### Into the Woods

**by** [Skasis](http://archiveofourown.org/users/Skasis)

**Summary**

Frank is a logger living a life of isolation up in the mountains of Seward, Alaska. Running from his grief, he has retreated so far into himself that he couldn't find his way out if he tried.

Karen is an author who has rented the cabin down the way from Frank’s in order to get away and write her next novel in solitude. Having suffered severe writer's block, she's hoping that the quietude of Alaska will help her find her muse.

After years of falling apart, the universe has decided that it's time for these two to fall together.

"Frank watched her, with her head thrown back, fascinated. It had been a minute since he’d made anyone other than Curtis and David laugh. He was surprised at how easily it was coming to him—how relatively effortless it was to talk to Karen. He supposed, in part, it was because of her profession; he was sure that someone who spent most of their time studying people and writing dialogue would be a great conversationalist. But it also felt like he was dusting off the parts of him that used to be really good at this—the parts of him that were capable of making Maria laugh; were comfortable joking around. The parts that, while creaky and unused, were still there."
So....not as fluffy as my previous work. Also a slow burn that's extra slow. Drop me a line--I'm a bit nervous about writing these iterations of the characters!
“Holy shit, Trish, I don’t even think I’m on a road anymore. What the fuck?” Karen gripped the steering wheel of her rented Chevy pick-up tightly, until her knuckles turned white. She leaned forward, as though getting closer to the windshield would help her see through the gently-falling snow and find where the road had disappeared.

“What do you mean, you’re not on a road anymore?” Trish Walker, Karen’s editor at Hanson and Smith, was beginning to sound a little worried over the Bluetooth. Karen could tell by the way her tone had shifted in pitch, rising into “squeaky” territory.

“I mean that one minute I was on an actual paved road, and now I’m just, like…” Karen trailed off, making a frustrated noise. “Not!”

“Well what does the GPS say?” Karen could hear the clacking of a keyboard through the phone, and barely managed to keep down a bitter chuckle. Even in a crisis, Trish managed to keep working.

“Well, the GPS says I’m on the right track, but I don’t trust it.” Karen spared a quick glance at the screen in her dashboard. Sure enough, the little arrow that represented her truck was speeding merrily along its pre-designated route. “You remember that time we tried to go to the zoo and the GPS led us into a construction site?”

“You’re right. Fuck. I wouldn’t trust it either,” Trish sighed. “Maybe you should pull over?”

“Pull over where? There’s no road to pull over from!” Karen felt like banging her head against the steering wheel, but instead bit the inside of her cheek hard enough to hurt.

The snow that had been peacefully falling for the past fifteen or so miles was beginning to come down a little harder. On either side of the truck, Karen could barely make out the edges of the forest she had driven into thirty minutes ago—back when there was an actual road for her to follow. If she weren’t afraid for her life, Karen thought, she might have found her surroundings beautiful. Peaceful. But right now, all she could feel was irritation.

“Why the fuck did I think this was a good idea? I could die out here, get buried under a mountain of snow, and nobody would ever find me.” Karen wasn’t usually one for dramatics, but the situation seemed to call for it.

“You’re not going to die, Kare,” Trish’s voice was beginning to weaken over the earpiece—sound a little staticky. “Not before you get me the first few chapters of your next book, at least.” It was an attempt at a joke, but did nothing to diffuse the tension on Karen’s end of the call. If anything, it had her hackles rising even higher.

“Don’t mention the book, Trish, or I might just pull over and let myself freeze to death on purpose.” There was a panicky edge to Karen’s voice that had little to do with the very real possibility of getting stuck in a snow storm in the middle of the woods. It was the same edge that entered her voice whenever the book came up in conversation.

It had been three years since Karen Page, New York Time’s bestseller, had published a novel—a fact of which Karen was constantly reminded every time she spoke to Trish. The lapse between publications wouldn’t have been so troublesome if Karen were a writer like George R.R. Martin or Jeffrey Eugenides, who took their sweet time between novels.
But Karen wasn’t that kind of author—her career had been a whirlwind.

After graduating from the Iowa State Writer’s Workshop five years ago, she’d published five novels. One a year. Psychological mystery-thrillers that had instantly rocketed to the top of the NYT’s Bestseller list. Her work had been described as “a triumph in literary stylishness and intricate, clockwork plotting,” and praised for its “hypnotic prose and eerie, atmospheric storytelling” (quotes that Trish loved repeating back to her every time she started to doubt herself). Somehow, before Karen could quite get her bearings, she’d becoming a cultish sensation in the crime-thriller arena. She’d been on an upward climb with no end in sight.

Until three years ago, that is, when her inspiration just…disappeared. Almost overnight.

It was inexplicable—a mystery to rival those she wrote about in her books. With no rhyme and no reason, Karen found that she simply couldn’t write.

Every time she tried to pick up a pen—every time she sat at her computer—her mind went completely blank. And when it wasn’t blank, it was filled with drivel. Shocking, derivative drivel, even worse than the shit she’d churned out during her first year at Iowa. Not even the activities she’d learned throughout the grueling years of her MFA program could stimulate her muse.

A year passed after the publication of her latest book, The Marking, and Karen chalked her lack of inspiration up to being over-worked. She gave herself a vacation to Ireland to help clear her mind, and hoped to come back refreshed and full of ideas. But when she’d returned, nothing had changed. She was still empty.

And then the second year had dragged by—slowly, painfully—in much the same manner. With Karen pounding out endless streams of garbage, desperately trying to produce something of merit, only to realize the next day that everything she’d written had been creative detritus. And that was the point at which she had begun to panic.

By year three of the creative drought, Karen was beginning to think that her previous success had been a fluke. That she was a fraud who’d only had five good stories in her; that her creative constipation was a sign her work as an author was done. She’d been about to hang her hat and admit that her career was over, when Trish suggested she take a sabbatical.

Six months in an isolated cabin in Seward, Alaska. Surrounded by nothing but snow, trees, mountains, and harmless woodland creatures. Trish had been positive that this was what Karen needed to reconnect with her muse—an escape from society, and from the pressures of New York City, with its emphasis on going, doing, moving.

Which was how Karen found herself shivering in the cab of her rental truck, slogging through rapidly-sharpening snowfall, and contemplating how painful it would really be to freeze to death.

“Kare, are you still there?” Trish’s voice, sounding further and further away with every word, broke Karen from her reverie.

“Where else would I be, Trish? I have literally nowhere to go.” Karen knew she was getting snippy, but she was stressed out. She wasn’t even a full day into her Alaska adventure and already it was a nightmare.

“Just checking. I’ve been saying your name for the past 30 seconds.”

“I can barely hear you—it sounds like you’re a thousand miles away,” Karen moved to turn the volume up on her Bluetooth, but found it was already at maximum.
“I am a thousand miles away.” She had to strain to hear Trish’s voice.

“You know what I mean,” Karen grumbled. “Can you still hear me clearly?”

There was no answer. She waited a beat.

“Trish? You there?” Silence. Eerie, lonely silence. Then the sound of static. “Fuck.” She whipped out her phone, pressing the screen to life, and saw that she had no signal.

Karen’s heart rate ticked up, adrenaline flooding her veins. It was one thing to be lost in a snowstorm in an unfamiliar state with a friend on the phone. It was another thing entirely to be utterly and alarmingly alone.

“Okay, cool head, Page. Keep your shit together.” She held her foot steady on the gas pedal, following the not-road as it wound in and out of the forest that loomed foreboding on either side.

“You’re not going to die here.” The path she’d been following had been steadily increasing in altitude—so slowly that Karen had barely noticed it. But as her ears began to pop uncomfortably, she realized exactly how far up into the mountains she’d driven.

She tried calling Trish again, feeling desperation claw its ugly way up her throat. Slick and acidic.

No answer. Of course—it was a fool’s hope.

“Jesus Christ. Don’t let me die in a rented Chevy Silverado.” Karen sent up a prayer (to a God she was certain wasn’t listening).

The sputtering noise was so quiet, at first Karen thought she was just hearing things—that her overactive imagination was kicking in. She turned down the heater. Without the sound of warm air blasting into the cabin of the truck, she could hear it. A distinct, and wholly troubling, clanging noise.

“Fuck. Please no.”

The truck began to shake, ever so slightly, as though she were driving over rough cobblestones and not soft snow. Karen gripped the steering wheel impossibly hard. The shaking grew in violence, as did the rumble coming from the engine.

She began to ease her foot off the gas pedal, hoping that slowing down would keep the rented machine from falling apart beneath her. It didn’t work—the truck lurched painfully once. Twice. Then, with a loud “bang,” it rocked forward with enough force for Karen to narrowly avoid banging her forehead on the steering wheel.

And then it went still. Deadly still.

“Fuck.” The word would have come out more vehemently, had Karen’s head not been cloudy with fear. Instead, it was a terrified whisper. “Fuck, fuck.”

Almost instantly, the air in the truck began to grow cold. Without the heater or the engine producing warmth, the negative temperatures from outside were beginning the tear their way in. Cold fingers slipping between the cracks.

Karen sat for a moment, paralyzed, before forcing herself to think. What the fuck do you do when you’re stranded on a mountainside in the middle of a snow storm? Suddenly, she wished that just once she’d picked up a copy of *Motor Trend* at the bodega across from her apartment, instead of *The New Yorker*. A good deal of help all of those short stories she’d read would do her now.
She peered out the windows on either side—then turned to look out the back over the truck bed. Nobody in sight. The snow was falling in a heavy blanket, and soon it would be piled so high her tires would be covered.

She had to do something—anything.

Taking a deep breath, Karen cycled through her options. She couldn’t call Trish again—that was a lost cause; she had no signal, so AAA was out of the question; she could sit in the truck and do nothing, which would accomplish fuck all (plus, she’d read enough Jack London to know that letting herself get paralyzed with fear in a snowstorm would not end well). Final option: she could go out, pop the hood of the truck, and take a look at the engine.

Of course, she knew absolutely nothing about engines. But maybe whatever was wrong would be obvious. Maybe she’d spot it immediately—some disconnected tube or some bolt that had come loose. The odds were extremely low that would be the case. But she still had to try—she had to do something.

Pulling on the woolen hat she’d tossed onto the passenger seat, and slipping on her leather gloves, Karen steeled herself for a moment before throwing open the door of the driver’s side.

The cold air hit her like a wall—a kind of chill she’d never experienced before. Like frigid blades cutting to the bone. Her skin felt like paper for all it was doing to keep her warmth in.

Shoving her hand underneath the steering wheel, she popped open the hood of the truck, then circled around to prop it open.

Leaning over the engine, she felt dread pull deep in her stomach. She didn’t know what the fuck she was looking at.

“God help me.” She muttered, before bending forward to get a closer look.

Frank was driving home from work when he saw her—the woman leaning over her truck, her entire torso disappearing behind the propped hood.

“What the…” he frowned, brow furrowed. “What’s she doing out here?”

At first, he’d thought she was a hallucination. In the 5 years that he’d been living in the mountains outside of Seward, Alaska, it had been exceedingly rare for him to see anyone this close to his house. That was kind of the appeal of the place for him—at least initially—that nobody ever made it up to this elevation. Every once in a while, sure, he saw travelers who’d rented the cabin down the road from his own. But they usually only showed up during the warmer months, when the forest was more green and less white. But at this time of year—when winter had come early and promised to stay late—he almost always had the mountain to himself.

He slowed down, easing off of the gas, as his truck grew closer. Leaning forward, he stared at the woman, curious. A gust of wind blew through the trees, and he caught the sight of corn silk blonde hair.

It was obvious, from the way she was dressed, that she wasn’t local. Her coat—a stylish, beige trench—was clearly made for fashion and not to keep warm in subzero temperatures. Her boots—knee high leather—didn’t look at all appropriate for the snow. And the little woolen beanie she’d pulled down over her ears didn’t appear to be insulated.
Frank slowed to a stop, pulling up a few feet away from the stranded woman. Through the snowfall, he saw her head jerk up as he arrived. He was too far away to tell if she looked relieved or terrified.

Frank sat in his seat for a moment, deciding how best to approach the situation. He realized that a woman alone, stranded on the side of the road, would probably be suspicious of any man who pulled over to help. That was just self-preservation. And he was certain that his appearance wouldn’t help matters—he knew what he looked like, with his dirty work clothes and his scruffy beard. If he didn’t play his cards right, he might end up scaring the woman more than helping her.

It was moments like this that Frank really wished he spent more time around people. Women, in particular. Because then he might have some idea of how to put her at ease.

But as it was, Frank rarely interacted with anyone outside of the logging mill these days. And hadn’t for a long time. His usual routine involved waking up at 3AM, going to work, and coming home to make dinner for himself and Max. Occasionally, trips to the grocery store or the bookstore were sprinkled in, but not enough to make him a social butterfly, by any means. So his social skills were a little rusty, to say the least.

The woman shuffled uneasily from one foot to the next, and Frank realized that sitting in his truck and staring at her through the windshield was doing the opposite of setting her at ease.

He opened his door, slowly, and stepped out. The snow crunched beneath his worker’s boots, and it was a satisfying sound. He stood for a minute, not approaching, letting the woman get a read on him.

Karen hugged herself tightly around the middle, taking in the figure that had emerged from the beat-up red truck. She’d been half-relieved, and half-nervous when she’d lifted her head from the engine to see someone approaching down the not-road.

Having lived in New York for the past 5 years, she had learned to be cautious about strangers—especially men. And while she was glad to no longer be alone on the desolate forest path, she was also more than a little wary of her would-be rescuer.

It was difficult to get a good look at him. He appeared to be about her height—around 5’10”. Underneath the layers of thermal clothing, he seemed to be well-built; like a man used to physical labor, thought it was difficult to say for sure with so much padding filling him out. He was wearing a plaid trapper hat, pulled low on his head and obscuring most of his face, save for the dark, scraggy beard. If her sense of humor weren’t buried under ten layers of fear, she would have laughed at how stereotypically mountain-man he looked.

As she was sizing him up, he held up his hands, in a kind of placating gesture.

“You need some help, ma’am?” He asked, and almost cringed at how rusty his voice sounded—like it hadn’t been used in a while. “I’m pretty good with machines—I could have a look for you.” He took a cautious step forward.

Karen felt herself instantly unwinding at the sound of his voice. It may have been crazy, but something about it put her at ease. As an author, Karen prided herself on her ability to read other people quickly and easily, and her gut-level reaction to this man was that he wasn’t a threat.

*But that’s what people said about Ted Bundy, Karen,* she reminded herself, biting her lip in indecision, *and look how that turned out.*

She took too long to respond, and Frank read the uncertainty in her stance.
“Promise I won’t hurt ya, ma’am.” He took another step forward. “I live up the road,” he pointed in the direction of his cabin, which was about six miles away. “Name’s Frank Castle. Don’t often get people this far up the path in the winter.”

As he got closer, he was able to catch a better look at the woman. She was, he decided, uncommonly attractive. Big blue eyes, red lips, all that golden hair whipping around her face. A face that was quickly softening into something that looked a lot less like fear and more like gratitude.

“I’m Karen,” she spoke, and uncrossed her arms, taking the last few steps toward him with her hand held out.

It was his eyes that did it for her. As he approached, she could just barely make them out beneath the shadow of his hat. They were big and brown and soulful. And more than that, they looked a little timid. Or maybe not timid—but reluctant. Like he was feeling skittish in approaching her. A serial killer, Karen decided, would probably not be nervous to approach a woman like her.

“Nice to meet you,” Frank took her small hand in his own. He noticed that her fingers were trembling, likely from the cold. Her gloves really weren’t doing much. “Let’s take a look at that engine, huh?”

“Yeah, have at it,” Karen gestured at the truck with a shrug. “I’ve been staring at it for fifteen minutes and I still have no idea what I’m looking at.”

Frank snorted, heading over to the propped hood.

Karen watched with interest as he leaned forward and began fiddling with the inner workings of the truck. She stepped up beside him, keeping a space of a foot and half between their bodies, and peered forward as well. His hands, even encumbered by heavy gloves, were surprisingly delicate as they reached in between metal tubes and joints.

Frank was acutely aware of Karen’s presence at his side, looking over his shoulder. Her breathing was quiet and steady in his ear, and he began to grow a little self-conscious under her gaze. He knew that this was the kind of moment where people would normally make small talk—would chat about the weather or sports or the latest movie that had come out in theaters. But, again, Frank’s social interactions over the past few years had been limited solely to coworkers and occasionally the Liebermans, so he had no idea where to even begin. It had been a long, long time since he’d spoken to someone new. Especially an out-of-towner.

Through the snow, Frank could smell Karen’s perfume—light and delicate and floral—it was pleasant. And very out of place. How did a man like Frank, with dirt under his fingernails and grease stains on his jeans, even start a conversation with a woman who dressed in fancy clothes and smelled like daisies?

“I can’t decide what I hate more.” Karen broke the silence, much to Frank’s relief. “Being stranded in the snow or having to play damsel in distress. I don’t think Ruth Bader Ginsberg would be proud of me right now.”

Frank let out a huff of a laugh, taking himself by surprise.

“Not that I’m not grateful for your help,” Karen was quick to amend, rocking back and forth on her heels and rubbing her hands down her arms to create friction. “I mean, obviously I am. I could have died out here. And while freezing to death does seem like a relatively pleasant way to go, compared to—say—drowning or being burned alive, I don’t really think I’m ready to shed my mortal coil just yet.” There was a distant part of Karen’s brain that recognized she was babbling—and very
nonsensically at that—but her relief at no longer being alone in the isolating snow had her brain-to-mouth filter malfunctioning. “I just mean that being stranded on the side of the road and needing a big, strong man to pull over and help me is so cliché that my inner-feminist is rolling her eyes at me.”

Frank looked up from his task, amusement dancing across his face. Karen was looking everywhere but at him, an aura of nervous energy coming off of her in waves. She was a very strange woman.

“A big, strong man?” Frank repeated, keeping down a chuckle.

“Well, you know,” Karen was glad that her woolen hat was pulled over her ears, because she was sure they were turning red. “Objectively, that’s what you are.” She gestured at him vaguely.

“Uh huh.” Frank fought a grin, before turning back to his task of figuring out what had caused her engine to give up.

“My brother would be chewing me out if he were here. He tried to get me to take shop in high school—told me I’d need it one day. But I signed up for the school newspaper instead. And look where that got me.” Karen felt like the words were just spilling out. She’d never been great with silences—always felt the need to fill them wherever they popped up. (Trish theorized that this was the product of being the child in an unhappy marriage—that she’d grown up filling the tense quiet between her parents with words, and never grew out of the habit). And for some reason, the silence from the mountain man at her side was particularly troublesome.

Frank, on his end, was rather grateful for Karen’s babbling. It kept him from having to think of something to say. And it was quite entertaining.

“I mean, if you ever need anyone to investigate the source of the mystery meat in the school cafeteria, I’m your girl,” Karen lifted a shoulder in a half-shrug. “But for anything else, I’m pretty useless.”

Jesus Christ, Karen, stop talking the man’s ear off.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Frank heard the humor in his own voice, which was odd. He hadn’t heard himself sounding that way in a while—like he was in on a joke.

Karen scooted a little nearer to Frank, the sleeve of her trench barely brushing his elbow, and leaned in to watch him at work. He made a conscious effort not to stiffen at her proximity—he wasn’t used to being so close to other people, especially women.

“Oh,” Frank made an understanding little noise that had Karen shifting even closer.

“What? Did you find something?” She sounded eager, which was just a little bit adorable. The woman clearly had no idea what she was looking at.

“You flooded your engine. Got water in your intake manifold, and now it’s frozen.” He stood up straight, his shoulder almost bumping into Karen’s face. “When was the last time you got this truck inspected?”

“It’s a rental,” Karen stepped back so that she wasn’t so far into Frank’s personal space. “Don’t know off the top of my head, but I can look it up.”

“Hmm,” Frank folded his arms, casting his glance up and down Karen’s figure. She was shivering something awful, but she’d yet to complain about it. He’d wager that her toes had already frozen passed the point of feeling in those fancy boots; snow had begun to cling to her eyelashes, and her body heat wasn’t strong enough to melt it away. She needed to get inside as quickly as possible.
“Well,” he spoke, “I can work with this, but it’ll take me a while. We need to get you some place warm. I can drive you where you need to go in my truck, and come back tomorrow to hitch this guy up.” He patted the hood of the rental. “I can fix it up for you.”

Karen was taken aback. Again, having lived in New York City for so long, that kind of kindness was far too uncommon.

“You sure you wouldn’t mind doing that? It wouldn’t be out of your way or anything?” Karen bit her lip. “I can pay you—for the tow and everything.”

Frank wanted to explain that he wasn’t the kind of guy who needed to be reimbursed for helping someone out—that he couldn’t walk away from a problem if he had the skill to fix it. Or, at least, that was the kind of guy he used to be. Before he stopped being much of a person at all.

But he didn’t know how to say all of that in a way that made sense. So he said what he could.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m more concerned about getting you out of this cold. No offense, ma’am, but you’re not really dressed properly for this kind of snow.”

Karen snorted—a sound half-bitter and half-amused. “Yeah, I figured that out really quickly.”

“Where you headed?” Frank removed the prop from beneath the hood of the truck, slamming it down.

“Uh, Brynner’s Cabin? It’s supposed to be up this road a ways, according to Google Maps.” Karen looked over her shoulder in the direction she’d been driving before the breakdown.

Frank shouldn’t have been surprised—the only reason someone would be this far up the road would either be to visit him or to rent the cabin down the way. And obviously she wasn’t here for him. But despite the fact that it was only logical, he was still a little shocked. She didn’t seem like the kind of person to go about renting an isolated cabin in the middle of the woods in the dead of winter. She looked more like a European vacation type of lady. But what did he know—she was clearly a very unusual woman.

“That’s right down the road from my place. Jump in my truck—I’ll take you there.” He pulled out his keys, clicking the doors unlocked.

“Uh…” Karen hesitated, rocking side to side to keep her blood flowing.

Frank read into her apprehension, assuming she was still suspicious of his intentions.

“Not to frighten you, ma’am, but if I was gonna hurt you, don’t you think I’d have done it already? Nobody around here for miles.” Frank could have smacked himself—that sounded much more creepy than he’d intended.

To his surprise, Karen laughed. A big, deep laugh that was absorbed by the soft snowfall. He shoved his hands in his pockets, not sure if he should laugh as well.

“That’s not it—though wow, now I’m feeling a little nervous.” Her voice was playful. “It’s just that I have a ton of luggage and groceries in the back of the truck. And I’m afraid my fingers are too frozen to grab them.” She tucked the fingers in question into her armpits. “And I don’t want to ask you to do more for me than you’ve already done.”

“Oh,” Frank tilted his head to the side. So she wasn’t afraid of him—that was good. “Don’t worry about it. You just get in the truck and turn the heater on. I’ll grab your stuff.” He handed her his keys
before turning to open the back doors of the Chevy.

Frank’s truck was spacious—exactly the kind of truck she imagined a mountain man owning; it smelled like pine, but real pine, not the kind that came from an air freshener. As she slid into the passenger seat and turned the heat on full blast, she noticed a huge bag of dog food shoved into the foot well under her seat.

So he had a dog. She didn’t know why, but that fact set her even more at ease—obliterated the last, lingering doubts she had as to whether jumping into a strange man’s truck was wise.

She put her hands in front of the heater, trying to absorb as much warm air as possible, and watched Frank make five trips to and from her truck—first carrying her luggage, and then the groceries she’d picked up in town.

He was breathing hard by the time he finished, climbing into the driver’s seat and rubbing his hands together for warmth.

“Sorry about that.” Karen’s voice was sheepish; she would have helped, but her fingers were just beginning to gain feeling again.

“No problem, ma’am.” Frank waved her off, shifting the car into drive.

“Karen.”

“Huh?” Frank grunted.

