

Matter Out of Place

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Matter Out of Place

by [Polly_Lynn](#)

Summary

"He says there's nothing wrong. He says he's fine. They're fine. Most of the time, she believes him."

Notes

Post-Belly of the Beast (6 x 17).

Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

He says there's nothing wrong. He says he's fine. They're fine. Most of the time, she believes him.

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He bugs her more often. Ever since Elena. He inundates her with silly videos and pictures of cute animals he says they absolutely need to have as pets. He plans zoo capers to kidnap them. Elaborate schemes for him and supporting roles for her.

He sketches grand plans for a labyrinth of room-to-room otter tubes for the Hamptons and texts them to her. Snapshots of napkins and envelopes and meeting agendas he's probably meant to be following. He manufactures reasons to call her. Sudden, urgent wedding plans and bouts of indecision over everything from dinner to fabric softener.

She calls him on it sometimes. Not always, but sometimes. She says his name in a particular way, and he sighs. He knows he's caught and he comes clean right away.

Just needed to hear your voice, he says.

Me, too, she says, because it's true.

They're both a little . . . needier. A little less guarded, even in public. But there's nothing exactly *wrong*.

He's had nightmares. Ever since Elena. So has she. But he says he's ok, and it seems true. He talks about them. They're . . . big. The writer in him running away with the details. Conjuring up the worst.

He sees her lost, far, far below ground. He hears the endless, patient echo of water dropping on crumbling stone. He sees Vulcan Simmons with her hair wrapped around his fist. Sees him slamming her forward. He sees her shatter like one-way glass. All of her shatters and she bleeds. She disappears.

Professional hazard. It's all she has to say now. She tugs his ear or gathers him up if it's a really bad one. She whispers that his mind is making it more terrible than it was, and he nods.

He holds on to her and nods, even though it's hard for him to believe it. It's hard for her to believe it, but it's true. But he talks about them, at least.

He listens when she talks about hers. When she's ready to talk about hers. They're always the same for her. Variations on a theme. Nothing inventive, just short, awful, and to the point. Flashes of memory more than anything, and she needs a little time most nights.

He gives it to her. He settles next to her in the darkness. In the flicker of the gas fire. In the starlight when they wind up on the roof some nights. He lets things fall silent. He doesn't push, and she tells him that it was the same. It's always the same, but she tells him anyway. The next day, every once in a while, but she tells him. She doesn't shut him out.

They're fewer and farther between now. That's good, too. For both of them, the nightmares are getting fewer and farther between.

It's not like they don't know the drill. She's dutiful about her trips to Burke, and he asks how it went. Every time, he asks, even though he knows the answer already, whatever it is. He knows whether she'll shrug because it was a good day or barrel into him and hold on tight because it wasn't. Whether it'll be wine and a movie she doesn't have to think about or whiskey and quiet for a while. He always knows.

He still worries about her. He watches, more intent, even than usual, and he tells her when she's falling apart. He tells her and she listens. She hears him out and they put her back together again.

He worries, but he doesn't *worry*. Not like before. Two years ago. A year ago, even. There's no question of him walking out. Of her haring off after Bracken. Leaving him behind again. They've had that conversation.

I'm not . . .

I know . . .

She means it, and he believes her. Just like that, he believes her, and sometimes she's weak with relief. Sometimes how far they've come stops her in her tracks.

They're ok, all things considered.

She knows that when she pulls on a sweatshirt of his and shivers off the covers. Her feet are cold and clumsy on the floor tonight. She's slow.

She smiles, though, at the time it takes. How hard she has to think about what sleeves are and which way the door is. It means she's out of practice, and that's good. It's been a while. Weeks, probably, since either one of them has really been up in the middle of the night. She knows it's getting better.

She knows, because he holds out his arms to her right away and whispers that he's sorry he woke her. Because he whispers *Sorry* again when she flicks his hear.

Sorry.

It comes with a smile this time, because she tells him that he's supposed to. That she wants him to wake her. She wants to help.

He's ok and she is, too.

He comes right back to bed. Holds her in his lap for just a few minutes and gives a tired laugh as they tilt crazily in the office chair. But it's just a few minutes, and then he's letting her lead him back to bed. He's letting her drape the blankets over him.

He smiles up at her as she snaps them high and controls the fall. He curls himself around her when she clambers in on her side. He's already closing his eyes when she rolls on to her stomach and smooths a palm all down his ribs.

"You can sleep?" she asks and wishes there weren't a quaver in her voice. Wishes he hasn't heard it.

"I can sleep," he says into the deep hollow of the pillow. It's still warm. The bed is still warm.

"Not such a bad one," she says. That's stronger. No quaver there, and she's glad when his eyes flick open and he smiles at her. She's glad it's a little bleary. That he's already drifting off.

"Not so bad," he echoes.

She believes him. She mostly believes him.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

It's an ordinary morning when everything goes wrong.

Chapter Notes

Post-Belly of the Beast (6 x 17).

It's an ordinary morning when everything goes wrong.

She needs a file from robbery. An ancient paper file, and Douglas is afraid of their harridan of a clerk. She reminds him of a particularly traumatizing school librarian, apparently.

Castle offers to go. He's been antsy all morning. Later, that seems to matter. Later it seems like something she should have put together long before everything went wrong. Something that happens a lot since Elena. But right then, it's just him. It's just how he gets sometimes when things are slow.

She reminds him that she has to sign for it.

He scoffs. "Beckett, I've been forging your signature for *years*."

There's an edge to it. Another piece that snaps in place later. Too late. He's not entirely kidding. He's not entirely pleased.

He starts to push up from his chair. He's going, but she plants a hand on his shoulder. She weighs him down with it, and something loosens in him. He turns his cheek to graze the back of her hand. He keeps her there with the movement. A wordless plea for something, not even a moment long.

It strikes her right then. Something heavier with him than it should be. It strikes her, but she needs the file, and the evil librarian's lunch breaks are early and long. And anyway, everything's fine. He's let it go, whatever it is. She feels him let it go. He's ok. Everything is ok.

"We'll talk about the penalties for impersonating an officer later," she says. She takes a moment of her own. She brushes her thumb just barely over the corner of his mouth. There's something. There's *something*, but she really does need to go.

"Oooh, penalties." He grins and gives her an exaggerated once over.

"Workplace, Castle." She tosses it over her shoulder as she turns to go.

He echoes her. "Workplace. Yeah."

She's not gone five minutes. She has the file and escapes with a minimum of scolding. She's congratulating herself on that. On timing it so that Lydia wants to get on with her lunch break more than she wants to yell about forms filled out in triplicate.

Not even five minutes. That's all it takes for everything to go wrong.

She hears it first. Muffled through the stairwell door, but she registers the noise before anything else. Raised voices. Castle, then Esposito. It doesn't make sense. She hasn't been gone five minutes, and really, what could have gone wrong?

She doesn't know. She's hardly through the door at all when it happens. It's happening.

She's far away, but watching. Seeing every single thing that doesn't make sense.

It's not just her. They all stand by and stare. The whole bullpen. Everyone, and she's really too far away to do anything. But later—every time later when the scene plays and replays—she'll remember that she stood by watching. That she'd been standing by watching for weeks. That she should have seen it coming.

But in the moment, it's just details. Things she notices but doesn't really take in.

Drugstore flowers scattered everywhere. All over the floor at their feet. Castle's fists, pale against the fabric of Esposito's jacket. Two profiles. Castle's hard and expressionless. Esposito's caught in between believing and not believing.

He's laughing at first. Espo. Just him alone, then voices joining in. Nervous. A joke. That's what it has to be. The stilted laughter says so. Everything about Ryan says so. He steps up to the two of them, his face screwed up like it always is the second before he gets what everyone is talking about. Whatever it is. He's laughing, too.

He's still laughing when it's already too late. When all the humor goes out of Esposito and Castle's voice drops.

She tries to move then. She tries. She doesn't know what he says. She doubts anyone but Esposito has any idea what he says. She knows the tone, though. From one or two terrible moments, she knows, and she tries to move.

Ryan is closer, though. Too close, and he goes for Castle. It makes sense, given the choice. Given what everyone knows about the two of them and the only possible way this can go.

But everything is wrong. She realizes right then that everything's been wrong for weeks. Here, at least. At the precinct.

She realizes. She *knows*. But she can't believe it.

Everything has always been right for them here. Between them, this part—this place—has always worked. From the first time she faced him across the table with the open throat of his dress shirt and that just-right stubble, everything has always been right. Always.

But her memory has a lot to say in that instant. About always. About lately. The way he's mouthed off to Gates, over and over again. The way he leaves, tight lipped and silent. The blank face and something like meanness when Ryan and Esposito give the two of them shit for how they've been lately. Since Elena. A snarling undercurrent to the jokes he makes. When he makes them, and that's not much. Not with the boys. Not here. Not lately.

Memory tells her about all the things she should have noticed. Short days and excuses to take off. To take her with him. Away from here.

Memory speaks up, and she knows. It's all been wrong for a while. Here.

She almost blurts that out. She almost warns Ryan, but he's there already and that's his peacemaker voice.

