago and given him a recipe book and it might look trivial (though the coffee certainly isn’t: that’s expensive) but actually it means far, far more than anyone would know.

He’ll practice, and then when Beckett is able to come to the loft (and he thinks that will be soon, now) he’ll cook it for her, as she did for him. And then they’ll curl up together in his wide bed and in the morning they’ll still be there together, all tangled up as lovers should be.

“Castle!” he hears, in the sort of tone that means Beckett’s been trying to get his attention for the last few minutes. “Come out of your culinary dreams.”
“Uh, what?”

“Wake up!”

He manages to tear his eyes away from a particularly tempting recipe for eggplant and walnuts to look at her.

“Um…” she begins, which after such an impatient recall of him to reality is a touch unfair, “um, I thought maybe we should go for a pizza with Alexis so she doesn’t think Saturday was her fault or that I don’t like her or…”

“Okay,” Castle says, before she can really get wound up. “Tonight? Or tomorrow?”

“Is tonight too soon?”

“No, as long as it’s not late. School night. I wouldn’t mind but Alexis does.”

Beckett is stabbed by a pang of memory of her parents insisting that she was always home by nine on a school night, even when she was seventeen. Castle flashes her a quick, penetrating look.

“It’s okay,” she says, “I’m fine. Just… Mom and Dad used to do that.”

“Mm,” Castle emits, a touch sceptically. He’s not entirely convinced it’s fine, but on the other hand the moment has passed and her face has cleared.

“Tonight,” he says.

“Okay.”

“Because,” he murmurs, “if you don’t have to see Burke on Friday, we could go out on a proper date.”

“Date?” Beckett squeaks.

“Yeah. You know, we go to a movie and maybe do a little making out in the back row” – she makes a disbelieving noise, and he waggles his eyebrows at her – “or dinner and I take you home and maybe we do a little making out there.”

“Or we could skip straight to the making out at mine,” she purrs. “Only teens make out in the back row.”

“No, no, no. I want a date. You do want me to be happy, don’t you?” he adds plaintively, and produces huge blue puppy dog eyes. “It would make me really, really happy to take you on a date.”

He does want to take her out. He wants to do normal things like go to a movie or dinner or theatre just like they hadn’t so far, because so far has been defined by her therapy and her father and the only breaks they’ve had have been in the Hamptons. He wants – well, he wants to bring the relaxed informality of the Hamptons back here to Manhattan.

“If it makes you happy, then,” Beckett capitulates. “If no body drops.”

Castle is delighted, and starts to plot and plan immediately – then has to break off to tell Alexis about pizza and where to meet them. “Bruno’s?” he asks.

“Sure,” says Beckett, from deep in her papers. “Six-thirty.”
The day progresses without anything interesting happening, though after the most recent case Beckett is happy to have a quiet day. Only one, though. Tomorrow she’ll want a nice new case to keep her busy. It also occurs to her that they haven’t seen O’Leary for a while. Hmm. It might be nice for all of them – the four of them here, Lanie, and O’Leary – to go for a drink. By the time they’ve matched all the schedules, that’ll be next week at the very earliest. She realises with some embarrassment that the last time everyone went out was when the boys had collectively staged the intervention on her and Lanie, and breaks off from her papers to text both Lanie and O’Leary. They’ll be hardest. She’ll know the boys’ schedule, she obviously knows hers, and Castle is, pretty much, a free agent. The fact that it stops her fretting about tonight’s dinner is clearly entirely irrelevant. It’ll be fine.

At six-fifteen Castle taps Beckett on the hand to pull her out of her papers. He’s spent a happy afternoon perusing his lovely recipe book, plotting Nikki, and playing with his phone, all the time buoyed up on his feelings about Beckett’s beautiful present. Beckett has been buried in work, and he thinks that she’s more fretful than she’s letting on about this meal. The casual setting doesn’t mean that she’s doing it casually.

“C’mon, time to go.” There’s a tiny hesitation before she shuffles her papers together and taps them into an even mass; switches her computer off and puts everything away; makes a quick trip to the restroom and returns with her make-up pristine. Castle recognises it as a control mechanism and doesn’t comment, though once they’re in the elevator he manages a small brush of hands: finding hers chilly.

Somewhat to Castle’s relief (and from her small exhale Beckett’s relief too) they are there first. Castle had made a reservation, which from the busy, crammed area was just as well. She orders soda, Castle selects a beer, and Alexis’s flaming red head becomes visible through the door just as their drinks arrive.

“Hi Dad, hi Detective Beckett,” she chirps happily. “This is nice. Dad hasn’t brought me here before.”

“It’s always nice to try new places,” Beckett says.

“How was school?” Castle asks, just as he would any day. He thinks that since Beckett wants this to be casual, he’ll behave absolutely normally with Alexis unless and until he thinks that it’s getting too much. If Dr Burke thinks that Beckett need not see him twice a week any more, then she’s so much better that the pace can be pushed a little.


“Why don’t you tag along with Grams to watch her directing a few times?”

“Wouldn’t she object?” Alexis says.

“Why?” It’s apparent that Alexis, despite tagging along the other night, hadn’t thought that she might do so again. “She’d probably like the support. Or you could hide up in the circle.”

“Yes?”

“I would,” Beckett says. “Much better to see it on stage, and if you understand what your grandmother is doing when she’s directing you’ll understand the play much better too.” Her voice is pleasant and warm. Castle notices that her knuckles are pale around the soda glass. He also notices that Alexis is just a little reluctant to look at Beckett.
“I still don’t like the concept Carl came up with,” he says provocatively. “Shakespeare doesn’t need messed with. It stands on its own.”

This provokes a lively discussion which keeps everyone away from any difficult subjects or tension until pizza arrives. While Castle wants normality, a debate such as this is part of his family normality, and anyway anything that makes Alexis and Beckett comfortable with talking to each other is good.
Partway through the pizza, Alexis appears to Castle to be bracing herself to take some action. With a major effort of will, he doesn’t do anything to interfere. He has to let this play out, though he’s pretty certain that Alexis is about to try to apologise for Saturday.

“Detective Beckett?” She looks up. “Um… I’m sorry about what I said on Saturday. I didn’t want to make trouble.”

“You didn’t. You didn’t know about the past,” Beckett says seriously. “You can’t blame yourself for something you didn’t know.”

“Your dad said that,” Alexis falters.

“And he was right.”

“But…”

“Were you there when I was nineteen?” Beckett asks bluntly. “Did you stab my mother?”

Castle exhales as if punched. Alexis is stone-still. This is not the tack he would have taken.

“Did you know my dad, or offer him the bottle? No. You had nothing to do with this. It’s not your problem, and it never has been. It’s up to me and my dad to deal with, and you can’t go walking on eggshells just in case you say something that hits a nerve. I don’t want you to.” Beckett is still using the forceful, what-I-say-goes tone with which she’d begun. “We’re working it out, and people dancing round it doesn’t help. It just makes it a bigger issue.” She breathes. “You have nothing to apologise for. So don’t.” She breathes again. “Sometimes people asking the obvious questions shakes something loose. You did. Dad and I are better for it.” She holds Alexis’s eyes. “Listen to me. Don’t take blame on yourself for what others did. It never works out well. I blamed myself for Dad, and look where that got us.”

Castle puts his hand over Beckett’s, cramped round her soda glass. She forces herself to stop talking. Alexis says nothing, trying to process – Castle thinks – that she’s not in trouble; that she did something which actually helped.

“Pumpkin,” he says easily, “listen to Beckett. No-one’s blaming you for anything, and you shouldn’t either. Let’s just have a time-out from the heavy talk and eat the rest of the pizza before it goes cold and then have dessert.” He gives Beckett a look which says and you need a time-out from the talking too, but I’m cool with what you said. It’s absolutely not how he would have done it: it had no subtlety of language or tact about the circumstances – but it’s rammed the absolute truth into his daughter’s face. You didn’t cause it. You didn’t help it along. It’s not your fault. Alexis can hardly do otherwise than believe it.

They eat the rest of the pizza in contemplative quiet, cut with the inaudible noise of hard thinking, after which Castle summons a server to provide dessert menus as everyone calms down. He turns conversation back to the murder case, which seems safest, and with the production of lavish quantities of ice-cream the tension eases off.

Alexis keeps sneaking peeks at Beckett, who is maintaining a sublimely oblivious surface which is utterly false. It’s fooling Alexis, though, who, teen-like, thinks that it’s all over. For her, for now, it is. He, on the other hand, is now wondering exactly what went down in Jim Beckett’s kitchen. Dad and I are better for it? She’d said the start of forgiveness. Whatever it was, it’s made a major
change in their relationship.

Dinner finishes with no other areas of difficulty having been touched upon, and with Alexis regarding Beckett as some fabulous, but slightly remote, goddess (well, she is a goddess, but Alexis doesn’t need to know about that) who holds the secret to entry to Stanford (and from Castle’s viewpoint, the secret to entry to Heaven) and success. Conversation has been comfortable, though the more Castle has mentioned Alexis’s grades and chances of getting into a really good school the more Alexis has squirmed. Beckett has watched with a cool, sardonic smile, and finally told Alexis not to worry, that all fathers are equally embarrassing, and that no, as she’d seen on Saturday, they don’t grow out of it.

“Really?”

“Really. They’ll be like that forever.”

“Totally unreal.”

“Stop ganging up on me,” Castle whines. “It’s not fair.”

“I’m not,” Beckett points out. “I’m ganging up on fathers generally.”

Alexis snickers. Castle looks pained, and incidentally notices that Beckett’s fingers are still tightly locked, now not on the empty soda glass, but together. Hm. Not as cool as she makes out, then. On the other hand, she’s still here, Alexis is happy, and no-one is crying, yelling or shooting. And he is not dead. This is better than he had anticipated half an hour ago.

“It’s time I got home,” Alexis finally says, apologetically.

“That’s okay,” Beckett says. “School’s important.”

“I’ve had a really nice time, Detective Beckett. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Outside, Castle brushes a kiss over Beckett’s lips, notes her chill skin, and can’t do anything about it. He inducts Alexis into the cab that will take them home, hugs Beckett again, and whispers that he’ll call her later.

Beckett goes home with a feeling of achievement, tinged with some discomfort that she still can’t make herself be perfectly easy with Alexis. She chides herself for expecting everything to work out instantly just because she doesn’t need to see Burke every ten minutes any more, and attains the quiet surroundings of her home without further fretfulness.

She is, she realises, somewhat disconcerted by Alexis’s almost-hero-worship of her academic achievements, and more so by her complete non-stress about Beckett. It is, she works out far too slowly, entirely possible that Alexis hasn’t noticed Beckett’s tension: that tension not affecting Alexis in any way except that Castle spends time with Beckett here, not at the loft. In fact, Beckett’s been remarkably – not exactly self-important – but certainly guilty of thinking that her problems would have more of an effect on Alexis than they evidently had.

She arranges herself comfortably in a clutter of cushions on her couch and decides that if that’s the case, she just needs to make herself comfortable with going to the loft. Which still means without Martha there, but that’s not difficult either, since she’s directing and that will, Beckett expects, involve evenings. She contemplates the possibility of dinner at Castle’s loft with both Castle and
Alexis, with extreme caution and in great detail, and eventually concludes that it might be possible, soon. Actually, maybe next week. Murder permitting, of course.

She can do this. She can absolutely do this, because she has managed it tonight. It’s just another small step. She’s taken the big step, several times over. The big step was watching Castle with his daughter. Where doesn’t matter. She’s been to the loft and made herself look round its family-home accoutrements. She’s taken that step too. All she has to do is put the two steps together into one. She can do it – and if she can’t do it for long, Castle will understand. He always does.

Her thinking segues into how delighted he’d been with his present, and she drifts into a small cloud of happiness that she’d pitched it right. Such a small thing, to make him happy, notwithstanding that Castle could probably be made happy by a walk in the park with an ice-cream and sunshine, although she’d have to fight him to be able to pay for the ice-cream. He has a huge capacity for happiness, and when she’s with him (or when she thinks about him) it has a tendency to rub off on her. So now she’s done something that she’d hoped would make him happy and it did. She cuddles the feeling close, and wishes that she could cuddle her Castle close as well.

Which is when the door sounds. Padding across to it, she discovers that it’s Castle.

“How did you get here?” she says, flabbergasted, throwing her arms around him and kissing him soundly. “I was just thinking about you.”

Castle’s ears colour. “Alexis sent me,” he admits. “She said she didn’t need me at home and Mother came in at that point declaring that directing her cast into something that would make it past the end of the first performance had exhausted her, so she wasn’t going anywhere that wasn’t the family room with a large glass of wine. So Alexis told me to come see you and – er – here I am.”

“Good,” Beckett says, and tows him to the couch. She plops down next to him, and snuggles in with her head on his shoulder. “I was thinking,” she says. Castle jerks to attention and her head falls off his shoulder. She humphs at him, and replaces it. “I think we should plan for me coming to dinner at the loft with you and Alexis. Set a date. A target.”

Castle boggles at her, and emits only some strangulated squawks which are entirely incoherent. Beckett rolls her eyes, raises an eyebrow, glares, and when none of these tried and tested methods return him to somewhere vaguely adjacent to normality pokes him in the ribs. Hard.

“Ow!” he squeaks. “Don’t do that. It’s not nice.”

“You were gibbering.”

“I was not. I don’t gibber.” Beckett regards him very sardonically. “I was just surprised. Taken aback.”

“If I want to take you aback, Castle, all I have to do is open your shirt and pants and push you over.”

Castle’s eyes darken. “Go ahead. Just don’t complain if I decide to do the same for you.”

“Focus.”

“You started it,” Castle points out innocently, and follows up by wrapping her into him and hoisting her into his lap.

“Dinner. In your loft. With your daughter. Date.”
“It’s not a date, Beckett. I don’t take my daughter on dates – ow! Stop that!” Beckett has prodded his ribs again.

“Stop being difficult. You know what I mean. Date for dinner in your loft with Alexis.”

“Oh. I like date dates.”

“We agreed Friday for that. Stop evading.” She pauses. “Or… don’t you think I should come to the loft yet?”

Castle stops his persiflaging instantly. “No, of course not. I think you should come right now and stay. Lots. But it’s up to you when you’re ready. Always up to you, Beckett.”

“So when?”

“Not this week.”

“I thought that,” she says, and curls an arm around his middle. “Too soon.”

“We can’t miss opening night.” Beckett makes a noise that doesn’t exactly indicate pleasure at the thought. “No, we can’t. Well, you could, but Alexis and I certainly can’t, and… well, it would be great if you would come with us.” He grins, a touch lopsidedly. “Share the pain. If Mother can make anything out of this mess, she’ll have worked a miracle that Manhattan hasn’t seen since… since… since…” He fails to think of something suitable. “Anyway, that’s not relevant. I want you to come with us.”

“Okay,” Beckett says, confusedly, “but couldn’t we go see something more entertaining instead? You know, like – oh, Coriolanus, or Titus Andronicus? If nothing else, I could watch how the murders are done.”

“I bet you like John Woo movies too.”

“Yep. And Quentin Tarantino.”

“Oooh,” Castle says happily. “Will you cuddle me if I get frightened by the bad guys?”

Beckett rolls her eyes despairingly. “Yes, Castle.”

“That’s okay then. I’ll protect you from A Midsummer Night’s Mare.” She snorts. “Now that you’ve finished distracting me” –

“Hey!” she objects –

“why don’t we fix it for a week Friday, because then no-one’s got school the next day.”

“I’ll be on call.”

“If there were a murder, you wouldn’t come to dinner anyway, on or off shift, and I’d be shadowing you. So we’ll cross that bridge if we come to it.”

“Okay then,” Beckett says. “A week on Friday.”

“Opening night is Tuesday.”

Beckett acquires a very nasty smile. “I should be at therapy.” Castle’s smile becomes equally evil. “I have an idea.”
“So do I,” he lilts. “Do we have the same idea?”

“We should give Dr Burke tickets.”

“We do have the same idea.” They high five each other, and then collapse in evil snickering.

“That’ll be awesome,” Castle says happily.

Beckett makes a face. “He’ll find some way to enjoy it. Or pretend he does.”

“Yes, but then he’ll have to meet my mother.”

Her face clears. “I forgot that.” She sniggers. “Okay, it’ll still be fun.” She returns to seriousness. “So Tuesday is opening night, and Friday next week I’ll come to the loft. Just… make sure your mother is out?”

“Don’t worry,” Castle rumbles. “That won’t be a problem.” He tucks her in more comfortably, stroking down her arm and cossetting happily. “Now, since I’ve been thrown out of my own home, I’m officially homeless, unless some kind person will give me a bed for the night?”

“Mm, I don’t know. Are homeless people happy to share beds?”

Castle nuzzles into her neck. “They are if you’re in them.” He nuzzles some more. “Better than a teddy bear. They’re boring. You’re not boring,” he says childishly, and then drops his voice to velvet villainy. “You make such interesting noises when I share your bed.” His fingers wander from her arm to her collarbones, pause for thought, and then wander to the vee of her shirt. Shortly, there is no impediment to them wandering lower, or sideways, or round, or under. Shortly after that, Castle’s homeless state is entirely relieved for the evening.

Cleaned up, cuddled up, and completely coddled, Beckett snuggles into Castle’s broad warmth, ensures he can’t escape, and drifts into peaceful repose tucked into the perfectly shaped notch between arm and chest. Designed especially for her, she muses sleepily. She doesn’t need a manual, though The care and keeping of Castles might have been helpful earlier. Now, she simply needs to trust her instincts and her love for him, just like she had earlier in the week when she’d seen the coffee, the other day when she’d seen the book, and bought both on impulse.

Castle rumbles sleepily, rearranges her a tad to be placed to his satisfaction, cuddles her even closer, and falls asleep as quickly as a toddler. Not that he behaves like a toddler. Oh no. Very satisfyingly adult, her Castle. Very satisfyingly and assertively adult male. But now he’s wrapped round her in his usual reassuring fashion. She snuggles down and falls asleep almost as quickly as he had.

Castle wakes in the small hours, wondering sleepily why his foot is falling out of bed when there is always plenty of room in his immense edifice. He shouldn’t be falling out of bed. He becomes vaguely aware that he has been pushed right to the edge of the bed, which isn’t fair. Beckett isn’t allowed to thieve his bed. She’s supposed to share it. About that point, he recalls that this isn’t his bed. It’s Beckett’s. And it’s too small if she’s going to do that. She’s sprawled across it, taking up at least three times as much room as she should. He growls affectionately at her, and tries to push her into a more limited space – that is to say, only occupying one and a half times the space she should. It takes some effort, and is only achieved when he rolls her over and then spoons her in. He drifts into renewed somnolence wondering if Beckett steals the bed often, and if so how he’ll stop her. The best idea seems to be spooning. It certainly pleases him.

Beckett wakes to her nuclear-klaxon alarm, grumps at it, slaps on the sleep button, closes her eyes
and pulls the pillow over her head as always – and finds that it doesn’t pull. This is not fair. She tugs harder, and finds that it still doesn’t pull. It transpires that Castle is leaning on it. Humph. On the other hand, not humph. She snuggles back into him and pulls his arm over her head – well, ear.

Ten minutes later the alarm screeches again, and this time Castle makes some very unhappy noises when she doesn’t slap it off.

“I have to get up,” Beckett points out.

“I don’t, though. Play hooky with me. C’mon.” He cuddles her very hopefully.

“Can’t. Comes of having a regular job. I’ve gotta be in for start of shift. No exceptions.”

“I could call Montgomery.”

“After last time you tried to sandbag him? Don’t you want to follow us any more? Because there are easier ways of leaving than with Montgomery’s Captainly boot up your ass.”

Castle grumbles and grumps and groused and eventually simply ogles Beckett as she exits the bathroom after the fastest female shower in recorded history and embarks on her hair, make-up and clothing. Most unkindly, clothing includes a thoroughly minimal, beautiful and provocative deep red lingerie set, which she takes extreme pleasure in donning very slowly. Castle makes some very animalistic noises at that point, and is only discouraged from some very animalistic actions by Beckett tapping her Glock meaningfully. He humphs, but it doesn’t stop him ogling with considerable attention to detail and a certain amount of intensely provocative commentary. Sauce for the goose, after all…

Beckett leaves before Castle’s commentary can entice her back into bed, and with a suspiciously high colour around her cheeks and neck. Castle lies back, smirks at her departing back, and as soon as she’s out the door bounces up and takes advantage of the fact that he’s been left alone here to investigate. He does not, however, investigate her clothing. That would be creepy and voyeuristic, and if there is any voyeurism to be done, he’ll do it to Beckett in person. He does want to look around her bookshelves, and is perfectly happy with what he finds, in particular the complete set of his works. He grins happily to himself, tidies up, makes the bed, and locks up behind himself as he bounces home.

It still being relatively early, his mother has not emerged from her room yet. Castle makes coffee, and awaits her. He wants to talk about two things: easily and pleasantly the tickets for opening night; and possibly not so easily and pleasantly the arrangements for her moving to her new apartment. All the legalities need to be finalised with his attorney, and he’d like to get the movers instructed in good time. Albeit the moving in date is liable to be Saturday at the end of the month, the more that’s fixed the less argument there will be. He is not going back on this decision. He gulps his coffee and fortifies his resolve. He also texts Beckett, in case she should think he’s deserting her in favour of the recipe book. He receives back a very blandly sardonic (he assumes the latter adjective) text suggesting that Georgian cookery practice might be a good plan.
“Good morning, darling,” his mother carols, from halfway down the stairs. Castle looks round, wishes he hadn’t (he is sure his mother is not colour-blind but from her dress patterns he wouldn’t have bet on it), and greets her in turn.

“Hello, Mother. How are rehearsals going?”

“Oh, well, if any of them had the thespian talent God gave a goose we might get somewhere,” she sighs, “but I shall persevere, and we will not disgrace ourselves. Tuesday may come too soon…” She casts herself down in a wearily languishing fashion.

“About that,” Castle says.

“About what?”

“Opening night. We’re all coming.”

“Oh?” Martha emits, pleased but slightly disbelieving.

“So could I have” – Castle suddenly rethinks – “five tickets? Do you even get an allocation or should I call the box office?”

“Five?”

“Alexis, me, Beckett” – Martha looks astonished – “Jim” – her mouth falls open – “and one other, for luck.”

“All right, darling. I’ll see what can be done this afternoon, when I go to try to whip this mess into shape.” She pauses. “Really Katherine and Jim?”

“Yes,” Castle says. “But no pressing them to come here, Mother.”

Martha nods. Castle leaves it at that, for now, not wanting to precipitate that row.

“Now, about your new apartment.”

“Oh, yes. Will it take long to organise movers, and to get an entry date? Moving the piano will need planning, darling, and of course I’d like to have a housewarming party and it would be good to send invitations out as soon as possible so that everyone knows where to find me. Not that I’ll be in a lot, of course. I’ve been looking round my old contacts” – old flames, Castle thinks cynically – “and there are so many opportunities on the stage. I absolutely can’t afford to delay.”

Around this point Castle manages to retrieve his lost composure and close his about-to-be-gibbering mouth. “I told the realtor that I wanted everything done by the end of the month. You’d be able to move in then.”

His mother purses her lips, clearly considering. “Mmm, yes. That would work… then an elegant soiree in June, yes. Perfect. Well done, Richard. Now, if you would just help me sort out a moving firm, and perhaps a party planner? I’m sure your PR person must have some names.”

Castle is so relieved that the discussion has gone well that he doesn’t even think about a sarcastic comeback. In fact, he’d pay nearly anything to the removal company and the party planner to keep his mother off his back and on-side with moving out.
“I’ll call Paula right away,” he says enthusiastically. He doesn’t have to fake the enthusiasm. “She’ll know just the person to give you the most elegant soiree in Manhattan this year.” He wanders off to his office, has a very short conversation with Paula, and is shortly assured that she will provide a brief list of the best party planners that money can buy, before the end of the day.

Castle bounces off to the precinct on a wave of joy that life is finally progressing all in the right direction with all the myriad different difficulties being some way towards resolution, and is not in the slightest depressed by the prospect of cold cases and paperwork.

“Beckett,” he continues to bounce on arrival, “Beckett, I’ve had a brilliant idea.” Beckett does not regard him with the unfettered admiration which that statement should produce. “I have. Mother’s opening night. I think we should invite your dad along with us.”

“You what now?”

“We agreed you’d come,” Castle reminds her, “and we agreed that it would be – er – fitting for Burke to have to go” – Beckett nods with a very nasty expression – “and I thought that if we all have to suffer then your father should too. If nothing else, he can sympathise with Burke. Means we don’t have to.” She looks a little more receptive. “C’mon. We should share the joy,” he says piously, and is rewarded by a laugh.

“What’s up?” Esposito enquires, coming to find out if it’s something he should know. Ryan trots up behind him.

Castle and Beckett exchange a look containing considerable mischief and not a little it-would-serve-them-right.

“We’ve got a surprise for you,” Beckett says. “A reward for all your hard work.” Ryan looks pleased. Esposito, both more cynical and more attuned to the Beckett sense of humour, starts to back away slowly. “Come back, Espo. It’s for both of you.”

“What is it?” Ryan asks, hopefully.

“It’s a surprise,” Castle says. “You’ll enjoy it.”

“Says who?”

“Me,” Beckett says firmly. “There will be beer.”

“If there’s beer…”

“There will be.”

“Okay then.”

The boys wander off. Castle and Beckett exchange a very discreet fist bump, and try not to collapse in laughter.

“I’ll buy an extra two shortly,” Castle says happily. “What do you think they’ll say when they find out.”

“I’d wear your vest when they do,” Beckett says dryly. Castle snickers, and the day passes in quietly satisfied style. Castle takes a call from his mother, and then calls the box office, from a conference room. He wouldn’t want to spoil the boys’ surprise. No way.
“Time to go home,” Castle eventually announces.

“Mm?”

“Time I went home. I have to arrange Mother’s moving out. And her moving in party. Ugh,” he says gloomily.

“It’ll be a roaring success.”

“I don’t want to be thrown to the lions,” he replies plaintively.

“Grrr!” Beckett says, and grins evilly.

Castle pouts. “Okay, see you tomorrow. Oh – and don’t forget we have a date,” he murmurs. “You might want to allow time to change after work? I’ll pick you up at seven.”

“Do I need to dress up?” Beckett asks provocatively.

“Up to you. You can wear jeans and a t-shirt if you want, but I was going to book somewhere really nice for dinner. Seeing as you never normally let me buy you anything,” he finishes with an equal share of sulkiness and saintliness.

“Where?”

“That’s your surprise. You’ve given Espo and Ryan a surprise, now you’re getting one.”

Beckett mutters darkly at her papers and desk, neither of which seem to reply. Castle merely smirks. “Till tomorrow,” he adds happily, and exits before Beckett can take any form of revenge.

Left to her papers and her own devices, Beckett finds that Lanie and indeed O’Leary have both provided – amazing! – overlapping availability for beer and fries. She ponders. Next week is already far more sociable than Beckett ever usually manages, what with the opening night – she winces – and Castle’s on Friday. She still has to talk to her father about opening night – another wince – and lunch or dinner on Sunday, like they used to but from a much better place. She’ll just deal with that now, she thinks, and wanders casually into a conference room where she can shut the door and have privacy.

“Jim Beckett,” comes through the phone.

“Hey, Dad.”

“Katie, hi. What’s happened?” Her father sounds a little worried, which means he’s a lot worried. She hastens to reassure him.

“No, nothing. I called because I wanted to come over for dinner on Sunday, like we used to? Just me.”

“Not Rick?”

“Nope. Just us?” She can’t help the hints of uncertainty in her voice.

“Sure.” Jim pauses for a second, and starts again with considerable mischief. “I can grill you about your intentions towards him. And then I’ll beat you at Sorry.”

“In your dreams, Dad.” She regroups. “Anyway, there was something else.”
“Yes,” he says suspiciously.

“Well, we’ve got some tickets for a first night performance, next Tuesday, and I thought you’d like to come. You, me, Castle, and Alexis.” She doesn’t mention Dr Burke.

“Sounds interesting,” Jim says, lawyer-cautious. “What’s on?”

“A Midsummer Night’s Dream, at La Mama Experimental Theatre.” Beckett crosses her fingers under the desk.

“Mmhm. I can’t say Shakespeare’s really my thing, but I suppose I tried Samuel Beckett and I liked that, so I’ll give it a go.”

“Great. I’ll text you all the details when I’ve got them.”

“I’m sure you have an ulterior motive, Katie. I can hear it in your voice.”

“Not at all. Typical attorney, totally cynical about even the nicest offer. Stop looking my gift horse in the mouth.”

“It’ll bite me, you mean?”

Beckett laughs. “See you Sunday, Dad. Five-ish?”

“Yes. Bye, Bug.”

“Bye, Dad.”

Beckett swipes her phone off with a sense of some achievement and a feeling of general happiness that she and her dad can make this work. Since she’s on a roll, she decides that speaking to Dr Burke is also a good plan, before she loses the will to do anything other than go home and have dinner, possibly with some yoga afterwards, or a nice long run, or both. She dials again.

“Dr Burke, please.”

“Dr Burke speaking.”

“Hey, Dr Burke, this is Detective Beckett.”

“Good evening. Is everything all right?”

“Yes, yes,” she says briskly. “I’m not calling to see you on Friday. It’s about Tuesday.”

“Mm?”

“You remember I told you about Martha’s play? Well, it’s opening on Tuesday.”

“So you wish to reschedule? That seems very reasonable. You can make the arrangements with my receptionist.”

“That wasn’t why I called you.”

“Oh?” Dr Burke sounds just a little confused. Beckett grins to herself.

“We thought it would be an appropriate gift if we provided you with tickets,” she says blandly. “I imagined that you would find the psychological tack that has been taken interesting. Would you
like tickets for both yourself and your wife, or just for you?"

Beckett listens extremely carefully, and detects in the quality of Dr Burke’s silence something that might, at a stretch, be tangentially related to surprise. It lasts a mere instant, but makes her happy nonetheless.

“That would be very pleasant. However, for ethical reasons, I may not accept a gift from you. I would, however, like to attend, as long as you will permit me to pay for my own tickets. I shall consult with my wife and advise you tomorrow. Will that be soon enough, or should I ask her now?”

“The sooner the better, I guess.”

“Very well. I shall let you know as soon as possible.”

In no more than thirty minutes’ time, Dr Burke has confirmed that his wife is, unhappily, unable to attend, but that he will be happy to do so. Beckett manages to preserve a calm voice, and doesn’t give way to her desire to emit a deep sigh that he is just as pompous off duty as on. She devoutly hopes that her father will keep Dr Burke away from her. She doesn’t need to meet another murder in the same theatre, though if she commits it, she’s sure she can cover it up effectively.

She texts Castle the good (her father: both play and Sunday evening) and not-so-good (Dr Burke) news, finishes off, books her rescheduled appointment for Wednesday and goes home. After a nice long run she feels much better, which is to say that she has stopped planning to push Dr Burke’s smug, self-satisfied ass off the top of the upper circle. It must be noted, however, that the mere act of thinking about it has improved her mood to such an extent that small bluebirds are – metaphorically – tweeting happily about her head. This mood lasts just as long as it takes her to discover that she has no dinner, and that her favourite pizza place will take at least half an hour to provide it. She humphs, hungrily, and orders it anyway.

Castle spends a relatively quiet period of time reviewing Paula’s list of party planners, removing those who are best suited to a frat party during Mardi Gras, and eventually reducing the list to a very short list of three, which he will provide to his mother so that she can outline her specifications. He’ll vet those, too. Obviously he’s not going to let her host a party equivalent to the Macy’s Fireworks.

He reads Becket’s text with mixed feelings which, had he but known it, were almost exactly equivalent to hers; and then with entirely unmixed feelings of pleasure contemplates his booking at Jean-Georges for the following night, humming happily.

After a while he goes to play with his lovely new cookbook, and spends the rest of the evening happily engaged with first the production of Georgian foodstuffs (which, since he is a good cook, are very edible indeed) and then with the production of vast quantities of Nikki, punctuated by deletion of vast quantities of X-rated writing fuelled by the pinpoint perfect recollection of Beckett’s deep crimson lingerie, which should, he feels, be distributed across his bed (with Beckett inside it) and then across his floor (with Beckett remaining on the bed, with him). Naturally, his dreams are also X-rated.

Equally naturally, he remembers in the morning to arrange a babysitter for Friday night, and to confirm that his mother will be home after rehearsal.

When Castle finally wends his way to the precinct, for which he is unusually late owing to a sudden need to try out another recipe which will take time to cool before he leaves it for Alexis for
her dinner, he finds that it’s still paperwork and still tidying up the last ends of Carl’s murderous acts. This is boring. Very boring. After an hour, it has become so boring, especially as Beckett is entirely impervious to his hints that she should ignore the paperwork and talk to him, drink coffee with him in the break room, come out for lunch with him and generally amuse him, Castle, rather than doing any work, that he departs again. Departure is hastened when Beckett informs him that if he expects her to be able to come out this evening he should let her on with her work before she shoots him. Since shooting is undesirable both because of the pain and because it would delay their date, (a date!) Castle skedaddles.

Skedaddling does not make the time go any faster, he finds. He can’t concentrate on Nikki, he can’t concentrate on games, and even online procrastination is not occupying nearly the length of time which it should do. It’s entirely unfair. When he’s supposed to be writing, online procrastination occupies hours without any effort at all: indeed without him even noticing. When he’s trying to waste time, it doesn’t work. It is just not fair, he humphs.

Finally the curfew tolls the knell of passing day – or at least his computer beeps chirpily at him to signal that it is probably time to start his sartorial preparations for their date (it’s a date!). He wouldn’t like Beckett to think he isn’t taking it, or her, seriously. Despite everything, they haven’t been on a date in Manhattan before and he feels very strongly that he should make an effort. He showers, shaves carefully (if Beckett wants stubble she can have it in the morning), fixes his hair in a rugged yet attractive fashion, and dresses in a carefully judged manner which indicates enough effort for the effect to be (he flatters himself) sexy and sophisticated but without appearing to have tried too hard and overdone it.

When he arrives at Beckett’s, requesting the town car to wait, he isn’t entirely sure what to expect. He is, however, deeply hopeful that it will involve an elegant dress which is covering elegant (and sexy) underwear.

The door opening discloses Beckett in what appears to be an above-the-knee midnight blue dress, the design of which is largely obscured by the presence of an astonishingly beautiful silk wrap: also dark blue with silvery embroidery in a faintly fern-like pattern. The decoration is more felt than seen, except where the light catches it. Naturally, she’s wearing heels: also midnight blue. Castle embraces her, kisses her a little cautiously so as not to leave a flaw in perfection, and offers his arm to her. She collects up a small evening purse, takes his arm (he tries very hard not to be surprised by this), and they leave.

Jean-Georges is smooth, classy and elegant. All of these descriptions apply equally to Beckett’s dress. Descriptions of Beckett’s dress which do not apply to the restaurant, however, include silky, seductive, and sexy as sin. It is fitted at the bodice, which is cut low enough to be interesting while remaining discreet, and has a slightly full skirt, which swirls and swishes enticingly. It takes Castle a moment to realise that the bodice has rather less of a back than is normal: specifically, a deep V-cut with fine lacing holding it together. His rather stunned mind reminds him that it is technically called a corset back, which does nothing at all for his overheating thoughts but quite a lot for a potential Christmas list of Beckett-presents. This generous impulse is, of course, not at all initiated by the thought that the result would be a spectacularly beautiful present for him, preferably residing in his bed.

Ingrained manners allow Castle to let Beckett seat herself first in the small booth he had reserved. Ingrained instincts lead him to run a delicately sensual finger-stroke straight down her spine before she sits. She shivers, and it’s not because the restaurant is cold. He smiles lazily, and sits himself, next to her. The choice of table is quite deliberate in order to ensure the seating arrangement was the one he wanted.
Dinner is exceptional. Beckett even consents to a glass of wine, though her enthusiasm for both wine, appetiser and entrée, excellent as they were, is utterly dwarfed by her enthusiasm for the dessert. Castle had suspected that she would go for the chocolate tasting dessert, and he is not proved wrong. Nobody who didn’t know her extremely well would notice the enthusiasm, but Castle does know her extremely well, and does notice. There is still glaze on the plate when she finishes. It is not scratched. If, however, there is a single molecule of chocolate remaining, it would take MIT’s largest scanning electron microscope to find it. While Castle feels that using this method to ensure that all chocolate has been consumed would be overkill, he is not entirely convinced that Beckett would feel the same, and therefore declines to mention the possibility. They’ve had a delightful evening so far: conversation has been smart, witty and interesting; they are perfectly comfortable and content in each other’s company without anyone interrupting them; and Castle has been able to press his thigh discreetly against Beckett’s, while occasionally placing an arm around her.

Over coffee, it is clear that dinner has been a resounding success.

“That was lovely,” Beckett says. “Thank you.” She hesitates a little. “It felt just like when we were in the Hamptons.”

Castle is delighted. That’s exactly what he’d been aiming for. “It did, didn’t it?” His arm sneaks back round her. “We should do this more often.”

“Mm,” she hums happily, and leans in slightly. Kat, fed, watered and very content, is much in evidence.

“So we should have a regular date night,” he says, crossing the fingers of the other hand.

“Mm,” Kat hums again.

Castle considers saying and let’s run off to Vegas and get married to see what happens, but then reflects that he wants a proper wedding with friends and laughter and cake and celebrations – and no bullet wounds. Instead he says, “More coffee?”

“Mm, but let’s have it back at home,” Kat purrs.

Castle blinks. Her casual reference to home, though it is her home (for now) in connection with the two of them, is really very telling.

He settles the bill, stops Kat’s attempt to contribute by pointing out that he invited her, holds the wrap for her to be swathed into, and escorts her home in an entirely gentlemanly fashion, all the way to her door.
Come to the fair

Gentlemanly conduct is preserved as the front door of Beckett’s apartment closes. Well. It’s a form of gentlemanly conduct. Castle unswathes her from the silk shawl, as a gentleman should do. It’s the seductively erotic stroking that might not quite be described as truly gentlemanly. Nor, perhaps, would the teasingly light application of a fingertip to her spine, from neck to the point of the V-back. The shawl is placed out of the way, by the simple method of throwing it over the back of the nearest chair, and Kat drawn assertively into his arms.

It seems that Kat is not offended by the cessation of gentlemanly conduct. Kat, in fact, is curving, cat-like, into the tiny pressure on her back, and melting into his broad form. He smooths one hand upwards and runs it into her hair, spreads the span across her skull and tips her face up to be open and perfectly positioned for his kiss. She melts into that, too.

When his mouth meets hers, it explodes. Soft and melting she may be, but it hasn’t stopped her wicked little nip on his lip; the invasion of his mouth by her tongue; one of her hands cupping his face and the other wrapped around his neck: his Kat playing with him.

Two can play at that game. He runs his free hand up and down her back with the same light, teasing touch as before, slipping below the fabric at the bottom of each stroke, undoing the knot and then loosening the top of the lacing at the apex. She thinks that, because he isn’t resisting her invasion of his mouth, (and why would he want to do that when it’s so deliciously pleasurable?) she’s going to have it all her own way, but she’s about to find out that it’s not quite that easy to overwhelm him.

The touches up and down her back become a little harder, push her a little closer, cant her into him where she fits so tightly against his thick full weight – and at the top of each seductive stroke pull the lacing out from another eyelet. About the point where she might start to notice, Castle distracts her by fighting back and taking full control of the kiss, the pace of events, the closeness of her hips to his and the angle of her head. In an instant, the balance of seduction is completely reversed, and she sighs into his mouth and gives in, curling against him, rolling her hips slightly.

Castle manoeuvres them both in the direction of the bedroom, not ceasing his deep, erotic kisses nor his unnoticed untangling of the lacing, which is now almost entirely undone. He sets Beckett slightly back from him, detaches her hands from him and divests her of the dress in one smooth movement. Then he stands and simply admires, azure heat burning over her, firing her blood and nerves. She’s wearing midnight blue: a backless bra, tiny lace briefs, hold-ups, and, still, those midnight blue heels. She’s gorgeous, irresistible – and all his.

“Beautiful,” he murmurs. “My gorgeous Kat,” and draws her back to him, his hand slipping down and over her ass in the teeny-tiny panties; the other moving back to the nape of her neck and angling her head. When he closes over her full lips, words are unnecessary. Touch is so much more fulfilling.

She’s pressed against his chest: his shirt open and the hard points of her nipples through the thin silk bra rubbing over bare flesh; the lace above a delicate friction between them; the kiss hard, demanding and searingly hot: scalding them. Her long, flexible fingers play over his cheek, and then down his back to land on his firm ass: in return he grinds against her and holds her more tightly; the calloused pads of his own fingers sneaking lower and inward. His sure, assertive touch encourages her to bring one leg up around him so that he has access, to allow her head to drop back and open her neck to his questing mouth, to rely on him to hold her and never, ever let her fall.
“Take your shoes off,” he whispers, his voice promising velvet-soft vices and silky sensuality. He lifts her, removing her lingerie as the heels drop, turning and lowering her gently to the bed, watching the short hair spreading on the pillow as she wriggles a little. He toes his own shoes off, then his socks, all the time simply gazing at her, all the desire and heat and lust and love melding together in that one bright blue stare. She meets the gaze with her own sparkling gold-green-hazel, and smiles sleepily, endlessly inviting him into her life, into her world. Here, as in the Hamptons, they’re in their own little bubble.

Castle prowls over the bed, casting aside shirt and pants as he does: finally bringing Kat into him and, for a moment, simply holding her: his strength surrounding her, her silence soothing him in return; together in peacefulness.

And then he pulls her right over him, and she descends, and he takes her mouth with all that he has, and she has, and they will have; and when she’s spread over him and soaked and squirming he rolls her and presses her down into the sheets and then licks his leisurely, lazy way down her body, leaving little lines of lust behind him, not bothering to tease or detour on his direct path to her drenched core. His hands settle on her hips, not yet gripping, his shoulders nudge her legs wider apart, and he breathes softly over her and makes her twist and buck and mewl. He growls deep in his throat: mine, and then draws one firm stroke straight through her. His grip pins her to the exquisite torture of his talented tongue as he tastes and teases, thrusts and then retreats: only his mouth so that he can hold her still and exert his will to leave her hopelessly, desperately undone and she tries to buck and writhe and fails as he grasps yet harder and then he swirls his tongue again and again and she screams his name and explodes.

He slinks up the bed towards her and takes her mouth as ruthlessly as he’s just played her body; ensuring she tastes herself on his mouth, assuring her that he’s there, he’s leading, and she can stand down: just as she has outside Manhattan, now she can here within it. Tonight, here, now, finally she can start to believe that, deep into her bones.

Beckett tries to pull him down and over her, wanting the weight and warmth of his wide bulk covering her, pressing her down and keeping her safe even while his invading strength penetrates her, but Castle isn’t inclined to allow her to take charge even in such a mutually satisfying way. He’s playing gently at her hip, though his kiss remains hard and deep and all-encompassing. She accedes to his assertion of leadership, and surrenders, turning into him as far as she may and curling a leg over his. He might lead, but she’ll leave him as pleased as she. She slips her hand between them and finds hard flesh and heavy weight, perfectly fitted to her touch: grips and slides, strokes and squeezes; working him up. Growl turns to groan until he pulls her hand away and rolls over her, her hands held by her ears with just that tiny hint that she’s trapped that leaves her breathless and intensely excited; he rubs through her and growls again in pleasure at her readiness and then takes her in one smooth hard thrust to be deep inside, filling her full and oh-so-good, just the right side of too much. Her hips tilt up to bring him closer, deeper; he lets go of her hands and she bites them into his shoulders so that he’s touching her all the way down: her breasts rubbing on his chest, the extra friction almost overwhelming; and finally he brings a hand between them and circles and moves in rhythm and surges into her and there’s nothing at all in the world but him.

“I don’t have to go,” Castle murmurs into her hair, cuddling her in afterwards. “I can stay.”

“Good,” she murmurs back, and nestles closer. “Want you here.” She turns over into him and lays her arm and head over his chest. “Getting there. Wanna get to yours.” It arrives on a gaping yawn. Squinting down, it seems her eyes are already shut. His follow.

Castle wakes briefly in the middle of the night, tucks into Beckett and falls back asleep surrounded by her faint scent of cherries and her warm, surprisingly snuggly sleeping form. On the occasions
they have been able to spend the whole night together, she has been very tactile, whether that’s full contact or simply holding his hand. He likes that. He really likes that. Soon, he hopes in his contented dreams, they’ll be able to do it all the time.

He wakes in the morning to a still-snuggled Beckett and a delightfully cosy feeling. It can’t be the comforter, because Beckett has stolen that and then dumped most of it on the floor, clearly too hot. It must be that Beckett is tucked up over him and cuddling him as if he’s her favourite comfort object, which, of course, he probably is. All sorts of comfort, only some of which would be suitable for a non-adult. (but those are the fun sorts) He tip-taps fingers over her hip and waist, and thinks about tip-tapping them downward, but Beckett is still deeply asleep and he doesn’t want to wake her. He compromises on a considerable amount of staring, without the ever-present risk (when she’s conscious) of being growled at, which allows him to study her relaxed state and half-smile. It’s very cute. Beckett, in fact, is very cute when asleep. The removal of the bright sardonic spark in her eyes leaves her younger, somehow, and without her personality filling her face it’s smooth and unworried. Now, just so long as there’s no body drop, they can stay happily cuddled up in bed for some time. He manages to retrieve a corner of the comforter and cover them both up again, Beckett turns over and he drapes his arm possessively over her middle, bending his elbow so that his hand encloses one soft breast. His nose nuzzles into her neck, and his eyes drift shut again.

The next time he wakes, his movement also wakes Beckett. This produces a sleepy, disgruntled mutter followed by a wriggle into him and a tugging on his arm to make sure she is being appropriately cuddled. There is then a short pause. Castle waits with interest to see what happens next.

“Like this,” is what emerges next. It doesn’t sound like Beckett is actually awake. That’s just fine. Mostly-asleep-but-talking Beckett says the most interesting things. “Should always be like this.” Yes, it should. Preferably in the loft, where there would be no need to make complicated arrangements to achieve it. “Nearly there.” That’s true, too. She is so very nearly there, and in two weeks’ time or so one more obstacle will have been removed, when his mother moves out. She sighs, and her eyes inch open, close again, open a little further, notice Castle, and spring fully open atop a beautiful, entirely unguarded smile.

“Hey,” she breathes, and simply kisses him. There’s only ever one answer to that, and he makes it; there’s only ever one follow-up question to that, and she makes it, and by such non-verbal questions and answers they are both beautifully sated and satisfied.

“I tried out some of the recipes,” Castle says happily some time later, “and they were delicious. Nearly as good as yours.”

“You liked it?”

“Oh, yes. I love cooking. It’s very therapeutic when the writing isn’t going well. It’s so completely different – and you end up with dinner, which makes it practical.” Beckett snickers. “What? Practicality and time-efficient. What’s not to like?”

She snickers more loudly. “Time-efficient? That’s not a word I’d have expected to use to describe you. You’ve got lots of time.”

“Mm, but I need some of it for Alexis, and some for shadowing you, and some for spending with you, and some for writing, and some for everything else. Shopping. Procrastinating. Lots of things to fill my time.”

“My job fills up my time,” Beckett says, a little sadly.
“I could fill up your time,” Castle says, smiling wickedly, “and I could fill up” –

“Stop right there” –

“Your coffee cup, I was going to say. Whatever did you think I meant?”

Beckett huffs. Castle smirks.

“Anyway, it’s time to go home. I want to try out some more of those recipes.” His smirk changes to soft happiness. “I love the book. It’s perfect.” He doesn’t say like you, but it’s shining in his eyes. “By Friday when you come for dinner I’ll be ready.”

The rest of the weekend passes peacefully for Beckett, up till Sunday late afternoon, when she leaves for dinner with her father. It would be unfair to say she is worried: she’s merely a mite fretful. Her fingernails are unbitten, but that’s because her lip is shredded and only some heavy duty lip gloss is mending (and hiding) the damage. She can do this, she thinks to herself, and knocks on his door.

“Hey, Dad.”

“Hello, Katie.” Her father ushers her in, and grins happily. “I managed to cook for us.”

“And?” she says mischievously, and suddenly it’s Katie and her dad, perfectly happy to see each other. “Is it a cake?”

“No,” he says, parentally and insincerely offended, “not cake. Chicken, pasta, salad. Nothing that requires cake mix.”

“No dessert?” she says plaintively.

“Yes dessert,” Jim says very patiently. “Cheesecake. I bought it.”

Beckett grins happily. “I bought – and brought – chocolates. I thought we might share them. Or we could keep them for Tuesday.”

“Ah,” Jim sighs. “Tuesday. What exactly is going on Tuesday?”

“What do you mean?” Beckett says blandly. “We’re going to the theatre, to see A Midsummer’s Night’s Dream.”

“Yes,” Jim says sarcastically. “You’re not a notable theatre-goer, Katie. Why this one?” he watches with some interest as she almost imperceptibly squirms. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“You’re not a lawyer now,” Beckett points out.

“No, I’m your dad, and you’re trying to change the subject. What’s so special about this play?”

“Nothing.”

“Liar,” Jim says mildly. “Let’s see now. You, me, Rick and Alexis. Hmmmm. Now I’m not a hotshot detective like you, Katie, but that says to me that this is something like a family occasion. I get that no-one’s on great terms with Martha right now, but I don’t see Rick being unkind enough to leave her out when you told me that ‘we’ve’ got some tickets. And besides which, I looked this production up, just yesterday, because I was sure there was something you weren’t telling me. Imagine my amazement,” Jim says with sardonic emphasis, “when I discovered that Martha has
replaced the original producer.” He looks at his daughter, who is squirming uncomfortably in a very satisfying way.

“Okay,” she says, crossly. “It was like this.” She outlines the case, leaving out a few details which she doesn’t consider pertinent, such as the alcoholism of one and ex-alcoholism of another actor. Jim is exceedingly interested and finds it all highly entertaining. “So we had to involve Martha. It was” – she hitches slightly – “the only way.”

“Not easy,” Jim says sympathetically.

“No. I didn’t want to, but I knew it would solve the case faster. So I had to.”

It’s Jim’s turn to hitch slightly. “Just like your mother would have done. It didn’t matter how much she hated the person, if she needed them she just got on with it.” He isn’t looking at her, but back into the past. “I’m proud of you. She’d be proud of you.” His voice fractures. Beckett’s eyes puddle. “I know how hard you would have found that. Well done, Bug.” He sniffs. Beckett hands him a Kleenex, to match his face covering to hers. For a moment, no-one speaks.

“So,” Jim says, with an effort. “You involved her.”

Beckett gets the story back on track, playing up the appallingness of Carl’s direction. “So she sat on her hands – literally, Dad! – getting more and more and more wound up and suddenly it just all snapped. She practically shoved Carl out the way and took over – and I couldn’t believe it, but it all started to come together. It was astonishing. Castle couldn’t believe it either. Anyway, when I arrested Carl – he was caught on camera, imagine that? It never goes down that easy – Castle made sure that the backers let her carry on, and it’s opening night on Tuesday so Castle and Alexis have to go and he really, really wanted me to go so I said yes but I want you to come too.” She stops.

“There’s something else, isn’t there?” Jim says, trying to control his floods of emotion that Katie wants him there, and the memory of Johanna resurrected in his daughter’s focus on justice.

“Er… well, yeah.”

“Mm?”

“Well, er… Ryan and Esposito are coming, except they don’t know it yet.”

Jim explodes in laughter. He’s not met the two detectives, but he’s heard a bit about them and what he’s heard really doesn’t incline him to think that they’re going to enjoy the evening.

“They worked the case too. They should get to see the outcome.”

Jim continues to gurgle happily for some time, exchanging identically evil looks with his daughter.

“And?” he says. “I’m sure there’s something else. Or should that be someone?”

Beckett grins very widely and nastily indeed. “Well,” she drawls, “we – Castle and I – thought that Dr Burke deserved a reward for all his efforts.” Jim gives up all effort to control himself and guffaws until he’s crying with the effort to breathe through his laughter. “So he’s coming too. He’ll get to meet Martha.”

“Katie, that is terrible,” Jim says, though any force that there might have been in the rebuke is utterly lost in the continuing gales of his mirth. “That’s terrible.” She quirks an eyebrow at him. “I like Carter, and the poor man’s been a witness in one of your murders and now you’re going to inflict an experimental version of Shakespeare and Martha Rodgers on him? Don’t you appreciate”
– he snorts – “what he’s done for you?”

“I do,” Beckett says, dropping into seriousness for a moment. “I really do. But Dad, you have to admit that he is a pompous ass. It’s good for his ego to be punctured.”

“I think you and Rick probably did that already,” Jim says, and stores away the early part of her statement without comment. This is just too good for him to go with his previous plan of annoying Katie about Rick. He’ll save that for another day.

“Anyway, I did ask him if he wanted to bring his wife,” she says, as if this attention to good manners excuses the rest. “But she was busy. Or she looked it up,” she says sardonically.

“Ouch,” Jim grins.

“You will come, won’t you?”

“Wouldn’t miss this for the world,” Jim says, very, very sincerely. Never mind the play, he thinks, the floor show should be wonderful.
Give my regards to Broadway

Beckett is hugely relieved at how well dinner with her father had gone, when she gets home. They’d had the most comfortable evening in many years, and she’d beaten him at Sorry twice to make it even better. He had, of course, sworn to take his revenge next Sunday. She really thinks that it might all be close to sorted out. Sure, it’s still hard for them to talk about her mom, but just like a week ago, it’s shared pain, not one inflicting it on the other, and that’s manageable.

Of course, they’ll still have to be careful: still have to watch their words a little, still have to be a little wary not to hurt each other inadvertently – but if they do, it’s not a disaster, it’s just something that they’ll have to work out then and there. As long as they don’t let small grievances – or indeed larger ones – fester beneath the surface, they can do this.

She turns to thinking about the next couple of days, and indeed the week ahead. Tuesday… should be relatively manageable, though Ryan and Espo likely won’t speak to her till the following week. Friday… difficult. Definitely difficult. But… she has the treat in view of an evening with the boys, Castle, Lanie and O’Leary the week after, so she’ll regard that as her prize for getting through Friday. Now, as long as she manages to find somewhere for them all to go which has space for O’Leary’s giant redwood-length legs, they’ll be fine. She thinks for a bit. If she were organised, and talked to the place tomorrow, they could all go to Tribeca’s Kitchen, because there’s a nice big space on the mezzanine floor and O’Leary can stretch his legs out without tripping up the staff. Perfect. Especially perfect, because it’s not Molloys.

She makes a small note in her diary for the morning, and smirks. Then she looks at her watch, and decides that it’s a good time to make ready for bed. Once she’s all comfily sorted out, she’ll give Castle a quick call, and let him know it all went well.

So that’s what she does. She’s happily buried in her soft pillows and lightweight comforter, in a sloppy, soft sleep tee, when she rings.

“Hey, Castle.”

“Beckett,” he says. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, just calling to check in and tell you it all went really well. We had a good evening. And I won at Sorry.”

Castle blinks at the phone, and not only because of Beckett’s smug tone at winning at Sorry, which seems to make it the most important thing. She’s calling to check in? Uh? Since when has she needed to check in? He stares at the phone as if it might have an answer, but the only one of which he can think is that she considers that he has the right to know that it’s all okay. Which, he thinks blankly, is huge.

“Mm?” he hums, being devoid of any words that would make sense.

“Yeah. He’s really looking forward to Tuesday, too.”

“Good. We need all the support we can get.”

“You can’t hide from Espo behind my dad, Castle. You’re too big.”

Castle grumps. “Does that mean I need to wear my vest?”
“I’m sure he won’t shoot you,” she says reassuringly. “In public,” she adds, not reassuringly at all.

“Beckett,” Castle whines. “I’ll tell him it was your idea.”

“He won’t believe you. Even if it’s true, he won’t believe you.”

“That’s not fair,” he wails. Then he listens carefully. “Beckett, are you tucked up in bed?”

“Yep,” she agrees. “All nice and cosy.”

“You can’t possibly be,” Castle argues.

“Yes I am. Why not?”

“I’m not there. Or you’re not here. So you can’t be properly cosy.”

Beckett makes a very unimpressed noise. “I’m not a small child who can’t go to sleep without their teddy bear. I’m all grown up.”

“I know,” Castle oozes. “You still like it better when you’re sleeping with me.” His tone is lubricious and teasing.

“I sleep okay without you too,” Beckett points out, and rapidly changes the subject before he talks her into admitting that she likes sleeping with Castle a lot better than she likes sleeping without him. “I told Dad that Burke was coming. He couldn’t stop laughing for five minutes.”

“I bet he enjoys it,” Castle says gloomily. “Your dad can leave. We can’t.”

“If Ryan and Espo leave, at least they won’t be shooting you,” Beckett notes briskly. “Anyway. Let’s go out with everyone – the boys, Lanie and O’Leary – week after this one. That’ll cheer you up. And you can hide behind O’Leary if Espo gets a little rough.”

“Is that supposed to cheer me up?” Castle asks. “Espo’ll have had a week to abuse me.”

“I’ll protect you, poppet,” Beckett says mischievously.

“Poppet? Popper?” Castle squawks. “I am not a popper. When I catch up with you I’ll prove I’m no doll.”

Beckett sniggers evilly. “Took your mind off Espo, didn’t it?”

Castle emits a series of indeterminately growling noises. “Just for that, Beckett, I’m not going to tell you a bedtime story.”

“I think I’ll live,” she says dryly. “Especially since your idea of a bedtime story always seems to be X-rated, and since you’re not here to carry through, I think you should wait till you are.”

“We could” –

“Nope. If you’re not here, I’m not playing. This is not a solo game.”

“You’re so hot when you’re trying to give me orders,” Castle murmurs down the phone.

“Stop it.”

“Stop what? Stop telling you that I’m imagining you spread out over my bed, here with me? Stop
telling you that” –

“Stop. Or I’ll put the phone down.”

“That’s not fair, either. I can’t come over, and you know it.”

“I can’t come over either. Yet. So don’t make this worse.”


He’s gone before she has a chance to riposte.

There is nothing notable about Monday, nor Tuesday. Late on Tuesday afternoon, Ryan and Esposito march up to Beckett.

“Okay, what’s happening tonight?”

“You promised us beer,” Ryan reminds her.

“So I did,” Beckett says blandly. The boys look at her dyspeptically. “There will be beer. We’ll all go and get you your beers as soon as shift ends.”

“Where?” Espo demands.

“It’s a surprise,” Beckett says. “Trust me.”

They don’t. But they don’t see how they can extract the information either. Castle, sneaky bastard that he is, has simply not turned up, so they can’t interrogate him. Not that he’s much easier to interrogate than Beckett, but he’s less nasty about their attempts.

At five-twenty-five Castle arrives, and promptly scuttles for the safety of Beckett’s desk before the boys can surround him. “Are you all ready?” he asks, from the protection of her presence.

“Yes,” Espo growls. “Where are we going?”

“We’re going to the Queen Vic.”

“Where?”

“British pub.”

“What? What’s wrong with American?”

“We’re showing you international culture, Espo. Broadening your horizons.”

“They’re broad enough.”


The pub is not inspiring. It doesn’t, to Castle, look particularly British either, though since the beer is cold that’s an improvement on the London pubs he’s visited on book tours. However, it has beers, seats, and camaraderie.

Right up till the point Beckett tells them all that they’re going to the theatre. Camaraderie falls apart quite quickly, then.
“No friggin’ way, Beckett! I am not goin’ into any theatre an’ watchin’ that shit.”

“I had to sit through it already,” Ryan wails. “We didn’t do anything to deserve this.”

“We’re providing support,” Beckett says firmly.

“Why us?”

Beckett looks at them in a way the boys rarely see. There is a short silence. Castle’s arm is suspiciously invisible behind her back. She chews her lip.

“Because… it matters to me that we do.” Esposito rakes her face with his unspoken questions. “Um… There are some others coming with us. My dad. Alexis.” She swallows. “And my shrink.”

“Your wh– oof!” Ryan has just been very ungently elbowed by Esposito, who’s regarding both Beckett and Castle with a considerable dose of sudden understanding.

“Shut up, Ryan,” he says. “Okay. You don’t need to talk about it, Beckett. I get it.”

That is apparently it. Castle watches Ryan watch Espo, and stay very firmly shut up. Every time a question forms in Ryan’s blue eyes, Espo kills it.

“Time we went,” Beckett says, in a very conversation-stopping way, and leads them to the door.

At the theatre, Alexis and Jim are already there, waiting in the foyer.

“Dad, these are Esposito and Ryan.” Handshakes and assessing glances are exchanged.

“I’d rather be at the baseball,” Esposito mutters.

“Me too,” Jim says, to Espo’s surprise, makes his way to Espo’s corner, and engages him in an extremely detailed discussion about both the Mets and the Yankees. Male inter-generational bonding is clearly taking place. Ryan suddenly looks very left out. Alexis takes pity on him, and starts to grill him about theatre and what he likes. Castle favours Ryan with a terrifying glare, which Alexis misses but Ryan doesn’t.

The incipient parental intimidation, no matter how unnecessary, since Ryan is exhibiting the same joy in the situation as a rabbit trapped by a fox, is abruptly stopped.

“Good evening, Detective Beckett.” Dr Burke had arrived a little earlier, but has only now, after a few moments of assessing the situation and the participants, announced himself. He has found the relative arrangements of the group extremely interesting, from the moment he had watched them arrive. Mr Beckett had been first, and his posture did not denote enthusiasm. However, when Miss Castle had arrived, after an initial sense of constraint, conversation (largely on the part of Miss Castle, who, like her father but far more excusably in an adolescent girl, appears to have an endless supply of words) had flowed smoothly.

Detective Beckett had led in the three men who, it is clear to the slightest observation, form her team. It is also clear that she leads that team. Mr Castle is in the same secondary position as he had been when Dr Burke was interviewed, and the other two men have adopted a similar alignment. Neither of them appears to be pleased to be present. These will be the Detectives Ryan and Esposito of whom Mr Castle has spoken. It is easy to decipher which is which. It is also easy to identify that they have received something of a shock in the immediate past. Detective Ryan is exhibiting all the signs of wishing to ask Detective Beckett many questions of a potentially intrusive nature. Detective Esposito, who Dr Burke has immediately noted to have a military
background, is watching Detective Ryan very intently, and stopping all such potential for disaster in good time. He is, however, also watching Detective Beckett almost as intently as Mr Castle has been known to do, although, thankfully, without any indication of a wish for intimacy. That would have been a highly undesirable complication, and Dr Burke is really very tired of the complications which Detective Beckett has brought to his door. The game of Sorry and his guilty pleasure in Mr Castle’s novels do not balance it out.

Dr Burke continues to watch for a short time as the group re-forms. Detective Esposito and Mr Beckett appear to have formed a temporary alliance. No doubt the common ground will become clear, although it is extremely unlikely to involve the theatre. It will most likely involve sport. Dr Burke has observed that this is almost always the case between men who are not otherwise acquainted, no matter their relative positions, ages, or social status.

Miss Castle has turned her conversational intensity on Detective Ryan, who appears more scared than sociable. This may, of course, be a result of Mr Castle’s hostile regard. Mr Castle’s overprotective nature is currently being applied to his daughter, in a manner that is completely unnecessary. Dr Burke is perfectly assured that, even were Miss Castle to behave inappropriately, which presently seems unlikely, Detective Beckett would deal with the situation in very short order.

Finally, Dr Burke’s regard falls upon Detective Beckett and Mr Castle. Detective Beckett is showing an unusual level of strain, although only Mr Castle, Dr Burke and, surprisingly, Detective Esposito appear to be concerned by this. Mr Castle is, very unobtrusively, very close to Detective Beckett.

Dr Burke decides that it is time to announce his presence. “Good evening, Detective Beckett.” He looks around. “Good evening,” he says to the other parties. “I am Dr Carter Burke.”

“Hello, Carter,” Mr Beckett says promptly.

“Hey,” comes with Mr Castle’s usual informality, echoed by Detective Beckett.

“Hi?” says Miss Castle, unsure of who he might be and why he is greeting them.

The two other Detectives make an even more distressingly informal noise of greeting and inspect Dr Burke extremely carefully. Dr Burke deduces that Detective Beckett has advised them of his role. He remains as impervious to their hostility as to that of Mr Castle.

“Okay, we’re all here.”

A bell rings.

“Time to go in,” Detective Beckett instructs, followed by a groan from Detective Esposito. Dr Burke finds himself on the end of the party, and with rather less interest notes that he has ended up next to the Hispanic detective who does not appreciate theatre. It does not improve his view of the production, as he had wished to observe Detective Beckett’s reactions.

“So you’re Beckett’s shrink,” growls the detective. Dr Burke sighs to himself. It appears that an unpleasant conversation may be in prospect. “Good. She needed one.” Detective Esposito relapses into a scowling silence directed at the stage. His conversational ability appears to be as limited as that of Detective Beckett. Dr Burke wonders, frivolously, how the team manages to investigate if they do not talk. It seems unlikely that they use sign language.

Fortunately, at this opportune moment, a cacophonous overture begins. Dr Burke turns his full
attention to the stage, and, although he had certainly not expected to be so interested, he is wholly engaged. Had he been asked, and certainly on reading the synopsis on his programme, he would have suggested that the concept was a pretentious conceit having no validity except to stoke the ego of the previous director. However, seeing it played out in front of him, he is considerably impressed by Mrs Rodgers’ handling of it. Quite remarkable. While her attempts to psycho-analyse Detective Beckett had been erroneous and harmful, when applied to a theatrical production the correct applications of her talent have become obvious. He will so advise Mr Castle, at the interval, or afterwards.

Castle watches with considerable technical appreciation for the way in which Carl’s original “vision” has been converted into a coherent picture. While he is still not precisely convinced by the concept, he is impressed by the execution. He resolves to ensure that his mother continues to direct, and hopes that she will also find opportunities for acting roles. Beside him, Beckett’s tight-clasped hand has relaxed under his, and she also appears to be watching with considerable interest. Alexis is taking study notes. Jim is moderately interested, as is Ryan. Esposito appears completely bored. Dr Burke, on the other hand, is riveted to the stage, whence Castle returns his attention.

At the interval, Espo makes a determined assault on Beckett, and succeeds in cutting her off from the rest of the group.

“Beckett, I can’t take it,” he hisses viciously. “It’s so much bullshit. Why’re you making me sit through this crap?”

“Support.”

“You know I got your back. We all do.” Espo stops. “‘S not support, is it? ‘S telling us without telling us what’s been goin’ on. So since you’ve put me through this for an hour an’ a half, an’ you’re gonna make me sit through the same again, you can tell me what’s been goin’ down.” He scowls ferociously. “Spill.”

Beckett scowls back. It has no effect. “Been seeing Burke since Montgomery benched me. ‘Cause of my dad.” Esposito’s scowl dissipates. He knows about her dad. He always has.

“He been drinkin’?”

“No. Other stuff. We’re mostly fixed.”

“Castle know about this?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay then.” Espo turns back to the group.

“What d’you mean okay then?” Beckett whips out.

“If Castle knows, and he’s cool, we’re cool,” Espo says, like it’s no big deal. He exits, rapidly, before he can be grilled in return. Beckett glares at the wake his departure has left in the crowd, realises he has aimed tactically for the men’s restroom, and contemplates revenge. Before she can contemplate tangible actions, however, Dr Burke appears beside her. This is not necessarily an improvement.

“The treatment is quite fascinating,” he says. Beckett detects a faint air of enthusiasm. “It is clear that Mrs Rodgers’ talents” – ah. The good Dr Burke, she thinks very sarcastically, put a very interesting emphasis on the word talents – “are best employed in thespian endeavours.” When Beckett looks at Dr Burke, much to her amazement his eyes are almost – for Dr Burke – twinkling.
“I consider she should be very much encouraged in this new career.” He regards Beckett with some sardonic amusement. “Were you intending that I should be introduced?”

“The thought had crossed my mind,” Beckett says, equally sardonically. “Know thine enemy.”

“Is that directed at me or at Mrs Rodgers?”

“Up to you,” Beckett grins. She is finding that Dr Burke, off duty, has a sardonic sense of dry humour which she can appreciate – in small doses. She will not be inviting him to dinner any time soon, or indeed any time at all. Dr Burke smiles back at her.

“I shall be pleased to be introduced,” he says, and resolves that he will not remain after the introduction. Detective Beckett is clearly intent on provoking a scene for the entertainment of the others, and Dr Burke is entirely disinclined to assist.

At that opportune moment, Alexis bounces up. “Detective Beckett,” she chirps happily, “Dad said that Dr Burke is a psychiatrist. Would you mind if I asked him about it?”

“Not at all,” Beckett says, and basely leaves Dr Burke to be grilled by the flamethrower formerly known as Alexis Castle.

Dr Burke regards the teen in front of him with detached interest. “You are Miss Castle?” he confirms.

“Yeah. I’m Alexis. You’re the therapist who’s been treating Detective Beckett.” Dr Burke nods, judicially and cautiously. “Would you tell me about how you get to be a therapist? Mr Beckett told me all about being an attorney but I think I need to keep all my options open.”

By the time the bell rings for the end of the interval Dr Burke is quite enervated from the effort of answering Miss Castle. Really, her interrogation technique is exhausting, and it is not necessarily mitigated by her clear interest. It occurs to Dr Burke that Mr Castle’s novels, the fourth of which he is now enjoying, had displayed, to the trained eye, a considerable level of underlying research. It becomes immediately obvious from where Miss Castle had acquired the ability. It is also fair to say that Miss Castle’s technique is considerably more pleasant than that of Detective Beckett, though less focused.

He returns to his seat, now exceedingly pleased that he is placed next to Detective Esposito, who does not, thankfully, talk.
The reaction will be passionate

Castle is almost entirely engrossed in the second part of the play, and is, in a rare second of non-engrossement, delighted to notice that the entire theatre (which, astonishingly, is quite full, though by no means sold out) is likewise paying attention. He merely hopes that the critics are not going to trash the production tomorrow.

Critics or no critics, at the end of the play the theatre rises from the stalls to the gods. His mother is called on to stage to take her bow and innumerable bouquets, in which Castle spots his own, accepts adulation with grace and wit, and salutes the cast and orchestra. They are cheered to the rafters. Castle notes that his mother is accepting it as her due, spots the backs of the Carriblanes’s heads in the stalls, clapping as loudly as any, and thinks very privately that no matter what the papers say tomorrow, his mother’s new career is assured.

“She did it,” Beckett murmurs. “I’d never have believed that anyone could have turned that around from the trash pile it looked like three weeks ago.”

Castle squeezes her hand. “See there, just to the right in the stalls – small woman with a pink scarf?”

“Yeah?”

“That’s Dorothea Carriblane. Dottie, to her friends. She’s the backer. Well, with her husband, who’s next to her. Looks like they’ve got a little gang together.”

“And…?” Beckett asks.

“And, they have more money than Croesus and fund a dozen productions a year, mainly of the just-off-Broadway type.” He smirks very happily. “They’re standing too. Mother’s made.”