“Call me Karen. If we’re going to be neighbors and all. My mom used to make me call her ma’am, so it weirds me out a little bit.” Karen scrunched her nose, looking at Frank out of the corner of her eye. His face was still mostly obscured by the turned-up collar of his coat, and the hat pulled down over his forehead. From what she could tell, he looked to be about her age, and he had mighty fine eyes.

“Karen,” Frank nodded. Her name felt strange on his tongue—but good.

The cab of the truck grew silent as he slowly ploughed forward through the snow. Suddenly, Frank was feeling self-conscious all over again. He was alone, in a cramped space, with a woman he didn’t know—tongue-tied. Aside from the book club meeting he’d had with David and Curtis earlier in the week, his conversation with Karen had been the longest he’d had in a while. And he hadn’t even done most of the talking—he’d made vague grunting noises while Karen babbled on.

He felt like a rusty machine that had forgotten how to perform its task. There was a time—before—when he was at ease with everyone; when he was the kind of person people wanted at a party. But that version of himself had been long gone. Replaced with a man who didn’t know how to talk to a pretty stranger.

But despite his awkwardness, Frank decided, it was pleasant, just sitting there with Karen. He’d forgotten how nice it could be—meeting someone new. Exciting.

And also nerve-wracking. The silence was beginning to become uncomfortable. He cast out in his mind for a topic of conversation, trying to remember a time when he used to be good at this.

“So how long you gonna be here for?” That was good—simple, natural, small talk.

“Six months,” Karen was flexing her fingers in front of the heater, trying to get them to stop tingling.
“Six months?” Frank couldn’t keep the disbelief out of his voice.

“Yep,” Karen nodded. “Six months.”

She was either bat-shit crazy or she didn’t realize what she was getting herself into. Most people could only handle a week, at most, living up on the mountainside in this kind of winter. Not only did one need basic survival skills to make it through the dark months—cutting firewood, winter-proofing a house, keeping a car running in freezing temperatures—but there was also the fact that the road would often snow over around this time of year. Sometimes Frank would be stranded on the mountain for an entire week, calling in to work to let them know that the road was undriveable. And that meant stockpiling food, knowing how to fix the hot water heater if it went out while maintenance was unable to drive up, and keeping from giving into cabin fever.

Frank, for his part, had never really suffered the psychological effects of being isolated on the mountainside, with nothing but snow and trees for miles on either side. But he enjoyed solitude. He knew of other folks who had attempted to get away to the mountains for extended periods of time who had gone slightly mad. Up in those woods there was a sense of endless, echoing loneliness. Those prone to despair and paranoia rarely fared well in the mountains.

He hoped that Karen wasn’t one of those people.

“What brings you out here?” Frank was momentarily distracted by the sight of Karen removing her hat, shaking out all that pale golden hair. He forced his eyes back on the road.

“Uh, I’m a writer.” It was a declarative statement that sounded more uncertain than declarative.

“Well, I was a writer,” Karen amended. Then waited a beat, “No—I am a writer.”

Frank looked again at Karen through the corner of his eye, lifting a brow. She was staring out the windshield with a frown on her face. She looked…lost. Sad. Confused. Obviously there was a story there, somewhere dark and deep inside of her.

“What does being a writer have to do with you being in Seward?”

“Oh, uh, yeah. I guess that didn’t really answer your question.” Karen chuckled to herself. “I’m taking some time away from my real life to focus on my next book. Or, at least, that’s what my editor says I’m doing.” Karen looked down at the phone on her lap, which still had no signal. She was willing to wager that as soon as she was able to check her messages, she’d find at least ten from a frantic Trish.

“Written anything I’d have read?” Frank asked, slowing the truck as he began to near the stretch of road where both his cabin and the Brynner place nestled back into the tree-line.

“I don’t know. What do you read?”


“Ah. I write psychological thrillers. Murder mysteries. Like Gone Girl?”

“Never heard of it.” Frank pulled the car to a stop in front of Brynner’s Cabin.


Frank felt his lip quirking upwards. “Now you’re making me feel like an idiot or somethin’.”
“Oh no!” Karen held up her hands, “No—it’s just that I spend so much time around other writers and editors that I kind of forgot that there are people who don’t eat, sleep, and breathe the genre.”

Karen had been so busy with her astonishment that she didn’t even notice they’d arrived at their destination. She’d yet to turn around and look out the window at what was to be her home for the next six months.

“S’okay,” Frank nodded. “We’re here, by the way.” He jerked his head to motion out the window.

When Karen turned around, all of her doubts about the sabbatical disappeared. The cabin was perfect—idyllic. Pressed right up against the tree-line, it was covered in a fine layer of snow; a cozy little house with a wide wrap-around porch and tall, blinking windows with a perfect view of the mountainside.

“Oh my god,” Karen pressed a hand against the glass of the passenger window. “It’s perfect.”

“And if you look up there,” Frank pointed through the windshield. “You can just make out my place.”

Sure enough, through the steadily-falling snow, Karen could barely see out the outline of Frank’s own cabin. She felt something very similar to relief fill her lungs at the sight—at least she wouldn’t be entirely alone out here. She’d have Frank nearby, and he seemed like an alright guy.

“Well, let me grab your luggage.” Frank grunted, sliding out of the cab of the truck.

“And I can actually help this time.” Karen flexed her fingers. “Yay for being useful!”

It took them only two trips to get all of her belongings inside. Frank did most of the heavy lifting, while Karen got distracted wandering around her new home. It was a snug little place—one bedroom and one bathroom—decorated in over-stuffed furniture and lots of plaid. Everywhere she looked there were strange knick-knacks, throw pillows, and fleece blankets. The place was obviously designed for maximum comfort. Her favorite feature of the whole house was the window nook in the front living room—a comfortable little area perfect for early morning writing. Karen could just imagine herself curled up in the window, cup of coffee in hand, and typing away on her laptop.

If only the ideas would come to her, of course. And that was a big “if.”

“I’m gonna run down and turn the heater on,” Frank spoke, but Karen was so preoccupied fantasizing about the window nook to really pay much attention. She didn’t even notice him open the door in the kitchen that led to the basement.

She walked around the space, dragging her hand across the wall-length book shelf that took up one side of the living room. Squinting, she searched for her own name, and was tickled to see copies of all five of her books nestled among the collection. The cabin had been rented from some old friends of Trish who used it for skiing once or twice a year. And they were obviously fans of her work.

Karen’s perusal of the bookshelf was momentarily interrupted by the noise of the heater kicking on. Almost instantly, the small cabin began to fill with a near-oppressive heat.

“Shit, that heater isn’t playing around.” Karen turned, shrugging out of her coat, hat, and gloves, tossing them onto the nearby couch.

“It’ll be hot as hell for a while, but it’ll even out in an hour or so.” Frank’s voice carried as he made
his way back up from the basement.

“Well, I’ll never take the heat for granted again.” Karen ran a hand through her hair, shaking it out.

“Alaska’ll do that to ya.” Frank’s voice was suddenly a whole lot closer. When Karen whirled around the face him, she lost all of her words.

_Fuck. Mountain man is hot._

Somewhere along the way, Frank had shed his coat and his hat. He was standing in front of her dressed in jeans and a grey Henley, with his curly hair standing up in all directions. He was certain that he looked frightening, but Karen’s appreciative scan of his figure proved otherwise.

It was the well-defined muscles of his torso that did it for her—the way that his dirty, grease-stained shirt clung to impressive biceps and what were obviously-stellar pecs. But it was also that hair—all that dark, thick, curling hair. Wild and ruffled around his face. And, she decided, the jaw—sharp and strong and square. It was _everything_. She hadn’t been able to get a good look at him under his hat and coat, but now that she had, she was beginning to form a new appreciation for her rescuer.

Frank shifted on his feet under Karen’s intense gaze, and her eyes snapped up to his, looking a little horrified at how openly she’d been oogling him. The tips of her ears turned red.

“Sorry, I—it was hard to get a good look at you earlier. I just assumed you were a grizzled, old mountain man with a hunchback or something.” Karen immediately pressed a hand to her mouth to keep anything else embarrassing from coming out.

Frank was quiet for a moment, before bursting into a laugh. A deep, low laugh that sounded mighty fine reverberating off of the walls of the small cabin. It felt rusty, coming out of Frank’s throat. But good.

“I’m so sorry. I have no idea what’s wrong with me today. I usually have a better filter than this.” Karen was about ready to kick herself, she was so embarrassed.

“’S fine.” Frank waved a hand at her. It was a little charming, in fact.

“Oh, my mother would be so furious at me. I haven’t offered you anything to drink,” Karen began moving toward the little kitchen, which was attached to the living room. “I picked up some coffee at the store—I could make a cup for you?”

“Uh,” Frank shifted uncertainly on his feet. He was beginning to feel a little strange, standing around in Karen’s home. The feeling was just too unfamiliar. Being around other people, apparently, was like exercising a muscle. The less you did it, the less accustomed you became, and that faster you got worn out. It was embarrassing to admit, but Frank was ready to go home—all the reading body language and thinking of things to say and formulating appropriate responses was exhausting. “I should actually get going.” He jerked a thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the back door. “Dog’s waiting for his dinner. But I’m right down the way if you need anything.”

“I—yeah,” Karen wiped suddenly sweaty hands down the legs of her jeans. “Thank you so much. You really saved my life today. Sorry about all the—the babbling.” She waved her hands around for emphasis.

“No problem,” Frank turned to gather up his winter clothing, which he’d tossed on the breakfast room table. “I’ll go out and get your truck tomorrow. Should be fixed up in a day or two.”

“Thanks again, Frank. I really don’t think I can say it enough.” Karen walked him to the back door
and watched him shrug on his coat.

“Don’t worry about it. See you around.” He gave a funny little salute, and then disappeared into the snowfall.

Karen closed the door, leaning against it with a deep breath.

The cabin was quiet—save for the buzzing of the heater. And she was all alone.

Utterly, alarmingly alone.

“Hey, boy.” Max, Frank’s grey pitbull, was on him as soon as he opened the door, big paws landing on his owner’s shoulders with all the force in his little canine body. “Whoa there.” Frank stumbled back, laughing, as he reached down to scratch Max behind the ears.

The dog must have smelled someone new on Frank, because he was going a little crazier than usual, shoving his snout in all of Frank’s sensitive parts, tail wagging so hard his entire body was shaking.

“Okay, boy, calm down. Calm down.” Frank put a gentle hand on Max’s head, shoving him away so that he could take more than two steps in the front door. The dog proceeded the jump and nip around Frank’s ankles as he dropped the bag of dog food he had been carrying onto the kitchen counter. The noise of Max’s claws on the tile floor made him smile, as it always did—that dog was Frank’s pride and joy.

“Yep, boy. Met someone new today. Bet that’s what you’re smelling on me.” Frank grabbed Max’s water bowl from the floor and stood over the sink, filling it. “Her name’s Karen. Smells a hell of a lot better than I do, huh?” Max tried to shove his body between Frank and the kitchen cabinet, and Frank reached down the scratch the dog’s butt.

From the kitchen window, he could just make out the outline of Brynner’s cabin through the driving snow. It was lit up—glowing yellow in the distance, fuzzy through the storm. A warm spot of heat in a sea of white.

It would be strange, Frank thought, as he placed Max’s water bowl on the floor, to have a neighbor for six whole months. To be able to look out his window and see someone—see Karen—living her life adjacent to his own.

It would be strange, but decidedly pleasant.

Frank knew what the people in town thought about him; what they whispered when he walked by on his way to the Home Depot or the bookstore. They thought he was a hermit; a misanthrope; a crazy man who lived up in the mountains all alone because he couldn’t stand the sight of other people.

But they were wrong. Frank didn’t live so far from civilization because he hated people; it was because he was scared. He was broken. He was…lost. Or, at least, he used to be.

Frank absent-mindedly ran a hand over Max’s head, turning to lean his back against the kitchen counter, crossing one leg over the other. He eyed the piece of paper that had been stuck to his refrigerator for a few weeks now—a “save the date” for the town’s Winter Festival that was about two months away. Sarah Lieberman was planning it this year, which was why the invites had gone out so early; that woman always liked to be three steps ahead of the game. Every time Frank passed
the fridge, he stopped to stare at it for a moment, contemplating.

After the accident five years ago—after losing Maria and kids—he hadn’t known how to cope with being alive. Existing was painful; waking up every morning without anyone to live for carved away at him a little more each day, until he was a hollowed-out version of himself. In the wake of so much tragedy, he didn’t know how to be Frank anymore. Found it difficult to be around other people.

So he’d run away; he’d escaped. He’d left everything far behind, looking for a quiet place to lick his wounds and heal.

And he’d found it, up in the mountains. Found solitude and reflection—a place to break himself down and rebuild until he was a shape that could exist on its own. Isolation had become a habit. He learned to revel in it—to transform himself into an island, alone.

Pushing off of the cabinet, Frank walked toward the invitation on the fridge, running a finger over his name in embossed calligraphy.

That was five years ago. And Frank had done his healing—or however much of it he would ever be capable of—and it was probably time to rejoin society. Problem was, Frank wasn’t exactly sure how.

But living next to Karen felt like a start.
Chapter 2

Apologies for Karen being a little monologue-y. I think? IDK. This fic is like 65 pages in Word and I'm losing my mind.

The first day waking up alone in the cabin wasn’t so bad. It was actually quite peaceful; Karen had never realized just how quiet the world became when it was covered in snow. Like every noise made in nature was swallowed up by a soft, white blanket. And the way it glistened—looking out her window was like gazing above a field of compacted stars. The snow in New York was dirty with smog—a grey slush—but not here. Here it was pure.

She’d spent that first day exploring her new home—drinking a fresh cup of coffee in the window nook, listening to music on the stereo, and wandering from room to room, trying to decide which one exuded the most powerful aura of “inspiration.” She didn’t even try to write—didn’t want to push herself into it too quickly. It had been Trish’s suggestion that she take things slowly—ease herself in. In fact, Trish had been so relieved to finally get a phone call from Karen the night before, that she had promised to lay off pushing for a new chapter for at least a few days.

So instead, Karen had taken some time to decompress—to center herself. That evening, she’d waved to Frank out of her front window as she saw him driving up the road with her truck attached to his rig. It had put a smile on her face, seeing her mountain man nod through his windshield, a very serious look on his face. She’d gone to sleep that night feeling hopeful, thinking that maybe this cabin would help her find her inspiration after all.

The next morning, she woke up determined to get started on her writing. No more stalling, no more relaxing, no more playing around. She’d come to Alaska to write, and damnit, she was going to write. Foregoing her leisurely morning coffee, Karen had downed a quick and scalding cup, before forcing herself to sit down at her laptop and write.

And write. And write. And write.

For hours, she remained on the couch, wrapped up in a fleece blanket, fingers clacking away at the keyboard. By the time evening fell, she had 30 typed pages in front of her.

All of it utter shit.

Just reams and reams of un-usable garbage. She’d been writing based off of a storyboard she’d had in her notebook for a while—an idea involving a murder set at an all-girl’s, private school. Something with the flavor of Donna Tartt’s *The Secret History,* with a little bit of *Jaw Breaker* mixed in. It was a great outline—had all the elements of a compelling thriller—but everything that ended up on the page was atrocious. Lackluster, unoriginal drivel. Karen was embarrassed to even look at it.

At around midnight on that second night, Karen had decided that what she needed was a fresh start. To throw away her storyboard and build from the ground up. New concept, new characters, new ideas.
In a fit of anxious mania, she’d dumped out her entire briefcase in the middle of the living room floor and gathered up every Post-It note and loose leaf paper she could find. Frantically, in an almost hysterical state, she’d begun scribbling out plotlines and character webs on everything she could get her hands on. Like a woman possessed, she went to work, fueling herself with cup of coffee after cup of coffee, hoping that inspiration would reveal itself if she just kept trying.

She didn’t go to bed until 4AM. And when she did, she passed out on the living room floor cuddled up under a pile of blankets. When she awoke the next afternoon, at around 3PM, her living room had become something from *A Beautiful Mind*—every square inch of wall space covered in barely-legible notes about possible themes and character flaws and timelines.

She’d emerged from her fortress of blankets, sweaty and groggy, and stumbled into the kitchen for more coffee. Looking out the window over the sink, she noticed that her truck was in the driveway. Frank must have brought it by while she was in her writing coma, and she made a mental note to thank him the next time she saw him.

But she didn’t see him again—not for a full week. Partially because he left for work at 3AM every morning, long before she gained consciousness, and partially because she spent the next five days in a desperate haze, slipping in and out of despair as the writer’s block tightened its hold on her. Every day it was the same thing—waking up in the midafternoon, walking around the house like a zombie, imbibing too much coffee, trying to write, and going to bed in the early morning hours. Rinse and repeat. She didn’t leave the house—didn’t feel like she could until she had something to show for all of her effort.

In short, she was going crazy. Fucking crazy. Barely eating, not showering, and sleeping in fits and starts. Picking up her laptop, staring at the wall for an hour, then putting it down again.

She’d never experienced anything like this before in her life—this kind of desperate, tearing, mental *emptiness*. Ever since her days as an undergraduate at UNC Chapel Hill, she’d kept a notebook stuffed to the brim with ideas for characters and short stories. Usually, all she had to do to was flip to a random page, read through her notes, and get started typing away.

That simple.

She’d never had to struggle and agonize to find her muse. And maybe that was the problem, because now it was gone—that intangible, life-giving *thing* that allowed her to write. And it was sending her into a panic.

This Alaskan sabbatical was her last-ditch effort at producing something of merit; her last chance to try and find illumination. And if it failed—if *she* failed, out here in the wilderness—then that was it. That was all she had in her; nothing more. She’d admit that she was out of ideas.

But so far, she was no closer to literary revelation. Had no idea how to even *start* tackling the demon of the blank page.

So she decided to procrastinate. On day eight of her Alaskan adventure, Karen put down her notebook and slowly stepped away from her laptop. She couldn’t continue to torture herself like this—it wasn’t healthy.

She needed a fucking break.

The first order of business: a bath. The cabin was equipped with the deepest, most inviting claw-foot tub Karen had ever seen. She’d run enough hot water to risk overflowing when she got in, added a generous dose of lavender bath oil (a gift from Trish to help her de-stress), and sunk into the
steaming water. Her goal was to turn her brain off, even if only for a moment. And she did. Or, at least, she was able to turn her brain away from the problem of her next novel. Instead, she found herself preoccupied with thoughts of Frank Castle, the handsome mountain man.

He was a curious case—mysterious. Despite the fact that he lived only a two minute walk down the road, she’d yet to see him since the day he’d towed her truck up through the snow. It was almost like he had disappeared off of the face of the earth; the only sign of his existence was the plume of smoke that rose from his chimney every night.

It was odd, Karen thought, as she settled down in the tub until the water reached her chin. She knew why she had chosen a life of isolation in the Alaskan mountains, but why had Frank? What was it that made a man choose to live out here, all lone, miles and miles from the nearest person? And how did the solitude not drive him insane? She was barely a week into her sabbatical and she could already feel the need for human interaction eating away at her from the inside out.

Obviously he wasn’t living in the mountains because he’d been rejected from society. No way—not looking like he did; like every female fantasy of the rugged mountain man come to life. Karen slid further into the water, taking a deep breath and submerging herself. She didn’t see men like Frank in New York; men who looked like they could wrestle a mountain lion with their bare hands—who looked damn good in a grease-stained shirt. No—the men she knew in New York were more of the Wall Street type; wearing freshly-starched suits and swaggering around like they owned the world. She hadn’t realized how attractive the rough, lumberjack look could be; and if she found him attractive, she could bet other women did too. So his seclusion must have been self-imposed. But toward what end?

Karen sat in the tub, contemplating Frank, until the water began to grow icy.

When she stepped out, dressing in her most comfortable pajamas, she found that just thinking about picking up her laptop again was unbearably depressing. So instead, she did what she always did when she was trying to avoid something painful: she baked.

Luckily, she’d had the foresight to pick up strawberries, rhubarb, and pie crust at the store on her first day in town. It was something she’d learned from her grandmother—never go anywhere without the ingredients to bake a pie.

She was halfway through creating the perfect pie filling when the noise of the house creaking out a groan gave her pause. It was so loud, the floor beneath her feet rumbled—it sounded like it had come from the basement. She stood still, listening intently, braced for something (she didn’t know what). But the house was silent, so she shrugged it off, resuming her task and adding a generous heap of sugar to her filling mixture.

She almost dropped her measuring cup at the second groan—louder than the first—as it took her so completely by surprise.

“What the fu—,” she was unable to finish uttering the curse before the inner workings of the cabin let out another shudder, followed by silence. Deafening silence. It took her a moment to realize why the absence of sound was so shocking—and then it hit her: she couldn’t even hear the heater running. She stood at the kitchen counter for a moment, straining to hear the low hum of hot air circulating. But no—there was nothing.

Fuck.

It didn’t take long—only a handful of seconds—for the warmth of the kitchen to dissipate, replaced
with the encroaching chill from outside. The Alaskan cold was a predator, and did not hesitate to force its way in at the first opportunity.

Karen let her baking supplies fall onto the counter, and put her head in her hands. She stood there for a moment, breathing deeply, before shaking herself to action.

“Okay—you can do this. You have internet access. You can Google ‘how to fix a heater.’ You’re a smart, capable, 21st century woman, Karen. It’s going to be okay.” She grabbed her phone and marched down into the basement, determined to take matters into her own hands.

Frank had just gotten out of the shower, washing off the dirt and grime of a day at the logging mill, when he heard a knock at his front door. Karen—it had to be—there was nobody else around. But what was she doing at his place at 9 o’clock on a Friday night? Pulling on a pair of sweatpants and throwing his towel over his shoulder, Frank padded his way to the front door.

“Hey, Frank, I—” Karen’s voice died in her throat as she took in all the tanned flesh of Frank’s bare torso. With his sweatpants slung low on his hips, there was a lot to admire. He was tightly corded in muscle, brawny in the way that only men accustomed to physical labor were. The muscles of his chest caught a few drops of water as they fell from his still-wet hair, and Karen absent-mindedly noted that his pecs looked perfectly contoured to fit into the soft curve of her palm. Her eyes trailed lower, almost of their own volition, to well-defined abs bracketed by the most fascinating V of muscle. There was so much there to appreciate, but Karen found her eyes following the trail of his chest hair as it narrowed into a thin line, disappearing below his belly button. Her mouth went absolutely dry.

Luckily for her, Frank was too distracted taking in her appearance to notice the way her eyes devoured him greedily.

“Karen? Why are you wearing pajamas in -10 degree weather?” Frank’s brow furrowed as he let his eyes drift down her navy blue, plaid pajama set. She wasn’t even wearing a jacket for Christ’s sake. The woman was going to freeze if she stayed out there any longer.

“It was just a three minute walk over here, I didn’t think it would be that bad.” Karen shrugged, looking a little sheepish as her body convulsed in a shiver.

“Get in.” Frank held his door open wider and stepped back, allowing her to squeeze past him into the house. She took a deep breath as the warm air hit her frozen skin.

Frank watched Karen brush the snow from her shoulders. Over the course of the week, he seemed to have forgotten how lovely his new neighbor was. It was a bit like a kick in the gut, seeing her again; he was used to spending his days around sweaty, sawdust-covered men. Not women with lushly-curving smiles and distracting beauty marks next to their mouths.

He found himself feeling inexplicably tense, standing awkwardly in the front hallway and unsure of that to do or say. The only people who’d ever been inside of his house in the past few years had been Curtis and David, and only rarely. It was odd seeing someone new in his personal space—a vulnerable sensation that wasn’t exactly comfortable.

Karen, however, seemed oblivious to Frank’s inner tension, as she stomped her feet on the floor and shook out the sleeves of her pajama top, which sent a flurry of snowflakes to the ground.

“Thanks. Obviously I still haven’t learned my lesson about temperature-appropriate clothing.” Karen
was about to open her mouth to ask for his help with her heater, when she was interrupted by a large, furry body colliding with her legs. “Whoa, shit!” She barely managed to avoid falling over as a gorgeous, grey Pitbull shoved its snout right into the back of her knees.