Hey, guys, come on . . .

Every atom of air in the room rushes to one place and back out again. Every atom, and Castle is so *angry*. His body swallows up the light. Square shoulders and height and there's a second of profound silence. For one instant the world throws into sharp contrast how much *bigger* than Esposito he is. How much bigger than Ryan, and history gives way to that simple fact.

Ryan is there, and then he's not. There's the sharp crack of Castle's elbow as it meets Ryan's chin. The clack of teeth and metal ringing out as he bounces back against the bullpen fence. Blood at the corner of his mouth.

Still, she's standing there watching. Everyone is.

Castle's hands unclench and his body jerks back. She sees his mouth open and close. She sees the word *sorry*. She sees it die unsaid. He's shocked. Even he can't believe it. But he's angry, too. He's been angry all this time. Here. Since Elena.

And now he's going. He's gone and every single person is standing there. Dumbstruck.

He's gone.

She goes after him.

She rushes across the bullpen and past Ryan. Her foot skis and she stumbles. She looks down at the drugstore flowers, filthy and trampled underfoot. She looks up at him. She barely stops.

She doesn't know what happened. She was there. She saw, but she doesn't know. She opens her mouth to ask, but Ryan cuts her off.

Go, he says.

Esposito is swearing. He waves everyone else away. He turns to Beckett, confusion and fury pouring out of him. English and Spanish, but Ryan's voice cuts through.

Go, he says again. *He's not ok*.

She goes after him.

He's outside. He hasn't made it far. Just to the mouth of the alley. His back is to a dirty brick wall, and he's gulping down breaths.

He's looking back, though. From the second she steps through the doors, he's looking back like he's making up his mind to turn around and march right back in. Like he's steeling himself against the awful necessity. Like the precinct is the last place he wants to be.

He sees her and goes still.

I'm sorry.

His mouth forms the words, but it doesn't carry, and the street is loud. It's morning. It's New York, and he means it, but she can't hear a thing.

She walks straight into him. Her chin connects solidly with his shoulder and her arms go tight around his waist. He's shaking

He whispers it again. *Sorry*.

He is. She can feel that. He holds on to her, just as tight. He's shaking, though. Furious, even though he really is sorry.

He tells her. Before she can ask, he's telling her. Disjointed pieces of the story. About the flowers. It's a stupid joke.

"Stracke," he says and things start to fall into place.

He's a new guy. Young and just out of uniform. He passed out over a body a few days back. Something especially gruesome. It happens, and usually he'd be in for a few weeks of ribbing. Hazing, that's all. Usually.

Except some reporter saw him go down, and it went from that to a total chaos minutes later, some stupid website was reporting a jumbled mess about a cop killed at a crime scene. Twenty minutes after that, they had his name. A PR nightmare that lasted a few hours. A few more for Gates, who wound up with the kid's freaked out sister on the phone.

Stracke's due back in this afternoon for the first time since it all shook out. The flowers are a joke. That and a sympathy card waiting on his desk.

He tells her a story she already knows. He doesn't say what *happened*. They're shoulder to shoulder against the dirty brick wall. She holds his hand tightly as they both stare out at the traffic.

"Just a joke," he says flatly. "I lost it." He looks up at her all of a sudden. Startled like he's just remembered. "Ryan."

"It's ok," she says. "Ryan . . . Espo . . . Castle, it's ok."

"No." He shakes his head. He turns his body into hers. He finds her hip. Her shoulder. He holds on. "It's not."

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

He makes peace without her. The three of them do, and it's strange.

Chapter Notes

Post-Belly of the Beast (6 x 17).

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He makes peace without her. The three of them do, and it's strange.

It's a guy thing, she supposes. Stoic reticence. Except it's exactly the kind of guy he's not. Exactly the kind of thing she's never come up against with him. Not really.

He's quiet about himself a lot of the time. That surprised her along the way. Something she only realized bit by bit. That he's happy enough to spread everyone else's emotional mess out and pick through it. Sifting and sorting out motivations. Unearthing reasoning and twisted emotional logic beneath the horrible facts. He's good at that. Terrible and clinical and devastatingly *right*. She should know.

It's his job in more ways than one, and the fact that he keeps himself shuttered a lot of the time—heart and mind quiet, hidden from the outside world—that surprised her back then. The way a scar would show and he'd rush to cover it with a joke or a leer or blank denial, solid enough to make her wonder if she'd imagined the whole thing. The sudden story of Meredith abandoning Alexis. Abandoning him. Brief glimpses into the chaos of his childhood and the sharp edges of his love for Martha and hers for him. Raw moments piling up between them and him retreating. Hiding away again.

It surprised her, over and over, for a long time. Inconvenient substance beneath the surface. A good, complicated man in the flimsy armor of his public persona. It *annoyed* her at first.

Then it hurt. Because somewhere along the way, he wasn't like that with her. They weren't like that with each other. Except when he was. When they were. Demming and Gina and Josh and every time they couldn't be brave enough to name what was happening between them. Wouldn't be brave enough.

But it's been a long time. For him, it's been a long time since the last retreat. Not so long for her, maybe. Maybe, but it's not how they are anymore. They're not quiet about themselves,

even when it's hard. Even when not being quiet cuts and tears and she feels like the life is draining out of her, because this is so *hard*. Because being more isn't something she'll ever be done with, and *God* she hates when Burke is right.

All of it's hard. Every day. But they're better than this. It's not how they are any more. Not with each other.

Except he is now. About this peace he's made with her boys. *Their* boys.

That's not really fair. He comes clean about it. A little prodding from her. Some pushing and calling him out, because it's still not ok in daylight. It's still not ok in the bullpen or when Gates calls them on the carpet and the air hums with how *angry* he is. How angry he's been since Elena.

But he comes clean all on his own sometimes. He whispers *sorry* in the dark. He crashes into her in the stairwell, coming back just as she's going after him when it's the middle of the day and something breaks him to pieces. Something she never saw coming and doesn't really understand even now. When he crashes into her and holds her tight enough to hurt and whispers it again. *Sorry*.

He comes clean when she calls him out, too. When she won't let them be like this because they've fought too long and too hard and she *loves* him. He comes clean. Always. *Sorry. I'm sorry. I'm trying, Kate*.

He is. He's trying, and the three of them have made their peace without her. Except they haven't. Not really. They're hurting. All three of them in their different ways.

Esposito bristles. He's defensive and rough with both of them. With everyone, and Lanie tells her that he's falling apart in his own good time. That he won't talk about it, of course. Castle. Elena. Any of the whole mess. She says he's dark and silent. That he pushes her away and she's on the verge of letting him.

What else can I do? she asks. But Kate doesn't know. She doesn't know at all.

Ryan is tired. He takes too much on himself anyway. Always, and fatherhood sharpens that. He feels the need for them keenly. Friends, family. The ones he counts on to send him safe home every night to Jenny. To their little girl. He tries hard to make things ok, but everything is out of joint, and he's tired enough already.

He tells her that sometimes. Ryan. He uses her first name. Startles her with it and ducks his head. He tells her he misses how things were. How they should be.

He tells her that he's tired. They all are, and she knows.

She *knows* it's all still wrong. But there's nothing much she can do about it.

"Should you . . . do you want to . . ." She breaks off.

They're on the roof of the loft, and it's a beautiful evening. Something of spring in the air after so long a winter, and she hates to ruin it. He's wound all around her, back propped against something solid. He's wound all around her, and she loves the taste of warm wind on his skin.

He's been up here a long while without her. Things had been fine. Just an ordinary day, then a bad one all of a sudden. He'd walked out. Called before she could follow. Sent nothing but a choked *sorry* down the line and a sigh of relief when she said *ok*. That she'd see him at home.

But now the sun is down and he'd lifted his arms to her the second she pushed through the door and out into the night. He'd gathered her close and murmured *better now* before she could even ask.

He is. *Better now*. He is. But he's quiet. They both are. She tells herself they've earned it. That it's important to let *them* be ok. To hold him and know that's true. That he hasn't had a nightmare in weeks. She hasn't. That they're ok, and the nights are beautiful, even if everything else is fucked up.

She doesn't ask what it was today. An offhand comment. A file or a piece of paperwork. A name or an overheard conversation that reminded him of Elena. He doesn't know most of the time anyway. Not for days and days. Like he has to be through it. Past the dark moment completely before it drops in his lap and he says *oh. yes. of course*.

It worries her. It worries him. The fact that it's hidden. This machinery that keeps going wrong in daylight is a mystery them both.

He stays away. They both hate that. They all do. Ryan is tired and Esposito is angry, and they all hate that it's the best way sometimes. Taking himself out of the equation. Meeting them at the scene and not hanging around when nothing's happening and talk turns idly to the rest of their lives. Coming in late and cutting days short. Settling his arm tight around her and walking her out with him.

She hates not having him all the time. Little things winding into a knot inside her. Snapshots of murder boards she has to text him. Calls she has to make and his empty chair. She hates all of it, so she asks. *Should you . . . Do you want to . . . ?*

"What?" he asks, right away. "Do I want to what?"