“Uh?”

“Beckett, think! You’re not normally this dumb. One of the biggest off-Broadway funders is giving Mother’s directorial debut a standing ovation. She’ll be able to write her own ticket for the next show. Don’t you see? She’ll be too busy to think about anything else, and too happy to be jealous” –

“Jealous?”

“Didn’t I say? She was jealous of me being successful and her not. Well, I think we’ve solved that one.” He smiles beautifully, delighted with his mother’s success. “Let’s all go down and congratulate them all.”

“Dr Burke would like to meet your mother,” Beckett says, slightly mendaciously.

Castle goggles. “Beckett,” he says very tentatively, “are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“Oh, I think so,” she says nastily. “You never know, Castle, they might get on.”

Castle squeaks, horrified. “Beckett, that’s mean. That’s just such a horrible thought and now I can’t get it out of my head.”

“Could be worse.”
“How?”

“Could be my dad.”

“Go away. You’ve ruined my mood. I need brain bleach. Don’t say another word.” He humphs horribly and acquires an attitude of appalled sulkiness.

“C’mon. You’ve got to introduce Burke to your mother. That’ll cheer you up.”

Castle stalks off, still humphing, in the direction of backstage. Beckett pads along behind him, grinning wickedly at having finally got one over on him. Along the way, she collects the rest of the motley crew.

“So what did you think, Dad?”

“I still prefer baseball,” he says. There is a noise of vehement agreement from Espo. “But it wasn’t too bad. Where are we going now?”


“Castle wants to congratulate Martha. Dr Burke, you may want to meet her.” Beckett doesn’t wait for him to disagree. “Alexis probably wants to do congratulations too.” She smiles. “Ryan, Espo, you’re excused, if you want to go.”

“I’m staying,” Ryan says. “That was quite interesting.”

“Bro,” Espo wails. “I need a drink.”

“It’ll only take a few moments. I’ll buy the first one.”

Espo grumps and scowls. Castle keeps forging a path to backstage, through the crowds trying to leave.

“That was great, Mother!” he says happily, as soon as he’s near enough to be heard over the hubbub, and then hugs her.

“Darlings! You all came. There are some bits we need to work on,” she says to Castle. “There will be a rehearsal tomorrow afternoon, to iron out some issues.” The cast, strangely, do not look upset at this diktat. Martha looks around. “Who is this, Richard?”

“This is Carter Burke,” Castle says, without further explanation, and prevents Beckett from adding anything by standing on her foot.

“I was very interested in your exposition,” Dr Burke says, unobtrusively examining Mrs Rodgers. He detects considerable relief, under the overweening personality and brash veneer of confidence, and infers that the success of her production was by no means assured. “The visualisation of the sexual dichotomy was very well expressed.”

“Thank you,” Martha says, and preens. “We shall see what the critics say, tomorrow.”

“I wish you well.” Dr Burke turns to Detective Beckett, before anything more can be said. “Thank you for the invitation. A most enjoyable evening. However, I must catch my train. Please excuse me.” He turns back. “My congratulations, Mrs Rodgers.”

Behind him, Dr Burke hears Detective Esposito’s mutter of how come he gets to leave and I don’t? That would be because he does not wish to provide a floor show for everyone’s post-theatre
entertainment as Mrs Rodgers discovers who he is; which he is quite sure that Detective Beckett and, less obviously, Mr Castle had, if not precisely hoped for, certainly taken no steps to prevent. He almost feels sorry for Detective Esposito. It had, however, been a most interesting evening, and he looks forward to discussing it with his wife, who will tell him about her evening at the ballet. Dr Burke is not fond of ballet, and his wife is not fond of experimental theatre, although he and his wife are both very fond of opera and operetta.

“So, Mother, are you having the traditional first night party?” Castle asks, rather disgruntled that Dr Burke had seen the trap and neatly evaded it.

Martha looks at her cast. “I think so. Are you intending to come, darling?” She doesn’t sound wholly inviting.

“No. I’m going to take Alexis home, and Beckett, Ryan and Esposito – and Jim – all have to work tomorrow morning. I think we’d kill the mood.”

Castle carefully doesn’t look at Espo, whose face is undoubtedly resembling a scarlet carnation by now, occasioned by suffused desperation to leave. It doesn’t stop him sensing, rather than hearing, the sigh of relief.

“If you must all be slaves to the indignity of labour, I suppose I shall bear it.”

“Mother, tonight’s been a resounding success. Go celebrate in style.” Castle hugs her again, kisses her soundly on both cheeks, and passes her back to her adoring actors. She is instantly swallowed up.

“Okay,” Castle says. “Alexis, it’s time to go home.”

“Dad and I will go home, too,” Beckett announces. “Dad, I’ll take you.”

“I need a drink,” Esposito states flatly. “Beckett, you ‘n me are goin’ to have words about this.”

“Not till tomorrow, we’re not. Culture is good for you, Espo.”

“Baseball games and beer are better,” he growls. Ryan snickers behind his back, and swiftly wipes his face clear as Espo turns.

“C’mon,” Ryan says. “I’ll buy the first one.”

Everyone disperses.

Beckett takes her father down to her cruiser, parked at the precinct, and drives him home.

“What did you really think?” she asks.

“I’m with your Espo about baseball, but I have to say that it was interesting, though I’m slightly disappointed that Carter spotted your plan and escaped. Martha clearly did wonders with the play, from what you’ve said. I guess she won’t have time to interfere now?”

“Guess not.”

There is a short pause.

“So what’s next, Katie?”
“Huh?”

“Well” – Jim pauses, a little embarrassed – “we had that dinner at mine, and you came on Sunday, and, well, it seems to me like we’re in a better place to keep fixing things than we’ve been; but what about you and Rick?”

Beckett answers the question that he hasn’t asked in preference to the one which he has. “I think you and me are doing okay. Better than that. Sure, there’s still stuff to work out, but I think” – a light leaves sparkle on her cheek, a slight sheen glistens in her eye – “I think we’ve got it mostly fixed, now. If we try.”

“And Rick? What are your intentions towards the poor boy?”

Beckett emits a cackle of laughter. “Poor boy?”

“Katie…”

“We’re getting there. I’m going to the loft for dinner with Castle and Alexis on Friday. After that… we’ll see. It’s too soon to talk about anything else.”

“What did you think, pumpkin?” Castle says in the cab.

“About the play? That was good. Grams totally nailed it.”

“Yeah. It was great.” He smiles with satisfaction. “You told her she could.”

“But if you hadn’t involved her on the case” –

“That was Detective Beckett’s idea.”

“Seriously? After all Grams did to her?”

“Yep.”

“Wow.” Alexis’s mind flits away as they reach the elevator in their building. “Dr Burke was really interesting, too.”

Castle chokes. “Uh?”

“I wanted to know what being a therapist was like, so I asked him.” Castle supposes that this is not unreasonable, though a touch direct. “He told me all about it. He said you’d have made a good therapist.”

“I’d rather write best-sellers. It pays better. College is not cheap.”

“Yes, Dad,” Alexis says in a heard-that-before way.

“Bedtime for you, daughter.”

“Yeah,” Alexis yawns. “Is Detective Beckett still coming over on Friday?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

She disappears upstairs. Castle disappears to his study, totally content with the results of the
evening.

When Detective Beckett reaches Dr Burke’s office at six p.m. for her rescheduled appointment, he notes immediately that she appears to be moving stiffly, and to be somewhat sore.

“Good evening. Has there been an accident? You appear to be in some discomfort.”

“No. I was sparring with Espo. He said I owed him a match – which is true – for making him sit through the play. He’s not big on theatre.”

“So I had discerned,” Dr Burke says, with a flash of dry humour. “Would you like a painkiller?”

“No, thanks. I’ve taken a couple. I’ll be fine.”

“In that case, rather than discussing last night, which appeared to pass off well, shall we begin with your Sunday night dinner with your father?” Dr Burke has no intention of discussing his thoughts on Mrs Rodgers.

“Sure. That went really well. Dad cooked – edibly. I was a bit worried before I got there, but then it was fine.” Detective Beckett smiles. Dr Burke is pleased to observe that there is no concealment or strain in the expression. “We talked about the theatre trip, and he wanted to know about the case, so I told him – though I left out the bits about alcoholics.” She looks uncertainly at Dr Burke. “It wasn’t relevant to the story, and…”

“Tact is a different matter from avoidance or concealment. I consider you to have been tactful, on this occasion. However, be wary when deciding to leave matters out. Your father is much stronger than he has been, and can bear much where there is a wider story to tell.”

“Okay. Anyway. He said… he said Mom would have done exactly what I did. Involved the best person even if she hated them. He said she’d have been proud of me. Um… we both cried. And then I told him the rest and we had a really good evening.”

“Excellent,” Dr Burke says. “Tell me, do you consider that you have forgiven your father?”

Detective Beckett thinks for several moments, deeply and carefully. “I…think so,” she says, with some precision of wording. “I don’t think I resent him any more. I’m not sure we’re totally fixed, but we’re on the right track. So… yes, probably?”

“Good. It would be wrong to be too definitive at this juncture, but I consider that you have summarised the situation accurately.”

“But I’m still not sure about me.”

Dr Burke interprets that to mean that Detective Beckett has not yet concluded on whether she can forgive herself.

“I suggest that that point will become clearer after Friday’s meal with Mr and Miss Castle. We need not consider it before next Tuesday. Unless you wish to postpone Tuesday’s appointment for another visit to the experimental theatre shows?”

“No, thanks,” says Detective Beckett, emphatically. “That was a one-off.”

“You are not attracted to experimental theatre?”

“No,” she says baldly.
“So why did you attend this show?”

Dr Burke wishes to revisit the subject of compromising. They had not explored this in the last session: there having been more important matters, and it is now critical that Detective Beckett understands that Mr Castle is not the only party in their relationship who makes concessions. She also does: the reliance on his judgement at the possible expense of taking the most recent case, and, Dr Burke considers, the attendance at the theatre. Indeed, with a little careful consideration it should be possible to show that Detective Beckett’s involvement of Mrs Rodgers at the expense of her own feelings is a form of compromise.

“Castle asked me.”

“Despite you being, shall we say, less than pleased with his mother’s behaviour?”

“Yeah, but… well, it was only watching a play. Not like I would have to talk to her. Not if I didn’t want to.”

“But it was still a compromise, just like accepting Mr Castle’s judgement on your ability to take that case was a compromise, and indeed involving his mother, although that last point is not a compromise between you and Mr Castle, but between your entirely understandable discomfort with her and your professional duty to solve the case if at all possible. A personality compromise, if you will.”

“Oh.” Detective Beckett shifts in her chair. “Are we back to that?”

“That depends entirely on you. Have you considered the points which were made at our session almost two weeks ago?”

“Er…”

“No. No doubt with this most recent case, you have not had time. Please consider them now.”

Detective Beckett undertakes a short pause which Dr Burke considers to involve an exercise in focused recall. No doubt this is a key skill in her investigative armoury. Finally she looks up again.

“I get what you and Castle were saying. It’s just a bit difficult to believe it,” she says plaintively.

“Why should it be so difficult?”

“I just – it’s not normal to be so scared of going to your partner’s home. It’s because I haven’t been able to do that. So it feels like I can’t do the one thing I know would make him happy and he makes me happy.”

“Mm,” Dr Burke articulates, and intertwines his fingers. “Apart from your romantic relationship and attending the theatre, have you done anything since the session in which we discussed compromises which has made Mr Castle happy?”

“We had dinner with Alexis. Not the one with Dad. Another one. To show that I wasn’t upset or angry with her when she was asking questions at Dad’s.”

“Mhm. You had said that you intended so to do. Actually doing so makes a substantial statement. Was there anything else?”

To Dr Burke’s mild surprise, Detective Beckett wriggles in her chair. He deduces that she is embarrassed, but cannot see why that should be so.
“I got him a present. Um.”

“A present?”

“Some really good coffee and a Georgian cookbook. The country,” she adds. “It didn’t seem like much. I just saw them and got them on impulse.”

“On impulse?”

“I knew he’d love the coffee, but he’s insisting on sharing it,” Detective Beckett says, aggrievedly. “I got it for him, not to share with me.” Dr Burke elevates his eyebrows. “Castle brings me coffee. So I got him some but it was just for him.”

“I see. Mr Castle, I take it, has been resolute in his insistence that you should share it?”

“Mule headed stubborn, more like,” Detective Beckett says crossly. “He never takes no for an answer.”

Dr Burke takes that particular statement with a substantial helping of scepticism. “But would it not make him happy if he shared it with you?”

“Yes, which is why I stopped arguing. Well, that and I was never going to win,” she adds. Dr Burke considers the second sentence to contain at least equal truth to the first.

“And the cookbook? Georgian cuisine is hardly commonplace. Why did you choose that?” How interesting. Detective Beckett is shifting uncomfortably again.

“We… er… it was the first meal I cooked for him,” she rushes out, and blushes furiously.

“I see,” Dr Burke says meditatively, and declines to enquire further. He need not do so. Whatever Detective Beckett says about ‘impulses’, it is perfectly plain that both purchases are rooted very firmly in shared, pleasant experiences in which they have found comfort and companionship. An excellent circumstance.

“And was Mr Castle made happy by these impulsively bought presents?”

“Yes. He couldn’t speak.”

Dr Burke’s eyebrows fly north. “He was silenced?” he says incredulously. “Good heavens.” Even his famous imperturbability is perturbed.

Detective Beckett produces a very mischievous and infectious smile. “If I’d known it was that easy to shut him up, I’d have bought them months ago.”

“Mm,” Dr Burke says. “The presents were indeed well received.” He steeples his fingers. “It appears, then, that despite your previous inability to visit the loft, which may well have been overcome by the end of this week, you have taken actions which have made Mr Castle happy outside the romantic arena.”

“I guess so,” Detective Beckett says.

“Therefore, since you continue to progress towards visiting his loft, and you have taken actions in other ways to make him happy without any ulterior motive, why should Mr Castle not be content with the position?”

“But he wants me to move in.”
“Yes, but only when you are ready. And you yourself have said that moving in is also your wish, have you not?”

Detective Beckett sinks into her chair. “Yes.”

“Moving in with one’s partner is a substantial step to take, even without the complex issues with which you have had to deal. Most couples take time and think it over with care, even those who have been together for much longer than you. Careful thought and preparation prevents disaster,” Dr Burke adds didactically.

“Oh.”

“Therefore it would be most sensible to continue to work towards spending time at Mr Castle’s home, which you can extend at a pace which is appropriate for both of you. When does Mrs Rodgers move to her new abode?”

“End of the month. It’s all arranged, Castle said. Well, the moving. They’re still discussing the housewarming party.”

“I am sure it will be spectacular.”

“Yeah. The question is, will it be tasteful?” Detective Beckett says sceptically. “Martha subscribes to the nothing succeeds like excess school of thought.”

“You will be able to tell me,” Dr Burke says, with a seraphically irritating smile. “In any event, our time is up. I shall see you next Tuesday, Detective. Good night.”

“Good night.”

Detective Beckett swings out of the door. Dr Burke considers the session and concludes that it has progressed very satisfactorily. He does, however, consider that Mrs Rodgers’ apparent brash confidence may mask some deeper feelings of insecurity, and is somewhat concerned that these may make themselves known when the reality of moving out becomes manifest. It all seems to be progressing rather too smoothly, to Dr Burke’s experienced and cynical gaze.
Dining out

Chapter 186: Dining out

Castle betakes himself off to Beckett’s apartment and finds her sunk in contemplation, though not in unhappiness. He plons down on the couch next to her, curls an arm around her shoulders and enjoys her automatic movement to snuggle into him.

“How’d it go?” he is now confident enough to ask.

Beckett turns to him, and creaks. “Ow,” she says. “Shouldn’t have spent so long on the mats.”

“Espo?” Castle asks.

“Yeah. Ow.”

“You okay?”

“Yes. Nothing too unusual, but he really didn’t like the theatre.” She smirks. “Worth it,” she says. Castle isn’t quite so convinced, but if Beckett isn’t complaining he’s not going to start a fight. “So what about Burke?”

“We went back to compromises,” she says.

“Oh?” Castle dimples at her, which he knows to be irresistibly adorable. “I hope that means that you’re seeing my side of the story.”

“I guess,” Beckett says slowly. Castle dimples some more, and his eyes twinkle.

“See, I’m always right. You should listen to me and do what I tell you.”

“You what now? Do what you tell me? Is this 1950 and I didn’t notice?”

Castle sniggers nastily. “It would be an interesting change. You never do what I tell you.”

“You never tell me to do anything,” Beckett says, and adds quickly, “and if you did I’d only do it if it matched what I wanted to do.”

“Oh?” says Castle in a slow drawl. “So if I found something that you wanted to do I could tell you to do it and you would?”

Beckett looks full at him at the change in his tone. “You could try,” she says, huskily inviting. He smiles lazily, and the atmosphere around them alters. She nibbles her lip, and then self-soothes it with her tongue. He tightens the arm around her, still smiling that lazy, predatory smile.

“I want,” he drawls some more, “you to go to your bedroom, put on one of your pretty scraps of nightwear, and come back so we can play.”

Beckett raises an eyebrow. “And you think that’s something I might want to do?”

“I think there’s a pretty good chance.” His hand runs down her arm and turns her towards him. His gaze drops down over her chest and lingers there. The other hand collects her legs and drapes them
over his thighs. “Because if you did that, I’d be able to do this,” and he strokes along the length of her legs, “or this,” and he pets down over her collarbone and southward to the soft curves. She wriggles and curves and sighs, and then he leans over and kisses her hard. “And that,” he says, after a moment.

“But you could do that anyway,” she says seductively and very provocatively, accompanying her words with a wicked flick of her fingers over some very sensitive areas.

“I could,” he replies, and leaves the unspoken but I won’t hanging in the air.

Beckett wiggles, and with an immense effort of will he doesn’t react. Somehow he eludes her next trick, too. She snuggles back into him. “I’m comfy here,” she says, unconvincingly, smirking.

“You’d still be comfy there. I’ll keep you warm.” Heat you up joins the words in the air.

“Will you?” she husks. “I’m nice and warm now.”

Castle flicks the buttons of her shirt open in six fast movements, tugs it off and throws it over the back of the chair before Beckett can react. “Really?” he smirks.

“What did you do that for? I was nice and warm!” She glares. Castle is entirely unaffected, mainly because the glare is completely failing to conceal the desire in her face and the heat in her eyes.

“I want my own way,” he says, sounding like a toddler and looking very adult and hotly male. “And you want it too.” He kisses her again.

“I suppose I could be persuaded…” Beckett suggests, and moves in a sinuous fashion without actually going anywhere.

Without further ado or indeed input from her, her pants disappear. They’re probably playing hide-and-seek with the shirt. Or maybe Sardines. She might be playing Sardines with Castle. She’s certainly close enough.

“Are you persuaded yet?” Castle growls, after another scorchingly assertive kiss and accompanying grasp.

“Might be,” she breathes, “but I’m stuck.”

Castle’s tight clasp releases, and Beckett slithers off his knee, making sure that she trails across him in an utterly obscene manner as she does. Disappointingly, he doesn’t just haul her back. How unfair. She sashays off, simply to ensure that he can’t take his eyes off her. If he’s going to play, she’s going to retaliate – shouldn’t that be reciprocate, she wonders, and then thinks that no, retaliation is definitely the order of the day. She can feel his gaze burning into her back. Well, her swaying ass. If he thinks he can have it all his assertive own way… well, okay, he can. In a little while. She’ll just have a little fun first, and then he can be as delightfully, satisfyingly assertive as he likes. As she likes. Tonight, she likes assertive. She’s liked a softer, more cosseting variety for a little time now, while she’s been so roughed up by Martha, but that’s solved and she doesn’t need to be cosseted tonight.

She ruffles through her lingerie drawer. He’s seen the green set, but there’s a deep crimson babydoll set that she’s pretty sure will leave him utterly brain-fried. She pulls it out, examines it, is satisfied, and puts it on. Then she finds her old, warm, and very unlovely robe, which she never, ever wears because it is too tatty even when she’s alone (she keeps meaning to throw it in the trash and somehow never quite does) and puts that over it. Then she walks – slinks – back out.
Castle doesn’t notice for an instant, seemingly lost in thoughts: her bare feet make no sound on her floor. When he does notice, he looks first disappointed and then, clearly realising that she’s messing with him, predatory.

“That doesn’t look like a pretty scrap,” he rasps, deep in his chest. “It looks like a picnic blanket.” Beckett smirks. Smirking stops abruptly when Castle stands up, takes two fast strides to where she is, and whips it off, very assertively indeed. “That’s better,” he purrs.

Then he actually absorbs what she’s barely wearing.

“That’s a lot better.” His voice has dropped half an octave into a fur-lined full baritone. It’s really quite disappointing that he can still articulate. “Told you you’d want to.” He runs his gaze up and down her form. “I certainly want you.”

“I can tell.”

“So come here, then.”

She smiles wickedly, and doesn’t move an inch. She expects precisely what occurs, which is Castle’s large, firm hands encircling her waist and smoothly, but inexorably, bringing her into him; one hand then moving up her spine, pressing her in as it goes; that same hand settling in her hair and holding her head for him to take her mouth with no hesitation or apology or indeed anything but boldly assertive possession. Perfect. She flows against him and curves bonelessly and soft, receptive Kat comes out to play. It’s so good to be held like this; to melt into a – no, Castle’s, only ever Castle’s – strong body; to feel safe and protected and cosseted and loved. It’s so good to be able to kiss him as she wants to, whether that’s softly or deeply or possessively in her turn; to touch and tease him; to show him without words (for words are his business, not hers: she deals in deeds) how much he means and how much she loves him.

She pulls his head down as he shifts a little away and kisses him very hard indeed, locking her hands behind his neck and putting everything into it. Castle ignites, losing whatever control he’d thought he had and becoming harder, much more forceful and just a little rough. She surrenders to the sensation without a qualm, and gives back exactly as she wishes to: as lit up as he is. Her hands drop down to slide under his shirt and grip the broad muscles of his back; he tugs them both back to the couch and pulls her down on to him.

After that, there isn’t much talking. Shortly, there isn’t much clothing. And not long after that, there’s only silence in the living room, and the sounds are all coming from the bedroom, and then there’s only soft, slow murmurs and quiet breathing.

There is still nothing notable about Thursday, or indeed Friday. The team is getting antsy again, with nothing new to play with. Cold cases remain utterly boring and, though no-one would actually say it out loud with Montgomery on the prowl, a nice new Beckett-flavoured murder would be just the thing. But not at 4.30 p.m. on a Friday. Esposito waxes almost lyrical – for him, which in practice means ten words – on the subject of the weekend’s baseball; Ryan has apparently got a date and has a movie and dinner all planned out.

Beckett is trying not to think about the evening ahead because if she thinks about it she’ll freak out and never leave the bullpen. Castle isn’t even there. He’s gone home to cook. Beckett would settle for out-of-date luncheon meat and soggy salad with plain, cheap vanilla ice-cream for dessert, if only he were there in the bullpen right now to reassure her. He wouldn’t even have to know that he was doing so: his presence would be enough.
The clock hits five-thirty, and there is no more time for excuses or worrying or hoping for a murder or locking herself in the restroom and never, ever, ever emerging. She can do this. She really, really can do this. Everyone thinks she can. She thought she could. She stands up, puts her coat on, and leaves for Castle’s loft.

Castle had gone home not long after lunch to make his preparations: at least, those which he has not already made. One of them was a very careful discussion with his mother to establish that she will be at the theatre from six until eleven. Following that was a very careful discussion with Alexis to ensure that she is neither overly terrified of conversation nor overly questioning about difficult areas. Castle absolutely does not want a repeat of the last two meals, though progress has been made from both of them. Said discussion also involved a gentle suggestion that after dinner Alexis’s presence will not be required for long. Alexis had regarded him with pitying amusement and gently suggested that she didn’t want to be a third wheel, which, while Castle had reminded her that he was the parent here and that was rather too close to the line of what he’d allow her to say, was likely a pretty fair point.

He absolutely would want Beckett to stay, but that won’t happen. Not with his mother still here. In a week or so’s time, however… and maybe they can have a discussion about that after dinner tonight, once Alexis has departed for her own room. He hums happily and tunelessly to himself as he prepares the food and ensures that the table is set. The wine stands in the middle. It had taken him some time to track it down, mainly because he’d only heard the name and his mangled pronunciation of that had not assisted any of the liquor store staff in finding it. He is fairly certain that his tongue does not twist in the right fashion to pronounce that name. Unfortunately that thought leads him to consideration of how beautifully his tongue does twist around Beckett’s tongue, and other parts of Beckett, and how her tongue can twist in return, which really doesn’t help his concentration at all. He forces his errant mind back on track, promising it the pleasing prospect of Beckett later if it lets him stay focused now.

By the time Beckett arrives (and why don’t they use the keys they swapped? He never does, if she’s in; nor does she. How odd. Maybe it’s just one step too far when they’re not quite that casually connected yet.) everything is ready. Castle opens the door, and instantly recognises that same tight-strung Beckett that had appeared both at her father’s and in the pizza restaurant: the one who wants to take another step forward but is scared that the rope might sway and throw her balance off. She’s brought chocolates, which is always good. He draws her into a gentle hug, which gains him a soft kiss, after which her fingers stay locked into his.

“Hey,” she manages, being too busy examining the table and sniffing hopefully at the aromas emanating from the oven to talk extensively. “What’s for dinner?”

“It’s a surprise,” Castle says, twinkling at her in a ridiculously adorable way. “You’ll find out when I serve it up.”

“I know it’s from the recipe book I gave you.”

“We’ve been eating recipes from that book all week,” Alexis says from behind Beckett, who jumps, and drops Castle’s fingers as if they burned her. “Hi, Detective Beckett. It’s a really nice book. And Dad hasn’t tried to experiment once with it.”

Beckett tugs the trail of memory. Ah yes. S’morelettes. Ugh. “Good,” she replies to Alexis, who is very obviously not looking at Beckett’s hands but her face.

“Would you like a drink?” Castle asks. “I got the same wine you did to go with the food” –

“Kindzmarauli,” Beckett says smoothly.
“How do you even say that?”

“How do you even say that?”

“Practice,” she says smugly. “No, I’d rather drink it with the food. It’s not great on its own. May I have a soda, please?”

“Sure. Pumpkin, could you get Detective Beckett a soda, please?”

Alexis hunts down a soda in the well-stocked fridge, and produces a glass without being asked.

“Go and sit down, Beckett,” Castle says. “I don’t want you peeking – or worse, trying to help. This is my kitchen. I’ll be done in a minute.”

Alexis follows Beckett to the living area, but seems unusually short of conversation and her normal lively personality. Beckett tamps down her own nervousness and stress. She has to make some effort here.

“You said you were studying A Midsummer Night’s Dream?” she asks. It seems like a safe topic to start with. “We talked about the version your grandmother’s directing, but what’s the school telling you?”

“Nothing,” Alexis says bitterly. “Deconstructing the words, that’s all. Nothing about staging it or how it might be done or anything interesting. We don’t even read the whole thing, just key scenes.”

“But you’d read the whole thing,” Beckett says, drawing her out a little.

“Yeah, but Dad and Grams know it inside out and we could talk about it. You can talk about it. This teacher doesn’t want to go anywhere interesting.”

“He’s not going off-script?” Castle says from over her shoulder.

Both Beckett and Alexis groan, and exchange a put-upon look. Castle notices Beckett’s tension level drop.

“No. None. It’s so boring.”

“If it’s boring, let’s not talk about it. Dinner’s pretty much ready. Come and sit down.”

Everybody does. Much to Beckett’s amazement, Castle has produced Georgian food which, while not quite as good as hers, is very acceptable. It’s only taken him a week to try it out sufficiently to be really nice. It took her a good while longer.

Conversation has lapsed. The longer it’s discontinued, the less Beckett can think of a good – by which she means non-painful – subject. A Midsummer Night’s Dream has been exhausted, she has no intention of mentioning Martha, and there are no interesting cases. She racks her brains. Castle asks Alexis about school – but not her English class – which is at least unthreatening. However, she has nothing to contribute to that discussion. She looks around her, noticing once more the family aspects of the loft. Her hands clench in her lap, as Castle and Alexis continue to discuss the day at school. Her mother used to do that, and her father. Both of them, together, over dinner.

Her fingers bite into each other. She forcibly untangles them, and takes a mouthful of her food. Then she very deliberately listens to the conversation, and doesn’t block it out. It’s… not as hard as it might be. Castle’s parental input is a very different animal from her father’s.

But it is still not easy.
She eats quietly, and listens. Gradually, she realises that she is not becoming any more tense. The ghastly ratcheting up of her stress levels on the occasion when she and her father had been here is not occurring. Of course, any lowering is not happening either.

She manages to make a few sensible comments about organisation and the need for a good foundation now so that junior and senior year aren’t so stressful. That ice broken, she points out that there’s no need to worry about senior year when Alexis is only just finishing freshman year. Then she takes another mouthful of dinner and stops talking. She’s said quite enough. Alexis doesn’t look reassured.

Castle watches Beckett, listens to her lack of conversation-starters, and thanks his stars that she turned up at all. He’s unreasonably relieved when she joins the discussion, even for a short period. Alexis is still fretting, though. He’ll deal with that later.

“Detective Beckett, didn’t you do really well at high school? Mr Beckett said you did. What did you do in freshman year?”

Oh God no. Castle can see Beckett’s fingers twist. Her face, however, stays perfectly cool. There is a half beat pause, and then…

…a smile? He didn’t expect that smile, he expected a nasty pause as Beckett is forced back to memories of her pre-alcoholic father. He knows that smile. That is the patented Beckett I-am-going-to-make-you-squirm-Castle smile. Oh God. He has no idea what Beckett was like in high school. He only knows what happened next. He should have grilled Jim when he got the chance.

“In freshman year,” Beckett grins, “I had a lot of fun.” Castle’s heart sinks. “Sure, I worked hard.” It rises again. “But I had a lot more freedom – except I had to be home at a set time each weekday, if I went out after dinner – and I enjoyed it.” His abused heart falls out of the bottom of his feet.

Beckett shouldn’t tell Alexis any of this. Alexis wouldn’t get ideas, of course not, but still… what if she did? “I went out with friends, to movies, the mall” – Castle suddenly notices that for all her mischievous expression and smooth, confident tone her hands are still knotted in her lap. Alexis hasn’t noticed a thing. “I had boyfriends.” Castle chokes on his eggplant. “Mom” – Castle hears the hitch, but Alexis remains totally oblivious – “used to kill them with kindness. Dad just wanted to kill them.”

Alexis snickers. Castle looks pained. He’s suffered quite enough of Jim’s boyfriend-killing tendencies.

“And then there was the tattoo.”

“Tattoo?”

“Tattoo?” Castle almost shrieks.

“You got a tattoo, Detective Beckett?” Alexis says, astonished. Castle detects a hint of admiration, and his already high panic levels rise to life-threatening levels.

“You are not getting a tattoo!” he says before his brain has anything to do with his mouth. Beckett exchanges a glance with Alexis, which, if he had only been less panicked, he would have applauded. There’s no pain, difficulty or stress in that glance from Beckett, only a considerable amount of wicked appreciation.

“Why not?” Alexis asks innocently. “Nobody would see it. You’d totally never know about it.”

Castle turns a suffused shade of purple, and doesn’t notice the wink that Alexis drops Beckett.
Beckett, while originally terrified by where Alexis might take the conversation about high school – the record so far had not been encouraging – had locked down her own issues and suddenly realised that she could have some gentle fun with Castle, who is totally overprotective about almost everything and particularly his daughter. If she’s teasing him, she can, perhaps, find a level of ease with Alexis which has been notably lacking ever since she met her: not that the reverse is true. So, remembering his recent horror at the idea of Alexis getting a tattoo, she drops that into conversation.

The reaction is everything she could have wanted. Alexis picks up the cue instantly, and while Beckett doesn’t believe that Alexis has any desire at all to have a tattoo – in fact, she doesn’t even seem to have pierced ears – she does believe that Alexis will take the opportunity to wind up her father. Just like she, Beckett, would have done at that stage, and did. But she needn’t be upset by it. She and her father are at a much better place now, and she needn’t be upset, so she really should untwist her fingers before they twist themselves off. But she can’t.

Until Alexis winks at her, grinning mischievously, and she looks at Castle, who appears to be about to expire of horror and/or failing to breathe, whichever works first, and she realises that this is completely unlike her father’s behaviour at the same stage. Her father would have calmly resorted to his attorney’s techniques to question her, analyse her reasoning, and (about half the time) negotiate her round to what he wanted. (The other half she would get what she wanted.) Castle has gone straight to histrionic horror, which is entirely consistent with his very loud family, theatrical background, and his celebrity-showbiz life in general. It’s really quite sweet to watch, though she does wonder how long it will take him to catch on, and whether it will be before she collapses with laughter.

“What’s your problem with tattoos?” she asks.

“Nothing. As long as they’re not on my daughter.”

“But Dad, you wouldn’t see it.”

“What? No way. You are not getting any tattoos and you’re certainly not getting tattoos in private places.”

He suddenly realises that Beckett is now unsuccessfully suppressing laughter, and his definitely-not-darling daughter has dissolved in giggles.

“I totally pranked you,” Alexis manages. “You don’t really think I want a tattoo, do you?”

Castle growls fearsomely, which has no apparent effect on his errant daughter. Beckett is snickering happily in her chair. Castle doesn’t notice, but her fingers are less knotted.

“You… you…” He turns to Beckett. “And you… you… you subversive! You traitor!”

“Traitor? Subversive? I didn’t do anything except answer Alexis’s question.”

“You’re undermining my parental authority,” Castle wails. “You’re supposed to be on my side. You’re a cop.”

“What’s that got to do with it?”
“We’re the adults here. You’re not supposed to admit to getting tattoos at fifteen.” Something suddenly occurs to him, and his jaw drops. “Hang on a minute,” he blurts. “You don’t have a tattoo.”

“Ewww, Dad! TMI! Totally not appropriate!”

Beckett gives Castle a deadly glare. He cringes, but still mouths *but you don’t have a tattoo.*

“It was a temporary tattoo, wasn’t it? You had a temporary one to annoy your parents. That’s cheating! And you lied to Alexis about it.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“She didn’t,” Beckett and Alexis say in unison.

“I assumed it was real,” Alexis carries on. “Detective Beckett didn’t specify.”

Castle gibbers incoherently. Beckett takes a delicate sip of wine, and continues to eat her dinner with considerable enjoyment. This is *nothing* like her parents used to be. She can deal with this. She really, really can.

Eventually Alexis stops teasing her father, dinner is completed, and despite Beckett’s offers of help she is not allowed to assist in the clean-up operation. She is, instead, banished to the couch with her wine.

“Night, Detective Beckett,” draws her out of her reverie.

“Good night, Alexis.”

“I’m really glad you came. Will you bring your dad sometime?”

“If your dad invites him, yes,” Beckett says, without really thinking about it until after she’s spoken, by which time it’s rather too late to retract it.

“Awesome!” Alexis turns round. “Dad, Dad, Detective Beckett says she’ll bring her dad if you invite him.”

Castle whips round, an expression of considerable amazement on his face. It would be nicer, Beckett thinks, if it weren’t cut with considerable worry. She realises her fingers are knotted together again, and more to the point, that Castle has noticed it.

“We’ll work that out, pumpkin,” he says smoothly. “Now, don’t you still have homework?”

“Yes. Night, Dad.”

“Till tomorrow.”

Alexis scampers up the stairs. Castle puts the last plate in the dishwasher, and wanders innocently towards Beckett, who is still planted on the couch, wondering what on earth she has just said.

“Coffee? We can have it in my study.”

“Okay.”

“Good. We can share the one you got me.”
Beckett grumbles and groused and grumps. Castle ignores every darkling mutter with amiable aplomb.

“I said we’d share it when you came here. You’re here. Therefore we are sharing it. Stop fussing. It’s my coffee and I’ll share if I want to.”

Once they’re settled in Castle’s office, it doesn’t take long before he starts on the complaints about the tattoo, which is definitely better than a discussion of her nervousness or a possible visit with her father.

“That was so unkind, Beckett. Ganging up on me with Alexis. You’re not allowed to do that. You’re supposed to be on my team.” He looks more closely at her from his perch on the edge of the desk, noting her still tight fingers and furrowed brow. “Are you okay?” Beckett supposes she couldn’t have expected Castle not to notice.

“Yeah. It’s good.”

“Mmm?”

“It wouldn’t have been like that at home.”

“No?”

“Dad would have tried to argue me out of it – negotiate, as if it was a contract. Mom would have told me to examine the reasons why I wanted a tattoo and whether they’d still be valid in a week, or a month, or longer. Much quieter. You went straight to horrified outrage.” She snickers, but it’s a little forced. “It was fun to watch.” Her fingers lock together. “It was okay.” There’s a pause. “It’s been okay.”

“Really?” Castle asks softly, and sits on the arm of her chair, playing with a wisp of her hair. While Beckett’s thinking and talking about her past, before it all went wrong, and not upset, he doesn’t want to say anything much that might cause her to stop.

“The way you react is just so different from Dad. It… helps me to separate them.” She breathes slowly. Now that dinner’s over, it seems that the implications are piling up on her. “It’s not like it was for me. So it’s not so bad.” She relapses into silence.

“You did it,” Castle points out. “You came for dinner with Alexis and me and it went fine. And you even agreed that your dad should come next time. When you’re ready.”

Beckett doesn’t react for an instant. Then his words hit her brain not simply her ears. “It did.” she says. “It really did.” Suddenly she smiles. “I did it.” She turns round, hauls his head down and kisses him firmly. “I did it – awwk!” Castle has fallen on top of her. Pulling him down to be kissed has unbalanced him to such an extent that she is now painfully squashed. He rearranges himself to be perched back on the chair arm. Beckett stands up to shake herself out and check that she remains in one piece. She is not entirely convinced of that.

When she sits down again she finds that instead of sitting on a cushion she is sitting on Castle, who has sneakily inserted himself into her chair.

“There.” he says smugly. “That’s better.”

“Mm?” Beckett hums questioningly, making herself comfortable. This involves moving Castle’s arms out of the way, snuggling in, and then replacing them around her, while tucking her head on to his shoulder. He doesn’t seem to be objecting.
“Yep. Now I’ve got you.” His arms lock around her. “You’re not going anywhere now.”

“No?” she murmurs, her eyes sleepy and body languorous. “I’m trained in self-defence.”

“Mm?” Castle rumbles. “What are you going to defend yourself from? This?” and he tips her chin up and round to be in the perfect position for kissing, but doesn’t kiss her. “Or this?” and he untucks her shirt, and tickles fingers around her waist, sending little shivers up and down her skin. “Or this?” Her pants fall open, and are tugged away without resistance. “You’re not going to defend yourself at all, are you?” He leans in, slow and intent, and kisses her: a soft touch of lips, a delicate probe along the seam of her mouth, a gentle, insinuating exploration; until she opens and responds and surrenders with no defences raised at all.

His mouth becomes more demanding, hard and possessive; his hands explore and take and command her response; she turns to him and gives it all back as his fingers slip down, undoing her button-down, trickling heat before them and kindling the blaze behind; gliding further and then lighting the fuse that triggers the explosion.

Afterwards, he keeps her clasped tight against him: simply enjoying having her here: in his arms in his office in his loft; kissing the top of her head softly, as she is soft in his lap, her own arms embracing him and her mouth gentle on his skin. Gradually he realises that she’s whispering into his neck: the words inaudible, the tone, however, unmistakable. Love you.

It’s too late, too close to his mother coming home, to pick her up and tuck her into his bed; too early to take that step; too soon for his mother to be gone to her own home. If only this were a few days later.

But she came here: coped with dinner with his daughter here in their family home; another step on from coping with dinner in her father’s home; and she didn’t run, didn’t hide; there were no gut-wrenching moments of vicious tension or crippling misery. Granted, it’s not yet easy for her; but yet it’s not nearly as hard.

She snuggles in a little more deeply, holds him a little more closely; but then straightens up and starts to pull away.

“I have to go home,” she says: a little rueful, a little resentful.

“That’s usually my line,” Castle says, likewise rueful. “I don’t like it any better when you say it,” which is likewise resentful.

“Nor do I.” She snuggles closer again. “I want to stay here.” Her face twists. “But I can’t deal with your mother.”

“I get it. Anyway, you did the main thing. You came here, and had dinner with Alexis and me, and you still haven’t run away screaming or shot me. That’s a definite win. Never mind my mother.”

“Yeah.” She nestles some more. “I did it.” Her smile lights up the room.

“You sure did.” He smiles back at her. “My Kat. Knew you’d make it.” He pets down her back, and she curves into the touch, in a very feline fashion.

“Next time… maybe I can stay?”

“Yeah,” he says, without spoiling it with an ill-timed joke or flip remark. “Next time, you should stay.”
Stay always.

She slides off his knee, retrieves pants and buttons her shirt again; buttons his for him with a wicked little wander of her fingers; slips her feet into her heels and runs fingers through her hair to tidy it. Castle stands up to escort her to the door, where he’s rather hoping to sneak a few extra kisses.

Extra kisses are indeed snuck. By Beckett, who basely and unfairly gets in first and reduces him to a quivering mess with a few carefully concealed hand movements and an extremely possessive ravaging of his mouth. He would have ravaged right back, and made a few gestures of his own, but it’s rapidly approaching the witching hour of his mother’s potential return (not at all an accidental phrase) and he isn’t prepared to risk everything they’ve won over the last couple of weeks for one more kiss, no matter how desirable. He lets go of her, opens the door, and watches her step through.

“Till tomorrow, Beckett.”

She looks startled. “Huh? Not at the precinct tomorrow. It’s Saturday.”

“I know. I’ll call you.”

“Okay,” she says happily. “See you tomorrow.”

Beckett gone, Castle wanders back to his study, collecting a coffee along the way, and contemplates the evening with considerable satisfaction, which merges seamlessly into considerable inspiration, which in turn produces a considerable quantity of excellent writing.

Beckett picks up a cab, having looked very carefully around to ensure that there is absolutely no chance of bumping into Martha, and goes home on a thick layer of relief. She got through, and having done it once, it will never be as difficult ever again.

She falls asleep as easily as a happy child.

“I’ve arranged the moving-in date and the movers,” Castle says over breakfast, of which his mother appears to be partaking from the wrong end of the day. “They’ll be here next Saturday, and you get the keys the same day.”

“Yes, darling,” Martha says abstractedly. “I’m sure you’ll take care of it all.”

“No, Mother. You have to pack. Or at least, you have to tell the movers what to pack. The piano will wait for the specialists, on Monday.”

“But Richard, I have a matinee performance on Saturday. I can’t possibly miss that.”

“You don’t have to. I knew you wouldn’t, so they’re arriving at eight. As long as you tell them what to do, they’ll be finished with you by eleven, and Alexis and I will make sure that everything’s done the way you want it. They’ll deliver to your new apartment, and then come back on Sunday afternoon when the theatre’s dark so you can tell them where to put everything.”

“Well,” Martha says. “You certainly seem to have it all in hand.” She doesn’t sound entirely approving.

“You still need to decide some things, Mother.”
“What? You’ve done it all.” That is definitely not approving.

“I thought you wanted a housewarming party,” Castle says mischievously, twinkling at his mother. “I have a list of planners for you. Don’t you want to look at them?”

“Oh!” Martha says, much more enthusiastically. “Well, now you’re talking, kiddo. Where’s this list?”

She bustles after Castle, who congratulates himself on distracting her from the about-to-be difficult subject of moving her out. The actual packing might get a little – er – emotional. Not to mention appallingly histrionic.

“Here you are, Mother. Three of the best party planners in Manhattan. Just choose one, after you’ve had a discussion with each of them.” She starts to speak. He holds up a finger. “There are a couple of ground rules. No more than fifty people on your list. Plus Alexis and me.” He smiles. “And I get to invite up to ten of my own.”

“Ten?”

“Yes, ten.”

“There’s room for sixty people in my new apartment?”

“It might be a tiny bit crowded, I guess. But you always told me that a party wasn’t a party unless it was too crowded to reach the bar.”

“That, kiddo, was to stop you sneaking Scotch when you were six.”

“Oh,” Castle says, deflated. “So you don’t want a big party, then?”

“Wash your mouth out,” his mother snips. “Of course I do.”

“Discuss numbers with the planner. But I get up to ten invites. Okay?”

“As you like it.”

“Is that your next production?”

His mother produces a tinkling laugh. “No, darling. Not until this one closes.”

“May that day be long delayed.”

“I’ll certainly drink to that,” Martha says.

“Not at ten a.m., please. Not a good example for Alexis.”

“Pish-tush. You’re both so straitlaced.”

Castle declines to comment, on the grounds that being dead is not a good look, and ushers his mother out of the study.

Alexis is still picking at the pancakes and bacon when, having despatched Martha upstairs, cooing over the prospects of an enormous party, he returns to the table and the coffeepot, of which he is still much in need.

“Why do you want ten invites for Grams’ party, Dad?”
“Just in case,” he says vaguely.

“Hm.” Alexis sounds extremely sceptical. “That sounds like Detective Beckett and her team, and her dad, and your poker buddies.” She pauses. “Are you going to invite her therapist again, Dad?” she asks rather hopefully.

“No,” Castle replies very bluntly. “This is a party. We want to enjoy it. Do you really think that introducing a shrink to fifty theatricals is a good way for us to enjoy it?”

“Call it performance art and sell tickets,” Alexis smirks, in a very teenage smart-ass manner. “We’d make a fortune. You could save it for my college fund.”

“I think I’d need it to meet your Grams’ bail,” Castle ripostes. Alexis snickers. “Now, be off with you. I’m going out and you said you were going to Lauren’s to study with her and Paige.”

“Yes. We’ve got a science test on Tuesday.”

Alexis disappears. Martha re-emerges, swishes grandly downstairs, announces that she has to go and shop for a suitable outfit for a housewarming party, and leaves Castle lamenting his credit limit, which had looked perfectly reasonable only ten minutes previously.

To alleviate his sudden expectations of poverty he sees Alexis off and promptly departs himself, seeking out Beckett. Maybe he can test out his idea on her this morning. He thinks it’s a good plan. He always has good plans. But… he is certainly not going to sandbag Beckett with surprises relating to his – or her – family.

He thinks that it would be a good idea to invite – as his rather-too perceptive daughter had guessed – Beckett, her father, and her team to the party. It would not be a good idea to ask Dr Burke, amusing as the results might be. Burke would be nearly as popular as a fortune-teller would be, and for much the same reason. Every actor there would want analysed, though why Castle has no idea. He doesn’t like it when Burke washes his brain out. It’s invariably discomposing. Or possibly decomposing. In addition, if he invites his poker pals – both sets? No, maybe just the writers. Adding Montgomery isn’t going to improve anything – then at least he’ll have someone to talk to if Beckett won’t spend the whole evening glued to his side. It won’t exactly provide the same level of protection – after all, Beckett’s gun is glued to her hip – but it’ll keep the worst of the thespian sharks from circling.

Still, he’s not going to start down the line of inviting the precinct team without talking to Beckett first. He suddenly smiles widely. Esposito’s face on being invited to his mother’s housewarming should be a sight to behold. Not, perhaps, a pretty sight – but a very amusing one.

He bounces up to Beckett’s door and rings the bell.
What a photograph!

“I had an idea, Beckett,” Castle chirrups as soon as she opens the door.

“Hey, Castle. Hey, Beckett. Nice to see you,” she snips, spoilt by a yawn.

“No, no, no. You have to listen to my idea.”

“I haven’t had enough coffee for crazy theories, Castle – and we don’t even have a case.”

Castle stops and takes a look at his Beckett. She’s still in silky pyjamas and a light, short, silky robe. Her feet are bare, and her face unadorned; her hair is ruffled.

“You only just woke up,” he says. “But it’s after ten.”

“I was tired,” she says. “Now I need coffee. Want some?”

“Of course I do.” He sidles up close to her. “But I want a kiss first.”

She turns into his arm, sneakily positioned to catch her as soon as she spun round, and tips her face up to meet his. Their kiss is leisurely and prolonged, and is only interrupted by filling the kettle and then curtailed by the kettle boiling. Coffee isn’t quite as good as kisses, but it’s necessary. It’s taken to the couch, where they can be in contact without being unable to drink.

A few mouthfuls in, Beckett has awoken enough to be interested in Castle’s idea. “So what’s the grand idea?” she asks.

“You know Mother’s moving out” –

“Yes” –

“and she’s planning a housewarming party” –


“Well, I’ve told her that she needs to save some spaces for me. And I thought” –

“You want me to come,” Beckett says flatly.

“Yes. But not just you. The whole team, and Lanie. And your dad. And Alexis, obviously, and my writing poker buddies.”

Beckett’s initial petrifying tension is fractionally relieved, but only fractionally. “When is this party?” she asks tightly.

“No date set yet. Not before the middle of next month, anyway.” There is another fractional relaxation. “Alexis said I should invite Burke.” Beckett is electroshocked into sitting vertically.

“She what now?”

“I won’t,” he says hurriedly. “But how about if I invite O’Leary? And Pete, if O’Leary wants him there.”

“Uh?” Beckett emits, totally blindsided.
“I want you there, and I want my friends there, and I like the rest of the team and I like O’Leary
and I like your dad and my poker buddies. So, what about it?”

Beckett doesn’t answer. She does move slightly closer, which induces Castle’s arm to curl around
her shoulders, and leans on him. “All of them?” she queries.

“As many as’ll come. I’d invite all of them.” He looks pathetically at her. “Someone’s got to
protect me from all those actors.”

“I’m sure Burke would,” she snarks.

“I’m not. Anyway, I can’t afford to meet her bail if Mother defenestrates him, so he’s not invited.”

“Good point.”

She relapses into silence again. It’s not exactly reassuring. Castle cuddles her and drinks his coffee,
so that he doesn’t say anything. She only came to the loft last night, for dinner with Alexis. Granted
she’ll have at least three weeks to think about it, this is a very big step. His mother is not Beckett’s
favourite person, and their interactions to solve a case and a polite exchange of compliments after a
successful first night do not amount to anything like friendship or even wary civility. Jim isn’t
likely to be any more instantly enthused by the suggestion, either. At least Beckett liked Alexis:
that problem was all around her own feelings about her own relationship with her father. Beckett
had no problems with Alexis as a person at all.

Beckett considers, trying to be dispassionate. Leaving Martha out of the equation (which is
difficult, since she’s the point), she’s not that keen on spending an evening with a group of actors
and similar types. Her tolerance for pretension and theatricality is very low, and her experience
with the Dream cast has not increased it. On the other hand, if there were the buffer of her team,
Lanie, O’Leary (and Pete) and her father, then she would always have a safe haven to return to, no
matter where Castle might be.

“I’ll think about it,” she says carefully. “It’s not a bad idea.” She ponders for another few minutes.
“Would you invite them all even if I…”

“If you didn’t come?”

“Yeah.”

“I could do. Then you could decide right at the last minute.”

“Do that then,” she says decisively. “Do that, and then…”

“No pressure.”

“Yeah.”

She curls back in against him, feet tucked up under her. He draws little patterns over the silky robe,
and enjoys the quiet.

“Mother’s moving out next Saturday,” he says, after a quiet time.

“Mm?”

“I don’t think she’d really thought about it till I said the movers were arriving at eight on Saturday
morning. I’m sure it’s not going to go well, but I have to be there.”
Beckett turns slightly and slides an arm round his middle. “Not going to go well?”

“I don’t think it was real to her. Um… like the play got in between her and reality and so she’s not been thinking about it so it wasn’t real. Now it is.”

“You think there might be trouble.” It’s not a question.

“Yeah.” Castle sounds very flat, suddenly.

“Mm.” She cuddles more closely. “Is it worth you and Alexis doing something nice Saturday night? Make up for any nasty moments?” She thinks for a moment. “Or make sure Alexis isn’t there. A sleepover, and not getting back till it’s all done?”

“Mother needs to be at the theatre for the matinee, so I guess – I told her – that she’d only need to deal with the movers till eleven. Sleepover might work. I don’t need to listen to two worked-up red-heads. One at a time is enough. But I need Alexis to help supervise after that, when they’re doing the initial unpacking. She’s better at deciding how Mother likes things than I am.” He pauses. “Well, probably not. But if she does it Mother won’t complain as much. If Mother thinks I arranged it she’ll object on principle, especially if there’s been a row.”

“You can come here for Friday dinner, if Alexis is out.” The cuddle tightens, briefly, around his waist. He can’t see her face. “Um… I could help? If your mother wasn’t there. But not Saturday night. That’s just for you two.”

Castle pouts at the last part. “I want you to come.”

“No.” Her head droops further. “It’s…going to be all about family and your mother and I can’t do that.”

He drops a kiss on her head. “That’s okay.” He grins. “I knew you wouldn’t come. I just wanted to see what you’d say.”

“What?” She sits up straight and withdraws all hint of a cuddle of any sort. “You were testing me? You rat! You…you…” She fails to find any other words that convey her annoyance in a suitable fashion.

“Yeah, and see what you did? You didn’t do what I wanted, you didn’t even hesitate. You just said no, and even said why.” Beckett growls in an indeterminately fierce manner. “Progress.” He acquires an infuriatingly saintly expression of patronising pride. “Dr Burke will be so proud of you – ouch! Not nice, Beckett.”

“You’re not nice,” she growls.

“I’m very nice to you,” Castle murmurs, and pulls her back into him, ensuring that her legs curl up over his lap in the process. “I could be even nicer.”

“You brought doughnuts?”

“Better than doughnuts.”

“I’m a cop. Nothing is better than doughnuts.”

Castle pouts. “I’m better than doughnuts.” Beckett raises an eyebrow. “I can do so many things that a doughnut can’t. Like this.” He kisses her firmly.
“I suppose doughnuts don’t do that,” she says. “But they do remind me of you in some ways.”

“I’m irresistible too,” Castle says, preening.

“I was actually thinking that they’re ubiquitous.”

“Mean.”

“You telling me your books aren’t on sale everywhere?”

Castle has no answer to that. “I’m nothing like a doughnut,” he humphs sulkily instead. “I’m not fattening, or deep-fried, or cheap and common.”

“Did I say you were? But you could be covered in chocolate frosting, if you like?” Beckett says naughtily, distracted from the main problem.

“If you have chocolate frosting in your cupboards I’ll be amazed. You never have any food unless you’ve invited me for dinner.”

It’s Beckett’s turn to humph sulkily. Since she combines her humph with a pout of which a toddler would be proud, Castle is totally unable to resist kissing the protruding lip, and having kissed it once, doing so several times more.

“What shall we do?” he asks happily, when she’s nicely ruffled and coloured up and just a little flustered.

“Do?”

“Do. We could go out to an exhibition or a museum or lunch” –

“Or I could do my chores and my shopping, like I need to do.”

“Oh,” Castle says, disappointed.

“But before I do all of that,” she says in a sultry tone, “I need to have a shower and get dressed.”

Castle brightens up instantly. “Need some help with that?”

“I don’t need help.” He droops. “But I’d like some.”

Some considerable time later, chores and shopping done, Saturday coming to a close and no new bodies dropping, Beckett contemplates the question of housewarming parties. Specifically, Martha’s housewarming party. She has no desire to go. She has no desire to see Martha socially, or indeed otherwise. She would, in fact, be perfectly happy never to see Martha again.

She ponders deeply over why, and why not, she might go to the party. She is extremely keen to ensure that, when she does come to a conclusion, she knows exactly how she got there. She is also extremely keen to avoid coming to a decision simply because she knows that Castle would really like her there. She has to go – if she goes – for her own reasons, and because she feels that she can deal with it, not because she ought to or she wants to make someone else happy at the expense of her own feelings.

There’s an interesting line to walk here, she realises. Refusing to do anything that she might mildly dislike or might inconvenience her for a moment is selfish and stupid. But agreeing to martyr yourself because you always put someone else’s feelings first is also stupid. She needs to decide
each time, on each set of facts. She sips her tea – she does like this Orange Pekoe tea – and thinks some more. She needn’t make a final decision right now. She can see how it goes. Help – after Martha’s out the way – next Saturday. Talk to Dr Burke about it on Tuesday, or next Tuesday. Take her time. And anyway, she’ll want to see how many of the gang are going.

Thinking of which, the gang is all congregating on Wednesday. That’ll be nice. No stress, no need to push herself, no need to second-guess herself or her reactions. And no actors or therapists of any sort.

On that thought, she goes to bed, wishing a little wistfully that Castle were here, or she were there.

Sunday again passes quietly, but this week she is not fretful when she goes to her father’s for dinner. In fact, she is, if not quite looking forward to it, quite sanguine about seeing him. Apart from anything else, they can always talk about the play. It would be entirely unreasonable for her father to want to cross-question her about Castle. Totally the wrong way round – though since he’s cross-examined Castle already she can’t exactly use that to stop her dad. She shrugs. She’ll deal with that if it arises.

She leaves for her father’s apartment quite content to be seeing him, without any feeling of obligation or necessity.

Her father is pleased to see her, though this turns out to be because he is intent on beating her at Sorry and wants to start immediately. It’s not that they’re competitive, or anything like that. Just… er… enthusiastic. That’s it. Enthusiastic. She has a sudden memory of a Monopoly game after which her mom had decreed that they were no longer allowed to play without an umpire. Her mom had declined to take the role.

“What’s so funny, Katie?”

“Remember when Mom told us we weren’t allowed to play Monopoly any more?”

“Yes. She was really cross with us.”

“It was your fault.”

“How was it my fault? You were cheating.”

“I wasn’t. You were.”

“I was not,” Jim says, grossly offended. He glares at Beckett, who glares back – and then snickers.

“Maybe she had a point,” she says. “We’re still fighting about it and we’re not even playing Monopoly.”

“Hm,” her father emits. “I’m still going to beat you at Sorry.”

He doesn’t. Beckett is unreasonably triumphant at her success, right up until Jim threatens that she won’t get any dinner.

“I’m not six!” she squawks. “You can’t still try sending me to bed without dinner.”

“I’m your dad. Goes with the territory. Though when you were six you didn’t have a gun, I guess.”

“I do now,” she points out ominously. “And I’m hungry, and” –

“I won’t like you when you’re hungry?”
Beckett laughs. “Exactly.”

They start to put the dinner out, while Jim grins mischievously. “I get it, Katie.”

“Get what?”

“Why you keep Rick around. He makes sure you eat.”

Beckett flashes her father a very careful-what-you-say glance, and embarks on her pasta and salad without further comment or ado.

“I just want to know if I can expect a dinner invitation from him,” Jim says. Beckett’s piercing stare does not diminish, but her smile turns evil.

“Not a dinner invitation,” she grins. “This time.”

“Oh?” Jim emits trepidatiously, examining her expression. “What, then?”

“They’re having a party.”

“That doesn’t sound too bad.”

“It’s Martha’s housewarming party.”

“Oh.” He sounds dumbfounded. “What’s that got to do with me?”

“You’re invited.”

“What? Katie,” he says as ominously as she had a moment ago, “did you put Rick up to this?”

“No. Absolutely not.”

“So why’s he inviting me? I get why you – are you going?” Jim says suddenly, looking closely at his daughter.

“Haven’t decided,” she mutters, and stuffs a mouthful of salad in to avoid having to speak.

“Mm. I guess I get that too. Anyway, why’s he inviting me?”

“Not just you. The team. Lanie. O’Leary and Pete.”

“Who?”

“O’Leary. Used to work with him in the beginning. Pete’s his partner.”

“Oh, okay. Cops.”

“O’Leary’s the cop. Pete’s an accountant.”

Her father consciously adjusts his assumptions. “Ah,” he says. “Partners.”

“Yeah, Dad,” Beckett sighs.

“Okay. Anyone else?”

“No.”
“Carter?”

“No.” Jim looks a little disappointed. “Do you really want to introduce a shrink to a room full of actors? Or my shrink to Martha when he can’t escape? Not a good plan, Dad.”

“Suppose not. I’ll wait for Rick to invite me, then. In the meantime, since dinner is done, how about I have another try at beating you at Sorry?”

“Er… can we do something else?”

“Scared I’ll actually win?”

“No. Um…” she chews at her lower lip… “er-um… I wanted to see the photos you showed Castle.”

Jim sits down with a hard thump. That was the last thing he expected Katie to say. “Erp?” he emits faintly.

“It’s fine,” she says quickly. “You” –

“I’ll get them,” Jim says even faster, before she can backtrack and flee. He whisks out of his chair and produces the most readily available albums, placing them on the coffee table in front of Katie. There are more albums, but they’re safely stowed away, and Jim has the unaccountable feeling that if he leaves the room Katie is very likely to abandon the apartment entirely. Therefore, he stays put.

Now that the albums are in front of her, Beckett’s screwed-to-the-sticking-point courage has almost failed her. Even asking had been a considerable stretch, but she’d thought of it over dinner and determined to do it before she could back away again. But now the albums are right there in front of her, and all the memories are piling up and pushing their way to the front of her mind, and she can feel her dad’s worry and tension and confusion and hope right there next to her…

“Shall I make some coffee, Katie?” he asks – and it’s enough. Enough that he’s stepping back, giving her a moment, being elsewhere and letting her start in her own time.

“Yes please,” she answers, and as he rises reaches for the first album.

“You showed Castle this?” she screeches as she discovers precisely what her father did when she wasn’t paying attention. “Dad! I am going to shoot you and dispose of your body in a pig farm in Connecticut. How could you?”

“It’s every dad’s duty to embarrass their daughter by showing the baby photos to their boyfriend,” Jim says mildly. “Anyway, you were really cute with the little tuft of dark hair in a clip on top of your head.”

“You” – Beckett wails. “You…”

“That one was cute, too. The teddy bear was bigger than you.”

“I hate you,” Beckett says, just as she might have done when she was three. “How could you show Castle these?”

“He thought they were really cute, too. Come to think of it, I never did get to see his photos of Alexis. I’m sure he’s got lots like this too.”
Beckett isn’t listening. Beckett is frantically flipping through the albums to find out exactly what damage her father has done to her twenty-nine year old dignity, and finding that she might very well have none left. The sheer horror of her father’s parental actions has completely washed out her misery. In fact, she has no room at all in her head for anything other than a series of detailed plans for murdering him and hiding the body. The only faint hope of salving her feelings is that the albums stop before she was ten, so don’t cover the braces and gawkiness of early teen-dom. Even so, she’s deeply embarrassed.

Jim is not deeply embarrassed. He’s not embarrassed at all, and in fact is highly amused by the whole situation. He hasn’t seen Katie flustered like this in years. His conviction that he will be receiving a formal visit from Rick strengthens, although he very much doubts that his permission will be sought at any stage. Katie was never big on asking permission, though she wasn’t exactly big on seeking forgiveness either, now he thinks about it. Anyway, her crossness is amazingly reminiscent of her childhood, and still amazingly cute. Still, better not poke the bear any further. He likes seeing his daughter, but he doesn’t want to see her through the door of a hospital room.

“Next time you mention photos I am going to vet them first,” Beckett eventually says. There is a bright line of colour on each high cheekbone.

“I like them,” Jim points out happily. “Shows me how much you’ve grown up.”

“Hm.” Beckett pauses for an extended period, and then speaks. “I’m… I’m glad I saw them.”

Without thinking, Jim hugs his daughter. After a very surprised pause, she returns the hug.

“Now,” Jim says, “how about that Sorry game? I’m definitely going to win this time.”

“In your dreams, Dad. In your dreams.”
“Do you want to get some lunch, Castle?” Beckett asks, midway through a Monday without murders.

“Sure. Remy’s?”

“Yeah.”

“Remy’s?” Ryan asks hopefully.

“Not with us,” Beckett says smartly.

“You never want us around any more. Too busy with your new friend.”

“And what’s Wednesday, then? Chopped liver?”

“Wednesday?” Espo says.


“You never told me about Wednesday,” Espo says darkly. “I might be busy.”

“Are you?” Beckett asks unkindly. “If you’d had a date you’d have been announcing it to everyone, ‘specially after the fuss you made about Ryan’s date at the weekend. And I did tell you.”

“I can introduce you to some pretty girls, Espo – ow! That was my foot you just trod on, Beckett!”

“Sorry,” she says insincerely to Castle. “Wasn’t looking.”

“Distracted by my rugged good looks.”

“More like by your excessive use of hair gel,” Espo, who has never knowingly used a male grooming product except aftershave in his life, says.

“If you had hair, bro…” Ryan steps in to defend Castle.

“I got hair! I just don’t need to mess with it like you wannabe models, like anyone would want you to model …”

The argument rages as Beckett and Castle slide away without being noticed. Attack with sprayable hair products may be imminent, and neither of them wish to be part of the chemical warfare.

“Why’d you want lunch?” Castle asks. It’s not that lunch is completely unprecedented, but there are small signs of an ulterior motive, and he’d quite like to know what’s going on. Well. His insatiable curiosity is desperate to know what’s going on. Beckett doesn’t look overly stressed, and she’s certainly not irritated with him (though she is getting very irritated with the lack of interesting cases), so it can’t be anything too awful.

“I had dinner with Dad last night,” she says, and stops there.

“Mm?” Castle says encouragingly. Dinner between Jim and Beckett is good, especially if she’s not stressed or tearful afterwards. Matters are clearly improving.
“I asked him to show me the photo albums he showed you.”

Ah. Oh. Ooooppsss. That… might not be so good. Not that the photos weren’t utterly adorable, and make him, now he thinks about them again this far on, think of small people with dark hair and hazel eyes, but… he can’t imagine Beckett being that impressed by his having seen them.

She isn’t. She is volubly unimpressed. Admittedly, maybe he shouldn’t have pointed out how adorable cute a baby Beckett had been in the middle of her tirade about her father’s perfidy – but she was – but he does think that a big (bad) Beckett telling him that the next time he and her dad gang up on her will be the last hour they see life from the living side is a touch unreasonable.

“So you just wanted me to come out to lunch so you could complain about your dad and then threaten us both?”

“No-o,” Beckett says slowly, and munches a handful of fries.

“Mm?” Castle eats his burger, and waits.

“Dad’ll likely come to the housewarming party,” she rushes out. “He wanted Burke there, but I told him it wasn’t a good plan. But he’ll come. I didn’t want to say in front of Ryan and Espo. He expects me to go, though.”

“Up to you,” Castle says, to buy time. He doesn’t think that this necessarily justifies lunch, but a nice lunch is always better than a quick sandwich.

“I got to thinking about it.” Her hand steals out over his, and stays there. “I think I should come, but I wanna talk to Burke before I decide.”

“Should?” Castle inquires, cautiously. He doesn’t want shoulds, unless Beckett is really clear that it’s not an obligation that he’s imposing.

“I need to make sure that it’s not just because you want me to even if I really didn’t want to, or because I would feel guilty if I didn’t even though I might hate it, but because I won’t hate going more than” – she blushes – “anything else,” she finishes, rather incomprehensibly.

“Okay,” he says slowly. “So shall I invite the others already?”

“Yeah. Yes. Soon.” It sounds a little like she’s trying to bolster her own resolve.

“Wednesday. I’ll see them all then, anyway.”

“Yeah.” She eats a mouthful of burger and chases it with a gulp of milkshake; repeats, repeats. Her words appear to have dried up, but her hand hasn’t moved from his. It doesn’t move at any stage till she tries to pay the check and Castle sneaks in ahead of her.

“Hey!” she complains. Castle merely smirks. “I was going to pay.”

“Too bad,” he says. “I wanted to.”

“What if I want to?” Beckett says. Castle flicks her a glance. There’s an undertone there… oh. She’s said this before. She doesn’t like it when he pays for everything.

“If you want to, you can pay next time,” he notes.

“I do want to.”
“Okay then. I’ll behave.” He smirks. “At least when it comes to paying restaurant checks.”

Beckett glares, rolls her eyes, and on neither having any effect on Castle’s happy smile, humphs, which has no effect either.

Back in the bullpen Esposito and Ryan are still sniping at each other across the desk, in moderately good-natured terms. It takes them a few moments to realise that Castle and Beckett are back and no-one has brought them lunch. Castle scuttles out before they can wreak revenge. Beckett puts her head down and works on existing cases until the boys give up.

Tuesday isn’t much different, though before they go for lunch Beckett informs Castle that she’s paying and if he tries to pay he won’t be invited for lunch again unless Espo’s patted him down to take his wallet away. He pouts spectacularly and grudgingly acquiesces. His mood is not improved by the audible sniggering of Esposito. Letting Beckett pay doesn’t sit well with him, but he recognises that if he doesn’t let her buy lunch she’ll feel very second-best in the relationship. He hasn’t forgotten that he didn’t like feeling second-best, way back when.

End of day rolls around, and Castle politely walks Beckett out. Of course, he has an ulterior motive, which is to sneak a kiss or two before she sees Dr Burke.

“Will you come round after I’ve seen Burke?” she asks.

“Sure. Why wouldn’t I?” Castle smiles, with a considerable proportion of lazy seduction. “I haven’t seen you properly for quite long enough.”

“You’ve seen me today, yesterday, Saturday, Friday…”

“Yes,” he murmurs into her ear, “but you were wearing far too many clothes for far too much of the time.” Since there’s no-one else in the vicinity, he smoothly settles her against him and rolls his hips just enough to point his meaning, and follows up with a wholly assertive taking of her mouth. “See you later,” he says, and saunters off, leaving her to betake herself to Dr Burke’s office and try to calm down along the way.

“Good evening, Detective Beckett.”

“Hey.”

Detective Beckett sits down in a relatively relaxed fashion, which Dr Burke is pleased to see.

“Would you like to discuss your dinner with Mr and Miss Castle on Friday?” he asks. “Or is there another issue about which you have been thinking?”

“Dinner was okay,” Detective Beckett says.

“Mm?”

“I didn’t say easy,” she points out. Dr Burke had noticed that, and does not require Detective Beckett to point out anything relating to her word choices. He is perfectly capable of understanding the subtleties of small word changes.

“Mm?”

“It was sticky at the beginning. I didn’t have anything to talk to her about – how do I know what to talk to a teen about? And I’m hardly likely to find common ground if I talk about my experience,
am I? How to clear up after an alcoholic isn’t good conversation.”

Detective Beckett stops, and looks considerably surprised at her own words.

“You seem to be more disturbed by the dinner than you had thought,” Dr Burke says gently. He is unsurprised by this. “Let us explore this a little further. It is evident that you did not believe that you had these feelings, and certainly you cannot have expressed them either at your dinner, or subsequently. If we draw them out now, they will not poison your thinking.”

“Oh,” Detective Beckett says doubtfully.

“How did you feel about visiting the loft for the primary purpose of having a family dinner with Mr Castle and his daughter?”

Detective Beckett’s mouth pinches. “Scared,” she forces out. “I didn’t want to go at all, even though I suggested it.”

“But you attended, nevertheless. Why?”

“I said I would. I said I was ready and I thought I was right up until a couple of hours beforehand. I wasn’t worried about it until Castle went home to cook.”

“I see.” Dr Burke says nothing further.

“I got there, and then Alexis didn’t have anything to talk about and neither did I. We tried to start with A Midsummer Night’s Dream, but there wasn’t much to say. I couldn’t think of anything.”