“Max! Be careful!” Frank held a hand out as if to grab Max by the collar, but Karen was already crouching on the ground with her hands behind the dog’s ears before he could do much.

“Look at you! Wow, aren’t you handsome?!” Karen’s face was lit up in a wide grin, as she let the puppy bury his face in her neck. “Are you Max? Is that you, huh?”

“Yeah, he doesn’t get to meet strangers that often.” Frank shoved his hands into the pockets of his sweatpants, watching Karen dote on his dog. She leaned down to press a kiss to Max’s forehead, and Frank was struck, suddenly, by how sweet a gesture it was.

“He’s gorgeous.” She breathed, patting his head one last time before standing up again. Max continued to circle around her legs, nudging at her thighs with his nose.

“Yeah, he’s okay.” Frank couldn’t keep the smile from his voice. There was a pause, and then. “Uh, so did you need something, Karen?”

“Oh yeah!” Karen blinked in surprise, looking around as if suddenly remembering where she was. “I’m so sorry to bother you, but I think my heater is broken, and I can’t figure out what’s wrong. I don’t want to use you as my own personal maintenance man, or anything, but I tried looking it up on Google—what could be wrong with it—and I’m just lost. You said you were good with machines, so I just figured you might know a thing or two?” She looked reluctant to be asking a favor.

“Uh, sure. I can look at it.” Frank raised an arm to scratch at the back of his head. Karen’s eyes tracked the bunching of his bicep as he did.

“Are you sure?” She darted her eyes back to his before he could notice the direction of her gaze. “I feel like the shitty neighbor who only comes over when she needs help with something.”

Frank cracked a smile. “Ain’t got nothin’ else to do.”

“Oh, thank god,” Karen let out a breath of relief. “It’s starting to feel like an ice box in that cabin. I’m pretty sure I can’t feel my toes.” Frank was a little bit offended at how relieved Karen seemed—like there was a chance that he’d say no.

“Let me finish getting dressed.” Frank turned to walk back to his bedroom. “Grab a coat from the closet to your left. You’re gonna freeze out there,” he threw over his shoulder as he disappeared down the hallway.

Karen bit her lip, trying not to admire the sloping curve of his back as he walked away (and failing). She turned, opening the hall closet to reveal a line of sturdy winter coats. Leaning forward, she inhaled—they smelled like man. Of sawdust and warmth and something smoky.

“What do you think, Max?” She reached down to pet the puppy that was still pressed up against her leg. “Should we go with the brown leather or the shearling?”

Max made a little yipping noise, dropping his head to nuzzle at Karen’s feet.

“Yeah, me too.”
By the time Frank returned, wearing a plaid shirt and a heavy duty jacket, carrying a tool box, Karen was wrapped up in a shearling coat that seemed to swallow her whole. Frank was momentarily stunned by the sight of a woman wearing his clothes—he hadn’t experienced that in a long, long time.

He hadn’t realized how intimate it was to see someone else inhabiting your wardrobe—it was like they were slipping into your skin. Their body surrounded by your smell and your presence, while the heat from their flesh sunk into the fibers. The thought took Frank aback for a moment.

It wasn’t wholly disagreeable, just odd.

“Uh, ready to go?” He shook his head of those thoughts, moving to open the front door.

“I think so.” Karen took a deep breath. “God, I feel like I’m steeling myself for the apocalypse every time I walk outside.”

Frank smirked down at the blonde bundled up in his coat, and threw the door open.

“Fuck me,” she muttered under her breath, as soon as the burst of cold air hit. Frank shook his head, snorting. Poor thing. How was she going to survive six months out here?

“Oh, by the way, I never got to thank you for fixing my car the other day. So thank you.” Karen had to shout to be heard over the roaring of the wind as it whipped at their faces. She wished she’d worn better shoes, as the snow began to seep in.

“No big deal.” Frank leaned down toward her so that she could hear.

“Are you sure? Because it seems like a big deal to me. Just fixing my car for free?”

“Friend of mine owned an auto shop in town. Went out of business a few years ago. I always keep some spare parts in my garage that he wasn’t able to sell.” Frank shifted the toolbox in his hands. “ Took me 30 minutes.”

“Ah, well. Thanks anyway.” Karen shrugged, struggling to keep up with his pace in the ankle-deep snow. “I really mean it—I owe you big.”

“Gotta stop thanking me for everything. It’s gonna get old real fast.” Frank shook his head as they approached the back door of Karen’s cabin.

“You foresee me needing your help a lot in the future?” She raised a brow, throwing open the back door and practically shoving passed Frank to get in from the biting wind.

“At the rate you’re going now…,” he trailed off, setting his tool box on Karen’s breakfast room table. The inside of the cabin wasn’t much warmer than the outside, so he kept his coat on.

“Hey—I tried to fix this one myself. I really did!” Karen threw her hands up in exasperation. “It’s not my fault that heater was installed in the 1950s and there’s no YouTube tutorial on how to fix it.”

“Alright. Let’s see if I can figure it out, huh?” Frank grabbed a few tools from his box, shoving them into the pockets of his coat, and heading down to the basement.

“Hate asking men for help,” Karen grumbled under her breath, watching his disappear down the stairs. She glanced around her frigid kitchen with a frown. Her strawberry rhubarb pie sat on the counter, still waiting to be baked. Not wanting to be useless, she decided to pop it into the oven—maybe it would be done by the time Frank had figured out the heating situation, and she could repay
him in baked goods.

There was a small part of her mind that was rolling its eyes at how stereotypical the situation was—the woman baking while the man was in the basement doing manual labor. But an even larger part of her mind just wanted pie.

Frank knew almost immediately what was wrong with the heater—he had the exact model in his own home. All it required was cleaning the filter, tightening a few bolts, and unblocking a pipe. Wouldn’t take more than 30 minutes.

He had been at his task for around 18, when a delicious smell began to waft down the basement stairs. Frank paused in his work to turn his nose up and sniff the air. It was a familiar scent—sweet and cloying—but he couldn’t quite place it. Shrugging, he returned to his task.

While he still wasn’t entirely comfortable being inside someone else’s home—someone he didn’t know all too well—he was comfortable here, with his hands busy at work. Having something to do occupied his mind; kept him from thinking about the woman upstairs, and the fact that she was likely going to expect more small talk when he finished fixing the heater (he’d used up his entire store on the walk over).

By the time he was finished, the scent from the kitchen had begun to make his mouth water. Clearly Karen was baking something, and it smelled damn good. With one last twist of his wrench, Frank heard the heater hum to life. He gave it a satisfied pat, then began to make his way up from the basement.

“Oh good! You’re just in time for pie!” Karen met him at the door, wearing oven mitts and a thousand watt smile. Frank felt his lips quirking up—with her pajamas and her mitts, she looked like a sleepwalking baker.

“Pie?” Frank looked over her shoulder at the pastry sitting on the kitchen cabinet.

“Uh, yeah.” Karen pulled her oven mitts off. “Strawberry rhubarb. My grandmother’s recipe. Let me cut you a piece to say thanks for the heater.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Frank scratched the back of his neck. He didn’t like people feeling indebted to him. And more than that, the out-of-place feeling he got standing around in her house was beginning to wear at him.

“Of course I don’t.” Karen shrugged. “But I want to. How sad would it be to eat a pie, alone, sitting in the dark, on a Friday night?”

“Pretty sad, I guess.” Frank admitted.

“Exactly. So go sit on the couch and I’ll bring you a slice.” She tilted her head in the direction of the living room.

“Alright.” Frank shrugged off his jacket, throwing it over the breakfast room table, before following her directions. It wouldn’t kill him to eat a little pie; plus, it smelled so damn good.

As soon as he set foot into the living room, Frank didn’t know what the fuck he was looking at. All he knew was that it was insane.

“Holy shit…” he muttered under his breath, turning in a complete circle to take in what Karen had
done to the place. The walls were covered in papers, taped up in a seemingly random order, overlapping one another in a chaotic array. Everywhere he looked—more manically-scribbled notes.

He walked forward, leaning closer until he could read some of them: “killer is an imaginary friend who turns out to be real (is that lame???)”; “a re-telling of The Marking from the killer’s POV?”; “Isolation? Paranoia? What’s compelling there?”

He ran a finger over a line of sticky-notes that were illegible, brow furrowed. It felt like looking into someone’s chaotic mind.

“Oh—oh my god.” Karen’s voice had Frank whirring around quickly. She was standing at the threshold between the kitchen and the living room, holding two slices of pie, looking mortified. “I absolutely forgot about the Beautiful Mind room.”

“The Beautiful Mind room?” Frank stepped forward, reaching out to grab a plate from her hands.

“Yeah. I went a little crazy the other day when I was trying to write. Pulled a John Nash and just covered the walls in ideas. Most of them shitty.” Her voice took on a bitter edge as she spoke. Casting her glance around the room, Karen sighed, before plopping down on the couch. “I meant to tear it down before anyone saw.”

“So these are all…” Frank continued walking along the walls of the living room, stopping to read a scrap or two along the way. “Notes for stories?”

“Yeah,” Karen took a bite of her pie, thinking while she chewed. “Obviously I have no idea where I’m going with any of it. But yeah.”

“Damn.” Frank took his own bite, and almost groaned in delight. It had been a long, long time since he’d had a baked good. He was an excellent cook, but Maria had been the baker. And this pie was amazing.

“You know, I think 99% of writing is just throwing ideas on the wall—literally—and seeing what sticks. It’s frustrating.” Karen propped her feet up on the coffee table, eyeing Frank as he leaned forward to read another note.

“’Fear of not being able to protect those that trust you’?” He read out loud, a dark, familiar feeling curling in his gut. That was a fear he recognized. “What’s it mean?” He turned to look at Karen.

“Uh, sometimes I try to come up with plotlines by just thinking about the things that scare me, y’know?” She ran a hand through her hair. “People think that a good murder mystery is all about the blood and gore and the jump scares, but really it’s about tapping into those things that really keep us up at night.” She bit her lip, looking thoughtful. “The nightmares that are difficult to explain to other people because they feel so private.”

“Huh,” Frank grunted. It was fascinating. He’d read a lot of books in his time, but he’d never once stopped to think about where the ideas for those books came from. Never thought about the kind of people who made a living imagining whole worlds for others to inhabit. When Karen had told him she was a writer, he’d assumed she’d been embellishing—that she was one of those wealthy ladies who pursued creative projects on the side. But looking at the covered walls of her living room, he guessed he was wrong. She was a real writer.

Scanning the notations on the walls, Frank felt all of his self-consciousness melt away—replaced wholly with curiosity. About everything he was seeing; about Karen. There were doors to entire worlds spread across those walls. “Where do you get these ideas?” He took another bite of pie.
“Uh…” Karen sighed, shaking her head. “Mostly from watching people, I guess. Studying them. Talking to them—finding out what drives them. What they long for, what they dread.” She leaned forward, placing her elbows on her knees. “I think writers like brokenness. We kind of gravitate to it. For better or worse.”

“What do you mean?” Frank moved to sit down in the arm chair across from Karen, who was staring off into the distance at nothing at all.

“You ever heard that David Foster Wallace quote? ‘Good fiction’s job is to comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable’?” She placed her chin in her palm, turning to look at Frank, who was watching her with an unexpected and intense interest.

“Uh, I think so. Maybe.” It sounded like something he’d heard David say before, or maybe Curtis.

“Well, I think that’s especially true for the kind of fiction I write. The psychological kind.” Karen bit the end of her thumb, thinking. “I write about the parts of the human psyche that terrify me—that I don’t understand. About pain and loneliness and the kind of sadness that can turn people into monsters. A lot of people are disturbed by that kind of thing, y’know? And for other people, it’s cathartic. It’s comforting to read about the macabre from the safety of your own home. Makes you feel insulated and protected. Does that make sense?”

Frank hummed, indicating that he was still listening.

“Well, everything interesting in humanity comes out of brokenness, I think. Everything I write about—all of it is an attempt to understand how people can break past a certain point. Get to a place where they’re living in a distorted reality. So I guess I gravitate toward hurt—toward those jagged parts of humanity—because I’m just trying to figure it out.”

It was odd—Karen had never really tried to put it into words before, what it was that she did. Why she did it.

Frank chewed his pie thoughtfully. “Isn’t that kind of… dark?”

Karen snorted out a laugh, smiling. “Yeah. Yeah, it is.”

“So why write it?” He stared at Karen, with her cornflower blue eyes and hair the color of sunshine, and tried to see her as the kind of person who spent all of her time completing darkness. It was a disconcerting image.

“Uh,” Karen nodded her head. It was a good question. “I guess because books are machines of empathy. They teach us how to step outside of our own skin and understand realities we’ll never get to touch, right?”

Frank nodded. He’d definitely heard Curtis say something similar before.

“Well, the world’s a really dark place. And I think understanding that darkness is important. I think the only way we have of fixing the brokenness we encounter in the world is to understand it. Plus, these stories remind us that the truth is very rarely simple, and neither are people.”

There was a pause, in which Frank tried to digest that.

“Oh god, am I boring you?” Karen pressed a hand to her mouth. “I feel like I just went off on a book lecture when all you wanted to do was eat some goddamn pie.”
“No. No.” Frank put his empty plate on the coffee table, leaning forward. “I asked.”

He’d never had a conversation like this before—never spoken to someone who created things; who worked with their mind instead of their hands. It was different—it was intriguing. And it definitely wasn’t small-talk.

“So you said,” Frank gestured around the room with his hand, “that this is all shitty?”

“Ha!” Karen let out a bitter laugh and collapsed back against the couch. “Yes. All of it. Not a single worthwhile idea in the bunch.”

“How can you tell?”

“Because…” Karen trailed off, brow furrowing. How could she tell? “I guess because…none of it sounds true?” It came out as a question.

“What does truth have to do with fiction?” Frank ran a hand over his beard, scratching slightly.

“Everything.” Karen nodded to herself. “If it’s not honest, what the point of reading it? If it’s not going to—I don’t know—make you confront your own reality?”

“Hmm,” Frank nodded as well.

“Are you sure this isn’t boring you? We don’t have to talk about my crazy writing process. I’m sure you don’t like to spend your Friday nights pontificating about books.” Karen tilted her head to the side.

“No, I—,” Frank paused; thought. “I actually go to this book club every Tuesday with some friends. Talk about stuff like this.”

“Really?!” Karen sounded delighted (and a little shocked).

“Yeah,” Frank quirked a smile. “Surprised I can read?”

“No, that’s not—” Karen jolted, immediately in back-tracking mode. “That’s not what I meant at all, I just—”

“I’m teasing. It’s okay.” Frank held up a hand, grinning fully now.

“You just don’t meet a lot of adults who do stuff like that anymore. In fact, I think a lot of adults stop reading after school. Life gets too busy. Too much going on.” Karen shook her head.

“Obviously not a problem in my case.” Frank’s tone was self-deprecating; humorous.

“Yeah, what is it that you do, actually? I realized I haven’t asked.” Karen scrunched her nose. “You’ve just let me talk about myself for so long.”

“Uh,” Frank shifted in his seat. He was comfortable listening to other people—and actually, listening to Karen was interesting—but talking about himself was still a little rough. The people he saw everyday didn’t need to ask him about his life—they already knew him. “I work at the logging mill in town. Oversee the circular sawmill.”

“Hmm,” Karen nodded sagely. “No idea what that means.”

Frank snorted. “Yeah, somedays I don’t either.”
“That doesn’t sound like something a man who operates heavy machinery should be saying,” Karen said with a chuckle.

“That would explain why I’ve got three prosthetic fingers.” Frank deadpanned, and Karen’s chuckle turned into a full-blown laugh.

Frank watched her, with her head thrown back, fascinated. It had been a minute since he’d made anyone other than Curtis and David laugh. He was surprised at how easily it was coming to him—how relatively effortless it was to talk to Karen. He supposed, in part, it was because of her profession; he was sure that someone who spent most of their time studying people and writing dialogue would be a great conversationalist. But it also felt like he was dusting off the parts of him that used to be really good at this—the parts of him that were capable of making Maria laugh; were comfortable joking around. The parts that, while creaky and unused, were still there.

Karen, for her part, was contemplating the mystery of Frank Castle. He was a great listener—and he seemed genuinely interested in what she had to say, which was unexpected. Not that she was an intellectual elitist who assumed people who worked with their hands couldn’t enjoy literary pursuits; it was just so startling, that her rugged mountain man would take such an interest in what she had to say.

She could see it in his eyes—that keen intelligence—like a man used to being under-estimated. And something else, too—something that was a little timid and unsure. Karen found that infinitely interesting; why would a man like Frank have anything to be timid about? Especially around her.

“So,” Karen slipped very carefully into prying mode. “You been working at the logging mill long?”

Frank stiffened slightly. So she was trying to turn the conversation in his direction.

“Yeah.”

“And do you enjoy it?”

“Sometimes.”


“So you’ve lived in Seward for a long time? Were you born here?”

“Yes.”

Karen bit back a smile. “You don’t like talking about yourself, do you, Frank?”

“Not really, ma’am.”

“Uh oh. Back to ‘ma’am,’ is it?” Karen raised a brow.

“Sorry, Karen.” Frank frowned. He hadn’t even realized he’d done it; he was sure Curtis would have something to say about formal terms being used as a defense mechanism. And he would probably be right. “Habit.”

“Hmm,” Karen nodded, understanding. “That’s okay. I’ve got six months to get to know you. I’ll let you off the hook for now.”

Frank felt relief flood him. “Well I sure do appreciate it.”

“Is that sarcasm I hear?” Karen’s lips quirked up.
“Just a little bit.”

“Well, as long as it’s only a little bit.”

Frank grinned. They were bantering; it was nice.

Karen figured she’d pushed her luck enough—the easy comfort he’d slipped into when she’d been talking about her writing had disappeared. He looked like he was getting close to his limit of human interaction, closing off a little. She’d gotten an hour’s worth of conversation out of him, and that counted for something. So she decided to give him an out.

“Want me to wrap up some pie for you to take home?”

“I don’t want to take your pie from you.” Frank waved a dismissive hand.

“Well I’m not going to eat a whole pie by myself, am I?” Karen stood up, stretching. “Let me give you some to go. Say thanks for all the work you’ve done for me.”

“Yes ma’am.”

She turned and gave him a sharp look.

“Karen,” he corrected with a smile.

After Frank left, Karen picked up a pencil and a sticky note, then stood in the middle of the living room, staring at the wall of manic scribbling in front of her. She crossed her arms—uncrossed them—stepped forward.

Pulling off a handful of sticky notes, she cleared a blank spot. In the middle, she stuck her new Post-It and wrote “lonely mountain man living in solitude—running from something.”

She took a step back, staring at the notation, tilting her head. It looked right—it looked good.

For the first time in weeks, she felt something akin to inspiration bloom deep in her gut.

That Saturday morning, Frank made his way into town to drop by the bookstore. He’d been thinking about Karen all night—about the wall of sticky-notes in her living room and what she’d said about finding empathy in the darkness. It was intriguing. He found himself desperately wanting to read something she had written.

“Frank fuckin’ Castle,” David Lieberman’s voice met him as soon as he walked in the door. “Are my eyes deceiving me? It’s not even book club day, and you’re out of the house?”

Frank grimaced.

“Just here for some books, Lieberman.”

David leaned over from behind the counter, arms spread to indicate the whole of the store. “Well, you definitely came to the right place, buddy.”

“Oh, I must be going crazy. I thought I heard Frank’s—” Curtis emerged from the back room, stopping mid-stride when he saw Frank standing uncomfortably in the doorway. “Frank! What are
“You doing here?!” He looked at David, confused. “It’s not Tuesday, right?”

“No, it’s not Tuesday,” Frank grumbled, shoving his hands into his pockets.

“Good. Good. Thought I was going crazy.” Curtis made his way around the counter and grabbed Frank in a hug. “What are you doing here, man?”

“Can’t a guy buy a book on a Saturday without getting the third degree?”

“Uhm, a guy can,” David put his elbows on the counter, resting his chin in his hands, “but you can’t.” He raised an eyebrow.

“And why is that?” Frank tamped down his irritation.

“Because for the past five years, it’s been the same thing. You stay hidden up in your little mountain cave except for Mondays, when you come into town to buy supplies, and Tuesdays, when Curtis and I threaten you with bodily harm in order to force you to come to book club.” David looked away thoughtfully. “And once in a blue moon Sarah bothers you enough to come to dinner. But if you start changing the routine now, all the rules fly out the window. There’ll be chaos!”

Frank sighed, regretting the decision to make the drive down.

“Oh, leave him alone, man.” Curtis pointed a finger at David. “You bust his balls too much, and he’ll never agree to hang out with us again.”

“Okay, fine.” David rolled his eyes. “But you gotta admit, seeing Frank on a designated-non-Frank day is kind of weird. Twilight Zone-y.” He wagged his eyebrows.

“Every day I regret going into business with you,” Curtis sighed.

“You say that, but if you didn’t have me, you’d have nobody to run the computers.” David shook his head solemnly. “Nobody to order inventory, manage the books, keep the records. Admit it: you’d be lost without me.”

Curtis sighed. “Some days, being lost feels preferable.” He turned to Frank. “You need help finding something, man?”

“Nah. Just browsing.”

“Okay, let me know if you need anything.”

Frank nodded, turning on his heel and heading to the “Mystery” section. Curtis waited until Frank was far enough away to pin David with a glare, mouthing “leave him alone, asshole.” David nodded, albeit reluctantly.

He tapped his fingers along the counter, thinking, while Curtis disappeared back into the stockroom to continue inventory. It really was discomfiting, seeing Frank in town on a Saturday. Frank was a creature of habit; you could set your watch by him.

Something must have been going on, David thought, to make Frank switch up his routine. Something big, because it was the first time he’d deviated from the norm in the past five years.

Frank reappeared from between the stacks, brow furrowed, as he continued squinting at the spines of the books—searching.

David watched him with narrowed eyes. If he looked long enough, in a certain light, he could almost
envision the old Frank. The Frank from five years ago—the confident, happy Frank who cracked jokes and liked to flirt (usually with little old ladies). The Frank who taught Zach how to make burgers for his cooking merit badge, and who bought Sarah flowers every year on her birthday.

But then he would move in a certain way, or look at David with those hang dog eyes, and the old Frank would be gone. As quickly as he came.

It had been hard for David, watching his friend become someone else in the wake of his family’s death. Watching him withdraw and isolate, sequestered away in that lonely little cabin in the mountains—disappear into his hurt until there was very little recognizable in him. But Curtis had said it was natural; that it was Frank’s only way of coping. “It could be worse,” were Curtis’s exact words. And he was right—at least Frank hadn’t turned to the bottle. He’d only turned inward, collapsing in on himself.

Except that sometimes there were glimpses—little flashes—of the old Frank. He was buried in there, somewhere, David knew.

“Uh, I can’t find what I’m looking for.” Frank’s sudden appearance broke David from his thoughts.

“Huh?” He stood up, trying to refocus his eyes, which had drifted.

“I said I can’t find what I’m looking for.” Frank glanced over his shoulder at the bookshelves. “Karen Page? Mystery author?”

“Oh, Karen Page!” David’s face lit up. “Curtis!” He yelled over his shoulder. “Frank’s looking for some Karen Page!”

“Finally!” Curtis reappeared, sticking his head out from the back room. “I’ve been trying to get you to read her stuff for years.”

“You have?” Frank’s brow furrowed. He didn’t remember ever hearing the name Karen Page before she showed up on the side of the road.

“Yeah. Remember? The book about the woman who gets in the car accident and has facial reconstruction surgery? And her husband thinks she’s been replaced by an imposter?” Curtis was gesturing ambiguously with his hands. “I swear, I’ve told you about this book a million times. So good.”

Frank grunted—that seemed vaguely familiar.

“Well, I can’t find any of her books.”

“That’s because she’s in the ‘Staff Picks’ section.” David pointed at the far corner of the store.

“Thanks,” Frank turned to walk in that direction. David rounded the counter to follow him.