It wrenches at her insides. How eager he is to try. How much he wants her to know that he'd make it right if he could. That he's trying hard to be ok all day long. As if she doesn't know. As if that isn't what hurts most. How hard they're both trying.

She's quiet. It feels like she's asking too much. Like it's selfish when she has him like this. When he never lets her think for an instant that it's her. That it's them that's wrong and they're in trouble.

But he asks again. Forlorn and insistent. Hopeful. Because he wants to be ok all the time. "Kate. Please. Should I what? Do I want to what?"

"Talk to someone." It comes out in a rush and she hides her face against him. "Burke . . . for me . . ." Her mouth drops open. "Not Burke. You can't talk to Burke."

He gives a pained laugh. A strangled puff of air against the back of her neck. "Not Burke," he says. "Not Burke."

He's quiet then. The laugh subsides and she's burning. She'd unwind it if she could. Those stupid words. She'd pull them back. He's not broken like she is. He fractures along different lines, and she . . . God knows it hurts her enough to need it. God knows it still makes her feel weak after all this time. Trailing into that damned office like a bird with a broken wing.

"I don't know," he says after a while. Into her skin the first time. Up at the night when she doesn't answer. "I don't know . . . maybe."

But he means no. They talk it out. Halting and careful with quiet in between. It's hours and hours and the wind changes. Rain patters on the metal overhang above them.

He tells her that it's hard for him. That so much of the time he doesn't know how to be close. To stop peering under the hood the minute he meets someone. Taking them apart and putting them back together again. Bits and pieces of disparate lives joined on the page. That it gets in the way, and he's out of practice opening up. Letting other people see inside him.

"I have . . . I'm lucky. I have Alexis. My mother." He makes a face. She laughs. Tugs his ear, but he brushes her hand aside. He dips his head to kiss her, shy, sweet, and grateful enough to make her blush. "I have you, Kate, and I know . . ." He draws a shuddering breath. Closer to tears than he's been in a long time. "I know it's not fair. How I've been . . . and maybe . . ."

She quiets him. Kisses him mouth and tells him *no. stop*. She kisses him and tells him it's not about fair. She makes him look at her and tells him again. Again and again and again. Until he nods and says ok. Until he promises not to be quiet with her.

"I won't," he says. "But, someone . . . maybe. I'll think about it."

He will. She knows he'll think about it. That he'll keep trying to be ok in daylight, because he wants it as badly as she does. As they all do.

He'll think about it. But *maybe* means *no*.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I'd forgotten I thought this would be a three-shot when I started. And then I kept thinking it would be "just one more chapter."

Matter Out of Place

Chapter Summary

Today she'd watched through the break room window. She'd looked on with her heart fluttering in her chest and settling to see the three of them grumbling and Castle handing coffee around. To see him ganging up on Ryan with Esposito over who knows what.

Spring comes to the city. To them.

They walk more. To and from the precinct. They'll hop off the subway early and stroll side by side. Some days it seems to help. Some days it doesn't.

It's different from when they're on the job. When they're shoulder to shoulder, exactly in stride and sparking off each other. Their life and the case seamlessly weaving together.

These walks aren't like that at all. He doesn't talk much. He watches. He'll pick out a person—a family or a group of school kids calling back and forth to each other. He watches, so intent that she can't help herself sometimes. She asks. *What?* But most of the time, he shakes his head. *Nothing. Never mind.*

He's calm when he says it. Thoughtful, rather than evasive. It's the truth. He really doesn't know. Not yet. He's working through things, so she lets it go.

She mostly lets it go.

It's harder when it's not helping. When they walk long and far enough to beat back the chill in the air. Because it's only just barely spring and he's still wound up. He's still tense and unhappy and as likely to leave her at the door of the twelfth as he is to come with her. As likely as he is to try to hard for a few hours, then go.

It's harder then to leave him be. She misses him. He misses her, and she wishes it could just be *fixed*.

It's a good day when it spills out of him. Something more does, anyway.

It's quitting time, and he's still there. He's stayed the whole day, and it's close enough to old times that she'd like to think it's good. It *is* good. Better all the time, and today especially.

Today she'd watched through the break room window. She'd looked on with her heart fluttering in her chest and settling to see the three of them grumbling and Castle handing coffee around. To see him ganging up on Ryan with Esposito over who knows what.

It's been a good day, and she's glad. *Better all the time.*

She's still glad when she turns toward the subway and he tugs her back. When he knots their fingers together and ducks his head. He murmurs *Walk a little?* and smiles wide when she nods.

She's still glad. She tells herself that over and over. Fiercely. Because he stayed. And so what if he needs this? So what?

But he's tense and wound up. It travels up her arm and each step is jarring. Like the pavement's hitting back. Like the city presses down on him and he's fighting back all the time.

A couple of kids catch his eye. They can't be more than fifteen. Wannabe toughs in hoodies and sagging jeans. They're shoving each other. Posturing. It's nothing, but his jaw is working. He falls out of step with her.

She stops. Her feet just won't go on, but they have each other by the hand. It tugs him back a little way on. He's startled. Guilty. He looks down at her fingers. Their fingers and the rush-hour crowd darting around them.

He looks sorry. Like he's about to say it, and it's not what she wants.

"Do you want to go?" she asks suddenly. She's surprised and not surprised to hear herself. To hear what comes next. "Leave."

He jerks back. He has her by the elbows now, backed into a doorway, and he's stricken. Afraid.

Leave. It's . . . unfortunate. The wrong choice of words, but she can fix that. She can fix *this*, and she wishes she'd thought of it before.

"Us. The two of us." She raises up and kisses him. Knots her fingers behind his head and holds his face close to her own. "Together. We could . . . get out of the city for a while?"

Ideas run into one another in her head. A plan she didn't know about, but it's something she's been working on. She's see it now. That she's been thinking about this for a while without really knowing.

It's tricky. It could be. She's been hoarding time off for the wedding. The honeymoon.

But there's what she *could* ask for and what she does. They've never been the same thing. *Never.* And since she's been back . . .

She's been performing. Working as hard as she ever did at the beginning. Out of the academy. When she made detective. And lately, she's been working hard to prove herself all over again. Since she left and came back and *fuck that*, she realizes, suddenly. *Fuck* proving herself. She could have *died*. She said yes to being Elena—to some half-assed, thrown together operation for Captain she'd never laid eyes on before—and she could have *died*. She could have left him and her dad and the boys just like that.

She can ask for a few damned days. She can *take* them.

"We could go away," she says. She's smiling hard. Excited. "The Hamptons. It's early, but . . ."

For one moment—hardly even a second—his face is bliss. He's overjoyed. *Relieved*, and the contrast to his everyday look is painful. The weight of every worry, big and small falls away. Since Elena, but before that, too. Since Maddox and Montgomery and Tyson and Paris.

But it doesn't last at all. He kisses her, long and grateful and sad. He kisses her lips and her forehead and cheeks, a determined, cheerful pattern.

"Thank you." He kisses her mouth again, and the worst thing is he means it. He reaches up and slides his fingers in between hers. He turns the face of her dad's watch up between them. "You hungry?"

"Castle." She thinks she's angry. It's a dismissal. A pat on the head when he *knows* how hard she's trying. He *knows*, and she thinks she ought to be furious. But every last bit of energy goes out of her. She deflates. He catches her and she wonders if she's falling. If she'd be heaped on the sidewalk right now if they weren't tangled together in this stupid doorway with the unkind city rushing by.

"Sorry." He breathes the word once against her cheek and holds her tighter.

I know, she wants to say, but *me too* and *why?* and *what for?* She wants to say all of that, but it won't come. The words won't come for either of them, it seems.

It feels like forever before he speaks again. Just her name—*Kate*—and it's so helpless that it pulls the next thing from her. The only thing to get them through the next moment and the next. To keep them moving.

"I'm hungry." She kisses him. As desperate and fierce as the first on his doorstep with the world flashing blue around them. "I'm hungry."

It's the right thing, somehow. That kiss and those two words.

It's a spark touching his skin and she wishes she knew how. She wishes she knew why this one thing is right and how to do it again and again.

Because he's tired. The day and the city still weigh on him. But he's himself, too. He darts them in and out of seething crowds. He moves from cart to cart and truck to truck. He wants a hot dog and a pretzel and something on a stick. He chatters and bundles greasy white bags under one arm to keep hold of her hand.

It's the right thing and she's glad. She stumbles along at his side. She bumps her shoulder into his. She chatters back and lets him lead her, and she's glad.

He finds them a park bench. He spreads out their haul with a flourish and makes a show of settling a napkin over her lap.

"This is good," he says.

"Good!" she mumbles it enthusiastically around a bite of hot dog. She's starving. She really is starving all of a sudden, and the food and spring and him and the setting sun are exactly what she wants. She's exhausted with the up and down of it. With good days that turn bad and the uphill climb. She's wrung out and worried somewhere inside, but this is perfect for now.

He laughs. He jostles close to her. Slings an arm over her shoulder, even though it's awkward.

"All this," he murmurs. "It's good."