Dr Burke rapidly considers the surprising point that Miss Castle had had nothing to say. His experience of both his own teen daughters and their friends and of Miss Castle would normally incline him to believe that conversation would be continuous and delivered at machine-gun speed, whether or not Detective Beckett said anything. It is unusual for that not to be the case. Of course, there is a possibility of external interference with Miss Castle’s torrential flow of inconsequent and occasionally unfortunate conversation.

“Is it possible,” Dr Burke enquires, “that Miss Castle’s attempts at conversation in your previous meetings, whereby she has inadvertently triggered difficult subjects, may have led her to be very cautious in her words? Or, indeed, might Mr Castle have asked her to take more care?”

“I guess. Anyway, Castle said dinner was ready before it got really obvious. They talked about school over dinner. I don’t know anything about that, either. I said some stuff about how freshman year is a time to get organised and have good foundations, but that didn’t seem to help anything.”

“How did you feel, listening to the conversation?”

Detective Beckett’s lips twist again. “Uncomfortable,” she says unhappily. “But it wasn’t nearly as bad as the first time. I just listened, and it wasn’t at all how it was when it was me, so it wasn’t as bad. But…”

“You?”

“But I should have been able to say something. I just couldn’t think of anything to say.”

“Why do you think that was? After all, you had been able to carry your share of conversation both at your father’s and at the casual dinner you had after that. What made this occasion different?”
Dr Burke watches as expressions play across Detective Beckett’s face. Finally she speaks.

“It was at their home.”

“But you had a dinner at your father’s apartment.”

“That’s not my home. Our home.”

“And…?”

“The loft’s a family home. Oh.” Realisation dawns, gratifyingly quickly, considering Detective Beckett’s ordinary inability to consider matters of emotional importance swiftly. “It’s the first time since… well, that I’ve been in a family home.”

“Indeed. Naturally, you were uncomfortable. However, you did not leave.”

“No.” Detective Beckett settles back into her chair.

“Do I infer that the situation eased?”

“Alexis asked about my freshman year at high school.” Detective Beckett smiles. “And then I had an idea. I knew I didn’t want to talk about home” – the smile fades – “but Castle was getting concerned and it was all going wrong so I talked about things that would wind him up.”

“Oh?”

“Boyfriends, fun – and tattoos.” Detective Beckett snickers. “Alexis played up to it and Castle nearly exploded.”

“Did your technique succeed in reducing your tension?”

“Yes.” Detective Beckett sounds satisfied with herself.

“To what extent?”

“Um… enough. I was still a bit stressed, but I didn’t want to run out the door any more.”

“Good.”

“I thought I’d really done it,” Detective Beckett says thoughtfully. “I really thought it was all okay and I’d got over it. I didn’t realise I was still so tensed up about it.” Her face falls slightly. “Does that mean it’s not all fixed?” she says unhappily.

“What do you think, before I comment?”

“Probably not.” Detective Beckett pauses, while Dr Burke waits. She does not appear to have completed her thought. “But it’s better. One visit wouldn’t fix everything, would it?”

Dr Burke declines to answer that immediately. “Do you consider that you would return, if invited?”

“I think I was invited. So was Dad.”

“Explain, please?”

“Alexis asked me if I’d bring Dad.”

“I see,” Dr Burke says, judicially, leaning forward. “How did you respond?”
“I wasn’t thinking about that. I’d been thinking about other things, so I just said yes, if Castle invited him, and didn’t realise till afterwards.”

“Mm. So, Detective Beckett, your instinctive, unthinking response was agreement. Please consider that reaction, starting with a consideration of the response you might have given had you taken time before answering.”

Detective Beckett considers her fingernails, apparently in preference to the question. However, she eventually does begin to ponder the point. This is obvious to Dr Burke from the contortions of her face, which, whilst they would be amusing in a child, are merely excessive in an adult. It appears that Detective Beckett has absorbed some of Mr Castle’s less desirable characteristics.

“If I’d thought about it, I’d probably have said no,” Detective Beckett admits. “I wouldn’t have been happy about it.”

“Mm. So why was your instinctive response different?”

“Maybe,” she says, uncertain of her conclusion, “even though I was more stressed by it than I realised, underneath I was okay enough with it to be able to go back?”

“That is possible,” Dr Burke says. “It appears to me that you are in two minds about such family events. You are still made very nervous by them; but at the same time you are now able to endeavour to recognise and deal with your emotions in such a way that you are also able to contemplate repeating the experience.” He pauses. “Alternatively, your underlying desire to mend matters is coming to the fore. If the latter should be the case, then you need to be extremely careful not to fall into the trap of automatically assuming that others’ feelings are more important than your own. It would be unfortunate to revert to that habit.”

“About that…” Detective Beckett emits.

“Yes?” Dr Burke is immediately worried, although he does not, of course, let it show.

“Castle’s mother is having a housewarming party.”

“She has moved out, then?”

“She will on Saturday,” Detective Beckett says laconically. “I don’t expect it to pass unmarked.”

Dr Burke acquires a smile that, did he but know it, is very similar to Detective Beckett’s own sardonic visage. “I expect not. Still, please explain the connection as you see it?”

“Castle asked me to go to the party. I wasn’t sure. I think I should go, but…”

“Mm?”

“He’s going to ask some others.” Detective Beckett regards Dr Burke’s expression with some amusement, only lightly tinged with sympathy. “Don’t worry. You aren’t one of them.”

“Mm.” Dr Burke is much relieved. A roomful of actors would present him with an evening of extreme discomfort. They are invariably in search of validation of their incorrect assumptions – that is, when they are not endeavouring to make themselves interesting by assuming personalities and indeed disorders. Dr Burke is only interested in patients who are in genuine need of his services. This does not, naturally, mean that they are aware that they are in such need – for an example, he need only consider Detective Beckett’s original presentation.
“It’s the team at work, Lanie, O’Leary and Pete, O’Leary’s partner. And Dad.”

“Why does Mr Castle want to invite these people?”

“He says it’s because he likes them all.” Detective Beckett exhibits extreme scepticism. “He probably does like them all. Castle likes pretty much everyone, and they pretty much always like him. He’s part of the team, too, so he’d invite them.”

“But you do not believe that reasoning,” Dr Burke states. Entirely reasonable of Detective Beckett, since nor does he. It is perfectly obvious what Mr Castle is doing.

“No. He’s making sure I’ve got” – she pauses briefly – “safe people around me for when I need them. So that if he’s occupied it’s not a problem. He said he’d invite them whether I came or not, though.”

“Mm. I agree.” Dr Burke does not specify with which point he agrees. In point of fact, it is both.

“So I thought about whether I wanted to go at all. I don’t know. Obviously Castle wants me to. And I want to do something that he’d like, but I don’t want to do it just because he’d like me to,” she says over Dr Burke’s breath.

“Mm?” hums Dr Burke, only a touch reassured.

“I don’t want to go if it’s going to be awful, but I don’t want to not go if it’s just that I wouldn’t enjoy it much.”

Dr Burke perceives that Detective Beckett has, once more, undertaken a process of detailed consideration outside of his treatment room. How very gratifying.

“Do continue,” he says encouragingly.

“I can’t decide if I don’t want to go because I’ll need to see Martha in a social situation – she’s the host – and I really, really don’t want to see her at all and I especially don’t want her picking at me about everything; or if I don’t want to go because it’ll really upset me; or if I don’t want to go because I simply won’t enjoy it as much as anything else I could do that evening.”

Detective Beckett’s wording is hardly precise. It is, however, illuminating. She appears to have taken to heart the concept of compromise, although she has not mentioned the word. She is, in fact, endeavouring to balance her emotions and her relationship with Mr Castle; which is exactly what she should do.

“If it’s the last, then I should just suck it up and go. If it’s the middle one, then I probably shouldn’t. If it’s the first, I just don’t know.”

“I agree with your analysis of the options,” Dr Burke pronounces. Detective Beckett appears extraordinarily relieved. “When is this occasion taking place?”

“I’m not sure. Castle said at least three weeks from now.”

“In that case, you have time to consider. We may discuss it again if you wish to do so, but it is not essential that you decide now.” Dr Burke casts a glance at the clock. The session is almost complete. “Are there other matters which you wish to discuss?”

“No, not today. I had dinner with Dad again, but it all went okay. I asked to see our photo albums.”
“Oh? Why?”

“I wanted to see them. I might have talked to Dad about Mom, but… not yet. It wasn’t the right time.”

“What did you do instead?”

Detective Beckett suddenly colours. “Dad had showed these ones to Castle. How he could…” she trails off. Dr Burke understands perfectly, and conceals a parental smile.

“I see. How unfortunate,” he sympathises.

“It was fine, though. I was glad I’d asked. We were fine.”

“Very pleasing.”

“Mhm.” Detective Beckett emits.

“I shall see you next Tuesday, then?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

Dr Burke sits down again as Detective Beckett leaves. Really, her progress is very pleasing. Surely no lesser psychiatrist could have achieved these results.
“Hey, Castle,” Beckett says with a bright glance upward, not that she needs it to identify her caller, as she opens the door.

“Hey.” Castle, true to his earlier words, wraps her neatly into his arms and indulges himself with some highly provocative kisses. Beckett is not objecting in any way, and in fact is indulging herself with some highly provocative touching. While this is very nice, and exactly what Castle would like, it does make him wonder what she isn’t telling him about her session, since she’s clearly aiming for a very different occupation of the evening from talking. He kisses her some more, while wondering, until an utterly filthy use of fingers tips him firmly into the view that the best place to continue any discussion is Beckett’s bed. Thinking stops quite shortly after the decision, in favour of action.

“I talked to Burke about the party,” Beckett says, afterwards, snuggled over him with her head on his chest where, undoubtedly not co-incidentally, he can’t see her face. “I didn’t get anywhere.”

“Uh?” Castle emits, too amazed that Burke had not set Beckett on a definitive path to comment.

“He agreed with all my thinking, but I still don’t know what to do.”

“So decide later,” Castle says comfortably. “See how the weekend goes. See how next weekend goes.”

“Next weekend?”

“Mother will be gone. You could come for dinner again – and stay.” He pulls her up over him so he can see her face. “If you wanted.”

“I want to,” she says slowly, and with emphasis. “I don’t know how I’ll feel when I know it’s Alexis there too. Could be an interesting conversation over breakfast, couldn’t it?” she adds acidly.

“I think she’s worked out that we’re not just playing Sorry,” Castle says dryly. This statement does not help.

“That’s not the point,” she says, rolling away from him. Castle doesn’t approve, and rolls her back, exerting some force to achieve it.

“Come back here. What is the point?” He keeps her facing him.

“I’ve hardly been to your loft and suddenly I’m spending the night?”

“So? Alexis knows enough about why you haven’t been to the loft to understand.” Castle observes Beckett’s scarlet face, and finally understands that she’s thoroughly embarrassed. “Why’re you so embarrassed about this? It’s not like I parade women through the loft. I never did that. Only the ones I was actually married to spent time in the loft when Alexis was there.” This statement doesn’t help either.

“We aren’t married.”

“That could change,” Castle says, deliberately annoyingly, and takes the precaution of hanging on to Beckett’s hands before she can change him from living to dead. “Anyway, what’s that got to do with it? It’s not a requirement.” She makes a very peculiar noise. “Not that I wouldn’t like to be
married to you, but it does seem a little hurried, and I wouldn’t want your dad to think you’d been forced into a shotgun marriage. He’d shoot me.”

“Not before I do,” Beckett growls, trying to free her hands to work considerable and painful mayhem.

“Look, Alexis isn’t going to care. But you don’t have to stay if you can’t deal with it, so long as you come for dinner.” He rolls over, rolling Beckett at the same time. “Say you’ll come for dinner, and then let the rest work itself out.”

“Okay. Dinner.”

She flops back against the pillows. Castle leans down slowly and intently and kisses her with some force and more possessiveness, which causes her to stop considering killing him and start to respond in a much more friendly manner. His hand swoops down the length of her body and pauses for a moment on her hip, where he finds that it is very easy simply to turn Beckett into him and re-align her leg up round his middle and therefore have free access to her glorious responsiveness. He slides slowly into her and holds her close until they move slowly to gentle completion.

“You’ve got your pass for tomorrow night?” she asks sleepily.

“Yeah.” He cuddles into her. “Till tomorrow,” he says, without making any significant move to get out of bed.

“Night.”

But it still takes him a further length of time to extract himself from Beckett’s bed, and every time he has to he dislikes the necessity more. If she’ll only stay at his, there will be none of this unpleasant leaving business. He plots darkly all the ways he might convince her to stay, the first time she visits after his mother is gone.

“This ain’t like Molloys,” O’Leary rumbles as he enters, audible to the entire establishment.

Beckett sighs. “Do you ever go anyplace else?”

“Sure I do. But only if you make me.”

“Join the gang,” Esposito says very bitterly. “You only get dragged to strange bars. We got dragged to some bullshit experimental theatre crap an’ had to sit through it all evenin’.”

O’Leary’s saucer-sized eyes sparkle. “Anyone alert the newsies?” he jibes. “Don’t recall that your rep includes theatre.”


“I like the theatre,” O’Leary rumbles mildly. “Don’t think I’m a wuss.”

Esposito regards him dyspeptically. Before it can come to an argument, Beckett intervenes.

“I thought you liked the circus, O’Leary? Especially when you got to be the strongman.”

“That’s not fair.”

“Neither’s picking on Espo. Stop it.”
“Okay,” O’Leary says amiably. “So you tell me how come he was at the theatre with you?”

“Yeah, girl,” Lanie adds. “You’re not so keen on experimental theatre yourself. And if you invited these guys” – for some reason Beckett hears *lunkheads* – “how come you didn’t invite me?”

“Or me?” O’Leary says, contriving to look as plaintive as a grizzly bear sized man can look. It’s not terribly successful. He hasn’t quite mastered the puppy look as practised and epitomised by Castle.

“Didn’t want to lose my friends,” she says lightly.

“What are we?” Ryan asks.

“I get to see you like it or not. Anyway, you were on the case. O’Leary wasn’t.”


Ryan and Esposito fall over themselves to explain, with considerable profanity and disgust in Espo’s case and a few comments of a very critical nature on the staging and actors from Ryan, who is clearly aiming for his next job to be that of NY Times theatre critic. Castle stays quiet, Lanie adds a few technical details of the autopsy until everyone tells her to shut up so their drinks and food stay in their stomachs, and Beckett awaits disaster.

“An’ so Beckett sent me off with Castle to visit his mom,” Ryan explains, “an’ get her involved for a technical take on things.”

The mountain moves. That is to say, O’Leary sits upright in surprise. “You got Castle’s mom involved?” he says with amazement. “After your dad I thought” – he stops, at Beckett’s vicious glare. Unfortunately it’s too late.

“You knew about this?” comes in various forms from Lanie, at a soprano pitch which would shatter glass, Ryan, who simply sounds plaintively left out as usual, and Espo, who has produced a fearsome growl last heard from Colonel Kurtz and appears to be about to enjoy the smell of napalm in the morning.

“How come you knew and we don’t?” arrives with menaces.

“Because O’Leary was there in the beginning and you were still at the 54th doing organised crime,” Beckett says coolly. Espo is not notably impressed by this reminder that, however tight the team may be, O’Leary has been tight with Beckett for much longer. “It had nothing to do with the job,” she carries on. “When we needed Castle’s mom on the case she was asked. Who asked her doesn’t matter, because I decided we needed her and pushed it through Montgomery.”

O’Leary settles himself again, rustling napkins on other tables. “Okay then,” he drawls. “Guess it’s not a problem.” He pauses a beat. “But you still gotta explain why you din’t invite me to the theatre. I’d’a liked to have seen this play.”

“Trust me, bro, you wouldn’t.”

“You can still go,” Castle points out. “It’s a success. Even the critics liked it.”

“Huh?” emits Espo, utterly dumbfounded. “Your mom pulled it off?”

“Your mom?” O’Leary repeats. “What’s your mom got to do with it?”
Castle explains, briefly and with a considerable lack of any detail relating to Beckett’s interactions with his mother outside the case. O’Leary regards him with bright, intelligent eyes which clearly say I know you’re missing out a ton of detail and thankfully doesn’t articulate the point.

“Interesting,” O’Leary comments, taking around a full minute to finish the word. “Can’t ‘zackly say it’s simple, but seems like it worked.”

Castle looks around the table. Ryan is relatively calm. Espo and Lanie, on the other hand, are fulminating. Beckett’s hand has, under the table and without anyone noticing, migrated to be clinging to his. She clearly expects there to be a row. His fingers stroke over her tense hand.

“Lanie, I’ve known you ten years and you have never, ever mentioned that you like experimental theatre. In fact, last time I suggested we went to see Shakespeare you told me that you’d rather poke pins in your own eyes and then eviscerate yourself with your own scalpel than watch – quote – that mediaeval crap,” Beckett says.

Lanie’s mouth opens and shuts like a gobsmacked goldfish. She doesn’t have any sort of an answer to that, and the unexpected guerrila attack leaves her defenceless.


“Shut up,” everybody says. Castle looks hurt and subsides into his beer.

“I hate theatre too,” Espo complains. “You still made me sit through it.” He turns to Lanie. “You were lucky. It was total crap an’ there wasn’t any beer. Least Beckett’s dad c’n talk about baseball. The shrink din’t talk about anythin’.”

“Shrink?” screeches Lanie. “What shrink?”

“My shrink,” says Beckett flatly. Lanie stops screeching. The noise is replaced by a laser-like glare. Beckett reflects it straight back at her. “You told me I needed help,” she says. Lanie gobbles like a turkey. “Now you’re complaining that I got it?”

“No, but…”

“No buts,” Beckett says. “Can’t have it both ways.” She smirks at Lanie, who turns a satisfying shade of purple, and then laughs.

“You wait, girl,” Lanie threatens. “You just wait.”

“I still don’t get how Bigfoot there gets to know an’ your team din’t,” Esposito growls, scowling at O’Leary and Beckett more or less equally.

O’Leary, who has been amusing himself by stretching his legs out and maliciously appreciating the envious glances from lesser men (those under six-foot-ten, that would be), rumbles into life. “I was Beckett’s team back in the day. Long before you were, little man.”

Castle looks at Beckett with more than a hint of worry in his eyes. The gang is not precisely making nice or gelling, and in fact it’s beginning to look more like the start of a free fight than a pleasant sharing of fries, food and beer.

“Stop it, all of you,” Beckett raps out, suddenly very much in charge. “I didn’t get you out so you could all start arguing and spoiling the evening. It’s not a competition and none of you get to try and play the I’ve-known-Beckett-longer-or-better card.” She glares impartially at everyone bar
Castle. There is a certain amount of cringing and hiding behind beer bottles; and a brief pause.

“So why are we all here?” O’Leary asks. He obviously feels that his size will save him.

Castle takes over. While in-charge Beckett is incredibly hot, he doesn’t think that there’s a need for any more I’m-in-charge-ness. Tempers are fragile enough.

“I wanted to invite all of you to a party,” he says happily.

The response is not precisely enthusiastic.

“What ain’t you tellin’ me, Castle?” Esposito growls. He still hasn’t recovered from the play.

“Whose party?” says Ryan, suspiciously.

Lanie and O’Leary merely look very sceptically unconvinced.

“Guys, it’s a party. Free booze, all night, good food, interesting company. Why’re you all so reluctant?”

“I’m going,” Beckett notes. Fortunately Castle controls his face, though she’ll have bruises where his surprised grip clamped round her knee. However, it doesn’t seem to help.

“You went to that bullshit play,” points out Esposito. “An’ you suckered me into goin’ too. I’m not goin’ anywhere till you an’ Castle tell us exactly what this party’s about, an’ who’s givin’ it.” He scowls.

“Yeah,” Ryan supports. “Spill.”

O’Leary wriggles his squirrel tail brows and looks quizzical. “We-ell,” he drawls, which comes out as waaaalllll, “I like a good party, an’ if Castle here’s payin’ for all the beer an’ food, I can stand a whole lotta theatrical types.”

“How did you know?” Castle wails. “It was supposed to be a surprise.” His last words are drowned out by the much louder and more desperate wails from Ryan and Esposito, modulated with some ear-splitting harmonics from Lanie.

“Actors?”

“It was obvious,” O’Leary says, with an iceberg-scaled grin. “Somethin’ ‘bout the way you said ‘interestin’ comp’ny’. That’s what we call detectin’ over at Central Park.” The grin, impossibly, widens. “Like I said, I like theatre. Did a bit, once upon a time.”

All wailing abruptly stops, stunned into absolute silence by the sheer unlikelihood of O’Leary having ever trod a stage.

“Say what?” shrieks absolutely everybody. The entire restaurant is silenced and turns to look at their table. O’Leary blushes brightly at the attention, thereby increasing the air-conditioning requirement by at least four degrees.

“Er… I was in the high school drama club,” he admits, trying to cringe. Since mountains find it difficult to cringe effectively, it doesn’t work. Beckett regards him very sceptically, but doesn’t say anything. Castle, from the way in which her hand had slipped into his over her knee and the tip-tap of her fingers, thinks there might be more to it than that. He’ll find out later.

There is more hubbub and noise, which takes quite a long time to subside. O’Leary munches his
food and lets his scarlet cheeks cool while the noise swirls around him.

“Why d’you want us at this party anyway?” Espo challenges. “What’s it for that we need to go?”

“My mother’s moving out,” Castle says, trying to make it bland. “This is her housewarming at the new place. She’s inviting all her friends. I’m paying, and so I want my friends. You guys, and my poker pals.”

“You’re not inviting that shrink again?”

“No.”

“Thank Christ,” Esposito emits, quite unfairly.

“But your mom’s inviting all these theatre types?” Ryan reminds everyone in the guise of a question.

“They’re her friends. Well, cronies, and enemies that she’s on speaking terms with this week.”

“I thought you said you wanted us because we’re your friends,” Lanie says.

“Yeah?”

“Sounds like you want this lot as security.”

Beckett sniggers.


“I’ll come,” O’Leary says easily. “An’ Beckett says she’s goin’, so that’s two.”

“My dad’ll come,” Beckett says.

Esposito looks a little less pained. “Your dad? I c’n talk about baseball with him, I guess. ‘S better than talkin’ ‘bout crap plays.”

“So are you going?” Ryan asks.

“Might as well,” Espo notes, with a lot of cool-boy non-enthusiasm. “You heard Castle say free booze an’ food.”

“If you go, I’ll go,” Ryan says.

Everyone looks at Lanie. Lanie looks back. “Yeah?” she says combatively.

“C’mon. You’re the last hold-out. You gotta come too.”

“It wouldn’t be the same without you,” Beckett says, carefully not specifying what that might mean.

“Okay. But you all gotta promise that no-one’s gonna make me do anything that involves dead old white men.”

“Only the ones in your morgue, Lanie.”

Everyone snickers. Having achieved what he wanted, to wit a quarantine zone for Beckett to protect her from his mother, Castle turns the conversation to the remarkable lack of any interesting
murders for the last week or so and how is he supposed to write a book if nothing happens for him to put in it? No-one appreciates his commentary, and in the fuss he causes (quite deliberately) everyone forgets the early part of the conversation – and in particular they don’t start asking detailed questions about Dr Burke, Jim, his mother – or any of those people’s dealings with Beckett.

Beckett notices the turn in conversation, but is too relieved that her friends will attend the party really to worry about what they might have asked about the recent past. She can do this. She can make it through this party.

More pertinently, right now she could do with going to the restroom. Conveniently, the restroom does not accommodate more than one person. Lanie, who is suddenly regarding her beadily, has the aspect of a hunting dog on the scent. Beckett knew there was a good reason to like this place. She has a very uncomfortable feeling that Lanie might start asking some very pointed questions, quite soon. Well, she can forestall that without the same sort of falling-out that had happened the first time round, but not tonight. Definitely not tonight. Tonight she is going to have drinks (okay, soda, but still, it’s the principle which counts) and food (there are some very nice desserts in a cabinet downstairs) with her friends and no-one is going to ask her difficult questions which she doesn’t want to answer.

When she gets back to the table O’Leary and Esposito are not-quite-butting heads again. This time it’s about the relative weights they lift. Ryan looks glum, until Castle points out that no GQ models look particularly muscled up and that he, Ryan, seems to have a wider social life than any other detective in the bullpen. Castle does not mention his own gym routine, Beckett notices.

The party breaks up, not too late, following the frankly excessive consumption of desserts and fries. Ryan, Espo and O’Leary go their separate ways, Lanie decamps for Grand Central, and Castle smiles happily at Beckett.

“See,” he says, “all sorted. Enough people to keep my mother well away from you.” He snickers. “I think I’ll introduce O’Leary to her.”

“I thought you liked him?”

“Yes, but he said he was interested in experimental theatre. And besides which, Mother’s Dream might need an understudy for Snout, as the Wall.”

Beckett snorts with laughter. “Don’t tell him that. He’ll probably volunteer.”

“About that. I got the feeling you knew more about his play-acting career than he was saying.”

Beckett almost giggles. “Yeah. O’Leary’s done a lot more than he was saying. He told me once he was part of some am-dram group in Queens, and if you pour enough beer down him he sings.”

“Sings?”

“Bass. What did you expect, with a windpipe that long?”

“No, O’Leary can sing?”

“Yes. It does cause small tidal surges and birds fall out of the sky, but he can sing.”

“My mother will adore him.”
Safely back at Beckett’s apartment, she flops down on the couch and tugs Castle after her. “That wasn’t so bad,” she says, “once the boys stopped locking horns with O’Leary.”

“Mm,” agrees Castle. “Um… do you think you should explain just a little more to them about your – er – dealings with my mother before they come to this party?”

Beckett opens her mouth on a snap response of the order of *Hell no*, and then shuts it again. “Why?” she asks instead, not particularly comfortably.

“Because otherwise they’ll get my mother’s version? Or she’ll pull some other trick and it’ll all turn into a histrionic nightmare and the boys won’t know what’s going on to step in if they need to.”

“Oh,” she says, sounding flattened. Her face twists in an unhappy grimace, as if she’d tasted something foul. “I’d hoped…”

“You wanted to keep it all away from work.”

“Yeah.” She tucks herself into his side, and leans into him. “As if it hasn’t been bad enough them knowing what they do know.”

“They’re your team. They don’t think less of you.”

“‘S not the point,” she mutters. “I didn’t want them to know in the beginning and I don’t want them to know more now. As long as it doesn’t affect the job, why should I need to talk about it?”

“Because you don’t let it affect the job – except that you just worked harder and harder – they just want to help. They’re not looking for ways to undermine you. I think Ryan’s already guessed a lot of it, from what he was saying when I took him to the loft to prime Mother.”

“I know,” she says dispiritedly. “I know that. But I don’t like my private business being known about.”

Castle thinks for a second. “It’s going to be the lesser of two evils, then,” he points out.

“Tell the boys something, and Lanie, and O’Leary – or listen to your mother broadcasting it to hundreds of histrionic theatre types?” she says acidly.

“Yes. Though I hope it won’t be hundreds,” he adds, “since I’m paying and have you ever seen how much they drink?”

“I don’t like either option.”

“I got that,” Castle notes, cuddling her closer. “But your team is definitely on your side.” He drops a kiss on the top of her head. “I’m on your side.”

“I know,” she says, and wriggles in. “I always know that.” She looks into his eyes, and then kisses his cheek. “Couldn’t do it without you,” she murmurs, blushes luridly and drops her head back on his shoulder.

“Nope,” Castle says smugly. Beckett growls gently under his ear. “So what’re you going to do?”
“Talk to them, I guess,” she says, dully. “Better than the alternative.”

“Mmm,” Castle rumbles soothingly into her hair. “But we don’t even have a party date yet, so you don’t have to do it right now.” He drops another kiss on her hair. “Let’s just be peaceful.”

“If you want,” Beckett says quizzically.

“You don’t want to be peaceful?” His voice drops into the velvet baritone that surrounds and strokes her.

“Depends how you define peaceful,” she replies, her own tones softening and becoming inviting.

“Right here like this,” Castle purrs, and pulls her up into his lap where she can be spread across his chest and kissed: deep and slow and sure; and in the natural way of things, deep and slow and sure continues until he’s deep and slow and sure within her.

Since there hasn’t been the decency to be any sort of a murder, still less a Beckett-flavoured murder, Beckett herself has no excuse not to quietly remove Ryan and Espo to a conference room some time after Castle arrives. She manages to delay the fateful moment (she is getting as linguistically florid as Castle, she thinks bleakly) by the production and consumption of vast quantities of coffee, but eventually she runs out of deferral strategies.

“Ryan, Espo?”

“Yeah?”

“You got a minute?”

“Sure. What d’you want?”

“A chat,” Beckett says, uninformatively.

The boys look at each other as she turns away, raising confused eyebrows, but follow her to a conference room where Castle is already ensconced with some more coffee. They look at each other again. Beckett, to their observations, has already had four coffees, and quite possibly one or two before they arrived. She isn’t obviously jittering, but there is an air of considerable tension that’s snapped into place as soon as Espo shut the door.

“Whassup?” Espo asks. “Shut doors an’ coffee made? Somethin’ you wanna tell us?” He fixes Castle with a piercing stare, and then flicks a glance at Beckett’s hands.

“Nothing like that,” Beckett says firmly, but then stops, not knowing quite how to start what she needs to say. She’d had a lot of thoughts about it, but they’ve all fled.

“So what is it?” Ryan asks, regarding her rather narrowly.

“Dad and I had some differences,” she blurts, elbows on knees and leaning forward. “Castle’s mom tried to get in the mix and I told her where to get off before the theatre case so it might be a bit difficult at the party because I don’t want her to start on the subject again and I don’t need her getting involved because the real shrink’s enough.” At the end of that she takes a breath, and drops her head towards her knees.

Ryan and Espo both notice that Castle’s arm is discreetly invisible, but it’s pretty clear to two trained detectives that it’s behind Beckett, and they are individually sure that his hand is
somewhere in contact with her. They meet his eyes. Beckett’s barely said anything more than she did at the theatre or in the bar beforehand, so they don’t quite see why she needs a closed-door conference room to say it. There is a rather uncomfortable silence.

“You already told us that,” Espo breaks the silence.

“Yeah.”

More uncomfortable silence happens.

“C’mon, Beckett. Spill,” Espo says. Ryan unobtrusively moves a little back, to leave Esposito on point. “We know that you spent all that time supporting your dad once he got dry. We covered it all the way, though you din’t need much coverin’. More like bein’ told to go home. You said you were seein’ that stick-up-the-ass shrink, an’ while I ain’t much on shrinks, seems like he’s fixed you. So say what you gotta say. It don’t make no difference to us but if it’s gonna help you with Castle’s mom at this bullshit party we all gotta go to” – Castle winces, but refrains from comment – “then spit it out.”

There might be no-one but Beckett and Esposito in the room. Ryan is silent and still, Castle pulled back into himself. Slowly, her head comes up.

“You know Dad got dry, because we’ve worked around it. You don’t know what it was like before that. Before I left him to it. He…he wanted Mom. He didn’t…he got upset that there was only me.”

She stops, and breathes slowly. Ryan and Espo exchange glances of realisation, and then look at Castle, who says nothing out loud but a great deal with a twist of his mouth and flick of his eyebrows. Esposito makes a few fast calculations and understands a great deal more than he previously had.

“Anyway. He got dry, after I left him to it. I thought we’d patched it up, and it seemed like we’d fixed it. Then we caught that case with the Berowitzes, and it threw up a lot of stuff. Turned out we weren’t fixed at all. Turned out that I couldn’t deal with normal families, outside the job.”

Esposito casts a quick glance at Castle, Beckett being fixated on the patch of floor between her shoes, and receives a small, confirmatory nod.

“So I found a shrink – no thanks to Lanie,” she adds, and Esposito winces in sympathy – “and I’ve been seeing him since.”

“So what’s Castle’s mom gotta do with any of that?”

“She wants to be my mom,” Beckett says baldly.

“Oh. So? She ain’t your mom.”

“So, she keeps trying to weasel in and lay a guilt trip on me that I won’t go round and won’t tell her all my life story and beg for her help and advice and won’t just marry her son and move in tomorrow,” Beckett says in one miserably exasperated breath.

“Oh,” Espo says again. “That’s shit.” He catches Castle’s eye and pitch-black, furious scowl. “Maybe not the marrying Castle bit,” he adds, with an evil grin. Beckett flips him the bird, though there’s no lightness or camaraderie to it. “But the rest. So you think she might raise hell at this party an’ you’ll up the ante and it’ll turn into a complete clusterfuck. So why the hell are you goin’ at all? I’d’a thought you’d emigrate to avoid it.”
“Yeah, Well.” Which doesn’t enlighten anyone at all.

“What d’you want us to do ‘bout it?”

“Nothing. Unless it all kicks off.”

“Okay,” Espo says. “We can do that. Ryan can run interference.”

“What?” squawks Ryan.

“She likes you. Castle’s mom. And you like all that theatre shit so you get to run interference.”


“Both of you can do it,” Esapo says. “Tag team, like wrestling.”

“Why not you?”

“I don’t like theatre shit or actors. Make me reach for my gun.”

“I don’t think the party’ll be improved by you being marched out in cuffs on a murder charge,” Castle points out. “I think if I were you I’d leave my gun at home.”

“I’d enjoy that, especially since I’d be the one doing the arresting and marching out,” Beckett mutters. It’s the first leaven of humour they’ve seen from her all day.

“Don’t think you’re allowed to get out of it that easy,” Ryan says. Beckett grumbles indeterminately under her breath. Castle relaxes somewhat.

Coffee mugs are drained by everyone, and there is a certain amount of standing up and making for the door. Too much talk and emotion isn’t a cop thing. Beckett’s explained enough to them for them to appreciate what’s going on, though they don’t envy her the (they assume) likely chat with Lanie.

The boys exit first, mainly because Castle lays a delaying hand on Beckett’s arm.

“You okay?” he asks, as soon as they’re gone.

“I’m fine,” Beckett says, earning an assessing stare. “I am. Didn’t want to have that conversation, but it’s done.” Castle provides a swift hug around her waist, resists the urge to kiss her, and gently ushers her out of the conference room.

One down, one difficult one to go, Beckett thinks, as Castle messes with his phone, her paperclips (he appears to be making paperclip daisies) and anything else within reach except her elephants. The discussion with Lanie is likely to be hellish. On the other hand, she can only die once, right? And if she doesn’t die, she and Castle can go out with O’Leary, who knows almost all of it and really only needs some background on Martha, and have a relaxed evening. Okay. She can do this. She picks up her phone and texts Lanie, suggesting this evening so that it’s all over with and she’ll never ever have to mention any of this again. Far too soon her phone chirps with Lanie’s enthusiastic acceptance.

“What’s up?” Castle asks, presenting her with a paperclip daisy chain.

“Seeing Lanie tonight.” Beckett droops slightly.

“She’s not likely to be as dumb as she was a couple of months ago,” he points out reassuringly. “I
think she worked out that was a bad idea.”

“I really hope so,” Beckett says in a very downbeat way. “Otherwise it’ll be me being perp-walked in handcuffs.”

Castle grins evilly. “I could arrange that,” he leers. “In some of that really sexy underwear right into your bedroom.”

“Shut up, Castle,” Beckett growls, but she’s smiling and there is a very come-on glint in her eyes.

“It’ll be okay. And if not, just call me and I’ll swoop in on my white charger and rescue you.”

Beckett raises an eyebrow. “Please tell me you’ll be wearing clothes. Specifically, modern-day clothes.”

Castle looks sulky. “I was planning on shining armour,” he grumps, not wholly sincerely.

“You do know how much jousting armour weighs, don’t you? Where are you going to find a horse that can take two hundred and fifty pounds? You’ll need a Percheron. Hardly the romantic ideal.”

Castle grumps even more. “You have no soul,” he sulks. “No sense of the proper way of doing things.”

“And you couldn’t sweep me up in front of you, either. Mediaeval maidens weighed about thirty pounds less and were eight inches shorter than me. You’d drop me. If I were dumb enough to let you try to sweep me up, anyway.”

“I would not,” Castle squawks, horrified. Then he grins very nastily. “I could prove I can pick you up…” he says provocatively.

“Don’t you dare! If you try I will shoot you.”

“You wouldn’t,” he says smugly. “You’d be overcome by my manliness.”

Beckett splutters with laughter. “What, as you fell off the horse?”

“What horse? I could do it right now. I didn’t say anything about a horse.”

“No,” says Beckett quellingly. Castle smirks and makes as if to move towards her. She squeaks, and then puts her hand on her Glock meaningfully. He settles back, and smirks more widely. Beckett relapses into grumpy, then glum, silence.

The day progresses through current, but boring, casework, involving much cross-checking and detailed analysis. Castle remains present, but doesn’t help. The field of paperclip daisies eventually takes over the desk. This apparently represents a successful day.

Beckett does not feel that she is about to have a successful day. She’s meeting Lanie at Matilda’s, again. At least the food is good. She gets there first – she only has a short walk – and orders some crostini de taleggio to nibble on while she waits. She’s starving. Lunch had been minimal, which is her own fault, but she’d not been hungry.

Lanie doesn’t keep her waiting long. She bowls in at speed, bounces into a chair, spots the food and is right in there with both hands.

“C’n we get another load?” she asks. “I’m starving. Missed lunch because the Second sent me in some urgent case and demanded answers like yesterday. Dude wasn’t even dead most of
yesterday. How’m I supposed to do a Y-cut if he’s still alive?”

“I wouldn’t try,” Beckett says dryly. “You get arrested for doing that.”

“Not that I couldn’t have managed it. He was a wussy little guy. I could have knocked him down
with surgical thread. Wouldn’t even have needed the reel it came on.”

Beckett snickers happily, cheered by the thought and Lanie’s breezy style. “So what was the big
hurry?”

“Apparently he was part of a drugs ring. They thought he had the drugs on him, and when they
couldn’t find them they thought he might have swallowed them.”

“Had he?” Beckett asks, taking another piece of crostini.

“Some of them. They should have done a cavity search, though…”

Beckett makes a face. “So one of them burst?”

“Yeah. Death by dumb overdose. There’s a reason they call them mules” –

“They’re as dumb as them,” they chorus together.

A server appears: more crostini – taleggio and some mushroom ones – are ordered; Lanie asks for
a glass of wine, Beckett has soda; and courtesy of Lanie’s imprecations about the Second, the ice is
very firmly smashed.

“I wanna know about Espo at the theatre,” Lanie says happily. “How did you get him there? I’d
have thought you’d need to sedate him.”

“I thought about it,” Beckett smirks evilly. “I didn’t tell him where we were going. We went for
beers first. No problem getting him and Ryan out for booze.”

“I bet.” Lanie sniggers.

“He wasn’t happy, for sure. But he sat it out.”

“Bitching all the way.”

“Probably. I was at the other end of the seats.”

“Wish I’d seen him after,” Lanie says wistfully. “I’d have been smiling for weeks.”

“Yeah.” Beckett shifts in her seat. “About this party of Castle’s…”

“Yeah?”

“I need to warn you about his mom.”

“Yeah?” Lanie says, eyes brightly focused. “What’s the problem? Want me to slip her a dose of
something not-quite-lethal?”

Beckett quirks an eyebrow. “Don’t think the AMA allow you to do that, do they?”

“Who’d tell them?”

“Good point. Not yet, though.”
Lanie looks a little disappointed. Beckett, however, is enormously relieved. Lanie is not going to ask intrusive questions. Lanie, in fact, is simply going to be her friend. Just like she used to be. Beckett remembers when Lanie was in pre-med and spiked the drink of someone who’d been getting unpleasantly handsy with them both – with an emetic. She sniggers at the memory. The guy had thrown up on the biggest man in the bar, and been punched out.

“What?”

“Remember that guy you doped with an emetic?”

Lanie sniggers too. “Good times.”


“Lanie, you know and I know you won’t do that now you’re a real doctor. You’d be struck off. Stop pretending you’d do it.” Beckett grins. “But keep telling me about it. It’ll cheer me up.”

“You first. Start talking.”

“Okay. So...there was the Berowitz case, and the wife was propping up her drunk husband and wanted me to support her. So Castle thought maybe Dad could talk sense into her. Dad invited Castle and me for breakfast, and somehow worked it so that Castle asked us round for dinner. It wasn’t fun. Then Dad said he’d really enjoyed being part of a family again and I was so wound up I lost it with him. It sounded like he liked them better than me.”

“Oh, Kate,” Lanie says softly. She knows that covers a world of pain that Kate’s not mentioning.

“Yeah. Anyway, Castle got me to see the shrink. Or got me to see I needed to, maybe. And we’ve been working it out since and Dad and I are pretty much fixed, I think.”

“So what’s Castle’s mom got to do with any of it? Sounds like you’re okay.”

Lanie does not ask any of the worlds of questions in her head. It hadn’t worked before and it won’t work now, but Kate’s said more than at any time these last few months and anyway friends know when to keep their mouths shut. She wishes, rather uselessly, that she’d remembered that the first time round, but they’re tight again now.

“She was so freaking delighted to meet Dad and me that she kept pushing for us to come back. And she’s so freaking happy that I’m dating her darling son” – Beckett’s acid tone dissolves the air – “that she kept pushing even more.”

“Didn’t think Castle was short of dates,” Lanie observes, through a mouthful of crostini.

“I don’t think so,” Beckett says, with a wry grimace. “That’s not the point. She was absolutely desperate to be a mom to me.”

Lanie chokes on her crostini. “She what?” she squeaks and splutters. “She’s freakin’ insane. You’d met her once” – Beckett doesn’t correct her – “and she thought she could be your mom? That’s insane.” She stops. “Want me to get her committed?”

“I think you need a bit more evidence than that.”
“She’s an actor. Don’t need any more.”

Beckett sniggers, and considers the possibilities very obviously through another mouthful of food.

“So what’d Castle do?” Lanie asks interestedly.

“Told her to back off. Over and over. Then he said if she didn’t she had to move out. She didn’t—and he did.”

“Wow.” Lanie’s eyes sparkle. “You gotta marry him now. That boy’s a keeper.”

“Uh?"

“Throwing his mom out for you? When you’re not even going there? Marry him quick, or I might.”

“Paws off, Lanie.”

Lanie pouts, and then snickers. Beckett glares.

“So that’s why there might be trouble?”

“Mostly. Um… she came to my apartment to try and be motherly.” Lanie blinks in astonishment.

“It didn’t go well.”

“You don’t say?”

“I threw her out. Then Castle evicted her. Um… I don’t think we’re on great terms.”

“You don’t say.” Lanie says again. “Wow.” Her sharp brain works. “So she might pick a fight, or she might try and mother you, or” –

“She might try headshrinking me.”

“But you got a shrink. Who is it, anyway?”

“Carter Burke.”

“Say what?”

“Uh?”

“He’s the best around. How’d you manage that?” Lanie regards Kate as if she’s caught the fabled unicorn.

“Um…made an appointment, like you do?”

“Wow. No wonder you and your dad are pretty much fixed. He’s legendary. Even us corpse choppers have heard of him.”

“Oh. Castle said he was really good – Castle researched him – but I wasn’t really paying attention. He’s got a giant redwood up his ass.”

“Yeah, but he’s the best. Lucky you.”

Beckett makes a face. “I guess,” she says. “Anyway, that’s the story. Just in case. Wanna stick with the crostini, or d’you want some real food?”
“Stick with these, and I need to get some more wine. Now, girlfriend, I want some answers.” Beckett looks terrified. “I wanna know all the juicy details about Castle.”

“Nope.”

“But Ka-ate,” Lanie whines.

“Nope. No kiss and tell.”

“You are no fun at all,” Lanie grumps. “Okay then. I’ll tell you about my last disaster of a date…”
Friday having largely passed without incident, Castle pads up to Beckett at the end of the day and favours her with a huge-eyed puppy-dog pathetic stare. She returns it with a coolly quizzical look. She knows what he wants, but a little fun won’t hurt and might cheer him up a tad.

“Something up, Castle?”

He widens his eyes further. It’s ridiculously appealing and goes straight to her hindbrain. Fortunately, her frontal cortex is in control. For now.

“You promised me dinner,” he whines. “But you haven’t said a word about it.”

“Well?” Beckett says innocently.

“Yes,” he whines even more pathetically. “You said you’d do dinner before tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Beckett says even more innocently. “Is something happening tomorrow?”

“Beckett!” he squeaks indignantly. “You know the movers are coming. You promised you’d do something nice…” he trails off. “You remember perfectly well! You’re just winding me up.”

Beckett sniggers. “Took you a while,” she grins. “Of course I remember. There’s a nice Thai takeaway menu waiting for us, and I even got some beer for you.”

Castle scowls theatrically. “You’re not nice to me,” he says very childishly. “If you’re not nice to me I won’t be nice to you.”

“Guess the swansdown-lined handcuffs’ll be wasted, then,” Beckett ripostes, and watches Castle splutter and choke. She starts to put away her papers, while he gripes and grousers under his breath, though his eyes are sparkling and delightfully wickedly crinkly. His mind is very clearly no longer on his woes. He’ll be even happier when he finds out what’s under her prim shirt and dress pants.

Her mischievous plans are somewhat foiled when Castle isn’t particularly responsive to being kissed when they get to her apartment, and then doesn’t evince much of an appetite for his favourite Thai dish – even when she steals part of it, which would normally evoke histrionic wails and the wreaking of revenge.

So instead of seducing him into happy, sated stillness, she tidies up, makes coffee, and then returns with it to snuggle into him and hug him close.

“You okay?” she asks quietly.

“Maybe. It’s just…”

“All changing?”

“Yeah,” he says heavily, and leans his cheek on her head. “I don’t see how we’ll get through tomorrow without an argument.”

“Mm. You’ve got a plan, though.”

“Yeah, but… I just think when the movers arrive Mother will suddenly wake up to reality and then she’ll be really upset. I hate it when she’s upset.”
“It’s not your fault, though.”

“But I told her she had to leave.”

“You gave her plenty of warnings. She could have stopped anytime, and then she wouldn’t be moving out. You’re not responsible for her choices, just like I’m not responsible for Dad’s. We talked about this, and you’re unhappy because you love her, but that doesn’t mean you need to cave in every time.”

“I know all that,” Castle says heavily, “but it doesn’t help.”

Beckett has another try at hugging him. He’s resistant, but she doesn’t drop her arms. He’s hugged her through her own emotional resistance before, and it’s always helped. She won’t abandon him now: he’s such a tactile person normally that he’d likely see it as confirmation that he’s on the wrong side of the argument. She’ll just stay here and hold him for a while. And so she strokes his shoulder and pets his hair, waiting until he’s somewhat soothed.

It takes a long time, before he loses some of the massive weight of misery that burdens him tonight; a long time of quiet and peace with no demands. His jaw loosens from the tight clench, and his hands relax and slide around her in return. She kisses him gently: no seduction, no hot desire, simply I’m here, you’re here, we’re okay. He holds her, then, for another peaceful, quiet space, and gradually Beckett feels his big body ease, the knots of his muscles untie, and his upset lift. She kisses him gently again, on his cheek, and lays her head back on the broad, comfortable shoulder where it belongs.

“Promise you’ll come tomorrow?” he says, less certain than usual.

“Promise,” Beckett says definitively. “Where am I going?”

“Come to the loft first – say eleven-thirty? Then we’ll all go to the new place together.” His large fingers twist and play with her hair, his palm grazing her jawline. “With the three of us, and the movers, unpacking shouldn’t take long.”

“Mm,” Beckett says. “If you need me round earlier, call.”

“Uh?”

“Um…” She doesn’t want to say if Martha kicks off and storms out and you’re upset. “In case you need someone to order the movers around. You’re not much of a dictator.”

“I can dictate just fine,” Castle says firmly, “when I need to.”

“Huh,” she says disbelievingly.

Castle smiles slowly and lazily. Beckett sees it with considerable pleasure and a healthy dose of relief that he’s come out of his despondency. “An essential item in every dictator’s armory is handcuffs. But since you don’t seem to have any with you, despite your earlier promises, I’ll just have to improvise.”

Desire flashes darkly from his eyes to hers, and he shifts her without effort for his mouth to cover hers, to trap her slim wrists in one broad span and use his unhindered hand to undo that prim and proper plain shirt, and push it off her shoulders. It’s but the work of one wicked moment to wind it around her wrists behind her back, to knot it just firmly enough: more than the illusion of restraint, given once before when she’d shown him that deeper trust, less than the reality. Her eyes are hot and sparkling; small gold flares in the endless depths, and she softens against him, that unusual
femininity that only ever arrives when they’re alone; the first clue he’d had that she wasn’t the badass Beckett of the bullpen.

He kisses her smoothly again, then sets her back to allow for the unprotested removal of her pants, and a slow, scorching perusal from pate to pedicure and back again.

“Pretty,” he says suavely. “You put them on just for me, didn’t you?”

*Them* means a matched set of midnight blue lingerie, form-fittingly brief and lacy.

“I like them.” He runs a finger along the edge of the bra, down into her cleavage. “Very… directional.” She shivers, and her nipples peak. “Not that I do what other people tell me. Being a dictator, you see.” He nips delicately at her ear, and she wriggles against him. “I guess I’d better think up some suitably tyrannical actions to deal with you.”

She smirks. “Like what?” she purrs.

“Mmm,” Castle rumbles into her neck. “Well, your hands are tied, so I guess I can do anything I like.” He stands up. “Starting with relocating you.” He picks her up, puts her over his shoulder, pats her ass, at which she squeals in vocal protest, grins evilly and drops her back into his arms to kiss her hard and stop the noise; and then takes her through to the bedroom and arranges her neatly on the bed.

“I want a kiss,” his Kat pouts at him.

“Do you?” Castle says.

She moves sinuously, and disentangles her hands.

“Yes.”

She sits up and hauls him down in one fast movement. Castle, however, isn’t inclined to give up on his immediate plan, and therefore allows himself to be hauled down and thereby also land on top of her, pinning her down. She’d have done better to dispose of the shirt first, too. Tactical mistake, that, Beckett. He leaves most of his weight on her, preventing her moving, and retrieves her crumpled cotton shirt, threading it quickly through the spindles of her headboard and then detaching each hand from his neck and knotting the shirt-sleeves around them. Who needs handcuffs when he can invent some MacGyveresque solution right here?

“Too bad,” he says, and acquires a hungry, wolfish look. “I’ve got different plans.” He dips his head to tickle his tongue at the hollow of her throat. She squirms under him. He sits back on his heels, between her legs, and undoes his own shirt exceedingly slowly, playing to the gallery. She watches with hot eyes and parted lips, and as it slips from his shoulders attempts to use her own feet to push him forward to fall over her once more. She fails.

“Tut, tut,” Castle says smugly. “That’s not going to work.” She growls. It would be a lot more effective if she wasn’t wearing two tiny scraps of midnight blue lace, neither of which are concealing her feelings in the slightest. He flexes slightly, and smirks at the indrawn breath. When she’s in this mood, he knows exactly what a show of strong muscle and wide chest does for her: fires her up and melts her down. She’s watching him intently, more aroused with each small muscle movement designed to show off his power and potency, and completely unable to do anything about it, her hands held above her head.

He follows up by bending forward and licking a hot wet line down the valley between her lace-covered breasts, not touching her anywhere else, and then sits back again. He unbuckles his belt as
slowly as he had undone his shirt: watching her watching him watching her. Desire crackles on the air between them as it slides through the loops and to the floor. The slow scratch of the teeth of his pants zipper scrapes in the silence, and his pants follow the belt to the floor. She moves again, fluidly feline, locks ankles behind him, pushing at him. He doesn’t move, and tsks at her.

“You said I wasn’t much of a dictator,” he says. “Funny how you’re the one who can’t do anything.” She tugs a little on the shirt, but this time it doesn’t give. She looks at him, eyes wide and dark, but no hint of panic or uncertainty or fear.

“Seems not.” She bites down on her lower lip, and strokes it with the very tip of her tongue. It’s intensely provocative, and Castle is certainly intensely provoked. He leans forward again, propped on his arms so that he doesn’t touch her, so that she has to arch and curve towards him and still not reach her goal, and with mobile mouth slides the dark lace damply across each neat breast. She pushes into him, and sighs softly.

He takes his time. No reason to hurry, no need to leave, no desire to stop. Her pert nipples deserve plenty of attention, and he provides it: long strokes and furling rolls, palmed pressure, the occasional drag of teeth. She likes all of it. He likes all of it.

“Who said I wasn’t very dictatorial? I’m dictating your reactions,” he growls into her ear, and she shivers against him and wriggles and tries to steal a kiss. And fails.

“Come here,” she breathes. “Come kiss me, Castle.”

“Oh, I’ll kiss you,” he returns, and does: all the way down her throat, cleavage, stomach and to the narrow strip of lace that covers her. He rests hands on her hips, leans up on his elbows and smiles lazily all the way up her body. “Now, where were we?” he asks rhetorically, and proceeds to prove that in this one matter he is quite definitely dictating her actions, reactions, and vocalisations. Calling them words might be overstating the case somewhat, though his name is prominent, until she dissolves on a long a and a convulsive shudder and her body relaxes beneath him, quivering with aftershock and completely his.

She’s untied before her eyes open, cuddled in; lax and soft and draped around him; her arms creeping around his neck, pulling him closer, over her, opening for him and to him and welcoming him in. She’s so very tight around him, as close as they can be, and they move together as her hips curve and arch to his thrusts and at last they come together on each other’s name.

They fall asleep still tangled together, without even cleaning up.

Regrettably, Castle has set his alarm for six, and while it’s not Beckett’s klaxon it’s still plenty loud enough to wake the dead, to which Castle’s sleep bears a considerable resemblance. He jerks into wakefulness, is entirely not inclined to return to sleep at the thought of the nightmares that consideration of the coming hours will undoubtedly produce, and gives Beckett a hopeful jab with a finger which does not produce anything except a sleepy groan.

“Wha’zz’t? Sleeping.”

“Gotta go. Movers.” He rolls out of bed, discovers his revolting state, and aims for the shower. Beckett doesn’t shift.

“Moversh?” she slurs through a yawn. But Castle’s already under the hot water, frantically trying to clean himself. He needs to be an hour ahead of the movers, just in case. In case of what, he doesn’t want to think about right now.
“Movers!” she suddenly squeaks, and her eyes fly open. “You got to go, Castle. You’ll be late.” About that point her ears catch up with her eyes and hear the shower. Some time after that her brain catches up with both of them. At that point she falls out of bed, staggers to the kitchen, puts the kettle on and wonders how the hell she is awake at six-fifteen on an off-shift Saturday. It doesn’t seem fair.

Coffee helps. Marginally. She does remember to make one for Castle, who arrives at a run, downs the coffee in one scalding mouthful, kisses her hard and departs on a call of See you at eleven-thirty. Or possibly at elven-thirty, which at this hour of the day is equally probable since she should still be dreaming, though elves are not the dream she’d choose.

She glares at her empty coffee cup, glares at the empty space where Castle had been, currently refilling with air, glares around at her bedroom door – and goes back to bed.

Three hours later, her alarm wakes her body, which, being at a more reasonable time, also wakes her brain. Her brain tells her she needs a shower, probably three hours ago, and then lots of coffee. It seems like a plan.

Castle has made it home with, unusually, a reasonably adequate margin to spare. He even manages to shave and style his hair: feeling that he needs all the moral reinforcement he can get. It’s all in the small details. Speaking of which, a not-so-small detail is swishing down the stairs. There is a considerable aura of tragedy queen around her. He hopes it’s Desdemona. He expects it to be Lady Macbeth, possibly combined with Regan and Goneril. If only he could claim his mother were Ophelia, and have her safely committed. A convent seems unlikely, though White Plains would be a good alternative.

“Good morning, Mother. Would you like some breakfast?”

“Ah, Richard,” Martha declaims. “Come to deliver the coup de grace?”

“Mother,” he says with exemplary, if pained, patience, “you are moving to an apartment which most actors would kill for; you will have ample opportunity to – how did you put it to Alexis? Ah yes – conduct individual rehearsals, which is a phrase I truly wish I had never heard – and don’t even try to explain, thank you; and your thoroughly excessive allowance will continue to support your Bergdorf habit until you are too old to stagger there no matter how many Mimosas you consume. Even you cannot describe this as a coup de grace.” He hands her the keys to the new apartment, and removes the old keys from her purse.

Martha regards him with a very black look indeed. “You are evicting me, however you dress it up. This is my home.”

“No,” Castle says, still patiently. “This is my home. Your apartment will be your home. Now, the movers will arrive in less than an hour. Are you ready for them?”

His mother looks at him, and suddenly Castle sees tears forming in her sharp blue eyes. He steps forward and hugs her.

“Mother, it’ll be fine.”

“I just wanted us all to be a family.”

Castle doesn’t say anything at once. His mother might be upset but he’s not going to change his mind now.
“We’ll still be a family. Nothing will ever change that.” He hugs her again and then steps back. “Coffee?”

“No. I shall go and attend to my packing. I will depart with the utmost dignity.” Her eyes are now tearless and hard.

Castle regards her departing, poker-stiff back with some dismay. He would have been a lot more relieved, paradoxically, if his mother had gone for loud and theatrical histrionic argument. He’s still unhappily sure that there is more emotion to come.

He pours himself more coffee, and awaits the movers.

The movers duly arrive precisely at eight a.m., consisting of two men who more closely resemble refrigerators than humans. Castle, who even in his state of trepidation can’t help himself making mental notes for minor characters, is rather pleased by them.

His mother, however, is not. The first intimation of this is a high-pitched screech which fills the loft.

“Not that one, dolt! This one!”

Clearly her direction of the Dream has affected her vocabulary. Castle is already half-way upstairs before his brain has instructed his feet.

His mother is over-stressed, and is doing her best to ensure that everyone around her suffers from the same malady. The removal men are commendably placid, though Castle does take a surreptitious peek to see whether they have donned earplugs. He looks around. Very little is packed. He opens his mouth to start directing –

– and most fortunately Alexis appears, returned from her sleepover earlier than expected, and seeming as if she’d dressed rather hurriedly and a little flustered.

“Grams,” she says, “what are you doing? I thought you promised I could help? You said you wouldn’t start without me. We talked about this!”

Castle takes a sneaky, silent step backwards to the door.

“Sweetie, of course you can help. But…”

“But nothing,” Alexis wails, and half-turns to drop a wink encompassing her father and both removers. “You promised. If you don’t let me help how’ll I know where you want anything put in your apartment? You said I could pick a room, too.”

Castle admires, in a rather appalled fashion, the creative use of emotional blackmail inherent in Alexis’s tirade, though he does rather wonder why his mother hasn’t spotted that it would be far more appropriate to a preteen than a fifteen-year old. No doubt it has something to do with her own ability to throw tantrums, which makes Alexis’s behaviour completely explicable. To his mother, not to him. If she hadn’t winked, he’d have been considering Alexis’s sanity.

“How can I start on my interior design career” – what? What has Alexis been saying to his mother? – “if you won’t even let me help arrange your apartment?”

“But sweetie” –

“Grams,” Alexis whines. Beckett would have recognised the patented Castle pathetic, puppy-dog,
wide-eyed expression. Of course, she’d have ignored it. Just as well she isn’t actually here to scoff. It would have ruined the whole production.

“Darling, of course you can. But these dreadful removers are utterly confusing me.”

Alexis turns to Castle, winks again, and says, “Dad, give me and Grams a minute or two.”

“Grams and I,” Castle says. “How many times must I tell you?” He locks gazes with the two removers. “D’you guys want coffee? The girls here’ll take a few minutes” – Alexis produces a sizzingly furious scowl – “to get organised.”
By the time the removers have been supplied with, and drunk, their coffee and returned upstairs with promises of substantial largesse if they can only succeed in packing his mother up by eleven, without killing her, (he feels he has to add that qualifier) Castle is more than a little stressed. He considers very carefully whether to provide assistance, for all of half a second, decides that discretion is the better part of valour and retreats to his office, though he leaves the door open in case he is needed.

There is a certain amount of high pitched – er – discussion upstairs, but since no corpses slither horribly down the staircase Castle declines to intervene, though the loft’s atmosphere is becoming more and more strained. At five to eleven, he mounts the stairs to find out what the state of play is.

It’s surprisingly quiet, though that does not imply peaceful or relaxed. There are many boxes. Alexis is sitting on top of two of them, directing operations. His mother is creating chaos almost as fast as the removers are bringing order.

“Mother,” he says, “don’t you need to get to the theatre?”

“But we’re not finished,” she snaps.

“We’ll finish for you.”

“Evicting me already? I should have expected that. You can’t wait to get rid of me.”

Castle recognises this as the beginnings of the histrionic argument he’s been expecting to arrive since six a.m., and clamps down on his temper. Again.

“I don’t want you to be late for your pre-matinee efforts,” he says through gritted teeth. “Seeing as you’re off-off Broadway’s new directing star.”

“It’s so nice to know that you’re considering my welfare and my future, Richard,” Martha says acidly. “I’d begun to think that you’d forgotten that.”

Alexis cringes in the corner. The removers find it necessary to remove some boxes right out of the room and down the stairs. Castle’s teeth grind.

“I brought you up and made sure you always had a home. I did everything to keep our family together, and you’re destroying it.”

Castle’s temper snaps. “You sent me to boarding school. After I went to college you barely saw me from one end of the year to the next. Then you married that con artist and didn’t even tell me you were getting married. The next time I saw you was when you turned up destitute on my doorstep thirteen years ago and you’ve been here ever since. I’ve made sure you had a home. So don’t guilt trip me about what you did for me as a child. I know what you did and what you sacrificed and how you struggled but it was your choice to keep me. Just like it was your choice to keep interfering with Beckett despite being asked to step back. You chose this. So quit the crap. You are moving. Right now, you’re going to go and direct your matinee. Tonight, you will be in your own apartment. We will have got it ready for you. This time, no-one is leaving you homeless or penniless.” He catches an infuriated breath. “Because you’re still family. Not that you seem to appreciate it.”

Martha regards him, white and shocked.
“Just go,” he says. “We have to finish this,” and he turns away from her.

“Richard…”

“No. I’m not having this fight any longer. Go and be a star, Mother. It’s what you deserve.”

She leaves without another word being said, her shoulders shaking. As she reaches the head of the stairs a muffled sniff can be heard, followed by the rustle of a Kleenex.

Castle slumps down and sits on the floor. “That went well,” he says bitterly.

Alexis slides off her perch and comes over to hug him. “She’ll come round,” she says. “She’s just scared.”

“Yeah. Well.” He pushes it away. “Where’d the men go?”

“Hiding.”

“Wish I could’ve,” Castle says under his breath. “Let’s get them back up here. Is everything packed?”

“Dad…”

“Don’t worry, pumpkin. Let’s just get this finished.”

Castle doesn’t see Alexis’s worried look at the back of his head, since he’s exiting the room to find the removers.

The men turn out to be in the kitchen, indulging in a no-doubt much needed drink. Neither of them say anything. There is a slight aura of man-to-man sympathy.

“Okay,” Castle says, “let’s get going again.”

At that point the door sounds. Castle goes to it to find Beckett on the other side.

“Is it safe?” she asks, and then actually looks properly at him. “Oh,” she adds, and hugs him. “Rough?”

“Mhm,” Castle mutters. The hug tightens. When she lets go of him, the two removers are regarding him with some admiration and a definite sense of can-I-have-one-of-those-too-please? It doesn’t do much to improve Castle’s mood. Fortunately they remove themselves upstairs, from where Alexis’s best organising tones can be heard. The remaining boxes transfer from upstairs to downstairs and then from downstairs to the removal truck. Castle watches to ensure no damage is done, and he, Alexis and Beckett carry lighter boxes, leaving the two big guys to deal with the heavy items.

By one p.m. everything seems to have been cleared. Castle bribes the men to go and have lunch on him for an hour or so, and after they come back they’ll all go and start unpacking at the other end.

Lunch at the Castle loft is quiet. Martha’s parting shots and Castle’s loss of temper hang over the table like a shroud, and while Beckett leaves her hand over Castle’s knee as much as she can manage, it doesn’t lift a single particle of his gloom. Even Alexis is suppressed, though she’s regarding Beckett with a hopeful kind of look, as if Beckett is a small light in the darkness. It’s not exactly where Beckett expected to find herself, in anyone’s opinion. As soon as the sandwiches are eaten, Alexis disappears, and Castle beckons Beckett through to his office.
He shuts the door behind her and grabs her, burying his face in her hair and holding on to her as if she’s his lifebelt.

“It was awful,” he says to the top of her head. “Mother at her dignified tragedy queen worst. She hates me for making her move out.” He sighs, with a hint of moisture. “I hate me for making her move out,” he adds miserably. “But we can’t go on like this.” He sniffs. “I didn’t want this to happen.” Beckett pats his shoulder, and then strokes him comfortingly. “Why can’t she just act like a normal mother?”

“Come here,” Beckett says softly, and realises that she’s borrowing one of Castle’s techniques for soothing her when she’s upset. It seems to work, since he nuzzles deeper into her hair.

“All that about how she sacrificed for me. She’s my parent. Isn’t that how it’s supposed to go? She didn’t have to keep me. Even then, she could have given me up, or…”

“But she didn’t.”

“That’s not the point,” Castle bites out. “The point is that she chose to keep me. So blaming me and making me feel guilty that she did forty years on is a complete headfuck. Has she felt like that for the last forty years?”

_Uh-oh_, Beckett thinks. This is about to go totally wrong. She doesn’t let go of him, though he’s anything but clinging to her now.

“Even if she did give up everything, surely taking her in and everything I’ve done since she turned up here makes up for it? Or don’t I get any credit for that? After all,” he emits acidly, “I can afford it. It’s not a sacrifice.”

_Ouch_, she thinks, and pets him, trying to give comfort without actually having to find words which, try as she does, she can’t locate. She becomes aware that he is very close to angry, masculine tears: devastated and strung out on the day so far. He’d expected, she remembers, that it would be his mother who would be emotionally wrecked. Instead, it’s Castle, forced to a decision he never wanted to make, and burdened with the blame for other people’s bad choices. She moves him to a chair, and sits him down before sitting in his lap where she can continue to hold him close and pet him. His face remains buried in her hair; his hands still.

And suddenly she’s not sympathetic, she’s angry.

Angry not at Castle, but at his mother, at the bitter words that have hurt _her_ Castle, her love. She is absolutely not having this. She’ll deal with Martha later. Right now, she is going to pull this poison out and drain it.

“Stop saying that complete crap,” she rips out. “None of this was your fault. You’re still not responsible for her choices. We talked about this. You talked about it with Dr Burke. He told you not to feel guilty and he told you not to sacrifice your own life for hers. You’re not to do what I did. You hear me? You’ve done more than anyone would have done. You do nothing but give.” She draws a fast breath and doesn’t let him get a word in: her voice rising. She shakes his shoulders, hard. “Your mother is having a tantrum. Nothing else. You still love her and she still loves you but she’s behaving like a toddler. Just like with a toddler, you’ve set some reasonable limits and because she’s never hit them before she’s making a fuss. She’s picked the thing most likely to hurt you and _I am not listening to you beat yourself up about it_ when it’s utter crap. She chose to screw everything up and ignore you. It’s your life too.” Another fast breath. “Stop blaming yourself. _This is not your fault._”
The last words are delivered with skull-crushing force. Castle’s spine straightens without any input from his brain as her tone goes directly from ears to bones. He’d thought Montgomery was intimidating. Roy Montgomery has nothing on an enraged Kate Beckett. Clearly the other side of soft Kat is actually a sabre-toothed tiger. And she still hasn’t finished.

“If you don’t get your head out your ass about this I’ll march you off to Dr Burke right now, in cuffs at gunpoint if I have to, and leave you there until he’s fixed you. None of this is on you. So get up from that chair and stop it right now.”

And then she hauls his head round to hers and kisses him in a way she has never, ever initiated: wholly in command and in charge, ravaging his mouth without his permission but suddenly with his complete surrender. Far too soon she pulls back from him, her eyes blazing and her expression terrifying.

“Up!” she orders. “We are going to do this and you are going to stop blaming yourself.”

There is the sound of applause from the doorway. Beckett subsides into flaming embarrassment at the sight of Alexis.

“See, Dad? Grams was just being a pain in the ass.”

“Alexis!”

“Don’t ‘Alexis!’ me. You listen to Detective Beckett, Dad. Now go and talk to the movers. They came back five minutes ago.”

Beckett goes an even darker red. Given the choice, she wouldn’t have been kissing Castle in full view of his daughter and two random removal men. She looks around hopefully in case there is somewhere to hide. Since Castle is doing what his daughter has just told him to do, she can’t hide behind him.

Alexis shuts the office door with herself on the same side as Beckett. There is an extremely awkward silence.

“Um… I’m glad you said all that to Dad.”

“Uh?”

“He won’t believe me, so maybe he’ll believe you.” Alexis droops. “Grams was really horrible to him, and it’s not fair. Now he’ll be upset.”

Beckett straightens her own spine. “Not if I have anything to do with it,” she says.

Alexis brightens up. “Promise?”

“Yes.”

Alexis departs. Beckett wonders what on earth she’s just promised. On the other hand, Castle may be a kind, forgiving soul, but she is not. Martha Rodgers has just made a very big mistake. Mother or not, there is no way that Beckett is allowing her to hurt Beckett’s Castle like this. This evening should be very, very interesting. She smiles, and there are knives and blood in her expression.

The removal men avoid Beckett’s gaze almost as assiduously as she avoids theirs. It makes communication a tad difficult, but Castle, though locked down tight, seems to have a fairly clear
idea of the location of the major items, and Alexis deals with the decorative matters. Beckett carries boxes and doesn’t proffer any opinion at all. By the end of this evening Martha will have had an ungracious plenty of her opinions. Oh yes.

Castle is locked down because his two emotional options are to finish with the movers, go home, and then either throw everyone out of his house so that he can have the temper tantrum he wants to have, in private, or throw everyone but Beckett out of his house so that he can take her to bed and lose himself in her until he feels better, again in private. Neither would be fair to Alexis. Since he is a better parent than his mother, he won’t upset Alexis like that. However, his fragile temper displays itself in politely curt instruction to the movers, who are carefully exact and do precisely what they are told.

By five-thirty everything is completed. No doubt, Castle thinks bitterly, it will all be wrong, but he’s past caring. It’s done. The movers remove themselves and the packaging, Beckett very domestically pushes a vacuum cleaner around the rugs (the domesticity really doesn’t suit her), and Alexis titivates the pictures and posters. Pride of place goes to a new poster of A Midsummer Night’s Dream, in which his mother’s directorial debut is prominent. He’d planned to present it to her at her party, but right now he doesn’t care. He’ll find her a different present. A sacrificial lamb, perhaps. Or a scapegoat.

He looks around, and is satisfied that no more can be done.

“Let’s go back home,” he says to the others.

“Okay,” Alexis assents.

Beckett flicks him a rather are-you-sure look.

“I think we all deserve a drink. Beckett, I still have some Blue Mountain…” Truth to tell, he knows he should let her go, do what they’d discussed and have a small dinner with only himself and Alexis, allowing the two of them to find their familial equilibrium again, but he doesn’t want Beckett to go just yet.