“What has you so interested in reading her books all the sudden?”

Frank shrugged. He didn’t know why, but he wasn’t very eager to tell them about Karen. Wanted to keep her to himself for a little bit longer. She felt like some strange creature who’d wandered into his life out of nowhere—like a secret.

“Well. If you get her first novel, you’re going to want to get them all. Trust me.” David started pulling books off the shelf. “This shit’s amazing.”
“You a big fan?” Frank grabbed the books from David’s arms.

“Am I! I’m going crazy waiting for her next book. It’s taking forever.”

Frank felt a gut instinct to defend Karen—tell David to be patient with her. But he didn’t.

“You want anything else, or just the Page books?” David ran a finger over the rest of the Staff Picks.


“Okay.” David walked Frank back to the checkout counter. “You gotta let me know how you like them.”

“Maybe we’ll make one our next book club selection.” Curtis reappeared from the back room as David rung up the purchases. “I’d be down the re-read one of hers.”

“Yeah, I’ll let you know. Thanks.” Frank grabbed his bag, gave a quick wave, and was out the door.

David watched him climb into his pick-up truck through the front windows. “That was weird, right? Frank just randomly showing up and buying a bunch of books?”

“Yeah, pretty weird.” Curtis joined him, arms crossed, to watch Frank pull out of the parking lot.

“But weird-good, right?” David turned to look at his business partner.

“Brother, any time we can get Frank to leave his little mountain, it’s good.”

As soon as he got home, Frank pulled the first book Karen had written from his shopping bag. Small Dangers. He read the back—it was the one Curtis had been talking about; it sounded interesting.

He made sure Max had enough food in his bowl, brewed a cup of strong coffee, and sat down on the couch to read.

It was early Sunday morning when he finally put the book down, stunned.

“Fuck.” Frank ran a hand through his hair.

Karen had told him that she wrote mysteries; thrillers. But reducing what he’d just read to a simple concept like "murder mystery" would be like describing Anna Karenina as "that story about the train."

The book was more than that—it was a delicate and empathetic exploration of loneliness. Of what it means to feel the edges of the space you inhabit shrink inward and inward, until the world as you’ve known it is reduced to what’s inside of you; until it’s distorted into solipsism. It was a treatise on love, and the thousands of ways it can break you. It was an intimate look at slowly losing your mind. And yes, it was a murder mystery, but as Frank sat on the couch, staring at the book in his hands, he knew that it was something more.

He stood up, pacing the space of his living room, his mind working a mile a minute. That book—that fucking horrifying, magnificent book—was written by Karen.

It’s strange, how you can have your idea of a person shift so radically because of something so small; have your understanding broadened so massively.
Before he’d read *Small Dangers*, he’d through Karen was many things: strange, interesting, cerebral, attractive, nervous, charming. But as he flipped through the book in his hands, he began to recognize that Karen was also something else. She was a person who created entire worlds; who made *people* out of thin air—people who felt real and live and broken.

And that was…that was something else altogether.

That was intimidating.

Frank threw together a quick sandwich from cold cuts left over in the fridge, then grabbed book number two, hunkering down in the same spot on the couch.

By Tuesday morning, he’d read all five of her books.

By Tuesday morning, he was a fan of Karen Page
Hey, dudes! So I know I've been updating every day so far, but it might shift to every other day? Or every three days? Because I've been neglecting all of my grading, and I kinda need to do that so that my kids know if they're failing my class or not lol.

In the three weeks that followed his Karen Page binge, Frank had begun to have some conflicting feelings about the woman. Because on the one hand, Karen had become, in his mind, a kind of intimidatingly-brilliant figure. A masterful architect of worlds. His new favorite author.

But on the other hand, she was also just his neighbor; the woman next door who slipped on the ice almost every day when she went to get her mail.

He hadn't told her yet that he’d read her books—he didn’t quite know how to have that conversation without sounding like a pathetic fanboy. But he’d definitely been paying more attention to her—curious; captivated. Sometimes he’d wake up in the middle of the night, around 1AM, and look out his window to see her living room light on. And he would wonder if she was writing—and what she was writing about. If worlds were taking shape in her mind.

Other times, as he prepared dinner, the orange glow from her cabin would carry through the darkness of the chilly night, and he’d see her shadow pacing to and fro. For hours, he could watch the light darken and burst, as her form moved in front of the window. And he would wonder if she was stuck—if she was trying to fight off her writer’s block.

He had taken to watching, intrigued, for any sign of her existence he could catch from the comfort of his own home.

And then, suddenly, without Frank quite knowing how, they had started having conversations with one another.

Before he knew it, they’d fallen into a routine of talking to each other every day. Just little chats here and there, mostly around 5 o’clock, when Frank was pulling in from work. Strangely enough, Karen was always out on her front porch around that time, usually drinking coffee and staring off into the tree-line at nothing in particular (she seemed to be adjusting to the cold, bit by bit). He would wave to her as he unfolded from his truck, and she would, without fail, find a way to pull him into a conversation. About the weather, about Max, about something she’d heard on the news.

And almost every time, Frank walked away baffled by something Karen said or did. She was different from anyone he’d ever known before—always adrift in her own mind. Sometimes, she would say things that made absolutely no sense, and when Frank pointed this out, she’d realize, suddenly, that most of the conversation she thought she’d been having with him had actually taken place in her head. Like she had one foot in reality and the other in some inner world too far away for anyone else to reach. It was fascinating.

And she was always doing the strangest things.

He’d watched her through his window, one day, running in and out of her house upwards of seven
times, each time wearing a different outfit. She’d stand out in the cold, staring at her watch—
sometimes for ten minutes and sometimes for three—before running back inside, changing, and
doing it all over again. Finally, Frank had given into his curiosity and walked out the back door to
see just what was going on.

“Oh!” Karen had jumped in surprise when he’d approached her. “Hey, Frank! You’re so quiet.”
She’d grinned, running a hand through her hair.

“It’s the snow,” Frank had looked down at his feet, before glancing up at her with a frown. “Uh, I
hope you don’t mind me asking, but what the fuck are you doing?”

Karen’s eyes had grown wide, and she’d looked a little embarrassed. Like she’d been caught doing
something she was loathe to explain.

“Oh, uh, well…” She’d shifted from one foot to the other in an attempt to keep warm. “It’s kind of
weird.”

“I figured it was.”

“Hey!” Karen had tried for offended, but she had actually been pleased to have Frank joking with
her. “I’m toying with an idea, writing a scene for this character who gets locked out of their house
and has to stand out in the cold for half an hour.” She shrugged.

“So you’re…?” Frank had trailed off, waiting for the explanation part of her explanation.

“I’m doing a little science experiment.” Karen had wanted to laugh—she knew how ridiculous it
sounded. “To try to figure out what that character would need to be wearing to stay warm for 30
minutes in this kind of weather.”

Frank had stared at her, fighting a bewildered smile. There had been a beat of silence, in which
Frank hadn’t been quite sure how to respond to something so absurd.

“But mostly,” Karen had felt the need to say something else—offer a better explanation, “I’m just
procrastinating. Little known secret, Castle, but authors will do very, very strange things to distract
themselves from writing.”

“Obviously,” Frank had muttered, letting the grin break through.

“When I was working on my MFA, a guy from the program once recorded the entirety of Mrs.
Doubtfire and went through it, frame-by-frame, making a supercut of every time Robin Williams said
‘oh’.”

“Why?”

“Because it was the end of term and he was trying to avoid working on his chapbook,” Karen
shrugged. “Point is, writing can be very heavy business, and sometimes the pressure gets relieved in
strange ways. I’ve always thought that the darker your work is, the more levity you need to bring to
your real life. The more distraction you require.”

“And is it working?” Frank looked skeptical.

“Well, I’m feeling pretty distracted, so I’d say yes,” Karen had nodded. “Plus, I now know that I
need three layers of thermal underwear to not feel like my legs are being submerged in ice every time
I walk outside.”
“Interesting.” Frank had shaken his head. “I’ll let you get back to it.”

He’d walked away, confused and a little bit delighted by the idea that Karen Page, who had written the line “there is something of darkness at the heart of everything we love, and if there isn’t, we will find a way to put it here,” was also a little bit eccentric.

Then, of course, there was the time a week ago, when he’d come home from work to see her crouching in her front yard, filling drinking glasses with snow.

He’d slid from his truck and approached her (taking care to walk extra heavily this time, so as not to frighten her again).

She’d looked up with a blinding grin when his shadow fell over her.

“Procrastinating again?” Frank had crossed his arms, looking down at her.

“Always.” She’d stood up, wiping her hands on the backs of her jeans. “My friend Trish told me that I should try collecting snow and dousing it in flavored syrup. Make my own snow cones.”

“Pretty sure it needs to be fresh snow, Karen.”

There had been a pause, in which Karen stared down at the glasses she’d collected.

“Be honest with me, Frank. Am I an idiot for not thinking of that?” She’d squinted up at him, her mouth quirked in a grin.

“Well, you’re not a genius.” He’d replied. And she’d laughed, dumping out the snow she’d collected.

So Frank was a little bit confused. Or not confused, but rather enchanted, by the idea that Karen Page could be so many things at once: brilliant, insightful, and penetrating, but also silly and eccentric and ridiculous. But then again, he supposed that was part of what made her writing so compelling—she understood that people are an amalgamation of a million little parts, each strange and misshapen on their own, but perfectly-matched when taken altogether.

Their little conversations quickly became the thing he looked forward to. Usually, he just came home and went right into the woodworking shed attached to the side of his house—where he did some occasional carpentry and carving. Hiding away from the world with his tools and his lumber. But it was nice, having someone to talk to when he came got back from work, covered in sawdust and sweat. He’d forgotten that—the simple pleasure to be found in returning from a long day and seeing someone there waiting for you. Though Karen wasn’t really waiting there for him; she just was. It still felt nice.

Having her around made him realize just how isolated he’d become up on that mountain, and how sorely he craved human connection. The loneliness was like a bruise he didn’t know he had until Karen had pressed her fingers into it.

He wanted to tell her that he’d read her novels—that’s he’d devoured them—he really did; he wanted to find a way to start another discussion with her, like the one they’d had the night of the broken heater. But he wasn’t sure how to go about it—every time he tried, he seemed to lose his words. How did he even begin? How did he tell someone that he’d like to sit down for hours and just listen to everything they had to say?
In the three weeks that Frank had been busy contemplating Karen, Karen had been wavering back and forth between a state of heightened inspiration and the need for instant, prolonged distraction.

Frank had given her a spark—an idea for a compelling character—but that was about all she had. She liked the idea of a solitary mountain man, sequestered away from society. It was a gripping image—one that had attached to it feelings of exile, secrecy, dread, and paranoia. She could see the character forming in her head so clearly, based off of Frank, but not Frank.

The idea was intriguing, because Frank was intriguing. But it wasn’t enough to simply have a character she want to play God with—she also needed a world in which to play God.

There was the lonely mountain man; there was the isolation of the forest; there was the idea of him running away from something. But Karen couldn’t, for the life of her, decide where to go after that. She’d been toying with some ideas: turning her mountain man (who she’d begun to think of as Michael) into a man battling the inevitable onset of dementia, making him a scorned lover convinced that his wife hadn’t abandoned him, but rather had been murdered, or maybe turning him into a murderer himself. But nothing felt right to her.

She’d written pages, created outlines, and scribbled nonsense in her notebook. Some of it was salvageable, but most of it was not. Trish, for her part, was simply glad that Karen was working again—that she had a vague idea building in her mind. It was the best news she’d heard in a long time.

But it wasn’t enough—not for Karen. She’d been in Alaska for a month, and had very little to show for it. So she’d taken to distracting herself, attempting to scrub away some of the self-doubt that was flexing its vice-like grip on her mind. She’d gone into town a few times a week—mostly checking out the local bars, which allowed her to drown her sorrows in cheap beer and games of darts with rough-looking locals. She’d Skyped with Trish, trying to divert the conversation away from the book and toward the gossip she’d missed while she was away.

But mostly, she distracted herself with Frank. She’d made it her personal mission to lure him into a conversation at least once a day. It was her goal—the one thing that kept her from losing her mind as her writing life began to unravel; she was going to get Frank Castle to be her friend, whether he liked it or not. Problem was, she had to go about it subtly—ingratiate herself into his life before he could see it coming. She’d figured out, rather early on, that the best tactic to do so involved being out on the front porch when he pulled in from work around 5:30ish every night. It was almost like he couldn’t resist—like he had some sense of propriety that forced him to say hello every time he saw her standing there, waving as he drove up.

He’d gotten a lot better at small talk, she’d noticed, over time. The first time she’d engaged him in conversation on her lawn, it had lasted around 3 minutes—a quick “hello, how are you?” and then he was gone. But now, after weeks of Karen’s persistence, they were having full-blown, 20 minute conversations at the end of each day, which was a miracle considering how fucking cold it got after 20 minutes of standing in the snow.

Worth it, though, as far as Karen was concerned. Because Frank was starting to reveal himself to her slowly, bit-by-bit. He never talked too much about himself—that was still a topic with a red “X” over it—and they’d mostly stuck to painless small-talk. But she’d learned so much about him in their month of micro-conversations. For example, he was a sarcastic little shit. And funny, too—always had a comeback for anything she said. Had a real mouth on him, that one.

But he was also withdrawn—always a little bit distant. She supposed it was to be expected; someone
who willingly chose a life of solitude in the mountains would likely not be very open to strangers.

Despite Frank’s tendency to evade when the topic of conversation was brought around to his personal life, Karen would, after the month had passed, confidently say that she and Frank were friends.

She would be less confident in claiming that work was going well in regards to her writing. Which was how she found herself, standing in the side yard of the cabin, procrastinating by trying to chop wood.

She’d been staring at the fireplace in the living room for weeks, trying to decide if the appeal of a roaring fire on the cold nights was worth the effort it would require to get started. That morning, after finishing a call with Trish (during which she’d had to admit that her fits and starts of inspiration weren’t leading to a whole lot of writing), she’d resolved to give it a go. If anything, it would take her mind off the fact that her latest bout of creativity was beginning to die out.

So she’d made her way out to the back shed, taking survey of the equipment the Brynner’s kept in stock. She’d been delighted to not only see an axe hidden underneath a pile of assorted, rusty tools, but also a stack of un-split wood in the far back corner. Great, round logs that had obviously been gathered by the previous renters, but never used. She’d lugged out five or six, blindly guessing at how much would be needed to keep a fire burning for a few days, and lined them up next to the tree stump that she’d assumed was for chopping wood.

Once everything was arranged perfectly, she pulled out her phone and Googled “How to Chop Wood.” It seemed easy enough—a pretty standard case of supplementing your own strength with the laws of gravity—she’d taken upper-level Physics in college, she was sure she could figure it out. But she watched a YouTube vide for good measure, just to make sure all her bases were covered.

“Alright, easy enough.” She chose a piece of lumber, set it on the chopping block, stood back to admire how perfectly-placed it was, and then took a swing.

The axe buried itself halfway into the log and stayed there.

“Fuck.” Karen released the handle, stumbling back. She bit her lip, tilting her head to the side in contemplation. “Okay. New plan.”

She approached the chopping block, raised her right leg to place her foot atop the uncut wood, grabbed ahold of the axe handle, and pulled.

Nothing happened. The axe didn’t budge.

“Okay. You are not a quitter, Page.” She moved to find a new angle—used her left foot instead of her right—and tried again.

Nothing.

“Third time’s the charm.” She walked around the log, eyeing it from every possible perspective, before grabbing hold of the axe handle again.

And that was how Frank found her when he turned onto their road, coming home from the mill.

“What the fuck?” He’d leaned forward, brow furrowed, to stare at her through the windshield as he pulled into his driveway. It looked like she was wrestling with a log. “Jesus, Karen.”
He put the truck in park, sliding out of the driver’s seat, eyes still tracking her movements. Leaning against the truck bed, arms crossed, he watched her struggle to remove the axe from where it was embedded. It took an inhuman amount of self-control to contain the laugh that bubbled up at the sight. The expression on her face—the determination mixed with a healthy dose of exasperation—was just so perfect. He let her continue her efforts for a moment longer, before deigning to intervene.

“Uh, you need some help there, Page?”

Karen’s head shot up at the sound of Frank’s voice, the tips of her ears going red in embarrassment. She had hoped to be done with her log-cutting adventure before he returned home; Frank was a professional lumberjack, so her attempts were probably shameful to watch.

“No, I’m good, Frank.” Karen held up a hand, waving him off. “Thanks, though!” She turned, gripping the handle of the axe again.

Frank remained in place, observing her very feeble attempts to free the axe from its resting place. It was like the fucking sword and the stone over there. Karen tried to ignore the feel of his gaze at her back, heavy and judgmental.

“Can I give you some advice?” Frank called out, rubbing a hand along his jaw.

“Are you going to be annoying about it?” Karen responded.

“I’ll try not to be.”

“Then okay.” Karen huffed, dropping the handle and letting her arms dangle limply at her sides.

“Grab the axe handle again,” Frank instructed, and she did as she was told. “Now lift it in the air like you’re going to swing it, log and all.” She gave him an incredulous look, pausing, before she hoisted the whole deal over her head. “Now when you swing down, don’t use your shoulders. Bend your knees just a little, and let gravity do its job.”

She took a deep breath, then swung. The log hit the chopping block with a “thud,” and then split in two, leaving the axe unencumbered and in her hands. She couldn’t help it—she let out an excited “whoop.” It was the first log she’d ever chopped, and she was mighty proud.

Frank grinned, watching the look of self-satisfaction spread across Karen’s face. Like the sun coming out. She turned to Frank, giving him a thumb’s up.

“Thanks, Frank! I guess you’re useful after all!”

He grunted in response, shaking his head.

She turned, contemplating how she was going to split her half-logs into quarter-logs, wondering if there was some special way to go about it. Realizing she was a little in over her head, she sighed.

“Got any more tips?” She called out, refusing to turn around and see the smug look she was sure he was wearing.

“Tons.” Frank said with a chuckle, pushing off of his truck and walking over.

He’d started with a quick lesson—how to swing an axe so as to avoid throwing out your back, while also keeping it from embedding in the wood. Karen had listened, like a good student, and managed
to split two of her logs into quarters, of which she was very proud. After the second log, however, one of the blisters that had been growing on the palm of her hand burst, and Frank begged her to let him take over. At first, Karen had put up a fight—she was the kind of woman who liked to do things for herself. But eventually she’d been forced to admit it was impossible for her to swing an axe with an open wound on her palm.

And once Frank started slinging that thing around, she found that she had no reason to complain. Sitting on the ground a few feet away, on top of Frank’s coat (he’d insisted), Karen had a perfect view of his body at work. The arch of his back as he lifted the axe above his head, the swelling of his biceps on the down-swing, the grunts he made when metal met wood. It was all heady stuff.

Karen found her eyes repeatedly darting to his forearms, which he’d revealed as he’d shed his coat and rolled back the sleeves of his plaid flannel. The veins and tendons above his wrist strained as he lifted the axe again, and she had the sudden and powerful desire to trace her tongue along their ridges.

“I read your book.” Frank’s grunted statement pulled Karen’s eyes away from his arms, albeit reluctantly. She looked at him in surprise, but his eyes were on his task.

“Oh?” Karen tried not to sound too delighted. The idea that Frank had gone out and bought one of her books warmed her. “Which one?”

Frank swung the axe again. “All of them.”

“Really? All of them?” There was no point in trying to conceal her delight anymore—it was more than apparent from the upswing in her tone. Frank nodded.

“And, uh,” Karen tried for casual, “what did you think?”

Frank paused, setting the head of the axe against the chopping block and leaning on the handle like a walking stick. He looked thoughtful for a moment.

“Never read anything like it before.”

Karen pursed her lips, waiting for more. But Frank just nodded to himself, like he was satisfied with his statement.

“Is that…” Karen tried to think of how to phrase the question without sounding desperate for his approval, “a good thing?”

“Karen.” Frank pinned her with an unwavering eye. “I’m not great at compliments, okay? But I mean that in the best way.”

She felt her heart stutter in her chest. Her home office in New York was filled with clippings from The Washington Post, the New York Times, the Chicago Tribune, and even a review from Donna Tartt herself—all commending her literary prowess. But Frank’s awkward and graceless approval meant more to her than all of their praise combined. She felt like glowing from the inside out.

Frank returned to his job, and Karen tried to hide her giddy smile behind a cough. She watched him for a moment longer, as he huffed his way through another log. The way the buttons of his flannel strained over his chest as he moved was absolutely fascinating.

“I really liked John Mackey.”

“Huh?” Karen jerked; she hadn’t been expecting Frank to speak again.
“John Mackey. From Little Fires.” He repeated, sparing a quick glance at Karen.

“Really? John Mackey?” Karen had heard a lot of favorite characters from her fans over the years, but she didn’t think anyone had ever told her they liked John Mackey.

Mackey was a side character in her third book—the austere, cold, cynical Chief of Police constantly at odds with her protagonist. He was a bleak character, based on the kind of police officers she’d met whose jobs had become so rote that a dead body was an “unfortunate accident” rather than a very real, very human tragedy. Though she had her own soft spot for him, as she did with most of her characters, she didn’t think he was anyone’s favorite. He was hard to love.

“Yeah.” Frank nodded to himself.

Karen waited for him to expand. He just raised the axe again, letting it fall.

“Uhm, any reason why?” She probed.

He stopped and took a deep breath, frowning, staring off at nothing in particular.

“I guess because he was honest.” Frank ran a hand over his beard.

“Honest how?” Karen was riveted—“honest” was such an interesting word to use.

“Yeah, I mean, the way you wrote him,” Frank inclined his head toward her, “it seemed like the job broke him. But he still showed up every day. Still did what he could. Because—I don’t know—being broken doesn’t mean you stop functioning.” He shifted from foot to foot. “And there was that moment—in the graveyard—when he put the toy truck on the kid’s grave.” Frank shot a glance at Karen. “He wasn’t a hero; he was just human.”

Karen’s eyes scanned Frank’s face, as he looked down at his hands. She was a little bit shocked, though she supposed she shouldn’t be, at how insightful his comments were. He did attend a weekly book club, after all.

And his assessment of Mackey was incredibly on-point. As she’d written him, she’d tried to hide vulnerability in his character; blunt his sharp edges with some veiled humanity. Use him to point out that cynicism is often a protective attempt at covering up deep frailty. She wasn’t sure how effective her characterization had been, as most people hated Mackey without seeing his softer parts. But Frank had nailed it right on the head.

And there it was again, Karen thought, that deep, quiet intelligence that she had seen earlier in his eyes.

“You know,” she pulled her legs to her chest, resting her chin atop her knees. “They say your favorite character says a lot about who you are as a person. What do you think Mackey says about you?”

Frank snorted. “That I’ve got good taste.”

Karen rolled her eyes. Leave it to Frank to divert any questions she asked about him that got too personal.

It was silent for a moment as he swung the axe again. Peaceful—comfortable. Karen could just hear the branches of the trees rustling against each other in the surrounding forest, a gentle sound.

“Still got writer’s block?” Frank’s voice broke the quiet.
“Unfortunately.” Karen pressed her forehead against her knees, her voice muffled as she pushed her chin to her chest.

“So, uh. Where’d all these other characters come from? The ones in your books? Mackey and Sheffield and Rasp?” He listed off his favorites.

“Oh,” Karen lifted her head, squinting up at Frank. “Honestly, a lot of my best characters came from my brother. He was a cop in Vermont, and was always telling me stories about his colleagues. Giving me ideas.”

She felt a brief desire to tell him that Sheffield was actually based off of her brother, but she didn’t. She wanted to keep that little piece of Kevin to herself.

“So why don’t you call him up again if you need inspiration?”

Karen bit the end of her thumb—a nervous habit. “He actually passed away six years ago. Shot in the line of duty.”

Frank stopped, turning slowly toward her. His eyes held a mixture of sorrow and understanding—something Karen made a note to revisit on another day. “I’m sorry, Karen.”