They eat in silence, mostly. There are dogs and kids and ridiculous people on unicycles. It's New York and she elbows him and he elbows her. They make faces and trade sidelong glances. He steals bites of her food. She chases him off and steals bites of his.

They're done too soon. Before she's ready, it's all crumpled wrappers and a hollow pull at the last dregs of her shake. She busies herself. She keeps her head down and ignores the blur of tears as she gathers things up. It's no use, though. He knows. It's too soon. He stills her hands and rests his forehead against hers.

"Sit with me," he whispers. "Just a little while."

She nods, tears too close to the surface to do more.

"This helps."

Her eyes flick open, and she's surprised at how he's watching. She's surprised to find him like this. Eager and . . . something. She's the only one wallowing here, and she's surprised.

"Being out like this."

He glances down at her and she nods. She's not really following, but she will when she can. She'll listen, because he's working it out. This is how he does it, and it's so different from how she copes. She can listen, though.

"It reminds me."

He looks lost at that. Sad, and she has to say something. "Of what?"

He thinks about it. Stares hard into the gathering dusk. He watches a pack of kids kicking around a soccer ball and trying not shiver. Wringing the last minutes out of the day.

"That it's important." He's turning the thought over in his mind. "What you do."

"What *we* do," she snaps. She turns on him. A sharp tug at his ear and she makes him look at her. "Us."

"Us." He says it on a shaky breath, and something complicated breaks across his face. She wants to ask about it. She means to, but he kisses her, and it ends in a smile. "What *we* do."

They're quiet again. They watch together. The kids part ways, calling insults to each other. A dog runs out the length of his retractable leash. He rushes up and noses at the trash sitting by

Castle's side. He talks nonsense and scratches the dog's ears. They wave off the owner's apologies and laugh as they retreat. The dog dances at the woman's side, oblivious to the scolding he's getting.

"I want to leave."

It comes before she can wonder what's next. Before the weight of how they do this settles in her chest, and she's *glad*. The words lift her high, and she's sharply, wildly *glad* before it catches up with her. The regret in his voice. The pain and effort of it, even though he smiles down at her. He kisses her temple and rests his cheek on the top of her head.

"I want to . . . buy a volcano in the middle of the ocean and move in."

He's laughing. She is, too, but it hurts. It's this terrible thing for both of them.

"I want to fix it so you never have to leave, and I never have to . . ." His breath leaves him. He drags it back in. "I never have to wonder like that again."

He forces the words out and so much pain with them. *Fear*. She feels it. She lays her hand over his heart and she feels it knotting his muscles and sliding between his ribs.

You won't. She wants to say that. *Never. Never again*. She wants him to believe it, but she can't. He wouldn't believe it anyway. He shouldn't because it's something she can never promise.

She hides her face against his neck, and it's him soothing her. Him trying to make it better.

"I want a volcano."

The words burst out of her. Ridiculous and petulant, but somehow right, too. Sincere. He breathes her in,

and some of the fear goes. She feels it. An unpleasant tingle over her palm, but it leaves him. It breaks up in the night air.

"Retirement volcano," he says. "When we're too old for this."

She shivers. The sun is well and truly gone and the illusion of spring with it. He stirs. Gathers himself to go, but she stills him. She slides her fingers between his buttons. Skin on skin, and he shivers, too.

"It helps?" She tips her head up to look at him. To wait for him to look at her. "Being out like this?"

He does. He looks at her, naked and honest. He answers and she knows it's true, however far they have to go yet.

"It helps."

Matter Out of Place

Chapter Summary

They joke about the volcano. Good days and bad. There are blueprints. New ones. Versions and versions and versions, but every single one has otter tubes. He sighs and tells her they'll probably only have room for Asian elephants.

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"With the ELT," he says with an expectant grin.

She rolls her eyes and asks. It's part of the deal. The retirement volcano deal. "ELT?"

"Extremely large telescope!" He shoves close to her on the couch. He swaps the hardback in her lap for the iPad to share between them. "That's its name? Isn't it awesome?"

He shows her pictures. Websites in German and French. He spouts endless statistics and says theirs will be better. Because you can't have a volcano lair without a huge telescope.

"But no African elephants, Beckett." He shakes his head. "You'll have to give on that."

"I'll have to give," she agrees.

He tells her just where in the volcano everything will go. Boba Fett—because they have to take Boba Fett—and the Buddha head from her apartment's hallway. Because he thinks they'd get along. He thinks the Buddha might have some tips on life and death and the next time around for a bounty hunter son of a clone.

They laugh about it most of the time. Even on the bad days, the volcano is enough to make him laugh. It gets him to where he can lay his head in her lap and dream.

Sometimes she asks, though. Because it's part of the deal. Because they've worked *so* hard at this. They're still working at it, and she wants to get there. She wants to get back to ok in the day time.

She checks on him. Where he is. Where they are. It's part of the deal.

"Someday volcano or now, Castle?" She runs her fingers through his hair and smooths the lines trailing down from the corners of his mouth.

"Someday," he says.

Most of the time it's a someday volcano, even if he drifts off right after, because he doesn't always sleep. Because the nightmares are mostly gone, but he doesn't always sleep.

Most of the time it's someday.

He's busy. It's that time of year. It's been the same for as long as she's known him. He reminds her of that. They have their routine for this, too. Their back and forth about long lunches and *real* work. About Gina and Paula and battle scars.

He's sidelong about it, but he makes sure she knows that he's actually busy. That most days it's not that he's staying away. It's not that he wants to.

She believes in it. More and more all the time, because he's cranky when he can't be there. It's more than just needing to be near. More than just wanting her close at hand. He's cranky about missing out on the cool stuff. The work.

He's nosy and wants to know *everything*. He rushes in late in the day sometimes. He peels his off his coat even though it's almost time to knock off, and Ryan and Esposito taunt him when he asks what he missed. He smudges the murder board with eager, searching fingers and rifles through every file. Most days he wants to be there.

They're back to normal. They're getting there, anyway.

They fight sometimes. They're both busy. They're both tired and a little tone deaf with each other at the end of long days. So they fight. Strange, short bursts that end with them both white-faced and staring. That end with him launching himself into her or vice versa. A chorus of whispered *sorries* and grasping, frantic need.

Burke tells her it's a good sign. She kind of wants to break things. It's something that scares her. It takes her forever to confess, and he's so blasé about it. He smiles his cryptic smile and tells her it's a good sign and she wants to break things. She usually does when he's right.

But he *is* right. They have to be able to fight. They can't be so fragile. It's another thing they have to get back since Elena, and they are.

So she breathes deeps and she yells. Steels herself and takes it when he yells at her. She clings to him in the dark afterward. He clings to her, and they fall asleep together. They climb up to the roof and watch the stars if sleep isn't in the cards. They wind themselves together and whisper. *I'm sorry. I love you. I know. I know.*

They're getting there.

He's busy the day her phone rings and it's Jenny.

She stares at the lit-up screen for too long. She stares at the name. The picture of little Sarah, because Ryan stole their phones, one by one, and changed the contacts. Different pictures for everyone.

She's a beautiful, funny-looking little thing. Wide-eyed and swimming in a Wonder Woman onesie on Kate's phone. Castle's, too. A different shot on her belly, so she looks like she's flying.

The onesie was a gift from Castle, of course. From both of them. Her name on the card, but really from him. Something he picked up before everything. After the fire. Before Elena. Way back when.

Kate stands there too long with the phone in her hand. Something grabs her insides and twists. She hasn't seen Jenny in weeks. The baby. The picture is old, and she must be so big now.

Castle's seen her. The two of them. He'd called her after everything went wrong. He'd gone alone. Said he had to. So he'd brought a peace offering and hadn't said much afterward.

She yelled.

He hasn't said much more than that. A comment every once in a while. Something tight-lipped and thoughtful, from time to time, but not much more than that.

Kate hasn't seen her in weeks.

It's a reminder. Another reminder that they're not back to normal. They're only just getting there.

But Jenny's voice is bright when she finally answers with a stilted *Hello?*

"Kate! I caught you!"

It's exactly how she feels. *Caught*. Even though Jenny is chattering like she doesn't notice anything wrong. Like choked, one-word answers are perfectly normal. Like she she doesn't mind, even though they're not.

"Jenny. Ryan's not here. He just . . . just a canvas," Kate blurts it out. A sentence at last. Almost a sentence. She feels her cheeks burning, but she can't seem to shut up. "Esposito's with him," she finishes lamely.

"I know, Kate." Jenny's laughter rings down the line. "Just talked to him. Baby wipe emergency averted. But I was calling for you. Do you have some time?"

"Time?" She chokes that out, too. *Time*. Like she's never heard of it. *"Now?"*

"I thought . . . But if you're busy . . ."

Uncertainty creeps into Jenny's voice. Just a hint of a waver, and Kate feels like the lowest life form possible.

"No!" She hears herself say it. Bright and false and cringeworthy, even though it's true. "Not busy."

It's true. She's overdue for lunch. She forgets too often these days. Since Castle's been busy. She gets in trouble because M&Ms and coffee aren't a meal, apparently.