“If there’s coffee, how could I refuse?” she says, achieving lightness with some effort, and packs them all into her cruiser to take them back to the loft.

The drink is awkward. Alexis keeps casting shy glances at Beckett, who is tense in a way she hadn’t been earlier. Castle desperately wants to have his arm around her, to take comfort from her body tucked into his, but he can’t do that with Alexis there. It’s not appropriate, no matter what he’d said to Beckett about Alexis working out the situation.

Beckett drains her coffee in a way that indicates that the day is, for her, over, bids farewell to Alexis, who tactfully excuses herself upstairs, and collects her light jacket. Castle escorts her to the door, and turns to her before she presses the handle down.

“I’m glad you were here,” he mutters, wrapping his arms around her. “I wish…”

She hugs him close. “You and Alexis need some time together. Tomorrow… look, call me, okay?” She plants a kiss on the small part of chin that’s all she can reach. “I’ve got no plans, so…”

“Okay.” He sounds despondent, and she kisses him again: he turns his head so that she can meet his mouth.

“It’ll be okay,” she promises. “It’ll all be okay.” Castle holds her very tightly for a further moment, and then allows her to leave, her sneakers making no sound on the hallway. He feels unreasonably
as if she’s disappeared, a cobweb caught by the wind, leaving him only fragmented strands where she should be. If only she had been able to bring herself to stay.

Alexis returns downstairs to find Castle morosely flicking through takeout menus without really looking at any of them.

“Detective Beckett wouldn’t stay?” she asks, disappointedly. “I thought…”

“No,” Castle says heavily. “She said tonight was for us to be a family.”

“Oh. But…”

“No.”

“But… I thought… I thought she was going to stay to cheer you up.”

“She’s not ready. She was going to come over next week.”

“Okay,” says Alexis doubtfully. “But I wish she’d stayed.”

“Me too,” Castle says miserably. He makes an effort. “Thai, Chinese, or pizza?”

“Let’s go out. Can we have Mexican? We could walk up to Rosa Mexicano. Please, Dad? Otherwise we’ll just stare at the walls and then you’ll mope.”

“Okay. Whatever, pumpkin. Let’s go and eat too many tacos and too much guacamole.”

“No sombreros. No singing.”

“No fun,” says Castle, but his heart isn’t in it and both of them know it.

Beckett hadn’t wanted to leave at all. She’d wanted to stay, cuddle Castle and keep him happier: listen to him recover his usual joyfulness, or be there to give him the contact he is very likely to need. Sex might not solve problems, but lovemaking can make up for a hell of a lot. She also knows that Alexis will be thinking that she, Beckett, had meant that she would stop Castle being upset by staying, and is likely a little confused and upset herself that Beckett had left.

She’ll explain to them both in due time. They’ll understand, when she explains why she didn’t stay now.

It belatedly occurs to Beckett that she’s been so angry with Martha all day that she’s barely worried for a second about Castle and Alexis as a family unit. She stops off at home to pick up her shield and for a drink of tea – not even her best Ethiopian coffee will compete with the Blue Mountain which Castle had shared with her – and contemplates that. She’d barely thought about the close relationship Castle and Alexis have, and she certainly hadn’t been stabbed or stung by it. Okay, so they hadn’t exactly been their usual bubbly and chattery selves: no jokes or smartass comments, but they’d been doing things as a family and she hadn’t twitched an eyelash, she’d simply pitched in and got on with helping out.

Dr Burke had said it: she couldn’t expect to be comfortable and fixed with one visit, but this least comfortable of visits had left her more comfortable thereafter. Not that much of it had been in their home. Still, it was easier. Lots easier. So maybe, just maybe, her instinctive agreement to the invitation for her dad and her to dinner – wasn’t a reversion to bad habits, but really was because she was less stressed by it, more familiar with it, just plain better about it.
She drains her tea and sets her cup down with a confident click. Time to go and deal with Martha Rodgers.
Won’t you stay with me?

Beckett has carefully arrived at the theatre half an hour before the interval. She really does not care that Martha will want to watch her scenes from the wings, take notes, and deal with any points tomorrow. She can just miss them.

Beckett, in fact, is on a mission. She strides into the back of the theatre, through the stage door, holding up her shield at the doorman without breaking step.

“You!” It’s Derren, looking terrified, but sober. “Why are you here? No-one’s been killed.”

“No. Not so much as a dead critic.” She smiles with no humour at all. “Where is Mrs Rodgers?”

“She’s in the wings.”

“Side?” Beckett snaps.

“Left, usually.”

Beckett strides off, Derren left staring unhappily in her wake, to locate a stagehand.

“Please would you fetch Mrs Rodgers,” she says to the first one she finds on the left hand side. It’s not a question, and despite the politeness, it’s also not a request. The hand looks precisely once at her face and scuttles off as fast as quietness permits. Very shortly he returns, with Martha in tow.

Had Beckett been in the slightest bit bothered about anything other than Castle’s feelings, she might have cared about the slight red rim to Martha’s eyes and less than total confidence. However, she is still carried on a tide of cold fury that his own mother has hurt him so badly, and she is simply not having it. Her ire has carried her right over any discomfort about talking to Martha.

“You owe Castle an apology,” Beckett opens up, icily.

“What are you doing here?”

“Telling you that you’ve managed something I’d have bet was impossible. You’ve hurt your son – you know, the one you claim to love more than anything,” Beckett says with flaying sarcasm – “so badly that he actually thinks that you’ve never cared about him at all. That you’ve blamed him for even existing.” She lets that sink in. “That everything he’s done for you, giving you a home, money, love – doesn’t count because he can afford it.” She watches every word hit. “Of course, from what I’ve seen recently, that might be true. You haven’t exactly shown him that you appreciate him.”

Martha says nothing. She is incapable of speech.

“You’d better decide what really matters to you. Because it doesn’t look to me like it’s Castle.” Beckett turns on her heel, and then turns back. “He thought you were a family. He thought you loved him like he loves you. Did you? Because he doesn’t think so any more.”

She turns again, and walks away. Martha is left shaking behind her, tears falling down her suddenly-old, crumpled cheeks. Beckett’s cold contempt has pierced her in a way that nothing else could have done. She totters to a chair, alone in the dark of backstage.
Beckett whirls out, still raging at Martha’s complete lack of care for Castle’s emotions and surfing the wave of her anger. She marches away from the theatre, exuding intimidating fury, which clears a path through the Manhattan streets. Shortly, she passes a pizza place, and stops. She’s hungry, now the rage is dissipating and her adrenaline is starting to leak away. She goes in, sits down, and orders.

When she’s done, during which time not one single person apart from a rather nervous server has approached her, she looks at her watch. It’s closer to ten than nine, since she hasn’t hurried her meal: pizza, dessert and then coffee. She considers having another coffee. She has time, she thinks, and orders one. She has to give Castle and Alexis all evening to be a family, after all. She’s made her own decisions about tonight as she’s eaten.

Finally, she has no more ways of wasting time. She pays the check, leaves the tip, and picks up a cab.

Castle and Alexis had returned from dinner somewhat before nine, neither one of them happy, and Castle completely devoid of any of his normal cheer.

“I really thought Detective Beckett would stay,” Alexis had said on the way back. “She said she’d stop you being upset.” Castle had managed not to choke on that. It doesn’t help his mood now. Beckett hasn’t stayed, and she hasn’t stopped him being upset, and he knows she’d said that he didn’t expect her to have dinner with them but he’s still hurt that she didn’t.

He bids Alexis good night and then turns to his office, on-line games, and the bottle of whiskey. It won’t make him any happier, but it might distract him for a short while. He plays without any enthusiasm, sips the whiskey, which doesn’t help, and dissolves into a morose marsh of misery. He hunches into his chair, and wishes fruitlessly that he’d pushed Beckett to stay; that he had insisted; that he hadn’t given her so much support when she can’t even be here now to support him. Even though she’d come today and helped and stayed, more than she’d ever promised, he wants her to be here now, and she’s not. Contrarily, he doesn’t bother texting, or calling. If she won’t be there for him, he’s not going to beg. He drinks another sip of whiskey, and remains sunk in gloom. Would it have killed her to support him tonight?

When he half-hears a noise he nearly doesn’t bother going to investigate. What’s the point? If it’s his mother, she can go to her new home. She probably just came back here on autopilot and then found her keys didn’t work. It certainly isn’t because she has any desire to make nice with him: that’s perfectly clear from today. It’s probably the pipes knocking: an airlock, or something. The building managers can look into it tomorrow. He slumps in his chair and has another sip. The noise repeats, more loudly.

Annoyed, Castle heaves himself out of his chair, determined to give his mother (he is sure it must be her) a considerable piece of his mind. She doesn’t live here any more. Banging on his door and no doubt waking Alexis is unacceptable. He stomps to the door, and flings it open.


Beckett steps inside, shuts the door behind her, and looks up at him. “I guess you weren’t expecting me?” she says dryly.

Castle doesn’t answer. He simply hauls her against him and once more buries his face in her hair. He couldn’t let go of her if it meant his slow and agonised demise; he can’t bear not to have her so tightly in his arms that she can’t ever leave. She came back.
She came back.

Her hands have slid up around his neck, holding him, and he’s leaning on her, utterly undone that she came back, desperately clinging to her so she won’t go away again: his Beckett who is here, where and when he never expected her.

“You came back,” he whispers. “You came back.”

“Come here,” she murmurs. “Just come here. It’s okay.” She steers him to the couch, and gently pushes him to sit down, then joins him, replacing her arms around his neck and waist, letting him re-inter his face in her hair. She becomes aware that his breathing is short and choppy; the presumption of tears without the reality. “It’s all going to be okay.”

“I didn’t think you’d come back tonight.”

Beckett doesn’t say anything for a second. It had taken her all of dinner to gather up her courage actually to do so, though she’d intended to return from the moment she’d left.

“I always meant to,” she eventually emits. “It just took me a while to pull myself together.” She doesn’t mention the intervening meeting with Martha. “And you needed to have dinner with Alexis, without me.” She pats his head softly. “I’m here now.”

“Mm,” Castle half-whimpers. “Don’t go.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” She holds him closer, trying to cosset him. He stays leaning on her for some time, heavy and wounded, as close as he can manage. Slowly, his hands curve around her waist and shoulder; more slowly than that, his face moves from her head downward, and he presses a kiss into her neck: no sexuality, as soft and simple as he would have kissed a baby. She turns into him, satiny cheek pressing into late-night stubbling, and waits. Nothing happens, and Castle doesn’t speak. She carries on holding on to him, and drifts.

When next anything happens, Beckett is half-dozing, Castle propped between her and the arm of the couch.

“Dad?”

Castle startles into some sort of life. “Pumpkin? What’re you doing awake?”

“Why aren’t you in bed? It’s the middle of the night, Dad. Go to bed.”

Beckett has slithered down to ensure she’s not in view. She really does not like the thought of the explanations she’d have to give.

“Okay. But you get back to bed now. If I should be asleep, you sure should. Scoot!”

Alexis scoots. Castle stretches, and yawns, and then cuddles up again.


“Don’t go,” Castle says, desperately. “Don’t leave. I don’t want you to.”

“Okay. Not going anywhere.”

Castle takes that as a promise, clamps a hand around her wrist, and tows her to his bedroom. Beckett has a sudden memory of an illustration of Christopher Robin towing Pooh Bear, and moves a little faster. Her head will not be improved by bumps.
On reaching the bedroom, Castle abruptly remembers his manners. “Would you like the bathroom first?”

“Please,” Beckett says, becoming aware of biological necessity.

“There’s a spare toothbrush in the cabinet, too.”

Beckett disappears into the bathroom and closes the door with a firm click. Castle sits down very heavily on the edge of the bed and starts to pull his socks off, still dispirited and miserable.

He’s stripped down and huddled in a comfortable robe when Beckett re-emerges, wrapped in his spare robe, which drowns her.

“Oh,” he says with realisation. “Do you want a t-shirt or something to sleep in?”

“Yes, please.”

Castle rummages in his closet and finds a t-shirt that’s not quite likely to reach Beckett’s toes or strangle her in her sleep. She wriggles into it with a short but very attractive view of herself in nothing but panties, and disappointingly becomes entirely swamped in the fabric. It droops below her knees, mainly because it’s so wide on her that it’s falling off one shoulder. It is, regrettably, distressingly impervious to non-X-ray vision and to telepathic suggestions that it should droop a lot further. All the way to the floor, in fact. Since it doesn’t, his gloom is not alleviated, so he proceeds to his nightly ablutions uncheered, and returns no better.

In the interim, Beckett has snuggled herself into bed, and is watching him as he returns, hair dark against his pillows, eyes soft. He slips in beside her, and before he’s wholly settled she’s turned into him, nestled into his side, draped an arm over his chest and lain her head on his shoulder. It’s astonishingly comforting, and Castle is, finally, comforted.

“Go to sleep,” Beckett murmurs. “I’m not going anyplace. Love you.”

Castle is left almost wordless, and barely manages to choke out, “Love you,” in return. His arm doesn’t need instructed in order to wrap itself around her, and he drifts into sleep surrounded by the scent of her hair and the warm body curled against him, holding him gently, her strength bleeding into him.

*She came back,* is his last conscious thought. *She came back to me.*

Castle wakes up slowly, failing to understand why there is a weight on his chest and something tickling his nose. He yawns and flexes, and is greeted by a sleepy growl.

“No alarm,” Beckett mutters, and buries her head under the covers. This is unwelcome. If Beckett is in his bed, she shouldn’t be growling at him. She should be purring, preferably because he’s stroking her. And come to think of it, why is she –

Oh.

The disaster of the previous day falls in on Castle’s head, and he remembers precisely why Beckett is here. He slumps back on his pillows, miserable, and turns away.

A hand slides around him, followed by Beckett pressed to his back. “Still here. It’s okay.”

“It’s not okay,” Castle grates. “My mother blames me for everything and that’s not *fucking okay!*”
There is a brief, unpleasant silence.

“‘You’re right,’” Beckett says acerbically. “It’s not okay when your parent blames you for not being something. God knows I know how that feels. So you’re right. It’s not okay.” She pulls until he turns over to face her. “So are you going to let it warp you for years like I did or are you going to talk about it like I should have?”

Castle stares at her, shocked into intelligence by her tone. “You really don’t pull any punches, do you? Aren’t you supposed to be soft and sweet and sympathetic?”

“Me? You helped to fix me, your way. Now I’m returning the favour – my way. You never want soft lies, you want the real story. The true story.” She takes a deep breath. “The truth is, either your mother will apologise and mean it, or she won’t. Just like my dad. He was always sorry, but it didn’t stop the drinking till he was ready. And after he stopped, he was truly sorry, and he meant it. But by then I wasn’t able to believe him, and you know how that panned out. So don’t make the same mistakes I did, Castle. Don’t ruin your own life because of someone else.”

It’s her turn to roll away from him, to turn her back and hide her face; his to pull her back over and around.

“What aren’t you saying, Beckett? There’s more to that than you’ve said.” He thinks for a swift second. “Alexis said that she thought you were going to stay to cheer me up. But you didn’t stay, and you never told her a lie. So you didn’t say you were going to stay. So what did you say to her to make her think you were going to cheer me up?” He pins her down, searching her face. “You must have said something.”

She shakes her head.

“You did. So if it wasn’t staying – ‘cause you didn’t – then you meant something else.” His gaze rakes her face again. “You were angry yesterday. Not just angry, you were really mad with… my… mother – oh my God, Beckett. You went to see her. Oh my God.” His eyes have flown wide. Beckett makes a determined effort and manages to wriggle away and under the coverlet. “That’s why you didn’t stay.” His words spill out faster than his brain keeps up. “You went to give her hell. Oh my God. What did you say? What did you do? Do I need to bail her out? Do I need to bail you out?”

Beckett wriggles further down under the covers, and tries to become invisible. This is not a discussion she wants to have. Castle, sadly, has other ideas, strips off the covers, and hauls her back up.

“You went to talk to Mother. You can’t bear being near her, but you went in to bat because” – his eyes widen so far they’re sure to fall out – “because she hurt me. And then you came back here to stay over because I was upset even though you said just two days ago you couldn’t do it when Alexis was here. Kate…” He stops. “Oh, Kate.” He pulls her in and refuses to let her go, no matter her attempts to escape. “You did all that just because I was upset?”

“Not just,” arrives from the vicinity of his chest. “You were really miserable. It wasn’t fair.” She makes another attempt to disappear.

Castle has been completely distracted from his misery by Beckett’s astounding actions. Coming back to the loft had been quite surprising enough. Actually searching out his mother and – he has no doubt of this – tearing into her on his, Castle’s, behalf… he can barely believe it. He’d wanted her support, and thought it was missing. He’s received it in spades.
“Stop trying to wriggle off,” he says with mild, absent irritation. “Stay put. Stay right here.” He tucks her in, firmly. She’s not going anywhere. She belongs with him and that is where she’s staying. Not for the first time, she’s made her position perfectly plain – and it’s with him. All he can do is hold her tightly and take from her strength.

Because if she’s on his side, against her father and his mother; if she’s so sure that none of this is his fault, and says so in blunt, harsh words; if she’s here with him – then finally he can believe it, because his Beckett has never, ever softened or shaded the truth. Not told him it, and let him be hoist on his own assumptions, but she’s not lied to him since the mince pies. She’s not lying now. He relaxes back into the comfortable bed and pillows, and pulls Beckett into a better position, over his chest and with her head tucked just below his chin. A sidelong glance downward shows him only flaming colour and futile attempts to hide from him.

“You weren’t going to tell me, were you?” No answer. “You were just going to let me assume that you’d let us have dinner together and then sneaked back.”

“I did have dinner,” she mutters.

Castle makes a sceptical noise. “Not what I meant and you know it. Now, why did you go and accost Mother?”

“Told you. You were upset.” She clamps her mouth closed and tries to curl further under the covers. When that fails, mainly because Castle isn’t letting go of her, she tugs the covers up as far as she can over her head, and tries to hide.

“Stop hiding. I want to know what you said to Mother.”

“I want doesn’t get,” Beckett grumps. “Not telling you. ’S not important.” She clings on to the coverlet. Castle unpeels her fingers from it, one by one, and extricates her.

“I want to know,” he says firmly, rabid curiosity for the story having dispelled his last fragments of unhappiness. Or possibly it’s the effect of having Beckett in his loft, in his bed, and in his clasp. It hasn’t happened nearly often enough for his liking. He keeps her hands in his, so she can’t hide all over again. It occurs to him that she’s quite seriously embarrassed by the whole affair, and by the admission of her feelings that it makes. She isn’t exactly good at admitting her feelings, but he’s getting very good at understanding them whether she wants him to or not. Right now, he understands that she’s forced her way past her own feelings to put his first.

“It’s not important.”

Which invariably means that it is important, in everyone but Beckett’s eyes. That’s almost as big a tip-off as it’s fine.

“Yes, it is. It’s important to me. What did you say? I won’t be mad.”

There is a very extended silence.

“Just that she’d made you think she didn’t care about you.”

Castle doesn’t believe for an instant that this is the whole sum of the conversation. He waits.

“And that you used to think you were all family, and she loved you.”

More waiting.
“And I told her she’d better decide what really mattered,” Beckett mutters. “And then I left.”

Presumably without shooting anyone, Castle thinks, on the grounds that no-one’s breaking down the door to arrest Beckett.

He kisses the top of her head, which is the only part of her that he can see. “I’m not mad,” he says. “Really not,” and follows up with a hug. “Just…”

“Yeah?” rises nervously from the coverlet.

“Is the theatre still standing? Ow!”

Beckett emerges from the covers, eyes flashing dangerously. “Never mind about the theatre, you overgrown idiot! Of course it’s still standing.”

“Gotcha,” Castle murmurs smugly, “and now you’ve come out.” He kisses her hard. “No hiding.” Another kiss, deep and possessive, and he rolls so that he’s leaning down over her, a sleepy, sexy look on his face. “I don’t like you hiding from me, especially when you’re in my bed,” he drawls. “It means I have to hunt you out.”

“Neanderthal.”

“Not at all,” Castle pronounces suavely. “I’m a thoroughly modern man. On the other hand,” he purrs darkly, and places said hand on her stomach, fingers downward, “some things haven’t changed much over time.” He bends down and takes her mouth. His hand shifts to find the edge of his oversized t-shirt, and pull it out the way, his fingers return to slide over and then under her panties; she turns to him and her own elegant fingers embark on wickedly arousing actions and then everything else disappears in the hot haze of desire and lust and love.
“I didn't mean to hurt you

“Hi, Dad,” carols from the top of the stairs, as Castle and Beckett are addressing a large quantity of well-crisped bacon, pancakes and syrup, washed down with coffee.

“Hey,” Castle responds.

“Detective Beckett?” are the next words up. “I thought…”

“She came back,” Castle says, before Beckett can say anything evasive.

“You did? Awesome!” Alexis looks around. “Are there enough pancakes for me or do I need to make more?”

Beckett sits dumbfounded by Alexis’s complete non-issue with her presence. She’d been so worried about it, and Alexis doesn’t seem to care. It doesn’t stop her blushes.

“There are plenty,” Castle says.

Alexis plumps down at the table with a plate and starts to load it with pancakes and bacon. “Delicious,” she mumbles through a mouthful.

Beckett finishes her plateful and squirms uncomfortably. “I need to get home,” she says.

“Oh,” say both Castles together, identically disapproving for diametrically different reasons. “Why?”

“Chores. Gotta be ready for work tomorrow.”

“Oh,” they chorus disappointedly.

“Um, I’ll just get my things,” Beckett says, and slides off her stool. She disappears into the office en route to the bedroom.

Alexis turns and quirks her eyebrows at Castle, whose ears turn a delicate rose pink. She smirks knowingly. Fortunately, she doesn’t say anything. Castle endeavours to preserve some parental dignity. He’s not really succeeding when the door sounds.

Castle looks at Alexis, who shrugs, teenager-esque. Castle isn’t expecting anyone at ten-thirty on a Sunday, either. Alexis bounces up to open the door.

“Oh,” she says flatly. “It’s you. What do you want?”

Castle turns round slowly with a feeling of gut-wrenching dread.

“Mother.” He is entirely unwelcoming. He can only just hear the very quiet click of his bedroom door closing, and wonders which side of the door Beckett is on. A definitive set of hard clacks on the floor tell him that it’s this one. Beckett walks out to the table, interrogation face on and complete disinterest in her attitude: plants herself beside him. Alexis hasn’t shifted from the door.

“Alexis,” Castle says coolly. “let Grams in, please.” His tone doesn’t indicate any pleasure in the request. Alexis moves clear of the door, back to Castle’s side. The arrangement of persons is unpleasantly confrontational.
“Have you left something behind, Mother?”

“Richard,” Martha starts, colour limning her cheeks. Then she stops. “I wanted to talk to you,” she says quietly, almost pleading.

“Really? Another round of telling me all about my cruelty and unreasonableness? No, thanks. If you haven’t left anything, you’ve no reason to visit.”

Alexis winces. Beckett doesn’t twitch an eyelash. Martha crumples as if he’d punched her.

“I didn’t believe her,” Martha whispers. “I didn’t think it could be true.” A tear escapes the corner of her eye. What have I done? is written across her face.

Beckett looks at her, impassive. Castle turns back to the table, and his coffee.

“It’s time I went,” Beckett says, as if Martha weren’t there. She drops a quick peck on Castle’s head, strides past Martha, who shifts from Beckett’s inexorable path, and leaves.

It’s not until the door closes behind Beckett that anyone realises that she has shut Martha in.

“Richard…”

“Still here?” Castle doesn’t bother turning round.

“Why are you here, Grams?” Alexis asks aggressively. “Haven’t you done enough to upset Dad yet?”

“Sweetie” –

“It’s Alexis. Don’t call me sweetie.”

That hits Castle hard. He has a sudden memory of Jim’s white, ghastly face as Beckett had flung I’m not Katie. My name is Kate at him. Jim had looked like he’d been shot. He spins round on his seat.

“Why are you here, Mother?” he asks neutrally.

“She said… but I didn’t believe it… and of course I love you. How could I not? You’re my son.”

Castle’s expression hasn’t altered one jot. He isn’t precisely radiating belief. Behind his poker face, his mind is working furiously. Beckett must have said to his mother that he didn’t believe she loved him any more. She’d managed not quite to say that, earlier. Didn’t care is not at all the same as never loved.

“You’re my family.”

Castle’s memories of Beckett’s sessions with Jim and Dr Burke come forcibly to mind. You were my only family, Jim had cried, and Beckett had ripped him apart until he was weeping and destroyed; and almost destroyed herself in the process. You’re my daughter. You’re all I have left. And only this morning Beckett had said are you going to let it warp you like I did?...don’t make the same mistakes I did...don’t ruin your life.

He doesn’t have to put up with mistreatment, or lack of boundaries. But what matters here is being able to make the right decisions for him. He has to decide what he’ll put up with. He doesn’t want to find himself in the position Beckett had been in: facing his parent across a therapist’s office and unloading years of pain in one devastating storm-surge. Nor does he want to spend months
unpicking old errors and misunderstandings, as the Becketts had, all because neither of Jim or
Beckett could or would talk honestly to each other.

He sighs.

“Alexis, would you leave Grams and me alone, please,” he says firmly. “Mother, go through to
my” – there is a marginal emphasis on my – “office.”

Martha complies, shakily.

“But Dad” –

“No, Alexis. This is between Grams and me. I’ll handle this.” He hugs her, ignoring her sceptical
expression. “Now, be off with you.”

Alexis reluctantly ascends the stairs, flicking backwards glances at almost every stair-tread in case
her father should change his mind. Castle doesn’t. Alexis’s presence is absolutely not required. Nor
is Beckett’s, and where last night he had been hurt that she was absent (though her reasons turned
out to be the best possible), right now he is profoundly grateful that she has gone.

He enters his office and sits down, deliberately behind the desk, creating a certain emotional and
physical distance; asserting with the placement an air of his authority in his home. Then he simply
waits for a moment, until his mother looks at him. The moment of calm allows him to look beneath
the careful make-up to the red-rimmed eyes and slight shadowing of her hollowed cheeks; the
crumpled, pallid skin. Her hands are wrung together. Whatever Beckett had said, it has clearly hit
home hard.

And suddenly, he knows where to start.

“What did Beckett say to you?” he asks, still neutral, leaning forward on his desk.

His mother half-sniffs, but it’s more miserable than offended. Her hands twist and twine. Castle
waits, again, until it’s clear there isn’t a response arriving.

“Mother, if you can’t tell me the whole truth about what was said, then there’s nothing more to
say.”

“Didn’t she tell you?” Martha says bitterly. “Seeing as she’s already moved in.”

“No.” Castle has absolutely no compunction at all about shading that truth. He wants his mother to
tell him precisely what was said. If she has to repeat it out loud, then truth will be laid out before
them. “And Beckett is not living here. Now, either tell me what was said, or leave until you can.”

He’s implacable, and deep within it’s killing him, but he has to bring this to a head now. He almost
wishes for Dr Burke. Almost.

“She said,” Martha forces out eventually, “that you think I never cared. That I blamed you and that
everything you did didn’t count.” Her face twists. “It’s not true. She’s got it all wrong. We are a
family and I do love you.” Her hands wring again. “I didn’t mean to hurt you.” Another twist of
knotted fingers. “I... I’m sorry, Richard.”

“All I asked was that you stayed out of my relationship
with Beckett and out of her business. You kept saying you loved me but you wouldn’t do the one thing I asked you to.” He pauses. “So why should I have let you keep on doing what you like and just spouting out sorry every time you go too far as if it’s a magic cure?” He shrugs, and sits back. “Words don’t fix anything, Mother.”

She gasps, and the bitter tears start to puddle in her eyes.

“Only actions. I want you to think about what I just said. I want you to go home – to your home – and think about what Beckett said to you.” He stands up, and opens the door. Perforce, Martha stands too. “Go home, Mother. When you’ve really thought about what you’re doing and saying, and what you’ve done and said, then we’ll talk. Not now.” He escorts her to the front door, somehow towering over her, and opens it. “I still love you.” Can you say the same hangs in the air around them. He steps back, and she leaves, the door clunking shut behind her.

Castle returns to his office, thumping heavily into his chair. It had to be said, but his stomach is still churning over it. He simply sits, head on hands, staring at the grain of the desk’s wood.

He doesn’t look up when soft footsteps enter, but he certainly does when arms with an entirely familiar scent surround him and a kiss arrives on his head.

“How did you get here?” he asks. “You went home.”

“You gave me a key, remember? And I didn’t go home. I went to the coffee bar on West Broadway that you collected me at when I went running without my wallet.”

“How did you know Mother was gone?”

Beckett colours up. “I didn’t.”

“Uh?” Castle says, confused, and goggle at her.

“If she’d still been here I’d have sneaked back out.”

“Like you sneaked in? I didn’t hear a thing.”

Beckett blushes a little harder.

“Sneaky. I like sneaky.” Castle sneaks an arm round Beckett, and even more sneakily pulls so that she ends up on his lap. “Especially when I’m being sneaky.”

Beckett humphs, but wriggles to be a little more comfortable and runs her arm round his neck. “You okay?” she asks.

“Urnphm,” Castle emits.

“Don’t prevaricate,” Beckett raps.

“Have I told you I love your vocabulary? Prevaricate… pre-var-i-cate… mmmm.”

“Castle!” He produces a hurt, puppy-dog expression, that doesn’t fool Beckett for a second. “Very cute. Doesn’t work on me.” He tries again. All but the hardest of hearts would be melted. Beckett has the hardest of hearts. “So you’re not okay.” She pats his shoulder. “Wanna talk about it?”

“No.”

“Okay then.” She stays quietly where he’s brought her, nestling in, softer against him than her
words would imply, petting soothingly.

“Dad, Dad! Dad, I’m going to Paige’s – oh!” Alexis bounces in, and stops dead. She blushes brightly, which almost matches the colour of Beckett’s face and Castle’s ears, and then smirks wickedly. “Have a nice day!” she chirps, and makes a run for it.

“Well, *that* was awkward,” Castle says, after a brief, scarlet-faced pause.

“You think?”

There’s another pause.

“On the other hand,” Castle purrs dangerously, “now there’s nobody here but us.”

Beckett just has time for that conclusion to reach her brain from her ears when her mouth is invaded. Castle isn’t taking any prisoners. Her head is angled to his satisfaction, her body clamped to his, and he kisses her ruthlessly.

“I need you,” he growls. “You’re mine and I need you.”

But all he does is kiss her, frantically, desperately, passionately; keep her tightly against him and not give the slightest indication that he’ll ever let go; and in between each kiss he’s whispering *don’t go, don’t ever let me go*.

“I won’t,” she breathes, when she’s finally given a space to reply. “I won’t let you go.”

Castle, still wrung out by the entire weekend, simply holds on to her, his desperation passed and reaction setting in. His head drops to her shoulder, and his arms slacken slightly. He can’t bear to let go of the one adult on whom he can currently rely.

Some quiet time passes, and Castle begins to recover himself, drawing consolation and strength from the knowledge that Beckett had pushed straight through her own previously overwhelming dislikes to fight on his side. It’s not something he thinks she would have been able to do even three weeks ago, before the theatre case, but somewhere in there she’s taken another giant step forward, without either of them really noticing how big it had been. He dimly realises that it’s the good side of her tendency to decide what should be done and then do it regardless of the personal cost: the one that she uses to find and fight for justice for the victims, the one that’s taken her to the decision that she needs to fight for him: however she may feel about the actions she has to take, she’ll take them anyway.

She doesn’t say much, and what she does say is all too often hidden behind snark, brusqueness or flip replies, but if only he looks at what she *does*, he’ll always see the truth.

The truth is, she’s all in.

He stays just as he is for some while longer, eyes closed, finding in Beckett’s undemanding silence the peace and distance that he needs to attain, drifting.

Eventually his drifting is interrupted by Beckett shifting and moving away from him. Castle doesn’t like that.

“Come back.”

“My arm’s gone to sleep, and I need a minute.”
He reluctantly lets go. Beckett removes herself. Castle stands up, and immediately realises that his feet have gone to sleep, but are now awakening. He hates having pins-and-needles. In order to try and fix it, he wanders to the kitchen and realises that they hadn’t cleared up, so he starts on that. When Beckett returns, she follows him and works around him, snitching fragments of bacon and cold pancake along the way. Castle wrinkles his nose disgustedly.

“It’s cold and stale.”

“It’s food. I’m hungry.”

“It’s usually me who’s hungry. You live on coffee and takeout.”

Beckett humphs at him, and defiantly snitches another piece of cold bacon.

“Beckett, stop courting food poisoning and let’s tidy up. We can have some edible lunch right after.”

“I like bacon. And two hours isn’t going to give me food poisoning.”

“Seeing as you eat that salmonella flavoured slop from the food truck one night in three, you probably think nothing’s going to give you food poisoning, but I’d still prefer it if you didn’t take the risk.”

Beckett looks carefully at Castle, and comprehends that actually he needs to be taking care of someone right now. Since she’s the only person here, she’s the victim. She growls, for form’s sake, and glares, also for form’s sake, and stops snitching the bacon. There wasn’t much left, anyway.

Tidying up is rapidly achieved, lunch arrives in the form of bread, cheese and cold meat with some salad, and soon enough Beckett’s stomach is pleasantly filled. Unfortunately, however much she’d like to stay hanging around doing nothing very much with Castle for the rest of the day, she does have to deal with her chores and in particular her washing, which is threatening to make invasive forays over her entire bathroom instead of staying safely contained in her laundry basket.

“I need to get home,” she says. Castle’s face falls.

“I don’t want you to go home,” he argues. “Stay here.”

“I can’t. I have to deal with stuff at home – oh, shit.”

“Uh?”

“It’s Sunday. I promised Dad I’d go for dinner. I’ve got to get everything done before I go.” She springs into action. “I need to get back right now.” Suddenly she stops. “You could come back with me. Er – if you wanted.”

Castle hadn’t thought of that, being too lost in his own head. “Okay,” he says, much more happily, and rapidly scribbles a note for Alexis. He’s barely scrawled Dad at the end when Beckett’s hurrying him up and out the door.

Beckett’s attitude to chores is pretty much the same as her attitude to anything: go at it until it surrenders. Washing is put on first – naturally, thinks Castle, in an organised and logical fashion so that it is spinning merrily while everything else happens.
Except that everything else doesn’t start to happen, while Beckett is nibbling her lip and frowning gently.

“Beckett?” queries Castle, after thirty seconds of nothingness.

“Oh – thinking,” she says. Castle had rather worked that out. “Um…” Beckett is not normally prone to doubtfulness, but that has almost the same flavour as her earlier suggestion that he come here with her. He waits. “Um, I could ask Dad if you could come too.”

Castle’s first instinct is to say Yes. So is his second, and third. Unfortunately, by the time his mouth is ready to speak his fourth instinct has kicked in – the one that holds common sense.

“I can’t,” he says ruefully. “Alexis has school tomorrow and I need to fix dinner at home.”

“Okay,” Beckett accepts, though she’s rather downbeat about it. “You said you’d tell me if you couldn’t do something.”

“Yeah. I could do something else, though,” he leers.

“Yeah? Like what?”

“I can wield a mean vacuum.”

“You’re on,” Beckett says with alacrity, and the chores are done in double quick time, followed by coffee, gentle snuggling on the couch – and a vicious game of Sorry which is not completed by the time that Beckett needs to leave to visit her father and Castle needs to go home and attend to dinner. They mutually agree to leave the game set up and to complete it another day.

Just as Castle is about to indulge in a very leisurely kiss of farewell, Beckett has another thought. “You could always come to the session on Tuesday. I’m sure Burke would adjust.”

“Urg. Why are you torturing me? I don’t wanna see Burke.”

Beckett shrugs. “Up to you. Just a thought.”

Castle pushes away the horrible thought and kisses Beckett thoroughly instead. It’s a much better plan than seeing Burke, and gives him far more pleasure.

Unfortunately the horrible thought won’t leave him alone, all the way home, all the way through preparing dinner, and all the way through eating dinner. It then pursues him all the way through clearing up, and gets between him and his writing, procrastinating, on-line games and fan sites. Even his sales stats don’t remove it, which is downright unfair.

Eventually, he begrudgingly sends a text to Beckett. OK, I’ll come to Burke’s. Mysteriously, as soon as he’s done so he relaxes, and then falls asleep instantly.
Listen to me, mama

While Monday besets Beckett with murder, it has no interesting or redeeming features whatsoever, which is disappointing. Not that she wishes there to be murders, naturally, but if there are going to be murders, they could at least be interesting. Mundane data-mining and matching, while effective, is not much fun. Tuesday is no better. On the other hand, Castle is going to see Dr Burke tonight, which means that – for once – she can simply sit there and say nothing. Silently supportive is her aim. It’s an odd role reversal, but, she thinks, healthier than where they had mostly been. Give and take. He’s done a lot of giving, and now it’s her turn to give to him.

Oddly, he hasn’t been in today. She’d had a brief text last night to the effect that he was going to try to write, but that doesn’t usually stop him showing up around lunchtime just in case any of them can be inveigled into a decent lunchbreak.

Beckett puts her pen down, steeps her hands under her chin in a style which she would be horrified to learn is very reminiscent of Dr Burke’s signature gesture, and thinks very hard. Castle, she decides, had entirely failed to talk about his discussion with his mother, both on Sunday and yesterday. She’d left it to him to open that conversation, not wishing to push him, just as he has always left when, and how much, to talk up to her. She knows, though, that matters were anything but mended, simply from Castle’s lack of bounce. Her brow wrinkles and her nose scrunches up, as she ponders. Mostly, what she thinks is that Castle is very likely to be talking to his mother, right now, in which case, his discussion with Dr Burke tonight might be very painful.

It’s funny, she muses, how her relationship with her father has improved, just as Castle’s with his mother has fallen apart. She hopes abruptly that this isn’t some seesaw, where only one of them is getting on with the in-laws at any given time – what? What did she just think? In-laws? No. No way. No. Far too soon – what?

She puts her head in her hands, as an alternative to finding a nice comfortable wall against which to beat it. This is all premature, till they’re both fixed.

But the thought sticks around in the back of her mind, without her noticing it. Because they’re getting there: they are very nearly fixed. She is getting there. She’s had so much more work to do, and she’s doing it.

Unlike the work on her desk. Which she had better get back to, before Montgomery notices her lack of concentration. She’ll have to leave Castle till later… but she still takes a few seconds to fire off a quick text. You OK? B. She doesn’t get an answer, which doesn’t ease her mind, but there is nothing more that she can do right now.

Castle had received a call from his mother on Monday evening, corresponding fairly accurately to a time between finishing a run-through and Overture and beginners, please. She simply asks if she can come and talk to him tomorrow morning, and on receiving assent, rings off.

He doesn’t tell Beckett about the call. Since he doesn’t know what he thinks, he doesn’t want to discuss possibilities that might not come to pass, he tells himself. Actually, he’s uncomfortable. For all this time he’s been the strong, stable one in their relationship, and he’s finding it difficult to be on the other side. When Beckett’s there, he doesn’t have that feeling, but she’s not here. He knows, intellectually, that that’s ridiculous: that the last thing she finds him is weak – but his gut doesn’t agree, and right now he’s listening to it not to his brain. His brain, would he but listen to it, is yelling at him to call Beckett, or better yet go to her apartment, and simply let her console him for a
while, in whatever way works best. After a while, his brain loses its voice in the puddle of gut-induced discomfort, and while he goes to bed, and even sleeps, his dreams are vaguely unpleasant and his slumber consequently unrefreshing.

The morning is no better. He makes a salad which Alexis can have for dinner, which is the only productive thing he achieves. He can’t write anything: he tries a few times, but all he does is delete it as soon as he reads it back. His brain is still telling him that there’s no shame in talking to Beckett, but he’s still not listening to it. Beckett’s early afternoon text proves she’s worrying about him, but he still doesn’t answer it immediately, justifying himself by noting that he’ll see her at Burke’s at six, and anyway his mother is due any moment now and it would be rude to be texting when she arrives.

His mother is, unusually, precisely on time. She is, also unusually, sombrely dressed, and almost haggard under the careful, discreet make-up. It appears, in fact, as if she has barely slept since Sunday. She doesn’t try to kiss or embrace him. Well. That’s not quite true. She makes a move towards him and then stops herself, almost before she’s begun.

“I only came to say I have always loved you, Richard. That is all.” She turns back towards the door, immense dignity in place. “You might not believe it, but I do. You will always be welcome in my home.”

The door is half open before he manages to react. “Stop,” he says. “Come back.” He gestures her to sit down in the family room, though he sits on a chair, not the couch. Having done that, he doesn’t know where to begin. The room is full of awkward, not-quite-hostile silence.

“Why wouldn’t you just leave Beckett alone?” Castle eventually asks, achieving a neutral tone with some difficulty. He wants his mother to explain exactly why she embarked on this course. Maybe if he can pull answers out of her they can drain this swamp.

“She needs a mother,” Martha says.

Castle regards her with utter disbelief, and takes no trouble whatsoever to conceal it. Martha colours slightly. There is an uncomfortable pause as the weight of Castle’s disbelief presses down.

“I thought she’d want to treat me like a mother.”

That might actually be true. Completely misconceived, but it’s quite possible that his mother’s previous overconfidence had led her to that conclusion.

“Why?”

His mother acquires some spark: that is to say, looks at him as if he’s an idiot. “Because she’s head-over-heels about you.”

“That does not mean that she’s going to treat you like her mother.” Nor, he thinks, does it mean that Beckett will treat Alexis like a daughter. Ugh. That would be so wrong. “Beckett had a mother. Her mother was murdered. No-one is ever going to replace that. I told you that, and you still tried to force your way into mothering her. Why?”

His mother tosses her head defensively. Castle waits, borrowing Beckett’s intimidatory interrogation silence techniques.

“Because then I could stay,” she mutters. “If I was her family too then you’d never have suggested I should move out.”
“Despite me saying over and over that it was only if you didn’t stop pressuring her that you’d have to move out?”

“It wouldn’t have mattered, because Katherine would have wanted me to stay, and then you’d have let me.”

It’s possibly just as well Castle doesn’t have a drink, because he’d have spat it all over the table at that piece of idiocy.

“Beckett would never have accepted anyone at all as a replacement mother. You could have been a cross between Mother Teresa and all the female saints and she wouldn’t have had it. She would never have moved in while you kept on at her. I told you that.” He stops himself continuing that line of argument. “You’re not usually so unkind or unperceptive” – his mother winces at the words – “and you must know that it wasn’t going to work. So why were you really so keen on her being on your side?”

“I’ve just told you,” Martha says angrily.

“And I just don’t believe that that’s all of it. So tell me the rest of it, or go home until you’re prepared to tell it. I said on Sunday that if you wouldn’t tell the whole truth there was nothing to say. That’s still where I’m at. If you won’t tell me the truth then I’m not going to try and fix this. Up to you.”

He sits back in the chair, clasps his hands together in an attitude of calm patience and authority, and says absolutely nothing further. His mother mutters blackly to herself, but he’s backed her into a corner and she knows it. She only has the same two alternatives that she had when she came here: tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth – the judicial words are quite deliberate – or leave. Up to her.

“I was scared,” Martha spits out. “This was my home and you were bringing in someone new and then you started talking about moving me out and it was just like that cheating, lying creep in LA.”

Castle boggles. What?

“He had everything in joint names and then he started introducing his so-called daughter in law” – she stops. Castle has just about managed to shut his mouth. He’s also just about managing not to re-open it on a tide of absolute fury and denial that he is anything like that man. Dr Burke had been right all the way along, which does not help. About the only thing he hadn’t spotted was the other woman.

“I knew you wouldn’t behave anything like that,” Martha says, hopeless and old. “I knew Katherine wasn’t her. But it looked just the same and it triggered all my fears about losing everything, so I thought if we were close it would all be different. I didn’t want to lose my family. I couldn’t bear losing my family a third time.”

“Third time?”

“Now, that creep in LA, and when my loving parents threw me out for wanting to act.”

Castle gapes uselessly. That last piece he had never heard.

“I couldn’t get parts because I’d been out of the New York scene” – Castle fills in in LA in that sentence – “for too long and I was just an old, has-been actor tagging along on your coat-tails. And then you met Katherine and it was history all over again.”
“How could it be the same when she wasn’t coming here?” Castle points out, unable to control his exasperation. “First you say it was because she wouldn’t come here and be a family and now you say it’s because she reminded you of your cheating ex’s other woman weaselling into your life? This makes no sense at all, Mother!”

“You said you’d move me out so she could move in!” Martha cries. “It felt just like the last time.”

Castle’s upset and temper get the better of him, regardless of his determination to have a calm discussion. “So, according to you, I’ve evicted you, threatened to leave you destitute, and never given up anything for you. According to you, I was going to throw you out in favour of another woman. According to you, you’ve sacrificed your whole life for me. Is that what you’ve felt for forty years? That’s not love, that’s martyrdom.” He snatches an infuriated breath. “Did it ever occur to you to ask me about any of this? You know, rather than making assumptions? Or tell me you were worried or unhappy? I could have fixed this then. I could have told you that I’d never have let you down like that. I did tell you I wouldn’t let you down. But you didn’t ask me and you still just assumed that I would.” He sighs, bitterly, and lowers his voice to a forced calm. “I can’t say I’m flattered. I get it. I just can’t believe that you thought that I’d be just as bad as them.”

“I didn’t think that!” Martha flings back. “I didn’t think that.”

Castle has a sudden, unhappy flashback to Dr Burke saying *I do not believe that she does think that.* He had also, unfortunately, said *I do not, incidentally, recommend that you say that. It would not answer.* Bit late to remember that now.

“It just all came back on me.”

“Why couldn’t you just talk to me?” Castle forces out.

“Because I couldn’t bear it if I was wrong. What if you didn’t love me?” Her voice drops into fragmented misery. “No-one else had. You were all I had. The only person in the world who loved me no matter what.”

“And how was treating me like you didn’t care going to help that? I kept telling you that I still loved you and you wouldn’t listen to what I wanted and wouldn’t tell me what was really wrong till it was too late to change anything.” He tries to get himself under some sort of control, still just about managing not to raise his voice. “I thought once you found that you were still a big name it would all settle down again.”

“It was still you. You made them take me on.”

“So now I’m a liar?”

“What?”

“I didn’t make them do anything. I told you that. I said you’d likely take it if asked and they bit my hand off. You know who got you in there? Beckett. She’s the one who said we had to use you on the case, because she’s the one who found that the whole lot of them worshipped you. I didn’t have to do anything at all except say you’d probably do it if asked. So you got that wrong too. You don’t need me.”

“Of course I do. You’re my son.”

“And you’re my mother, but *need isn’t love*.” Castle stops, and suddenly realises the time. “I have to go. I have to be in Midtown in less than half an hour.” He stands up. There is no chance that he will be on time for Dr Burke. Martha looks tired, and miserable, and ravaged. “Mother, come back
tomorrow morning. We’ll finish this then.” His heart goes out to her, and he manages an awkward hug. “I do still love you. But that doesn’t change that you’ve hurt me. Now go and knock tonight’s audience dead.”

He ushers her relatively gently out of the door and closes it. He really doesn’t want to go to see Dr Burke, but that probably means that he needs to. He hastens out, leaving a quick note for Alexis, and takes the first cab he sees.

Beckett arrives at Dr Burke’s office only a few moments early, and is both surprised and worried that Castle is not there before her. She’s even more worried when she is called through and Castle still hasn’t shown up.

“Good evening, Detective Beckett.”

“Hey,” she returns, distractedly.

“I had thought you had advised me that Mr Castle was also attending?”

“Yeah.”

“Is there some matter for which his presence is required? I had thought that your relationship with your father was now progressing well, and that Mrs Rodgers had been dealt with.”

Dr Burke observes the displeased twist to Detective Beckett’s mouth, and is concerned.

“It’s Martha,” Detective Beckett says. “And it’s not me we want to discuss tonight, it’s Castle.”

“Oh?” Dr Burke steeples his fingers, and regards Detective Beckett over them. “But this is your therapy, not Mr Castle’s.”

“And I’m donating this session to him,” Detective Beckett says decidedly. “He needs it.”

“What has occurred?” Dr Burke asks, already sure that some significant event is, once more, interfering with his treatment plan. Really, this is most irritating. He had almost begun to think that the disruption to his well-ordered life occasioned by Detective Beckett and all of her highly complicated relationships and attachments was drawing to a close. He will be most thoroughly content when his only contact with any of them is the occasional indulgence in one of Mr Castle’s books.

“Martha moved out on Saturday. It didn’t go well at all. She turned into the Wicked Witch of the West and took the opportunity to have a go at Castle as well. He was pretty upset. So now he thinks she doesn’t care about him and never did.”

“Mm. I see. What, may I ask, did you do?”

Detective Beckett stares at him. Dr Burke fails entirely to understand why his statement should come as any surprise to her at all. It is perfectly obvious that Detective Beckett would have defended Mr Castle: Dr Burke wishes only to know the form which such defence had taken.

“I went and told her what she’d done.” Dr Burke raises his eyebrows. “That she’d made sure that Castle thought she didn’t love him and didn’t care about any of the things he’s done for her.”

“Ah.”

“Then I went back to the loft and stayed with Castle. Martha turned up Sunday morning, so I left,
then I came back when she was gone. It wasn’t any better. But I think Castle was seeing her this afternoon even though he said he wasn’t coming to the precinct because he was going to write.”

“Mm. I can see that Mr Castle may be in some need of a discussion. Were you intending to stay?”

“Only if Castle wants me to. If he doesn’t, I brought a book, and I’ll go get a coffee or something.”

“I think,” Dr Burke says judicially, “that it might be helpful for you to explain to me, when Mr Castle arrives, precisely how you felt and why you then confronted Mrs Rodgers.”

“Castle knows all that. I told him.”

“You told him, or he guessed and you agreed with his conclusions?” Dr Burke asks, with a hint of disapproval.

“He guessed,” Detective Beckett admits.

“Mm. I consider it would be effective for you to explain. In that way, he will understand the depth of your support for him. That will be most valuable when he comes to explain his own views of these events.” Dr Burke pauses, and sits back in his chair. “I consider that you have made a material breakthrough, in the pursuit of Mr Castle’s happiness. It was well done, Detective. You have weighed up” – she hisses negatingly – “consciously or not, competing emotional interests, and come to a rational decision as to the most important. In doing so, you have, I perceive, become far more comfortable with visiting Mr Castle’s home, even when his daughter is present, and you have shown yourself that you are able to face difficult familial situations without becoming overly distressed.”


At that point, Dr Burke’s receptionist calls through to advise him that Mr Castle has arrived. “Please send him in,” requests Dr Burke.
His anger and his shame

“Sorry I’m late,” Mr Castle begins, obviously flustered. “Traffic…”

Dr Burke nods sympathetically, and manages also then to shake his head to stop Detective Beckett jumping in.

“Detective Beckett has informed me that she wishes you to take advantage of this session,” he says. “This is highly irregular, and I would not normally countenance such proceedings. However, it appears to me that the events of the last few days have contributed to a significant progression of Detective Beckett’s recovery, and therefore I consider that we may legitimately explore your issues as part of that.”

Mr Castle raises an exceedingly cynical pair of eyebrows at Dr Burke’s elegant sophistry, coupled with a sardonic twist of his mouth.

“I’m delighted to hear it,” he says with extreme sarcasm, which, naturally, does not affect Dr Burke at all. Of course Mr Castle is not delighted by the prospect in any way. However, that does not change the immutable fact that he is in need of the help which only Dr Burke’s extensive skills can provide. He reminds himself that one should be exceedingly careful for what one wishes: as only a few days prior to receiving Detective Beckett as a patient he had wished for a new challenge. He will not be wishing that for some considerable time to come. He is most certainly living through interesting professional times, which he finds exceedingly tiring, not to say tiresome.

“Detective Beckett has already provided me with her summary of events. However, I consider that it would be useful for her to explain in your presence exactly what actions she took over the course of the last few days, and why she did so.”

Detective Beckett favours Dr Burke with a searing glare, by which he remains serenely unaffected.

“We know all this,” she says with irritation.

“Nevertheless, it will assist. Please begin.”

“Castle was nervous about what his mom might be like when it hit her that she was really moving out.” Dr Burke nods, coolly sympathetic. “So I had said that he should come over Friday and that I’d help out on Saturday after Martha had gone to the theatre, but that he and Alexis should do something on their own Saturday night.”

“And I totally got you,” Mr Castle puts in, snickering.

“Mm?”

“Castle whined that he wanted me to come with him and Alexis, and I wouldn’t,” Detective Beckett growls. “And then he said he knew I wouldn’t and he was just messing with me to see if I’d made progress.”

Dr Burke frowns disapprovingly at Mr Castle. That had been a somewhat risky tactic, and Dr Burke is not particularly pleased that Mr Castle had tried it, even though it had worked.

“It worked, didn’t it?” Mr Castle says smugly, as if he had read Dr Burke’s thoughts.

“It was not the best strategy which might have been employed,” Dr Burke says quellingly. Mr
Castle subsides, and his smug smile dissolves. Detective Beckett makes a satisfied noise. “Please return to the point at hand.”

“So we had dinner Friday, and then I went over for eleven-thirty Saturday.” The very slight tinge of colour to Detective Beckett’s face and Mr Castle’s air of happy memory informs Dr Burke that Mr Castle had remained at Detective Beckett’s apartment for some considerable time after dinner. More than that he need not, and does not wish to, know.

“It was pretty obvious that it hadn’t gone well. Castle was already upset and angry, and Alexis was doing all the organising for the removal men and keeping her head down. We got everything into the truck and they went off for lunch, we all had lunch, and after that Castle said that Martha hated him for making her move out and he hated himself for doing it. And then” – Detective Beckett throws a quick, concerned glance at Mr Castle, and moves closer to him – “he said that she’d been laying it on about how much she sacrificed for him and making him feel guilty, but how he felt that she didn’t appreciate anything he’d done because it didn’t cost him anything.”

“Mm. What actions did you take at that point?”

“I just hugged him. He was really, really upset.”

“Was that all?”

Detective Beckett colours further. “No. I was angry. Not with Castle, but with Martha.”

“You lost your temper,” Castle says.

“Well… yeah. So I told” –

“Yelled, actually” –

“Told Castle not to believe it and to stop blaming himself and – er – if he didn’t get his head out his ass about this I’d march him off to you right then, in cuffs at gunpoint if I had to, and leave him there until you’d fixed him.”

“I see,” Dr Burke says mildly, succeeding in concealing his amusement at the thought. On second thoughts, it is quite likely that Detective Beckett would have done precisely that. His amusement dissipates. It would have been entirely inappropriate and very discomposing to his well-run office. “Why were you so angry? After all, Mrs Rodgers had not insulted you.”

Detective Beckett regards Dr Burke as if he had grown a second head, both of whose combined intellects would not out-think a gnat, just as he had expected her to do.

“Don’t be dumb,” she snaps. “Martha had no right to say that. It’s not true and she was just being hurtful.”

“But it is still Mr Castle who she had hurt, not you. Why do you consider that you have the right to be angry on his behalf?”

“Because I love him,” Detective Beckett bites out – and then stops hard, blushes furiously and hides her face in her hands. Mr Castle re-acquires his satisfiedly smug smile, which softens as he leans down and murmurs to Detective Beckett. It sounds distressingly like I knew you liked me. Dr Burke ignores the admission for the moment, though it had been important for it to be made in unequivocal terms.

“So you were very annoyed with Mrs Rodgers. Please continue your description of events, in
chronological order.”

“Alexis came in and said she was glad I’d said that” –

“She did?” –

“and I decided that I would go and talk to Martha. Then the movers came back and we went over to the new place and unpacked.”


“And then,” Detective Beckett says, throwing Mr Castle a minatory look, “we all went back to the loft, had coffee, and then I left. I went home to get my shield and have a few minutes alone, and then I went to the theatre to see Martha and tell her what she’d done. Then I went for dinner, and then I went back to the loft, and stayed there.”

“Mm. How did Mrs Rodgers react?”

“I don’t know. She didn’t say anything, and I didn’t want to hear it anyway.”

“Why not?”

“It’s for Castle to hear her, not me. She doesn’t owe me any explanations.” Detective Beckett stops for a second. “She owes Castle a few, though. And then I went back to the loft and stayed with Castle.” Dr Burke pins her with a firm look in order to prevent Detective Beckett evading the real point. “Overnight.”

“I see. Did you have any feelings of hesitation or concern about assisting with the removal, either immediately prior to Saturday or at any time during Saturday?”

“No. Before then, yeah, but not on Saturday at all.”

“Why not?” Dr Burke asks again.

“I was too irritated with Martha to worry about it.”

“I see,” Dr Burke says. Detective Beckett’s ever-present level of irritation makes itself manifest. “So, to recast that slightly in the light of all you have said, your concern for Mr Castle’s well-being easily over-rove your previous concerns about the way in which Mrs Rodgers might have behaved towards you. Indeed, your emotions towards Mr Castle also over-rove your concerns about visiting his home when his daughter might be present, although you have done so before, and indeed staying, because you felt that he had need of you.”

Dr Burke observes Detective Beckett and Mr Castle’s identically gaping expressions with some satisfaction.

“I believe the saying is Love conquers all,” he adds. Both parties are silenced.

After a suitable pause for Detective Beckett and Mr Castle to appreciate her actions, it is time for Mr Castle to contribute.

“Now, Mr Castle, you may provide your view of the position, either with or without Detective Beckett present.”

Mr Castle looks at Detective Beckett, who shrugs. “Up to you,” is all that she says.
“Yeah. Right.” He looks pleadingly at her. “Stay?”

“Sure.” Dr Burke observes, without a single movement of a muscle in his bland expression, that Detective Beckett has slipped her fingers into Mr Castle’s. How very pleasing to see that support is, as it should be, continuing to run in both directions.

“Please begin, Mr Castle.”

“I need to go back a bit. You know that Mother got the directing gig after the case, and the play’s a hit. Critics loved it, and everybody’s credited her – rightly. She was high on the success of it, and I thought that maybe it would carry her through the move, though I was worried that it wouldn’t. But it seemed like it was all okay, and she was planning her housewarming party, and kept it to a couple of comments. Anyway, she was pretty easily distracted from any upset.” He breathes out, heavily.

“In summary, Mrs Rodgers seemed to have come to terms with the impending change, apart from some few moments of nervousness?”

“I guess so. I still thought it might all blow up when the movers actually showed up, and it did.”

“Please expand?”

Mr Castle does, in detail. It appears to Dr Burke that he has almost perfect recall of each word.

“So she started to cry, and I gave her a hug and told her we’d all still be a family and nothing would change that, but instead of listening to me she pokered up and told me she’d depart with utmost dignity and then I knew that it was all going to go horribly wrong. And it did.”

Detective Beckett’s fingers close more tightly around Mr Castle’s hand.

“Mother picked a fight with the movers less than ten minutes in. Fortunately Alexis managed to calm that down.”

“What did you do?” enquires Dr Burke.

“Got out the way and stayed out the way,” Mr Castle says, with annoyance. “Seeing me wasn’t going to help, and Alexis was using full-on emotional blackmail and didn’t need me there for that. In fact, she was giving me the signal to clear off.”

Dr Burke recalls his single meeting with Miss Castle. “Miss Castle is well able to handle your mother, then?”

“Oh yes. Manipulating Mother a speciality. Usually I tried to stop Alexis doing it, but not this time.”

“Mm. So you left the scene.” Dr Burke’s voice is completely neutral.

“Yes. Mother would just have wound herself up even more, and that would have made it even more difficult to get her stuff packed up and everything organised.”

“How did you feel about leaving your mother and daughter to deal with the movers?” Dr Burke asks delicately.

Mr Castle does not immediately answer. Detective Beckett pats him with a stray finger. Mr Castle looks at her, clearly uncomfortable. “Beckett…”
“Okay. Call when you want me back, or you’re done.” Detective Beckett stands up, trails her hand around his shoulder without any hint of embarrassment, and departs.

Dr Burke regards Mr Castle questioningly. Although he had considered this possibility, he is slightly surprised that it has actually come to pass. Mr Castle twitches even more uncomfortably.

“I don’t want her to hear this. She doesn’t need to worry about my problems.”

Dr Burke turns a focused, and very sceptical, gaze on Mr Castle. “Is that really true, Mr Castle? Is it not true that you would rather not expose a weakness to Detective Beckett?”

Mr Castle regards him balefully.

“Explain to me why not.” There is a resentful silence. Dr Burke ignores it. “We cannot make progress if you do not understand why you have deprived yourself of Detective Beckett’s support at a time when you undoubtedly need it, and when you have availed yourself of it throughout the weekend,” he adds acerbically. Really, Mr Castle is being most foolish.

“I told you,” Mr Castle says sulkily. “It’s not her problem.”

Dr Burke simply waits.

“I’m the one who supports her. She shouldn’t have to support me.” Dr Burke continues to await Mr Castle’s thoughts. He foresees that this may take some time. Thought is not a noticeable component of Mr Castle’s behaviour at present.

Dr Burke is not wrong, naturally. He spends the intervening moments reviewing his plan for his next erudite paper.

“She shouldn’t have to. She should lean on me.”

Oh, dear. Mr Castle’s saviour complex has reasserted itself in a most unhelpful fashion, at a most unfortunate time. Of course, it is entirely obvious why. However, Mr Castle must be led to that conclusion, not simply told it.

“Why?”

Mr Castle’s mouth drops open. Clearly, he has not considered his words.

“Because I’m there for her.”

“And now Detective Beckett wishes to be there for you in return. Why should this not be possible?”

“Because she doesn’t need me being weak,” Mr Castle eventually forces out.

“Did Detective Beckett think you weak at the weekend?”

“No,” he grits.

“Has she ever indicated in any way that she thinks this?”

“No.”

“So, in fact, it is not Detective Beckett whose opinion concerns you. It is your own. Tell me, Mr Castle, why you are so uncomfortable with the concept that you might need another to help you?”
“I shouldn’t need anyone. I’m the one who does the fixing… oh.”

Mr Castle scowls blackly into thin air.

“You’re saying that I’m so used to saving people that I can’t stand being saved. Ugh,” he says gloomily.

“Continue that thought, please. Has there been a recent occasion on which you have felt unable to rescue the situation in order to return to a position which you consider should obtain?”

Mr Castle transfers his scowl to Dr Burke’s impervious blandness. “I’m not an idiot,” he says with irritation. Dr Burke is not as convinced of that as Mr Castle appears to be. “I couldn’t fix my mother’s behaviour in time to stop her moving out. You’re saying that I can’t accept support because I’m too used to providing it.”

“Almost. You have, in all your relationships of which I am aware, provided stability: to your daughter, to your mother, and to Detective Beckett. You have even provided some stability to Mr Beckett, albeit at some distance. Now the stability which you have provided to your family has been challenged by your mother’s actions, and you have been unable to cure the issue. Detective Beckett’s presence over the weekend just past has been of her own volition, and therefore did not challenge your perception. However, I infer from your present discomfort that, when it came to a point where you actually had to ask for support, you baulked.”

“But I went to Beckett before, when Mother was acting out,” Mr Castle argues.

“Indeed you did. But, just as your mother did not appreciate the magnitude of the change or its reality until the removal was actually upon her, nor did you.” Dr Burke taps his fingers together and sits back in his armchair. “I should be interested to hear Detective Beckett’s views on your emotional state on Saturday,” he adds mildly. “You will, of course, recall that I have only asked her to comment on her actions and reasons, not on yours.”

Mr Castle frowns at his hands, which are twitching in a manner which inclines Dr Burke to think that he wishes for some form of writing implement. He will not be provided with one. Mr Castle will not be permitted to escape proper consideration of his emotions or actions.

“I guess you’re right,” he says, without any enthusiasm for the thought. “I didn’t call Beckett yesterday or today.”

“Mm?”

“Mother came round this morning. I knew she was coming yesterday.”

“And you did not advise Detective Beckett, or consider asking her for support.” Dr Burke expresses that as a plain statement of fact.

“No.”

“I see.”

“I just bet you do,” Mr Castle mutters.

“Let us leave today’s events for a moment, and return to those of the weekend. Do you wish Detective Beckett to return?”

Dr Burke metaphorically holds his breath. Of course he will not betray his concerns to Mr Castle,
but he does strongly hope that Mr Castle is able to put aside his pride and allow Detective Beckett to rejoin the session.

“Yeah,” Mr Castle drags out, with the air of one who is not convinced that his decision is correct. He pulls out his cell phone and taps the screen.

“Yeah, me.”

“Yeah, um, will you come back?”

“Okay.”

Mr Castle swipes off his cell phone, and appears in some way relieved.

Beckett had betaken herself to the same coffee bar close to Dr Burke’s offices which she and Castle have visited in more stressful circumstances. The necessity doesn’t please her, but coffee is always welcome. She pulls out her Kindle, and tries to read, but she’s far more worried about Castle not wanting her there than she’d have admitted, and she’s also upset that he didn’t want her there.

She examines her upset. Part of it is a feeling of hurt that she’d overcome so many of her issues to go back to the loft and confront Martha and now he doesn’t want her to hear what he thinks. Part of it is insecurity that, whatever he’d said, she’s overstepped and he’s annoyed about it. And part of it is sheer worry that he doesn’t feel that she can be any support to him.

She sips her coffee, pretends to read, sips her coffee, frets and fiddles and destroys a serviette by twisting and shredding it, gives up pretending to read, pulls her phone out and finally simply glares at her phone in between coffee sips to try to persuade it to ring. It doesn’t.

And then it does.

Castle’s number comes up on screen, but with some vague idea of preserving dignity Beckett manages to let two rings go by and then answer in a relatively calm tone.

“Hey, Castle.”

“Still at Burke’s?”

“Okay, back shortly.”

She considers her coffee, of which she still has three-quarters of the cup, goes back to the counter, has it transferred to a go-cup, purchases a coffee for Castle to prevent him staring pathetically at her coffee and whining about his lack of any drink, and with some faint remembrance of her normally good manners purchases a green tea for Dr Burke. It must be her overwhelming relief that has made her take any of these actions, since her usual procedure would be to down the coffee in one throat-opened, scalding rush.

Very shortly, Detective Beckett reappears, holding – how extraordinary – two go-cups of coffee, and a third cup which she discloses to contain green tea.

“They didn’t have much of a choice,” she says briskly. “Seeing as I hadn’t finished mine” –

“And you’ve never knowingly discarded coffee no matter how disgusting” –

“Shut up, Castle,” Detective Beckett chides, though Dr Burke thinks that it conceals considerable
affection and not a little relief of her own. “I thought I’d better bring some back. Otherwise Castle’ll whine all session.”

“If you shared…” Mr Castle says provocatively. Detective Beckett simply glares at him. “Okay, maybe not.”

“Thank you,” Dr Burke says politely. “The tea is much appreciated.” He notes that his words prevent the incipient squabble, and is reassured that his skills are not diminished. “Now, shall we begin again?”
Communication is the problem

“I would like us to return to Saturday, Detective Beckett.” She appears startled to be addressed. “You have described your actions and emotions. Please now describe how Mr Castle appeared to you.”

“Like he’d had enough,” Detective Beckett says. “Everyone else had made their choices and he’d had to cope with all of it.” She considers for a moment. “He was punch-drunk.”

“Elucidate.” Mr Castle clearly requires elucidation, since he is staring at Detective Beckett without a single sign that he has understood her words.

“Everything hit him and none of it was his fault, but he was still blaming himself.” Her mouth contorts. “I recognise that,” she says bitterly, and pauses to collect her composure. “Anyway. It was the same when I got back after dinner. He wasn’t expecting me, and he didn’t want to talk” – how astonishing, Dr Burke thinks, without the slightest hint of sarcasm – “so I didn’t put any demands on him.” Detective Beckett swallows. “After all, he never put any on me to talk.” She turns to Mr Castle. “All you seemed to want was just that I was there.” She swallows again. “Was I wrong?”

Mr Castle shakes his head, without emitting words. Detective Beckett relaxes marginally. Her hand slips into Mr Castle’s.

“So. Sunday morning he was still upset but he was so damn nosy once he worked out I’d gone to see Martha that he forgot to be miserable.” Dr Burke does not approve of the comment, but Mr Castle appears more complimented than offended by the description of his curiosity. “Until she turned up, anyway. So I shut her in with them as I went out.”

“That was deliberate?” Mr Castle squawks.

“Yep. And when I came back I thought you’d been throwing up. You were green. But all you wanted to do was hang on to me. You still didn’t want to talk. So we didn’t. All weekend you didn’t want to talk, but you were wrecked. So I left it up to you, because that worked when you left it up to me.” Detective Beckett shrugs. “And here we are.”

“Talking,” Mr Castle says with a flash of smile directed only at Detective Beckett. “You were right.” It is fortunate that Detective Beckett appears to comprehend Mr Castle’s meaning. Dr Burke considers his statement to be at best ambiguous. “I’m sorry. I’ve worked it out now. It was just so weird looking to someone else…” Again, Detective Beckett appears to understand. Her fingers have closed over Mr Castle’s. It seems to make him happier.

“Over the weekend, therefore, Mr Castle received the support which he needed and wanted.”

Mr Castle nods.

“Now, Mr Castle, please return to your feelings regarding your mother’s behaviour, starting with the arrival of the removal workers and your retirement from the emotional turmoil which she was creating. How did you feel once you had removed yourself from the scene?”

“Mostly guilty,” Mr Castle admits heavily. “And a lot relieved that she wasn’t yelling at me. Mother never yells at Alexis, so I didn’t worry about that. I left the door open so I could hear if any of that started, and” –
“You would naturally have intervened.”

“Yeah.”

“And then what?”

“I went up to see how they were going, and to remind Mother of the time. When she’s upset she can be a bit scatterbrained, especially about time, and I didn’t want her to be late to the pre-matinee rehearsal.”

Dr Burke sips his tea. It is evident that the discussion had been painful. As Mr Castle relates the exchanges, he understands that it had been excruciating, in a way in which only a loving family can achieve. While Mrs Rodgers is undoubtedly the one at fault, Mr Castle’s words in response can only have stung. It appears that there are some substantial disadvantages to being a writer, in particular the ability to inflict severe damage with one’s choice of language. The use of Not that you seem to appreciate it must have been particularly cutting, especially when followed with the cold shoulder which Mr Castle had turned. Dr Burke understands why Mr Castle had done so, in order to avoid exacerbating the already tense position: however, the cumulative effect on both parties has been extremely hurtful.

“So she left, and about five minutes later Beckett arrived,” Mr Castle concludes. “And” – he turns to Detective Beckett, and pouts childishly – “you told me off like I was four and sulking about having to share my colouring crayons.”

“Bet you didn’t share.”

“Did so.”

Dr Burke feels it necessary to intervene, again, and does so with a sigh. Had he wished to be a kindergarten supervisor, he would not have undertaken medical training.

“The next time you saw your mother, then, was Sunday morning?”

Mr Castle acquires an expression of slight surprise. It is possible that he had expected Dr Burke to deal with one meeting at a time. However, it will be much more efficient to deal with all of them at once.