“No, it’s—” she waved a dismissive hand. “It’s fine. It was a long time ago.”

Frank made a soft noise. “Still hurts though?” It was a question, but it sounded like a statement.

Karen nodded. “Still hurts though.”

Frank watched her a moment longer, before turning to place the last log on the chopping block. It grew quiet once again, save for the rhythmic sounds of his swinging—axe hitting wood.

Then Karen spoke. “I think about grief a lot.” There was something heavy in her voice.

Frank paused mid-swing, eyes darting to her face, but she was staring at the ground near her feet. He let the axe fall.

“Well?”

“Yeah.” She began picking at a loose thread on the coat beneath her. “Actually, I think that grief is kind of self-centered.” Frank shot her a confused look. “I mean, not in a bad way. Not like selfish—just centered on the self. In an honest way.”

Frank made a “go on” noise, so she continued.

“The way I see it, in the beginning, we grieve for the person we’ve lost, right? We grieve for their life, for their tragedy, for their pain.” She ran her fingers over the soft lining of Frank’s coat. “But I think, after a while, we start grieving for ourselves. For our hurt, for our loss, for the fact that our lives will no longer be the same. You know, we grieve because we’ll never get to—I don’t know—pretend their shitty puns are funny ever again. Or bust their balls for always picking out the worst Christmas gifts. Our sorrow comes from the fact that we have to live without the people we’ve lost.” She shrugged. “Self-centered.”

Frank swung the axe again, splitting the last log, and the task was done. He removed the wood from the chopping block, then turned to take its place, sitting down facing Karen. Leaning forward with his elbows against his knees, he anchored his gaze to her—deliberate.
“I mean—again—not to say that’s a bad thing. In fact, I think that’s why grief is so healing. Because it is inward-looking.” Karen lifted her gaze to Frank, as though waiting for him to say something.

But he didn’t know what to say. He knew what he was feeling; a little raw, a little exposed. This talk of grief—it hit something deep in his gut, something soft and unprotected.

And part of him wanted to say “yes”—he wanted to tell Karen that he thought she was right; that he knew from experience how grief could turn you inward. But he didn’t.

Instead, he nodded and said, “Makes sense.” His eyes darted down to his hands, which were calloused and dirty—strong hands. “You think about this kinda stuff because of what happened to your brother?”

Karen sighed, a big, chest-emptying sigh. “Yeah. And no.”

“No?”

“I write about murder, Frank. About death. Most of the time I end up writing about grief, too.” Karen tapped a finger against her head. “End up spending a lot of time concerned with these things.”

“Hmm,” Frank nodded. He stared at Karen—hard—with her wide, soft eyes and her easy smile, and thought about how much time she spent contemplating all the darkest parts of being alive.

“Like a few years ago, I was writing this piece—a short story during my MFA program—and I wanted to use the phrase ‘grieving period.’” Karen brought her arms back around her legs, hugging them close. “And I got to thinking about how weird it is that that’s the way we talk about grief. Like it lasts for a certain amount of time—a definite start and stop. Like ‘whoop, my grieving period is over, so I’m happy again.’” There was a part of Karen that recognized this was not exactly a fun and friendly topic of conversation—that it was a little depressing for a Friday afternoon. But Frank was looking at her so damn intently—really listening—so she just kept talking. “But that’s not what it’s like, right? Grief is messy.”

A strange kind of noise escaped Frank at that—something that sounded involuntary. Grief is messy; it rang so true. Karen paused, watching him with inquiring eyes. But he shook his head, telling her to continue.

“I mean, when I lost my brother, Kevin, it was like my body became a vacuum—everything I was before losing him was sucked out of me. All of the beautiful and terrible parts of myself, just gone. And then it was all replaced with this deep, consuming sadness that made its home in the marrow of my bones. And I thought I’d be like that forever.”

Karen was momentarily distracted by Frank shifting closer, leaning toward her.

“Yeah.” He said. It was not an affirmation—it was not much of anything. It was just a word that hung between them in the cold. Then he inclined his head toward her, urging her on.

“I guess…” Karen tilted her head back, looking up at the clear sky above. “I guess that after a while I started having these moments where I’d be happy again. If a friend told a joke or, I don’t know, showed me a funny cat video, I’d be laughing again. I’d forget that he was dead, just for a moment. Then I’d feel guilty—like I was betraying him by letting myself feel something other than his loss.”

Frank caught himself fidgeting, wringing his fingers together as he listened to Karen. It was all too familiar—too real. Like hearing his own life story told in someone else’s voice.

“People started telling me, you know, ‘you should let yourself be happy—it’s what he would have
wanted’.’” She let out a laugh, half-way between bitter and amused. “But he absolutely wouldn’t have. He was a dramatic little shit. He would’ve wanted me wailing in the streets until the day I died.”

An involuntary smile quirked at Frank’s lips. Maria was the same way.

“But I started thinking, y’know—why do we care so much what the dead would have wanted for us?” Karen’s voice grew an adamant edge. “I mean, I get that it’s about memory and legacy and wanting to feel that those we’ve lost are watching over us. But at a certain point…your life is still your own.”

Karen was quiet for a moment, shifting on the ground. “So do you still grieve for him?” Frank’s voice was soft.

“In a thousand little ways,” Karen nodded. “But I also let myself be happy. Not because that’s what Kevin would have wanted, but because that’s what I want.”

They sat there for a moment, not moving, not speaking. It was a different kind of silence—not awkward, not tense, not strained. But not entirely comfortable, either. But rather, filled with something that felt a lot like expectation.

Then Karen laughed—a soft little sound. “Frank, why is it every time we have a real conversation, it always turns into something dark?”

Frank shook his head, grinning. “I think that’s your fault, Page. You’re the one who writes about murder for a living.”

“Takes two to tango, Castle.” Karen stood up, stretching, and grabbed Frank’s coat for him. “Thanks for being my personal lumberjack, by the way.” She nodded at the stack of wood by his feet.

“Well, I was already your personal mechanic,” he shrugged, grabbing his coat and shaking it free of snow. He shuffled his feet.

For the first time in a long time, Frank wasn’t ready for a conversation to end—wasn’t ready to go home. Rather, he wanted to continue sitting with Karen, listening to her talk, resting in her company. He didn’t want to be alone, and that was a big deal for him. Usually, being alone was always preferable to being with other people (Curtis and the Liebermans being rare exceptions). But as Karen bent to gather up an armful of wood, Frank felt the acute need to keep her with him.

“Uh, do you need some help getting the fire started?” He offered.

“I should be fine, I think. Thanks, though.” Karen struggled to balance the firewood in her arms.

“Are you sure? If you don’t know what you’re doing it can be unsafe.”

There was something in Frank’s voice that had Karen pausing, looking at him with narrowed eyes. This was an interesting role reversal—usually she was the one trying to convince him spend more time with her—but this time, it was almost like Frank was trying to find a polite way to be invited in.

And Karen wasn’t going to say no to that.

“Uh, yeah. You can carry the rest of the wood for me. Be my personal pack mule, too.”

Frank snorted. “Maybe I should make you pay me back for all this free labor.”
“Your payment is my friendship.” Karen shot back, using her elbow to open the kitchen door, holding it open for Frank.

“Just wait until I unionize.”

Karen laughed so hard, she almost dropped her armload.

It felt like a turning point—that night. Frank not only helped her get the fire going in her living room, but also stayed for dinner (which he insisted on helping with), and coffee. He didn’t leave until 11 o’clock that night, trudging through the cold, dark snowdrift back to his own house.

They didn’t talk about grief or finding empathy in the dark or brokenness, but they did talk. Actual conversation that wasn’t 99% Karen babbling and 1% Frank grunting. They didn’t get into the real shit; nothing too personal—every time Karen tried to broach the subject of Frank’s family or his past, he shied away.

But he did share stories about his friends, David and Curtis, who ran the bookstore in town. They seemed like quite the pair—neurotic, irreverent David and patient, thoughtful Curtis. Karen wanted to meet them. He also talked about his co-workers, who were a riot. Apparently, working at a lumber mill was full of drama—just last week, he explained, one of his subordinates had discovered that a co-worker was sleeping with his wife, and had tried to shove him into the line of the circular saw. It had been quite the mess for HR, and Frank had been buried under mountains of paperwork for days.

Karen had shared about Trish—about how they’d met when Karen was working on her MFA, and Trish had come over to her house for a party her roommate was throwing. Trish had ended up drunk and crying in the bathroom after her boyfriend broke up with her, and Karen had crawled into the tub right beside her and rubbed her back until she fell asleep. They’d been friends and partners ever since.

She also talked about her years travelling on book tours. How she once had a fan approach her dressed up as the main character from Small Dangers, and refuse to break character the whole time they were talking. Or how a man had once asked her to sign his ass cheek (she did, because why not), and a month later, he found her at a different book signing to show her how he’d turned it into a tattoo.

It had been good—surprisingly good—Frank thought. He’d slid so easily into conversation with her, like slipping into an old skin he used to inhabit. (Little did he know, Karen had been slowly priming him for this moment with her daily mini-chats, goading him into sociability one day at a time).

Lying in bed later that night, staring up at the ceiling, Frank actually felt lonely. Like the boundaries that separated his body from the rest of the world were starting to feather and blur—like he could dissolve into nothingness. It was a bittersweet feeling—knowing that loneliness was still within his grasp. That he could still access that emotion; that need for human companionship. He’d begun to think that it was beyond him.

But it wasn’t. Because there he lay, with that dull and spreading ache in his chest. And it was all because of Karen.

After Frank left, Karen felt revved up—felt like she could write for days. Their conversation earlier, about grief, had struck something electric in her chest. Pacing around her living room, she picked up
a pen, tapping it against her chin as she thought.

Turning on her heel, she stepped up to the sticky-note with “lonely mountain-man living in solitude—running from something” written on it. She paused, chewed her bottom lip, then crossed out “running from something.” In its place, she wrote “running toward something: grief.”

She stepped back, admiring her work.

Yes, she thought. That felt true. That felt honest.

And now she had some where to go—a place to move forward with her story. Motivation for her not-Frank character, Michael.

And the floodgates opened—for the first time in years, Karen sat and wrote.

And wrote. And wrote. And wrote.

Until 6 AM, when she finally collapsed into a contented sleep. The sleep of someone not dreading the morning light. When she woke up the next day, well after noon, and reread the pages she’d filled in her notebook, a feeling of gut-deep relief flooded her. It was good—really good. She’d been half-worried that, upon re-reading, she’d find that it was more of the same garbage she’d been spouting for weeks. But scanning the pages of plot notes she’d created felt like reconnecting with an old friend; she could hear her voice in the words, a voice she’d thought she’d lost years ago.

The idea was simple: we begin with Michael, the broken, lonely mountain man. He is a man motivated by grief; by emptiness; by a sharp and acute sense of loss. He is guarded, intense, and inward-looking. Michael begins to take shape.

Then we introduce his tragic backstory: His brother was murdered, twenty years before our story opens. A child, ten years of age, wandered away from town with some friends after school one day and never returned. His body was found, three days later, in the mountains. Michael, haunted by the loss, becomes obsessed with the scene of discovery—obsessed with the dark and consuming forest—obsessed with chasing his grief as far into the shadows as he can wander. As soon as he is able, he buys a plot of land as close to the discovery site of his brother as possible. And from there…Karen wasn’t sure what happened.

But damn, it was a mighty fine start.

So fine, in fact, that Karen decided to reward herself with a trip into town—a celebratory drink at the local bar she favored. The only time she seemed to drink these days was to chase away the fear and self-doubt, but tonight she would celebrate.

She thought about inviting Frank along with her, but figured that their extended interaction might have worn him out the night before; she didn’t want to push him too far. (She was wrong. As she pulled her car out of the drive and headed into town, Frank watched her out of his window, wishing she would have stopped in to say hello).

Karen had made it into all three of Seward, Alaska’s local bars in the month she’d been living there, but Alias was by far the best. For starters, it was run by a woman, Jessica Jones, a real ball-buster of a bar keep. She kept her ship running real tight, and Karen had seen her, on multiple occasions, bodily eject men twice her size from the bar for groping women. While the place was still gritty—sawdust on the floor, broken jukebox in the corner that only played AC/DC, scruffy-looking patrons who probably ate nails for breakfast—Karen always felt safe as long as Jess was there.
Karen Page!” Jess shouted above the noise as a group of men drunkenly got up to play darts. “Back to drown your writer’s block in more whiskey?”

Karen shrugged her coat off, stomping the snow from her boots at the front door.

“Not this time, Jess.” She nodded to a few grizzled old men she recognized from previous visits, making her way toward the bar. “I’m actually celebrating today.”

“Well that’s a change of pace.” Jess stopped her task of stacking clean cups, giving Karen an assessing look. “So no whiskey, then?”

“Oh, I’m still drinking whiskey,” Karen slid onto a bar stool. “I just won’t be crying while I do it.”

“Well there goes my entertainment for the night.” Jess smirked, pouring two fingers of Maker’s Mark into a glass and placing it in front of Karen. “What finally got you over the hump?”

“Well,” Karen took a sip of her drink. “Frank did, actually.”

Jess jerked her head, surprised. “Mountain man, cave-dwelling Frank Castle?”

Karen nodded. In the handful of times she’d visited Alias, she’d struck up a kind of friendship with the mouthy barkeep. She’d shared a lot about herself with Jess—as most sad, drunk people do with a good bartender. About her book, about Trish, about how she was worried her career was over. But she hadn’t really told her about Frank; Jess knew that Karen lived down the way from him, but she didn’t know much about their burgeoning friendship. Karen had wanted to keep that to herself, for just a little bit longer.

“Yep, that Frank.” Karen lifted her glass in a toast. “Bless him.”

“If you say so,” Jess leaned forward, placing her elbows on the bar. “So are you and Frank, like… friends or something?”

Karen shrugged. “Yeah. He’s actually kind of fantastic.”

“Really?” Jess’s voice was dripping with surprise and—as per usual—a hint of sarcasm. “That’s interesting.”

“Interesting. And also true.” Karen took another sip, letting the liquor roll over her tongue. “He’s saved my ass so many times in the past month or so. He’s really quite generous—kind of chivalrous. And, weirdly enough, he’s actually very funny. He’s got this wry sense of humor—sarcastic. And smart, too. Fuck, he’s deceptively smart.”

Jess watched Karen with a knowing little smile on her face.

“Sounds like you’ve gotten to know him quite well, huh?”

“Not really. Not half as well as I’d like.”

“I’m sure.” There was something lecherous in Jess’s tone that had Karen sending her a sharp look. “What?” Jess held her hands up defensively. “He may be Seward’s very own Boo Radley, but the guy’s a full meal. That ass alone, I mean god damn.”

“Aren’t you dating Luke?” Karen was pretty sure Frank had mentioned that the other night—that Jess was seeing the mill’s safety coordinator.

“Who told you that?” Jess’s eyes narrowed instantly.
“Just heard it around.”

“Well we’re not dating, Page. We’re fucking. There’s a difference.” Jess turned around, fiddling with the liquor bottles behind the counter so as to avoid looking Karen in the eye.

“Okay, whatever you say.” Karen took a loud sip of her drink, rolling her eyes.

“Plus, we’re not talking about me right now. We’re talking about you. And Frank.” Jess glared at Karen through the mirror behind the bar. “And how you don’t know him nearly as well as you want to.”

“Okay. I’ll drop it.” Karen grabbed a straw from the cup sitting atop the bar, twisting in her hands to have something to distract her. “So Jess…” She trailed off, waiting for her friend to turn around and look at her. “What do you know about Frank?”

“Uh,” Jess squinted in thought. “Not much recent. Haven’t spoken to the guy in like 6 years.”

“But anything about, like…his past?”

Karen felt a little wrong for prying—for trying to dig up information on Frank from someone who wasn’t him. But she was curious, and she’d never been great at denying her curiosity.

“Yeah, actually.” Jess moved to lean forward, palms pressed against the bar. “What’s it worth to you?”

“I will give you,” Karen pulled her purse into her lap, rifling through all the garbage to find something of value. “The rest of these Tic-Tacs.” She held up the little see-through box, shaking it to make the candies rattle around.

Jess pursed her lips in thought. “Deal.”

Karen laughed, handing over her payment.

“So the Frank you see before you today is not the Frank we all knew and loved 5 years ago, let’s start there.” Jess popped a Tic-Tac into her mouth. “First off, Frank used to be married. Had two kids, too. A little boy and a little girl. Beautiful family.”

It hit Karen in the gut, this new piece of information. She had been expecting some kind of a revelation, but not anything that big.

*He had a family?* A sense of overwhelming dread landed square in her chest. *Oh God.* Frank was not the kind of man who would walk away from a family; he just wasn’t. Something terrible must have happened. Karen steeled herself.

“If I recall correctly, they passed away in a car accident; driving on the icy roads. I think it was an 18-wheeler—skidded out of control.” Jess shook her head. “It was fucked up. Really fucked up.”

Karen wasn’t looking at Jess. She wasn’t looking at anything, her eyes unfocused and glazed over as she thought.

*Fuck,* the realization hit her. All that talk last night about grief—all that she’d said about brokenness and death. It all took on a new light with this information.

“So he—” her voice broke just slightly, and she tried again. “So that’s why he lives up there, on the mountain, all alone?”
“I guess so. I mean, after what happened, he still lived here in town for a few months. Then just… disappeared. Didn’t tell anybody where he was going—not even those guys at the bookstore he hangs out with. Reappeared weeks later with a cabin in the mountains.” Jess sighed, sucking on another Tic-Tac.

“Did you know him? Before?” Karen downed the last of her drink, the burn slipping down like liquid fire.

“Not personally. Knew of him.” Jess shrugged. “I guess he was kind of the big man on campus around here. People liked him—easy to get along with. He and his wife were always hosting parties at their place.”

Karen tried to imagine it—a Frank who was her Frank, but also different. Also someone else’s Frank. Happy and sociable and charming. She could just begin to conjure it in her mind’s eye, before the whisper of him disappeared, and she remembered the look on his face when she began to talk about Kevin the other night. That look of understanding, deep and aching, that had passed over his eyes.

“He didn’t tell you any of this?” Jess was watching Karen with what bordered on concern (though Jess would never admit to being concerned for anyone but herself).

“Uh, no. No.” Karen shook her head. “We don’t really talk about him too much.”


There was a beat of silence, in which Karen vacillated between regret for having learned such a huge piece of Frank’s history from someone else, and a kind of selfish happiness that she had another small piece of him to hold onto—to make sense of.

“You want another drink, Page?” Jess was still staring at her, watching the complex play of emotion across her face.

“No. No, I’m actually going to go.” Karen no longer felt like celebrating.

On the drive home, her mind was a mess. The way she saw it, she had two options. One, she could admit to Frank that she’d done some snooping and knew about what happened to his family, which could go terribly wrong and end in the decimation of their friendship. And two, she could try to pretend like she didn’t know what she knew, and carry on with Frank as though nothing had changed. Though, irrevocably, things had changed. Glimpsing the very real, very present world of hurt living inside another person will do that.

By the time she’d pulled into her driveway, she’d settled on a halfway point between the two. She couldn’t ignore what she now knew about Frank, but she didn’t think she could tell him just yet. It was a coward’s option, but it was all she had.

As she lay in bed that night, under a mountain of blankets, she thought about the evening’s revelation. Thought about the unrelenting hurt she’d felt after Kevin had passed, then tried to imagine how that pain would grow and fester if she’d lost children. It was hard to understand how someone could possibly recover from that kind of emotional wreckage. How someone could still stand under the weight of that grief.

And she’d called it self-centered. To his face.
She wanted to smack herself.

After hours of tossing and turning, Karen had finally been able to drift off, the memory of Frank’s understanding eyes flitting before her mind.

Which was why it was so troubling when she shot up from sleep, five hours later, with an entirely different set of images in her head. Images of calloused fingers dragging down her flesh, of a rough beard scratching red marks against her collarbone, of a head of dark, curly hair disappearing between her thighs.

She’d gone to sleep thinking about Frank Castle’s dead family, and had woken up dreaming about his body devouring her own.

“Oh fuck.” Karen wiped the sweat from her forehead, scrubbing a hand down her face. “Oh God, I’m fucked up.”
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Hey, folks! I’ve written about 6 out of the 8 chapters. So hopefully I’ll have chapter 5 up in a day or two? Let me know how you’re liking it (or not liking it; I don’t know your life)!

She waited a few days to see Frank again—giving herself some time to begin sorting through the roiling, disquieting thoughts that had pushed themselves to the forefront of her mind. Not only did she now have to figure out what to do with her newfound knowledge of Frank’s past, but she also had to spend some time dissecting the sex dreams she’d been having about him.

Plural. As in, more than the one, isolated incident. Sweat-prickled flesh; sloppy, eager lips; breathy moans that blew hot air across her neck. The whole deal.

Of course she’d always found him attractive—distractingly so—since day one. She was only human, and very red-blooded at that. Had always thought of herself as sex-positive; as someone who advocated the right for women to be as sexual as men without shame. But having erotic dreams about someone after finding out that their entire family had been killed? That was fucked up by any standard.

She had several theories, though, about the unfortunate timing of her sexual awakening to him. It could be that she was attracted to vulnerability, and the revelation Jess had dropped on her uncovered an entire world of it living in Frank. But that didn’t feel right—she’d never been the kind of person to fetishize others’ pain. There was, of course, the idea that she’d been socially-conditioned by Nicholas Sparks novels to find tragedy romantic. But again, she’d never fallen prey to that particular trope before, so why would she start now? Which left only theory number three—that the more one learns about a person, the more human that person becomes. The more authentic. Maybe the feelings she’d already had toward Frank had just heightened—sharpened—because he’d become more real to her.

Karen didn’t know; she wasn’t a psychologist. So she tried not to think about it too much.

Instead, she’d been occupying herself with writing, non-stop, with a fervor she’d not felt in a long time. It was the only way she had to push thoughts of Frank from her mind. Because, as fucked up as her personal life was looking, her professional life was finally on the right track.

It felt like waking up after a long, fitful sleep. Like stepping into the sunshine after weeks locked away in the dark. Parts of her brain that she’d begun to fear were withering away lit up in glorious technicolor, and the words just kept coming. Trish was on Cloud Nine; she’d never admit it, but she had actually begun to worry that Karen’s career really was over—that the spark was never going to return. Fortunately, it seemed, Alaska had worked its magic—or really, Frank had worked his magic—and the old Karen Page was back.

The writing was a brilliant distraction from Frank, for a little while at least. She’d absorbed herself so fully into the world she’d been lovingly creating that she was almost able to pretend it was the only thing she had to worry about.

Until one evening, when she had been sitting in the window nook of the living room, clacking away
on her laptop, and happened to look up in time to see Frank pulling in from work. She’d very subtly watched him from the corner of her eye, as he slid out of the driver’s side of his truck. He’d paused for a moment, running his hands down his jeans, staring in Karen’s direction. She’d frozen, thinking that he’d caught her looking. But he didn’t wave—didn’t indicate that he’d noticed her interest. He’d just remained in place a moment longer, before lifting his shoulder in a little half-shrug and turning to walk away.

There was something forlorn in that little movement, something that had the barest echo of longing, which had Karen feeling a touch guilty. Just because she was having some issues figuring out her thoughts about Frank didn’t mean she could completely ignore him—that wasn’t fair to him. And after she’d gone to such lengths to embed herself into his life—to make talking to her every day a part of his routine—avoiding him was a shitty thing to do.

So she’d dragged herself from her window nook, rooted around in the kitchen until she found the chocolate chip cookies she’d baked the other day (which she placed on a top shelf to keep herself from eating all at once), and bundled up to head over to Frank’s cabin.

When she’d knocked on the door, he’d looked glad to see her, which was a good sign. She’d made up an excuse about baking too many cookies, and wanting to know if he’d be interested in taking some off of her hands. Like she knew he would, because he was a damn gentleman, he’d invited her in. She’d ended up staying for dinner, then helping him polish off a dozen cookies for dessert.