Not even peanut M&Ms, Beckett.

He scolds her. He sits her down at home and stuffs her full of every major food group. Lures her with the promise of whipped cream out of the can if she eats her vegetables. She forgets on purpose sometimes because he likes to take care of her. Because she likes it when he does.

But right now she's just overdue. She just forgot, and everything's under control. Ryan and Esposito are out, and Castle's only a maybe for later. She ought to do this. For all of them. She really ought to.

"Not busy," she says again. "Lunch?"

"Lunch! Perfect."

Jenny is smiling. Kate can tell. It's like sunshine even through the phone.

"Perfect, " Kate echoes. It's hollow, though. It's not sunshine at all.

She walks. It's going to make her late, but she walks anyway.

It's a nice day. Gorgeous, actually, but that's not it.

She's stalling. She wants to do this. She knows it's good. The right thing. And now that her feet are moving, she *wants* to. She just doesn't want to do it alone.

But Castle is busy. He hasn't called to say he's done. She misses him along the way. She broods about it. She should bring something. For the baby, right? Or for Jenny. For the two of them. New parents with no time to themselves.

She should pick up something, and he would know. Castle would know the perfect thing. She wants to call him. She wants to hear his voice. Pleased and curious. He'll like that she's doing this. She knows, that, but mostly she wants him to tell her that it'll be fine. That Jenny won't yell. That she'll live if she does.

She yelled. She remembers his face. Stoic and hurt. Lost in thought.

She goes with socks. A little box she spots on a stall in front of a florist's. They're expensive. Ridiculous. A cellophane top revealing three tiny pairs in a row. They're done up to look like shoes. Black-and-white checkered Vans and bright green Chuck Taylors. Ruby slippers done with some kind of sparkly thread.

They're silly. Castle would love them. Plus she doesn't have to know the size.

She clutches the cutesy shopping bag tight. She slides the ribbon out of the way and tries not to crush the carefully arranged spray of tissue paper spilling out the top.

But Jenny's alone when she gets there. She's leaning back in the cafe chair, tipping her face up to the sun, and there's no baby in sight.

"Jenny?" It's out of her mouth before she means it to be.

"Kate!"

Jenny is on her feet. She's pulling her into a hug and bustling her into a chair. She's ordering her coffee and exclaiming over the socks. *How thoughtful* and *Kate, you didn't have to*.

"Didn't you . . ." Kate blinks into the sun. She looks around stupidly when she's finally able to get a word in edgewise. When she finally thinks of something to say. "Don't you have a *baby?*"

"Not for one more hour." Jenny laughs. She turns and gestures. "I was tearing my hair out, and he said 'anything'."

Kate follows her gaze. Past the outer row of patrons sipping coffee in the sun. Through the gaps in the string of pedestrians and all the way across the street to a blur of familiar blue streaking back and forth. A wide, slow arc. Back and forth.

"I *told* him." Jenny clucks her tongue, but she's laughing. Warm and bright like sunshine. "I told him she's too little for the swings."

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

It's soothing. Distracting, too, but mostly it feels right. The fact that he's so close. The fact that she can see him out of the corner of her eye. The shape of him anyway. Bright colors and cool shadows gliding back and forth. Slowing and stopping and beginning again.

It's soothing. Distracting, too, but mostly it feels right. The fact that he's so close. The fact that she can see him out of the corner of her eye. The shape of him anyway. Bright colors and cool shadows gliding back and forth. Slowing and stopping and beginning again.

It's not that she doesn't wonder. She definitely wonders. It's *odd*. She keeps coming back to that as she and Jenny chat. How strange this is, but nice, too.

Nice to just be away. To hear stories. To listen to Jenny chatter about Ryan at home. About how he is with the baby. How over the moon in love with her he is. It's nice to counter with her own stories. Castle and the wedding. Family and life around the loft. To talk about things that are sweet and funny and full of light. And to have the two of them—Castle and little Sarah—nearby. A sturdy, present link between them.

Jenny checks over her shoulder every once in a while. Curious, though. Not anxious at all. She shakes her head and mutters, "Will you *look* at him?"

She does. They both do. He's turning the swing in circles now. Sarah is a tiny swipe of bright green sunhat in his arms as he winds up the chain high. His toes barely drag enough to control the spiral as it unspools.

They turn back toward each other, smiling hard. Kate's cheeks hurt with it. She sips coffee. She leans back in her chair and lets the sun warm her face. This is nice. Lazy. Important.

It helps.

Kate's eyes flick open. The memory is sudden. Present as his whisper on her cheek that day as the sun set.

"Did he . . ." she blinks across the table. "Jenny. Did Castle ask you to do this?"

"This?" Jenny laughs. "Let him babysit so I didn't go out of my mind?"

"Me . . ." Kate blushes. Feels stupidly naked about this. What would he even have asked? What could he have possibly asked and why? But it's odd. This is so *odd*. "Lunch. Was this his idea?"

Jenny looks at her, baffled at first, but her face clears. She studies Kate a moment. Regards her a little sadly, like something's only just clicked. "Kate. What happened with Kevin and Rick . . . you know we worked that all out?"

"Yes. Of course." Beckett lets out a breath. "I know."

"Good," Jenny says. She repeats it with a furrowed brow. Like she wants it to be true, but there's something coming together in her mind. "Good. Because . . . I hope. Kate, you haven't been avoiding us? Me?"

"No!" Kate is ready with the denial, but she wonders even as she says it how much of a lie it might be. How relieved she is deep down that he's taken the burden of making this peace on to himself. "No. Not avoiding. We've . . . *I've* . . ." She comes out with it miserably. All she really knows. "He said you yelled."

"So did he." Jenny laughs again. She snags another fry from the plate still piled high between them.

"He yelled at *you*?"

"He yelled . . . in my vicinity." She makes a vague gesture. She waves off Kate's horrified look. "We both yelled. And then we hugged it out." She sobers a little, though the amusement still bubbles through. Sunlight and fondness as she gazes across the street. "And we talked. It was good for both of us."

"Talked," Kate echoes. "Good. That's . . . Thank you. That's good."

Jenny nods, and that's the end of it. Something about the firm press of her lips says in no uncertain terms that if this goes any further, it's up to Kate to ask. She *wants* to ask. Something's been dawning on her all this while. Dancing with the knowledge that this is *odd*, and she wants to. *Something*.

Her eyes find him again. Across the street and through the crowd that thickens and thins. He's up with the baby now. One hand dwarfs the back of her head as he presses her to his shoulder. The other gestures a girl of eight or so to the swing he's vacated with exaggerated gallantry.

"He's better." She takes it in. The looseness of his shoulders. The easy mobility of his face. He's better than he has been since Elena. She says it again, quietly. "He's better today."

Jenny hears her. However quiet it is, she hears. "He is, Kate. He's *so* much better than he was. I'm glad."

"Does he . . . ?" Kate turns to her, fire climbing in her cheeks again. "Does he talk to you? More than just that time?"

She just wants to know. She struggles with it. Fierce privacy. Embarrassment. Shame that the two of them are not enough in this, even though she's the one who asked. She's the one who gets it all out, week after week while Burke's armchair swallows her up. She's the one suggested it might help to talk to someone. She hates that the possibility of it—him doing just that—burns her somehow. She hates that there's a struggle at all. She hates every thought she's had in the last thirty seconds, but that one most of all. That they should *have* to be enough. The two of them alone.

"I'm not . . ." She pushes out a breath. Sour and unkind. She breathes in spring and faces Jenny again, lighter now. Trying to be lighter, anyway. "I would never ask you to betray a confidence, but if it . . . I guess it would. You and Castle. It would help. It makes sense that he'd talk to you."

Jenny waits for her to trail off. To settle herself before she shakes her head with a kind smile. "Kate. He doesn't. That one day . . . it really was good for both of us."

"After it was bad," Kate says absently. She remembers the weariness. The way it had tugged at him for days. She remembers the regret. A sad kind of thoughtfulness that she'd mistaken for him pulling away again. *She yelled.*

"After it was bad," Jenny agrees.

Silence falls again. Jenny opens her mouth and closes it with a click, like she's biting something back. Weighing something that isn't easy for her. Kate waits, a breath caught high in her chest. She wants to know. *Badly*, she wants to know, but this is new territory for her. This complicated intersection. She's not sure she should be asking.

"I was leaving," Jenny says finally. It's a painful rush of words. "I was ready to. When I found out I was pregnant, Kevin was . . ."

Jenny's mouth is a straight line. Kate does the math.

"Fenton. When he went undercover."

"I had a bag packed." Jenny tips her head back and takes a shaky breath. It's the first real crack Kate has seen. It's jagged. It runs deep, and it's shocking to see running through the heart of her. This sweet, indomitable, *happy* woman. "I was leaving."

"What happened?" Kate asks faintly. She almost doesn't. This is hard. The kind of thing she can barely scrape out in dim, quiet room with nothing more dangerous than the studied, bland expanse of Burke to answer back. But it's Jenny offering. Jenny asking her to listen. It's what she talked to Castle about. It must be.