“Yeah. She showed up. I – er – wasn’t exactly receptive.” He colours. “Beckett left, like she said, and shut Mother in. Then Alexis got into the mix, and Mother called her sweetie. It’s always been her pet name for Alexis. But Alexis said Don’t call me sweetie and it was just like when Beckett said I’m not Katie to her dad, right here.” Dr Burke blinks. Detective Beckett winces. “I couldn’t bear it if we ended up like that. So I asked Alexis to go upstairs and took Mother into the office to find out what she wanted. She said we were a family and she did love me and she was sorry.” Mr Castle’s face is hard. “But she’s said that before, and it didn’t change anything. So I told her that, and told her to go home and really think about her words and actions, and then we’d talk. I wasn’t going to talk then.” He pauses. “I did tell her I still loved her,” he says heavily. “But I could barely stop myself asking if she really loved me, ever.”

“I am impressed that you did stop yourself. It must have been a particularly difficult situation.” Dr Burke sits forward in his chair. Mr Castle tightens his grip on Detective Beckett’s hand.

“Following on from that event, Mrs Rodgers advised you on Monday that she would attend on you today, which, for reasons which we need not presently repeat, you did not mention to Detective Beckett.”
Mr Castle does not seem anxious to relate the most recent meeting. He is, in fact, concentrating on drinking his coffee. Since, to Dr Burke’s certain knowledge, most relatively young neurotypical children are capable of drinking without mishap, and Mr Castle is not a child, despite behavioural traits to the contrary, this is quite clearly a deferral mechanism. Dr Burke flicks a glance at the clock, and finds that there remains a reasonable time to conclude the session, assuming, of course, that Mr Castle ceases to be evasive.

“Yeah. Well. She showed up exactly on time.” Another mouthful of coffee passes Mr Castle’s tight lips. It appears to dissolve Mr Castle’s inability to speak. The words spill from him with, again, that precise recall of the exact sentences and phrases used. Detective Beckett does not allow Mr Castle’s hand to escape hers for so much as an instant.

“And you have come straight here from that meeting?” Dr Burke queries, with some amazement.

“Yeah.” Mr Castle slumps into himself, which is almost instantly converted by Detective Beckett into a collapse into her. She favours Dr Burke with a combative glare, which is quite unnecessary. Dr Burke has no intention of interfering with Detective Beckett’s provision of some comfort. Indeed, he would be positively ill-advised so to do.

“I see. Emotions have run very high, but that is entirely unsurprising, and is certainly not irredeemable. You have displayed commendable, although potentially excessive, restraint for the majority of these discussions, and it is not, in fact, problematic that your mother should realise that your patience and forbearance have boundaries. We have, of course, discussed boundaries to a certain extent before now.”

Mr Castle emits a long sigh of considerable relief. Dr Burke considers that he is most in need of reassurance that his actions have not created a permanent breach with his mother, which, in Dr Burke’s expert and experienced opinion, they have not. Were that to be likely, Mrs Rodgers would have behaved quite differently.

“Now, Mr Castle, how would you like to approach the remainder of the session? We may discuss potential strategies for your discussion with your mother tomorrow, or we may discuss the feelings which currently distress you, or we may simply conclude the discussion. If either of you so desire, we may use any remaining time to discuss any matter over which you or Detective Beckett have concerns.”

There is a brief pause while Mr Castle considers the options. Detective Beckett has already shaken her head to indicate that she has no need of the remainder of the session. Dr Burke considers that Detective Beckett may, unforeseen events aside, quite safely reduce her attendance to twice per month at most, and indeed after no more than two months reduce it further. It is even possible that she need not continue with a formal schedule of appointments at that stage, while being made aware that she may return if necessary. Her recent progress has been most pleasing, although he would not wish to discharge her fully without that structure in place.

“I don’t know what I think,” Mr Castle emits. “I don't know what to say to her” – Dr Burke correctly assumes that to mean Mrs Rodgers – “or what to do. I’m so angry that she could believe that but I still do love her,” he ends piteously. “I even put up the poster that I was going to present to her at her party, I was so furious with her. I don’t want to be like this. I’m not like this.”

Detective Beckett pats Mr Castle's shoulder. Her arm is still around him.

“Mr Castle, you have forgiven your mother much over the last few months. A moment of temper does not change that. I am sure that you will find an equally appropriate housewarming gift.”
“If I go at all,” Mr Castle bites.

“Indeed,” Dr Burke says smoothly and reassuringly. “However, I believe you have not yet arranged a date for this event, and so you need not concern yourself with that for now.” He steeps his fingers, and ignores the knowing look with which Detective Beckett regards the action. “Do you consider that you have been telling Mrs Rodgers the truth about your emotions over the last few days?”

Mr Castle quite definitely squirms. Dr Burke allows him to ponder the point, and the extent to which he may have been evading the truth.

“Um… mostly?”

Detective Beckett raises an exceedingly cynical eyebrow out of Mr Castle’s view; a gesture with which Dr Burke is entirely in agreement. Her fingers tap meaningfully on his shoulder.

“Mostly not,” he confesses. I didn’t want to lose my temper and yell. I was trying not to make matters worse,” he adds plaintively. “So I was patient and just tried to find out what she was thinking. But then she said that I was evicting her so Beckett could move in and I lost my temper then. But I didn’t say how much she’d hurt me. I only said that she had.”

“So your mother’s only knowledge of your true feelings has come from Detective Beckett’s commentary on Saturday, since when no-one has apprised her of the depth of your anger and distress?”

“Yeah.”

“Mm. Mr Castle, is your mother likely to believe Detective Beckett?”

Mr Castle opens his mouth, stops, and shuts it again. The thought that Mrs Rodgers might not believe Detective Beckett does not appear to have occurred to him. Thankfully, Mr Castle takes a short time to contemplate it.

“I don’t know.” He hesitates. “I don’t think Mother would have tried to come round Sunday if she hadn’t believed at least part of it.” He hesitates again. “She was upset. But… she would be upset just because someone didn’t believe her version of the narrative, whether she believed what Beckett said or not.”

“And what do you think the narrative is?”

“Right now? She gave up everything for me and I’m cruelly evicting her to move Beckett in tomorrow.” Detective Beckett emits a strangulated squeak. Dr Burke does not conclude that she is entirely impressed by the concept. How sensible.

“Why have you concealed the true depth of your hurt from your mother?” he asks. It is obvious why, but Mr Castle must analyse his actions for himself.

“I didn’t want to make it worse. I said that.”

“Make what worse?”

“The whole situation. Getting into a fight with Mother wouldn’t help.”

“Why not?” Dr Burke asks mildly. Mr Castle has continually mentioned that confronting his mother would not help, but has yet to articulate why that should be the case.
“She’d just get louder and more upset.”

“And so?”

“What do you mean? The louder she gets the less likely she’ll listen. How does that help? If I stay calm, then there’s a better chance she’ll hear me.”

“Have you ever lost your temper with your mother in a way which means that you have raised your voice to her for more than a brief time?”

“No.” Mr Castle scowls. “What’s the point of this? I keep telling you that yelling at her won’t help.”

“I am not at all sure that you are correct in that supposition.”

Mr Castle goggles at Dr Burke.

“Say what?”

“Mr Castle,” Dr Burke says patiently, “throughout this chain of events – I refer to Detective Beckett’s entire relationship with your family – you have consistently preserved calm, considered responses to your mother’s actions and statements. I have inferred, and you have not contradicted me, that you have previously always been calm and stable in the face of emotional upheaval.” Mr Castle nods. “It appears to me that this may have misled your mother into believing that she has not caused you any significant feeling of hurt.” Mr Castle opens his mouth, but Dr Burke continues before he can speak. “She is wrong. However, you must understand why she might think in this manner. Your mother is used to, and indeed is an exemplar of, the theatrical type. These personalities are quick to express their emotions, and often display them in a highly exaggerated fashion. It appears to me that your mother has become used to an excessive level of emotions, and therefore has come to believe that more restrained behaviour merely means that a more limited emotional response has been felt.”

Detective Beckett’s face indicates that she is following this argument with considerable understanding. No doubt this is because she is fully aware that she conceals her emotions as often, and as extensively, as possible, and is in this respect exactly the opposite of Mrs Rodgers.

“Oh,” Mr Castle says. “You mean that because I’m not yelling, she thinks I don’t care?”

“Exactly so.”

Mr Castle ponders for a while, his brow furrowed. “But what if you’re wrong? You told me to trust my instincts and this doesn’t feel right.”

“Let us explore your concerns, then. I would not lightly discount your instincts.” Dr Burke thinks, however, that whereas Mr Castle’s instincts have run true in relation to Detective Beckett, he is not as convinced that they are accurate in relation to his mother, not least because Mr Castle has resided with his mother for the majority of his existence.

“Um…”

“Detective Beckett, have you at any time raised your voice to Mrs Rodgers?”

“No.”

“And yet you appear to have made enough of an impression on her without so doing that she has
admitted her actions to Mr Castle on two separate occasions.”

“Yeah?” says Detective Beckett.

“Why do you think that is?”

Detective Beckett appears completely blank. Mr Castle, however, does not.

“You scared the shit out of her,” he says, profanely. “Just like you do with suspects.”

“I didn’t yell,” Detective Beckett snips.

“You don’t have to. You project intimidation.” Mr Castle stops. “You project massive intimidation. Even if it’s not exactly an emotion, it’s heavy.” He stops again. Realisation is dawning. “Massive projection. Oh.” He slumps back on the couch. “No, Beckett didn’t raise her voice,” he says to Dr Burke. “But that’s not what you mean, is it? What you really mean is that Mother felt her – er – strong emotion and reacted to it.”

Mr Castle’s brow wrinkles again. “That sort of feels better. Fits better.”

He relapses into silence, his fingers twitching. Dr Burke is still not inclined to provide Mr Castle with a writing implement. He must articulate his thoughts, not inscribe them. Based on Dr Burke’s one opportunity to view Mr Castle’s writing technique, allowing him to inscribe his thoughts will not clarify any matter whatsoever.

Dr Burke is confounded when Mr Castle extracts a small memo pad from his pocket, together with a stub of pencil, and starts to scribble. Detective Beckett sighs, and exchanges a look of some resignation with Dr Burke.

“He thinks with his fingers,” she says. “Trust me, you don’t want him to start wandering around touching things.” Dr Burke raises an eyebrow. “Pick up, put down, turn round, tap, turn upside down…lather, rinse, repeat.”

“Perhaps not,” Dr Burke agrees dryly. Mr Castle is entirely oblivious to the conversation. He is scribbling, rapidly. After a moment or two, he stops and stares at the page for a further two minutes. Then he scribbles some more, stares hard at the page, and eventually sighs deeply.

“Ugh,” he says gloomily. Dr Burke regards him fixedly. “I get it. I don’t like it, but I get it. The story works.”

_The story?_, Dr Burke thinks with indignation. This is no _story_. Mr Castle should realise that this is an important point in real life, not a fictional invention.

“I guess I’m going to have to yell,” he says unhappily.

“Guess so,” Beckett says.

“It might be the best strategy,” Dr Burke says sententiously. “Now, we appear to have exceeded our time. Perhaps you might return next week, Mr Castle, and we may discuss how your meeting with Mrs Rodgers progressed.”

“Mm,” Mr Castle says very dubiously.

“C’mon, Castle. Let’s go,” Detective Beckett says, before Mr Castle can say anything unfortunate. “Night, Dr Burke.”
“G’night,” Mr Castle says, as Detective Beckett leads the way to the door.

“Good night.”
“Do you think he’s right?” Castle asks, shortly after they’re back at Beckett’s apartment with a very necessary coffee, a small side lamp the only light.

“The infallible Dr Burke?” Beckett says sardonically. “If he’s not, it’s probably going to be on the front page tomorrow.”

“Seriously, do you think he’s right?”

Beckett looks more closely at Castle. She can’t imagine that the irritatingly always-right Dr Burke is wrong now, especially as – though she will take revenge for the comment about intimidation – she can see his logic quite clearly. However, Castle is obviously worried. She puts a hand over his where it lies on his knee.

“Yeah. I do.” She regards Castle very seriously. “He really hasn’t been wrong yet. Lanie heard who I was seeing and pretty much genuflected. He’s the best. I still don’t much like him – though I guess he’s better outside work – but if he isn’t right about what you should think about, then no-one’s going to be able to do any better.

Castle grunts unhappily. “It fits,” he drag out, “but I don’t like it.” Beckett pats his hand, and then intertwines her fingers with his.

“It’s up to you,” she says, in deliberate echo of his words to her. “But I think you should try it.”

“You do?” Castle turns to her. “Really? Why?”

Beckett gathers herself. He’s asking for the truth. She just hopes that he’s ready to hear it.

“Yes.” His expression asks the question. “If you don’t, you’ll never clear the air. You’ll just keep on feeling guilty and trying to make up for it and never managing. You’ll resent her for not understanding you. Just like I never cleared things up with Dad. You’ll be right where I was, and you’ll hate it. And” – she breathes deeply, and hopes – “I’ll hate it. We can’t get anywhere if this isn’t fixed too. You’ll say you want me to move in, and you’ll even mean it, but every time I turn round you’ll remember the fight with your mother and it’ll poison it before we’ve begun.” She breathes slowly, again. “I’m not going to start down that line. I wanna get this right. I wanna move in, sometime, and… all the rest… but not if this isn’t fixed. I’m not setting us up to fail from the get-go.”

Castle stands up and walks to the window, staring out, his shoulders stiff and set. Beckett slumps back on to the couch, drinks her coffee and descends into gloom. It had to be said, and it had to be said in unequivocal terms, but it’s crunch time, and Castle has to do this for himself. He’s picked up her little red stone, and is turning and stroking it. She’s done that, too. She hopes he sees the point she’s making: not trying to force him to anything, but pointing out that this needs fixed for them to have the future she wants them to have. He keeps staring out, and twisting.

Castle couldn’t stay sitting down. He had to move, to separate, to think: undistracted by touch. Staring out over the city, night falling and streetlights sulky pushing back the darkness, he automatically reaches for something for his hands to do: finding the small stone beneath his fingers and sliding it over and over, unconscious of the similarity to Beckett’s actions, weeks ago.

He doesn’t, yet, know what to think. He can hear the truth in Beckett’s desire to move in, and more – and he wants that: he really does want that too, and she’s saying flatly that she wants it – but he’s
scared of the fight he has to have with his mother to achieve it, because after all, what if she says she never loved him? It doesn’t matter that he’s forty, a successful adult – he still, deep down, needs the security of his mother’s love.

Or does he? He turns the small stone, unseeing. Does he _need_ it, or does he _want_ it? Not quite the same. And isn’t the truth, whatever it is, better than no truth? He’s seen the damage lying about relationships has caused Beckett, and how it nearly broke them before they’d even begun. Her blunt words are no more than the truth of her experience: an attempt to save him the pain which she’d felt. He remembers, abruptly, that her relationship with Will (whoever he might have been) had broken on her failed relationship with her father.

She knows whereof she speaks. But yet it hurts: the truth hurts. She’s right, but _oh_, how it hurts. It had all been different, watching from the outside, and that had been quite agonising enough. He doesn’t want to be another Katie-and-Jim, though.

His broad shoulders slump, and as if that had been the signal for which she waited, Beckett pads softly across the floor and curls arms around him from behind, leaving his hands free to fret and fidget.

“You’re right,” he says heavily, not looking at her. Her head leans on the back of his shoulder, lips a breath away from his neck. “You’re right, but I hate that you’re right. I hate that Dr Burke is right again.”

“Yeah,” Beckett emits in bitter agreement. “Me too.”

“What if she doesn’t?” Castle whispers. “What if she never did?”

“Someone said to me, not so long ago: you need to tell your dad the truth. It’s the only way you’ll move on. I’ll be there. I’m on your side, whatever it is. Were you wrong?”

“No-o.”

“So. You need to tell your mother the truth, and make her understand. I’ll be there for you. Same as you were for me. You said: _Truth hurts, Kate, but nothing ever works if it’s built on lies._ And, God yes, it has hurt, but look where we got to.” She’s almost pleading with him.

“But what if she doesn’t?” he asks again.

“I’ll be here. Right here with you. Better to know. I’ll still be with you, whatever.” Somehow, standing in the almost-dark together, only the small side lamp puddling dim light on the floor, she can say these things without embarrassment. “Always with you.”

He turns in her arms and holds her hard, dips to take her mouth, the small stone smooth against her back, suddenly no doubt, no hesitations, no-one in their way. “Always with me,” he agrees, “and always with you.” He kisses her deeply again, possessive and sure, and then lifts back off and leans his brow on hers, more peaceful now than at any time these last few days.

“I still don’t want to,” he says, a long while later. “I know I’ve got to, but I don’t want to.”

“Sounds familiar,” Beckett says with a quiet edge. “I didn’t want to go to therapy. I didn’t want to see Dad. I didn’t want to meet your family, or go for brunch, or come to dinner, or deal with your mom or Alexis.” Her hands tighten on his midriff. “But I did it all, because I wanted… I wanted to have us.”

“Look, I can’t be there tomorrow ‘cause of work, and anyway I don’t think you’d want that, but… as soon as you’re done, come to the precinct or call me, and we’ll work it out.” She looks up into his face in the faint light through the window. “There are enough of us there to form a cordon,” she says, and smiles mischievously.

“Might need it,” he replies gloomily, but there’s a tinge of dry humour below the gloom, brought into full view when his stomach rumbles loudly.

“C’mon, let’s get some takeout,” Beckett says, and instantly turns to her stack of menus, riffling through them. “What d’you want?”

“Chinese,” Castle decides. “Let’s see that?”

Chinese is ordered. Nothing much happens while they wait, except some peaceable snuggling. Mostly, it’s Castle who snuggles. Well, maybe. What actually happens, Castle being rather wider than Beckett, is that he decides that the best form of snuggling is to treat her as if she were a teddy bear and snuggle around her. Beckett simply has to consent to being snuggled, and is perfectly happy to be so, if it will reassure Castle now. Anyway, she could do with some snuggling too. She hadn’t been at all sure that she’d taken the right tack, and the reaction is setting in. She needs to be sure that they’re still sound, and this cuddled closeness is the best truth of that. She nestles closer, and keeps her arms around him, as his encircle her.

Dinner arrives, and is eaten; cleared away, and replaced by more coffee. Castle doesn’t want to leave: so much is clear; and Beckett is not precisely encouraging him to go. She is quite content to stay nestling for some considerable time. How convenient that Castle likes being nestled into as much as she likes being nestled, and that therefore both of them are wholly comforted. She leans her head on his shoulder, her hand on the other shoulder, and is quiet.

Castle idly plays with a tress of Beckett’s hair (it’s longer now, he notices. Not much, an inch or so, but just enough to notice), cossets her close, and is content. Now that the tide of emotion has ebbed, he recognises the risk she thought that she’d been taking to speak as honestly as she did. He hopes he wouldn’t have taken it wrongly, whatever she said, but… it’s been a bad few days, and he couldn’t swear to it. He feels the need to hold her, simply to hold her, and regain equilibrium.

Eventually, he has to go. He doesn’t ask Beckett to come with him, and when she manages a very coded reference, he declines.

“I need to think,” he explains, a little unhappily. “I won’t think if you’re there.”

Beckett curls back into him. “’S okay,” she murmurs. “I get it.” She hugs him for a moment, then slides away towards the door. Castle collects himself together, but before leaving kisses her softly, not, tonight, the ready, blazing desire that’s so easy and so good, but simply comfort taken and thanks given.

Castle doesn’t sleep particularly well, and breakfast with Alexis is likewise muted. He doesn’t want to burden his daughter with any more issues; she’s dealt with enough already, and besides which, stress before school isn’t helpful. He frets his way through the time until his mother arrives.

She looks, if possible, worse than yesterday. It wrenches Castle’s heart, but he’s had half the morning to think about Dr Burke’s words.

“Mother,” he says. “I want you simply to listen to me.” He pauses. Martha is silent. “Just because I don’t get emotional and loud like you do, doesn’t mean that I don’t have strong feelings too. You
He takes a deep breath. "Deciding that you had to move out really hurt me, because it seems like you cared more about being right than about the family. Seems like you didn’t love me enough to do what I asked, because you thought you knew best. You didn’t. You’ve said that you’ve given up everything for me, and all I hear now is that you resented it. Nothing else.” He swallows, hard. “If that’s what you’ve felt all these years, then whatever you say, it doesn’t sound like you loved me like I thought you did.” He stops.

"That’s ridiculous!” his mother cries. “Of course I love you. You were my baby and you’re my son. How can you think otherwise?’’

"Right now? Quite easily. You haven’t done or said anything since I met Beckett to make me think you want me to be happy on my terms. The best you’ve done is said don’t screw it up. Not exactly a vote of confidence.” Martha gasps. “Everything you’ve done has been to try and make sure that you’re happy with Beckett on your terms.”

Martha opens and shuts her mouth twice, and then finds her voice. “How dare you!” she emits. “How dare you say I don’t want you to be happy? I only ever wanted you to be happy but you’d never be happy till Katherine came here so I wanted to make that happen.”

“I told you Beckett was seeing a shrink,” Castle points out, voice starting to rise. This time, he doesn’t try to bring it down. “You wouldn’t listen. We even tried to make him meet you, but he ducked out ten seconds after he did. He” –

“That was a therapist?” his mother screeches at him. Castle doesn’t think that was the actual point.

“That was Beckett’s therapist. Who knows what he’s doing, unlike you. He’s fixed her, despite all your efforts to screw things up. If I’d listened to you it would have been a complete mess and she’d never have fixed herself. Were you trying to make it go wrong?”

“No! I want you to be happy!”

“Then why didn’t you just let me be happy?” Castle shouts at her. “Why didn’t you just butt out when I told you to?”

“I told you,” Martha cries. “I was scared and you kept not explaining” –

“It wasn’t any of your business. You just needed to trust me and you wouldn’t. How can I trust you if you won’t listen to me? How can I trust anything you say?”

“Because I love you,” she whispers, and begins to weep. “I love you but I made a mistake. I was scared. I knew you wouldn’t but it felt just the same and I couldn’t stand a third time and I couldn’t talk to you because it was already all wrong. I thought you didn’t want me, Richard. All you did was tell me off without any emotion. I thought you didn’t care.”

“Not everyone needs to shout to show their feelings.” His mother doesn’t seem to hear that. She’s sobbing, quietly.

“I just wanted it to be better and I thought it would be better if Katherine just started to come here.”

Castle sighs. He can’t disbelieve his mother’s tears, and he can’t bear to break her heart.

“I see. You almost ruined everything, Mother. If there hadn’t been that case…” He stops there.

“Okay. I believe you didn’t mean it. But I don’t believe you really understand what you could have
done by not listening. I need to think about that.” He sighs again. “I get that you love me. We’ve fixed that. The rest… that’s going to take some time. Alexis isn’t too happy with you right now either. Just saying you love me doesn’t change that you’ve really, really hurt me. It’s going to take time to fix it.”

He watches his mother’s devastated misery, and is hard put to it not to weep too. But somewhere in all this tangled emotion, he thinks she finally gets it. The test of that, of course, will be this damn party, but he’s not opening that can of worms now.

He stands up. For the first time in – well, he can’t think how long – his mother essays an embrace of her own volition. He returns it, tentatively. It’s better, but there’s work to do still.

Once his mother has left, Castle doesn’t instantly call Beckett. He will do, because he needs to see her; needs to see the love hiding deep in her eyes, hidden by the snark and snap and sparkle of her precinct self; needs to know that later he’ll find soft, feminine Kat who’ll only want him. However, first he needs some time to himself.

He hadn’t stopped himself shouting, but he hadn’t exactly done a lot of it. Still, he hadn’t tried to calm emotions, and it seems to have worked. He hates that his mother was crying, but he hadn’t tried to fix that or appease her or stop it.

On balance, a win. Maybe by only a single point, but a win. He slumps back in his seat, tired of all this high emotion and drama. He doesn’t want to go into the precinct, suddenly. Too many people, too much going on, too much need to preserve a façade. Instead, he texts Beckett to meet him at Remy’s. She’ll give him that space of mental quiet that he needs.

Beckett reaches Remy’s first, manages to secure a secluded booth by dint of sharp elbows and familiarity (that is to say, the server recognises her and doesn’t quibble), and orders a milkshake to be going on with. She doesn’t order for Castle, who might need anything from soda through to neat whiskey, depending on the way the morning has gone. The one thing she can be sure of is that he’ll need consoling, and she’s dealt with that possibility in her choice of booth.

Castle lumbers in a couple of moments later, appearing tired, heavy-eyed and uncheerful. Even so, he’s not nearly as bad as she was expecting. He spots her and trudges across to the booth, sitting down opposite her. Beckett takes both his hands firmly in hers, makes sure he sees her assessing gaze, and simply says, “Hey.”

“Hey,” he manages in return, with a dull attempt at a smile.

Beckett strokes her thumbs across the backs of his hands. “Let’s get lunch,” she says decisively, “and then you can tell me about it without anyone interrupting.”

“No interruptions? Did you put Ryan and Espo in Holding?” Castle says with a poor attempt at humour.

“Not quite. I sneaked out when they weren’t looking.”

At that point the server returns, orders are given, and Beckett notes that Castle is not so upset that he can’t face food. She pats his hands again, squeezes reassuringly, and has a slurp of milkshake.

“I didn’t shout much,” Castle says despairingly.

“No-one said you had to, just that you needn’t stop yourself if you wanted to,” she consoles. “Wanna talk about it?”
Castle makes an unhappy face. “She might have got it,” he drags out. “But I keep thinking that and she hasn’t so far. At least this time I got a bit more explanation. She just keeps saying she was scared and she thought she couldn’t talk to me.”

“Mmm?” arrives sympathetically.

“Then she said” – he digresses – “you know, I really hate how Burke is right every single fucking time” – he reverts to the main point – “she thought I didn’t care because I wasn’t emotional. And then she started to cry and I can’t bear it when she cries because she hardly ever does.” He stops, and sighs deeply. “She meant well,” he says, and slumps, head in hands, elbows on the table. “If only she’d listened.”

There is a pause, in which their burgers arrive. Eating his burger gives Castle an excuse not to say anything more, and Beckett, thankfully, doesn’t push. In fact, she does exactly what he needs: doesn’t talk, doesn’t ask questions, and doesn’t try to turn his head inside out.

“Have you got a few minutes more?” he asks, burgers eaten and not a single fry remaining.

“Yeah,” Beckett confirms, having checked her watch.

“Let’s go for a walk. It’s sunny. Tompkins Square Park should be nice.”

Beckett sneaks a look at him from under her eyelashes. “Should I be thinking up quiet, secluded spots?”

Her comment causes Castle to perk up somewhat. “Could do,” he leers more happily. “C’mon.”

They make it to the park without incident, though Castle insists on his arm arriving and then remaining around Beckett every step of the way. She tucks in, and doesn’t complain, or shoot him. He draws them to a seat in the sunshine, heedless of the heat of the early June day, and stays, silently curling her into him and with his head resting on her hair. She allows him to do so, for a while, but eventually looks at her watch.

“I need to get back. You coming, or going home?”

Castle looks pathetically at her. “Home.”

“I have to work. If a body drops, I’ll call.” She pauses, and hugs him quickly, adding a brief peck on his cheek. “Um… I could come round later. Text me,” she adds, already starting to stride very briskly away.

Castle stays sitting on the bench for a few minutes. Then he taps out a text, and for the first time since he woke up this morning, smiles with some genuine happiness.
You've got a way

Come six, since there are no new homicides to detain her, Beckett makes her way to her own apartment. Once there, she puts the kettle on, and while it’s boiling finds a small overnight bag, packs a clean set of clothes and some extremely attractive nightwear into it, and then stares at it in the hope that having packed will make the coming evening – and subsequent morning – much easier.

Not that Castle actually knows that she’s planning a potential sleepover. He’d only mentioned coming for dinner. If he doesn’t like the idea, no harm done. She does think that Castle not liking the idea that she stays would be even more unlikely than pigs flying, and as far as she knows there are no fat pink pigs circling the flight paths into JFK this evening. But it’s still another step. At least she’s done it once before. It shouldn’t be this difficult.

But somehow it being a week night, and having no surge of anger to buoy her up and drive her onward, makes it harder. She berates herself for cowardice while she drinks her tea, then picks up her bag and vacates her apartment before she can unpack again.

She knocks at Castle’s door, and is greeted with considerable enthusiasm, manifesting in a toe-curling kiss.

“What’s this?” Castle enquires curiously, taking her bag. “You didn’t need to bring your own provisions.” He prods it, and finds that it squishes. “Beckett…?” His wide grin crinkles up his eyes. “Have you brought a change of clothes?”

“Might’ve,” she mutters, blushing.

“Ooohhh,” Castle emits happily. “I know where this goes, then.” Seems like that solves the question of whether he likes the idea of her staying. He bounces off towards his bedroom, and shortly returns, minus bag and with an even wider grin. He’s obviously peeked into her packing.

“What’s for dinner?” she asks, and thinks that a little ice water might be a good accompaniment.

“Chicken in cream sauce, pasta, green salad. It’s nearly ready.” He trots to the stairs. “Alexis! Dinner time.”

Alexis comes scampering down the stairs, and dinner is swiftly dished up. Conversation remains, at least on Beckett’s part, fairly stilted, but it’s easier. It’s especially easier because Alexis chatters at nineteen to the dozen – at her slowest. Had she not known that they were father and daughter, the machine-gun speed of conversation might have clued her in.

Dinner done, she’s not allowed to help clear up, but is sent, with a mildly malicious grin, to sit and behave yourself, Beckett, because you can’t threaten the washing up with your Glock. She growls and glares, but it makes no difference: she is left to curl up and await the coffee which had been promised to her.

She’s daydreaming when it’s placed in front of her, followed by Castle plonking himself down next to her and without hesitation slinging his arm around her.

“That’s better,” he murmurs. “You’re here.”

“Mmmm,” Beckett hums.
“I’m glad. You’re really peaceful.”

Beckett splutters out her mouthful of coffee all over the table and the knees of her dress pants. Peaceful? Her? He’s known her for nine months, in which they’ve hardly been peaceful.

“You are,” Castle emphasises. “I mean, not like everything’s peaceful around you, but you’re quiet. Still. You don’t fidget.”

“You make me sound like a statue.”

“I wouldn’t like you if you were marble, or on a pedestal,” Castle points out. “That wouldn’t be any fun at all.” He curls his fingers around her upper arm, and tip-taps gently. “Anyway, you’re peaceful.”

Beckett proceeds to prove his point by drinking more of her coffee without chatter, and peace has, indeed, descended.

Set at a slight distance from the morning’s events, and with Beckett tucked in beside him, Castle can apply some thought and intelligence to the goings-on of the last weeks. After some pondering, he comes to the conclusion that he might actually have got through to his mother. After some further pondering, he decides that he’ll only know the truth when some time has passed. A while after that, he realises that he needs to set a date for the housewarming party. But after that, he wonders whether it wouldn’t be a good idea for his mother to meet Dr Burke properly. Castle hadn’t failed to notice Dr Burke’s tactical retreat after opening night, and while admiring his skill and acuity, had been less than appreciative of the strategy. Apart from anything else, he’d been very disappointed that he’d not had a front-row view of the expected floor show.

“Do you think I should ask Burke to talk to Mother?” he says, apropos of his thoughts. Another splutter greets the comment, consisting largely of the remains of Beckett’s coffee.

“I like these pants,” Beckett says crossly, dabbing at them with a Kleenex and not notably improving matters thereby.


Beckett considers. Clearly Castle is serious about this. “I don’t think he’d take her on as a patient,” she says slowly. “I think he might have hit his limit with the rest of us, and he scuttled off pretty damn quick from the theatre.”

“I don’t want him to take her as a patient – much, though I think it might be funny from a safe distance – I just want him to make sure she realises how wrong she was.”

Beckett considers some more, chewing her lip thoughtfully. “I’m not sure. She didn’t believe him when she wasn’t involved – about me – so why would she believe him now? Don’t you think she might just dig her heels in?”

“I guess she might,” Castle agrees gloomily. “But we’ve tried and tried to make her see, and what if she still doesn’t? Burke’s washed everyone else’s brain out. Why shouldn’t he do hers?”

“I’d leave it for a few days. See what happens.”

“You?” Castle squeaks, astonished. “You are telling me to wait and see? You never wait and see. You blast straight through all the obstacles and get things done.” He stops. “At work.” He stops himself saying anything further, such as but then you let your relationship with your father fester. That wouldn’t be helpful. Beckett flicks him a half-irritated glance, which makes him think that
he’d better quit while he’s ahead: to wit, stick with his problems with his mother. “Okay. I’ll try it,” he says with resignation.

“And don’t forget to shout,” Beckett says with mischief suddenly brimming in her eyes.

Castle growls at her, though his matching grin underlies the growl. “No fair, Beckett. If I start shouting, I might shout at you.”

“You do that anyway,” she notes.

“I do not!”

“So that wasn’t you shouting Beckett! Beckett! in bed?” She dissolves into laughter at his expression of general horror. Castle merely dissolves into pouting grumpiness, which is eventually replaced by a smug grin.

“You shout too,” he points out. She glares. “You shout at criminals.” She reverts to dark mutterings over a delicate blush. “I wouldn’t mind if you were shouting my” –

“Shut up.”

Castle sniggers, pulls her in much closer, and then leans in slowly to kiss her, making no secret of his intentions. A single searching exchange later, however, he stops.

“Let’s take this elsewhere,” he purrs softly. “I don’t want to be interrupted.” He stands and pulls Beckett, who is rapidly softening towards Kat, with him towards his office and then his bedroom, shutting both doors firmly behind him.

Once in his bedroom, he takes her firmly into his arms, tips her head up and kisses her slowly and assertively, stroking the length of her spine and then returning his hands to span her waist. Kat softens against him, curves in, and slides elegant fingers into his hair: letting him take the lead and take her wherever he wants to go.

For long minutes he simply kisses her, still slow, sure and assertive: content to own her mouth and hold her slim body; happy to defer more while delicately stoking the rise of desire between them. She’s soft in his arms, pressed against him bonelessly and purring quietly in pleasure between kisses, infinitely pettable. Gently, he begins to explore under her top, skimming the waist of her pants and the pale skin of her back, roaming round to unbuckle the narrow belt, undo the dark button and the zip, allow the pants to fall away and leave her glorious legs bare. She steps elegantly out from the pools of fabric, and returns to be cradled against him, unbuttoning his shirt as he slips hers off: skin to skin and then mouth to mouth.

Slow, sure kisses turn inexorably to harder, hotter exchange; hands begin to wander more intently, pressing in begets rolling of hips and thick weight pushing between lean legs. Castle’s pants disappear, his shirt follows, and both of them are left, still standing by the shut door, in minimal underwear: shivering, though anything but cold. Time slows in their sensual haze: each touch, stroke and kiss languorous and leisurely; drawing them nearer to the bed without haste; the measured pace only adding to the deepening sexuality between them.

Castle brings Kat to the bed, standing between her legs and lowering her down on to her back: taking the opportunity to study her with heat and adoration mingling and matched in her keen gaze; then kneeling himself with his chin resting between her breasts and, now, an entirely male, predatory expression which slithers down her nerves and pools in her core. And yet despite the blazing heat between them, he’s still unhurried, tracing her body with his tongue as if they’ve all
the time in the world, as if the evening would never end.

He starts at the top: a barely-there flick of the tip of his tongue across her clavicles; a tiny scrape of teeth, hardly enough to notice. He continues downward in the same vein, paying detailed attention to each inch he passes: the same deliberate pace as he goes. It’s wholly erotic. The fabric of her bra moves across her nipples, providing delicious friction that sends sparks through her senses, until it’s unfastened and discarded and his lips have replaced the silk. Castle amuses himself there for a while; coaxing her to white-hot arousal and mewing noises of desire.

When his leisurely teasing has had the desired effect, he moves further down, still softly predatory and assertively masculine: his hands firm around her waist, then her hips, then gripping her thighs, as his mouth follows. He draws her panties down and away, leaving them to join the rest of their clothing on the floor, and laps at her: open to him, wholly his. She squirms and writhe, hands in his hair, face turned into the pillow to muffle the noises (damn those bookshelves!), completely unable to escape his slow tightening of his tongue; entirely given up to the sensation and to him, until she’s wound so tight and so high that the only escape is to snap, on a high cry.

She smiles, cat-like, as she discovers Castle’s hard body wrapped around her; brings long, delicately probing fingers to bear, delicately, and as slowly as he had, exploring around thick, hot weight and stoking him to tense, poised-to-pounce flashpoint: but when she dips her head he prevents it, pulls her up to his mouth and kisses her deeply; rolls her and settles in the cradle of her hips; then takes her in one deliberate, forceful thrust which leaves her filled full and gasping into his matching growl. He moves, and she lifts to receive him again, and the rhythm picks up pace until all that’s swallowing their desperate, seeking noises are their kisses, and then on one last frantic movement there are mutual cries and then only stillness and silence and serenity, and then, not much later, sleep. The carefully packed nightwear is entirely ignored.

Deep in the night Castle wakes, finds his Kat curled beside him, and leaving his hand on her waist so that he’ll know she’s there even while he’s asleep, drifts back into utterly contented slumber. Still later, Beckett shifts, barely awake, and snuggles herself closer into his warmth, bringing his hand to over her heart, and slides back to sleep.

When she wakes, it’s time to get going. Castle is snuffling gently into the pillow, two degrees of turn away from suffocating himself. Beckett pokes him in the ribs until his eyes flutter. “I have to get going,” she notes. Castle grumps. “Work.” She slides away. Castle reaches out and tugs her back, but contents himself with one hard kiss, and then releases her. Less than twenty minutes later, she’s showered and dressed, putting on her make-up and trying to fluff her damp hair into semi-dryness: that tried and failed, she’s gone in a whisk of Beckett-ness.

Castle stumbles into his unsatisfyingly solo shower and eventually emerges with marginally more intelligence and attention to the day. Breakfast is punctuated by Alexis’s curiosity about the lack of Beckett, which Castle deflects, unconvincingly.

“I don’t mind you having friends over,” Alexis notes mischievously, with a salacious accent on friends that causes Castle to raise an eyebrow and emit a parentally displeased noise.

“How lucky,” he says sarcastically, “since last I looked this was still my loft.”

“Da-ad,” Alexis pouts, abruptly similar to his expression. “I didn’t mean that. I just mean you shouldn’t worry about bringing Detective Beckett home. It doesn’t upset me.” She pauses, and acquires a seraphic smile. “So long as you don’t object when I want to bring boys home.”
Castle chokes on his coffee and takes some time to recover. “You won’t be bringing boys home overnight till you’re twenty five!” he manages.

Alexis snickers happily as she clears her breakfast dishes away. “Gotcha,” she smirks. Castle harrumphs and clears up his own detritus before retiring to his office, his laptop, and a floodtide of inspiration.

The precinct is quiet and boring, and remains so throughout Thursday and Friday. The team’s on call at the weekend, but as of lunchtime on Saturday nothing has occurred, Beckett has completed her chores, and she is bored. She looks up exhibitions, and can’t muster enthusiasm for any of them; so eventually changes to go out for a long run. Her exercise has been of the paired-up variety, recently, and a nice run is just what she needs to stretch out her muscles. She clips her phone, gun and shield on (just in case anything interesting happens) and sets off at an easy pace, aiming for Central Park.

About halfway around her circuit, the phone rings. It’s not, almost regrettably, Dispatch with a nice new body, but it is Castle, which makes her happy.

“Beckett, what are you doing tonight?” he bubbles.

“Uh?” she says, confused. “Tonight? I’m on call, but I hadn’t any plans. Why?” She’s just a tad suspicious. Castle is overflowing with enthusiasm, which could be marvellous – or could be dreadful, depending on whether his enthusiasm is for a nice dinner in good company or for something entirely ridiculous, such as a trip through an abattoir which he requires for research. He would be equally bouncy about either: she, however, would not be.

“I’ve been dumped,” he says soulfully. Beckett makes an unsympathetic mutter of disbelief. “I have. I was going to take Alexis to the theatre – not La Mama,” he says very hurriedly as she emits a fearsome noise, “but she’s had a better offer and I couldn’t really let her not go even though normally I make her stick to the first one she accepted and” –

“Focus, Castle,” Beckett raps out, in the hope that he’ll slow up and explain.

“So would you like to come to the proper theatre?”

“Yes. What is it?” she asks, rather after the fact.

“Blithe Spirit. I’ll even give you dinner first. Can you be ready for me to pick you up at five-thirty, and we’ll do a pre-theatre meal?”

Beckett checks her watch. It’s after three. She’ll need to make tracks. “Okay.”

“Great. See you at five-thirty. Till later.”

“Bye.”

She turns herself round and speeds up.

Once home, she devotes all her energy to a soothing, but accelerated, bath, and is ready to go at quarter past: putting on a pretty, summery dress in recognition of the warm June evening, but having her badge, gun and phone (carefully switched to vibrate) in her clutch bag. She snatches up a light silky wrap in case it’s cooler later, and is content.

She is extraordinarily glad she made the effort to dress up some when she sees Castle. He’s dressed
up some too: blazer and formal pants, a dress shirt but no tie.

“Oh good,” he says with relief, “you’re all dressed up. I forgot to tell you” – he catches her glare – “not that you don’t always look gorgeous but you’d be uncomfortable with everyone else dressed up if you were in jeans…” He stops his venture into dentopedology. Beckett doesn’t do anything at all to help him extricate his foot from his mouth. When she thinks he’s reduced to a proper sense of his silliness, she changes the subject.

“What was Alexis’s better offer?”

“Some teenybopper that she’s been desperate to see for months, who she probably has a crush on,” says Castle with deep dislike, “and a subsequent sleepover.”

“Oh. I see. Rather her than me.”

“Me too,” Castle says in a very heartfelt tone. “C’mon. Let’s go get dinner.” He wraps his arm around her waist and steers her out of her own door, barely remembering to allow her to lock up.

Dinner is good. The performance is good, too, enhanced by its utter lack of pretentious “concepts”, strange casting choices, modern interpretations, and inaudible dialogue. It is, in fact, a thoroughly enjoyably classically produced play, and both Beckett and Castle enjoy it to the full, improved yet more by the lack of any urgent calls from Dispatch.

“Now, Miss Beckett,” Castle says with exaggerated gallantry as they exit the theatre, “please allow me to escort you home.”

“I’ve got a gun,” she replies provocatively.

“I’m much more fun than a gun,” Castle rasps into her ear, and proves his point by a tiny, meaningful nip.

“Mm? I guess I could test that out,” she husks in return, and slips her hand into the crook of his elbow. “Let’s go.”
Dream of the old days

Castle follows Beckett into her apartment with a cheerfully wolfish grin, which it is possibly fortunate that she can’t see.

“Did you enjoy our date?” he asks mischievously.

“Date?”

“Yes, date. That’s our second date. You agreed we should have more dates,” he points out innocently.

“I did?”

Castle droops theatrically and acquires a hang-dog, pathetic look. He almost manages to bring moisture into his widened blue eyes, though it’s fair to say that he only achieves that by thinking of a very unhappy, first-ever-cold-ridden baby Alexis.

“I thought you liked our first date,” he whimpers.

“I did,” Beckett says consolingly, folding up her stole. She looks at him. “I told you I did. Of course we can have more dates,” she adds, and moves to cuddle him. Sadly, at that point Castle can’t conceal his snickers any longer. “You rat!” she says in a very different, indignant, tone.

“Got you good,” he laughs, and hangs on to her hands to prevent her instant attack. He takes her wrists into one of his large palms, and uses the free hand to pull her against him. “No fighting,” he says lazily. “It’s not nice.”

She tugs at his grip, not particularly strongly, and unsurprisingly fails to shift him. “Big bully,” she sulks. “I could take you down.”

“Sure you could,” Castle says easily, “but we’d both get hurt on your wooden floors. Anyway, you don’t want to.”

Beckett humphs.

“You don’t. We’ve had a lovely evening, and you don’t want to spoil it now. I know what you want.”

“Humph.”

“You want a kiss,” Castle concludes, and delivers it upon the word.

“I think you wanted a kiss,” Beckett says.

“Yeah, so? I got one. You got one too. Fair’s fair.”

Beckett suddenly smirks evilly. “Well, you’ve had your date, and you’ve had your kiss, so I guess it’s time you went home.” She acquires a completely insincere innocent, doe-eyed expression. “It is only the second date, after all. Far too soon for anything more.” She frees herself and dodges away, watching Castle’s dumbfounded face with considerable amusement.

“You...” he weebles. “You...”
She plumps down on the couch and snorts gleefully. “Got you good,” she says with satisfaction. “Now who’s laughing?”

Castle harrumphs hugely, and then pouts. “You’re mean,” he says.

“And you started it,” she says smugly, “so I finished it. Appropriately.”

He harrumphs some more.

“Did we miss an elephant lurking in the corner?” Beckett says teasingly.

Castle leers. “I could show you my tr” –

“Shut up, Castle.”

“But” –

“No.”

Castle pouts, and arrives at the couch still pouting. It would be adorable, if only he weren’t so very obviously peeking under his lashes at Beckett’s reaction and adjusting the expression to fit.

“Pouting doesn’t work on me,” she points out. “I’m immune.”

“You’re inhuman.”

She smirks naughtily. “Really? I thought you’d spent quite a lot of time exploring my human aspects. I assure you there wasn’t any plastic involved.”

Castle’s eyes darken. “No? Maybe I should investigate further. You wouldn’t want to have undiscovered plastic, would you? Though it might be proof of alien abduction,” he adds enthusiastically, “or maybe you’re a hybrid or a humdroid – ow!”

“A what?” Beckett says direfully. “I am not a hybrid anything. And a humdroid sounds like a cross between an SUV and a robot, so you’d better not be implying that I’m square, weigh two tons, and can’t act without orders.”

“A humanoid android,” Castle says happily, evading her wrath. “Like a better version of Asimov.”

“No,” she says with quelling hauteur. “Definitely not. Totally human.” Her face alters. “If I were a robot I wouldn’t be doing this,” and she reaches out long, flexible, evil fingers and tickles him mercilessly until he falls off the couch and is struggling to breathe through his laughter and protests, looking up at her from the floor.

“I like this,” she muses. “You falling at my feet. Mmmm.” Said feet curl round his middle, and the attached toes wriggle at his waist. Castle squirms and wriggles and squeezes balefully, completely helpless, flailing hopelessly to try and catch one of her feet and wreak his revenge. Finally his wildly seeking hands catch an ankle, and heedless of any common sense or self-preservation he pulls hard until she loses her grip on the arm of the couch and falls on top of him, leaving him both literally and metaphorically breathless.

On the other hand, she’s landed right over him, and her eyes are dilated and dark, and her mouth… is on his, taking advantage of his desperate attempts to gather breath to invade and tease him; and most unfairly she is wiggling seductively right where it’s most effective. Oh boy, is he affected. Another wicked wiggle stops him worrying about any unfairness except the unfairness of not being
in a nice comfortable bed instead of on a very hard wooden floor. He musters the combined efforts of the two unfried brain cells; sits up, which does not involve stopping kissing Beckett, nor her wicked wiggling; detaches her, which does, and then provokes considerable protest; explains, which reduces protestation to a disgruntled mutter indicating agreement; and is then conveyed to the bedroom, where he is pushed flat on the bed and the wicked wiggling, and the kissing, resume.

It doesn’t really take long before hands have found hard flesh under shirt, before pants are loosened and discarded, before the dress is opened and pushed from slim shoulders and skin meets skin on a soft sigh of simultaneous happiness. Castle rolls them, her leg tangles round his midriff, and thought, worries, and everything but sweet sensation is lost.

Later, they clean up. Later than that, they clean up from the first clean up. And after that, they sleep, curled together.

“I’m having dinner with Dad tonight,” Beckett discloses over PopTarts (the only form of edible breakfast she currently possesses) and coffee.

“Yeah?”

“Mm. We’re having dinner every Sunday again.”

“That’s good – isn’t it?”

“Yeah…”

“I thought it was all working fine?”

“It is. But… I want him to show me some of the photos, and talk about them… I don’t think we can really be properly fixed till we can do that.”

“Oh,” Castle says blankly. He hadn’t thought about Beckett and Jim moving through their shared past and pain like that. “Um… yeah?” He swallows. “Um… do you want me there? Or… somewhere?”

“No,” Beckett says definitely, and then hitches. “We – we need to do it ourselves. Like when you and Alexis came for dinner at Dad’s. But…” she hesitates again, “maybe afterwards? I might want to come over.”

“Sure,” Castle says easily, thinking very privately that he’ll make sure he’s got extra Kleenex out, and a well-padded shoulder suitable for absorbing high emotion. “You could let me take an overnight bag for you now, then you wouldn’t have to carry it. If you don’t wanna come, no loss.”

“Hm,” Beckett says sceptically, “and I guess that not having to explain to my Dad why I’ve got a bag with me and you not getting interesting calls from him had nothing to do with it?”

“Nope,” Castle says innocently, “because you’d have left the bag in the trunk where he couldn’t see it.” Beckett grouses under her breath, and then snaps her teeth through a blameless PopTart. Castle smirks. “So do you want me to take a bag for you?”

Beckett takes a deep breath, and contemplates the offer.

“Yes. Please.”

“Can I help you pack?” he asks mischievously.
“Don’t push your luck. I’ll go do it now. You stay here.”

“You’re no fun.”

“Nope,” Beckett states, and stops the argument by making for her bedroom and the packing. Shortly she returns with a small overnight bag, which Castle takes from her and puts by the door.

“Time for me to go,” he notes. “Look, um, how about just letting yourself in, rather than knocking? I gave you a key so you could use it.”

“Kay.” She stretches up on her toes and kisses him gently, then harder, which is firmly reciprocated. Castle vacates the apartment, cheerfully swinging the bag and threatening the paint on the doorframe therewith.

Beckett tidies up, and then starts to consider her visit to her father. She’d ducked this discussion two weeks ago, and last week, but she thinks she really needs to start it soon. Everything else is going well – except Martha, but she’s Castle’s problem – and so she can deal with this too. One fewer issue: and after the housewarming party, still of indeterminate date, there shouldn’t be any more issues.

She spends some considerable time thinking about the days when she still had a mother, when her father wasn’t head down in a bottle, when she wasn’t desperately resentful and trying to hide it. She sniffs a few times, and dabs at her eyes rather more than that, and tries to control her emotions. It doesn’t work, and eventually she stops her efforts and simply lets the bitter memories and burning tears flow freely.

Quite some time later, she has another cup of coffee, puts on waterproof mascara, and deals with lunch and the early afternoon with less misery. She recalls, quite deliberately, that she and her father have reached a much better place: that they’ve shared humour and tears without the taint of earlier, unnecessary pain; that – most vital of all – he’s stayed dry through all this agonising time.

It’s time.

Time to take the last step: reopen the happy memories and hope that, this done, she can wholly forgive herself, as her father had long forgiven her, as she has, now, forgiven her father. Time to reclaim Katie, and all that’s bound up in that name: good and bad alike.

She slips on her sandals, picks up her purse, takes a very deep breath and girds up her loins, and leaves for her father’s apartment.

Castle wanders home, equal shares happy and worried. Happy is easy. He’s happy because Beckett’s (one) recognised and (two) said that she’ll rely on him for comfort after a difficult situation, just like after they interrogated Derren and she pulled him into the back stairwell and simply leant on him, and she’ll stay all night. Deep down, it makes him more at ease that he’s been relying on her, and a little niggly thorn in his soul dissolves. It goes both ways.

He’s also happy that Beckett is going to talk to her dad about their shared past and her mother. For ten years she hasn’t been able to talk about it – and she’s never mentioned her mother to him, except in the context of her father’s alcohol-fuelled words and deeds – so this might just break down the last taboo between her and her father. He certainly hopes so.

And lastly, he’s happy because having a date with Beckett on a nice, normal, adult basis with no underlying issues and emotions and interferences or reasons other than simply enjoying each other’s company has eased him considerably, to the point where he thinks that if he does nothing
else this afternoon he will talk to his mother about the housewarming party, set a firm date, and get everything on the move.

On the other hand, he thinks as he attains his loft, quiet and empty of anyone, Alexis not yet home; he is worried that this last step may leave both Beckett and Jim in bits. After all, the last time the wounds were opened it shattered them both, and it’s taken months to glue them both back together again. A different niggle squirms in his stomach. This isn’t his fight to have, but he hopes that Beckett’s picked the right time for her. He’ll stand with her, and stand for her, and stand her up again when she falls down – but he doesn’t want to see all this progress destroyed. His mouth twists unhappily, the more so because he can’t do anything about it.

He resorts to some entirely unnecessary tidying (the cleaning service does all of that), and then, Alexis having come home, lunch and a disciplined effort to write, whether or not he uses it later. Merely putting words on paper might take him into the zone, and then words will flow. Editing can wait.

After a while, he picks up his phone to call his mother, not without a certain degree of terror.

“Richard?” she answers, with a strange mix of joy, amazement and nervousness. “I…” – he doesn’t let her carry on.

“I called about the party. I thought we should fix a date.”

“Oh… Yes. We should,” she says, slightly flatly.

“I thought maybe the twentieth? A Saturday?”

“Yes. That would do nicely.” There is a pause. “Are… are you still going to come?” It’s very uncertain.

Castle stares agape at the phone.

“I do want you to come. And your friends,” his mother says sadly.

“Of course I am,” he recovers. “We all are.” He gathers some sense. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“Will you arrange it, then?”

“I’ll confirm with them, and then tell them to talk to you.”

“Thank you, darling.” She sounds considerably happier, and very, very relieved.

“Bye, Mother.”

He looks rather blankly at his phone, and the desk, and then arranges everything with the party planner he’d agreed to use.

The afternoon and then dinner comes and goes, the evening wears on, and finally the front door opens quietly and shortly there’s a Beckett next to him.

“Hey, Dad.”

“Hi, Katie.” Jim glances at her, and notices an unusual level of tension, certainly compared with the last couple of occasions. “Been a busy week?”
“No, not really. Nothing interesting. No actors, thank goodness.”

“Yes,” Jim agrees sardonically. “I think we’ve all had enough of actors and experimental theatre.”

“I went to a proper theatre last night.” Jim’s look asks the question. “Blithe Spirit. Castle had tickets. It was good. You’d have liked it, probably. No pretentious concepts or messing around.”

“Sounds good.” He checks, just for a second. “Thinking of pretentious concepts, how’s it going with Martha.”

Katie makes a very unpleasant face, for which Jim would certainly have chided her age six. “She didn’t take moving out very well,” she says carefully.

“Oh?” It’s gently sympathetic. He watches with considerable interest as Katie displays remembered annoyance.

“She completely ignored everything he’s done for her, and kept wailing that he was throwing her out on to the street – he bought her an apartment in the East Village, Dad!” – Jim considers the cost, and then considers, not entirely seriously, a shotgun wedding to ensure Katie will never want for a thing – “and then picked a fight and stormed off. Castle was really upset.”

“Mm,” Jim hums, noting Katie’s sympathy with Rick with absolutely no surprise at all.

“Yeah. Anyway, they were still fighting right up till the middle of the week, but hopefully that’s been mostly fixed now.”

Jim is perfectly certain that Katie has missed out a considerable amount of detail, and has to remind himself that she is twenty-nine, not nine, in order not to ask some parentally enquiring questions. Top of his sharp attorney’s mind is and what did you do, Katie? There is a familiar air of you don’t want to know the rest which inclines him to think that she took some fairly direct action. Good, he thinks to himself, and clamps down on his curiosity. He’ll only get himself into trouble if he asks.

“Must have been a bit difficult,” he says instead.

“Yeah.”

Katie’s tension doesn’t seem to have dropped much.

“Let’s have some dinner,” he says. “I got cold cuts and salad, and an apple tart from Fairway, and some cream.”

“Sounds good.”

Over dinner, Jim gains more and more of an impression that Katie wants to ask something, and is either nervous about it or doesn’t know where to begin. Since she isn’t regarding him with horror and/or loathing, he doesn’t think that it’s anything he might have done, now or in the days he doesn’t remember. However, conversation remains on nothing-in-particular subjects until dinner is done, when Katie clearly steels herself.

“Dad?”

“Yes?”

“Um… could we look at some more of the photos?” she says in a rush. “I want… I want to remember Mom.”
Jim’s mouth drops open, and he stands completely still. It’s only luck that he wasn’t holding plates, because he would surely have dropped them.

“You want to talk about your mom?” he almost gasps.

“Don’t you want to?” she queries, eyes glistening. “It’s okay if not…”

Jim remembers, very, very clearly, Katie’s bitter, unhappy voice across Carter Burke’s room: I wanted to talk about Mom. Remember her. But every time I did you started to cry. And then you started to drink. Or drink more. So as well as Mom being gone you might as well have been gone. You had me to lean on. I had no-one. And then: When did I get to cry? You never gave me any chance because you never dealt with anything and I get that you loved her but so did I. And still later in that lacerating session: I never tried to talk to you about Mom again. I couldn’t face starting you down that road.

“I want to, too,” Jim says. “Let me get the albums.” Behind him he hears a very quiet sniff. Before him, the doorframe is blurred. He wipes his eyes while finding the photos, several times over. He understands what his daughter is asking, and why – and if he can’t go through with this, they’ll lose everything they’ve gained. She must know how much this will hurt… but she thinks that they can stand it.

She thinks that he, her ex-drunkard, unreliable, fragile father can stand it, and not go running for the bottle, and his heart clenches and swells on a tide of emotion. His bright, blazing, beautiful and so very badly damaged Katie has forgiven him. His tears splash on his hands as he retrieves the box of albums, and he has to wipe his eyes all over again before he goes back into the family room where Katie is sitting, lips pinched together and eyes full.

“Here they are,” he says, pointlessly, and puts them on the table: his hands shaking a fraction. “All your high school years.” She picks up the earliest. “You’ve no idea how proud we were when you got into Stuyvesant.”

Katie begins to turn pages, slowly. For a few moments, she says nothing. Then she begins to respond to Jim’s very careful comments. Oh-so-cautiously, they share a few, easy, happy memories, and then a few more. It’s all okay, Jim thinks – until they reach Katie’s graduation from high school. The photo is of her with her mother – and it’s he who breaks down first. He’d forgotten, dissolved the memory in the amber anaesthetic of whiskey, just how alike they had been then. Seeing it now sends a seismic shock through him. She had said it:

You thought I was Mom. You were so happy because it was Mom… I can’t forget how you realised it wasn’t Mom, it was me, and you were so disappointed: you downed the whiskey and you started to cry and you told me to leave because you didn’t want me. You broke my heart, Dad. You broke me…. But I went and got my hair cut and coloured so that you couldn’t mix us up.

“Oh, Katie,” he weeps. “Katie, how could I?” Her own tears are falling. “I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry…” he trails off, momentarily unable to speak through his misery. She can’t talk either. “I can’t make it up to you.” He grips her hand. “I’m so sorry,” he weeps again. Her cold fingers close round his.

“Dad…” Her tone changes, and locks down. “No, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t” – she gulps – “ shouldn’t have made you.” Another jerky swallow. “I should have known. It’s too much for you.”

“No!” Jim cries. “Don’t say that. Don’t… you haven’t done anything wrong. You didn’t do anything wrong then and you’re not wrong now.”
“But you’re crying. Just like you always did.”

“No, Katie. It’s not your mother. It’s how much I hurt you. I can’t get that back…”

Katie bursts into renewed tears. Jim tucks her head on to his shoulder and pats her, just as he had when she was nine. The only difference is that he’s crying too. The photo albums lie, forgotten, on the table.

“I’m not crying about your mother,” he gulps. “I just wish I’d been stronger for you. Oh, Katie.”

There is a muffled whimper that might have been Dad, and more tears.

“I have to go,” she sobs. “I can’t… I’m sorry, Dad. I just can’t. I love you, but I can’t do this any more today.”

She tears herself away and flees.
The girl in the picture

“Hey, Beckett.”

There’s no answer. Castle looks up, assesses Beckett’s devastated, tear-stained face in less than a microsecond, and simply hauls her straight down into his lap.

“What happened?”

Surely Jim didn’t say something stupid? Surely he wouldn’t mess everything up now, just when it was all going so well? Beckett’s sobbing hopelessly into his shirt, and he has no idea why, or what to do.

“Sweetheart,” he tries. “Sweetheart, talk to me. What’s wrong?”

“Photos,” emerges from the tears.

Photos? Oh. Oh God. Oh, Kate, what were you doing? He remembers that she’d said they’d looked at some of them, but she’d been so cross that he, Castle, had seen all the cute baby photos that she hadn’t seemed to be in any way upset at all. She hadn’t been upset. He pats her shoulder.

“Did you have an argument?”

“No,” she sobs. “Mom…”

Photos of Beckett and her mom? Uh-oh. Castle suddenly sees the whole mosaic slide into place. Beckett had said that she’d decided to look at the family photos and talk about her mom with her dad and somehow it’s all gone totally, horribly wrong. He needs to speak to Jim, but first he needs to comfort his Kate.

“Come here. I’m here. It’ll be okay.”

She curls tighter into his shoulder and lets him pet her soothingly. “I couldn’t stay. He was so upset. I made him cry and it was all about Mom and me.” She drags in a scraping, agonised breath. “I’ve ruined it,” she weeps. “I thought we were ready and I’ve ruined it.”

Castle sees – and seizes – his opportunity. “Tell you what,” he rumbles. “You go get changed and have a hot shower. You’re freezing cold. Put my robe on: it’s warmer.” She nods, still sniffing miserably into his shirt. “I’ve ruined it,” she weeps. “I thought we were ready and I’ve ruined it.”

Beckett slides soggily from his clasp and drips towards the bathroom. She’s so upset she isn’t even arguing. As soon as he hears the door close behind her, Castle grabs for his phone and rapidly dials Jim. He doesn’t wait for him to speak.

“Jim, it’s Rick. Bec-Kate’s here, with me.”

“Thank God for that,” Jim says. Castle can hear matching misery in his voice, and the scraped tones of a throat raw with misery.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know.” Just like his daughter, Castle thinks.
“What happened?”

“We were looking at photos. Katie wanted to look at the photos and talk about Johanna, and how could I say no when I never let her grieve before?”

“You couldn’t,” Castle says softly. Jim doesn’t seem to hear him.

“So we looked at the photos and we talked and then there was her high school graduation and she was so like Johanna…” Castle can hear the lurch in his voice, but he pulls it together. “Exactly like, and I remembered everything she said with Carter and it was…”

“Too much.” Too much for one evening.

“I hurt her so and how can I ever make it up to her?”

“Jim…”

“I can’t get the time back.”

“Jim,” Castle says firmly, “Kate’s upset because she thinks she’s ruined all the progress you’ve made.” He winces at the formality of his words.

“No! It’s not her… it’s not ruined. Tell her I love her, Rick.”

“Tell her yourself,” Castle says. “Give her half an hour, and call her.”

“What if she won’t answer? She’s so upset and it wasn’t her fault and” –

“And it wasn’t yours either,” Castle says, harshly. “It wasn’t either of your faults. So I’ll ask her to call you too, but if she doesn’t, you should call. One of you has to. It doesn’t matter who it is, but Kate’s in the shower right now so if you try she won’t hear you and it’ll all go wrong right there. Give her half an hour.”

“Shower?” Jim says, confusion joining misery.

“She was cold.”

“Oh. Half an hour then.” He swallows hard, audible down the phone. “You will tell her I’ll call?”

“I’m going to suggest she calls you,” Castle says reassuringly. “She knew I was calling you. It’s going to be okay, Jim.” He dials off, before Jim can start arguing or taking offence at his taking control of the situation, and then pads off to prepare some very rich, creamy hot chocolate, which is a cure for many ills.

He’s set it all bubbling gently when he hears noises of the shower stopping and goes to find that Beckett, bedraggled and still brimming-eyed, has dragged herself out of the shower and wrapped herself up in his oversized, warm robe. She looks very small.

“I’ve made us hot chocolate. You look like you need something nice.” She wobbles over to him and simply flops against his chest. “C’mon. I’ll pour it out. D’you want marshmallows?” She nods pathetically. “Let’s do that, then.”

He steers them through, plants Beckett in a corner of the couch, serves up hot chocolate with a veritable blanket of marshmallows, and wraps her in, so that she knows he’s there. He’s just a little relieved when she takes a drink, and then another, and then meets his concerned gaze.
“Thanks,” is all she says, and drinks again.

“I spoke to your dad.” She flips towards him.

“Is he okay?” she demands frantically.

“Yes. About as upset as you are, and terrified it was his fault. He was going to call, but you were in the shower…” He lets that trail off.

“He wants to talk to me?”

“Mmhm.”

“Where’s my phone? I need to talk to him. I can’t let him do something dumb.” She’s desperately patting around herself. “Where’s my purse?”

“I think you left it in the study,” Castle says. Beckett is gone on the word, almost tripping over the ends of the robe. Shortly he hears the sounds of conversation. He resists the urge to listen in, with difficulty.

When Beckett re-emerges, some few moments later, it’s clear that she’s not only been crying again, but that she’s still on the verge of yet more tears. He waits for her to sit down, and then tucks her in comfortably and allows her to hide her face in his chest until she’s recovered herself. It takes a few minutes more, after which he hands her the still-warm chocolate and unobtrusively makes sure she drinks.

It’s only after she’s drained her mug that he takes the opportunity to ask.

“You okay?”

“I guess,” she says tiredly.

“Your dad?”

“Yeah. We’re… okay.”

She doesn’t say fine, which would have triggered all sorts of bad memories. Okay is more hopeful. Or less tragic. “Mmm?” he hums into her hair.

“We were looking at my high school graduation photo. It was okay till then. Then Dad started to cry, and then he kept saying sorry, and I should never have made him look.”

“He doesn’t think so, does he?” Castle asks, not quite neutrally.

“No, but I should have known…”

“He wanted you to be able to talk about your mother with him,” Castle breaks in. “He loves you, and just like I’d do anything for Alexis, he wanted to do this for you. He knew it would hurt. Hell, Kate, I think you knew it would hurt him and you too, but it wasn’t a mistake. Your dad doesn’t think it was a mistake, does he?” There’s an emphasis on the last two words.

“But…”

“You’re trying to protect your dad, but you don’t need to. He’s sober. You don’t need to.” He cossets her gently. “Both of you needed to do this. Whenever you did it, it was going to hurt. That’s not a problem unless one of you makes it a problem.” She burrows into his chest, trying to get
closer. “You both tried. It all broke down, and then what?”

“I said I couldn’t do it. I loved him but I just couldn’t do it.”

“You told him you loved him?”

“Yes.”

Castle looks down at the lachrymose lump in his lap. “I don’t think you need to worry,” he reassures. “If you managed that, that’s the only important thing. He knows you mean it – you’d never say that if you didn’t. You forgave him weeks ago, so stop worrying now. Sure, it’s a bump, but it’s not a barrier.” He pats and pets and soothes, and says no more. Beckett’s stopped weeping, and is small and crumpled within his cozy robe and his arms. He gives her some time, and then looks at his watch. “C’mon, it’s your bed time.” She unfurls, slightly, and regards him with an unfocused gaze, seemingly three-quarters asleep already. “It’ll all be clearer in the morning.”

He stands her up, and encourages her in the direction of the bedroom. It’s actually not even ten, but Castle doesn’t think that Beckett’s noticing the time and she is emotionally exhausted. Besides which, he wants another little chat with Jim, just to make sure everyone is still on the same page. Beckett doesn’t protest in the slightest, and is shortly tucked up: still small and white-faced. He kisses her briefly, and leaves her to sleep, with another gently soothing stroke of her hair, shutting the door behind him.

He picks up his phone and goes back out to the family room. The last thing he wants is to disturb Beckett when she needs to sleep.

“Jim, it’s Rick.”

“How’s Katie? Is she okay?”

“She’s sleeping. She’ll be fine. I just wanted to check you’re okay.”

“You already did that.”

“Yeah, but… Anyway, all I wanted was to make sure that you’d talked properly to each other.”

Jim manages a rather ragged laugh. “I talked to Ed. Setting up as Carter Burke, Rick?”

“No!” Castle squawks. “Absolutely not.”

Jim snickers again, still raw-edged. “Good. I’d hate to see Katie in the dock for your murder.” He hesitates. “Is she really okay?”

Castle decides on truth. “She’s pretty shaken up. I think she thought she’d really done some damage when you’d got it mostly fixed.”

“No…” Jim says slowly, “no. It had to happen sometime. Rather now.” He hesitates. “You’ll make sure she’s okay?”

“Yes. Count on me.”

Jim mutters something beneath his breath, which Castle thinks translates to I do.

“Jim, if I square it with Be-Kate, how about coming over for dinner?” he says, somewhat nervously. “I can guarantee my mother won’t be here.”
“Erm… okay.”

“And…um… will you still come to the housewarming party? Proper invitations’ll go out tomorrow, but it’s on Saturday twentieth, and…um…Kate needs you there and I’d like you there.”

“Yes,” Jim says much more decisively. The thought that his Katie needs him to do something or be somewhere pushes him on.

“Okay. Um… look, if there’s anything, call me, yeah?”

“It’s okay, Rick. I think we’re okay. It’s just a bump in the road, and rather now than later. Night.”

“Night.”

Castle meditatively swipes off the phone and ponders for a while without reaching any definite conclusions. Instead, he prepares for bed, and slides in beside Beckett with no further disquiet.

Beckett wakes in the morning to the knowledge of the disaster of the previous evening, and fails to find either sense or solace in the pillows. She can’t even stay curled up under the covers, because it’s Monday and she needs to be at work. She stretches out without any pleasure and then wends her way to the bathroom to try to pull herself together. Castle is still sound asleep when she returns, washed, dressed and very carefully made up to hide her still-pallid skin and under-shadowed eyes.

She kisses him lightly, which extracts a sleepy mumble of no intelligence whatsoever, and departs, hoping to find enough work to stop her worrying until she can call her father again. She can’t ring him at seven-thirty a.m. Apart from anything else, she hasn’t had enough caffeine for this conversation.

She buries herself in a pile of current, but boringly mundane, homicide files, and doggedly works on them, only glancing at her watch every other page, greets Ryan and then Espo with a similitude of normality when they arrive, grumbling at the lack of original murders and the absence of a three-day weekend, and finally observes that her watch has dragged itself round to nine. She vacates her desk, occupies a small conference room and shuts the door firmly.

Behind her, Ryan and Espo exchange glances.

“D’you think something’s up?” Ryan asks.

“Dunno. You think anyone’d tell us if there was?” Espo points out bitterly.

“Naw. They never do.”

“Too freakin’ right.”

They return to their own files, sneaking peeks towards the conference room every so often.

In the small room, Beckett gulps, stares at her phone, and dials.

“Katie?” Her father sounds absolutely stunned. “Are you okay?”

“I was going to ask you that,” she says, and manages a smile. “Um… I’m sorry about yesterday. I didn’t mean to” –

“That’s enough, Katie,” her dad says, in very parental tones. “You didn’t mean to upset me, and I didn’t mean to upset you. We’re okay.”
“You sure?” she says, shakily.