And it hadn’t been as difficult as she’d thought it would be—to act normal around Frank after learning about his family. Because, at the end of the day, Frank was still Frank. Karen had gained new insight into who he was, but it didn’t actually change anything on his end. He was still the same sarcastic, generous, complicated, guarded person he was before. He was still her fucking friend. (That she occasionally imagined going down on her, but that was neither here nor there).

It had been so enjoyable, in fact, that Karen immediately started scheming to make this a part of their routine as well—her showing up at his house around 6:30PM with some kind of baked good; him inviting her inside; eating dinner together and talking. Their daily chats had been nice—and had gotten Frank to open up to her considerably—but now it seemed time to raise the stakes. So just as she’d wiggled her way into Frank’s life by forcing him to converse with her for a few minutes a day, she found a way to make dinner together the norm.

At first, Karen tried for subtlety, thinking Frank might shy away if she attempted to force herself into this life too obviously. So she always showed up on his doorstep with some excuse: I needed a break from writing and saw your light was on; I’m out of batteries and my remote just died, do you have any I could borrow?; There’s a massive spider in my kitchen and now I’m scared to be in my house, can I stay here for a bit? But Frank knew exactly what she was doing, and honestly he didn’t mind—he thought it was amusing, how she believed she was manipulating him into spending his evenings with her. (After the third time she’d shown up halfway through his meal, he’d started delaying his dinner so that he could enlist Karen’s help in the kitchen when she inevitably knocked on his door).

Eventually, though, the excuses ran dry, and Karen decided on a more direct approach. “Look, Frank,” she’d said one evening, over the most delicious Pho she’d ever eaten (courtesy of Frank), “you’re all alone at the end of the day. I’m all alone at the end of the day. We like being around each other, so let’s just let this happen, okay? Don’t be weird about it. We eat dinner together now.” Frank had laughed, a deep-belly laugh, and replied “so I shouldn’t be expecting more lame-ass excuses every time you show up here?” Karen had thrown a chopstick at his head.

They started alternating nights—two nights at Frank’s place, two nights at Karen’s place, then repeat.
When Frank was in charge of dinner, they ate adventurously. He liked to try new things—to pull up strange websites and pick a recipe he didn’t know how to pronounce for them to trip and slogged through. (On more than one occasion, they’d had to run their recipes through a translation engine to make sense of them). Nine times out of ten, they ended up fabulous.

When Karen was in charge, they ate mostly comfort food; recipes she’d learned from her grandmother. Chicken pot pie and pulled pork and clam chowder. Food that warmed Frank right down to his toes—that tasted like family and tradition. When Thanksgiving rolled around, which neither of them really felt liked celebrating, she’d made her mother’s secret stuffing recipe and they’d sat on the couch, watching the annual dog show with Max.

And they talked—a lot. Frank was getting better and better at it, too. Each time she breezed her way into his home, he learned new, small ways to unwrap the fragile parts of himself that had been stored away.

At first, it was mainly Karen who led their conversations, sharing concepts from her novel (which was coming along nicely) and soliciting his advice in regards to characterization or plotting. (It always made Frank feel smart whenever Karen asked for his opinion; every time he made a suggestion, she’d nod excitedly and urge him on. Like she genuinely wanted to hear what he had to say). Or telling stories from her childhood, like how she’d been so obsessed with the movie Anastasia when she was younger, her most prized possession was a music box like the one in the movie. She’d played it nonstop so often that it began to drive Kevin crazy, until one day he’d come into her room, grabbed it from her hands, and chucked it out the window, before walking away without saying a word. It had taken her months to forgive him.

But after a few weeks of Karen’s stories, Frank began to open up, too, largely because of her prodding. She was so curious about his life—always pushing and questioning, trying to get him to share parts of himself with her. Frank would have found it annoying, being pressed so insistently, but for some reason, with Karen, it was kind of entertaining. That she had such a desire to get to know him; it was new. He’d never had someone care so deeply about discovering him.

He talked about his parents; they had him late in life, so he’d been a bit of a hellion—too much for them to control. Most of his youth had been spent running just a little bit wild, fearlessly exploring every impulse that struck him. His high school stories, in particular, blew Karen away—the kind of shit he and David and Curtis would get into. She’d always been a good girl, the kind to follow the rules. So when Frank admitted that he and his friends had started an underground fight club at their high school during senior year, she’d been completely shocked. She didn’t even know people did stuff like that.

Or when he confessed that he’d faked mono for an entire month his junior year just to get out of P.E., only to be caught smoking under the bleachers by the football coach. All of these little anecdotes added to Karen’s growing fascination with him. He was full of stories the way that people who’d lived bold lives always were.

Of course, there were whole swathes of time that he never spoke about—a decade of living that he wouldn’t touch; his wife, his kids, the accident. But Karen tried not to prod him past the point of his comfort.

She had such a gentle and curious way about her that set Frank at ease. Talking to her was like pressure relief; like every sharp, dark part of himself became blunted and soft in her presence. She made him feel fucking human again—there was no other way about it. For the longest time, he’d been living a kind of shadow life, tucked away inside himself like he could disappear if he tried hard enough. But when Karen turned to him with those curious eyes, he felt like a person made up of
nerve-endings and blunt fingertips and flesh.

She was a marvel, with that fantastic mind—the way it made connections and leapt from one idea to the next with curious speed, keeping him on his toes. He’d never encountered someone who lived so entirely inside their own head, who had so many ideas swirling around in her brain at one time that she had to tuck some of them away into little catacombs, to be revisited at a later date.

But every time they spoke, she invited him in a little further, to explore the most mesmerizing parts of herself.

It had been so easy, so natural, that a month passed by in that manner without Frank even noticing. Before he realized it, Karen had been in Alaska for eight solid weeks, and had thoroughly embedded herself in his life.

“Frank, can I ask you a question that might sound offensive, but I totally don’t mean for it to?” Karen looked up from her plate of lasagna, which she had been contemplating for the past few minutes.

“Hell of a way to preface a question.” Frank glanced at her over the stack of papers in his hands—the most recent edit of one of her chapters, which she’d asked him to read for clarity.

“Well, you know.” Karen shrugged. “Just covering all my bases.”

“Go ahead.” His voice was slightly wary—he could never guess what Karen was about to dig into when she started asking her questions.

“How did you get to be so smart?”

Frank couldn’t help the huff of a laugh that burst from his mouth.

“How did I get so smart?” He repeated, amused, making sure he’d heard her correctly. “What kind of question is that?”

“No, I mean—” Karen dropped her fork, leaning back in her chair and running a hand through her hair. “Do you know how many actual editors I’ve met, who do this for a job, who give shitty feedback?” Karen gestured at the draft in Frank’s hands. “But you—you’re really good at this. You notice the most amazing things.”

Frank looked down, a little embarrassed about the praise.

“No, really. It’s just so unexpected,” Karen shifted forward. “I mean, not to stereotype you or anything, but a lumberjack who knows about literature? I’m just wondering how that happened?”

Frank sighed, putting down the papers and staring off in thought. He ran a hand over his jaw, scratching at his beard.

“I guess because of Curtis. You know he got his degree in Literature from Columbia?”

“What? Really?” Karen’s eyes widened in surprise. “I absolutely didn’t know that. How’d he end up back here from New York?”

“His father passed away about ten years ago. He came home to take care of his mother.” Frank picked up the pen lying next to his hand, fiddling. “He was planning on going back, I think, maybe for his PdD. But then David—he had this little computer repair business for a while—and it went
belly up. Curtis stuck around to help him back on his feet; eventually they opened up the bookstore together.

“Wow, that’s amazing. So Curtis is kind of like a mama bear, huh? Just goes around taking care of people?”

Frank chuckled. “Yeah. Just a little bit. Not that he’d admit it.”

“So Curtis got you into books?” Karen placed her elbow on the table, slipping her chin into her palm. It was something she did all the time—her patented “listening stance,” as Frank secretly thought of it.

“Yeah, I–,” Frank paused, cleared his throat. “When I moved up here, to the mountains, I didn’t have a lot to do. I just got that TV last year, actually.” Frank gestured over his shoulder at the living room, with its janky little set that looked straight out of the 90s. “Curtis started mailing me books up here. To keep me busy.”

“Good friend,” Karen’s lips quirked.

“Yeah.”

“So you just learned by reading?”

“Yeah. Keep a log of what I read, too. I’m over a thousand deep at this point. Try to read a book a week.”


“Yeah,” Frank nodded. “Started with the classics. Curtis really likes the Post-Modernists. Got me into DeLillo for a while; turned my brain inside-out. But I’ve been on a murder mystery kick recently.” He smirked at Karen, who flushed under his gaze. “Read that Gillian Flynn book.”

“Gone Girl?”

“Yeah.”

“What did you think?”

Frank crossed his arms, looking thoughtful. “She’s not as good as you.”

“Oh, you can’t say that!” Karen threw her balled-up napkin at him.

“It’s true.”

“No it isn’t. You’re just saying that because I made peach cobbler for dessert, and Gillian Flynn hasn’t baked you squat.”

“Believe whatever you want, but it’s true.” Frank grumbled, picking up her draft again to resume reading.

Karen was quiet for a moment, watching him with a slow, easy smile. She grabbed her fork, stabbing at her dinner, as a comfortable silence fell over them, punctuated occasionally by a grunt from Frank. She’d learned to decipher his little noises: when he enjoyed a line she’d written, it was a grunt; when he had a qualm with a dialogue choice, or characterization, the sound was more like a huff. When he put the paper down and stared off into space, it was usually a bad sign—meant that she’d written something he didn’t agree with. (They’d had an hour-long argument, one night about whether or not
one of her characters would be pro-choice or pro-life).

And Karen would just watch him—intrigued. It wasn’t often an author got to sit and stare at someone reading their work—experience the range of emotions as they flitted right in front of their eyes.

It was a solid five minutes before Karen spoke again.

“So, Frank.” She pushed what was left of her lasagna around her plate, watching him coyly from beneath her lashes.

Frank glanced up. She had that look on her face—the one she got when she was about to ask him a favor (but couch as a demand, because Karen Page always got what she wanted out of him).

He put the papers down.

“So, Karen.” He mimicked her tone, and she quirked a small smile.

“I was in town earlier today and I heard something very interesting.” She chased a chunk of meat sauce with her fork.

“I’m sure you did.” Frank folded his arms over his chest, leaning back in his chair.

“About some Winter Festival that’s coming up in a few days?”

Frank tried not to groan—so that’s where she was going with this.

“I heard it’s going to be all the rage,” she smiled at him prettily, and he cursed himself for being such a sucker for the little beauty mark above her mouth. “Games and rides and lots of interesting booths. So I’m just wondering, am I driving us, or are you?”

The sound that left Frank was entirely involuntary—a half-laugh, half-scoff.

“I’m going to take that laugh to mean that you’re volunteering for the job. And I accept your offer.” Karen crossed her own arms, in a mirror of Frank. If he could be stubborn, she could be too.

“Sweetheart, that’s not going to happen.” The endearment slipped out so naturally, Frank barely noticed it. In fact, it almost sounded like he’d been saying it for years, though this was the first time. His eyes widened, shooting to Karen nervously for a reaction. He hadn’t used a term like “sweetheart” since Maria, and he wasn’t sure how she’d take it—Karen was the kind of woman who might find it patronizing. But she was too busy working herself up for an argument to give it pause. (Later, she would realize what he’d said, and her heart would stutter painfully in her chest).

“Come on, Frank. I really want to go—and I deserve to go. Look at how much I’ve written!” She gestured at the pages sitting in front of him. “I need a fucking break. And I’m not going by myself. Aside from you, I only know Jess and a few old guys I see every time I stop by the bar. And I don’t really think I’d call the old guys my friends.”

“Well that’s not nice. I’m sure they’d call you theirs.”

“Stop trying to distract me by being a little shit, Castle.” Karen rolled her eyes, the irritation of the gesture undercut by a smile.

Frank sighed. He’d wanted to go to the Winter Festival at one point—he really had—but now that it was so close, he found himself feeling reluctant. It was the social event of the season, and everyone
in Seward and its surrounding hamlets would be there. Frank wasn’t sure he was ready for all of that. Karen had done miracles, helping to socialize him like he was some feral child fresh out of the woods, but being swallowed up by a crowd of people? That seemed a little too much.

Karen sensed his anxiety, and reached across the table to lay a gentle hand on his arm. (The first few times she’d done something similar, he’d jerked under her touch, surprised. Now he didn’t even bat an eye).

“Hey,” her voice was soft. Frank’s eyes anchored to hers, which were wide and gentle. “It’s you and me, okay? I’m gonna stick to you like glue, and if you want to leave, we can leave. But I’d like to try.” She squeezed his forearm softly.

And how could Frank say no to that?

At the book club meeting the Tuesday before the festival, Frank decided to give Curtis and David a head’s up about Karen. It was time, he supposed, to come clean about the fact that their favorite author had been living next door to him for two months. Though he would have preferred to keep their friendship a secret—it felt like a kind of fragile and precious thing—he didn’t want Curtis and David losing their shit when they saw him pull into town with her sitting pretty in his passenger seat. Karen wasn’t too fond of people making a big fuss over her.

To say that they went nuclear on him would have been an understatement; he’d received the verbal flaying of his life. David kept yelling the word “betrayal” over and over again, increasing in volume every time Frank tried to speak, while Curtis shook his head with a disappointed look. Frank had tried to explain that this thing he had with Karen was private, in that way that tender, green things are, but he didn’t have the words. So instead he’d said “get over it, and don’t be weird when you meet her,” and then left.

But he didn’t really trust either David or Curtis to keep their shit together, so on the drive into town the afternoon of the festival, he prepared Karen for the very real possibility that his buddies would fanboy over her.

“You mean to tell me that your only two friends in the world, aside from me, are huge fans of mine…and you purposely didn’t tell them I was living like ten feet away from you?” Karen stared at him in disbelief across the console of the truck.

Frank nodded, eyes on the road. “Yep.”

“Oh my god, Frank Castle,” she made a frustrated little noise. “All of the sudden I understand why you only have three friends.”

“Hey, I thought I was protecting you from having to deal with crazy people.” He tried to defend himself.

“Frank, in case you haven’t noticed, I’m becoming a crazy person.” She pressed an adamant hand to her chest. “Because I only have you to talk to! If I’d known there were other people to entertain me, I’d have taken advantage a long time ago!”

Frank rolled his eyes.

“We’ll see how you feel after you meet them,” he grumbled.

“Aww, are you afraid that I’ll like your friends more than I like you, and I’ll start spending all of my
time with *them* instead?” Karen’s voice was teasing.

“Trust me. I’m the winner of the bunch, and that’s saying something."

“Yikes,” Karen hissed, shaking her head. “That’s grim.”

“Hey. I’m the one driving you to a festival I didn’t even want to go to. Be nice.” Frank shot her a look from the driver’s side. Karen snorted.

“I’ll try. No promises."

The Winter Festival was unlike anything Karen had ever seen before—like a scene from a stereotypical Hallmark Christmas movie. On the drive over, Frank had explained that most of the festival activities would take place outside during the afternoon, when the sun was high enough to keep people from freezing where they stood. There was to be ice skating, a hay ride, carnival games, a snowman contest, a chili festival, and a million little booths set up by local businesses to sell their wares. But after dark, the activities moved into the big, town hall convention center, where central heating would take over the task of warming the crowd. As he’d shared stories of the Winter Festival from his high school years, one of which involved he and David putting laxatives in one of the contest chilis, Karen had felt her excitement ramping. She’d always been a city girl—the kind that never really got to know her neighbors—so the idea of all of Seward getting together to celebrate the winter months sounded incredibly charming.

As they pulled onto Main Street, squeezing in among a long line of cars, Karen was not disappointed.

The entire town was covered in twinkle lights as far as she could see, strung across the street from tree to tree. Though the sun was still high in the sky, the lights glinted like fireflies as they swayed in the afternoon breeze. Each storefront along the road was wrapped up in frothy Christmas decorations—red ribbons and silver stars and a dizzying amount of tinsel. Wreaths hung from every street lamp, little sprigs of holly popping vibrant red in the sun.

Karen slid out of the truck to stand in the middle of the blocked off road, turning in circles, admiring the gaiety of it all. Like something out of a painting. And the *smells*—cinnamon and sugar from the fresh pretzel stand, roasting chestnuts from the stall with the Santa impersonator, and the vague, sugary scent of funnel cake. She inhaled deeply—it smelled like happiness. Combined with the sounds of Nat King Cole drifting out of the speakers mounted to each lamppost, the atmosphere was enough to make Karen’s head spin.

Frank stood, a smile on his face, and watched her turning circles with wide eyes. He’d been living in Seward for so long, and had grown so accustomed to the beauties of small-town life, that he’d forgotten the kind of joy they could bring. The kind of warmth and comfort to be had in a place as cozy as this.

“Shit, Frank. I can’t believe you were going to miss out on all of this because you’re grumpy.” She’d beamed at him, eyes crinkling in delight, as a gust of wind blew her hair around her shoulders like a halo. Frank wanted to rejoin with something snarky, but found his words caught in his throat.

She looked so lovely, smiling at him with rosy cheeks, like she was happy to be alive—so wonderfully human. And a feeling of gratitude swept over him, filling his chest like warm air. He suddenly felt so lucky to get to experience this exact moment with her—to get to stand in her light. It was a giddy sensation, similar to the way he’d felt looking over the Grand Canyon on the school trip
senior year—like it was not only a marvel something so magnificent existed, but that he got to see it with his own eyes. The revelation made him lose his train of thought, which was confusing, and just a little troubling; he hadn’t felt anything like that since Maria.

And feeling happy—that particular brand of happy—almost felt wrong. Felt like a betrayal.

I let myself be happy. Not because that’s what Kevin would have wanted, but because that’s what I want.

Karen’s words from weeks ago floated through his mind, and he took a deep breath, trying to clear his chest of the heavy, dark guilt. He wanted to be happy—here, with Karen. And he even wanted to let himself be happy in that way—the way that made him think of Maria.

If Karen sensed Frank’s inner turmoil, she didn’t mention it, as she grabbed his arm and pulled him toward the nearest stand, which was selling candied apples. She somehow managed to ignore all of the curious looks being shot his way—the open astonishment with which people stared. He couldn’t blame them; he knew his reputation. There was little doubt in his mind that his presence at the festival would be the highlight of tomorrow’s gossip. He tried not to let the attention make him uneasy, instead focusing on the feeling of Karen’s delicate fingers wrapped around the crook of his elbow.

“Every time I eat a candied apple,” Karen explained, grabbing her snack from the woman behind the booth (who had yet to take her mystified eyes off of Frank), “I feel like I’m about to crack a tooth. Why does everything I love try to hurt me?”

Frank snorted, grabbing his own treat, which was covered in peanut bits.

“You might be overdr—”

Whatever he was about to say was unceremoniously cut off by the sudden impact of two preteen bodies slamming into his own. Four arms were suddenly wrapped around his torso, and he had to do some quick recalibrations just to keep his balance.

“Uncle Frank!”

“Dad said you probably wouldn’t show up, but I told him you would.”

Frank turned around, looking down at the faces of Leo and Zach Lieberman. They’d grown since the last time he’d seen them, three months ago at a dinner Sarah had forced him to attend. Some of the baby fat had melted from Zach’s face, while Leo was looking more and more like her mother every time he saw her. At their ages, the changes happened so rapidly—kids one day and teenagers the next. Something dull and painful thudded in his chest, like it always did when he saw the Lieberman kids.

But it disappeared as soon as Karen laid a hand on his shoulder.

“Friends of yours, Frank?” She raised her eyebrows, licking tiny shards of red candy from her lips.

“Uh, this is Leo,” he yanked on the girl’s ponytail, “and Zach,” he ruffled the boy’s hair. “David’s kids.”

“Ah! Nice to meet you. I’m Karen.” She held out her hand, which the kids shook in turn, staring up at her with wide eyes.

“You’re the one Dad’s not supposed to freak out about, huh?” Leo crossed her arms, shaking her
head in a move that looked too old for her 12 years of age.

Karen and Frank exchanged an amused glance.

“Mom’s been giving him shit the whole way here about not being a loser when he meets you.” Zach cut in, wanting attention.

“Language.” Frank shot him a stern look, to which he rolled his eyes.

“Been giving him ‘poop.’” The boy corrected snarkily.

“That’s better.” Frank nodded, lips quirked. “Where are your parents anyway?” He looked around, trying to see through the crowd.

“Mom’s making Dad take pictures by the carriage. She said that if we saw you, we were supposed to tell you off for staying away for so long, and also invite you to dinner sometime next week.” Leo’s attention was starting to wane, her eyes drifting away as she caught sight of the face-painting booth.

“Yeah. I’m working on my first aid merit badge, and Dad sucks at making a tourniquet. He said you might know how.” Zach shrugged, as if he didn’t care either way. As if he didn’t desperately want Frank to spend more time with them.

“Yeah, I might know a thing or two.” Frank nodded. He caught Zach eyeing his candied apple, and held it out for the boy to take.

“Kids, go do something stupid somewhere else and stop bothering Uncle Frank.” David suddenly appeared at Frank’s side, his wife Sarah on his arm. He was speaking to his kids, but his eyes were on Karen. She shot him a nervous smile.

“But Dad, I was going to show him how I learned to tie all my knots last month at scout camp.” Zach crossed his arms.

“And I was going to tell him that I helped.” Leo jumped in.

“Well, you can tell him later. It’s adult time.” Sarah slipped into what was clearly her “mom voice” and the kids rolled their eyes.

“Fine,” Leo dragged the word out until it was at least seven syllables. “We have better things to do anyway, right Zach?” She grabbed her brother by the arm before yanking him away into the crowd.

“Sorry about that,” Sarah chuckled, watching her kids melt away into the mass of people on the street. “Pre-teens.” She gave an exasperated look. “Good to see you, Frank,” she gave him a smile and a nod.

“You too, Sarah. Been too long.” He nodded back. “This is Karen.” He jerked his head in her direction.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Sarah, and this is David.” She pointed to her husband, who had yet to take his eyes off of the other woman. She would have been offended, if she hadn’t known that David had been holding in a million and one questions since the moment Frank had revealed that the great Karen Page was his neighbor.

David made a valiant effort to be normal, he really did, but as soon as his mouth opened, what came out was:
“Holy shit, you’re my favorite author.”

Sarah looked like she wanted to smack him; Frank just looked disappointed.

“Ha!” Karen threw her head back in a laugh. “Nice to meet you too, David. You’re my favorite of Frank’s friends. You’re the only one I’ve met, but you’re still my favorite!” She held her hand out, and David shook it vigorously.

“Sorry about that,” his face was stuck somewhere between sheepish and overjoyed. “I had planned on saying something totally cool and casual, but obviously…” He trailed off.

“Don’t think you’re capable of saying anything cool.” Frank grumbled, and Karen smacked him gently on the arm.

“Be nice,” she chastised.

“I’m trying.”

“Not very hard.”

David watched the exchange with intense interest. Frank didn’t really like to be touched by anyone other than he and Curtis—sometimes even hugging Sarah made Frank tense up. But the dynamic between him and Karen was so casual—as though she’d done something similar a thousand times. He stored that piece of information away.

“David’s a huge fan. He keeps telling me I need to read your work, but I’m so busy with the kids these days.” Sarah cut in. “But they’re on the top of my list when I have a minute.”

“Ah, well,” Karen looked a little embarrassed. She wasn’t entirely sure how to respond to that.

Frank, sensing her awkwardness, spoke up. “I think Karen wanted to watch the snowman building contest. Is it still in the town square this year?”

“Yep,” Sarah nodded, then glanced at her watch. “Speaking of which, I’ve got the go make sure my judges aren’t getting sloshed on cider already. Planning this thing’s been a full-time job.” She made an apologetic little shrug, kissed David on the cheek, and waved goodbye.

They watched her disappear into the crowd for a moment, before Karen turned to David.

“So I hear you own the book store. You read a lot?” She asked, rocking back on the balls of her feet.