"I asked him a question." Something settles over her. Peace. Confidence. She smiles. "He gave the right answer."

She and Jenny make their way across the street, a leisurely stroll through the park. Castle is oblivious, talking nonstop to Sarah. Smiling and showing her off to parents pushing bigger

kids in the baby swings. To nannies holding the hands of toddlers who shake them off at the top of the slide.

"Are you taking credit for my pretty baby, Rick?" Jenny calls out from the edge of the wood-chip lot.

"Probably." Kate grins as Castle whirls toward them. Sarah shrieks in some combination of delight and disapproval. "Good thing she looks just like Ryan."

"Esposito, I heard," Jenny says.

"I can't believe Kevin *told* you that!" She blushes and sidesteps a sly elbow to the ribs from Jenny.

"Kate!" Castle's face goes from bright to blank to sheepish to guilty in rapid succession. "I was done. I was coming. To the precinct. And Jenny . . . Sarah . . ."

He hikes the baby higher on his shoulder, but Jenny raises on tiptoe to pluck her right from his arms. "Oh, no, Rick Castle. You're not blaming this on my daughter."

"Blame?" He trails a hand down Sarah's back, like he's reluctant to let her go. "There's blame?"

"No blame." Kate shakes her head and gives him a quiet smile. He smiles back, glad to see her. Pleased by the surprise, however odd it is. Sunlight in him, too.

"Rick, I can't thank you enough." Jenny deftly gathers Sarah's things into a pastel quilted bag as she balances the baby on her hip. "I feel like I took advantage . . ."

"Anything, Jenny," Castle cuts in. "I meant it. And we had a great time, didn't we, Sarah?"

The baby's head is heavy against Jenny's chest. Her big blue eyes blink open and closed.

"I can see that." Jenny tugs Castle's sleeve. He bends and offers his cheek. "Really. Thank you."

"Welcome," he says warmly.

"And thank you." She repeats the gesture, curving an arm around Kate's neck to pull her into a hug. "I needed this."

"Me too." Kate realizes she means it—*really* means it—as her palm drifts over the warmth of the baby's back.

They stand side-by-side watching Jenny settle Sarah into the stroller and bump off across the park. She turns to find him peering at her, sheepish and sidelong, with his hands shoved into his pockets. She wraps one hand around the silver chain of a free swing, the other around his elbow.

"So." She sways far back, bringing him stumbling toward her into a kiss. "Come here often?"

He sweeps his arms around her waist, framing her body with the chains as he drags them, swing and all, along with him. He leans through to kiss her again. "Going to now. Just got action from three hot women in, like, five minutes."

She laughs as she shoves him away. She drops into the seat of the swing and tips her head toward the one next to it when he pouts.

"I was heading to the precinct when Jenny called." He holds on to the chain of her swing, pulling it close to his as he sits. "I wasn't staying away."

"I know," she says. She does. It feels good to say it out loud, but she knows. He tells her. It's her that he talks to. She knows that.

Castle trails a finger along her arm to her wrist. He traces the oversized arc of her dad's watch. "Need to get back?"

"Not right away." She shakes her head. "Boys have it handled."

"Nice." He grins. His feet sweep up. He leans back and sets his swing in motion, tugging hers along with it.

She lets him. She lets herself tip back and lazily rise, listing side to side a little. His pace and hers just off from one another. There's no hurry to it. Just back and forth in the sun, letting the wind catch their clothes and ruffle their hair.

"Good day?" he asks after a while.

She turns her face in his direction. She lets her weight fall that way and the swing carries her close, but he shrugs. He's just asking. It's a good day for him, and he wants to share. She nods. "Good day."

It is. It will be, even if she asks. So she does. She opens the door to it, anyway.

"Jenny says you talked." She watches him. He's studying the ground. The grooves his feet fit into beneath the swing. But it's not heavy. He's thinking. Listening. The sun doesn't go just because she brings it up. "That's good."

"After the *yelling*," he says. That's sly. He skates his swing toward hers, ducking his head and trawling for sympathy.

She catches the chain and snakes her ankle around his calf. She holds him there. "You yelled, too."

She says it gently, but he's startled. Unnerved by the mention.

He owns it, though. He nods. "I yelled."

"Not at me."

It drops between them. Not startling, exactly. It's not to her, anyway. She realizes she's been thinking about it all along. Wondering. Even now, even though they fight, it's never about that. It's never once been about Elena.

"Kate . . ." his face is a blank. His voice is. So maybe it *is* startling to him. Maybe it's a surprise. "Kate, I never . . . why would I yell at you?"

"You yelled at Jenny. You bait Gates all the time. You *hit* Ryan . . ."

"I *wanted* to hit Esposito," he cuts in, correcting with a wag of his finger.

It's a performance. The wacky sidekick. She knows it's a performance, but it makes her laugh anyway. It makes her roll her eyes. She falls forward against him, their arms all tangled together through the chains. They rock back and forth. A cosy little knot. "Probably lucky you didn't get around to that."

"No probably about it. Have you *seen* him?" He kisses her forehead. Her cheek. He lifts her chin. "We probably need to go, huh?"

"Castle . . ."

"I'm not . . ." One hand drops to fiddle with her dad's watch. "I'm not avoiding, but it's been a while already, and this isn't really the place."

"Where *is*?" She kicks out at the wood chips, frustrated. She's tired of good days slipping into bad days. The right place turning wrong. She's *frustrated*. "Where's the right place to do this?"

"Home. We'll talk at home." He smiles, like it's obvious. Like it's still a good day. He gently unknots himself from her, trailing his fingers along hers 'till the very last second. He pushes to his feet and tugs her up. "But now. Work."

"You're coming?" It lifts her. Before she even realizes she was down—she was sinking—it lifts her. The way he's matter of fact about it. "To the precinct?"

"Said I was, didn't I?" He bumps her hip with his own. He folds her arm through his and leads her through the sunlit park.

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

She comes home to a half set table and him sitting in the middle of the kitchen floor.

He leaves the precinct a little ahead of her.

"Just to set up. Dinner." He stops a minute. Makes a space around them and pulls her into it. He shows her it's really just that. That it's still a good day. He kisses the top of her head. "Wine. Nothing big. See you soon."

But she comes home to a half-set table and him sitting in the middle of the kitchen floor.

"I started with the table. And then then I thought maybe the roof. I don't know . . ." He's staring into the depths of the picnic basket in his lap. "I'm overthinking it."

She pulls off her jacket right there. She kicks off her shoes and empties her pockets into the clutter already littering the counter. So many things left half done, none of them important now. She drops down next to him. "How come?"

He smiles at her. Shoves the picnic basket aside and hauls her legs into his lap. He curls his arms around her waist and settles his cheek in the crook of her neck. "Don't know."

"Castle." She knocks her head against his.

"I thought . . ." He sighs. "I opened the same bottle of wine."

She stiffens. He holds on. It's miserable. Shocking physical pain, and she's right back there. The white walls of the mansion. Her face stark and staring in the silver oval of glass. Clutching pen and paper like they were precious things.

Worse. She's here. A ghost over his shoulder. The table set. The loft darkening as it goes from "a little late" to "something terrible." As he calls and calls and there's nothing but silence in return. As he waits and wonders alone.

But she's *not* there. He's not alone, wrecked and mourning her with nothing but seven sentences to hold on to. They're not out of time. They're here. They're home, and they can do this.

"So," she says when she thinks her voice might sound something like hers again. It's close. Not quite there, but close. "How'd that go?"

"Not great." He holds up his hand. There's a gauze pad taped to the heel, spotted with blood. "The smell of it . . ." He shudders. Presses closer to her skin and breathes deep. "I was just going to pour it out. I think I got all the glass."

Everything is lead inside her. Words and breath. All the things she's feeling, heavy and unmoving. She can't make them go.

"It's like not being me." He's the one who says it, but it's like something excavated from her. Something it took her such a long time to uncover.

"Like someone else moving your body around, and they don't know how. They don't care what they do with it or how it hurts."

That's her. Those words are hers, though he catches them with his mouth. He whispers *Yes. Yes.*

"I don't like it." He rests his head on her shoulder after a while. "I'm fine. Happy. And then . . . a name or even just a sound or . . . anything." He sounds young. Bewildered. "I don't like not knowing who's in here." He takes her hand. He presses her palm to his chest.

"It's you." She spreads her fingers wide. Patters them against his skin. "It's all you in there, Castle. Even when it doesn't feel like it."

He dips his chin to kiss her fingertips. To chase them. "I need to talk to someone."

Her lungs seize up. Her heart. There's too much rushing through her. Relief. That's uppermost, because she doesn't think she'd have survived this without Burke. Because she *knows* she wouldn't have survived the year after her shooting. Because she doesn't just want him to survive, she wants him back. Whole and happy in the day time. Her irrepressible, resilient optimist. Her partner.

But there's fear, too. Bone-deep sorrow that it's this bad. Still this bad and suddenly this bad, even though she *knows* that's how this works. She knows, but it was a good day in the sun and here they are now.

She pushes it aside, relief and fear both. She listens.