“I’m sure. We weren’t upset with each other, but the photo shook us up. Bit like Alexis did, really, and we got through that too.”

Beckett emits a rather strained snicker. “I shouldn’t have run off like that.”

“Maybe, maybe not. Though,” he says with a complete change of tone, “maybe you should be explaining why you ran off straight to Rick’s loft, rather than home? Is there something you should be telling me, like a change of address?”

“Dad! No.”

“Hm,” her father says, sceptically. “I don’t want to hear that you’re stringing that poor boy along,” he adds in an exaggeratedly sententious tone.

Beckett makes a cross noise. “Dad, stop it. Castle and I are doing just fine without you digging out your shotgun.”

“So should I ask him or you your intentions?” Jim says mischievously, completely reassured that they’re okay again.

“Dad!” Beckett squawks. “No! Absolutely not.”

Jim subsides, perfectly satisfied. “Okay. Though I do think you should let me do the parental interrogation. I miss terrorising your boyfriends.” Beckett growls balefully down the phone. “Now, will you come by Sunday as usual?”

“Yeah. Definitely. If there’s not a murder, of course. I’m on call next weekend.”

“Okay. See you then, Bug.”

“Bye, Dad.”

Phew. It’s all okay. They’re okay. She flumps back in the couch, and takes a few calming breaths. Then she dials Castle.

“Beckett? Have we got a body?”

“No. Spoke to Dad. We’re okay, I think.”

“Good. Told you so,” Castle says smugly. Beckett growls at him. “I thought maybe, if you didn’t mind, he could come round for dinner, with you, me and Alexis.” There is a dead silence. “Beckett?” She gapes at the screen of the phone. “Beckett?”

“I’m here,” she manages. “Uh… what?”

“Dinner. All four of us. At the loft. This week.”

It’s so unexpected, given last night, that she can’t process it properly. “Uh? Why?”

“You did dinner with your dad, so it’s our turn.”

“He doesn’t like Georgian,” she says almost irrelevantly.

“Good to know. So that’s fixed. If there aren’t any murders, how about Thursday?”
“Okay,” Beckett says, too confused by the fast moving idea to argue.

“Good. See you later.”

“Bye,” she says faintly to the cut call.

When she walks back out to her desk she’s still dazed. She stares at her files without really seeing them until Montgomery’s less than dulcet tones recall her to reality, fortunately before he attains her desk. She forces concentration.

“Breakfast service,” chirps Castle cheerfully, depositing her bear claw and coffee in front of her. He does a very obvious review of her face and posture as he does. She glares at him.

“I’m fine,” she snips very pointedly at his smug smirk.

“Yo, Castle, where’s our breakfast?”

“In the bakery,” Castle replies happily.

“That’s favouritism,” Ryan grouses. “All this time and you never bring us breakfast.”

“If you had legs like hers,” Castle starts, and is silenced by a fearsome scowl from almost everyone.

“TMI, bro.”

Castle sits in his chair until the stormy weather from the other three has passed, which turns out, amazingly, to coincide with the point at which he suggests that they could all do with some doughnuts; and doughnuts having been provided, the rest of the day is relatively harmonious.

Tuesday is not quite as harmonious. For a start, the team are waiting for information, which always makes them tetchy. Secondly, Montgomery is not in a good mood, which makes everyone nervous, and kills conversation. Thirdly, and most annoyingly, Castle has turned up and issued party invitations to each of them, and while they are all perfectly well aware that they agreed to go, none of them are looking forward to it. Beckett has a fourth reason to be inharmonious, but she’s not discussing that with the boys. She takes another painkiller, and dreams of a hot water bottle.

The day wears on without improvement, results, or Montgomery’s general irritation reducing. For once, Beckett is almost glad to pack up and leave in order to reach Dr Burke’s in good time. Castle trails along with her, exuding a certain air of being grateful that he doesn’t have to talk. Beckett is by no means as sure about that. Dr Burke has a very uncomfortably nasty habit of remembering all the matters that one really wishes he wouldn’t. She expects that this will include Castle’s interactions with his mother, and she also expects that Castle will take his revenge by mentioning her most recent interaction with her father.

“You okay, Beckett?” Castle asks in the cruiser.

“Yeah, why?”

“You’ve been swallowing Pamprin” –

Beckett gleeps, horrified. “How the hell do you know about Pamprin?”

“Research. And I can count, too.”

“You don’t need to comment on it.”
“But” –

“Castle, shut up. Now. I’m not discussing this.”

Castle subsides, accompanied by the scarlet scowl surrounding Beckett’s flaming cheeks. All he’d been going to say was that he’d got a heat pad at home (for his back: leaning over desks can leave him creaking) and if she wanted, he’d go get it. Of course, that would mean that he wouldn’t be at Dr Burke’s, which would be a very desirable outcome. Seems like he’s going to be deprived of the chance to bail.

Far too soon they pull up. Beckett is still scowling. Castle decides that he’s got into enough trouble for one day, and doesn’t poke the bear. Poking, of any sort, is not obviously in his future.
Dr Burke has planned this session to assess Mr Castle’s success, or otherwise, in making his feelings clear to his mother. That should not take long, and then he intends to turn to the status of Detective Beckett’s relations with her father. He anticipates that this will be a reasonably pleasant discussion. Before his patient is due, however, he carefully ensures that his latest book in Mr Castle’s oeuvre is safely concealed in his briefcase. It would be an entirely unnecessary distraction to have such a volume on view.

His contented demeanour is adversely affected when both Mr Castle and Detective Beckett arrive, quite clearly less than wholly happy with each other. Dr Burke is quite definite that he will not address any relationship difficulties which they might be having. He intends to remain strictly within the bounds of the issues which they are experiencing with their respective parents. They may resolve their other issues as if they were reasonable, intelligent adults. Dr Burke believes that intelligence is not lacking. He is not nearly as convinced of the presence of the other attributes.

He preserves a mild, calm visage as his troublesome pair sits down. They are, at least, sitting next to each other.

“Detective Beckett,” Dr Burke begins, “are you content that we commence with Mr Castle relating his progress towards reaching accommodation with his mother?”

“Yeah,” she replies, appearing relieved.

“Mr Castle?”

“Yeah,” he replies, not appearing relieved at all. That is most unfortunate, but Mr Castle will just have to put up with it.

“Mr Castle, you said that you were intending to see your mother again on Wednesday morning. On Tuesday, you will recall, we discussed the risk that she saw your calm as a lack of emotion, rather than an effort to maintain a reasonable discussion despite your experiencing very strong emotions. Please relate the events of Wednesday?”

Mr Castle does, in a flat, unemotional voice which tells Dr Burke considerably more than Mr Castle would undoubtedly like him to know. Detective Beckett’s scowl has entirely dissipated, not half a minute into Mr Castle’s narrative, to be succeeded by a discreet linking of fingers.

“I see. Do you consider that advising your mother of the strength of your feelings, and not suppressing your urge to raise your voice, has assisted in correcting her misapprehensions?”

“I think… I think she really does love me.”

“Reassuring,” Dr Burke puts in, very dryly.

“But I’m still not sure she understands just how close she came to ruining everything.”

“Mm,” Dr Burke hums. He very much hopes that Mr Castle is not going to suggest that he should take Mrs Rodgers on as a patient. He has, of course, a tactful refusal already prepared, but he would prefer not to have to employ it.

“I guess I’ll have to wait and see. This damn housewarming…”
“Ah, yes. Detective Beckett had briefly mentioned that you were planning to provide Mrs Rodgers with a party.”

“Yeah. Well. I spoke to her about that. Sunday afternoon. She didn’t get in touch with me at all after Wednesday, but I didn’t expect her to. I told her I had to think about things. She sounded really happy I’d called, but I only talked about the party. Then…”

“Yes?”

“She asked if I was still going to go,” Mr Castle says. Detective Beckett draws a sharp intake of breath, and wraps her fingers more closely around Mr Castle’s hand.

“How did you answer?”

“Said I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“I see.” Dr Burke steeples his fingers, and meets Detective Beckett’s amused gaze at the gesture with aplomb. “When will this party occur?”

“The twentieth. Week from Saturday.” Dr Burke was perfectly capable of calculating the exact day, and did not need told. He frowns at Mr Castle.

“Mm. And you will attend?”

“Yes. I just said that. So will the rest of us.” Dr Burke’s eyebrows elevate. “The guys from the Twelfth, Lanie – ME Parrish – O’Leary and his partner, and Jim.”

Dr Burke observes a slight flinch by Detective Beckett. Mr Castle’s fingers now wrap over hers. Clearly there is an issue to be explored between Detective Beckett and her father.

“Mm,” Dr Burke hums once more. “I do not think that you need to take extensive steps between now and the party. Simply do what you feel most comfortable with regarding contact, and do not be afraid to show your emotions to your mother.” Dr Burke regards Mr Castle levelly. “Nor, of course, should you ignore her entirely. That would not assist.”

“Urgh,” Mr Castle comments. “Okay.” Dr Burke could wish for a little more articulacy: however, the point is made and understood. Strangely, Mr Castle looks to Detective Beckett, who gives a small shake of her head, before he answers.

“Now, Detective Beckett, is there any matter troubling you?”

Detective Beckett begins to shake her head. Mr Castle nudges her and whispers something which colours her cheeks. When this produces nothing of any use whatsoever, he simply says, “Beckett, what about the photos?”

Dr Burke does not witness Detective Beckett’s now-scarlet face with any enthusiasm, nor are her subsequent words helpful.

“I spoke to Dad and we’re fine,” she emits with considerable exasperation.

“What has transpired?” Dr Burke asks, concealing his weariness at the thought of another substantial set-back about which Detective Beckett does not wish to talk. “If you are, as you assert, ‘fine’, then this will not take long. If not, let us address it early so that it does not require substantial input.” He pauses. “You would not, I am sure, wish to return to twice-weekly sessions, or joint sessions with your father.”
Detective Beckett winces. “No. But we worked it out ourselves.”

“Very laudable. What occurred, and how did you resolve it?”

“I wanted to look at the photos of us all together, and talk about Mom. I thought we could handle it. And we did – right up till my high school graduation photo.”

Dr Burke recalls that Detective Beckett had mentioned this goal two weeks ago.

“Mm?” he hums interrogatively.

“He started to cry,” Detective Beckett says, and her mouth contorts in an effort to conceal her incipient tears. “It was just like before, but then he started saying how sorry he was” – Mr Castle has already exchanged clasped hands for a supportive arm around Detective Beckett – “and I couldn’t bear it and ran away,” she finishes on a note of self-contempt.

“She came to mine,” Mr Castle puts in, Detective Beckett appearing incapable of speech. “But then you wanted me to talk to your dad, so I did, and he was just as upset as you were. Both of you kept thinking you’d messed it all up.”

Detective Beckett acquires a Kleenex and blows her nose. “But we hadn’t,” she says with undampened force. “We’re okay. I spoke to Dad after, and we talked about the photo” – Mr Castle starts, as if he had not known that – “and then I called him again on Monday and we’re all fixed. So that’s that,” Detective Beckett finishes, her voice giving the impression that she is about to brush her hands together and wipe away the event.

“Not precisely, Detective,” Dr Burke says dryly. “You have told me that on previous social occasions when discussing the past, you and your father have shared the pain, not inflicted it upon each other. This time, you have separated, although this was a similar occasion of shared pain. Now, explain in a little more detail what took place when you informed your father that you wished to look at the photographs of your family, and to talk about your mother.”

Detective Beckett makes a particularly childish and ridiculous grimace.

“Dad was surprised, and then he said yes, and went to get the albums.” Detective Beckett continues to explain. Dr Burke appreciates the emotional pain which she and her father had chosen to work through, and determines that he should have a brief conversation with Mr Beckett in the near future. “But he just kept crying and it was just like how he used to cry and then he always started on the whisky.” She swallows hard. “I couldn’t bear to see it again.”

“You should have said, sweetheart,” Mr Castle murmurs. The endearment passes unmarked.

“In fact, that specific photograph triggered not just memories of your shared, pleasant past, but also of the most traumatic days of your father’s alcoholism, in both of you. It is entirely unsurprising that you were both badly shocked.” Realisation dawns on Mr Castle’s face, though Dr Burke is unsure why. “Although, of course, you would now prefer that you had been able to remain, it is not fatal or indeed troubling that you could not, provided that you later spoke, which you did. You then spoke again the following day.” Dr Burke steeples and unsteeples his fingers, and leans forward to emphasise the gravity of his next words. “There will be setbacks, Detective. That is a natural part of therapy and of healing. The crucial point is that you have learned how to manage setbacks and overcome the difficulty. You should not regard this as a failure in any way, as you and your father have dealt with the issue effectively. It would be profoundly unhelpful were you to revert to regarding any small impediment to your progress as an absolute failure.”
“They’re both coming for dinner at the loft on Thursday,” Mr Castle interjects, before Detective Beckett can retort.

“A sensible move,” Dr Burke allows temperately. “Now, is there anything else which you would wish to discuss?”

“No,” Detective Beckett says.

“Not yet,” Mr Castle says, gloomily. “But… if Mother still hasn’t got it, would you read her the riot act?” Detective Beckett regards Mr Castle with some surprise. Dr Burke’s heart sinks. “I don’t mean treat her – though I’d pay good money to see that,” he says with inappropriate levity, “but just… I don’t know, put the fear of God into her about interfering?”

Dr Burke is appalled. He is not to be utilised as a threat. He is so offended that he frowns blackly at Mr Castle. “I do not believe that would be appropriate,” he chastises. Mr Castle does not look notably chastised, regrettably.

“But if you don’t, my mother will continue to harass Beckett, and her recovery won’t be as fast,” he says.

This may well be true.

“It would spoil all your efforts.”

That may also be true, Dr Burke reflects. However, he is not at all inclined to spend any time with Mrs Rodgers, especially in highly emotional circumstances; and he is certainly not inclined to be manipulated or persuaded by Mr Castle’s use of language.

“Mr Castle, I have said that I do not believe it would be appropriate. Should the situation actually arise, we may reconsider the point, but I must tell you that it is extremely unlikely that I should consent. If you consider that your mother would benefit from the advice of a qualified psychiatrist or psychotherapist then I shall be pleased to recommend suitable colleagues.”

Mr Castle smiles ruefully. “Okay.”

“Now, we have utilised the whole session. I shall see you next week.”

“Night,” Detective Beckett and Mr Castle say in unison, and depart, hands already meeting before the door closes. Dr Burke breathes a sigh of relief.

“Let’s go,” Beckett says. “I’ve had enough brain scrubbing for this week.”

“Oh, yeah,” Castle agrees fervently. “No more brain scrubbing. It’s a shame he wouldn’t talk to Mother, though.”

“I told you he’d had enough of all of us. I can’t wait to be done with therapy,” she adds, “and don’t say I’ve got to do it properly. I know that.”

“Wasn’t going to. I was going to say I’m hungry and can we go get dinner someplace?”

So that’s what they do. They have a pleasant dinner without talking about anything to do with their respective parents – in fact, they largely lament the lack of murders lately – don’t fail to linger over their coffee, and finally Beckett drops Castle at his loft with a leisurely, languorous kiss that leaves him deeply ruffled.
“Have we got a case, Beckett?” Castle bounces as he wanders into the precinct.

“Urgh,” everyone says back at him.

“No? How can we not have any interesting cases?”

“Guess no-one’s that pissed with their pals,” Esposito says.

At that point Beckett’s phone rings. “You jinxed it,” she says, and listens. “Okay, off we go.”

“Huh?”

“Someone’s discovered a corpse round the back of the Dry Dock Playground.”

“Toddlers with guns?” Castle says flippantly.

“No, adults with knives, sounds like. C’mon. ME’s on the way, and so’s CSU.”

The team dash out with enthusiasm. Anything new, after the tedium of the last few days, would be very welcome.

The playground itself is not the scene, which given that it is full of screaming small children – Beckett thinks that most of the screams are of enjoyment, but is not prepared to get close enough to find out whether she is wrong – and also full of shouting and more sporting older children and teens, is probably just as well. Manhattan this may be, but children do not need to see messy murders.

And it is messy. Blood is spattered widely, and the victim has been slashed open in several places. Even Espo is a little shocked.

“Jesus,” he emits. “What the hell happened here?”

Perlmutter looks up, which is not a good start to a case. “He was stabbed, Detective,” he says snidely.

“Thank you for stating the obvious, Dr Perlmutter,” Beckett says sarcastically over Esposito’s fulminations. “Now, why don’t you tell us what has happened, like Espo asked you?” She fixes Perlmutter with a hostile stare, and he cringes.

“The victim is a male of approximately 25 to 30 years old, who appears to have been stabbed at least ten times with a large knife.”

Beckett halts him. “Have CSU found the knife?”

“No,” the CSU team leader puts in. “Still sweeping the scene.”

They look around at the spatter pattern. “Throat cut first,” Beckett surmises.

“Then a slice through the gut,” Espo adds, looking at the corpse’s revealed innards.

“Looks like a lot of stabbing after that,” Ryan says, attempting dispassion and only managing disgust.

“If I were writing this,” Castle says thoughtfully, “it would be a crime of passion. Only someone who’s really mad and totally over-emotional would do this.”
“It’s extremely unlikely that a woman could inflict these injuries,” Perlmutter says patronisingly.

“I know,” Castle points out. “But if I were you,” he carries on nastily, “I’d check my assumptions before you carry on. This is 2009, not 1909. It’s just as likely that the passionate person was male.”

“So only women get emotional, Perlmutter? Is that what you’re telling me?” Beckett says forcefully. “Wanna continue that thought, or do you want to apply some intelligence rather than keep showing off your prejudices?”

Perlmutter colours unbecomingly, and turns back to the corpse. “Of course I’ll need to do proper analysis, but my initial impression is that these wounds were made by a large, very sharp knife. There does not appear to be any tearing at the edges.”

“And what height do you think the attacker might be this time?” Ryan asks with a certain degree of nastiness.

“Six foot eight,” Esposito mutters, not at all inaudibly. Castle sniggers, also not inaudibly. Perlmutter’s high colour rises yet higher, and he favours the surroundings with a vicious stare, akin to that of a trapped sewer rat.

“I have no idea until I can measure the angles precisely,” he says with irritation. “I’m taking him back to the morgue.”

“Not till we’ve checked his pockets, you’re not,” Ryan says, and pulls on nitrile gloves to do just that. He delicately extracts a wallet and a bloodied mess which might, if carefully dissected by CSU, prove to be a driver’s licence or some form of ID. CSU fuss and bustle and take over from there, and the team watches in the hope of something that could at least give them a lead. A phone is extricated, and bagged.

“Perlmutter, what’s an approximate time of death?”

“The early hours of the morning.”

“So anywhere from six p.m. yesterday to ten minutes ago, if it’s like his height estimates,” Espo bitches, fortunately unheard by the unfortunate Perlmutter. Castle acquires an ear-to-ear grin.

“Okay,” Beckett says, before matters can get any worse. “Ryan, you start looking up camera footage. Espo, you get on to the phone records. I’ll run prints.” She turns to the CSU team. “If you could get a name out of that mess that’d be helpful. Can you do that first?”

“Sure thing,” the CSU tech says.

Everyone disperses to carry out their tasks. Castle bounces happily beside Beckett. “A nice new murder,” he enthuses. “Just what we need.” Beckett rolls her eyes. “It is. You were all getting bored and fretful. Now you’ll all be happy again.”

“You won’t be helping much.” Beckett opens the car door.

“What?”

“You invited Dad and me to dinner tomorrow. You won’t be investigating anything more than a recipe book.” She sits down and puts the keys in the ignition. Castle makes some very unhappy noises.

“But… I can do both,” he points out plaintively.
“We won’t get much until Perlmutter’s done, and CSU. We’ll be lucky to get anywhere tonight, so that means that we start the heavy lifting tomorrow.”

Castle pouts unhappily. “But I wanna play too,” he sulks.

“You can. But you did invite Dad and me so you have to feed him something.” She pauses. “Or we reschedule.”

“No,” Castle says very quickly. “No rescheduling.”

Beckett drives them smoothly back round the last intersection before they reach the precinct. “Okay, no rescheduling.” They get out. “Let’s go see what we can get done today.”

Up in the bullpen, the Beckett murder board becomes decorated. After a little gentle persuasion, so to speak, Perlmutter is encouraged to send over a photo of the victim’s cleaned up face, which helps, but informs her (made brave by the fact that it’s over the phone not in person) that Beckett will have to wait for the rest of the information until at least the morning and, since he is busy with other deceased persons, probably Friday. Beckett growls, achieves nothing thereby, and glares holes in the desk, walls and windows, and possibly also innocent passers-by.

“What do we got?” Beckett asks, glaring at the number of empty spaces on her board.

“Still waiting for ID and prints from CSU. Don’t suppose any of you recognise the guy?”

“No,” Ryan and Espo say in unison.

“Nor me. I want some data,” she complains. “When are we gonna get the phone records, or camera footage?”

“Phone records tomorrow,” Esposito says placatingly. “I’m just waitin’ for the techs to hack in so we get friends-and-family – maybe we’ll get next of kin that way.”

“Footage soon’s I can,” Ryan says. “Request went in the moment we got back, like with the phone. Usually takes a couple of days, minimum.”

Beckett growls again. Castle, recognising the signs, glances at his watch and determines that it is lunchtime.

“C’mon, let’s go get some lunch while we wait.”

The four of them traipse out to the nearest food truck and then sit down in the park to eat it. After fingers are licked clean and mouths wiped, Castle claims things to do and people to see, and decamps until – as he puts it – there is something to theorise about.

“Not having any information never stopped you in the past,” Esposito jibes gently.

“Genius needs a foundation,” Castle replies easily, and scarpers before anyone can jeer.

The others wander back to the bullpen and get on with other cases until someone gives them some base data to work with.
Castle has decided that it might be sensible to do his shopping and as much preparation as possible so that he can maximise the time spent with the team tomorrow. Despite appearances, he is actually quite good at planning and organisation. He wanders contentedly round the shops, and then home, bedecked with bags and with a menu in mind.

Once home, he efficiently prepares a particularly nice marinade, in which he places pieces of chicken fillet and then leaves the whole dish in the fridge to soak overnight and for the majority of tomorrow. It will stir fry in a flash, accompanied by neatly sliced peppers, which will be the work of a moment, baby corn cobs, bamboo shoots and water chestnuts, all of which come from cans, and cashew nuts. It’s a reliable and, most importantly, extremely quick dish. Rice will not take long in the microwave, there will be no alcohol, and he is now ready to embark on a dessert. He whistles as he puts together an open-faced apple tart and, while it’s cooking, concocts a caramel sauce.

Halfway through his sauce-making, Alexis wanders down from her homework to find out what’s going on and, teen like, what’s for dinner tonight, never mind tomorrow. On being satisfied on both counts, she disappears again.

Over dinner, however, she is more pressing.

“So are Detective Beckett and her dad fixed now?”

“Pretty much,” Castle says neutrally. “They’re having dinner every week, so I guess it’s better.”

“Good,” Alexis says. “Does that mean that Detective Beckett will come round more? I like her. She treats me like a grown up.”

Castle doesn’t point out that this is not necessarily true. “Maybe,” he says instead.

“And she can give me loads of advice on clothes and make-up and boys and still doing really well at school.”

Castle chokes.

“And of course, there’s the tattoo I want to get for my birthday,” she says.

“Stop it, daughter, or you’ll get coal for your birthday. You’re not allowed to make fun of me.”

“But it’s so enjoyable,” Alexis mutters. Castle is sure he’s heard exactly that sardonic tone from Beckett, and he really doesn’t want to hear it from his daughter.

“Have you finished your homework?” he asks.

“Yes. Dad, can I stay with Paige at the weekend?”

“This weekend, yes, if you’ve finished your homework” – that’s no barrier at all, his diligent daughter always finishes her homework – “but not next weekend. Grams’ party comes first.”

“This weekend. I don’t wanna miss Grams’ party.”

“Okay. Friday or Saturday night?”
“Both?” Alexis says very hopefully.

“No. One night. You know that.”

“But Da-ad, if I was away for both nights Detective Beckett could” –

“That’s nearly sneaky enough to be an idea of mine, pumpkin, but it’s not going to work. One night. Maybe when you’re eighteen I’ll let you stay out all weekend.”

“I’ll be at college then, and you won’t know,” Alexis points out. Castle splutters, and Alexis takes advantage to clear her dishes. “Saturday night, then,” she says.

“Okay.”

Alexis scampers off, perfectly happy. Castle tidies up, also very happy. The weekend is suddenly looking perfectly wonderful.

Castle rolls in to find the team – well, sulking. Perlmutter has not delivered anything, and is not answering the phone. Montgomery has apparently vetoed Beckett’s suggestion that she goes to the morgue and extracts results. There is a strong impression that she wouldn’t mind extracting Perlmutter’s guts, either. With considerable irritation, Esposito tells Castle that Montgomery also – Castle makes all the right noises of sympathy for the unfairness – wouldn’t let him go and threaten Perlmutter.

The sum total of all this sulking seems to be that there are no trails to follow just yet. Fortunately, CSU is not quite as unhelpful as Perlmutter, and send over a cleaned up ID and, indeed, usable prints just on ten a.m. The machine gets going.


“Social security number?”

“Just lookin’ for it – oh. Here we are. Worked at Espanola.”

“Hm,” Beckett says. “C’mon, Castle, let’s go. Field trip.”

Espanola is a small restaurant at First and Eleventh. Some very appetising smells are issuing from its kitchen as they walk in. Castle sniffs happily and obviously.

“I’m hungry,” he says hopefully.

“Too early for lunch.”

A small, dark haired young man emerges from a door through to a kitchen. Beckett flicks her shield out.

“Detective Kate Beckett,” she says briskly. He looks confused. “We’re here about Diego Diaz.”

“Chef?” he says.

“He’s the chef here?”

“Yes, but he didn’t turn up yesterday or today, so that’s his assistant in the kitchen.”

“Smells good,” Castle says. Beckett rolls her eyes.
“You are?”

“I’m Clay. Clay Jones. I’m a server here. Paying my way through school.”

“Okay. Tell me about Diego, Clay.”

Clay appears rather uninformed. “He was just Chef, you know? Turned up, cooked, went home. Never really talked to him.”

“Who’s in charge here?”

“Chef.”

That’s not terribly helpful. Chef is dead, so he’s not going to be in charge of anything.

“When he’s not here?”

“John.”

“John?” This is like pulling teeth.

“John in the kitchen. John Carnoso. He’s the one cooking.”

“Who owns this place?”

“Dunno.”

This kid made it to college? How?

“Okay, Clay. Go get John, please.”

Clay drags off with no enthusiasm at all. Beckett looks at Castle.

“I think I like Alexis’ style a lot better.” Castle blinks. “Intelligence and some enthusiasm about life. He’s just totally meh.” Castle manages not to trip over his own feet in surprise and happiness. “I bet if she were serving in a café she’d know more about what was going on than this guy.”

“Mm,” Castle agrees, temporarily bereft of words. Before he’s retrieved them, Clay trails back again, with a tall Latino following him.

“John Carnoso?”

“Yeah?”

“Detective Kate Beckett and my associate, Richard Castle. We’d like to” –

“Richard Castle? Like the guy who writes the books?”

“I am the guy who writes the books.”

“Really? I love those books. I got a paperback with me. Will you sign it?”

“Sure.”

“You can do that later. Right now, John, I need to ask you some questions about Diego Diaz.”

“Diego? What’s he done?”
“It’s not what he’s done. It’s what’s been done to him.”

“He’s hurt? Who’d wanna do that?”

“I’m sorry to tell you that he’s dead.”

John turns white. “Dead? He can’t be dead.”

“I’m afraid he is.” Beckett deliberately doesn’t mention how.

“An accident? Mugging?”

“It was murder.”

John pales further. “Oh my God.”

“We need to ask you some questions,” Beckett says again, before he can faint.

“Sure, sure, anything.”

Beckett goes through all the basics. Name, address, job, did he own the restaurant, family. Nothing particularly stunning there.

“Girlfriend? Boyfriend?”

“I think he did, but I dunno who.” That’ll need to wait for phone info, then.

“Anyone who disliked him?”

“Bruno.”

“Who’s Bruno?”

“He was one of the servers. Diego fired him a week ago.”

Beckett extracts all the details John can remember.

“Thank you,” she finally says.

“When did you last see Diego?” Castle asks.

“Tuesday. Lunchtime. We don’t do dinners, just breakfast and lunch.”

“And you said Diego lived in New Jersey?” Beckett knows that from the licence run, but she wants to hear John say it again.

“Yeah.”

“So what was he doing down here late Tuesday night?”

“Huh?” John emits, as if he’d been punched. “Here?”

“Near enough.”

“No idea.” He shakes his head. “Not a clue. We start early for breakfast – open from six” – aha! A stop point, since he didn’t show then – “and he wasn’t there, but he wouldn’t be here before five.”
“And he didn’t show at five?”

“No. Couldn’t get him on the phone, so we just got on with it.” An even better stop point.

“Okay. Thank you for your time, John. We’ll need to talk to all the servers and kitchen staff. Can we have a list, please?”

John suddenly looks very nervous. “Um… okay… but some of them aren’t too keen on officials.” Beckett gets it. Some of them aren’t entirely legal. Well, that’s not her problem right now. She’ll check what she ought to do with Montgomery, later. She’s not run across this precise problem before, and she doesn’t want to promise something she can’t or mustn’t make good on.

“I still need that list,” she says, not giving an inch. John, as so many before him, crumples under the weight of her stare.

“Oh,” he says dejectedly. He turns to a small computer in a barely-bigger-than-a-broom-cupboard office, taps, prints, and hands Beckett a list. Clearly he doesn’t know that she normally needs to get a warrant. She’s not going to tell him, either.

“Right. We don’t want to mess up your lunch service” – John looks pathetically grateful – “so we’ll do all the interviews after that.” She privately determines that Ryan and Esposito will be having lunch here, with her and Castle. She’s not that dumb, and she’s pretty sure that one or two on the list won’t be hanging around when their work ends. Besides which, it’s almost lunchtime now, and Castle is making faces that indicate both that he’s hungry and that he’ll whine if he isn’t fed.

“Have you got a table for four?” John’s face falls. It would be funny, if the cause weren’t so serious. “Castle, will you sit at it, and I’ll give the boys a call to join us?”

“Sure,” he says.

Beckett goes outside to call Ryan. She explains what she wants, and he agrees to fix it so it happens. Shortly, he and Espo join them for lunch, which is very acceptable in both quantity and quality. After lunch, they wander casually around the corner, and have a thoroughly pleasant conversation with the uniformed officers whom they find there. Strangely, those same officers appear to have found some friends. They look remarkably like three of the servers from Espanola. How very peculiar.

Beckett smiles like a knife and congratulates herself on her foresight. “Thanks, guys,” she says to the uniforms. “Can you take them down to the station, and we’ll get to them shortly?”

The servers left at the restaurant are really not much use to anyone, though courtesy of there being three detectives and one writer to conduct interviews they are dealt with in double quick time. The gang traipe back to the precinct, armed with nothing more than a series of negatives, and hoping that the three servers who’d tried to evade questioning are more use.

Castle keeps urging Beckett to walk quicker, drive faster, get there sooner, and frets at every stop light and intersections. It doesn’t take long for her to become frustrated.

“What’s your hurry, Castle?” she snaps, exasperated.

“I want to get on with this, before I have to go home.”

“Uh?”
“You’re coming for dinner tonight, with your dad. Remember?” He stops. “You’d forgotten, hadn’t you?”

“I’d have remembered,” Beckett says, not wholly convincingly. “The reminder would have come up on my phone.”

Castle gibbers, hugely insulted. “You’d have forgotten about my top-class hospitality and gourmet cooking?” About that point he registers Beckett’s evil grin and barely-controlled laughter. “You are mean!” he complains.

“Of course I didn’t forget. I’m insulted that you think I would.” She humphs, for good measure, and then dissolves into mirth again.

“Can’t we go faster?” he whines.

“Not without causing an accident. Patience.” She hears a very odd noise from beside her. It doesn’t sound friendly: it sounds sulky. “Anyway, I’m sure you thought up an easy-cook meal so you didn’t have to leave till two minutes before I did.” Castle harrumphs. “Am I wrong?”

“No,” he grumbles. “Stop reading my mind. It’s not fair.”

“We’re here,” she points out. “Wanna come interrogate, or do you need to go cook dinner?” She evades his grab with ease, but twines her fingers into his in the elevator. He harrumphs again, but his fingers curl round hers in return.

They stride into Interrogation One, where a very nervous server is fidgeting in his chair and glancing nervously at the one-way glass. He jumps as they enter, and cringes when the door shuts.

“I din’t do nuthin’,” he says, words spilling over each other.

“So what did you do?” Beckett raps. The server clearly doesn’t get it. “Tell me about Chef.” The server, Tony, repeats a vast amount of useless information which they already have. Beckett regards him with the look of a shark spotting a wounded whale. “You haven’t mentioned Bruno,” she points out, with enough of an edge to frighten the server still further.


“Precisely,” Beckett says sharply. “Why’d he get fired?”

“He was havin’ an argument with Chef. Getting’ pretty loud.”

“What was it about?” Castle asks, more gently. “They like the same girl?”

“Bruno was the girl, what I heard.”

Castle acquires an exceedingly smug expression which says far more clearly than words I called it, Beckett.

“Oh? Tell me about it.” Beckett leans forward on the table in an attitude of intimidating attention. Tony shudders, and would clearly like to shift backwards. Unfortunately he can’t shift backwards through the wall, which is clearly the desired outcome.

“They was together. Then they wasn’t. Then Chef fired him.” Tony stops. “Dunno what happened after. Not like we was friends.”

Tony, grill him as Beckett will, says nothing more. Nor do the other two servers. Bruno, it appears,
was not sociable. Except with Chef, of course, where he was very sociable. Interrogation has taken up most of the afternoon, and it’s already after six. Castle squeaks at the time, and skedaddles, calling to Beckett to follow him in half an hour.

It takes her half an hour to find that the techs haven’t broken into the phone yet – Chef was clearly in that minority of security-conscious people who actually change the code – and that Bruno is not in any of the databases. The boys are running his social security number, but it’s not recognised. Hm. Looks like Bruno wasn’t exactly legal.

“At least we shortened the timeline,” Espo points out. “Seein’ as we got Perlmutter, we gotta take any wins we can get.”

“Yeah,” she replies gloomily. “I want to know where Bruno lives. No-one seemed to know anything about him. He probably isn’t even called Bruno.”

“We could try to get something off camera footage,” Ryan says hopefully. “I should have that first thing tomorrow.”

“I want a lead,” Beckett complains.

“We do too,” the boys agree.

“But it’s almost quarter to seven,” Ryan says, “an’ you should have been gone ten minutes ago.” He looks at her frustrated face sympathetically. “We’ll keep lookin’ for a bit. But all the techs go home and no-one’s giving us anything more tonight.”

Beckett makes a very irritated noise.

“Detective Beckett,” Montgomery says from behind her, “no point being here when you don’t have any evidence, suspects or witnesses. Start again first thing, when you’ve had a break.”

“Yessir,” she says dispiritedly, and departs.

When she opens Castle’s door, everyone else is already assembled, and Alexis is obviously grilling Beckett’s dad about anything and everything. Castle spots her and bounces over to envelop her in a bear hug and plant a kiss on her lips. It feels rather as if he’s making a statement, though she’s not entirely sure to whom.

“Hey, Beckett,” he says happily. “You’re late. Got a lead?”

“I wish. Not even a sniff of a clue.”

“Hi, Detective Beckett,” Alexis says enthusiastically. Since Castle is still embracing her, this does not fill Beckett with anything other than mild embarrassment, which turns to less mild embarrassment as her father regards her with considerable mischief.

“Evening, Katie.”

“Hey, Alexis. Dad. Sorry I’m late, just finishing up neatly.” Castle still hasn’t fully let go of her. This is – well, *odd*. He’s definitely making a point, but she still doesn’t know to whom, or why.

“What are you doing?” she whispers.

“Hugging you.”

“Why?”
Castle’s eyes sparkle. “I wanted to.” That is not a sufficient answer, Castle. Unfortunately, in company, it’s the only one she’s going to get. “Come and sit down. Dinner’s ready.”

For a few minutes, the only sound is of contented munching.

“This is excellent,” Jim says. “Wish I’d learned to cook a bit better.”

“Mom used to do it all,” Beckett says unthinkingly. “She wouldn’t let you near a cookpot. She barely let you in the kitchen.” She realises what she’s said a second later, and blinks.

“She swore I could burn water,” Jim recalls, a hitch in his voice and a very slight forcing of the humour in the comment.

“I learned pretty early,” Castle interjects. “Mother can’t cook at all. It was self-defence, really. Then Alexis arrived and I had to learn a whole new way of cooking. It involved vegetables, and healthy choices, and balance.”

“Not just burgers and fries, then?”

Castle humphs. “I could do a lot better than that. But there was a pretty heavy reliance on mac-n-cheese at times,” he admits. “When I was buried in writing and didn’t want to stop.”

“Dad’s teaching me to cook,” Alexis says happily. “He still tries the weirdest things, though.”

“I hope it’s not those s'morelette things for dessert,” Jim says anxiously.

Castle grins wickedly, and opens his mouth.

“No,” Alexis says.

“Stop spoiling my fun,” Castle grumps. “No. Alexis wouldn’t have let me, so” – sulkily – “I didn’t even suggest it. It’s an apple tart with home-made caramel sauce, and there’s whipped cream or ice-cream or both.”

“Sounds great,” Jim says, clearly much relieved and impressed.

Indeed it is great. Conversation is kept light, for the most part, centring around the new case, in which everyone is interested, but leaving out the gorier details of the extent of the stabbings.

“So we need to track down Bruno,” Beckett winds up.

“Surely that can’t be hard?” Jim queries. “I mean, social security number, drivers’ licence, tax filings. Wouldn’t one of those work?”

“Any of those should have worked,” says Beckett with strained patience, “but it turns out that Bruno’s not on any books.”

“We think he’s likely an illegal immigrant, or doesn’t have permission to work here,” Castle amplifies, largely for Alexis’s benefit.

“Mm,” Jim hums thoughtfully. “Didn’t he even have a surname?”

“Yeah. Talaga. We’re running it, but no luck so far.”

“Shame you don’t know his phone number,” Jim muses, caught up in the intellectual challenge. “You could simply call it and pretend to be a new offer to hire him.”
Castle’s eyes light up. “A disguise?” he grins. “I love acting.”

“Not you,” Beckett says absently, lost in thought. Suddenly she snaps out of her reverie. “I need to call Espo.”

She’s standing even as she says it, pulling out her phone and dialling, pacing impatiently till he answers.
“Espo, Beckett.”

“Yeah. We had an idea.”

“Techs got into Chef’s phone yet?”

“Well, put the hurry up on them or get a warrant for the records.”

“Put the hurry up on that too, then,” she raps. Jim blinks at the command tone; Castle smiles, seeing his character in his head; and Alexis watches with admiration. “As soon as we get something we need to pick out Bruno’s number. If we’re lucky, it’ll be in contacts, if not, we’ll have to do it the hard way.”

“We’re going to gaslight him. You’re going to call him, pretend to be another diner looking to hire, you got his name and number from a friend of one of the three who tried to sneak out on us.”

“Because you’re the only one who can put on the right accent, Espo.” There’s a distinct flavour of you idiot with which Castle is only too familiar. Jim, it seems from his raised eyebrows, is also familiar with it.

“It’s got to be worth a go. Have you any better ideas?”

“Right. Lean on those techs and the warrant. I want that phone open and I want that data.”

“Bye.”

She swipes off the phone and returns to the table, appearing very satisfied and smiling sharply.

“Thanks, Dad. Good idea. Let’s see if it works.”

Castle notes with no surprise at all that Jim lights up at the suggestion that his idea has helped his Katie’s case. Beckett, who is clearly still running case-thoughts and strategies through her head, hasn’t yet noticed. Although… on a closer look, there’s a crease across Jim’s forehead and a crumple of strain around his mouth. His eyes are indeed brighter, but it’s not all happiness. Some of it is undoubtedly distress: a realisation that Jim’s little Katie grew up, and he missed it: head down in amber bourbon, drowning his grief and his daughter together. Now, Castle can recognise and even sympathise with the considerable toll which this whole debacle has taken on Jim as well as Beckett. No-one’s come out of this unscathed.

Beckett’s focus returns to the present and to present company.

“Sorry,” she says. “Just making sure I hadn’t missed anything.”

Castle sees Jim’s face twist: memory flashing over his visage.

“So like Johanna,” he murmurs, and Castle’s heart clenches on the words. He’s seen the photos, in which Beckett was frighteningly like her mother in looks – and, it now appears, in personality. Every minute, hour, day: sharp-stabbing reminder of his lost wife whenever Jim looked at his daughter.

Beckett, again, doesn’t notice. Oh. Doesn’t seem to notice, but there’s a tightness pinching around her eyes and a downward flick to her lips. Castle slides his hand towards her and dusts a touch over
her knee, hidden by the table. It seems to help, for now.

“Is everyone ready for dessert?” he asks enthusiastically, and bounces up to clear the table. Beckett rises too, intending to help.

“Sit down,” Castle tells her. “Alexis’ll help, and there’s only room for the two of us in the kitchen.” This is obvious nonsense, since he could fit a small herd of buffalo in the open plan arrangement. Still, if it makes him happy… She sits back down.

Shortly, apple tart, caramel sauce, cream and ice-cream appear. Conversation ceases once again, in order to appreciate Castle’s culinary talents, and only really re-starts when the last remaining crumbs are consumed.

“Coffee?” Castle enquires.

“Not for me, thanks,” Jim declines. “These old bones need to get home.”

“You’re not old,” Alexis says, just as Beckett says Dad!, and rolls her eyes heavenward at him.

“You don’t have to go yet,” Castle points out mildly.

Jim grins impishly at both Castle and Beckett. “I think I should,” he smiles. “You two must have things to talk about.” Beckett emits a muffled noise of irritation and Jim grins more widely. “The case, Katie.” She growls.

Castle politely escorts Jim to the door, waving Alexis away. “I thought fathers were supposed to do the disapproving glare and intimidation bit,” he says.

“I think Katie can do all of that for herself, and besides, it’s not good manners to scare your host.” Jim’s smile turns a little lopsided, and then reverts to impish. “If I were you, I’d make sure she doesn’t get away.” Castle goggles. “Though I think she’s already decided you won’t.” Jim steps through the door. “Night, Rick. Thanks for dinner.”

Castle closes the door from habit and not from any conscious action, and returns to the family room somewhat shell shocked.

“What did Dad say to you?” Beckett murmurs.

“Nothing much,” he evades. “I think he approves of me,” he adds smugly, and revels in the disgusted noise which Beckett makes.

“Eww, Dad,” Alexis complains. “So not cool.”

Castle makes a face at his daughter, who rolls her eyes at him but arrives in the kitchen to help tidy up. Beckett manages one trip from table to kitchen counter before she is spotted, growled at, and packed off to the couch to behave like a dinner guest – there is some emphasis on that word – and await coffee. Her protests are, once more, entirely ignored by both Castles.

As soon as the cleaning up is done, Alexis says goodnight and disappears upstairs. Her vanishing act is both impressive and embarrassing.

“I think we’re alone now,” Castle hums, half in tune and mercifully quietly. “Coffee?”

“Please.”

Coffee and Castle arrive forthwith. Castle’s arm arrives around Beckett forthwith, too. She snuggles
in without a hint of resistance and lays her hand on his leg. It’s not quite seductive, but it’s certainly suggestive.

“I brought a bag,” she says, unexpectedly. “I didn’t want Dad or Alexis to see it so I left it in the car.”

“Give me the keys and I’ll go get it,” Castle offers.

“’Kay.” She hands over the keys, and curls deeper into the couch.

Castle looks back from the door at the sight of a relatively relaxed Beckett happily cuddled up in the corner of his couch, shoes off, toes tucked up, and thinks how far she’s come. Just his mother’s party, now. One last step, and then this can become their reality.

He retrieves the bag and with some difficulty resists the temptation to peek. He’s pretty sure that would spoil the surprise.

Beckett’s sleepy, sexy smile when he returns makes him certain that there’s a present for him within the bag. Present, in this case, really meaning wrapping for the real gift: his Beckett in his bed. His answering smile is as slow, sleepy and sensual as hers, and a moment later they’re snuggled close together, anticipation scenting the air as their coffee is consumed and cups set down.

“I think it’s bedtime,” Beckett breathes into Castle’s very receptive ear. It becomes even more receptive when she follows up with a delicate little nibble of the lobe. He likes that. Ohhhh yes.

“I think so too,” he growls. “I think you brought something pretty.”

“Do you?” she asks, in a teasing, sultry tone, and nibbles along his shadowed jawline, ending up just short of his mouth. This is not at all fair to Castles. Kisses should definitely end on his mouth, from where he can return the favour. Still, there’s more than one way to skin a cat – or a Beckett-Kat. Perhaps not skin, either. More, well, strip. On which happy thought, he tugs her up on to his lap, cradles her face, and kisses her hard. She might have started it, but he’s not going to be chasing the game. Chasing Beckett until he catches her and she turns into purring, sensual, sexy Kat, now… well, that’s another matter.

“That’s more like it,” he says, some moments later, and immediately kisses her once more, before she can slither away. He doesn’t want her slithering away just yet: she’s here in his loft (again) and he wants to enjoy it. Her. Them. He carries on kissing her: her hands around his neck; his slipping round to her nape, down to the small of her back, across to her hip. She sighs a little, wriggles to become closer, and gives in to his demands.

After far too short a time, Beckett pulls her lips from Castle’s excellently talented osculation, then detaches his hands by means of a contortionist’s twist, fold and wriggle to leave her a foot out of Castle’s astonished clutch. She throws him an entirely wicked come-hither glance, and sways towards the bedroom with a swing of her hips that he’d much rather feel against his when he’s buried inside her. Another heated, heating glance scorches towards him.

He doesn’t move.

“You brought something pretty,” he says again, in a deep velvet baritone designed to stroke down every sensitised synapse. “So I’m giving you time to put it on.” He smiles, lazily predatory. “I like surprises,” he purrs. “I like unwrapping presents, too.”

Kat’s sly smile turns the anticipatory tension another notch tighter. As if she were the Cheshire
Cat, or Kat, it’s the last thing he sees as the rest of her disappears. He sits tight, letting her play out her game. He’ll play his own game soon enough, and it’s only fair that he should ensure that she’s as aroused as he is.

In fact, by dint of physically sitting on his hands, Castle manages to delay standing up for precisely eleven minutes. That’s the point when he hears his bathroom door reopening, and fails utterly to stop his body from rising from the couch to investigate the extremely interesting contents of his bedroom.

He is certainly not disappointed. Nothing about Kate Beckett, thoroughly feline and totally Kat, in his bedroom could ever disappoint him. However, just as a black belt is, though the top rank, divided into dans, so Castle’s level of Beckett-appreciation, though always high, has divisions of intensity. Currently the division he’s occupying is marked as maximum.

His Kat is lying seductively across his pillows on his bed and gazing at him as if he’s edible. (He is, but only if Kat’s doing the eating.) It therefore takes him a moment to rip his gaze from hers and take in her attire. It certainly couldn’t be called dress. It doesn’t cover enough. In fact, it hardly covers anything. For a woman whose last ten years have barely encompassed relationships, she sure does have an astonishing collection of drop-dead sexy lingerie. This is no exception. He could call it a nightgown. It’s being worn at night, and it might just about qualify as a gown. Maybe. If it were six inches longer.

Mostly, it’s black chiffon, almost translucent. The outfit appears to include a pair of panties for which the term brief is entirely inadequate. Brief would imply a little more fabric. The garment is more remarkable for the extent to which it uncovers than covers. He doesn’t realise that he’s already growling deep in his throat. The top piece is also mostly black chiffon. It has two thread-thin straps. Its lace-rimmed upper edge rests one single solitary inch above her nipples, which are already taut. The lower hem finishes one inch below the panties. It has a crimson ribbon snaking through its centre, tied at the top in a small, neat, and above all inviting bow. A similar bow decorates each side of the panties.

Castle’s growl becomes far deeper and much more predatory. This is no fluffy, playful kitten, nor yet affectionate Kat. This is a full-fledged tiger, who’s pleased to play and keep her lethality restrained, though it’s there beneath the invitation. Just as with any big cat, there’s danger in the air, scenting her seduction with savagery.

His brain ceases utterly to function about the point she bites her lip and then licks it lasciviously. He doesn’t need it. All he needs is the instinctive response to her open invitation.

Instinct has him rampantly naked before he’s reached the bed; instinct hauls his beautifully wrapped Beckett from her languorous lounging on the pillows; instinct sets his mouth firstly to hers and then to her proud breasts and hard points tipping them; instinct rips the bows open and casts the chiffon aside to leave her stunningly, louchely naked, slick and hot in his grasp.

But it’s experience which allies with instinct to instruct mouth and hands to tease and tantalise and torment; tongue to touch and taste and drive her frantic; teeth to leave small nips everywhere but where she wants them most; fingers to frolic and wreak joyous havoc through flesh and folds.

Of course this tiger-Kat fights back with her own bright-burning wickedness and hunger of tongue and teeth and fingers; but in the end size and weight and sheer hard muscle-strength gives him the advantage: she succumbs to him and screams his name into the pillows in which her cries are muffled; and then opens to take him into her, perfectly fitting, perfectly matched as he calls her name into the hot wet haven of her mouth and spills inside the cradle of her body.
They lie, satisfied and sated, together; nestled as peacefully as two now-sleepy tigers when the hunt and the feeding are done.

“Mine,” Castle murmurs into her hair, clasping her close; and then more smugly, “I knew you’d brought something pretty.”

“My Castle,” Kat mumbles, nine-tenths asleep already. “Mine, love you.”

“Night, love,” Castle whispers, so only she can hear, and she makes a small sleepy noise and curls against him. No tension now, no worry or thought or sleeplessness; simply calm acceptance that she’s here and complete relaxation.

He slips into slumber with everything he hadn’t known he always wanted (until nine months ago) right here in the palm of his hand.

Castle does not love Beckett’s alarm, either for its volume or timing, and he especially does not love that its klaxon noise means that she will now wake up and, worse, get out of bed. On the other hand, his shower is definitely big enough for two. And washing in pairs has some very interesting side-benefits. It does mean that they have to wash all over again, though. Without the side-benefits.

At least they have a case.

Beckett also brought clean clothes, which is encouraging, even if she does pack away her scraps of sin. He’d try to persuade her to leave them, but they do need cleaned. Not, quite, repaired. He’d managed not to tear them. That’s better than his tiger-Kat had managed on his shoulders.

Beckett emerges from the bathroom far too quickly to look as composed as she does. However, she’s – “Haven’t you forgotten something?” Castle asks, confused.

“You mean my lip gloss?” she smirks. “No. I didn’t forget it. I just didn’t want to smudge it.” She slinks the last step between them, stretches up and takes wholesale possession of his mouth.

“Now I’ll put it on.”

“Not yet you won’t,” Castle rasps, and catches her back in to do some ravaging of his own. When he’s finished, she’s lax against him. “Now you can put it on,” he says to her dazed eyes. “See you in the precinct.”

The sway of her hips as she leaves nearly makes him haul her straight back to bed.

In the bullpen, safely ahead of Ryan and Esposito, Beckett considers her murder board with a homicidal glare for its lack of information. About all she’s got right now is a timeline and the victim’s ID. Her prime suspect, Bruno, is in the wind. She growls ferociously – and rather too loudly. Montgomery pokes his Captainly pate out of his office to find out what new terror is pacing his precinct.

“Ah, Detective Beckett,” he says smoothly. “Isn’t the case progressing?”

“Not unless you let me squeeze Perlmutter till his pips squeak,” Beckett emits.

Montgomery winces. “I can’t have you physically encouraging him.”
“I want his results,” Beckett complains.

“Yes. Indeed. Well, instead, I wanted a word with you, Detective, and if you’re stalled on the case, it might as well be now.”

“Yes, sir.”

Beckett automatically stands and follows her boss to his office.

“I’ve been watching you, Beckett.” Oh God. Now what?

“Seems to me that you’ve cleared up whatever was wrong a few weeks back.”

“Yessir,” she says on a sigh of relief.

“I still want you to follow the same protocol relating to any alcoholics on your cases. Castle will stay with you and report directly to me. But you don’t need to get my permission to work the cases as long as you do that. I’ll re-evaluate whether I need Castle’s reporting after the next one.” He chortles, suddenly. Beckett looks questioningly at him. “That man can’t write a basic, plain, factual report to save his life.”

“Sir?”

“Never seen so much flowery description in my life. Tell him to cut it out. If I see one more reference to your emerald-hard gaze” – Beckett emits an extraordinary noise and winces, and Montgomery guffaws – “in interrogation, I’ll be interrogating Castle myself.”

“Yessir,” Beckett manages, and retreats at full speed, followed by the sounds of amused Captain.

Fortunately, she has calmed herself down when the boys arrive, all fired up and ready to go just as soon as the techs get into the phone or the warrant comes through.

Which is not yet happening, as Castle discovers almost as soon as he walks in. Something about the black roil of raging frustration around Beckett’s desk and person tells him that much. He puts her coffee down before she can see him, but just as she’s reaching for it, the phone rings.

“Beckett.”

“Okay. There shortly.” She swipes off. “Finally, Perlmutter’s managed to pull his scalpels out his ass and do something.”

“You’re not saying *useful* there,” Esposito points out, almost as sardonically as Beckett might.

“Yeah, I’m not. Chances of it being useful are fifty-fifty, on past performance,” she returns, equally dryly. “You coming, Castle?” She sweeps out, Castle on her heels.

At least, he’s on her heels until he’s out of sight and the elevator doors have closed. Then he stops any hint of following and simply slings an arm around her: utterly confident that she won’t flinch or shake him off. Nor does she, until the elevator creaks to a halt, when she’s abruptly two feet away.
At the morgue, Perlmutter is his usual fussy, snide and unhelpful self.

“Just give me cause of death, a proper time estimate and the weapon,” Beckett snaps, after two full minutes of circumlocutions undiluted by pleasantry or indeed civility.

Perlmutter harrumphs. “This is not an episode of NCIS, Detective,” he says irritably.

“I know that. If it was I’d get something useful without having to fight for it.” In the background, Castle emits a very curious noise. It sounds like a quack. She has considerable trouble maintaining a straight face.

“This man was stabbed eleven times with an extremely sharp knife. He has defensive wounds on his hands and arms. The fatal wound severed his jugular vein, causing him to bleed to death. The other wounds were inflicted both pre and post mortem.” Perlmutter pauses. “The assailant had no extensive knowledge of anatomy,” he adds contemptuously.

And you do? Beckett thinks, extremely unfairly. Perlmutter is just fine at anatomy and indeed pathology. It’s the drawing of sensible conclusions further than his findings and the social skills to interact with the rest of the human race at which he is utterly hopeless. Luckily, drawing conclusions is her job.

“How do you deduce that?” she enquired.

“He stabbed at the ribs from above. That, as any anatomically aware person would know, is not the most efficient way to proceed. Such a blow would be much more likely to be effective if delivered upwards from below.”

“I knew that,” Castle says happily. Perlmutter glares at his broad back as Castle peers at an interesting exhibit, and tuts. Castle whips his fingers away from the scalpels.

“I had not, regretfully, considered you to be a suspect,” Perlmutter snipes. “I’m sure I shall have that pleasure in future, however.”

“Have you two quite finished?” Beckett inquires icily. “What’s my time window?”

“Three to five a.m.”

“Weapon?”

“A very sharp knife.”

“Details, Perlmutter!” she snaps. “Broad blade, narrow, serrated, what? Anything useful you can tell me about it?”

“Broad, not serrated. Eight inch, I think.” He pauses again.

“And? Stop dragging this out.”

“There’ll be a shard missing from it,” Perlmutter says sulkily.

“What?”
“When it hit the bone, a small piece of metal lodged there. Some flaw in the metal, no doubt.” Perlmutter’s glance at Castle indicates that he feels Castle to be a flaw in the metal (and mettle) of the NYPD.

“Send me the picture. And get that shard to CSU for testing.”

“Kitchen knife?” Castle surmises.

“Guess so. A chopping knife, for preference. A big one.” She turns back to Perlmutter. “Anything else you can tell me?” Her tone says she doesn’t think so. “Tox, bruising, diseases?”

“Nothing relevant,” Perlmutter says in a very final fashion. “Now let me get on with the rest of my work. That oversize brute whom you claim to know from Central Park is whining for his results almost as loudly as you.”

Beckett turns back from her exit slowly and menacingly and pins Perlmutter to the wall with the force of her expression.

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” she grates, “but I thought my job – and that of Detective O’Leary – was to solve murders. I also thought that the city employed you to provide us with assistance in the form of medical evidence; not to fund your complaining. I suggest you get on with your actual job, before someone decides to audit your performance.” She stalks out.

Perlmutter’s pathetic gobblings can be heard all the way down the corridor as they leave.

“Right, we’ve got a narrower window, and a weapon.”

“I still think this is a lover’s quarrel,” Castle muses.

“Okay, what’s your theory?”

“That sort of violence only happens where there are really strong feelings. Either love or hate, and who’s going to go behind the bleachers with someone they hate?”

“Someone who’s so furious they’re not thinking,” Beckett says cynically.

“Or someone who thinks there’s a chance to kiss and make up. Tony said that Chef and Bruno were having an affair…” he trails that lure hopefully across her path.

“Yeah, but surely Chef couldn’t be so dumb as to think Bruno would want to see him if he’d just fired him? I mean, that’s just – dumb.”

“Depends. If someone else told him that Bruno wanted to mend fences… and Chef regretted firing him…”

“This sounds like high school,” Beckett says tartly. “Becca tells Sophie that John wants to make up.”

“Yeah, it does a bit. But Chef wasn’t that old, and most of the staff were even younger. High school might not be so far off the mark.”

Beckett mutters sceptically, but doesn’t actively disagree.

The news is not as good back at the Twelfth. The techs are still struggling with the phone and the warrant is still outstanding. It’s going nowhere – at least until Ryan has an idea.
“Why don’t we just ask John for Chef’s number, and then get those records from the phone company? ‘Stead of having a warrant for a name that might be one of several, an easy one for a specific number?”

Beckett nearly wails at her own stupidity. So simple: why hadn’t any of them thought of that earlier?

“Good idea. Let’s do it.”

The boys scoot off to re-interview John. Beckett regards her murder board dyspeptically. It’s not much improved from earlier. She foresees a long and tedious re-interviewing of all the staff now that they have narrowed down the period for which alibis are required. Of course, that does mean that they also have a much narrower window for which they need to review street camera footage, which is now waiting for Ryan to return. Small blessings.

A lot of tedious work is done over the next few days. It’s proving ridiculously difficult to chase all the loose ends and obscure trails. They’ve found the knife, but Bruno’s still missing, somewhere in the wind, and without him and his fingers they can’t even try to match the partial print that CSU lifted from the handle. It’s got to be Bruno’s, because if nothing else (and there is quite a lot of nothing else) they’ve managed to eliminate most of the others. In fact, if they could only find Bruno, everything would fall into place.

And then suddenly, Bruno still not found, it’s the day of Martha’s party. Montgomery had insisted, late on Friday night, that since the trail is no longer hot, they don’t come in on the days that the team’s off-shift, and so Beckett, sitting fretfully at home on Saturday morning, has nothing to take her mind off the coming evening. Castle, apologetically, had pointed out that he needs to be on hand for the party planners’ inevitable last-minute queries. So she doesn’t even have him to distract her.

Instead, she goes out for a long run, follows up with quality time with her yoga mat and the most difficult asanas she knows, and then a very long, hot bath with a book, until she’s as wrinkled as a raisin and has to spend some considerable period of quality time with her moisturiser. It would probably have helped if she could have had more coffee, but even her legendary tolerance of caffeine has been exceeded and she doesn’t want her hands to be shaking. It might prompt accusations of being scared or ruffled by the occasion.

However. She counts off the positives on each finger. Her friends and team will be there. Her dad will be there. Most importantly, Castle will be there.

She can do this.

To help her do this, though, she’s scoured her closet and then the stores for a knock-them-dead dress. Nothing like dropped-jaw admiration on Castle’s face (and others, but she only cares about one man’s reaction) to give her confidence.

By the time she’s dressed from her skin to her light wrap, carefully; applied her make-up, likewise carefully; and slipped her feet into a pair of shoes that both flatter and put her eyes almost on a level with Castle’s, she’s donned the armour she needs.

She only hopes it’ll be enough.

Castle had informed Beckett that he was going to pick her up and escort her to the party, no matter
what happens. It’s not that he thinks she’d bail on him: she had, after all, stated that she was going in front of the assembled gang and she’ll never renege on that commitment – but he thinks that it’s entirely possible that she’ll need reassurance.

At least, he thinks that she might need reassurance right up until she opens the door, at which point all thought leaves his head without so much as a fare-thee-well. Well. *One* thought sticks around: the one that simply says *bedroom.* *Now.* She is not *allowed* to wear that… that… that sliver of sin.

It’s black. It’s short. It has small slits in the sides of the skirt. It has a middling-to-low neckline and backline. It is *not* indecent. It merely goes straight to his groin.

About that point he closes his mouth and swallows very hard. Swallowing hard does nothing to relieve any other areas which might also be very hard.

“Shall we go?” he manages, an octave and noticeably increased vibrato removed from his usual tones.

“Okay,” and when she says it he realises how tense she is. He steps inside and simply clasps her in, letting her lean on his absolute certainty that it will all turn out right.

“Last step, love,” he breathes. “Last step.”

Her arms close around him. “I can do this,” she whispers, and he hears the promise implicit in her words: not to him, but to herself.

The party is in full and noisy swing. All notions of being fashionably late, dear to the hearts of actors everywhere in normal circumstances, were abruptly removed from their minds by the careful dissemination of some very interesting information. Somehow, no-one at all knows how (unless you happened to be one Richard Castle, who *always* knows a guy), the gossip has spread that Dottie and David Carriblane, and their cultured circle of funders, will be attending. *No-one* can afford to miss that. Who knows who might be spotted? Besides which, Martha Rodgers is *the* hot new director, and who knows who *she* might spot for whatever she takes on next?

Miss this party, and you might as well quit acting now, because you’re not one of the in-crowd.

In one corner, far away from any possibility of being contaminated by culture, Esposito is scowling at the world. He’d been inveigled here under false pretences. Castle had told him that Ryan, Beckett, Castle, O’Leary and O’Leary’s partner Pete, and Jim Beckett, would all be here. He can’t see a single freakin’ one of ‘em. He can’t see any friggin’ thing past all the glam and glitz. At least the beer bucket’s within reach, and he’ll admit the beer is good. He should know. He’s three bottles down already. He scowls more blackly, unaware that several actors are observing and imitating him.

He observes a ripple in the jam-packed crowd and, (though he wouldn’t admit it under torture) hopes like hell that it’s someone he can talk to. It’s coming from the front door, which is positive.

From a different direction, Ryan fights his way through a crowd of actors. Esposito watches dyspeptically as a number of them (not all female) flirt with him. It’s disgusting. Cops should display a decent dignity, not wink at actors who’re giving them the eye. And that snake-hipped walk is just not cool. He ignores with magnificent (and scowling) indifference that it is Ryan’s normal cop stride, and that Ryan is not winking at anyone but him.

Ryan spots Esposito and makes straight for him.
“Beer,” he says. “for God’s sake, beer!”

“What’s wrong, bro?”


“You shouldn’t try to hide from me, sweetie.”

Ryan cringes. Esposito snickers. It lasts three milliseconds until Ryan wraps him in a hug and – oh fuck what are you doing bro? – makes as if he’s kissing him!

“You pair are just so darn cute,” arrives from the ceiling. It’s O’Leary, holding the hand of a smaller (that is, normal sized) man.

The omnisexual fashion plate slithers off, muttering.

“Is he gone, bro? Tell me he’s gone?” Ryan weebles frantically, hiding behind the mountain. “Is he gone?”

“What the fuck just happened?”

“He wouldn’t leave me alone,” Ryan wails. “I couldn’t get rid of him so I thought the best thing to do was pretend I was into you. If Beckett had been here I’d have” –

“What would you have?” Beckett’s cool tones reach the group rather before she does, trailing Castle and Jim, whom they’d picked up on the way. The boys’ jaws drop in tandem as they register her attire.


“You’d have hugged Beckett?” Castle asks. There is a very tiny stress line in his voice.

“Not if he wanted to keep his balls,” Beckett mutters. Castle relaxes.

“But Beckett, he was harassing me.”

“Welcome to a woman’s world,” she says very tartly. Ryan blushes. Castle snickers. Jim raises a very parental eyebrow, which Beckett entirely ignores.

“Now, butterfly,” O’Leary drawls, “that’s not fair.”

“Oh? Remember those guys we went sparring with, back when?”

O’Leary outright guffaws. “Sure I do. That’s why it’s not fair. You mopped the floor with them.”

“And Ryan could have mopped the floor with that guy,” she points out, and then pauses. “It was a guy, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Castle says.

“This is all your fault, bro,” Ryan grouses. “You invited me to this party.”
At which opportune moment Martha makes her entrance, in highly dramatic style.

“Darlings!” she carols, at a pitch and volume which would have reached the back of the Met, unamplified, and shattered every wine glass in that institution along the way. “You’re here!” Unwillingly, but they are indeed all here. “Help yourselves to food and drinks.”

And then she notices O’Leary. Quite how she has overlooked a mobile mountain, Castle has no idea. His mother looks up, and up, and further up. “Oh my,” she says, faintly.

“Hi, I’m Colm O’Leary. This is Pete Kasman, my partner.

“Friends of Richard’s?”

“Yaas,” O’Leary drawls more slowly. Beckett almost expects him to add *mam* to the end of it.

“Oh,” she says.

“We came to see your production,” Pete puts in. “Colm thought it was really interesting. He’s done a bit of am-dram” –

“You have?” Martha’s eyes light up. “What have you done?” She slices O’Leary (Colm? Really?) out of the group and bears him off. The remaining gang breathes a sigh of relief.

Beckett, somewhat shielded from the general hubbub of the noisy party by the boys, her father, Pete and Castle; watches O’Leary being borne away and raises an eyebrow.

“What’d I miss?”

“Waal,” Pete drawls, “he said he liked her play…”

“And you didn’t?” Beckett asks, watching his face wrinkle.

“I prefer football, y’know.”

Shortly Pete has been absorbed into the gang. He, Jim, Espo and Ryan have seized on the chance not to become involved with theatrical types and are deep in discussion of the merits of various football teams. Lanie slides up, only a little late, and joins in. Beckett pretends to listen. Castle doesn’t even pretend.

She is recalled to reality when a snatch of conversation makes it past her ears to her brain.

“You were a choirboy, Ryan?”

Ryan colours up, and then clearly decides that offence is the best form of defence.

“Not the only one. Espo here was too.”

Beckett nearly falls over with the shock. Castle goggles. Lanie giggles.

“*You* were a choirboy, Espo? *You*?”

“When I was ten,” he growls, scowling. Lanie outright sniggers.

“So both of you can sing?” Castle asks. “I can sing too,” he continues, and abruptly stops the rest of that sentence, undoubtedly containing the words *and I know you can, Beckett*, very short indeed as he is punched by her fulminating glare.
“And so can Colm here, darlings,” arrives again, once more at theatre-pitched volume and clarity. “How lovely. Everyone,” Martha announces to the room, “We’ve acquired the evening’s entertainment. We’ve got a barbershop quartet.”

Beckett, Lanie, Jim and Pete glance at each other and promptly dissolve in gales of hysterical laughter. Ryan and Espo are hunting frantically for the door, but O’Leary’s mountainous form is blocking their line of retreat.

“Mother,” Castle says firmly, “I didn’t invite my friends so you could turn this into a rehearsal for America’s Got Talent 2009. Leave us be.”

“Oh, pish, Richard. It’ll be fun. We’ll all join in.”

“How much have you had to drink?”

“Not nearly enough,” Espo mutters, and drains another bottle. Ryan hides behind Castle, until Esposito extracts him.

“Not cool, bro. C’mon, let’s get a drink. Jim, wanna soda, and what about the game last weekend?”

Jim, Pete, Espo and Ryan, who is clinging to the other two men for safety, wander off, basely leaving Castle and O’Leary to deal with Martha. Lanie looks at the developing issue, looks around, spots a rather attractive man and takes off. Castle looks only marginally down at Beckett, ignoring both the almost un-ignorable mass of O’Leary and his mother, speaking softly.

“You okay?”

“So far.” Under the camouflage, there’s a hint of strain.

“Come and meet the Carriblanes. They’re quite normal, for theatre types.” He puts a hand on her waist, preparatory to steering her away.


“Did you?” Beckett says, and leaves it at that. It’s not exactly inviting.

“Of course I do. We’ve got lots to talk about. After all, you’re taking such a big place in my son’s life.”

Oh fuck no. Her heart sinks. She doesn’t want to talk to Martha for very long. She especially doesn’t want to talk lots. In fact, she doesn’t want to talk at all. And Martha is, from her heightened emotional state, likely already well on her way to tipsy, which means that her almost invisible filters will be completely absent.

“I don’t think so,” she says quietly. “I think we should just enjoy the party.” She steps back.

Martha steps forward and clamps a hand around her wrist. Beckett snaps her hand down and breaks the grip.

“What are you doing, Mother?” Castle asks brusquely. “Beckett’s said she doesn’t want to talk. I don’t think this is the time or the place.”
“Naw,” O’Leary agrees. “I don’t either.” He moves very slightly to be in front of Beckett. “Didn’t you say you were going to introduce me to Humphrey?”

“Humphrey?” Martha says, distracted for a second, which is all that’s required.

“Sure. I wanna meet him. You said he started in amateur productions.” O’Leary keeps talking in his hayseed drawl, as Beckett and Castle slip backwards and O’Leary steers Martha forward.

“C’n we find somewhere out of the crowd?” Beckett asks.

“Sure,” Castle says. Beckett looks considerably less than happy, and when she slides fingers into his waiting hand they’re chilled.
Castle steers the pair of them out of the main party and into a small nook screened from any passers-by.

“This isn’t the time,” Beckett says, which as an opening line is both accurate and depressing. “Why does she want to talk anyway? There’s nothing to say.”

Castle covers his pause for thought by taking full advantage of the quietness and solitude of their corner and cuddling her in.

“There are things to say,” he says slowly, “that need to be said, but I don’t think that the middle of a noisy party is the place to start making apologies or explanations – her, not you,” he adds rapidly.

“Oh.” Beckett shivers, and curls in further. Castle drops a kiss on her smooth dark hair. “She’s looking for a fight.”

“I’m not sure she is,” he says, working it out as he goes along. “I’m really not sure about that. But if she tries to start a conversation now she might well get one, hmm?”

“I won’t start it,” Beckett says. “I’m not getting into a fight in public.”

“That’s why we’re here,” Castle says reassuringly. “Even if it means you have to talk about football all night.”

“How about baseball? I don’t like football much.”

“Well, can’t talk about football?” Castle snarks.