“Oh boy. Wrong question to ask, Kare.” Frank grumbled, slipping his hand in the crook of her arm to lead her in the direction of the town square. “You’ll have to talk and walk if you want to get there in time.”

David’s eyes darted down to Frank’s hand, before he looked back at Karen to answer her. “Oh, I read a lot. I’m kind of a walking library. In fact, every piece of literary knowledge Frank has, he got from me.”

“Is that so?” Karen raised a brow.

“You bet.”

And that was how Frank became the third wheel to a 45 minute conversation about all of David’s favorite books, which he ranked for them in excruciating detail. Karen was great about it, smiling and laughing along to all of his shitty literary puns, and adding commentary every time he took a pause to
breathe. Frank, for his part, mainly jumped in to defend himself every time David made some comment about how he was the one who got Frank interested in a certain author or genre.

They’d watched the snowman building contest together, and cheered when their favorite won (it was a snow woman, thank you very much). As they moved onto the carnival games, the conversation turned to Karen’s latest book—the one she was currently working on. David was shocked at how much Frank had to say about it—and more than a little jealous that he’d been reading all of Karen’s drafts as she worked. He found himself getting lost in the conversation several times; it was like Karen and Frank were talking in code, or in a language only they could understand: “and then Frank read the scene in the toolshed and didn’t think that the characterization was haunted enough, so I had to go back to the drawing board” and “Karen took out this chunk of dialogue that was just amazing, about the killer’s father, but she might recycle it for later, right?”

David watched them with utter fascination as they made their way through the crowd, stopping to play a game every few minutes (Frank always won the shooting ones, as his aim was impeccable). It was incredible, seeing Frank interact with Karen. In fact, it was like the old Frank had returned; the version that was flirtatious and witty and comfortable in his skin. Like Karen had travelled back in time and brought home his old friend.

“You know, I don’t think I’ve ever done a book signing in Alaska.” Karen leaned against the Whack-a-Mole machine that David was bent over with intense interest, a mallet in his hands. “Do Alaskans not like my books?”

Frank reached out quickly and moved Karen’s elbow out of the way just in time for a mole to pop up right where it had been. She grinned a sheepish thanks.

“Oh no. This Alaskan loves your books, promise you that.” David’s tongue was sticking out, far too concentrated on his game for a man of his age. “One time I even turned down Sarah for sex because I was at a really good part in Little Fires.”

“Jesus, David.” Frank scowled. “Too much information.” He darted his eyes to Karen, who had her head thrown back in laughter.

“Oh god, can I get that endorsement on the back of my next book?” She was clutching her stomach, barely getting words out between bursts of giddiness. “This book’s so good, it killed my sex life.”

“Hey!” David glanced up from his game. “I didn’t say it killed my sex life. Just deferred it.” He was going to say something else, too, but he caught the look in Frank’s eye as he watched Karen doubled over in laughter. Soft, unwavering, and a little overwhelmed.

That look was pure Old-Frank. Was one David had seen his friend wear a million times, with another women, years ago.

David missed three moles, staring at Frank, before remembering his very important task of mole extermination. He took a few swings. And by the time he glanced up again, the look was gone—Frank was staring down at his shoes, brow furrowed.

“Y’know,” Karen was wiping tears from her eyes. “I could totally do a book signing at your store if you ever wanted me to.”

“Seriously?” David dropped the mallet in his hand, giving up on the game. “I would kill my own mother for you to do a book signing at the store.”

“David, your mother’s already dead.” Frank rolled his eyes, shoving his hands in his pockets.
“Yeah, but the sentiment still holds.”

“You don’t have to kill anyone, I promise. I’ll do it without a sacrifice of any sort.” Karen shook her head, lips quirked in amusement. “Just let me know whenever you want to set something up.”

“Will do.” David could barely contain his excitement.

“Now, if you’re done bludgeoning poor, defenseless creatures, I’m dying to try some of the cook-off chili.” Karen nodded her head toward the end of the street, where the smell of hot peppers and a thousand mouth-watering spices was wafting on the breeze.

“Then let’s go.” Frank put his hand in the small of Karen’s back, steering her through the crowd. David followed, biting his lip to keep down his grin at the sight of his friend looking so comfortable in his skin.

As the afternoon wore on, David was absolutely taken with the way Frank seemed to orbit Karen—seemed to hang on her every word, watching her with stars in his eyes. He doubted that Frank realized how moony he looked every time Karen laughed or smiled or said something smart, or he’d have tried to disguise it better.

And the little touches all the time—Frank brushing against Karen’s arm; Karen squeezing Frank’s to get his attention; Frank putting his hands on her shoulders to keep her balanced when someone in the crowd jostled her; Karen leaning against him to remove a rock from her shoe. It was so not Frank…it was so intimate.

It was beginning to grow dark as they finally made their way to the funnel cake booth, which Karen had been bugging them about checking out for the past thirty minutes.

“You know, when I was a kid, I used to tag along on all of my brother’s boy scout camp-outs.” Karen licked powdered sugar off of her fingers. “And every time, the scout leaders would make funnel cake in the dutch oven. Whenever I eat funnel cake, I can smell the smoke of a campfire.”

“They let you tag along?” Frank, who had insisted he didn’t want a funnel cake of his own, grabbed hers and took a bite. She didn’t even bat an eye, David noticed.

“Yeah. My mom tried to get me into the Girl Scouts, but they were doing things like sewing and baking to earn their merit badges. Meanwhile, my brother was tying knots and learning about poisonous snakes.” She shrugged. “I think I bugged the scout leaders enough that they finally stopped trying to kick me out of their meetings.”

“Zach’s a boy scout,” David said around a mouthful of cake. “I think Leo would give an arm a leg if they’d let her be one, too. It’s right up her alley.”

“Ah, not Lisa. She was always more girly.” The words were out of Frank’s mouth before he even realized it.

Karen’s gaze was on him in an instant, intense and penetrating.

“Yeah,” David chuckled, oblivious to the mounting tension on Frank’s end. “I remember the time she got into Maria’s makeup and tried to make herself ‘look pretty.’ I’d never seen a more accurate Bozo the Clown impression in my life.”

Frank’s already stiff shoulders grew even more rigid. He had been so happy, so fucking buoyant, only moments before, but now he was thinking about Lisa and Frankie Jr. and Maria. A tight, dark coil was building up in his gut.
Karen, with her keen eye and ability to read him like a book, cut in.

“Hey, you know, I think they’re starting to move everyone inside. It’s getting dark out. So maybe we should head in too?” Her voice was pitched just a little bit too high—nervous.

Frank shot her an appreciative look, his face softening. He still didn’t know that she knew about his family, so he assumed she’d sensed his mounting distress and diverted without knowing why. But nevertheless, he was grateful for it.

“Uh, okay.” David darted his eyes between the two of them, startled by the change of topic, but nodded anyway. “I think Mayor Murdock’s going to give his annual speech soon anyways. Don’t want to miss that.” He rolled his eyes.

“And why is that?” Karen quietly slipped her hand into the crook of Frank’s arm, pulling him in the direction the crowd had started to move, into the town hall.

“Murdock’s an asshole.” Frank grunted, looking down at Karen’s pale, perfect hand against the rough wool of his coat. It felt like an anchor—like a small comfort he didn’t know if he deserved.

“Ah, he’s not an asshole. He’s just incompetent.” David grabbed Karen’s trash from her funnel cake, dropping it into a waste basket as they passed by. “His assistant, Foggy, pretty much runs the whole town. Murdock’s just the good-looking figurehead.”

“He ain’t that good-looking.” Frank said with a dismissive grunt. Karen had laughed, giving his arm a gentle squeeze before letting go.

Frank was right, Karen found herself thinking a few minutes later, the mayor was not that good-looking. As soon as the crowd had packed into the town hall, Mayor Matthew Murdock took the stage to give his annual speech about good cheer and being neighborly and how lucky they all were to live in such a friendly town. David had disappeared at some point, after receiving an emergency text from Sarah that she needed help unloading boxes of party poppers behind the town hall. Which left just Karen and Frank, pressed against each other in the sea of Seward, Alaska’s entire population.

After the third mention of “small-town charm,” Karen leaned over to whisper in Frank’s ear.

“Is it just me, or is this a really boring speech?”

He snorted, nodding his head.

“Every year they get worse. And everybody still claps like it’s the fuckin’ State of the Union Address.”

Karen grinned, bumping into Frank as someone shoved passed her to get closer to the stage.

“Hey man,” a body appeared at Frank’s other side. “Been looking for you everywhere.”

Karen leaned forward to peer around Frank at the newcomer, knowing that it must be Curtis. Frank did only have two friends, after all.

“We’ve been around.” Frank inclined his head toward Karen. “This is Karen, by the way.”

“Curtis Hoyle,” he reached around Frank to extend his hand. “Huge fan.”
“Nice to meet you.” Karen shook it. “You’re the other book store owner? David’s partner?”

“Eh,” Curtis shrugged. “I like to think of myself as David’s boss.”

“Oh, I’m sure he’d love to hear that.” Karen chuckled.

“Where is David, by the way?” Curtis turned to look around.

“Festival emergency with Sarah.” Frank exchanged a knowing glance with Curtis. A “Sarah has that man whipped” kind of a glance.

Karen was about to speak, but the room erupted into applause. Apparently Mayor Murdock had finished his speech. Karen made a face at Frank and joined in the clapping.

The indoor portion of the festival involved everybody moving to tables that had been set up along the walls, leaving the middle of the hall open as a dance floor. As Curtis, Karen, and Frank moved to claim a table before they were all taken, a Shania Twain song kicked in over the speakers.

“So Frank,” Karen nudged him in the arm with her elbow. “What are the chances of me getting you out on the dance floor before the night is over?”

“Slim to none.”

“Hmm,” she tilted her head in thought. “What I’m hearing is ‘pretty high.’”

“Make that just ‘none.’” He covered a chuckle with a scoff, pulling out a chair for Karen to sit.

“Nope. You said ‘slim’ and you can’t take it back. I’m going to hold onto that ‘slim.’” She wagged her finger at him.

“You do that.”

Curtis barely managed to keep the look of shock off of his face as he looked back and forth between Karen and Frank. That was his Frank—flirting. Very poorly, but still flirting nonetheless. (Later, David and Curtis would compare notes, both marveling over the sheer magnetism Karen seemed to have over their friend).

“I’ll dance with you,” Curtis piped up. “I cut a mean rung.”

“See,” Karen shot a pointed look at Frank. “This here is a man who knows how to have a good time.”

“No. He’s a man who gets tipsy at these things every year and requests the DJ play ‘September’ by Earth, Wind, and Fire twenty times in a row so that he can try to get a line dance going.” Frank pretended not to notice the glare Curtis shot him for that.

“Oh wow, and does anyone join in?” Karen put her elbow on the table, resting her head in her chin.

“Never. Not even once.” Curtis shook his head sadly.

“Well maybe this is the year that changes, huh?” She wagged her eyebrows.

“Don’t encourage him.” Frank groaned.

They were about thirty minutes into a conversation about why more people don’t line dance these days, when suddenly Mayor Murdock was standing over their table, Foggy Nelson at his side. He’d
appeared out of nowhere

“Sorry to interrupt.” He held up his hands apologetically, though his tone was unrepentant. “But I was just informed by my assistant that we have a celebrity in the house tonight. Is there a Karen Page here?”

Karen frowned, glancing at Frank in confusion before holding her hand up. She immediately felt sheepish when she remembered that the man was blind.

“Uh, that’s me.” She piped up.

The mayor turned to face the sound of her voice.

“I’m Matthew Murdock, mayor of this little town. I just wanted to stop by and welcome you. It’s not often that we get anyone famous coming our way.” His voice had the ring of a politician—pleasant and mild and just a little bit smarmy.

“Oh, well,” she looked embarrassedly away. “I’m not exactly a celebrity.”

“Oh nonsense,” Matt waved a dismissive hand. “My assistant informed me that you are a New York Times bestseller. Give yourself some credit.”

Frank noticed, with amusement, the little tick in Karen’s forehead. Murdock was veering into patronizing territory with that tone—territory no man wanted to enter with Karen.

“I was wondering if you might need someone to show you around town sometime,” He continued. “Say tomorrow night? I’m always available to give private tours to special guests.”

Frank’s jaw tensed. Was Murdock flirting? Curtis’s keen eyes noticed his friend’s stiffness with interest.

“Oh, uh. I’ve actually been here for a few months now. I’m well-acquainted with the town, thanks.” Karen’s grin was awkward, and Frank almost wished Murdock could see it.

“Well, I’m sure you haven’t seen it the way you could see it with me. As the mayor, I have access to places the average person can’t go.” Murdock’s smile was a touch too familiar. A touch too arrogant.

A feeling akin to jealousy roiled hot in Frank’s gut. Everything about this conversation was rubbing him the wrong way, from the way Murdock hadn’t even addressed neither he nor Curtis, to the uncomfortable shifting of Karen in her seat.

Watching her eyes dart uneasily about, Frank realized that it wasn’t jealousy he was feeling—it was protectiveness. He didn’t like that anyone was making Karen feel ill at ease. The minor revelation bumped against something in his brain—a memory—of feeling the same sensation towards Maria. The need to shield her from anything disagreeable. But with Karen, this feeling was mixed with another—the understanding that she could take care of herself.

“I don’t mind getting the ‘average person’ tour, really. It’s suited me just fine so far.” Karen’s voice was clipped.

“Really? You haven’t enjoyed what Seward has to offer until you’ve taken a snow mobile tour with the man who has the keys to the city.” He leaned in just a little, closing in on Karen’s personal space. He was being too pushy, Frank thought, gritting his teeth.

“It’s a kind offer, Mayor Murdock, but I’m really fine.” Karen’s tone took on a hard edge. “I think
I’ve seen all the important parts of Seward. But thank you for stopping by.”

It was dismissive, and Murdock’s face fell. Frank felt a kind of pride welling in his chest.

“Ah, well.” Murdock straightened, trying to play off her dismissal as a minor thing. “If you change your mind, here’s my card.” He made a vague gesture with his hand, and Foggy leaned forward to place a business card on the table in front of her. “Have a good evening, then.”

As the mayor moved to walk away, Foggy leaned down to Karen with a smile. “By the way, Small Dangers changed my life.” He gave her a thumb’s up before rushing to catch up with Murdock.

There was a tense pause at the table, then Karen picked up the card and ripped it in two.

“I don’t fuckin’ like that guy.” She shook her head. “And he’s honestly not that good-looking.”

Frank couldn’t contain his laugh, as it erupted from him in a deep burst.

Curtis grinned—that was a fucking great sound to hear.

Karen wasn’t able to get Frank out on the floor that night, but she did succeed in getting him to bob for apples, which might have been better. Watching him sputter as water dripped down his beard warmed the cockles of her heart. She’d also convinced him to stay long enough to listen to a few songs played by a local Bluegrass-inspired band, who took the stage to much celebration (Frank had hoisted Leo up on his shoulders to help her see over the crowd at one point, which set Karen’s heart to thumping in new and strange ways).

On the drive home, Karen leaned her head against the passenger side window and closed her eyes, breathing deep.

“I love it here, Frank.” Her voice was quiet, in that way people tend to speak when it’s dark and calm and lovely.

“Yeah?” Frank glanced over at her, watching the way the street lights illuminated her face in a soft orange light for a moment or two, before plunging her back into darkness. She looked warm; small and contented, bundled up in her coat.

And beautiful—so fucking beautiful. Frank’s fingers tightened on the steering wheel; every time he looked at her for too long, he found something new to admire: the curl of her dark lashes, the way her smile was always just a little bit crooked, the freckles that dotted her nose and cheeks.

“And yeah. I wish I could stay here forever.” She sighed, sinking down further into her seat, hugging her arms close to her body. “New York already seems like such a distant memory. I used to be able to smell it every time I closed my eyes and tried hard enough—the smog and the dirt and the grease from the halal stands. But now I just smell cold and pine. And sawdust—but only when I’m with you.” Her voice was drowsy, fuzzy with sleep.

Frank smiled, and felt the ghost of a reaction in his right hand—the urge to reach out and run it down her hair. It was almost like a phantom limb—feeling a part of him that he thought he’d lost long ago pulling at him. He locked the muscles in his arm to fight the impulse.

He wanted to say that he wished she could stay forever too, but the light snoring emanating from her side of the car let him know that she was lost to the world.
The world outside was dark and close; as Frank left the warm glow of town and ascended into the mountains, the forest seemed to converge on either side of him, swallowing the truck in a sea of pine. Some might have felt a sense of foreboding—unable to see much for the densely-packed trees, their limbs like claws—but Frank felt an overwhelming comfort. He and Karen, tucked away safely in their warm little bubble, speeding through the night on their way home.

*Fuck.* The word “home” hit him hard. He’d said it a lot in the past few years—thought it a lot—but he’d never really meant it. The cabin in the mountains wasn’t his home; it was a roof and four walls intended to keep him from freezing to death, nothing more.

But now, when he thought the word, he meant it. Really fucking meant it.

What a gut-punch. What a head-fuck.

Frank glanced over at Karen, his brow furrowed. His chest tightened, filling with something that felt a lot like a revelation.

They had been hitting him all night—these moments of clarity—these overwhelming feelings of rightness. When he looked at Karen, his brain lit up like a fucking bonfire; his whole body became a livewire.

Which left him feeling confused, and kind of guilty. Because that was the way he’d felt about Maria.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Just a quick head's up...this is the last smut-free chapter.

The two weeks following the Winter Festival were Karen’s most productive yet, in terms of writing. It seemed that once the floodgates opened, there was no closing them. Every night at dinner, Frank would marvel over how much Karen had accomplished that day, reading over her most recent edits and changes, providing feedback. He continued his trend of being surprisingly insightful, pointing out moments of uneven characterization or indulgent jogs of dialogue that Karen need to cut.

Trish was over the moon; absolutely bowled over by the quality of work Karen was producing, and so quickly, too. Karen no longer dreaded her phone calls; no longer did everything in her power to avoid picking up when she saw her editor’s name flash across the screen.

“Okay, Kare,” the sound of Trish shuffling papers carried over the phone. “This latest edit is fucking amazing. You gotta tell me what this Frank guy is doing to stimulate your creative juices so much. I’m starting to worry he might take over my job.”

“Yeah, that could never happen. He’s too nice to me. You know what they say about editors—the meaner they are, the better.” Karen collapsed onto the window nook, pulling a fleece blanket up to her chin. “That’s why you’re the best in the business.”

“Hey. You be nice to me. I’ve been over here trying to build up some hype for this next book of yours. You’d be lost without me.

“Yeah, yeah.” Karen leaned her head against the window, the cool glass refreshing on her temple.

“But back to Frank,” Trish redirected the conversation, in the completely unsubtle way that was her standard. There was a pause, in which Karen could hear her rising from her desk and closing the door to her office. “Tell me—had any more sex dreams about him lately?” Her voice was low and conspiratory.

Karen groaned. “Is this something we should be talking about while you’re at the office? Using a company phone?”

“What are they going to do? Wiretap me to see if I’m talking about sex on their time?” Trish snorted. “Plus, everyone knows that talking about sex is part of the job, right? Writers thrive on passion—I’m just being a good editor and trying to awaken yours.”

“Sounds like a lame excuse to pry, Trish.”

“Well, it’s also that, too. But I’m not going to drop it until you answer the question.”

Karen thumped her head gently against the window. “Yes. Almost every fucking night.”

Trish made a noise that Karen would call a squeal (though Trish would never let her).
“Details, details!”

“Okay, you’re my best friend in the world, but I’m not going to share the gory details of my erotic dreams about my neighbor with you.” Especially not the one from the previous night, which had involved making love on his kitchen floor, featuring a healthy dose of chocolate syrup (she blamed that on the fact that Frank had asked her to make lava cakes the night before, and chocolate was on her brain).

“Fine,” Trish groaned. “You’re no fun. Sometimes I wish you wrote harlequins instead of murder, because then maybe you’d be less Puritanical about these things.”

“I am not Puritanical!” Karen’s offended voice slipped up in pitch. “I just…this is private. Personal.”

A beat of silence.

“Because you like Frank.” It was a statement, not a question. Karen didn’t respond. “Because you really, really like Frank,” Trish amended.

“I—” Karen toyed with the notion of denying it, but decided the effort wouldn’t be worth it. Trish was the most intuitive person Karen knew; there was no sense in playing games with her. “Yeah. A lot.”

“Uh huh. I knew it.” Trish sounded self-satisfied. “From the second you picked up the phone and said ‘oh, by the way, there’s an incredibly attractive mountain man who lives down the road and he helped me fix my heater today.’ Which I absolutely thought was a euphemism, by the way.”

Karen sighed. “Yeah yeah, you can read me like a book. What else is new.” She turned her head, staring across the expanse of snow-covered ground at Frank’s cabin. He wouldn’t be home from his book club meeting for three more hours; Karen felt like a desperate schoolgirl with a crush for knowing that. “I’ve never felt this way about anyone before.”

“Hmm, well that answers the question of what Frank’s been doing to get you to write. He’s made you fall in love with him.” Trish said it so matter-of-factly, Karen almost didn’t catch how smoothly she’d worked in the L-word.

“Uh, slow down there,” Trish sounded self-satisfied. “From the second you picked up the phone and said ‘oh, by the way, there’s an incredibly attractive mountain man who lives down the road and he helped me fix my heater today.’ Which I absolutely thought was a euphemism, by the way.”

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“Uh, slow down there,” Karen was sitting up suddenly, her heart pounding in her chest. “Nobody said anything about love, Trish.”

“Uh, I think I just did.”

“I’ve only known the guy for two months!” Karen couldn’t explain why her voice came out as a screech. “I’ve got one hell of a crush on him, sure. I’ll admit that. But love is a different beast altogether.”

“Are you saying you can’t fall in love in two months?” Trish sounded skeptical. “What—is there a year of probation before you can decide how you feel about someone? People fall in love in less than two months all the time.”

“Yeah, sure. But I’m not most people.” Karen got up from her window nook—she needed to pace. All the pent up energy was beginning to make her limbs tingle. “I don’t even know that I’ve ever been in love before.”

“Aw, so this is your first time?”

“Oh my god! Stop that!” Karen ran a shaky hand through her hair. “I’m not in love with Frank
Castle. I’m wildly attracted to him, yes. And I enjoy being around him, I’ll give you that. But I’m not in love.”

“Methinks the lady doth protest too much,” Trish muttered under her breath, then louder: “Why are you so freaked out by me suggesting that you’re in love anyway?”

“Because I—” Karen trailed off, breathing deeply. “I don’t know. I just…I guess the idea of love is scary?”

There was a short, almost sardonic laugh from Trish’s end. “Karen—you write about homicide every day and you think love is scary?”

“Yes!” Karen threw up her hands. “It’s the most vulnerable thing you can do, Trish—love someone else. Loving someone means they can hurt you. They can destroy you.” She thought of Frank losing his family, and what it had done to him—that was the price of love.

“Wow, I never took you for an anti-love cynic, Page.”

“I’m not! You know I’m not.” Karen sighed, throwing herself down on the couch. “It’s just…I’m leaving here in four months. I can’t afford to fall in love with someone I’ll probably never see again after I’m gone.”

“Why not?”

“Because…because I just can’t! Because it would hurt too much.”

“You know, Page, that sounds like a coward’s excuse. Sometimes things are worth the pain.” There was the sound of insistent beeping from over the phone, and Trish sighed heavily. “Shit. I’ve gotta go, Kare. But come on—think about it. Some things are worth it,” she repeated, before hanging up.

Leaving Karen alone to her thoughts. Her messy, tangled thoughts.

Ever since the Winter Festival, Curtis and David had been poking and prodding at Frank non-stop, trying to get him to talk about Karen. They weren’t even being subtle about it. Frank felt like they should have renamed their book club the “bother Frank about his personal life club,” because that’s all they did whenever they got together.