He's slow with it. Reluctant, even though it's not new. Most of it isn't, but it's different. It's picked over and arranged. A hundred iterations of the things he's afraid of. Elena is the least of it. Vulcan Simmons and Bracken. They're on the page for him, now. Stories he's made sense of. They've made sense of together, because they've worked hard at this.

But it stretches far beyond just Elena. It starts with her. With the ground opening up beneath their feet, but it reaches far and wide. It tunnels under them, and there are things running loose. Lying in wait and not on the page at all. Things they don't just put behind them, because they're more than just one case gone terribly wrong.

She listens to the things that scare him. Flag-draped caskets and the phone in the middle of the night. Her dad at his door. A long, terrible drive out to the cabin and his fist hovering over

weathered wood. Wondering for the rest of his life. She listens to him pour out things she doesn't have an answer for, because this is the job.

She listens to the things that make him angry.

That's new. He hasn't named it quite like that. He hasn't said it to himself, though she knows. She's known since the moment everything went wrong. She closes her eyes and the cheap, cloying scent of drugstore flowers rises up. She hears Ryan's voice and sees blood at the corner of his mouth. *Go. He's not ok.*

Anger. It's new and it's old.

"I don't want to yell at you." Her eyes flick open. He's watching her, concerned.

"You don't want to, or you don't *want* to want to." She shoots him a narrow look. "Shut up. It's a sentence."

"Checks out. Totally a sentence." It gets a faint smile. A kiss. "I'm a professional."

She swipes at him. He ducks. Stills her palm against his own.

"I thought about it. What you said in the park. I don't want to, Kate." He's choosing his words carefully. *So* carefully. It's truth for him, and he needs her to believe. To trust that he means this. "Of all the things that get churned up when this . . . when Elena sneaks up on me . . . that's not one of them. I've never been angry with you."

"Why?" The word comes like it's being torn from her. "Why not me?"

He runs his hands down her back. Firm fingers coasting along her spine until her breath comes easier. Until she's past it. The moment of her own frustration. The furious part of her that wants this to be simple. That wants him to be angry. To yell and have it finally over with.

He waits. He tips her chin up to ask, and she nods. The moment rushes out of her and she's tired. Limp against him.

"Because I understand. Everything you did . . . it makes sense." He kisses her temple. "It was supposed to be simple." He lifts her hand to his and finds the pinprick on her finger. Imaginary now. The one thing in this that's long since healed, but he comes back to it over and over again. "You weren't . . . it wasn't like before."

"Maddox," she says.

She feels the press of his chin. Agreement. "And Lockwood before that. This wasn't like that."

"I could have said no." She's insistent. A verbal stamp of her foot. "Gates gave me the out."

"But why would you take it?" He slides her hair through his fingers, soothing her out of it. "It was supposed to be simple. You weren't leaving me behind. And everything since then . . .

the way you're with me all the time. Even with Bracken's face everywhere . . . Kate, I know how hard that is. And I know you're not leaving me behind."

"Never," she says. "Never again."

"I know." He says it back. Just as fiercely, and she's glad. "I know, Kate. Never."

She's *glad* they have this, even if it leaves them still stranded on the kitchen floor. Even if it leaves them nowhere.

"So." She stretches stiff shoulders. "No yelling?"

"No yelling." He juggles her in his lap. Draws up his knees to keep her close when she tries to squirm away. "You'll have to get your fix elsewhere, Beckett."

"You could ask." She says it suddenly. Thinks of Jenny and wonders what he knows that she doesn't about how they do this. Kevin and Jenny, even though it's not the same. "Jenny said . . ."

"That Kevin gave the right answer, but I don't . . ." He studies her face. The picnic basket and the cluttered counter. His hands and hers and a blood-spotted bandage.

He has something. She practically feels it drop between them. It shakes him. It unnerves, but captures, too. There's light somewhere behind his eyes. Clouds and trouble, but light. Some realization he's working through.

"You could ask." She settles closer. She rests her head against his chest. She stays put.

"Anything. And I'll try . . ."

He wants to resist. She feels it in the straight line of his shoulders and the breath stalling in a knot under his ribs. He wants time, and maybe she should give it to him. Maybe, but she tilts her head back. She brushes a kiss under his jaw and murmurs *anything* into his skin.

He gives in. Pinches her hip and growls that she's cheating, but he gives in. He lets his head fall back against the cabinet. Sharp contact before he rolls his neck to look at her sidelong. Before he hesitates once more and makes his mind up to it.

He asks the last thing she'd have imagined.

"Am I the wife?"

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

It's awkward. So far from the instant relief she'd imagined—fantasized about feeling when they finally reached the heart of all this—that she's spun by it. She's quiet and unsure. Uncomfortable and she hates feeling that way with him. She hates feeling that way here. Uncomfortable.

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He is, too. He's not quite sorry he asked. Even so, there's something that leans forward about him. Something determined to do this. But he's at a loss, too, and even the melancholy closeness that had settled over them there on the kitchen floor is gone now.

"I'm hungry," she says in a small voice. "And my butt hurts."

"Me too." He doesn't quite laugh, but he helps her up. Exaggerated chivalry, then a wince. "Mine too."

They survey the mess of the kitchen. Nothing is halfway to anything. Everything is scattered. Pulled out of its rightful place, and it's hard to see where sense might come from.

"I can cook . . ." He begins doubtfully.

She cuts him off. "Snacks." She thinks about it. "Junk food. Beer. The roof."

He nods. Smiles as he reaches down for the picnic basket and busies himself. He likes when she's like this. Imperious about foolish things. Playing and not playing. She wishes that would work here. She wishes anything would work here.

"The *wife*?" She turns on him, the question consuming her. The need to know what the right answer could be. "What does that even mean?"

He doesn't look up from his task. His hands are efficient, even though the bandage gets in the way. He's tidying as he goes. Sneaking fancy cheese and real bread into the basket side-by-side with boxed cookies and marshmallows. He's thinking, though. She knows from the precision in it. The care and satisfaction as he makes things come together. He's thinking, not stalling.

"Did your dad know Josh?" He looks up for that. "You said I could ask anything." He grins at her, but there's something hard beneath it. The name still leaves a bitter taste for him after all this time.

She bites it back. The urge to argue. To *shake* him. It's not some idle question. It's not just stirring up, or deflecting or whatever, because he wouldn't. She knows that. She *knows*.

"He knew *of* him," she says, her tone as even as she can make it. It's bitter for her, too. She turns to the cabinet. Roots around for the cheap chocolate bars he mocks her for. She hides her face. "He knew we'd been seeing each other."

He's silent long enough that she turns. It feels like breaking. Being the first to flinch, but she hates that it even rises up like that. Something childish and leftover. She turns. He's still working. Clearing away the things they won't need and not quite hiding a pained kind of smile. Something that might be satisfaction if this weren't such a mess.

She's exasperated. She's trying to give him room for this. She's trying to listen, but she's lost.

"*Castle . . .*"

". . . He came here."

Their words overlap. She stares at him, blinking.

"Your dad. Not Josh," he says, as if that helps. As if that's what has her speechless. "Right before Montgomery died. When Lockwood escaped. He came here."

It's just a jumble of words. It's syllables and the oddest expression on his face. Like he's stiff with fear from the memory. A panicked teenage boy facing down his date's father.

The penny drops.

"He asked you . . . you came to my apartment."

"He was . . ." He moves to her. Abandons the busy work at last and takes her hands. "Kate the thought of losing you, too, was destroying him."

He stops. It catches up with him. The terrible thing on the tip of his tongue. The terrible truth.

"And that wasn't enough to stop me." She says it for him. She knows this. She knows her own part. She's made what amends she can these last two years. She's worked with Burke and taken risks. She's leaned on her dad. Confided in him and tried to make up for lost time. "Knowing what it would do to him wasn't enough." The words fall off her tongue and stall. The inside of her head is a wash of light. Blinding. "He thought *you* were enough."

He shakes his head. Rushes to get words out, even though he stumbles over them. "I thought he was asking me as a father, maybe, or that he . . . misunderstood." He's miserable. He's blushing and embarrassed, but he presses on. "I thought he must not know about Josh . . ."

She turns their hands over. Hers on top now. She strokes her fingertips over his palms. She skips over the bandage. Moves higher along the inside of his wrists. He does it for her sometimes. It soothes her. That intense focus and the way he invests all of himself in the simplicity of touch. It calms her like nothing else.

She'd give him that now if she could, but his mind is working. He watches the movement. His eyes follow the swaying, side-to-side pattern of her fingers, but he's struggling.

"I asked you to walk away. For them." It hurts him still. It hurts her. The events of that awful night laid out one after the other. "Even though I wanted . . ." He curls his palms around hers. A brief squeeze. A smile before he turns back to his work. "You know. You know what I wanted."

She knows. She knew then, and she's sick with the burden of memory. All these sins between them. That night. A year on. All the way up to the storm.

"I threw it in your face." She turns a jar of something over in her hands. "Both times. When you asked for them and when you asked for yourself."