“Normal normal,” Castle reassures her again. “More importantly, Mother won’t start anything in front of them. You can rely on her to be sure of her own self-interest.”

“Oh. Okay,” Beckett says without any particular enthusiasm, but follows him towards the miniscule Dottie and her barely taller husband.

Halfway there, she spots Martha, who has shaken off O’Leary, aiming for them. Beckett executes a sharp left, which confuses Castle considerably. He redirects them towards the Carriblanes, who are happily quaffing champagne, surrounded by a positive throng of fawning actors. Beckett resists. Castle tugs. Beckett tugs back, and then jabs at him.

“Ow! Stop it. We’re going to talk to the Carriblanes.”

“No, we’re walking right into your mother.”

Castle looks up just in time to prevent the collision.

“Ah, there you are. I was just looking for you, kiddo.”

Beckett slides behind Castle, and then into the crowd and away, towards Lanie.

“Were you?”
“Yes, darling.” His mother blinks a couple of times, and Castle realises that she might be emotional, but she’s very far from tipsy. “She’s gone.”

“Yes.”

Martha’s face creases, and she says nothing for a moment. “She doesn’t want to talk to me, does she?”

“Not tonight,” Castle says, which seems better than a blunt No.

“Do you want to talk to me?”

“Yes,” he says cautiously. “I wouldn’t have come, otherwise.” He looks down at his mother, and notices that her drink is barely touched. He doesn’t comment. “It’s a great party. You’re a roaring success,” he says, smiling sincerely. “I’m really glad.” He hugs her. She’s awkward for an instant, then suddenly throws her arms around him.

“I wish I’d done it differently,” she says quietly. “I’m so sorry.” Castle can’t disagree with that, but manages not to say so in the middle of a party.

“Let’s just enjoy the party,” he says instead. “Everyone who’s anyone is here.” He has an idea, and swipes a glass of champagne from a passing server.

“Everyone!” he calls out in declamatory tones and at penetration similar to his mother’s best efforts. “Quiet please!” Astonishingly, silence falls. “I want to propose a toast.” He pauses, to ensure every eye is on him – and his mother, as he puts an arm around her and draws her in. “As you all know, my mother has been resting for some time. However, thanks to the Carriblanes” – he raises his glass in salute to them, and the noise rises until he gestures it to stop – “and to my own particular specialty – murder, mystery and mayhem – and to the brilliant crime-solving team at the NYPD’s Twelfth Precinct” – everyone looks around to identify the people they hadn’t known and largely ignored, and finds them simply because of the raging blushes on their faces and their attempts to hide – “who found the killer… because of all of that my mother, Martha Rodgers, stepped back out on to the stage to make her version of A Midsummer Night’s Dream a stunning success. So, I want you to raise your glasses to talent and courage – Martha Rodgers.”

His mother, in true Tony winning fashion, is crying. The whole room is cheering her, even those non-theatricals from the uncultured wastelands of Esposito’s patch of the bullpen. The Carriblanes swoosh up and embrace her, and Castle, having achieved in one moment of on-the-fly inspired brilliance exactly what he wanted to achieve, slides away from the limelight in which his mother is bathing.

“That was really impressive,” Beckett breathes into his ear. Castle jumps. “She’s so happy.”

“Yeah.” He smiles mischievously. “And she’ll be swamped for the rest of the night, too. No chance of her looking for you.”

Beckett regards him very closely and very piercingly. “Stop that,” she snaps. “You did it because you knew it would mean everything to her and you love her despite everything. Stop trying to pretend you had ulterior motives.”

Castle drops his eyes and colours. He doesn’t like being called out on his real motivations. Beckett slides a hand into his. He thinks that she might have hugged him, had they been alone. “’S like I said. You’re a good man,” she mutters, and matches his blushes. His hand tightens on hers.

Fortunately, before all this sappiness can make them both ill, the rest of the gang appears. They
are no longer discussing football. Instead three of them are discussing baseball – Jim, Espo and Pete – and Ryan and Lanie are having an argument, watched by the immense form of O’Leary, whose shaking shoulders indicate his view of the spat.

“I am not!” Ryan squawks.

“Sure you are, honey,” Lanie oozes with an evil grin. “You just can’t help it.”

Ryan appears hunted. “I don’t wanna!” he wails.

“Don’t want to what?” Castle asks. Beckett simply smirks. She can see where Lanie’s eyes are, though it’s amazing that they aren’t bleeding. That outfit is bright.

“Lanie thinks I should talk to that” – he searches for a word – “person who was harassing me earlier. I don’t want to.”

“Who?”

“There. In the red pants and purple shirt.”

Castle looks over the company, spots – that’s not hard – the subject of discussion, and snickers. “Cedric?” he says. “How can you not like Cedric?”

Ryan boggles at him to such an extent that everyone else notices. “What? He’s harassing me!”


“No, no,” Castle breezes. “He’s not harassing you.”

“What? He was following me around and trying to touch me.”

“Cedric’s a method actor,” Castle notes happily. “He probably wants to study you, not seduce you.”

“He’s in love with your big blue eyes, Ryan,” Lanie jibes, very unhelpfully. O’Leary snickers. Pete outright guffaws.

At that point Cedric swishes up. He bats his eyes at Ryan, who tries to hide. Then Cedric catches a glimpse of O’Leary’s middle, being about his eye level, and more pertinently O’Leary’s closeness to Pete.


Everyone but O’Leary and Pete snickers. They roll their eyes at each other.

“What’s up, Cedric?” Castle asks. “Got a new role?”

“Not at the moment, but there’s an audition shortly and the description of the character is just like your friend here. I need to study him.”

Beckett utterly fails to control her sniggers. After all the grief she’d been given by the boys when Castle started to follow her around, this dandy studying Ryan is just plain perfect.

“If you wanted to study Ryan, I’m sure he could make time for you,” she says. Ryan emits a wail. “He likes theatre, so you’ve got that in common.”

“I like Beckett,” Jim says, tearing himself away from the sports discussion.

“I like Beckett too,” Castle whispers into Beckett’s ear, “but I don’t think that’s what either Cedric or your father means.” She chokes.

“A variety,” Ryan forces out.

“What did you see last?”

“Mrs Rodgers’s Dream.”

“Oh, I loved that,” Cedric gushes. “Such a brilliant realisation of the sexual dynamic inherent in the plot. I’d have given anything to be in it. I really hope that she continues to direct.”

“I…” starts Ryan, one hundred and twenty percent out of his depth.

“I’m sure she will do, though. After all, she’s backed by the Carriblanes.” Cedric looks as if he wishes he knew a sure-fire way to catch Martha’s attention. “The character I’m auditioning for,” he says, returning to his main concern, “is described as just like you. An everyday person, nothing outstandingly special” – Esposito, who had been looking just slightly envious, makes a suppressed noise of amusement – “but with an air of otherworldliness which implies a deeper soul than is shown on the surface.”

Esposito squeaks gently. Beckett has buried her face in Castle’s arm and is spluttering. O’Leary’s iceberg-revealing smile lights up the room. Castle is preserving a commendably straight face, as is Jim, whose attorney training has clearly included the art of utter blandness. Ryan is flabbergasted. His mouth opens and closes. Cedric clearly believes that he’s given Ryan a huge compliment. Ryan does not appear to subscribe to his thespian view.

Beckett excuses herself, and Lanie rapidly follows. When she attains the relative safety of the kitchen, she collapses, in tandem with Lanie.

“Oh God,” Lanie gasps. “Oh, girl. Have you ever seen anything like it?”

“No,” Beckett squeaks out. “Oh boy. Do you know how much fun I’m going to have with Ryan? Every time he got at me for Castle shadowing me…” Her teeth are bared. It’s nearly a smile. Lanie has to lean on the counter to hold herself up, she’s laughing so hard. “I wonder if I can convince Montgomery that Cedric should sit next to Ryan for a week or two…” She can’t continue. She and Lanie lean on each other and splutter, snurk and snurgle for a good five minutes before they can even take a half-serious breath.


“You gotta stop. I can’t breathe,” Beckett chokes out, weeping gently as she tries to stop chuckling. She still hasn’t stopped her occasional chortles when Castle finds them.

“So this is where you’re hiding,” he pouts. “I looked everywhere.”

Beckett grins widely at him, and another giggle escapes. “Ryan,” she emits.

“It’s not fair you left me to keep a straight face.” More giggles. Castle stops pouting and joins in
with a deep belly laugh. “It’s amazing, isn’t it.”

“Oh, yeah.” She giggles some more.

Castle looks at Beckett’s mischievously giggling face and is forcibly reminded of her relaxed happiness in the Hamptons. Her humour is infectious, and in her laughter his own bubbles up and washes away his remaining tension. He hugs her. Lanie gives them an amused glance, and slides away without a sound.

Castle carries on hugging Beckett. It seems like the best plan. She’s still spluttering gently with occasional bursts of giggles.

“I’m going to ask Montgomery if Cedric can interview Ryan in the precinct, after shift,” she says, and squeaks with hilarity. Castle rumbles happily.

“Really?” he asks. “Can I watch?”

“I’ll do it during your report-writing lessons,” Beckett snickers.

“What?”

“Did I forget to tell you?” she says innocently. “Montgomery doesn’t like your report writing technique. Too flowery.” Her innocent look turns to a glare. “And the next time you write that trash about my – quote – emerald-hard glare – unquote, you’ll be in Holding.”


“Not in reports to my boss,” she flicks back.

“Does that mean you’ll like it elsewhere?” he oozes.

“Depends,” she flirts.

“On what?”

“What and how and where and when.” She smiles invitingly. “How long do we need to stay?”

“You are remembering that Alexis is here too, aren’t you? She’s enjoying herself grilling every actor, director and vaguely theatre-related person around. Can’t go before she’s ready.”

“Okay,” Beckett says equably. “Fair enough.” She gives him back a hug, and then grins happily. “I’d better go tidy myself up. Then I’m going to spend a little quality time with Ryan.” Her grin has mutated to evil. Castle’s matching grin follows her out.

An hour or so later, enough beer has been consumed for the cops and their attachments to have started to circulate. O’Leary’s circulation produces a small tidal wave of disturbance in the sea of actors, but more and more of them stop him to discuss. It appears that he doesn’t just act in am-dram, he’s pretty well-informed about drama and the theatre in general. Pete trots along behind him, smiling rather patiently, until he’s detached by a rather less theatrical type.

Esposito is amusing himself by ensuring that the foppish Cedric is permanently next to Ryan. Lanie is with him, sniggering. Ryan is on the point of histrionics, which in this company will go entirely unremarked. When Beckett returns from the bathroom, she takes in the situation in one evil snigger.

“Introduce me to your new friend, Ryan?” She hadn’t been, earlier.
Ryan produces a growling mumble that doesn’t contain anything intelligible. His blue eyes are woeful.

“This is Cedric,” Lanie says happily.


“Cultured, too,” Ryan notes. “She never discusses corpses at the theatre unless they’ve arrived there first.” Her glare turns up another few notches. Ryan gives her a *your-turn-now* look.


Ryan has stopped grinning. Espo hasn’t.

“Anyway, darling” – another Beckett wince –

“Darling?” Castle says, appearing from the crowd. “Cedric, are you trying to suborn Beckett?”

Cedric assesses Castle’s expression, which is just a fraction harder than the party atmosphere would justify. “Of course not, dear boy. Why would I do that?”

“Mischief, Cedric. Sheer mischief.”

Beckett leaves the two of them to banter and, no doubt, turn on Ryan. She has no sympathy for Ryan, but she can rely on Esposito and Lanie to cover him in inglorious mayhem. She’s bored of the joke, for now, and she doesn’t trust Cedric not to irritate Castle by flirting, however insincerely, with her. Castle’s had enough stress lately without some blow-by actor starting on him, and he’d been just a little edged in his comment to Cedric.

She wanders through the party crowd, picking up snatches of gossip – usually malicious – and chatter – usually inane. She doesn’t stop to join in, pretending she’s looking for the bathroom or getting a drink from a server just over there. What she really wants is to go: she’s now a little tired of the feeling of somehow being on display, and she’s not that keen on large parties anyway. However, if Castle and Alexis are enjoying themselves, she can’t spoil their fun for no good reason, and if she says she wants to leave they might well decide to leave too. She wanders aimlessly some more, noticing without noticing a few minor changes of décor and ornaments from the arrangements Castle and Alexis had made originally, and slides through the packed hordes without a ripple.

Gradually her meanderings take her to the wall where Castle had carefully hung the *Dream* poster. She surveys it. Unlike the treatment dished out to the play itself, the poster is very attractive, even if she doesn’t like Art Deco styling. Martha’s name is very prominent. She wonders, cynically, whether Castle had arranged that.

“Richard had it framed for me,” Martha says, from over Beckett’s shoulder. Beckett freezes, and turns only fractionally, very slowly. Surely she had made it clear that she wasn’t interested in a discussion tonight? “It was a surprise.”
“That was kind of him,” Beckett says very calmly, and clasps her lips shut on it was a hell of a lot more than you deserved on moving day. She continues to survey the poster.

“I never meant to hurt him,” Martha pleads.

“I’m sure you didn’t.” A whole host of words are struggling to escape the prison of her throat, starting with you did, though.

“Katherine…” Martha tries.

“It’s not me you need to talk to. It’s Castle.” You’re not my problem. You don’t owe me anything.

“You need to understand too.”

“Castle will tell me anything I need to know. This isn’t a discussion we need to have. You made a mistake, you and Castle have talked about it and Castle’s forgiven you. It’s all fixed. That’s all there is to it.”

“You don’t believe that.”

Beckett turns round ominously. “I said, this is not a discussion I’m having with you. Certainly not in the middle of a party which you are hosting. I’m not looking the bad guy in front of half New York because you’re looking for a fight. You and Castle are fixed. We have no reason to fight. We have nothing to talk about.”

She spins on her heel and walks away, thoroughly irritated. Behind her, Martha watches her leave, unhappily.

The first person Beckett falls over who she actually appreciates seeing is her father. She’s swept past a considerable number of theatre types, who haven’t stopped or stayed her in her path. They’re not stupid.

“Enjoying yourself, Katie?” Jim asks. “It’s been a fun evening, but I think it’s time I went home. It’s getting a little lively for me.” Beckett translates this fairly accurately to mean that the booze flowing is beginning to get to him, and doesn’t quibble.

“Shall I come for dinner tomorrow?” she inquires instead.

“Yes. That’d be good.”

“Okay.” She hugs him easily. “See you tomorrow.”

Jim wanders off in search of his host, to make his excuses and leave. He’ll get whatever’s wrong with Katie, who had looked ready to shoot first and not ask any questions at all, out of her tomorrow.

Beckett manages to find her way back to her friends. Espo is displaying signs of wanting to leave too, and in fact, it’s now close to midnight and she thinks she can reasonably decamp.

In fact, as soon as she says she thinks it’s time she went, everyone else decides it’s time they went too, even Castle and Alexis, who is yawning.

“I’ll call a car, Beckett,” Castle says. “We’ll give you a ride.”

“Okay,” she says, a little drably. She’d rather expected – hoped – that Castle would want her to come home with them.
Car summoned, Beckett curls up in a corner and allows Alexis’s insouciant chatter to wash over her as they go. Lost in her own thoughts, she doesn’t pay much attention to the route until they’re pulling up at Broome Street, and even then she assumes that the car will take her on home after the Castles have hopped out.

“C’mon, Beckett,” enters her ears. From the tone, it’s a repetition.

“Huh?”

“We’re here. C’mon. Home. Out you get.” She stumbles out and follows them up.
Alexis pulls her disappearing act again, with a rather too knowing look which doesn’t really improve Beckett’s tension. Castle steers her towards his office, which is also the route to his bedroom, shuts the office door behind them, and hugs her.

“You didn’t think I was going to let you go home alone, did you? In that dress? Not likely.” He leers horribly. “Someone might try to molest you.”

“I don’t think so,” Beckett says firmly. “Not if they want to survive.”

Castle’s hand slides down her back and settles neatly on her rear. “Mm?” he hums into her ear, and tickles the lobe with his tongue. “I’m surviving.”

“Could be changed,” Beckett snarks, but he presses her closer and she rolls a smidgeon into his hips. He flexes, and keeps her very close indeed. His fingertips sneak round and down to one of those pretty little slits in the skirt of the dress, sliding over the tiny slice of skin exposed, tip-tapping under the fabric. She wriggles, and leans in to kiss him, barely needing him to bend to meet her lips in her heels. Her hands slide up his back, round over his pecs, and finally cup his evening-shadowed cheeks.

Matters heat up very rapidly, after that. So rapidly, indeed, that they don’t make it out the office. Fortunately, the office door is sturdy. Equally fortunately, short skirted dresses can simply be shoved up, panties slid out of the way of wicked fingers and hard hot flesh, pants merely opened until they’re joined in one swift, erotic motion.

Clinging to each other, they reach the bedroom. They should strip each other slowly, with delicate arousal and tantalising eroticism – but they don’t. Clothes are torn off, discarded in a trail across the floor, and they fall on the bed in a tangle of writhing limbs and come together once more.

“What happened there?” Castle asks, sprawled out across the bed with Beckett lax in his arms.

“Well, if you don’t know yet…” she yawns mischievously.

“I mean,” Castle says with awful portent, “I was planning to take things slowly and gently.”

“Mm?” Beckett emits agreeably.

“Yeah. And then you were all sexy and hot and it all changed.”

“Mm. Are you seriously complaining?” She doesn’t sound anything other than sated and content.

“No,” he says, and pulls her over his chest. “Never complaining about you in bed with me.”

“Good.” She distributes herself comfortably over him. “‘M sleeping.”

“What happened at the end of the evening?”

“Huh?”

“You were winding Ryan up and then you wandered off and when you came back you looked upset.”

“I’m fine. I’m asleep.” Her eyes are squinched shut. Castle emits a disbelieving noise.
“You’re talking to me.”

“In my sleep,” she says very unconvincingly, and buries her face in his neck. “Zzzzz.”

Castle doesn’t think that pressing Beckett in the small hours of the morning is likely to achieve anything more than a fight, which is undesirable. Besides which, she’s here, which is an improvement on not-here, and if she wakes up enough to remember that she has no clean clothes or washbag, she might also wake up enough to go home. He cuddles up, and tries to go to sleep himself. Some time later, in which he has reached no firm conclusions but has entertained plenty of suspicions, chiefly around the possibility of his mother accosting Beckett, he succeeds.

Not unusually when no alarm rouses Beckett, Castle wakens first, and enjoys some high-quality creepy staring. Unfortunately creepy staring at his beautiful Beckett does not prevent his brain functioning, and right now it’s functioning to good effect. It’s unlikely that any mere actor would have managed to upset Beckett (the reverse being emphatically not the case) and it’s equally improbable that any other theatrical type could have managed it. (the reverse still not being the case) An upset between her and her team and friends, or father, is also unlikely; and any disagreement with Alexis would have been instantly apparent on leaving.

That leaves only his first pick, being his mother. Hmm. He has two, equally unpleasant, options here. Ask Beckett flat out, or ask his mother. Ugh. Neither is at all attractive on a Sunday morning. He parks the whole issue. It can wait.

It does wait. In fact, it waits so long that Beckett has left, which in a way has made Castle’s decision for him. He’ll need to ask his mother. After lunchtime.

After lunchtime rolls around. Castle would almost have preferred a natural disaster, although his mother may qualify as one of those anyway. He heaves a paper-lifting sigh, and calls.

“Richard, darling,” she enthuses. “Did you have fun last night? Quite the best party I’ve thrown in years.”

“Yes. I told you you’d still got it.”

There is a slight, uncomfortable pause. Matters between them have, after all, not actually been mended yet. Castle had consistently put off any discussion about anything other than the party.

“Mother, how about coming over for dinner with Alexis and me tonight?” he says. “I” – he swallows – “want to finish clearing the air.”

There is a very noticeable pause.

“Okay,” his mother says. It’s not precisely confident.

“About six-thirty. Alexis will be delighted.”

“And you?”

“Me too.” It’s not untrue. It’s just that overlaying it is considerable worry about how to mend matters properly. Still… it can wait till dinner time.

Beckett had gone home, in a town car on which Castle had insisted – “to spare other people’s blushes, Beckett, when they get a look at your legs. I couldn’t possibly allow you to cause accidents and fights.” Glaring fearsomely hadn’t worked. Castle had simply smirked more widely
and completely not listened to her protests at all. On the other hand, she’d been so pleased to escape the expected inquisition that she’d put up with it. She had really thought that Castle would grill her like a hot dog, but he hasn’t.

Strangely, this does not reassure her. Instead, she fears that it simply means that Castle is applying his considerable intelligence and – er – unorthodox skills to what might have happened last night. However, he’s not here, and he won’t be here, and she needs to sort everything out and do her chores before she goes to see her dad for dinner.

So that’s what she does. The thought of last night’s unproductive discussion perches on her shoulder and occasionally pecks at her brain. It would peck more often, but Beckett has a very disciplined mind, most of the time, and is quite capable of ignoring it. Mostly.

“Hi, Dad.”

“Katie. Survived the rest of the party?”

“We all left not long after you.” She grins at him. “I think we’d all done our duty, and Alexis was tired.”

“You looked a little tired too.” He twinkles at her, parentally. “Too much burning the candle at both ends? How’s that chef case doing?”

“We still can’t find Bruno.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. We tried your idea” – Jim smiles, happy to have helped out – “but he isn’t answering the phone. He’s too clever,” she adds, irritated. “Everything we try, he isn’t there.” She makes a very cross face. “I hate it when we don’t get the guy.”

“Like not closing the deal,” Jim says sympathetically. “I don’t like that. It feels unfinished.”

“Yeah. Exactly like that.” She hesitates, wandering towards the kitchen. “Um, Dad?”

“Yes?”

“Um, I want your advice.”

Jim boggles at his daughter’s stiff back. “Sure,” he says. “What’s up? If you’re telling me you’re moving in with Rick, though, I don’t think you need my advice. Blessing you can have.”

“Dad! No.” Jim deliberately makes a very disappointed noise. “Nose out. If it was that I’d just tell you. Though if you carry on dropping brick-like hints, I might not tell you.”

“Awww. If I can’t tease you, who can?”

Beckett growls indeterminately. “I wanted to ask you what I should do about Martha,” she immediately blurts out, turning round.

Jim’s jaw hits the floor, and he sits down considerably faster than he had intended. “You want my advice?” he gasps. “About Martha? Why?”

“Well, I can hardly talk to Castle about it, can I?” Beckett says crossly. “And I’m not going to get any sense out of Ryan or Espo, or even O’Leary.” She suddenly smirks. “Sure won’t get anything
out of Ryan. He’ll be too busy keeping Cedric occupied.” She laughs, and Jim joins in. “Anyway. Martha was looking for a conversation last night.”

“At the party?” Jim queries, not impressed. No wonder Katie had appeared thoroughly annoyed. “Hardly the time or place.”

“Too right. That’s what I said. I wasn’t going to get into a fight with her at her big do.” She pauses. “But she’s going to keep hassling me till she gets what she wants or I take her apart again. I don’t want to upset Castle if she wants to mend fences, but I just don’t know.”

“Mm,” Jim hums pensively. “Okay. Why don’t we start with what she actually did and said?”

“She kept trying to talk to us.” Jim interprets that accurately as Katie and Rick. “O’Leary managed to distract her the first time, but then she came back and said we had lots to talk about since I was taking such a big place in Castle’s life.”

Jim winces at Katie’s acerbic tone. Whether she likes it being said or not, she is taking a big place in Rick’s life – about which he is quite delighted.

“I said I didn’t think so.” Jim winces again. True, but hardly tactful. Not that Katie has ever pulled her punches. “She actually stopped me moving away. Castle said it wasn’t the time or the place, and then O’Leary got in the way and hustled her off.”

It’s Jim’s turn to growl. He’s not impressed by Martha’s pushiness.

“Castle thinks she owes me an apology, or explanations. I don’t. I don’t think she owes me anything.”

“Hmm.”

“Said I was sure she hadn’t,” Katie says laconically. “I lied. I think she was so wound up she didn’t care, and I’m not sure she wasn’t trying to make him feel bad too. But in the middle of a party wasn’t the time. Anyway, she was trying to talk and I didn’t want to. It’s Castle she needs to mend matters with, not me.”

“Seems like you’ve got it all worked out. Why’d you want advice from me?”

Jim is genuinely curious. Apart from anything else, Katie’s still seeing Carter Burke, and he would have expected her to ask him, not her dad. He decides that he’s flattered, and more slowly that they are really, truly, pretty much mended.

“Because you’ve met her. Burke hasn’t – ran like a rabbit when he might have, probably because he knew Castle would ask him to take her on.”

Jim splutters. He doesn’t see Carter and Martha hitting it off. Or indeed being a viable therapy
“Did he?”

“Yeah. Didn’t work.”

“I don’t guess it would,” Jim says. “But that still doesn’t explain why you want my advice.”

“I said,” Katie says, irritably. “You’ve met her. And I don’t know what to do about her.”

“What do you mean?”

Katie acquires a fine line of deep colour across her cheekbones. Jim is suddenly reminded that Katie had been very uncommunicative (which is not precisely surprising) about any part she might have played in the Martha-Rick drama. He is also reminded that he’d thought she’d taken some direct action.

“Katie?”

“I might have told her off,” she squirms.

Jim raises his eyebrows. Well, well. Seems like that look still works. Once in a way. “Mm?” he hums, a little sternly.

“Um… she hurt Castle. So I went and told her what she’d done.”

Katie sounds like the small child who’d, laden with attitude, admitted to attempting to beat up the older boy who’d been annoying her then best friend. She’d nearly succeeded, too.

“What did you say?”

Oops. That was obviously a little too parental. Katie has raised her own eyebrow, and it’s a lot more intimidating solo than his pair are together.

“I said,” she says very coldly, “that she’d managed to hurt Castle, who she claims to love more than anything – at least that’s how she tried to guilt trip me - so badly that he actually thinks that she’d never cared about him at all and she’d blamed him for even existing. That everything he’s done for her: a home, money, love, didn’t count. Then I told her that as far as I could see it was likely true that she didn’t love him. And then I said she had to decide what mattered, ‘cause it didn’t seem to be Castle. And finally I told her that he had thought she was family and loved him – except he might not think so any more.”

Jim is appallingly, terrifyingly reminded of the way that Katie had shredded him in front of Dr Burke. Martha, it’s clear, hadn’t had a hope in hell. Katie might momentarily have responded to parental pressure, but right now she is frightening, and Jim, father or not, is very unnerved by it. He hadn’t understood, there in Dr Burke’s office so many weeks ago, that the intimidating violence of Katie’s personality was not only a product of her agony and anger at him. In that, at least, she is not her mother’s duplicate. Johanna had never had that edge of – well, focused fury.

“You did?” he asks weakly. “Er…what on earth did she do?”

“Don’t know. Didn’t care.”

“Oh,” Jim says even more faintly.

“But she came round to the loft the next morning.”

“Did she, indeed?” Jim smiles to himself. Not that he’s exactly pleased to be sure that his Katie is
sleeping with Rick: she is, after all, still his little girl, but it’s good to know that that relationship is pretty solid. Hm. Maybe he’d better dust off his best suit. Or possibly his shotgun.

“Anyway,” Katie says with a very this-is-not-the-point flavour, “she obviously wants to talk to me. God knows why. And – er – um – I don’t know if I should just let her.”

“Mm?”

“If she’s just going to go back to I’ll be a replacement mother I don’t wanna know. She isn’t, and she’s never going to be. Just ‘cause she’s Castle’s mom doesn’t ever mean she’s mine.”

“You don’t subscribe to the theory that your mother in law is another mother?” Jim says, a little maliciously mischievous.

“Dad! She’s not my mother in law.”

Jim grins wickedly. “Gotcha.”

“Anyway, no. It’s not the same. It would never be the same.”

Both of them look momentarily sad. Katie recovers first.

“This isn’t the point,” she mutters.

“Well, let’s think it through,” Jim suggests. “You said you thought Rick had fixed things with his mom. If that’s true,” he notes, attorney-cautious, “then why would she want to fix things with you? The way I see it, it’s likely one of three things: she thinks you’ll stop Rick’s relationship with her if she’s not happy” –

“No way.”

“Mm,” Jim emits. “I seem to recall that Rick wouldn’t tell me anything about you, a few weeks back.”

“That’s different. I… didn’t wanna talk to you, then.” They both wince. “Martha wants to talk to Rick, and if he wants to talk to her that’s up to him. Castle wouldn’t have stopped me if I’d wanted to call you. If he wants to talk to her that’s his problem.”

“Mm,” Jim hums again. “She might just want to fix things. Have a normal, adult-to-adult relationship.”

“Normal?”

“Normal for an actress with a taste for overblown emotions,” Jim amends, rather sardonically, “and no filters.”

“Too true,” Beckett mutters blackly. “I thought you quite liked her?”

“If she’s not upsetting you, and in small doses. One pleasant dinner talking about theatre every so often, sure. Too much histrionics spoils my digestion and cheerful disposition,” Jim smirks. Katie makes a face at him. He returns to the point. “Or, I suppose, she could still think you need a mom.”

There is a disgusted noise.

“Yeah, well,” Jim emits. “Even after everything you’ve said. Um – you said what you told her after she annoyed Rick, but I don’t think you ever really explained why Rick finally decided she should
move out?” Jim has the nagging feeling that he may be missing a piece of this puzzle. In fact, though he remembers very clearly Katie saying I’ve still got one parent and I wasn’t planning on finding a substitute, he doesn’t remember ever hearing about the precipitating event. Hm.

“Urgh,” Katie mutters, and then shrugs. “She came round to my apartment, tried to tell me she could replace Mom, then guilt-tripped me about moving into the loft. So I threw her out and gave her thirty minutes to get to Castle before I told him exactly what she’d done. He’d told her and told her not to interfere, and that was the very last straw. So he simply told her to choose an apartment and he’d buy it for her.”

Jim gasps gently, even though he knows that Castle had done that. The amounts involved are staggering, even to a senior attorney in commercial law. However, getting past that point, Martha had done what? The woman must have been crazy. He’s utterly astonished that Katie hadn’t shot her. He likely would have, and his temper isn’t quite as hair-trigger as Katie’s.

“Okay,” he muses. “I don’t really think she’s likely to try and be your mom again.” He ponders, during which time he takes dinner out and extracts a couple of sodas from the fridge for them. “I think you should hear her out,” he eventually states.

“You do?”

“Yes. If nothing else, if she’s still a pain then, you’ll know you did everything you could to have a sensible relationship with her. I don’t guess you’ll ever be best buddies” – Katie chokes – “but civility is always helpful.”

Katie looks very sceptical, but then starts to mull over his words. Jim is much relieved to see that. He munches placidly on his own dinner, and doesn’t disturb her.


“You could always pre-plan it with Carter,” he suggests.

“I guess. I’m not seeing him that often any more.”

“That’s good, but I’m sure he’d still help if you needed it.”

“I guess,” she says doubtfully.

There is a small, punctuating pause. “Now, Dad,” Katie says enthusiastically, “it’s time I beat you at Sorry again.” She smirks. “Highlight of my week.”
“Gramps is coming for dinner tonight,” Castle tells Alexis at a convenient moment mid-afternoon.

“Oh,” Alexis manages, not noticeably delighted. “Really? What’s she done this time?”

“Nothing. And that’s not the way to behave.”

“She upset you,” Alexis points out sulkily. “She’s not nice to you and you still invite her for dinner?”

“Gramps is still family,” Castle says firmly. “You’ll sit through dinner with her so we can all clear the air and you will be nice to her. We’re going to fix this once and for all. Gramps loves you and you’re not going to be the one who makes this all fall apart, are you?”

Alexis looks surprisingly mutinous. “But she deliberately upset you,” she says again. “Why’s it up to you to fix it? Gramps should be fixing it.”

“Gramps is trying to fix it. So since she’s trying, we’re going to try too. Understand?”

“Yes, Dad,” Alexis says without any pleasure at all.

“Now, what do you want for dinner?”

When his mother knocks, Castle opens the door with some trepidation. Alexis is still not entirely happy with the whole idea, and surprisingly unreceptive to any notions that she might play a part in fixing matters. Castle wishes that his daughter was just a tiny tad less attached to him, and a tiny tad more appreciative of how much her grandmother loves her. She’s being rather too teenage for his peace of mind: all grand causes and sacrifice. Castle doesn’t intend to see his mother made a burnt offering at Alexis’s altar.

“Darling,” his mother greets him. More unusual still, she embraces him: not with her normal theatrical gusto and display, but with a touch of reserve, as if she’s ready to pull away if her gesture isn’t reciprocated or desired. He hugs her back, rather awkwardly, and Alexis comes downstairs.

“Hi, Gramps,” she says, and doesn’t come closer. “Do you want something to drink?”

Castle’s heart sinks. Alexis is treating her grandmother as she’d treat Jim. That’s not a good start.

“Yes, please, sweetie,” she says. Fortunately, Alexis doesn’t repeat her don’t call me sweetie nuclear launch countdown.

“I’ve got some nice white for us,” Castle says. “Let me open it. Alexis, d’you want to get yourself a soda?”

“Ohay,” Alexis agrees, picking up the slight note of warning in Castle’s tone.

“How’s the show going?” At least that’s a neutral topic, for now.

“We’re still playing to full houses. Bookings are excellent. I think it’s going to run for at least another month, and longer if the theatre will let us stay on.”

“That’s great,” Castle says sincerely. “Can you move it to another theatre? Surely Dottie has some
“If La Mama moves you on?”

“I hadn’t asked,” his mother admits. “I… well, darling, I never thought it would be so popular. It’s the latest hot ticket, though, so maybe…”

“Even if it shuts down, you’re the latest hot director, so you’ll easily have something new.”

“Oh, but…”

Wow. His mother unsure of her ability? Astonishing.

“No buts. I was talking to Dottie last night, and everyone’s amazed by what you managed. You know Dottie was planning to pull the show after the first week because she knew Carl’s version was going to crater spectacularly?” His mother shakes her head. “Well, she was. But apparently ticket sales are so good that they’ve actually just about made a profit already, so you’re a star.”

“Oh!” Martha says with considerable pleasure. “Really?” She preens a little. “Well, well.”

“Yeah. I think you’ll have plenty of offers.”

“Thank you, darling.” She stops. “I meant to thank you for the poster. It’s beautiful. I” –

“Dad had it framed specially,” Alexis interrupts combatively. “Before you were so unkind to him.”

“A Alexis!” Castle says reprovingly. “That’s uncalled for.” She colours, which clashes with her hair.

“But she was! And you just invite her for dinner without her even saying sorry when she wasn’t nice to you.”

Martha’s happiness has drained over that one short sentence.

“A Alexis, that’s not even true. Grams has apologised to me. You’re being really rude and unpleasant. Apologise now, and if you can’t be civil, then leave the table until you can be.”

Alexis looks shocked at Castle’s tone. “But Dad” –

“No. Grams is trying to fix things. Now apologise.” Castle spears Alexis with a disciplinarian stare.

“I’m…sorry,” she forces out, red-faced, and precipitately leaves the table, tearful.

“I’m sorry, Mother. That wasn’t what I wanted.”

“I guess I deserved it,” she says sadly. “I hurt you, and I’m sorry. I just want us to be a family again.”

“Me too,” Castle says softly. “I guess it’ll take a little more time than I hoped. But…”

“Yes, darling?” Martha jumps on it, desperately hopeful.

“What did you say to Beckett last night? I know you wanted to talk to her, but last night wasn’t the time.”

“I wanted to tell her… I just wanted her to know I was wrong. She needs to understand that I know that. She said that you’d forgiven me and that was all there was to it, but it’s not. If she doesn’t believe that I understand, she’ll never be comfortable with me.”
“Mm,” Castle hums, sympathetically.

“I understand that she doesn’t want another mother, but we have to be able to get on. I don’t want to lose you, and if Katherine can’t believe I’m sorry, I will.”

“She’d never stop me seeing you.”

“No?”


“Really, darling? Not Alexis?”

“No. I don’t think that’ll help anything right now. She needs time to calm down, and I think this might be better adults-only.”

Martha looks unhappy. “I just want this all better,” she says dispiritedly. “I thought…”

Castle doesn’t say I told you so, or any close cousin to it. It takes some effort. Instead he sums up something of a smile. ‘We can try to fix it, Mother. But I think it’ll take a bit of effort from everyone. Don’t push.” She winces. “I’ll ask Beckett if she’ll come out. Maybe Wednesday or Thursday?”

“Wednesday. Easier, because I’ll have seen the matinee performance and can skip the evening if I have to.”

His mother is serious enough about fixing things to miss a performance? That’s – well, that’s an enormous statement. She really does mean it. His smile becomes far warmer and more open.

“Okay. I’ll do my best to convince Beckett.”

“Thank you.”

By the end of dinner Alexis hasn’t re-appeared, but on sounds of clearing up and shuffling around she stutters down the stairs, still shamefaced.

“I’m sorry, Grams,” she forces out, again. “I” –

“I understand. You were just standing up for your father.”

Alexis’s blushes do not diminish.

“Good night, Grams,” she says, and manages a rather awkward hug. Castle provides a much more familial effort, and escorts his mother to the door.

“See you on Wednesday,” he says. “I’ll make a reservation somewhere.”

“Thank you, darling,” his mother says, with immense feeling.

On Monday, Beckett is sitting on the edge of her desk, swinging her feet crossly and biting her lip. She’s glaring at the murder board, which is not responding with anything useful. They have everything they need for a conviction, except for Bruno. Ryan and Espo slide up, and stare equally blackly at it.
“Okay, let’s go through what we’ve tried, again,” Beckett says, depressed. “We got camera footage, that proves Bruno was there. We got phone records, that prove Bruno and Diego were speaking to each other at a time that suggests Bruno’s the one who called Diego down to the crime scene. We’ve got fingerprints from the knife, which we can’t identify, but we’ve proved they don’t belong to anyone else from the restaurant. Same for DNA. And even Perlmutter has conceded that the knife is exactly right for the wounds. The shard that came off it matches.”

“I’ve called that number several times. Voicemail’s full, and no-one ever picks up. Don’t know what else to try.”

“It’s like he’s just fallen off the face of the earth,” Ryan says bleakly. “He might as well be dead too, for all the luck we’ve had finding him.”

“Have you tried running Missing Persons for John Does?” Beckett suddenly asks. “It’s not a great result – I’d rather see killers rotting in Rikers – but it’s gotta be worth a go.”

Esposito suddenly has a flash of inspiration. “You know what we didn’t do?” he says. “We didn’t send anyone canvassing the shelters an’ soup kitchens.”

Beckett’s eyes widen. “No,” she says. “We didn’t. We tried everything else, but not that. I guess it’s our last chance. Ryan, you get on to Missing Persons, just in case. Espo, you get the canvass set up.”

“What’re you going to do?”

“I’m going back to the restaurant. See if anything shakes loose.” She picks up her phone. “Castle? Yeah, look, meet me at Espanola. I wanna talk to them all again. See you there.”

She can’t help feeling there’s something she’s missing. Something they’re all missing.

She walks up to Espanola, hoping that the brisk movement will help her think. Unfortunately, it’s late June, and all that her walk brings her is unpleasant stickiness and heat. The restaurant provides her with coffee and a large glass of water, and she curls into a corner where she can’t easily be seen. It has occurred to her perennially suspicious mind that if Bruno was really cute he’d have kept in touch with the three guys who’d tried to sneak off, to keep an eye on the investigation, but she’s pretty sure that if they were working illegally they wouldn’t want to give up a job if they didn’t have to. She smiles nastily. A little focused intimidation and some (Montgomery-approved) threats and promises, and there just might be some information.

A few moments later Castle sidles in, trying to be sneaky and failing miserably. He spots her, and bounces over, clearly forgetting to be sneaky.

“Beckett,” he says happily. “Why are we back here?”

“Checking up. There must be something more. Something we’ve missed.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know,” she says with frustration. “Something.”


“Hey, John,” Castle says. “I’ll sign it now, if you like. We were just passing by, and I wanted coffee and pasteis de nata.” Beckett stares at Castle. “C’mon, Beckett. You have to try a pastel de nata. They’re gorgeous.”
“Sure,” John says, rather weakly. Beckett thinks that this is not an uncommon reaction to Castle at full-on enthusiasm.

“Okay, I’ll try one.”

“And coffee, please. And more coffee for her. She gets very cranky if she isn’t caffeinated regularly, you know,” Castle says confidentially to John. Beckett growls fearsomely. “You do,” he points out in a hurt tone.

John bustles off to find coffee and pastel de nata, and quite possibly to avoid the backwash from the ominous scowl on Beckett’s face.

“What are you doing?” Beckett hisses.

“Getting us coffee and cakes,” Castle says suavely, “which gives you a better excuse to sit here until the people you’re really interested in turn up, or Espo or Ryan call with some news.”

Beckett is blindsided by the lucid explanation. “Oh,” she says. “Okay. Um… good plan.”

“I’m just full of good ideas.”

“Or full of something,” Beckett mutters. Castle manufactures a hurt puppy-dog look, which has no effect.

“Who do you want to see?” he asks.

“The three who tried to skip out. I’m going to ask John to send each of them out to have a little chat.” Castle soundlessly asks the question. “There’s a tiny chance they know where Bruno is. It’s a long shot…”

“But you’ve got to follow it up.”

“Yeah.”

Shortly, John arrives with more coffee and some little custard tarts. He sets them down, and before he can turn back to the kitchen, Beckett stops him.

“John, I want to have another chat with Tony, Piotr and Pedro. Can you send each of them out here? I don’t want any of them taking a walk before I see them, so make sure they know that if they try, they’ll be spending the rest of the day in the cells.” She smiles brightly. It’s not friendly at all. John cringes very slightly.

“Okay.” He scuttles off.

Beckett regards the small pastries somewhat suspiciously, not notably allayed when Castle disposes of one in two fast bites.

“Mmmm,” he hums happily, “delicious. Try it, Beckett. You’ll love them.”

Beckett tentatively takes a nibble. A small nibble. Her eyes widen slightly. “They are good.” The rest of the original tart, and a second, disappear as if by magic. She’s reaching for a third as Piotr drags himself over.

“John said you want to see me,” he says in a Slavic accent.

“Yes,” Beckett says, “I wanted to ask if you’d seen anything of Bruno lately? He’s the last one of
you to be interviewed, and if I can’t find him to talk to I’m going to have to bring you all in.”


“I have more evidence now.” She sips her coffee, totally cool. “So I can bring you back in. All of you. Or you can tell me where Bruno is, so I can talk to him.”

“I not know,” he bleats. “I not friends with Bruno.”

“Who was friends with Bruno?”

“Tony. Not me.”

“Huh. If you weren’t friends with Bruno, you’ll be happy to show me your phone to prove you haven’t talked to him.”

“Да, yes, look.” He opens his call log, which goes back well past the time of the murder. Beckett compares it to Bruno’s number, and doesn’t find anything matching.

“I want your consent to the phone company releasing the records,” she says. Wiping calls from the log is not exactly difficult.

“Yes, Да, how I do that?”

“Sign this,” Beckett says, proffering a form and a pen. Piotr scribbles frantically, and prints his name underneath. “Thank you. Now, send out Pedro. And don’t talk to him about what we’ve discussed.” She smiles sharply, without amiability, and sips her coffee.

Piotr practically runs for the kitchen. Pedro appears with terrified alacrity, and she repeats the process, with the same results. Bruno wasn’t Pedro’s friend. Pedro hadn’t called Bruno. Pedro is only too happy to sign his consent for the phone records if it means it takes Beckett’s attention away from him and on to someone else.

Finally, Tony appears. Tony does not look as if he wants to be here. Tony does not, in fact, look as if he wants to be within ten miles of here. Tony is, bluntly, terrified. All of this makes Beckett very, very happy. Not, however, because she enjoys intimidating witnesses (though she does, when she thinks they’re lying to her, as now), but because it means that Tony is hiding something. And if Tony is hiding something, then she will extract it.


“I don’t know where he is,” Tony falters.

“Really? Well, I guess you’re coming with me, then.” She drains her coffee, and reaches for the cuffs. Tony is pallid.


“Concealing information, Tony. Obstruction of justice.” She stands, and the cuffs glint in the sunlight. Tony can’t take his eyes off them. “Stand up,” she commands.

“I din’t do nothing. I don’t know nothing. You can’t do this!”

“You got that wrong, Tony. Turn around.”

“No! Look, I never” –
“Never what, Tony?” She sits back down.

“He’s my pal,” Tony says, miserably. “He shouldn’t have done it.” He droops. “Chef thought Bruno was cheating.”

“With you,” Castle says. It’s not a question.

“Yeah. ‘Cept he wasn’t. But Chef lost his temper an’ broke up with him.”

“So? Break-ups happen every day. Why’d Bruno kill him?”

“Chef reported him to immigration. Told ‘em Bruno was an illegal.”

“Was he?”

Tony doesn’t answer.

“So he was.” Tony nods, unhappily. “So where is he?” Tony says nothing, but looks very shifty. “Where is he?” Castle’s spine straightens at her tone. Tony crumbles.

“Soup kitchen on Bowery.”

“Right under our noses,” Beckett says disgustedly – and at that moment her phone rings. “Espo? What’ve you got?”

“I got Bruno,” issues from the phone. “Soup kitchen on Bowery.”

“Good work. I got a witness. Remember Tony from the restaurant?”

“Yeah. You coming back?”

“Yep. See you in ten.” She swipes off in a very satisfied manner, and stands. “Get up, Tony. You’re coming with us.”

Castle, not quite as absorbed in the case as Beckett, remembers to pay for the coffee and tarts, before, instead of Bruno being arrested, they are.

Back in the bullpen, Bruno is in Interrogation, and Espo and Ryan are enthusiastically interrogating. Beckett disposes of Tony into another room, for now, in case he’s needed, and observes, Castle standing close behind her and, since no-one’s around, twining his fingers into hers. Bruno spills his guts with the sordid tale: an affair with Chef, Chef thought he was cheating, and wouldn’t believe he wasn’t. Broke up, reported him, Bruno lost his temper and hacked him apart. He’d been a butcher, back in the day.

“So much blood,” Castle quotes. “And all for nothing. Misunderstandings and mistrust.” He looks into the interrogation room where Bruno’s being cuffed and then taken away.

“Better deal with Tony,” Beckett says.

“Yeah. Um… when that’s done, let’s go get some lunch. I’m hungry.”

“Sure, though you ate so many of those little tarts I’m surprised. You’ll get fat,” she says mischievously.

“I will not!” Castle takes offence. Then he grins. “I’m sure you can keep me properly exercised,” he adds, with a leer. She punches his shoulder, *almost* gently.
Tony disposed of, charged with obstruction of justice and in a cell next to Bruno, paperwork begun under Montgomery’s watchful, Captainly eye; Beckett and Castle still manage to slip away at lunchtime.

“What did you want to talk about?” Beckett asks, addressing her lunch as much as Castle.

“What? How did you know?”

She gives him a pitying look.

“Um… It’s about my mother.

“Yeah.”

“She wants to talk.” It’s not a question.

“Yeah.” Castle is as inflectionless as Beckett. “She wants to make it better. I think she finally realises that she was completely wrong.”

“Mm.” Castle observes with some surprise that Beckett is chewing over a thought. More surprisingly, she hasn’t simply said no.

“I spoke to my dad last night. He thought I should listen to her.”

“Uh? Um… what do you think?” He’s flabbergasted. He’d more than half expected an outright no, and certainly he’d never expected Beckett to have been considering for herself whether to talk to his mother. Not after everything that had happened. Beckett is not notable for giving up her grudges.

“I don’t know what I think,” Beckett answers crossly, and bites through an innocent fry with a snap. “I think I’m going to talk over it with Burke, tomorrow.” Another fry is decapitated. “When were you thinking about?”

“Um… Wednesday. Mother said she could miss the evening performance” – Beckett gapes at him – “and I thought the three of us could go get dinner somewhere quiet and discreet.”

“No Alexis?”

“No. She’s still really upset with Mother. She was really rude to her over dinner last night.”

“Oh.” Beckett appears to be mulling over that thought. “Mm. Okay. Why don’t you make a reservation and then I’ll decide after I’ve seen Burke.”

“You’ll think about it?” Castle gulps, rather unflatteringly obviously surprised. “I thought you’d outright refuse.”

Beckett lifts an eyebrow. “Don’t you think I can deal with your mother?”

“I don’t think my mother’s had any luck dealing with you.”

She puts a hand round his where it’s cradling his coffee cup. “I’m pretty confident it’s not me who’ll come off worst.” That is not at all reassuring for Castle. He doesn’t want to be picking up any more pieces, of anyone. “If I come, I won’t start a fight.” She smiles gently. “I’ll even try not to finish one.”

Castle manages a rueful grin in return. “Okay.” He drops his hand from his cup, turns it up on the table and recaptures hers, folding fingers over her slim span. “I’ll make sure we get a table in a quiet place.” He holds her gaze. “Thanks.” She colours fractionally, but her fingers fold round his in turn.

By late afternoon Tuesday, all the paperwork is completed, and Beckett departs for Dr Burke’s
office without any other matter nagging at her mind.

“Good evening, Detective Beckett,” he says pleasantly.

“Hey.”

“Is there anything in particular you would like to discuss? We have only needed to discuss relatively minor matters in the last two weeks, and I had thought that we were approaching the point where any appointments could be more ad hoc.”

“We are,” Detective Beckett says very quickly, her gaze dancing around the room, stopping occasionally for a second. Really, Dr Burke would have considered that Detective Beckett was only too pleased to complete treatment. “I want to talk to you about Martha.”

“Mrs Rodgers? What has occurred this time?”

“I’m not sure. We all went to the housewarming, and she kept trying to talk to me. It wasn’t the time or place, and I wasn’t going to be made to look the bad guy when she got upset. So I kept away from her.”

“Undoubtedly a wise course of action.”

“So I talked to Dad about what to do” – ah, excellent, thinks Dr Burke. Detective Beckett has truly forgiven her father, and they have re-established a good relationship. How very gratifying – “and he said he thought I should listen to her. But he agreed the party hadn’t been the place.”

“Mm,” Dr Burke hums non-committally, and steeps his fingers. Detective Beckett continues to outline the three directions which she sees that any discussion with Mrs Rodgers might take.

“I see,” Dr Burke says. “What do you think would be best to do, and what do you want to do?”

“Best would be to have some kind of a civil relationship, which means hearing her out. Or letting her have enough rope to hang herself,” Detective Beckett adds bleakly. It appears that she is unconvinced of Mrs Rodgers’ bona fides. “I want not to do this. I don’t want to see her and I don’t want to listen to her.”

Dr Burke is about to speak when Detective Beckett begins again.

“But. If I don’t hear her out, then it’ll poison everything. Just like it would have done if Castle hadn’t let her talk to him. So I have to hear her out, or we’ll be screwed from the get-go,” Detective Beckett says, more vulgarly than Dr Burke remembers. However, she is essentially correct.

“I agree with that analysis.”

Detective Beckett does not appear to appreciate the reassurance. Presumably she had had some small hope that Dr Burke would advise her not to listen to Mrs Rodgers.

“Ugh,” Detective Beckett says gloomily. “I don’t like this at all.”

“It would be extremely unusual if you did,” Dr Burke says dryly. Detective Beckett smiles swiftly. “However, you are taking a sensible approach.” He sits back in his chair. “Would you like to consider how best to respond to each possible line of conversation which Mrs Rodgers might introduce?”

“I guess so.”
“Then let us begin. What is the least desirable discussion?”

“She keeps trying to be a mother.” Detective Beckett has no hesitation about that statement.

“Indeed. Do you think that it is likely that Mrs Rodgers will pursue that tack?”

Detective Beckett ponders for a moment or two, her brow furrowed. “Not if she has any sense,” she says bluntly. “Trying that has got her thrown out of Castle’s loft.”

Dr Burke reflects that it has also exposed Mrs Rodgers to Detective Beckett’s wrath, which may well also be extremely unpleasant.

“How, then would you respond in the unlikely event that this route is taken?”

“Close it down and leave.”

“Mm. Yes. That would indeed be the best course of action.” Dr Burke assumes a soothing expression. “Now, what would be the second least desirable discussion?”

“Guilt tripping me because Castle’s angry with her, and she thinks it’s my fault he won’t talk to her.”

“Yes. That is quite possible, though I do not surmise it to be the most likely conversational topic. What will you respond in that situation?”

“Castle’s a big boy. It’s up to him how and when he talks to his mother.” Detective Beckett shrugs. “I’d never stop him. He would never stop me talking to Dad.”

“Mm. Also an acceptable response. One should not interfere between parent and child without excellent reasons.”

Detective Beckett raises an exceedingly sceptical eyebrow.

“I am a psychiatrist, Detective. It is my job to interfere.”

Detective Beckett laughs wryly. “Guess so,” she admits. Dr Burke smiles sardonically back at her.

“And finally, the most desirable” – Dr Burke observes Detective Beckett’s expression – “or least undesirable, option.”

“She acts like a normal adult, explains what she wants to explain, and everyone’s civil. Everyone feels better and there’s no baggage hanging around to mess us up.”

It is perfectly plain that the us in that statement refers only to Detective Beckett and Mr Castle.

“Your strategy?”

“Listen. Like she’s a witness. Maybe ask a question. Nothing much else. She explains, I listen, all done.”

“Mm,” Dr Burke says thoughtfully. “Tell me, what do you mean by all done?”

“She’ll have said her piece. I can decide what I think about it. We can move on from there.” Detective Beckett appears to notice Dr Burke’s inquiring visage. “In whatever direction we think we need to.”

“Indeed. I infer that you intend to stay calm whatever occurs?”
“Yes. Unless she starts on Castle again.”

“I see.” Dr Burke approves. Mr Castle requires a defender at times, as well. Detective Beckett has proved her worth in that regard.

“That all seems most reasonable, Detective. For when is the meeting planned?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Very well. Should you require to discuss any matter, I will leave your previous session time on Friday available.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

“Otherwise, I think that, should no issues arise from your discussion with Mrs Rodgers, we may reduce your schedule to one formal session per month, though you may make ad hoc appointments if you require them.”

Detective Beckett is as pleased by that as she was when the sessions were first reduced.

“Great!” she says happily, and pauses. “Er… thank you. We’d never have got here without you.”

“You are most welcome, Detective.”

Detective Beckett departs, and Dr Burke congratulates himself on a job well done. On returning to his desk, however, he notices, to his decided dissatisfaction, that he had left Mr Castle’s book partially visible within his slightly opened briefcase. However, Detective Beckett cannot have noticed it. She would never have resisted the temptation to comment.

Castle has booked a very quiet, private table for seven p.m. on Wednesday at a very discreet, quiet Italian restaurant, together with a trusted twenty-something to have a sleepover with Alexis. That done, he ensures that Alexis has dinner, defers any discussion of how she feels about her Grams until after he has heard his mother’s story tomorrow, and bounces off to Beckett’s apartment to wait until she returns from therapy. For almost the first time, he lets himself in, and occupies his time with firstly a book and secondly ordering dinner.

Beckett arrives before dinner does.

“Hey,” she says, surprised. “You came in?”

“Yeah. You’ve been waltzing in and out of my apartment so I thought I’d try it too. See how it felt.”

“And?” Beckett husks, shedding her light jacket and shoes and slinking towards him. “How did it feel?”

“Not as good as it would if you had been here,” Castle rasps, catching her into his arms and kissing her deeply.

A few moments later, they’re interrupted by the arrival of dinner. It’s fair to say that the interruption is in the nick of time. It’s also fair to say that it isn’t appreciated. On the other hand, during the pause in proceedings which the arrival and consumption of dinner had produced, Beckett has pinned down the nagging feeling that she had noticed an anomaly in Dr Burke’s soothingly professional office.
“You’ll never guess what Dr Burke had,” she enthuses. “Never.”

“Uh?”

“Dr Burke. I knew there was something odd but it took me till now to pin it down.”

“What was it?” Castle asks with interest. Beckett doesn’t often play guessing games.

“No, you have to guess. You’ll never get it, though.”

She’d said that before, and he’d totally failed to guess that Dr Burke was their witness. He thinks, though Beckett snuggled into him and stealing bits of his remaining dinner with the fastest set of chopsticks in Manhattan doesn’t help him.

“He had a collection of stuffed toys out.”

“No. Besides which, if he did it would only mean that he’d been seeing a child or doing play therapy.”

Castle huffs, and thinks some more. “Can’t be sports gear. We know he plays tennis. A board game – I know, his own Sorry set!”

“Nope. Though that would be funny.”

“Um – hey, stop stealing all the cashew nuts! Mine!” He swats at her chopsticks, and misses. Beckett munches the cashew nut triumphantly. “I don’t know. Tell me.”

“You’ve got one more guess.”

Castle cradles his remaining cashew nut chicken protectively while he ponders. What could be so surprising that Beckett would make him guess? His brow creases. What is the most unlikely thing that Beckett could see in Burke’s office… No. Surely not? Oh well. It’s worth a try.

“One of my books?”

Her face falls. “You guessed.” She pouts. It’s adorable, not least because he out-guessed her. “How did you know?” she huffs.

“Really? One of my books? Which one? How did you know anyway?” His delighted astonishment floods out of him. “My book? That’s amazing!” Suddenly he grins evilly. “Beckett,” he says slowly, “I think that Dr Burke might deserve a present, when all this is over.”

Beckett grins back equally wickedly. “I think he might. A signed set of your books – all your books, right back to that rubbish you wrote in the beginning. What was it?”

“In a Hail of Bullets,” Castle mutters grumpily. “It wasn’t rubbish. Merely… um… gauche.”

“Hm, that’s one way to describe it,” Beckett snickers.

“Stop it. You’re mean to me.”

“Are you five? Anyway, a present for Dr Burke?”

“Oh, yes. Presented in person, I think.”

They exchange very satisfied smirks. At least, they do until Castle realises that Beckett is stealing
the cashew nuts again, when his satisfied smirk drains away.

“They were mine!”

“You weren’t eating them.”

Castle puts down his now entirely cashew-nut-free dinner, safely out the way, wraps his arm round Beckett very firmly, leans down – and clamps her in to remove her chopsticks and encircle her wrists until he’s trapped her giggling self, removed her plate, and leaned down to whisper ominously in her ear.

“Theft is a felony, Beckett.”

“Misdemeanour. Three cashew nuts” –

“Three? You ate more than that.”

“Three,” she says firmly, though her eyes are sparkling – “don’t amount to a felony.”

“It was theft. You stole them.” His lips are a breath away from her ear. “You deprived me of them.” A whisper closer, and warmth on her neck. It might have been a flick of tongue, a brush of mouth. “You can’t give them back.” The words swirl between his lips, against her skin. “What’ll you give me instead?”

She turns into his avid grip, his greedy kiss, his hard, hot hands, and everything else is forgotten as he sweeps her up into him and takes her to the bedroom.

One button at a time, followed by small, teasing kisses; one more button, then a zip, still followed by mobile, sensitive, wicked lips. A soft slither of fabric to the floor, a step to freedom from the spreading material; a fall of cotton and a click of buttons against wood, repeated; the whisper of breaths and slide of hands through hair; the heat of skin on skin; the rustle of smooth linens, rumpling under the pressure of slick bodies and rhythmic movements; and then only the soft sounds of breathing, slowing and calming; of satiety, and of farewell, and finally of solitary, but never, now, lonely, sleep.

On Wednesday evening, Beckett and Castle vacate the bullpen swathed in tangible tension which prevents anyone asking any questions, despite the fact that it’s only just after six. Neither of them can sit still any longer. Without actually mentioning it, they meander to Tompkins Square Park, which is pleasant enough in the June evening: though the New York summer is beginning to swelter longer into the day, there’s still a slight cooling after six. On any other day, they might have sauntered, promenaded: today they walk, an indefinable heaviness in their steps. The threat of unhappiness looms ahead.

Their paces lag more obviously as their unwatched watches approach six-thirty; as they turn together for the exit; as they step out onto the street and flag down a cab. Again without speaking, they had agreed that neither of them would drive. Not tonight. Too many imponderables.

The traffic is as slow and tangled as their unspoken thoughts. They arrive barely before seven, to find Martha already there. In front of her is only a tall glass of sparkling water: no wine, no cocktail. They seat themselves: Martha across the table from them: eyes dull, face haggard under her make-up. Castle thinks very privately that the old expression hag-ridden is entirely accurate. She looks, once more, as if she hasn’t rested since Sunday, or if she has, it’s been plagued by nightmares.
“I guess I need to explain,” she says, none of her previous ebullience or confidence present. Nobody speaks, though Beckett produces a sharp nod. Castle simply watches. His hands are knotted under the table, but one of Beckett’s is over them.

“I…I need to go back to the beginning.” She grimaces. “Long before you arrived, Richard.” She hesitates. “Back to my parents.” Another, more uncomfortable, hesitation. “They were very normal. Straitlaced.” Her mouth pinches. “Moral.” More tightly pinched. “I lied to you. They never had a mind-reading act. Never went near a stage in all their lives. But it was a better past. Far better than the reality.”

Beckett can sense taut tendons in Castle’s twisted fingers. Suddenly, he’s gone on alert. Beckett thinks that he’s searching down the path of his mother’s story, scouting in advance of her words. She can see at least part of the shape of the tale, already.

“They thought I’d be just like them. Grow up, marry the boy next door, settle down to their boring, humdrum life. Wither away in nondescript tedium.” She grimaces, again. Old, bitter argument is written in the lines of her face. “It was another time, another place. Mid-America.” She stops that line of thought. “Anyway. I had dreams – big dreams – and I had talent, and I wasn’t going to be stopped by mere convention. I was worth more than their narrow little lives.”

She stops, and sips her water.

“They weren’t supportive.”

For the first time ever in their acquaintance, Beckett thinks that Martha is considerably understating the case. She thinks that war had broken out in the Rodgers household. If it even was Rodgers. She realises that she has no idea what Martha’s original name might have been, and wonders if Castle does.

“But they didn’t stop me.”

Okay, that wasn’t quite what Beckett expected.

“In fact, they told me if I was going to act I wasn’t going to be welcome. I could leave right there and then. They made it pretty clear, though, that they thought I would fail, and would come crawling back. They said they’d take me back if that happened. In those days… that wasn’t a small offer. There would have been strings, though. There were always strings, with my parents.” She sips again. Castle takes a gulp of his coffee. “Life was like that, then. The Sixties weren’t very swinging in middle America. Girls didn’t up and leave home to follow their dreams.”

“But you did, Mother,” Castle says, with soft admiration.

“Yes. I did. And for a while I was living my dream. I got parts – not big ones, but I knew I had to work for it, and I did. I crossed the continent, and I never had to rest for long. The world was my oyster, and I loved it. Being on stage was everything I needed and wanted. They don’t lie when they talk about the smell of the greasepaint under the lights.”

From the expression on Castle’s face, he’s never heard his mother talk about this, nor is he used to this almost-normal, serious tone. He waves the server away, not wishing anything to interrupt this story.
I'm keeping my baby

“I was in a repertory company in LA when I met him. The crowds loved me. It was A Midsummer Night's Dream. How ironic that is, now. I was Titania. It was my first really big role, and I was determined to make my name. We were applauded to the rafters. They gave us a standing ovation: the first time I’d ever experienced it. I was just twenty, and I suppose you could say that I was drunk on adulation and applause. I didn’t need alcohol. We went out anyway, for a first-night cast party, somewhere in downtown LA. Just another bar. I couldn’t have found it again if you’d paid me, but we’d moved on, touring.”

Martha looks at her water as if she wishes it were wine.

“We hit it off. You know that, darling. It was a fabulous night – but when I woke up, he was gone. Six weeks later, I realised that he wasn’t entirely gone.” She pauses. “You young women don’t know how lucky you are,” she says bitterly. “Reliable contraception isn’t the only point. There have always been condoms.” Castle winces. That sounds perilously close to his existence being a complete accident. “You have no idea what public morality was like then. Sanctimonious was only the start of it. Actresses were regarded as only a few steps better than streetwalkers, and pregnancy outside marriage was anathema. No easy legal abortions then.”

Castle makes a strangled noise.

“I can’t say what I would have done if there had been. I was barely twenty,” she cries. “I had no idea. But I didn’t even think about going to some backstreet crone. I couldn’t have gone through with that.”

Martha’s eyes are damp, but this isn’t some ploy, some triumph of her actor’s trade; it’s not stagecraft. Her emotion is real, not overstated or staged. For almost the first time ever, Beckett finds in herself a glimmer of pity and of admiration for the choice Martha had made. It couldn’t have been easy.

“So I managed to hide it for a while. But then I couldn’t, and the parts dried up, and all the success I was beginning to enjoy slipped away.”

Beckett hears the next words before they’re spoken. From the tight, angry set of his shoulders, so does Castle.

“So I went home.” She blinks, and her face twists. “They didn’t want to know. If I’d been properly humble and grovelling and pleading… but I would never have pretended that I’d been a failure and I certainly wasn’t going to agree to giving my baby away.” She sips again. “That was the condition. I wouldn’t agree. So they threw me out. Again.” She stops. “I never heard from them again. I never wanted to.”

“Are they alive?”

“No.”

Beckett wonders if that is true, or a polite way of saying that Martha doesn’t know or doesn’t care. Castle is quite clearly thinking the same thing. Though – she does some quick mental arithmetic: Castle is forty, Martha sixty one or sixty two – her parents would have been well into their eighties if they were still alive. It’s not wholly likely.

“They died about fourteen years ago.”
Castle blinks. He appears to have realised something. “That’s… I see. That’s when you bought that property in LA. You inherited.”

“They didn’t give me any security then. They’d be turning in their graves to know they did after they died.”

Martha sounds unpleasantly happy about that. The word schadenfreude slithers, hissing, into Beckett’s mind.

“I see. But…”

“You would have liked grandparents.”

“I would have liked to know about any other family,” Castle raps. “But since my father clearly wasn’t an option, grandparents might have been nice.”

“You think, kiddo? Their exact words as I left were if you’re going to keep your bastard child don’t come crying to us. You should give it up.”

Castle gasps. Beckett’s hand tightens over his.

“They didn’t care. They could have contacted me at any time. They didn’t. I said I never wanted to hear from them. I didn’t say why.”

Beckett has a cold feeling in the pit of her stomach.

“After you were born” – her face softens, and becomes in some way much younger – “once I’d got over the shock, and when you were a few weeks old and so cute – I sent them a picture and a short letter. I thought that when they saw you they’d love you. Maybe not me… but their only grandchild.”

“You were an only child?”

“Yes. No siblings. Perhaps it’s just as well. They’d likely have been just as moralistic and judgemental as my parents.”

“Mother…”

“I got a typed note back. It said we have no grandchildren. Among other things. It wasn’t even signed, just typed. Mr and Mrs Rodgers. So I never tried again.”

Castle is now pale. His mother’s eyes are far away, until they snap back to him.

“That was the first time. You know about the creep in LA. Fortunately he disappeared.”

“He’s in jail,” Castle blurts out. Beckett is certain sure he hadn’t meant to say that.

Martha stares blankly at her son. “Jail? How do you know that?”

Castle doesn’t say anything at all, for a second, then, “I had him arrested. Fraud. The money was all gone, though.”


There is a long, dead, silence, until, with a sharp gesture, Martha summons a server and orders herself white wine.
“So,” she says, which she’s been using as a punctuation mark for the whole of the conversation, “everyone I thought I might have leaned on turned out to be a washout.”

Castle’s hand twitches under Beckett’s. Martha must have noticed some tic in his face.

“You were a child, darling. And then you were independent and so was I.”

It doesn’t seem to make Castle’s biting tension any less. “Independent? Or just out of sight, out of mind? You sent me to boarding school.” Old pain and new anger mix.

“Let me tell it in order, in my own way,” Martha bites out. “You said you wanted me to tell the whole truth, so now listen to it.”

Castle is silenced, though his lips pinch in very much the same way as Martha’s had. Beckett’s hand closes over his, stroking.

“I just about managed when you were tiny. Once you went to school, it got harder. We had to keep moving to where the work was, and it just wasn’t stable. It… up till sixth grade I could make sure everything was covered, but I knew I wouldn’t be able to help you after that. So I entered you for the scholarship exam and when you won it I sent you to boarding school so you had the best chance.” She looks at her hands, her knuckles prominent and nailbeds white.

“It freed you up to carry on acting,” Castle says bitterly.

“I could send you to boarding school, and work – or you could have gone to a new school every week, dropped out, and we’d both have been living out of the soup kitchen. Think about that, Richard. Would you have preferred that?”

“I wanted my family. You. I hated boarding school.”

“I wanted you to have a better chance! If you had faced the same choice with Alexis – what would you have done? You never had to make that choice with her because I made damn sure you had the chances you deserved and you took them. What would you have done when it was your turn if you’d been on the breadline like I was?”

There is an extremely unpleasant silence. Castle’s eyes are hard in his pale face, but it’s he whose gaze falls first.

“I’d have done anything to give Alexis the best start,” he admits. Beckett’s hand drops to his knee, and squeezes gently.

Martha lets that hang in the air, for a full minute.

“But if she was that unhappy I’d have let her come home,” Castle adds, pointedly.

“How would you know, if she didn’t tell you?” Martha ripostes, equally pointedly. “I still have all your letters.” Castle startles. “Not one of them mentions unhappiness. Not one. I read them over and over. Do you think I didn’t miss you? I missed you every hour, every day. Your letters talked about the boy running the magazine – Damien” – Castle startles again. His mother’s recall clearly strikes at the foundations of his thinking – “and that your stories were a success. You wrote about the adulation your friends gave you for your writing and how popular you were.” She stops, and gulps at her wine. “So tell me, if that was what Alexis told you, even though you missed her – if she seemed to be perfectly happy and you knew it was the best education she could get – what would you do?”
Castle is, again, silenced; another edged pause extends. Beckett waits, and watches, and says
nothing: the silence of the interrogation room with a not-quite hostile witness wrapped about her.

“Left her there,” he says heavily: clearly uncomfortable with the inescapable conclusion. “I would
have believed her, and left her there.” His eyes are piteous, his whole posture defeated. “I would
have done what you did.”

Strangely, to Beckett’s eyes, Martha doesn’t appear to gain any satisfaction from the admission.

“I missed you every day,” she repeats. “So when I got successful again, and the scholarship ran out
– I couldn’t afford the fees even with the success: a Tony doesn’t help that like an Oscar does – I
didn’t make you sit for another scholarship, I brought you back to Manhattan. As I recall it, by then
you didn’t want that either, even if now you’re saying that you wanted to be a family. How could I
know what you wanted then, when even now you don’t?”

Beckett notes and appreciates – it’s not her place to approve or disapprove – Martha’s iron control
over her tear ducts. It would be so easy for her to weep, and Castle would melt – and later realise or
believe that he’d been manipulated into forgiveness. He’d be wrong, but that wouldn’t make it any
better.

Another edged, defensive pause.

“I tried to do what I thought best. Maybe I was wrong. It doesn’t change how much I love you.”
She takes another quenching gulp of wine. No-one speaks, until she swallows, and starts again.