"It wasn't that simple. " He plucks the jar from her hands. He sets it in the basket—the very last space—and taps down the flaps of the lid. "Either time. We both know that." He turns to her again. "And it's not . . . it's not just about having one person worth living for. I don't think that's how it works for us. For anyone, maybe."

"So how does it work?" She chafes her thumb over his palm. "What do we do?"

"For now, we eat." He slings the picnic basket into the crook of his elbow. He tugs her along. "The roof. Beer. Junk food."

They feed each other in the long light. Bits of chocolate and cookies that dissolve on their tongues. Fruit slathered in caramel. Fancy cheese on crusty bread and spray cheese on lousy crackers. Ice cold beers that sweat and send liquid running down their fingers.

It's warm. The air is thick with a storm that won't quite come. It holds on to the sun. It feels good, though. Even the sweat pooling behind her knees and underneath her breasts. A solid, real reminder that it was a good day. Whatever it is now, it was a good day.

He tells her stories about his adventures with Sarah, and that's good, too. The way he spins easy lies for her, even though he's tired. Even though the not-good parts of the day gather in shadows around him.

"I'm telling you, she's a scrapper. She wrestled a bear." He pops a grape in his mouth, his eyes wide and mock sincere.

"A rare, New York City park bear." She laughs.

"Huge." He spreads his hands wide, then tall. "Maybe she really is Esposito's."

"Castle!" She swats at him.

"What?" He ducks away. "Kevin Ryan has many fine qualities, but only a fool would back him against a bear."

She chases after him. She suddenly doesn't like the space between them, so she sweeps the remains of their feast off his lap and clambers into it. She wraps herself around him and rests her head against his shoulder.

"You're not the wife." She tugs at the collar of his shirt. Emphasis. Elaboration.

"I don't mind . . . having the wife is good. I can be the wife." He looks shy all of a sudden. Embarrassed. Struggling again, though not quite the same way. "I mean . . . of course I want to be the person you come home to. And I want you to always know there's me and your dad and my mother and Alexis . . . that we *all* need you to come home. That's not . . . I don't mind that."

She thinks of Jenny. Of Sarah, kicking in his arms. She thinks of Ryan's voice, firm and insistent, on the other end of a phone line fading in and out. She thinks of smoke and flame and the end of everything.

We're going to lose the phone soon, Beckett, so . . . there's something I need you to do

Kevin. You don't want to . . . not like this.

Beckett. I need to talk to Jenny. Now.

She's struggling, too. Like it's all here, but she can't wrap her arms around it.

"You're not *just* the wife."

It's not what she wants to say. She doesn't know what she wants to say. She doesn't *know*.

"Kate." He sounds alarmed, like he's just realized something. He kisses her, then. Swift and sure. "Not with you. I know who I am with you." His hands fumble at her waist. At the hem of her shirt and his fingers stutter up her ribs like he can lay hands on all the things he knows. "I'm . . . I think I'm doing this wrong. I'm saying it wrong. I'm not worried about who I am with you or *what* I am to you." He kisses her and the truth is in it. That he is here, body and soul, and she is, too. "I know that. With you, I know."

She thinks of Elena. Because it begins with her, even if it doesn't end there. Even if it stretches on and out and cuts deep.

"But they treated you like the wife." She has an image in her mind now. Nothing new. Nothing they haven't talked about it, but she can picture it. For the first time, she really *sees* it. Him racing into the precinct. Into the chaos, because they knew by then. They knew how badly it might go and no one had so much as picked up the phone. "Gates. Ryan and Esposito."

His head sinks lower. He buries his face against her shoulder like he's shrinking away from bright light, and maybe he is. Maybe they both are. He nods, and even that's an effort.

"Like . . . like the person who gets the phone call when . . . when it's all over." Every word is tight and small. Angry. Devastated. "Like the person you keep out of the way until it's all over, one way or the other."

"No." She tightens her arms around him. She presses her mouth to his skin. Her teeth. Hard enough to hurt. "No. That's not right. It's not right."

"I don't know." He eases her back. Disentangles the two of them to sink one hand in her hair. To study her face. "I don't know if I could have helped or if I would have made it worse or . . ."

"It doesn't matter. That's not the point." She's still, eyes fixed on him, because she wants him to know. "You're my partner and you should have been there. You *belonged* there. Not alone. Not wondering like that. We're a *team*."

He nods. His eyes are wide and he swallows hard like he'd like to say something. He doesn't though. He leans into her again, and he's quiet. His breath moves in and out. Steadier over her skin after a while.

"I'll talk to them." She drags her fingers through his hair. "*We'll* talk to them. So everyone knows how it will go."

"Except it's never going to happen again." His head pops away from her shoulder. He gives her a shaky, exaggerated frown, eager to joke about it. Eager for it to be something less awful. "Because . . . volcano. If it's going to happen again, volcano right the hell now." He's joking and he's not. Not quite.

"I wouldn't do it again," she says suddenly.

It startles him. The kind of morose playfulness he's only just managed to muster turning to guilt.

"Kate . . . I'm not asking you for that." He brushes his thumb over her lips. "I'm not asking you not to do your job. You didn't know it would go wrong."

She's grinds her teeth. Bites back something she doesn't mean. She's. . . *annoyed*. Not with him, with herself, though she grabs his hand and pulls it from her lips. He looks contrite. She waves it away. She wants to promise him this. She wants him to know that there's more to this than just her not leaving him behind.

"I knew it was giving up a day off. An afternoon with you. Giving *that* up for . . ." She trails off. He's not asking for that kind of promise, but she's giving it. "I don't have anything to prove. I'm a good cop. And, yes, I left and I came back and so what? I'm done bending over backwards. I do the job and I come home to the wife."

"Ok. " He smiles. Holds her gaze for one serene moment. "I can definitely be the wife if it means you come home."

"But we still talk to them, Castle." She hates to ruin it, this moment of peace—some kind of success at last—but it feels like this is what she can do. They can do together.

"You don't think . . ." The words start and stop a couple of times, but he sets his jaw and goes on. "I'm not a cop. I *do* know that. You don't think I'm over-stepping?"

"I think I want Ryan and Esposito to be absolutely clear and have our backs. And Gates, too." She grimaces and he huffs out a laugh. She holds him steady. "We talk to them so everyone knows exactly what I want . . . what *we* want if anything *does* happen."

"We still talk to them." He nods. He looks away. Off into the city like he's making his mind. Like he's remembering that it helps. "And I talk to someone."

The words are quiet. Serious and more than a little miserable on his part, but they fill her up with light. Hope. She loves him for saying it. She didn't even realize how it was creeping at the back of her mind all the while. The fear that it had gotten lost in everything else tonight. That he might not mean it.

"Yeah?" She peels herself off him. She turns his face to hers and asks again. "You talk to someone?"

"I do. I don't want . . . this anymore." He holds up the bandage. "And it's not . . ." He sighs. "It's obviously not going to go away on its own. Which I know you tried to tell me."

"Not easy to hear." She drops her hands from his face. She turns her arm over, takes his fingers and draws them the length of the scar there.

He remembers. He raises both her hands to his lips. Kisses her wrists gently. He hesitates, then. He's got something else to ask.

"Anything, Castle."

"Thanks." He gives her a sheepish smile. "Anything . . . ok. So, someone. Not Burke, I know that. But maybe . . . someone he can help us find. Someone who works with the wives?"

He grins at her. Bright and real this time. He's eating it up, because that's how he is. Resilient. Something painful an hour ago—ten minutes ago—and now it's a joke.

He's eating it up, but she burns a little. She feels stupid. Someone who works with cops' families. *Of course*.

"Hey." He tugs at her hands. He waits for her to look at him. "You're not . . . it doesn't bother you, right?"

"No," she says swiftly. She slides her fingers between his. "No, I'm glad. I'm *really* glad. I just should've thought of it. Of course Burke would know people . . . I just . . . I feel dumb."

"I know." She stiffens. He backpedals immediately. Realizes how it sounds. "No. Not that. You are *not* dumb. I just mean . . . our lives are strange. But not that strange. But I didn't think of it until Jenny called. What we talked about. I've been so . . . just trying to put one foot in

front of the other. But lots of people have to deal with this stuff. Not will-you-pretend-to-be-a-drug-distributor-you-vaguely-resemble-ooops-she's-actually-an-assassin-working-for-your-mother's-murderer things, but . . . wives, families. Not just cops. So of course there would be people for that, right?"

"Right."

"So we do this. Lots of talking." His head tips back against the the brick wall behind them.

"Rough for you, Castle." She nudges him.

"I know, right?" He smiles. His arms rest easy at her hips. He leans his forehead against hers. He breathes deep. "This . . . I feel good. I feel . . ."

"Lighter." She slips from his lap to sit beside him. To lean her head against his shoulder and turn her face up to the sky. To the lights of the city. "It's good to have a plan."

He nods. Sneaks a sidelong glance at her. "Even though it's never going to happen again."

"It's never going to happen again."

It's a lie. They both know that. But it's the right lie for now.

They tell it together. They'll do what they can to make it true.

They're both lighter.

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