“Anyway.” She sounds, suddenly, very like her son. “That was my parents. Then there was that
bastard in L.A. You know about that.”

Beckett doesn’t. But it’s – he’s – not her problem.

“And then,” Martha says, and Beckett herself tenses to match Castle’s high-strung attention, “we’d
been a family for thirteen years and when Katherine started coming to the loft I wanted her to be
part of the family too.” Castle looks very directly at his mother, who is only looking at him, as if
Beckett weren’t there at all. That suits Beckett very well.

“I thought if she was family I’d never need to worry...” Martha appears to remember that Beckett is
actually present.

“I thought...” she says, turning to Beckett, “I thought” – and she stops, her face twisting. “It was
quite clear Richard was enamoured. But then you quarrelled, and except that he was grouchy it
didn’t affect anything. Then you seemed to have patched it up, and you came for dinner, and
everything was fine. Except I was nervous. It didn’t matter with his second wife” –

“Her name was Gina, Mother.”

“I saw so little of her I never used it – because she barely spoke to me.”

Castle mutters something under his breath which might have been you started it, she merely
reciprocated. Beckett regards Martha with an interrogative stare and a silence which invites her to
justify herself but certainly does not promise forgiveness without question.

“I liked your father – he is certainly charming – and you seemed perfectly happy at dinner. But
then you didn’t want to come back. It was obvious Richard was spending a lot of time with you,
but it didn’t have much to do with murder. That many murders would have made headlines.
Anyway, it looked like he was besotted with someone who didn’t want to be part of the family.”
Martha looks at Beckett, who looks straight back at her without any embarrassment. “I don’t need to justify my actions to you,” Beckett says coolly. “It’s you who was trying to force the pace, when you were told to let it be.”

For a moment, it seems as if Martha might argue, but then she drops her eyes. “I guess I deserved that,” she admits. “But…,” she gulps, “that was what happened in LA.”

Beckett makes a whole series of connections in no time at all, and waits to see what will be said next.

“He said she was his daughter in law. So he said. But his _daughter in law_” – that’s laced with arsenic – “who’d fallen on hard times, well, she visited a bit, but she didn’t want to engage. Didn’t want to be a family. So he brought her round, but mostly he visited her in her apartment. When she did visit, I felt pushed out. Nothing obvious, nothing I could put a finger on. It was just a little uncomfortable, like I was out of place. _She_ should have been the one out of place.” Martha looks down into the remains of her wine.

“He said she needed his support.” Under the table, Castle’s hand turns upward to fold round Beckett’s fingers, now chilled and unmoving. “I offered to help. I was told it was all okay, he had it covered, just to leave it to him.”

“I see,” Castle says slowly, unemotionally. Beckett is very sure that he does, but they can talk about that later.

“And then one day someone knocked on the door and said that the apartment had been repossessed. He’d put a mortgage on it, forged my signature and that, as they say, was that. My accounts were empty. He’d disappeared. A week later I got a Dear Jane letter. He’d gone off with the girl. No wonder she didn’t want to be family.”

“I see,” Beckett says, just as Castle had. “Oh, I do see. So you thought if you buddied up to me it wouldn’t happen again. Despite it being exactly the opposite situation, and Castle telling you in words of one syllable that if you backed off you’d be staying.”

She breathes in, out; repeats: slow and measured. Beneath the table, her nails are biting into Castle’s hand. “I don’t need a new family. I’m happy with the family I have. Dad and I have fixed things.” She breathes in, and out again: the same, slow, measured cadence of her speech. “Even if Castle and I become a family, that doesn’t make you my mother. No-one on earth will ever be my mother.”

“But it’s not me you need to talk to, because it’s not me you have the problem with. It’s Castle.” Beckett brings their still linked hands up on to the table. “You didn’t trust your own son. It really had nothing to do with me, and everything to do with you not trusting him.” Beckett’s gaze is clear, cold, and only just the right side of contemptuous. “You didn’t think he’d look after you, even though he’s done just that for thirteen years.” She stops, before she loses the last shreds of her control. “You thought that he’d be the same as all the other people you thought loved you.” She stops again. “So first, you didn’t give him any credit; and second, you’re assuming you brought him up so badly that he would behave like that.”

She pushes her chair back. “I understand why you did what you did. God knows, I understand how the past shapes the present. I don’t blame you for what you were trying to do with me, because I get it. You don’t need to make up with me. But you’ve got a lot of making up to do with your son.”

Castle inhales sharply. Martha is stone still; marble white, striated wrinkles across her face. Beckett’s shield and gun are suddenly very prominent.
“I’m not going to get in the way of that. But if you upset him like you did the last time there’s going to be nowhere that you can hide from me. I won’t tolerate you hurting him.” The tidal bore of menace surging across the table drowns speech.

Not a single server has approached their table since Martha had ordered her wine. Not a single server approaches during the long pause that follows Beckett’s words.

“So you’ll block me from my family,” Martha says bleakly.

“No. You can manage that all by yourself. How you and Castle behave is your problem, not mine. Whether you talk or not is up to both of you.” She pauses. “You ought to give your son and yourself more credit than you do. He’s a good man. He didn’t get that way on his own.”

She stands up. Castle abruptly looks bereft.

“I’m going to the restroom. While I’m gone, you need to decide if you want me to stay for the rest of this discussion. Castle’s vote wins,” she adds, unnecessarily, from their expressions.

When she leaves, her purse remaining on her chair by way of reassurance that she will return shortly, she leaves behind a fragile, dangerous silence and two people who can’t meet each other’s eyes.

In Beckett’s words: you don’t trust your son; you didn’t give him or yourself any credit; he’s a good man; he didn’t get that way on his own: Castle hears the tolling of the truth. His mother is hopelessly insecure about everything. He’d never realised that while he’d been deeply, crippling homesick (and hidden it) she’d missed him as much. But deep down, he’s the product of her care, and if he’s grown up a good man, then she’s had plenty to do with that. It doesn’t excuse this whole mess, but it helps.

And yet. The knowledge that she doesn’t trust him bites as deeply now as three weeks ago. He might understand it, but that doesn’t mean he has to excuse that, either. Watching Beckett walk away, he contrasts her: for all their hopelessly mismanaged, rocky, tortuous beginning, she’s made it clear for months that she trusts him absolutely; that he’s her rock – and she is his, however difficult it is for him to ask; that she stands with him, at every turn.

There, facing his mother, who might truly always have loved him, and might love him still (and he does think that she does, though proof is yet lacking), but who’s still trapped in the prison of her past experience – there, watching Beckett’s confident, swinging, returning stride and the way her gaze is only on him – there, he suddenly understands how far she’s come to overpower the demons from her past and trust him.

She could, so very easily, still be in the same place as his mother.

She so very nearly was.

He looks up towards Beckett, who’s looking only at him, and smiles at her with his whole heart behind it. Her answering, blazing smile brands his soul.
“What do you want?” Beckett asks, still standing, but with a hand possessively, protectively on Castle’s shoulder. It takes him a minute to wrench his Beckett-besotted brain back to the decision he has to make. Oh. Yes. Does he want her to stay or not?

He raises his eyes from the table to his mother. She’s clearly desperately uncomfortable, but she’s not saying a word. Beckett’s hand is calm and sure against him: no indication of any preference she might have.

In other words, it’s up to him. Just as, in the end, he’d always trusted her to make the key decisions without trying to sway her judgment, so is she affording him the same trust. Just like at Dr Burke’s, if he asks her to go, she will, without hurt or fuss.

He doesn’t know what to do. He wants Beckett there to ground him, but he doesn’t think he’ll get the conversation that he needs to have with his mother if she stays. His mother’s discomfort is too strong, too palpable. In addition, she’s quite clearly now terrified of what Beckett might do if he, Castle, is in any way upset by anything his mother says to him, which will not assist in any conversation at all.

He reaches up and puts his own hand over hers on his shoulder; half turns to gaze up at her.

“I think I need to do this alone,” he says softly. Beckett’s hand flips up under his, and curves gently round his fingers. “C’rn I come over after?”

“Sure.” She drops a kiss on top of his head. Castle is perfectly certain she is making a point. He’s just not sure to whom she’s making it: to him, to his mother, or to the world at large. “See you later.” There is a perceptible drop in temperature. “Good night, Martha.”

As she walks away, silence falls. His mother is looking at Beckett’s departing back: smooth stride showing not a hint of hurt or worry. When he arrives at Beckett’s apartment, he is suddenly sure, she’ll be soft Kat who comforts him, and purring Kat who loves him, and quite possibly tiger-Kat who will make love with him until he’s happy and content and sure that he’s loved.

“It’s real.”

“Uh?” Castle says: his mother’s total non-sequitur leaving him rather confused.

“The way she looks at you. None of the others looked at you like that.”

“Uh?”

“You were infatuated with that red-headed trollop. God knows what you saw in Gina, or what she saw in you. You had nothing in common.”

“That red-headed trollop gave me Alexis. Besides which, when I met her she reminded me of you.” His mother chokes and splutters. “Before I knew she was cheating. She was a struggling actor and then she was pregnant. I wasn’t going to be like that one-night stand who left you alone. And…” he stops. This is all getting too raw, too fast – but they can’t stop now.

“And?”

“And I was pretty much programmed to love her because she seemed just like you!” he fires back.
“Don’t they say men marry their mothers?”

“She was nothing like me,” Martha hisses.

“I didn’t know that till I caught her cheating – and nor did you.” He stops. A dreadful thought has occurred to him, approximately sixteen years too late. “Did you?”

“No,” Martha states flatly. “I would have told you. However much you would have hated it and me, I would have told you.”

“Right up till I came home from Black Pawn early and caught her I never suspected a thing.”

His mother pats his hand. “Darling, nor did I. I didn’t hear any gossip.”

“And Gina – well, on paper it made sense. She tried. She tried to be a good mom to Alexis and she tried to be a good wife to me. It’s just we had completely different expectations of what that meant. She thought it meant applying her ambitions to making me write and get richer. I… didn’t.”

“She sure wasn’t anything like me, kiddo,” Martha says acerbically.

“No? You just told me you sent me to boarding school to make sure I got the best chance. You implied – any chance. How’s that different?”

Martha is silenced.

“There isn’t any difference, except with Gina I wouldn’t play along. Didn’t pretend to like it.”

“If you had told me you hated it then maybe it would have been different!” Martha cries. “Why are you blaming me for something I didn’t know?”

“You told me over and over how proud of me you were, how happy I’d be able to go, what a chance it was for me, how everything you’d done had been worth it – I couldn’t have disappointed you. I felt guilty that I would let you down. All your sacrifices would’ve been wasted.” His risen voice drops down again. “After all, I always knew how much you’d given up.”

“How?”

“It was all around me. Did you think I couldn’t hear the gossip? ‘Oh, Martha Rodgers? Oh yes. She’d have been a star, if she didn’t have the child. Ruined her.’”

“What?”

“You didn’t know?” Castle says bitterly. “How could you not know?”

“Did you ever, ever hear me say that? Me. Not others.”

Castle is stopped in his vitriolic tracks by the need to think back. Cold silence extends around him. “Not when I was a child,” he grates, eventually. “But later. After you moved in. Smart, sly little comments about how much easier it was for me.”

“I was jealous. Is that what you want to hear? You could give Alexis everything I couldn’t give you and more. You had it all. Successful, rich – and able to give your child everything and anything you thought she might need. Of course I was jealous. Who wouldn’t be,” she adds, bitterly. “Who wouldn’t be jealous that they couldn’t do as well for their child?”

“Jealous of your own son? How attractive, Mother.”
“I’m human. I’m not a saint. Of course I’m jealous. I couldn’t do any of that for you and now look at us. You’re blaming me for not being perfect, and for things I never knew.”

Castle abruptly feels like he’s been punched in the gut. Blaming his parent for things she didn’t even know… sounds bitterly, acidly familiar – from Beckett, blaming Jim for something he didn’t even know. Oh God. Bile rises in his throat. He doesn’t want that for himself. He swallows, spots a server, and orders a bottle of the same wine of which his mother had taken a glass: says nothing until it arrives and downs half the glass in one. Then he refills both his glass and, after a beat, his mother’s. He swallows most of his refilled glass, too.

This hadn’t been what he’d expected, on Sunday. He’d thought he was more… adjusted. Accustomed. He’d thought that he was most of the way to forgiveness. He’d even told Alexis off for being rude. He doesn’t have much moral standing for that right now. Suddenly, he wants Beckett. Just her calm support next to him would help.

“I’ll be back in a moment,” he says, and exits for the restroom. His phone is, as ever, in his pants pocket.

Physically eased, he pulls out his phone, and taps Beckett’s photo.

“Castle? I thought you were coming here?”

“Could you come back? Please, Kate?”

“Sure. There shortly.”

Castle stays in the restroom a few more moments, wasting time. He goes back out to find his mother has apparently not moved a muscle. The level of her wine is unchanged. It remains untouched for the few, uncomfortable moments it takes for Beckett to return.

“Hey.”

Castle looks up with enormous relief. “You’re here.”

“Yep.”

Beckett sits down next to Castle and, under the table, puts her hand firmly on his knee.

“Mother,” Castle says, discomfort soaking his voice, “would you give us five minutes, please?” His eyes plead with her.

“Yes,” she says, and aims in her turn for the restroom. She takes her purse. Castle thinks that she might spend some time repairing her make up. It’s less than perfect around the eyes.

“What’s up?” Beckett asks.

“It’s all going horribly wrong.” Castle says miserably. “but I’ve realised why. I’m doing just what you did, but you fixed it and I haven’t. I don’t know how to fix it but I don’t want to have years of trouble or months of Dr Burke.”

“Yeah,” she says definitively. “Months of Dr Burke would be pretty awful.”

“Mother said I was blaming her for things she never knew about, and suddenly it was just like you and your dad. He never knew what he’d done till you yelled at him, and seems like Mother never knew either.”
He slumps into his seat.

“She didn’t know.”

“So explain,” Beckett says flatly. “I didn’t fix anything with my dad by not telling him, did I? Tell her the truth. Tell her – again – that she’s hurt you by not trusting you. Tell her that her issues nearly screwed us up completely. You’ve got a chance to tell the truth. I fucked mine up, five years ago. You get to do it better. Unless you want to be me?”

“You still don’t pull your punches, do you?”

“No. Not when it’s this important.”

“Okay,” Castle says, heavily. “But…”

“Mm?”

“But would you tell Mother – just a summary, not the detail – why it matters so much that she should have butted out of your life? I don’t think she’ll ever get it if you don’t. She won’t listen to me.” His head drops. “She hasn’t listened to me yet.”

Beckett swallows. “Really?”

“Yeah. I know it’s a big ask…”

“Okay.”

Castle shuts his open mouth, and simply hugs her. “I love you,” he whispers. “You… you stand for me.”

“You’re there for me too. Both of us.” She snaps out of sappiness. “Let’s just do this, and go home.”

At that apposite moment, Martha returns, more perfectly made up but just as tense and unhappy.

“Hey,” Beckett says, civilly.

“Hello.”

Beckett swallows.

“Castle wants me to tell you why it mattered so much that you didn’t meddle,” she says bluntly, and watches Martha’s wince. “Dad tried to tell you, but it didn’t sink in. Maybe if I tell you it will.” She swallows again.

“My mother was murdered just after Christmas. Within a month Dad had drowned himself in the bottom of a whiskey bottle. He stayed there for five years.” The hard tone strikes both Castle’s ears and, it would appear, his mother’s. “Then he went to rehab. It took him nine months and then he called me. He’s been dry ever since. I thought we – he and I – were a family. I spent my time protecting him.” She swallows again, convulsively, and it’s Castle’s turn to put his hand quietly over her knee.

“Then Castle arrived at the precinct.” A spiked, tearing pause. “Showing off a family that worked, and trying to convince me to come and watch it. It couldn’t have been worse. All the things I used to have with my father. Before he got drunk, and ruined them all.” She meets Martha’s eyes, and hers flare. “Castle got why I wouldn’t come. But you kept trying to force me to.”
Her words are scalpel-sharp, laser-precise.

“You kept trying to put me in a situation which dragged up every memory of my drunk father telling me through the vomit and the urine and the degradation that he didn’t want me. He wanted my mother. Telling me to leave because I wasn’t her. Wasn’t enough of a family. You wanted to force those memories on me, because you couldn’t leave well enough alone and trust your son. You thought that you were bringing me – us – into your family. All you would have been doing was tearing what little was left of mine apart. It’s no thanks to you that my father and I have worked it out. Neither of us needed someone interfering. Neither of us need anyone to replace my mother.”

There is an icy, jagged pause.

“Castle knew what he was doing. You didn’t. You should have stayed out of it. All you did was drag up a past we were trying to get over. All you did was add more pain.”

Beckett looks coldly at Martha. “And then you went and did the same to your son because you couldn’t listen. Listen to me now. You and Castle have this one chance to clear things up. I had one chance with my father, when he came out of rehab, and I didn’t take it. It damn near broke both of us.” She shrugs, as if she’s completely indifferent to Martha. “I don’t care what you do. I only care what Castle does. The rest is up to you. I’ll be there for him whatever happens.” She takes a breath, and finishes. “It’s up to you if you’re there for him at all.”

Over the course of her edged, lethal words Martha has become paler and paler; Castle has stiffened: his shoulders set and knotted.

But his hand is still on her knee, and hers has slid over it, and they’re both still together.

“I… didn’t know,” Martha falters.

“You didn’t want to know,” Beckett says judicially. “You were told. Just the same way that Castle has told you over and over, in words and actions, how much he cared about you. Listening isn’t your strong point.”

Martha winces. Beckett sits there: face white from the strain of retelling the story, eyes blazing.

“You’ve got a chance to make this right. Take it.”

Castle turns to Beckett, breaking her gaze from his mother. “Thank you,” he whispers, almost soundless. “Will you stay, or would you rather go? I’ll be at your apartment, later, either way.”

“What do you want?” she breathes in return.

He flicks a glance at his mother. Before he can speak, Martha does.

“I’m sorry,” she says, largely directed at Beckett. “I just… I wanted you to be part of our family. That way I’d be safe. If you and your father were part of us… I’m sorry. I didn’t know how difficult it was.” Her mouth twists. “I didn’t want to know,” she admits.

“I didn’t want you to know,” Beckett says, not quite an admission; not, now, an accusation. Her eyes meet Martha’s: less frightening, still cool and collected. But it’s a better place to stand. Even Castle is less tense: his hand still on her knee less heavy, less gripping.

“Richard…” –
“Stop. I need to say some things.”

Martha recoils, as if anticipating a blow.

“I get where you were coming from. But – I said this before – I don’t get how you don’t see that not trusting me really hurts. I believe that you didn’t know how I felt – but how did you not see that I was taking care of you?” He stops, and regroups. “Beckett and her father didn’t tell each other the truth, and it nearly destroyed them. We need to tell each other the truth, and truth is, you’ve really hurt me. You didn’t trust me to look after you, or be family, and you didn’t trust me about Beckett. But now I know why.” He breathes out, slowly. Below the table his hand clutches Beckett. “I can’t say I’m not hurt. I am. Everything I thought was family… isn’t the same. Isn’t stable yet. I thought you loved me and now… I don’t know. I want to believe you, but I believed you before, and since I met Beckett and she…” he stops that sentence, because even now he doesn’t want to say that out loud; but then he thinks of what Beckett had said about telling the truth. “She loves me. No doubt.”

Beckett emits a very tiny squeak, and then raises an eyebrow such that only Castle can see it. He looks back at her, and she blushes. Castle’s ears are a touch pink.

Martha shrinks into herself. It seems that, after all the hard words and harder truth, Castle’s simple statement that Beckett loves him, with no doubt, has hit her hardest.

“Since I met Beckett you’ve been different. I get it. Now. But you could have stayed with me if you’d only been prepared to tell me the truth then, and to trust me about Beckett. I never wanted any of this to happen, but it has. So,” he finishes heavily, “we just have to adapt to it.”

“Adapt?”

“You have your home. I have mine. You don’t make any comments about Beckett visiting, and I won’t stop you coming to see Alexis and me, or Alexis seeing you.” He pauses. “But. You don’t just walk in and out of my loft. You don’t come into my office or bedroom any more. I love you, Mother, but I’m not ten any more, and you need to treat me like an adult. That means trusting that I know best about my concerns.” He carefully doesn’t use the term affairs. It could easily be misunderstood.

“I…” he thinks she’s about to argue. “Yes,” she capitulates. “I want to fix this, Richard. I really do.”

“Me too,” he says. Beckett manages a nod. Castle shuffles round the table, and envelops his mother in a hug. “Let’s all try to make it work, huh?”

“Yes, darling,” his mother says, buried in his shirt, her arms tight around him. “I’m sorry. I do love you. I just wanted… I was wrong.”

“Let’s fix it,” Castle says, in preference to it’s okay, or I forgive you. He’s not sure that forgiveness is what’s called for right now. They need to find their new normal, and then forgiveness, when it’s wholly established.

“Yes,” his mother says again. “Yes, let’s.” She disentangles herself from Castle, and briefly looks as if she might try to hug Beckett. Fortunately she thinks better of it.

Martha leaves, but there’s a better atmosphere between her and Castle than in weeks.

He sits back down, and looks at the remains of the wine. “Want some?” he says. “There’s enough for a glass or two each.”
“Yeah, okay,” Beckett says, and attracts the attention of a server to obtain a clean glass. When it arrives, Castle splits the last of the wine relatively evenly (Beckett gets a little more, since he’s already some way ahead) and much to his surprise she doesn’t protest. Seems like a normal relationship with her father, though Castle doesn’t think she’ll ever drink much, has allowed her to have some wine when she’s stressed, not only when she’s relaxed and happy.

She slides a little closer, and their thighs touch. It’s comforting. The wine slips down smoothly, and that’s comforting too.

“You okay, Castle?” she asks.

“I think so. I think we’ve really fixed it this time.” He has a large mouthful of his wine, and contemplates the evening so far, turning the glass. Suddenly he puts it down with a click and slings his arm round her. “I’m so glad you came back and told her the truth.”

Beckett colours. “’S okay,” she mumbles, and takes another sip of her wine to cover her general embarrassment.

Castle smiles softly at her. “So now what?” he asks. “We’re here, and now it’s all over, I’m hungry,” he finishes prosaically.

“Let’s get something to eat, and then go home.”

“Home?”

“I’m going to my apartment. If you’re going to be pedantic, you might have to go to your own home,” she snarks, but her eyes are mischievous and her shoulder is bumping his.

“Accuracy is very important, Beckett,” Castle ripostes – and then chokes on his wine as her fingers apply some considerable accuracy, under the table.

Dinner is eaten at a brisk pace, after that.
“Home,” Beckett says happily.

Castle pouts, adorably, as she moves out of reach. Beckett refuses to adore it, on principle. If she once starts adoring the pout, she’ll be lost. Instead, she rolls her eyes, follows up with a raised eyebrow, and lets Castle’s pout slide away. When it’s gone, by which time the kettle is on (she doesn’t need to ask) and her shoes are off, she saunters back to him and kisses the no-longer-protruding lip.

“Feeling better now?”

“Mm,” Castle says doubtfully. “I guess. I think it’s better.”

“It couldn’t have got worse,” Beckett points out. “And you got everything out there in fewer weeks than I managed years.” She sounds a tad bitter, under the matter-of-fact tone.

Castle hugs her. “Only because you made me pull my head out my ass,” he says. “If you hadn’t – most unkindly, Miss Beckett – threatened me with the ghastly spectre of being marched off to Burke in handcuffs – though I have no idea how you think you’d manage that ‘cause I’m much bigger than you – I would just have carried on.”

“I could put you in handcuffs if I had to,” she says crossly. “We’re trained to do it.”

“Really?” Castle says conversationally.

On balance, that was a mistake. Yes, he is much bigger than Beckett. Yes, when prepared for it he is capable of stopping her moving him. Unfortunately, on this occasion she moves so quickly that he is neither prepared nor has any chance of stopping her: at least, not without breaking either his arm or (far less likely) breaking Beckett, which latter would be highly undesirable.

She sits down on the couch, smirking nastily, and surveys Castle, currently prone on the floor with his hands cuffed behind his back.

“You were saying?” she adds smugly, which is just plain mean.

Castle laboriously levers himself to sitting up on the floor, and scowls. “That wasn’t fair,” he grumps.

“You said you didn’t think I could do it. I proved I could. What’s unfair about that?” She watches his contortions with some amusement. “Are you going to admit you were wrong?”

He glares, and grumps, and grouses. Beckett makes the coffee, and returns.

“Yeah, okay,” he says. “I was wrong.” She unlocks him. On balance, that was probably a mistake on her part. Castle catches her by surprise and traps her in one swift movement. “Got you,” he says with satisfaction.

“Mm?” she hums. “So? What were you planning to do with me?”

“Oh, so many things, my dear Detective. Starting with disposing of these handcuffs so that you can’t use them on me again.” He tosses them well out of reach. They don’t need handcuffs – especially not standard police issue. Not cool, and on the basis of immediate personal experience,
also not at all comfortable. He takes some care not to let his mischievous Beckett-bundle escape. Not that she seems to be trying to escape.

He manoeuvres them to standing, and celebrates this success with a prolonged and assertive raid on her mouth, accompanied by an assertive clapping into him. Protests are conspicuous by their absence. Instead, Beckett’s hands slide up around his neck, her lithe frame curves softly into him, and she succumbs. It’s precisely what he needs. He stops kissing for a moment, and simply buries his face against her hair, keeping her close: standing with her physically as, earlier, she’d made it clear that she stood with him against his troubles.

The moment of peace is ended when she nips at his earlobe and then kisses the nerve below it in an entirely seductive fashion. Castle ceases to be concerned about the evening’s events, decides that he’s done all he can to fix matters with his mother and that he need no longer feel in any way guilty about her decisions, and retaliates at speed and with some considerable further assertion of strength, culminating in hoisting Beckett up and transporting her to her bedroom. Protests, in the form of surprised squeaks, are swiftly silenced by hot hard kisses.

Castle keeps Beckett very tightly against him, devouring her mouth and pressing her into him so that he can hold and take as he chooses. He’s wholly sure of himself: possessive and passionate: losing himself in the certainty that this is his Beckett, or Kate, or Kat: his love and his future and his family-to-be. She’s soft and responsive and as into him as he is into her: soft but not – never – submissive; pleased to be purring and to follow his lead.

He slackens his grip to allow some freedom of movement, sliding one hand up to cup her cheek and one to cradle around her back: still kissing, less assertive and more seductive, fingers stroking, and then fluttering downwards to meet the hollow of her throat, the vee of her shirt, the topmost button which only briefly prevents further touch, and falls open with only the slightest encouragement of deft fingers.

His hand is sure and confident as it slowly unbuttons: searching out the lace edges on silk over soft, small, perfectly fitting mounds; first teasing, then palming, then gently rolling erect nipples and winding her up: proving her helpless to resist his clever, arousing hands. Her one attempt to retaliate is gently but firmly rebuffed.

“I need you,” he whispers into her ear. “Let me. Just be mine and stand down and let me love you.” Her hands return to his face: permission and acceptance both. “Be mine,” he breathes again.

“Yes,” returns, more vibration than voiced, and then her lips meet his once again with a tiny, half-heard purr, and she’s lost to everything but him.

His mouth takes hers hard, a little rougher, a little force that he knows she likes; and sure enough she opens to him, pressing closer and rolling hips into him, pushing into his searching hand beneath the opened shirt. His other hand comes away from her cheek to seek and find bare skin below the clothing, to tug at the fabric from the inside and let it drop unneeded to the floor, and then, that removed, to glide around and play while the other releases button and belt and zip, for pants to join the shirt in discarded crumplement, leaving her half-naked in his grasp: flushed and stunning in scraps of green silk.

His own shirt has become open, as he’s sated his immediate need to touch and relearn her through his fingers: and he brings her closer so that they’re skin to skin: shoulder to hip. He keeps her there: wide span over her taut rear, a delicate splayed motion never quite near enough or hard enough no matter her enticement. “Mine,” he growls, and walks her backwards till her knees touch the bed, then balances her as he pushes gently till she folds and half-falls, open to his searing gaze and scorching kisses.
She reaches for him, pulling him down over her by his broad shoulders, swift deft hands denuding him down to his boxers before he can stop her. He smiles wolffishly, hot and predatory, kneeling between her legs and yet still looming over her.

“Something you want?” he rasps, and catches her questing hands. “We’ll get there. Like this,” and he takes one firm breast into his mouth: laving and sucking; repeats to and from the other till she’s panting and arching up towards him and her hands are locked in his hair. “That was something I wanted. Now I’m going to do something you want.”

“Castle!”

“I know what you like,” he breathes across her stomach. “You know what I’m going to do, don’t you?” His tongue flicks at her navel: above his head, the green silk of her bra is soaked; below, he knows it’s also drenched: all for him, only because of him. Only ever him, and her, and them: and it’s so much more than physical addiction.

Though physical addiction has its advantages, too.

His tongue slithers wickedly downward, flirting with the narrow line of lace, flat and forceful against the panel of fabric underneath: a kiss and just a hint of teeth to each side. She squirms, gasping, so that her hips move and he has to place wide hands across her thighs: a little pressure to give him space.

When he lays his mouth on the soaked fabric she bucks and tries to twist: he works her through the thin silk until the imprecations are wordless, frantic moans; and then pulls them off to have her open and naked and desperate for him: needing him, only him; every whimper and moan telling him, some way below conscious thought, that she only needs and wants and loves him; that she’ll stand with him and for him; that they will, sometime soon, be their own family; the two of them, while still having families of their own, separately and overlapping: a Venn diagram of families.

He plays her till she’s on the point of breaking, and then slides up her body, her hands tugging at him to bring him up, closer, nearer and then her mouth pressing against his to plunder her taste on his tongue and own him; elegant fingers still soft and seeking over his back and down, between them, encircling and teasing in her turn until he’s as high as she and groaning with the effort of control.

And then she shifts a fraction and he slides forward and then there is no control at all, from anyone: she fits so perfectly tightly around him; he feels so perfectly at home with her; he’s lost almost before she is.

“Do you think it’ll all be okay now?” Castle asks, cuddled round Beckett.

“If it’s not, it won’t be your fault,” she says. “You’ve done all you can. Told her the truth. It’s up to her now.”

“But…”

“I think she does love you. She was scared, though, and she lost the plot. If she’d told you how she felt it would all have been different.” Beckett swallows. “If I’d told Dad… it might all have been different.”

“But you and your dad are fixed now. Okay, likely there are still some things you need to deal with, but you’ve fixed the big issues. Everything else is minor. I… well, I don’t know if Mother and I are fixed yet.”
“Not the point. The point is, you’ve done your bit. It’s up to her now. You can’t spend your life second-guessing her or trying to appease her or trying to change her. Been there, done that, not lending you the t-shirt.”

“It wouldn’t fit.”

“Nope. So don’t try to make it fit.” She rolls over and drapes her arm round him. “We talked about this, and the answer doesn’t change. You didn’t cause it, you can’t control it, and you can’t cure it. Just like I couldn’t. Your mother isn’t an alcoholic, but it’s the same thing. She’s the only one who can fix it now.” She runs soft fingers through his hair, and nestles closer, understanding his need for tactile comfort. He’s so strong, normally; but now he needs reassurance and love, and she has plenty of both for him. “Just stay here for now.”

“I wasn’t planning on leaving.” His own arms lock around her. “You’re mine.”

“Uh-uh, Castle.”

“What?”

“You’re mine,” she says very possessively indeed.

Castle simply hugs her harder. There doesn’t seem to be much answer to that, other than yes, I am. And, of course, “You’re mine too. We’re each other’s.”

“’Kay.” As if there could never have been any doubt. Her breathing is already slowing, deepening; and his follows her lead. “Love you, Castle,” she murmurs into his shoulder.

“Love you too, Beckett,” he mumbles into her hair, and is asleep in seconds, comforted and eased by her about him.

Beckett is not quite asleep yet, though it’s close. She contemplates the evening. It hadn’t been pleasant, but she can easily understand where Martha was at. That wasn’t a good story. She knows, deep into her soul, that in Martha’s place she would have done the same. After all, she pretty much had: doing what she thought was best for her father. She knows, too, how one’s unconscious assumptions can come back to bite through one’s throat. It’s exactly what had happened to her. And just like with her, Castle’s done everything to try to understand, to support, to help fix it. She’d – too slowly, perhaps – accepted it, and him, and done the work to fix herself because she couldn’t bear to be without him.

Because, even then, she loved him.

She only hopes that Martha loves her son enough to fix this.

Beckett snuggles closer to Castle’s warmth, chilled. All her instincts and training suggest that Martha does love her son, but she’s not wholly sure that Martha can overcome pride and past. Then again, Beckett had, and it’s not as if she’s short of pride, or past. If she can, surely Martha will? Martha has as much reason, and more.

This, she realises uncomfortably, is how Castle must have felt, watching her implode around her own demons, hoping she’d conquer them, but not at all sure. How should he have been, when she had not? But these aren’t Castle’s demons, they’re Martha’s, and Beckett’s only twice removed, only as they affect her Castle. She can’t help fix this: she won’t give in to an implicit blackmail that she should let Martha be a mother to her, and likely nothing else would do.

She shivers, and presses yet closer. Castle emits a sleeping noise, and cuddles tightly around her,
even in deep sleep protective. He’s her place of safety.

She’s right not to compromise on this point. She simply cannot treat Martha as a mother and honestly feel that’s true; honestly behave like it’s true. It wouldn’t be, and lies are no foundation for anything. It would, quite swiftly, breed resentment between her and Castle; and that would be fatal, in time; just as her resentment (hidden, but no less poisonous for all that) to her father had nearly finished them before they’d really begun.

All she can do, in truth, is be there for Castle, whatever he needs from her, and let him decide. It’s up to him. Which won’t stop her pointing out truth in her own way, as he had pointed out truth to her in his, rather different, way.

Decision made, she drifts into sleep, tucked into Castle, finally warm, and finally sure that she’s doing the right thing.

Castle wakes in the night, discovers sleepily that Beckett is the lovely warm snuggle against him, cuddles her in carefully, so as not to wake her, and takes comfort from her complete ease. Shortly, he’s asleep again, safe from his own demons: Beckett protecting him. With her, he can’t now doubt that he is loved.

Beckett’s klaxon of an alarm rouses them both, but Beckett gets to the bathroom first, clicks the lock shut, and then explains through the door that letting him in will only ensure that they’re both late. He humphs disgruntledly. He doesn’t get half enough chances to shower with Beckett. He returns to bed and breathes in essence-of-Beckett instead. It’s not nearly as good as having actual Beckett beside him.

She exits the shower, is dressed, brushed and made up in what seems like seconds, plops down beside him and kisses him soundly, and is half standing again before Castle’s instincts overtake his sluggish brain and ensure that his hand pulls her right back down.

“That’s not a proper goodbye,” he complains.

“It was so,” Beckett disagrees, somewhat muffled by her face being pressed into his chest.

“Nope. I want a proper goodbye kiss.”

“You got one.” She wriggles, and doesn’t get anywhere. “Let go. I need to get to work.”

“I want a proper kiss,” Castle says childishly.

Beckett sighs very audibly, and puts her mouth to his. Castle pounces. He has her wrapped up as tightly as a parcel in an instant and then takes his time devouring her mouth and quite deliberately ruining her lip gloss.

“There,” he says. “That was a proper kiss.” He smirks. “I like that lip gloss. It tastes nice.” Beckett emits a very unfriendly growl and tuts at him. “See you later,” he says. The growl intensifies, and he makes for the bathroom before his ears are maimed. Behind him, he hears the apartment door shut, one decibel short of a slam. He smirks, and pulls himself together perfectly happily, locks up and takes himself home, where writing is the order of the day. He does remember to text Beckett simply so that she doesn’t worry about him when he doesn’t show up, and then dives into his words.

Beckett’s morning is peacefully devoid of histrionics, lovers’ spats, and new murders. Montgomery’s Captainly attention is beasily fixed on a different team, and Ryan and Espo are
amicably bickering over baseball. Life is pretty good.

In fact, life is good enough that she calls O’Leary and invites him for a drink that evening, with a promise that Castle will show up (she hasn’t asked him, but she’s pretty confident he won’t miss out on a night with the mobile mountain). In fact, she adds Ryan and Espo to the mix, and then, on a flush of sociability, Lanie; texting O’Leary to tell him to bring Pete, if Pete can stand the shop talk. Castle informed of the plans, she sits back in her chair and contemplates her rapidly diminishing paperwork with satisfaction, sipping her coffee and scrawling her illegible signature.

When her phone rings, she automatically swipes on without looking at the number. “Beckett.”

“Katherine…” says a very uncertain voice, “I wanted to talk to you. Without Richard.”

Beckett stares at her phone. “Uh?” she says, inelegantly.

“Please will you help me fix it?” Martha pleads. “I can’t bear the way he looks at me now, the doubt in his eyes. I have to convince him.”

Oh, dear God. Why me? Beckett thinks bitterly. But she’d thought last night that she’d do what it took for Castle to be happy, so she’d better grit her teeth and do this. Only because he’s hurting.

“Oh, dear God. Why me? Beckett thinks bitterly. But she’d thought last night that she’d do what it took for Castle to be happy, so she’d better grit her teeth and do this. Only because he’s hurting.

“Okay.” She thinks for a moment. “I’ll meet you at Ground Support Café, West Broadway. Five thirty. I only have forty-five minutes.” And even then she’ll be pushing it to get to Molloy’s by six forty-five.

“Thank you,” Martha emotes. Beckett just about manages not to wince so obviously that the boys notice. “Please don’t tell Richard.” Beckett’s about to disagree vehemently when Martha carries on, “Not yet. I’ll tell him myself. Afterwards.”

Wonderful. So now the whole evening will be tainted by Martha’s problems. Again. Beckett wishes she’d never accepted the call.

“Thank you,” Martha says again, and dials off before Beckett can say anything more.

It seems like a very good moment to ask Esposito for some sparring practice, and to hold the bag while Beckett attempts to destroy it.

Fortunately, he’s up for a bout, and after a few exceedingly terse words of explanation, provides her with the workout she needs. It gets her through the afternoon.
Walk right through the storm

Beckett leaves a few minutes early to ensure that she hits the café first. She wants to have her back to the wall: a very primitive response to a situation that, she thinks bleakly, will redefine difficult to a whole new level.

Her coffee arrives just before Martha does, swishing through the door with a theatrical entrance that, Beckett notes, covers not simply severe uncertainty but something that looks a lot like terror. If it’s possible, Martha looks even worse than the previous night, and it’s certainly not a result of the careful application of make-up. If Beckett were to extrapolate from her own experience, she’d place a hefty bet on a sleepless night.

“Thank you,” she opens up. “I… I’d have understood if you’d simply refused.”

She orders herbal tea as a server passes. Beckett requests another double espresso. Her usual latte hadn’t seemed quite enough, somehow, and the first espresso hadn’t touched the sides. Caffeine induced courage, to make sure she’s still sitting here, cool faced and calm.

“I just want to fix it,” Martha emits. “You… he loves you. You know how I can mend it. You have to know.”

“You hurt him,” Beckett states flatly. “You as good as told him he was as bad as your parents” – her mouth twists – “or that creep in LA that conned you.” She puts her hands under the table, where Martha can’t see them flexing. “It’s not surprising that he’s hurt. He adored you.”

“Past tense?” Martha says, miserably. “I don’t know. He’s been upset enough that it could be either.”

Beckett isn’t pulling any punches here. She won’t lie to Martha, but she’s not above some pretty hard truth. Truth is, she herself isn’t sure how Castle currently feels about his mother. She’d thought, at the party, it was clear – Beckett had even said – that he loved her. But after the last set of revelations, she’s less confident. If she’d been asked to bet her life (or his) she’d have come down on still loves her. But she isn’t entirely convinced that he would articulate it, unless Martha were in dire straits.

“Let’s look at the facts,” she continues, and first gives a concession. “I get why you sent him to school, and so does he. He didn’t tell you how he felt. Just like I didn’t tell Dad,” she adds, through gritted teeth. “So he had all the chances you could give him and he took them. Then suddenly he was all grown up and went his own way. So did you. But because you didn’t know he’d been unhappy, you didn’t know there was always a small doubt in his mind that you loved him. Likely he didn’t know it either.” She skips ahead. “But when you got conned, he opened his life to take you in. Didn’t hesitate” – she’s sure of that – “because he wanted, more than anything, to be family. I guess somewhere, he felt that he couldn’t send you away like you sent him away.”

Martha gasps, and her eyes brim. Beckett continues her dissection: cool, calm and imperturbable. She is perfectly well aware that this is how Dr Burke behaves. Whatever works, she thinks, and forges ahead.

“So he didn’t ask anything of you. You were family” – she can’t help the emphasis – “and that’s all that mattered to him. That matters to him. Castle believes in family and he would never have let you suffer if he could stop it. Never.”
Again, she can’t stop the emphasis. All the early problems and quarrels and troubles she and Castle had had – had come from the differences (real or misunderstood) in their views and experiences of families. She doesn’t say that. It’s not relevant here and now.

“Anyway. Everything was fine: he made sure you had everything you needed. Not just money or lifestyle, but a loving family around you. And then you started to meddle, because you were scared and didn’t trust him any more. You didn’t trust him to know what he was doing and you didn’t trust that all the support he’d given you was for real.”

Beckett stops, and downs her coffee, and signals for another. She’ll be jittering, if she does this much more, but she needs the concentrated caffeine hit to get through this without a spectacular loss of temper. She wants, oh-so-badly, to yell at Martha until she’s reduced to scraps of misery and hurts as much as she’s hurt Castle, but she is not going to descend to that level. She’s terrified Martha quite enough, and this needs fixed, not further fractured.

Martha has barely touched her tea, though her hands are clamped around the cup.

“The only way you’re going to fix this is by showing him you know you were wrong. Words aren’t going to be enough. They’ll help, but they aren’t enough.” Beckett thinks for a moment. “You need to fix things with Alexis, too. Same point.”

“I’m hardly going to turn into Grandma Walton,” Martha says bitterly. Beckett sits calmly silent. “I’m not exactly the milk-and-cookies rural type.”

Beckett shrugs, unhappily. “I can’t tell you how you show him you were wrong. I’m not you or him: I don’t know how you show the truth, how you love him. All I know is that he needs to know you love him. How you do that… is up to you.”

She looks at her watch. “I have to go.”

“How did your father fix it with you?” Martha asks, desperately. Beckett ceases her departure.

“He let me say everything I needed to,” she says bleakly. “He didn’t try to argue with me. He just sat there and took it till I was ready to hear him. He didn’t push. He owned up to his mistakes. And he did all of it by coming to therapy when I asked him, and that showed more than any words.” She stops, to ensure she hangs on to her composure. “It’s taken us months,” she adds. “On top of all the time we wasted by doing it wrong the first time round.” Her mouth tightens. “If it weren’t for the shrink, we’d never have fixed it at all.”

Beckett knows what Martha’s next comment will be. She’s not wrong.

“So you think we should go to therapy?”

“I don’t think anything. I think you need to think about what would help you. But don’t try for Dr Burke. He won’t see you.” Martha opens her mouth. “Castle already asked. He said no.” Martha’s mouth closes. “Anyway, Castle’s already told you how he feels. Therapy isn’t going to show you anything about him you don’t already know. If you go, it’s to fix your issues. Not his. Dad and I had a different situation.” She doesn’t elaborate.

“Oh,” Martha says despondently. “I just want him to know I do love him. He’s my child. How could I not love him?”

Beckett manages not to point out that Martha’s own parents had evidently managed not to love her. It’s not likely to help. Nor would pointing out that Beckett’s own father loved her, but it hadn’t stopped him spending five years down a bottle and then the five years of disastrous non-truth after
“I need to go,” she says again. “Try talking to him, first. How you show him I don’t know. You have to work it out, because it only ever works if you work it out for yourself.”

She stands, and collects her purse. Martha stares down into her tea, now tepid at best. “Thank you for seeing me,” Martha says, quietly. “I know I didn’t deserve it. I’m sorry for what I did.”

Beckett doesn’t know quite what to say, and settles on the entirely inadequate and uncommunicative, “It’s not about me. It’s about Castle. We all want it fixed. Bye,” she tacks on, and departs before anything else can be said.

She is already late, and when she walks into Molloy’s the gang is in full voice. Pete, sensibly, is not present. Beers are on the table, as is food. She’s not sure that she wants either. Now that it’s done, reaction is setting in: she’s wholly unsure that seeing Martha was the right course of action and she’s equally unsure that anything she had said will have an effect, let alone the right effect.

Castle is surprised that Beckett isn’t there when he gets there, just ahead of the rest, but puts it down to a last-minute hitch. However, when Ryan discloses that Beckett left exactly on shift end and said she’d see them all there, he concludes that she’s plotting some piece of discomposing (but, he hopes, arousing) Castle-pranking, gets the first round in, and leaves an empty space for her between himself and O’Leary.

His first inkling that her tardiness is not due to any pleasant cause is when she enters and doesn’t sit down. Instead, she’s standing a little distance away, regarding their table as if it’s some foreign culture that she doesn’t understand. He’s only a little reassured when she shakes her head as if to clear it, and then sits down. Somehow, he thinks, she’s closed something off, and when he cautiously touches her hand, out of sight of the others, it’s tense.

“Are you okay?” he murmurs, under the general hubbub.

“Yeah,” she replies, but it’s not convincing. “Can I get a soda?” It’s clearly a close-down, and he accepts it, for now.

Beckett sips at her soda and listens to the exaggerated tales of cop derring-do as Ryan, Espo and O’Leary try to outdo each other. O’Leary is winning by several miles.

“So I was called in to Central Park,” O’Leary says happily, “to break up a domestic. Leastways, that’s what they told me.”

“Dispatch,” Ryan grumps. “Never get it right.”

“Too true,” Espo adds. “Surprised they c’n tell a homicide from a hamburger.”

Everyone snickers.

“So anyways,” O’Leary drawls, “I went off to the Park an’ when I got there I couldn’t find anythin’, so I called back an’ asked what was goin’ on. Just then I heard some yellin’ an’ cussin’, so I reckoned that was my domestic, an’ followed the noise.” He grins widely.

“So what was it?” Castle asks, intrigued. “It doesn’t sound like it was a domestic at all.”

“Only if you count shouting at your dogs as a domestic,”
“Someone called the cops for shouting at a dog?”

“Waal, that’s where it got a bit int’resting,” O’Leary smirks. “See, it wasn’t just the one dog. An’ to be honest, I’m not sure one of ‘em was a dog at all.”

“Huh?”

“When I got there, there was this guy with about six dogs cowerin’ up to him; an’ this other big guy with just the one animal. ‘Cept his one animal looked like an ambulatin’ carpet, an’ had dreadlocks just like its owner. Was the size of a pony, too. Didn’t know you could get floor mops that size,” he says wonderingly.

“How d’you mean, a big guy?” Espo enquires, while Castle soothes his curiosity by Googling dogs that have dreadlocks and is shortly staring at pictures of something called a Komondor.


“So I ambled up, an’ asked what was goin’ on, loud enough to get heard through the shoutin’, an’ they didn’t like bein’ interrupted. Funny, though,” he grins, “they both shut up pretty quick when they turned round an’ saw me.”

The group sniggers. Castle thinks that people shutting up pretty quick when they take cognisance of O’Leary’s immensity is pretty common.

“Least till I asked what was goin’ on. Then they started shouting again. Then the dogs an’ the other animal got goin’. Sounded like a war. So I told ‘em to pipe down an’ I’d take one story at a time.” His slow grin ambles, much as O’Leary does, across his face. “Summarisin’, the man with six dogs, all of ‘em those little yappy things that fit in a teacup an’ ain’t no use to anyone, was a dog-walker. He was sayin’ that the big dog had scared his little ones. Other guy said that the walker had delib’rately gotten up close so the little ones were nipping at his dog.”

“So? What’s so interesting about that?” Lanie fires. Lanie is obviously not much of a one for dogs, or indeed domestics.

“Waal, turns out the two guys had a bit of a history. Came out when they were yelling at each other. This wasn’t the first time they’d had a run in at the Park. Seems like the walker had a bit of a beef with the other guy’s dog, complained it was outta control a coupla times. No evidence, so nothin’ happened. But, y’know, big black dude with dreadlocks an’ a big black dog with dreadlocks too, he’s not gonna be treated same as a five-foot nothin’ grandma with a dyed-pink pug, so he was a bit uptight, y’know? Anyways, his story was that the walker was tryin’ to get his dog taken away. He was a bit emotional ‘bout it.”

“So what’d you do?”

“It all hinged on whose dogs were under control,” O’Leary explained. “So I had an idea.”

“Yeah?” Castle says happily.

“I told ‘em we’d settle it at the Academy. They’d each put the dogs through some tests an’ we’d see whose came out best.”

“Sneaky,” Ryan says admiringly.

Castle notices that Beckett isn’t listening. Though he expects she’s heard the tale before, her
inattention isn’t normal.

“What happened when you got them there?”

“Well, see, I never intended to take ’em there. How’d I manage that on no notice? Academy’s got classes and schedules an’ everythin’. So that was the funny thing. Dreadlocks and the matchin’ dog, they were dead keen on it. Couldn’t wait to get there an’ show off his dog. He’d’a gone right there an’ then. By this time I’d noticed that his dog was sittin’ good as gold, even if it did look like a rag rug, so I was beginnin’ to think that he wasn’t the problem.”

O’Leary’s eyes are sparklin’. “The other guy wasn’t havin’ any of it, an’ he was gettin’ pretty antsy, which I didn’t get. For all the fuss he’d been makin’, you’d’a thought he’d wanna see it through.”

The sparkle develops into a rumbling laugh. “Found out why he was in such a hurry to leave, ‘bout a minute later. This real pretty girl, with a real pretty red setter, turns up. She’d been runnin’ with the dog – gee, it was gorgeous” –

“Dog or the girl?” Ryan asks.

“Both.”

“Thought you weren’t into girls?” Espo says, just a little combatively.

“I’m not,” O’Leary says equably, “but just like I can tell Beckett’s good-lookin’, I can tell some other girl’s pretty. Like I’m sure you could tell a good picture from a toddler finger paintin’, even though I guess you’ve never been inside the Met in your life?”

Ow, Castle thinks. That’s telling Espo. Espo growls, and shuts up.

“So what about this woman and her gorgeous dog?” Castle asks, before there’s an argument that O’Leary’s going to win.

“Notice you’re not describing the woman as gorgeous,” Espo points out nastily.

“No eyes for anyone but Beckett,” Castle oozes sickeningly. Beckett’s lack of attention doesn’t prevent her punching his shoulder in retaliation. Various versions of ugh, shut up, and save it for private emerge.

“I think it’s sweet,” O’Leary says, to general disgust.

“Don’t encourage him, man.”

“Okay. So anyways, this girl an’ her dog clocked the situation and came over.” The rumble re-emerges, louder. Castle is sure his bones are resonating. “I was about to tell her to move along – politely – when she laid into the walker. Her voice sure didn’t match her looks. Hoo boy, she was mad. Then she flung herself on the big guy and kissed hell out him. Her dog was pretty keen on the mobile mop, too. Snuggled right up to it. It was really cute.”

“So she’d broken up with the first guy to get with the big man?”

“Not quite. Turns out she’d met them both at obedience classes an’ picked the big man, so the other guy thought if he could get the dreadlocked dog taken away for bein’ out of control she’d pick him instead.”
“Surprised it didn’t end in the morgue,” Lanie says cynically. “That’s where it usually ends up.”

“Ah, the optimism of the City’s ME department,” Castle puts in. Lanie makes a very rude gesture. Castle smiles seraphically, at which she repeats it.

“What’d you do with them?” Ryan wonders happily.

“Waal, I thought about sending the little guy to obedience classes, or one of those clubs you sometimes hear about from Vice” – Esposito snorts, and beer exits his nose; Ryan almost falls off his seat with laughter, and Lanie sniggers in a very knowing fashion. Castle guffaws. Beckett just about raises a smile – “but I wrote him up for his dogs not being under proper control an’ told him if it happened again I’d have his permit as a dog-walker revoked. He scuttled off pretty fast, after that. I left, too. The others were – er – occupied with each other.”

“How come you get all the funny ones?”

“How come you guys get all the weird ones? Natural talent,” O’Leary says happily, and smiles. “I gotta talent for humour, and you gotta talent for weird. I have to say that weird looks good on you all.” He ducks, as Ryan flaps a beer mat at him.

Esposito growls. “We ain’t weird. You’re the oversized freak of nature here.”

“Yes,” O’Leary agrees amiably. “Wanna spar again, little man?”

“Any time, mountain. An’ when I win” – Lanie snorts – “you’ll admit we ain’t weird.”

“Don’t think so. ‘Cause Beckett there is def’nitely weird.”

Beckett fails to react, much to Esposito’s disappointment and considerable surprise. “Beckett? You awake?”

“Uh? What? Did I miss something?”

“No,” says O’Leary, as Ryan says,

“Just O’Leary sayin’ we’re all weird, an’ you’re definitely weird.”

“What? O’Leary, you’re crazy. I’m not weird.”

“Hmmm,” O’Leary hums, very sceptically. “I’m not so sure about that.”

“Everyone’s crazy except me and thee, Beckett,” Castle singsongs, “and I’m not too sure about thee.”

Beckett mutters darkly, and drinks her soda. Castle notices O’Leary watching her carefully under his enormous eyebrows, meets O’Leary’s gaze, and waits while a quick exchange of mutual understanding passes between them.

More beer is consumed, more stories told, and Beckett manages just about enough attention for no-one to pull her up on her unsociability. Gradually people peel off. Ryan claims a date, Espo admits to nothing but departs anyway, and Lanie smirks evily and says that she’s going looking for this club where men get taught obedience, at which Beckett raises the first real laugh she’s emitted all evening.

Now, it’s just the three of them. Castle looks at the empty bottles and glasses.
“Want another?” he asks generally.

“Yeah,” rumbles O’Leary. “How about some nachos or somethin’? I’m hungry.”

“Sure. Beckett? You want something?”

“Soda,” she says, “please.”

“Food?”

“Nah. Not hungry. Not like Colossus here. You should be the size of a truck, O’Leary.”

Castle arranges for beers, soda and food while O’Leary snickers happily.

“I already am, butterfly. Hadn’t you noticed?” Now that the others have gone, O’Leary’s down-home drawl has slipped away. “It’s all muscle, though.” Beckett grins, slightly forced. “Though I guess I’m not surprised you didn’t notice, since you haven’t been noticin’ anything all evening.” He pauses. “What’s up?”
Beckett flicks a glance at O’Leary, then turns to Castle.

“Your mother asked to talk to me.” Martha might have wanted to tell Castle herself, but Beckett’s not going to lie to him on a direct question.

Castle spits beer out all over the table, and has to wipe it up. “She did what? And you went?”

“Asked to see me. And yes, I went. Right before I came here.”

“My mother wanted to talk to you?” he says, dumbfounded. “She’s terrified of you. Why’d she want to talk to you?”

“She hoped I’d tell her how to fix things,” Beckett says baldly. Castle chokes on his beer and needs to be firmly patted on the back. He’s still wheezing soggily a moment or two later.

“Fix things?” he struggles to emit.


“I didn’t do anything!” Beckett says, indignantly.

Castle stops wheezing. “You did so,” he contradicts. “You went after my mother and frightened her into fits. Twice.”


“Don’t call me that.”

“Butterfly,” says O’Leary, mischievously. “Oof! That’s not nice. Anyway, did I say as you were wrong?” He soothes the area of his midriff that Beckett had, none too gently, elbowed. “I guess you had a reason?”

“Mother didn’t like moving out,” Castle expands.

“Awww. That your protective side coming out again? You’ll be so cute when you have kids.”

Beckett spits her soda all over the table and O’Leary. “Kids?” she howls. After that she’s stunned. Fortunately, this prevents her whipping out her Glock and putting two through O’Leary’s head. Equally fortunately, she can’t see Castle’s suddenly thoughtful – and sappy – expression.

O’Leary dries himself off. “You’re twenty-nine, Beckett,” he says. “How come you can’t drink without spitting it out? Don’t most kids learn that by the time they get to kindergarten?”

She growls and mutters darkly.

“So you laid into Castle’s mom, ‘cause she hurt his feelings. Sounds pretty reasonable to me, from what the pair of you been tellin’ me. Just don’t shoot her, ‘kay? I don’t want my pal arrested.”
Castle recovers his train of thought from small Becketts or small Ricks, with some considerable difficulty. “Why did you agree to see her?”

A fine line of colour graces Beckett’s cheekbones. “I want it fixed,” she says shortly, and clamps her lips together. Castle ficks an appraising glance over her, and determines that she is both viciously embarrassed and unwilling to admit why in front of O’Leary. He surmises that Beckett is not saying, very loudly to his ears, I don’t like seeing Castle miserable so I’ll do what I can to fix it. From O’Leary’s knowing smile, he can hear it too.

“What happened?”

“She wanted to know how to fix it. Then she asked how Dad did it. Then she asked if I thought she should go to therapy.”

“What did you do?” It’s O’Leary who asks.

“Told her how much she hurt you.” Beckett’s still talking to Castle, almost as if O’Leary hadn’t been the one who spoke. “Told her that Dad just listened, and didn’t argue. Told her that therapy was up to her.”

“Oh,” Castle says. Beckett casts him a worried look, which is met by an arm around her. “Maybe... She must be trying, to talk to you voluntarily.” He smiles. “Actions speak louder than words. She’s trying to show me that she means it.” The smile broadens to light his whole face. “She couldn’t have done anything bigger.”

“Uh?”

“Beckett, I keep telling you this. She’s terrified of you. You’ve scared the crap out of her every time you’ve seen her since she was moving out. Talking to you is the last thing my mother would want to do if she didn’t absolutely think that it was the only way. She couldn’t have made a bigger statement if she’d announced it from the Broadway stage on opening night.”

His joy is unconfined. “It’s fixed,” he says happily. “Sure, we’ll have a few run-ins, but I really think it’s fixed.” He bends towards Beckett. “It’s down to you, too,” he murmurs, and hugs her, under O’Leary’s amused eye.

“Guess you both got everythin’ back on track?” O’Leary says. “ ‘Bout time.” He is the recipient of two irritated glares. “Don’t look at me like that. I won’t be comin’ to the weddin’ if you ain’t nice to me.”

Twin squawks assault his ears. “What?” O’Leary points out, aggrievedly. “The way you two look at each other an’ that cute way you hold hands when no-one’s lookin’, ’s obvious. Just get on with it. In fact, tell you what, we’ll have a double weddin’. Me ‘n Pete, an’ you two.”

“Gay marriage isn’t legal in New York,” Beckett points out. “You’ll need to go to Connecticut.” She remembers her argument. “And I’m not getting married just so you can do the white dress and orange blossom, O’Leary.”

“Awww,” he gurgles. “You have no romance.” He droops pathetically, to Beckett’s vocal derision.

Castle has completely dropped out of the conversation. He might have squawked, but that was more shock than disagreement, and anyway he’s so pleased by his conclusions about his mother’s actions that nothing else is really registering except that he should marry Beckett, upon which he’d already decided, quite some time ago, without needing O’Leary to suggest it.
Beckett is jabbing at O’Leary in order to conceal – from him – her extremely unexpected reaction to the thought of a wedding. It left a very cosy, warm feeling in her chest, but she’s not telling O’Leary that. No way. Still, her hand sneaks into Castle’s, where it twines into his, and holds on tightly. His fingers bend round hers in return. She’s more than a little surprised, given that she’s barely got her head round moving in with him (though that’s a discussion she thinks they should have quite soon, if his mother is really dealt with), that she’s so comfortable with the idea of marriage, but… if the wedding dress fits, wear it.

“Time I went home,” O’Leary rumbles contentedly. “Pete’ll be missin’ me.”

“Night,” Castle and Beckett say in unison.

Beckett looks at the empty plate which had held nachos. “How did he do that?” she says crossly. “I didn’t see him take a single bite and they’re all gone.” A lonely smudge of cheese and guacamole looks pathetically back at her.

Castle shrugs. “We can get more, or we can go somewhere else for dinner, or we can get takeout,” he points out.


“Where?”

“Your loft?”

“Okay,” Castle agrees, more than slightly astounded, but very carefully not commenting.

Castle’s loft is quiet. Alexis calls down a greeting, but admits to studying, and doesn’t bounce downstairs. Nor does Castle suggest it. Takeout is ordered, delivered and eaten, and snuggling resumes on Castle’s comfortable couch in his office.

“Did you mean it?” Beckett asks.

“Mean what?”

“That your mother’s fixed it,” she replies, somewhat ambiguously.

“Yes. You still don’t get it, do you? Mother isn’t keen on laying herself open to criticism, but she called you and asked to meet you, knowing you were likely to lay into her – which is just so hot, you know, when it’s the bad guys – or say no. She must have really wanted to fix it.” He cuddles her in. “Everything’s fixed,” he murmurs. “Everything.”

“Yeah,” Beckett agrees, wriggles round, and kisses him: first softly, and then much harder. Castle, not inclined to be passive, simply picks her up, kicks the door shut behind them on the way to his bed, and sets about proving that if everything’s fixed they should simply enjoy each other.

Later, nestled against each other, nothing more needs to be said, for now.

A week or so later, after a rather impromptu late night visit to the loft, Beckett mutters darkly as she pulls her clothes back on, accompanied by a series of disgruntled complaints from Castle. Suddenly, he has an idea, and being Castle, doesn’t pause for thought or breath before it moves from brain to exiting mouth.
“Um… do you think it would be easier if… um… maybe not now if you don’t want to but… um… er… soon… maybe you kept some spare clothes here? Um… for spontaneous moments?”

“That what the cool kids call it? Spontaneous moments?” Beckett snarks, before what he actually said hits her brain. She stops, her shirt half buttoned, and stares at him. “You what now?”

Castle sits up in bed. “I think you should leave some spare clothes here so you don’t have to get dressed and go home – er – if you don’t want to, of course you can go home if you want to…”

Beckett continues to gape at him. After a prolonged silence, she closes her mouth, then opens it again. “Keep some clothes here?”

“Er… yeah? And maybe some wash products and makeup?” Castle swings his legs out of bed and aims for the closets. “See, we could make space here, and I could clear out this drawer and this shelf here” – he gestures enthusiastically, and talks faster – “and then you wouldn’t be slipping out and having to wake up and get dressed and not have a proper amount of sleep.” He runs down, having run out of breath.

“Okay,” Beckett says. She’s not that keen on having to get dressed and go, so keeping a change of clothes at the loft doesn’t seem unreasonable. Just a single change, though. She’s not moving in. That’s… well, premature.

“But if you don’t want to it’s okay and – what?”

“Okay. Let’s work it out at the weekend, though, rather than midnight when I have work tomorrow.”

And so they do. Castle provides a space, and Beckett moves in a small amount of stuff. Enough to cover spontaneous moments, she thinks, and life progresses quite happily thereafter.

Gradually everything settles into a comfortable routine. Beckett sees her father for dinner every Sunday, murders permitting, and Castle and his mother maintain initially slightly cautious, but amicable, relations. Beckett tends not to go to the loft when Martha’s due to spend time there, but she doesn’t deliberately avoid her, either. Castle tells her that Martha – though not he – is seeing a therapist. Not, emphatically not, Dr Burke. Slowly, matters are approaching normal. Everyone is, in fact, content.

“Good evening, Detective Beckett. Mr Castle.” Dr Burke says, one evening in late July. He is mildly surprised that Mr Castle is attending, and hopes that there have been no further difficulties occasioned by Mrs Rodgers. Dr Burke had thought, courtesy of his previous discussions with Detective Beckett over the past month or so, that all issues with Mrs Rodgers had been satisfactorily resolved.

“Hey,” both Detective Beckett and Mr Castle say, as distressingly informal as they had originally been. Dr Burke observes that Mr Castle is carrying a small envelope, but assumes it to be of no significance.

“We agreed last time,” Detective Beckett says, “that I’d only need ad-hoc appointments from now on.”

“Indeed,” Dr Burke assents. “There is no longer any reason for you to attend upon a fixed schedule.” He is, in fact, most relieved that the necessity for Detective Beckett’s frequent attendance is resolved. It has been a most complex and difficult case, and his navigation of its manifold issues has caused him considerable stress. In fact, he intends, now that Detective
Beckett’s case is resolved, to book a vacation for his wife and himself, of a relaxing nature. They have both long wished to visit Angkor Wat, being a site of immense historical interest. Such a delightful vacation will be Dr Burke’s reward for his success.

“So, this is the last official time I’ll see you,” Detective Beckett says, otiosely, and with a smile that indicates that she could wish for no better gift than not seeing Dr Burke. It would, of course, be entirely unprofessional to reciprocate such a sentiment. Dr Burke will be perfectly content to see Detective Beckett in the future, although his extremely strong preference would be that such a meeting would involve only civic affairs.

“We thought, since you’d done so much to help us,” Mr Castle puts in, “that we should give you a gift, in token of all your efforts.” How extraordinary. Dr Burke is quite astonished, and almost overcome. “I don’t think that this should be a problem for your ethics, since you’re not treating Beckett any more.”

“Thank you,” Dr Burke says. Mr Castle extends the envelope to him.

“Beckett noticed that you enjoyed my books,” Mr Castle says. Dr Burke is left wordless, for the first time in many years, through sheer embarrassment. “So in this envelope is a letter to my publishers, where I’ve arranged for a complete set of all my books, signed, of course, to be held for you.” Dr Burke simply stares at him. “You just need to tell them where you’d like them sent to.” Mr Castle and Detective Beckett are sporting identically malicious expressions. “I have to say, I didn’t expect that you would like them, but I’m delighted that you do.”

“Thank you,” Dr Burke says again, pulling on professional composure to cover his indignation, which is coupled with not a little disappointment that Detective Beckett and Mr Castle have been unable to overcome childish revenge. He had thought better of both of them. He is really most upset, and would rather not have had a gift at all. Having dropped their ungracious bombshell, Detective Beckett and Mr Castle begin to leave. At the door, however, they pause again. Dr Burke’s heart sinks. What new embarrassment will they cause now?

“Also in the envelope,” Detective Beckett says, with a very different smile, “is a cheque made out to NARSAD. We noticed that you were a supporter. We thought” – she pauses, and both of them appear a little embarrassed – “that that would be appropriate.”

Dr Burke sits down very hard in his chair, completely astonished and unable to conceal it. He has been a supporter of NARSAD for many years. “I…” he begins, “I truly appreciate that. Thank you.” Not petty revenge, after all: merely a small practical joke.

“You’re welcome,” Mr Castle says.

“Yes,” Detective Beckett adds.

They leave. Dr Burke opens the envelope. On the top is a letter from Mr Castle to his publishers. Below it is a cheque for – Dr Burke hyperventilates. A cheque for _how much_? How extraordinarily generous. He must write a letter of gratitude immediately. He had not anticipated that at all. He can barely believe it, and examines the cheque extremely carefully to ensure that he has not failed to identify the decimal point. He has not. He is holding a cheque for _half a million dollars_.

Dr Burke sits in his soothing office, pulls open his desk drawer, and ingests three chocolate cookies in quick succession. The letter of gratitude will be written first thing in the morning. He regards the cheque with utter astonishment, until he leaves for home, the cheque locked in his little-used office safe.
Another month later, half of Beckett’s wardrobe has mysteriously migrated to Castle’s loft, which
she only discovers when she can’t find her favourite summer sandals in her own apartment. She is
not pleased with herself. Some moments of self-berating later, she reviews her closets and shelves
and stares, astonished, at the large gaps. How did that happen without her noticing? More to the
point, how come there is almost nothing of Castle’s here? Shouldn’t there have been a swap? This
looks more like an invasion of his loft. Not that he’s complaining, of course. The more time she
spends there, the happier he gets; and she’s not exactly finding it a hardship, either. Which is
probably why her clothing has migrated.

She makes herself a soothing cup of coffee, sits on her bed and ponders the paucity of her
possessions. She’d thought, weeks ago, that she wanted to move in with him, when she was ready.
It looks like her clothes are already ready. She ponders a bit more. Then she adds up how many
times she’s stayed at the loft in the last month. Then she works out that she’d started with a night
or two, but this last week, it’s been four out of five so far. Her subconscious is clearly also already
ready. Alexis is perfectly happy with her being there, too, and her father visits frequently.

She gulps in air, and flicks on her phone; taps Castle’s speed dial.

“Hey, Castle.”

“Beckett? I thought you were coming over later? Is everything okay?”

“Yes, yes,” she says, distractedly. “Um, Castle, could you come over? We need to talk.”

“What?”

Beckett realises what she’s said. “No, no, not like that. Nothing like that. And can you bring my
red sandals? I left them at yours.”

“The ones with the sexy little ankle strap?”

“Yeah.”

“Mmmmm. Are you going to wear them?”

“No. I’m going to feed them to my pet white mice, Castle. Of course I’m going to wear them.”

“Mmmmm.”

Rather less than half an hour later, Castle arrives with the red sandals dangling seductively from
one finger. He’s nervous, but that dissipates as soon as he enters and Beckett stretches up and
kisses him enthusiastically. Oddly, she seems a little nervous, too: slipping her hand into his and
twining her fingers tightly through his. She tows him to the couch, but rather than talking, she takes
her time fastening the sandals, and then examining them.

“Why’d you want me to come over, Beckett? You were already coming for dinner tonight. I guess
it’s understandable, though. You couldn’t wait to see my handsome face and muscular body, could
you?”

Beckett makes a derisive noise, but no words emerge.

“Kate, is there a problem?”

Finally she manages to release words from the prison of her throat.
“I was looking at my closets and most of my stuff is at yours and I was thinking that maybe if you wanted we could talk about me moving in because all my favourite shoes are there anyway and” –

“Move in?” –

“or I could just bring everything back here if it’s too much or too soon or” –

“Absolutely not,” Castle says very quickly and very firmly. “You want to move in together?”

“Yes,” Beckett says, staring at her toes in their red sandals.

Suddenly she is not staring at her toes. Suddenly she has been dragged into Castle’s arms and is being kissed hard. After a minute he lifts off. “I thought I’d have to ask you,” he bounces. “I was going to ask you tonight.” He kisses her again, in default of any more words. “I thought I’d have to kidnap the rest of your shoe collection.”

“You keep your hands off my shoe collection,” Beckett raps.

Castle smirks. “See, it would have worked. Now, how are we going to do this…?”

Beckett shuts him up by kissing him, after which there is no more talking, only them.

---

Epilogue

What’s in a name, she thinks. She’s been, and is, her father’s Katie, and to herself, Kate; Castle’s Kat, and the bullpen’s Beckett. Everything she is, is bound up in her various names: her past, and her present, and her future.

Katie, Kate, Kat and Beckett.

And in a few moments, as she looks at her father beside her with the pride and the love shining from his face, looks down to see all her friends, their families, Castle’s family: now hers too, and then at the end of the aisle Castle waiting for her, she’ll add another name to all of them: Castle.

What’s in a name?

Their whole life.

Fin.

Chapter End Notes

And - the longest continuous story in Castle fanfic history finally finishes. If you got this far, thank you.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!