But Frank didn’t want to talk about Karen—not yet. He was still trying to figure his own shit out, and didn’t need Lieberman or Hoyle chucking in their uninformed two cents. The way Frank saw it, the facts were as follows:

1. He found Karen Page to be unfairly, distractingly attractive. It was the wide, blue eyes and the lopsided smile and those legs. He’d be lying if he said he hadn’t had a daydream or two about those legs wrapped around him (for which he immediately felt guilty).
2. Talking to Karen was as easy as breathing, which was an absolute marvel. She had this way about her—she did everything so casually. Touching his shoulder, squeezing his arm, asking him about his favorite movie when he was a kid. Before he even realized it, Karen was pulling out pieces of him that he’d forgotten were there. Setting him at ease. And that counted for something—for a whole lot of something.
3. Every time he looked at her, his heart squeezed in his chest; he felt like a soft and pliable version of himself. Like there were entire worlds strung out on a line between them. And there were moments, more and more often since the festival, where Frank felt like he had cheated the universe—like he had gotten more out of it than he’d put in, for the privilege of knowing
Now, all three of those points, separately, Frank could understand. But taken together, as one…he wasn’t sure what they meant. He knew what Curtis would say, if he decided to confide in him: “sounds like you’re falling in love, man.” And yeah, it did.

But what about Maria?

Maria had been his everything—his whole world—and she was nothing like Karen Page.

Maria was traditional; the kind of woman who liked to look beautiful for Frank at the end of the day, with her sundresses and her face done up nice, giving him a kiss as soon as he walked in the door. She was a practical woman—not one for theories or hypotheticals, but rather concerned with action, with making things happen, in the here-and-now. Spent more time moving and doing and being, and less time sitting and thinking; she’d never been the kind to agonize. Maria was a contradiction—a ruddy survivalist who still needed Frank; who enjoyed needing Frank. At the end of the day, Maria liked having him around to do the difficult things—to make the hard decisions and to act as the head of the family.

And Frank had loved her with everything he had.

Then there was Karen Page, who was so unlike Maria it was almost laughable. Karen, with her crazy ideas and her rich, interior life. Always disappearing into her own mind, chasing down mental leads and clawing her way back to reality with a golden nugget of thought in her hands. He’d once seen her sit, perfectly still, perched on the edge of her couch, for a solid thirty minutes. When she finally moved again, it was to type out one sentence before retreating back into her mind. That kind of patience would have killed Maria, who always had to be moving. And Karen didn’t go in for tradition—didn’t believe in gender roles. Sometimes Frank had to beg her to let him help her with chores, like changing her tire chains or fixing the leak in the roof over her kitchen. She was always insisting that she could do things for herself, arming herself with Google and a can-do attitude.

So if Karen and Maria were nothing alike, then how could Frank be feeling this way? How could he look at Karen and get that overwhelming sense of rightness?

It felt like a betrayal to Maria—like admitting that Karen felt right meant that Maria was wrong.

And he knew—of course he knew—that it was stupid to feel that way. That the human heart was a complex organism, capable of a thousand different, conflicting emotions at once.

But still. There were things he knew cognitively, and things he knew in his gut; and in this case, the two didn’t agree.

Which is why he avoided the topic every time Curtis or David brought it up, which seemed to be all the time these days. And when they weren’t doing that, they were bugging him about how he was going to spend the holidays.

“Hey, man, you sure you don’t want to spend Christmas Eve with us next week? Sarah’s been riding my ass about convincing you. And Zach and Leo would love it, too.” David had his hands shoved in his pockets, trailing behind Frank as they left the back room of the book store, finished with their discussion for the evening (they’d been reading Middlesex, on Karen’s suggestion). They’d recently moved their meetings to Friday night, as Curtis had joined a small-business leaders association that gathered every other Tuesday (and at which he’d met a gorgeous, single woman named Claire, whom he had told neither Frank nor David about).
“Nah. I’m okay.” Frank shrugged into his jacket. “Promised Karen we’d do something. She’d be all alone up there if I leave.”

Just as neither of them had felt like celebrating Thanksgiving that year, Christmas wasn’t a high priority either. It hadn’t been, for Frank, in years. In fact, it was usually a pretty rough time; all the focus on family and tradition and merriment still stung when he was left alone with nobody to hold onto. And Karen’s parents, who had divorced when she was in high school and now had separate families, were both busy with other things—her mother going on a cruise with her step-dad, and her father staying with his wife’s family. Which left Karen all alone, and not really in the mood for cheer.

They’d decided to spend Christmas together, watching classic horror movies. It had been Karen’s idea; it was what she and Kevin used to do when the holidays rolled around and their parents were fighting too much to care about Santa Claus and snowmen. They’d spend Christmas Eve in the basement, huddled up on the couch under a mound of blankets, watching *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* (her favorite movie) and *Night of the Living Dead*. Karen had assured Frank that nothing healed the soul quite like low-budget horror.

“You know, Karen’s always welcome to tag along, too.” David rocked back on his heels. “There’s enough room at the dinner table. Plus, I still haven’t gotten a chance to pick her brain about where the idea for *Broken Signs* came from.”

Frank pulled his hat low over his head, steeling himself to walk into the driving cold. “Thanks for the invite, but I’m not feeling up to the whole family deal this year. Tell Sarah I’ll make it down next time.”

David pursed his lips. “Okay. As long as you’re not gonna be alone.”

“I won’t.” Frank shook his head, pushing open the front door and ducking down against the gust of wind that blew in. “See you around.”

“Yeah, see ya.” David watched Frank climb into his truck, sighing. As his friend pulled away onto the recently-salted roads, he shook his head. Turning down an invitation to one of Sarah’s ridiculously-extravagant holiday meals to spend Christmas all alone with Karen—the man was kidding himself if he wasn’t already half-way in love.

It was on the drive home from book club that Frank heard the news on the radio for the first time—or, more specifically, the weather report.

“It is 8:45, December 20th, Friday evening. You’re listening to 88.1 KSKA for your latest weather update. It looks like the beginnings of a blizzard building up just north of Seward, expected to hit the town around 2AM tomorrow morning. Predictions show upwards of 20 inches of snow by tomorrow afternoon, and continuing through to the next day. Wind speed expected around 50 mph. Meteorologists are guessing that this snow storm will last us through most of the week, so it looks like you should prepare to spend Christmas snowed in. Roads will be closing around midnight tonight, so make sure to stock up on supplies while you can. Stay tuned in and we’ll keep you updated on any new developments.”

Frank had listened with a furrowed brow, frowning. So far, they’d managed to avoid getting snowed in this winter, but it looked like the universe was just saving up for a big one. A solid five days’ worth of blizzard-force snowfall; five days of being trapped under a blanket of white, unable to leave the house or travel the roads. And over Christmas, too.
Karen.

The thought hit him suddenly, as he left the town behind and began his ascension up into the mountains. She’d have no idea how to survive something like this—the woman could barely chop her own firewood, for Christ’s sake. There was no way she’d know what to do while snowed in for five days straight.

As he took the slow and winding turns through the forest, the increasingly-heavy snow obscuring his vision, he came to a conclusion: Karen would have to stay with him until the storm had passed. She’d probably put up a fuss, he imagined, being an independent kind of woman. Might say something about how she could survive on her own, and didn’t need a big, strong man to swoop in and save her from the weather. But in the end, it was the only option that made sense. If they combined their resources, they could make it the five days without being able to leave for supplies—plus, Frank had survived many winters of being snowed in, and had experience in outlasting blizzards. More experience than Karen, who sometimes still slipped on the ice as she was walking to mailbox (more than once).

She’d stay in the guest bedroom, obviously, and she could even bring all of her writing over to continue working while they were trapped. There was a small part of Frank that felt a little odd at the idea of Karen spending the night—he’d never had someone stay over at his cabin before, and it would certainly be an adjustment, sharing his space. But there was a much larger part of him that liked the image—a lot.

Pulling the truck onto their road, he had made up his mind—Karen was going to stay with him whether she liked it or not

Completely defying his expectations, as she almost constantly did, Karen put up absolutely zero fight when he brought up the plan. In fact, as soon as he mentioned the blizzard—standing in her foyer still in his work clothes—she’d jumped at the suggestion that they ride out the storm together.

“Are you kidding me?” She’d exclaimed, rushing around the living room to pack up her writing supplies, when Frank confided that he’d expected more resistance from her. “I know my limitations, Frank. There’s no way in hell I could survive being snowed in for five whole days by myself. I can’t even fix my damn heater when it cuts out.”

While she finished packing up everything she would need to sit out the oncoming storm, Frank ran back to his place to make sure that it was ready for overnight company. Max skidded around his ankles eagerly, following him from room to room, sensing something exciting. The guest bedroom, which had never been used, was tidy, albeit a little dusty. He shook out the comforter and left the door open to air out. He’d had to dig through his linen closet for an extra towel, and felt a sense of something deep and warm blooming in his gut when he hung it on the hook next to his own.

Standing back for a moment, Frank paused to take it in, his towel actually having a companion. It looked cozy, and a spark of something familiar lit up at the base of his skull.

Standing in the middle of his living room, turning in circles to take in everything he owned, Frank tried to imagine Karen living in the space. Not just hanging out after dinner and talking—but living there, with her flurry of notes for her novel and her thousands of fleece blankets that she seemed to always be pulling out of nowhere. He could see her, in his mind’s eye, sitting on the floor at the coffee table, talking to herself (like she tended to do) and typing out a new chapter with a pen behind her ear.

His daydream was broken by the sound of Karen knocking at the door.

“Let me in, Frank. Snow’s coming down like a motherfucker out here.” Her voice was muffled by
“Jesus Christ, Page,” he muttered, as he threw open the door and let her push passed with three suitcases in tow. “You’re only going to be here for five days, not the rest of your life.” Max was on her in an instant, burying his muzzle in her side, tail wagging excitedly (like it always did when she came over). She patted his head, scratching behind his ears, before straightening again.

“Ha ha,” she’d rolled her eyes. “The purple one has everything from my pantry in it. The blue has all of my writing materials. And the grey is my belongings. I come prepared, Castle. Remember—I was an honorary boy scout.” She held up the three-fingered scout salute, and Frank snorted.

“Why do I get the feeling that you’re going to completely take over my house before the night is over?”

“Because you’re a smart man, Castle.” Karen wheeled her blue suitcase into the living room, dropping it in front of the fireplace. Max followed dutifully. “It okay if I set up my writing stuff in here?”

Frank nodded, watching her unzip the luggage with fascination. He walked closer, peering over her shoulder at what was inside. Every time he saw her, there was more paper everywhere—this novel was like a beast that just kept growing more heads—Post-It notes and pages torn from her notebook and typed-up drafts, all haphazardly strewn across her living room floor, or else shoved into her briefcase. He wouldn’t be surprised if she single-handedly kept the Seward paper companies afloat with how much she much have purchased in the last two and half months.

“Shit, Karen,” he breathed, observing as she sorted through her papers, laying them out neatly on the wooden floor. “Someone could lock you up in a mental hospital if they saw this shit.”

“Some days I feel like they should,” she grinned at him over her shoulder. “I’d fit right in.”

Frank continued to watch as she placed all of her papers into different stacks, in some kind of organization that made sense to only her.

“There,” she clapped her hands together, standing up. “Perfect.” Max proceeded to lay down right atop her perfect stacks, his head dropping onto his paws.

“If you say so,” Frank muttered, looking skeptical.

“I do say so. Now where do you want me?” She grabbed ahold of her grey suitcase, looking around the living room expectantly.

“Down the hall. Follow me.” He led her to the guest bedroom. “That’s me across the way from you. Bathroom’s the door to your left.”

Karen had never been down the hallway before—every time she’d come over, they’d stayed in the kitchen or in the living room. She noticed, with some interest, that there were no photos of his family on the walls, and supposed that she should have known there wouldn’t be. Instead, there were paintings of winter scenes and prints of pressed flowers.

She dropped her suitcase in her room, which was cozy and warm, with its fluffy, grey duvet and a rocking chair in the corner by the window. Slowly, she turned to stare across the hall at the closed door to Frank’s room. “Ah, the Frank Castle lair. A place of great mystery and intrigue.”

Frank rolled his eyes. “A place of unconsciousness and sleeping.”
“Where the great mountain man slumbers.” Karen brushed passed him, as he stood by the doorway, and crossed the hall to press her ear against his bedroom door. “If you listen closely, you can hear a whooshing noise. It’s the sound of the sense of humor being sucked out of anyone who enters.” She stared at him with facetiously-widened eyes. “How terrifying.”

“Okay, I’m thinking I should’ve just let you freeze to death on your own.” He grumbled, hiding a smile and placing his hands on her shoulders, steering her back down the hall toward the living room.

“We’re going to have a bad time if you keep ruining all my fun this week, Frank.” Karen turned her head to look at him over her shoulder, his hands still resting at the tops of her arms.

“Duly noted.” He nodded. “Now let’s unpack that last suitcase, huh?”

“Fine.” Karen sighed, grabbing the final piece of luggage, which clanged with the sound of aluminum cans sliding against one another as she dragged it into the kitchen. “I brought ingredients for bacon mac and cheese. Sound good?”

“Sounds perfect.”

And so the snow-in began like any other night for Frank and Karen—cooking dinner together and talking, mostly about Frank’s previous experiences with blizzards over the past few years. This was, he assured her, old hat for him.

The wind howled on outside the cabin, as the storm drew nearer and nearer. But the colder it got outside, the warmer and more homey it seemed to grow inside—Frank lit a fire, Karen pulled a fleece blanket out of her suitcase, and they sat in the living room to eat the most comforting of all comfort food. As he always did, Max settled with his head on Karen’s lap, like she was his owner instead of Frank.

As they ate, the conversation moved to the topic of Karen’s novel. The entire thing had been plotted out, and Frank had been fascinated to watch the story come together through multiple drafted iterations. It was a tense tale about grief and isolation and paranoia, set in an Alaskan logging town. Clearly influenced by her time in Seward.

While Karen talked through her ideas for pacing, running a hand down Max’s head in her lap, Frank wandered over to where she’d stacked up all of her papers—the materials from which she’d created an entire world. Glancing up at her for permission, he began rifling through them, reading what notes he could decipher as he went. One ear tuned in to her rambling (often times she liked to bounce ideas off of him, not really needing his feedback, but more to just hear herself talking), his eye caught on something scribbled on a piece of loose leaf paper: his name.

Michael is Frank? But not Frank. Guarded, intense, secretive, closed-off, inward-looking.

He re-read the note three times, making sure that it really was his name, and not just her loopy handwriting that had him confused.

“Karen.” The way he said her name had her stopping mid-sentence, looking up in confusion from the laptop she’d pulled onto the coffee table.

“Yeah?”

“Is—” Frank paused, unsure of how to ask what he wanted to. “Is Michael supposed to be me?”
Karen’s face went white, and her eyes darted down to the piece of paper in his hands. She opened her mouth to speak; closed it; opened it again.

Fuck.

“Because,” Frank held up the note in his hand, brow furrowed. “It seems like he is.”

“I, well—” Karen ran a nervous hand through her hair, eyes anchored to his own. From his expression, she couldn’t tell if he was angry, or just confused. Sometimes he could be difficult to read. “He’s not really you. But he’s based off of you? Just some parts of you—I wrote that after we first met, before I really knew you. I thought you’d make an interesting character. But I promise I’m not, like, writing about you, Frank. Just…I just borrowed some of your traits.”

Frank didn’t respond, frowning down at the paper in his hands. He wasn’t upset—not really—not that she’d based a character off of him. That was what writers did, after all, right? They created characters that they knew, pulling from their real lives. Be he was a little upset at what she’d written.

“Guarded, secretive, closed-off?” He read the words aloud. Karen bit her lip. “Is that—is that what you think of me?” His voice was curious, but not angry, Karen decided. She watched him for a moment, weighing her response.

“Well…yes.” She tilted her head to the side, sounding uncertain. “You are those things.”

Frank’s eyes darted to hers, and they held something that looked a lot like hurt.

“Not—” she jumped to defend herself, “not that those are bad things. They’re not negative traits, Frank. It’s not a judgement at all. But you…you have to admit, you are kind of…private.”

She was right, of course. He was. But seeing those words listed out next to his name stung a little. Those were his defining features—those were the things that Karen saw when she looked at him. Someone with walls ten miles high designed to keep people out. And he didn’t want to be that person—not with her.

It was quiet for a moment, as Frank worried the piece of paper in his hands.

“Is it…because I don’t talk about certain things? Certain, uh, times of my life?” His voice was low, and he refused to look at her.

“I—I mean—kind of. Yeah.” Karen shrugged, still watching him with concerned eyes. The hurt she’d seen on his face was like a knife to the fucking heart.

Another beat of silence, then:

“What do you want to know?”

Karen jolted—she hadn’t been expecting that. Max lifted his head, sitting up.

“No, Frank,” she got up from her position by the coffee table, and made her way to sit down next to him. “That’s not what I want. You don’t have to tell me anything if you don’t want to. You have every right to keep parts of yourself hidden; you don’t owe me anything.” She put a hand on his arm, and he stared at it a moment before looking up at her. “It’s not bad to have things you can’t talk about. I don’t mind. I like the parts of you I do know, and that’s enough.”

“But I want to tell you, Karen.” His eyes were adamant, and Karen was unsure how she should react. Frank didn’t know how to say that the idea of her seeing him as someone cagey and defensive
was painful. That he’d never intended to become that person—that it had happened without him even realizing. So instead he just repeated. “I want to tell you.”

Karen nodded, more to herself than to him, and pulled her knees to her chest, wrapping her arms around them. “Okay.” She nodded again. “Okay. You can tell me anything.”

Frank looked down at his hands. He had no idea where to start. He hadn’t ever told anyone the story—hadn’t had to; everyone he knew had been there when it happened.

“I…” he trailed off, making a frustrated little noise before starting again. “I got married straight out of high school—to a woman named Maria. We’d met in the ninth grade. Got her pregnant senior year, and that was it.” He looked up at Karen for her reaction, but her face was strangely calm, watching him with those wide eyes. So he continued. “Had a baby girl, Lisa. Perfect little thing—all her mom and none of me. And two years later we had Frank Jr. More me and less her that time—the little hell raiser.” He almost smiled, but it didn’t make it passed a slight twitch of the lips.

Frank half-expected Karen to jump in with a question—this was an awfully huge bomb to drop on her, after all, and she was a curious creature if ever he’d met one. But she didn’t; instead, she made a little understanding noise, as if telling him to go on. She probably didn’t want to interrupt him, he figured, for fear that he’d close back up. But he was determined to push through.

“Five years ago, late January, they were in the car on the way to Lisa’s school musical—she was Sandy in Grease. There was an accident—18-wheeler skidded on the ice. They were killed instantly.”

He was staring in the distance, at nothing in particular. It was still painful—still a twist of barbed wire around his heart when he spoke about them—but not as painful as he’d thought it would be. Time, against his will, had begun to sand away at some of the sharpest edges of his grief.

It was quiet—Karen didn’t speak. She didn’t move. Frank’s eyes darted to hers, and he saw something that gave him pause.

She looked pained, and sympathetic, and horrified. But she didn’t look surprised. It dawned on him, all at once. The Winter Festival, when she’d cut in and diverted the conversation when he mentioned Lisa—she hadn’t even asked who Lisa was. Because she didn’t have to.

“You—” he tried not to sound accusatory. “You already knew, didn’t you?”

Karen blinked, the guilty look that flashed across her face was all the confirmation he needed.

“I’m sorry, I—”

He cut her off. “How long?”

“About a month and a half.” She whispered, and he jerked back. “I found out when I was in town.”

“And you—you didn’t say anything to me?” There was the hurt again, and it made Karen’s throat feel tight.

“I didn’t want to push you. I didn’t want you to think I’d been snooping or ,or—”

“I can’t.” Frank stood up abruptly. “I have to go.”

“But Frank—” Karen stood as well, her hand stretched out toward him. But he was already out of her reach, backing away from her with a look that she couldn’t name, but that cut to her core.
“No, just…” Frank trailed off, disappearing into the kitchen, and out of Karen’s view. She heard a door open, then slam.

She stood there, for a solid thirty seconds, before tears started streaming down her face. Max, as if sensing her distress, rose from his spot to press against her leg, shoving his head into her hand.

“Fuck.”

Frank sat on the work bench in the shed, which was connected to the house, right off of the kitchen. He put his head in his hands, breathing deeply. It was cold, but he almost didn’t feel it—his mind was somewhere else, too preoccupied to notice the way his breath appeared as a white puff in the icy air.

The feeling in his chest—he didn’t know what it was. It felt like anger, but it wasn’t anger. Didn’t have the biting sting of it, or the violence.

He couldn’t be angry at Karen, could he? Couldn’t blame her for seeking out information about himself that he hadn’t been willing to divulge. She’d been so open and honest with him since day one—sharing her memories of Kevin, her writing, her stories of growing up in a broken home—she’d bared all the vulnerable parts of herself to him, and he hadn’t reciprocated. So could he really be upset that she’d gone out and learned his secrets from someone else?

What had he thought was going to happen? Karen was curious—a truth-seeker who didn’t like uncertainties. Of course she was going to find out about his past one way or another.

He huffed out a frustrated sigh, grabbing a chunk of unused pine and his favorite carving knife from atop his work table. Setting the edge of the blade against the wood, he began to cut. Having his hands at work helped to clear his mind.

It wasn’t anger. But it was something—the overwhelming feeling stinging his throat. There was hurt—a kind of sense of betrayal that she’d learned the darkest parts of himself from someone else. But something else, too—something uncomfortable that Frank couldn’t look at for too long.

He kept his hands steady, whittling away at the wood. He didn’t know what he was making—didn’t care. The whipping winds dragged and scraped their way across the walls of the shed, groaning in the darkness. It was a wet kind of cold—the kind that seeped into his bones—and Frank felt his fingers starting to cramp with it.

He dropped the wood, standing up to pace the length of the room, arms crossed and fingers tucked into his armpits for warmth.

It was disappointment, he decided. That was the feeling clawing at the soft inner walls of his chest—disappointment in himself. For letting himself become the kind of person who was so guarded, and so closed-off (just as Karen had said), that even a woman like her didn’t feel comfortable enough asking him about his life.

How had he gotten to this point? There was a time, he remembered, when he was open to the world—open to everyone. Fearless and confident and vulnerable in that way people unafraid of being hurt are. But after the accident, all of that had vanished. And he’d slowly, over time, without even noticing it, become someone completely different. Become someone with enough dark corners to turn his body into a haunted house.

And that was sad. That was…it was heart-breaking. To look at himself and see what he’d become.
He was angry at himself, for letting things get that far. For not pulling himself out of the pit earlier.

He ran a trembling hand through his hair.

_Fuck._

He thought about Karen, who was probably still sitting in the living room, wondering if she’d ruined their friendship. Agonizing over what she’d done wrong. While he was out here beating himself up.

He suddenly had an intense feeling of déjà vu. He’d been here before—in a similar situation—with Maria. Many times, in fact. It came to him, abruptly, a piece of their relationship he’d either forgotten or buried away. Every time they fought—or every time Frank got overwhelmed with emotion—he ran. Maria had hated it, that he’d run off on his own to think things through rather than staying it out and talking with her. She’d fucking _hated_ it; said it was a coward’s way to handle fear and hurt and anger. That you couldn’t run away in a real relationship—that you had to stand face-to-face and talk.

And here he was, running away again. Different woman; same shitty tactic.

_Fuck._

He groaned, scrubbing a hand down his face. He was a man who didn’t like change—who resisted it like his life depended on it. But some things are meant to be changed—sometimes _people_ need to change.

And this was one of those times. Time to make a different fucking choice.

Running a hand through his hair, Frank steeled himself, before pushing the door of the shed open, and walking back down the hallway.

Karen was sitting on the couch, curled up in a ball, her legs pulled to her chest and her forehead pressed to her knees. Max was lying next to her, whimpering quietly. She looked so small that way, it tugged at Frank’s heart. He paused in the doorway, shuffling his feet.

“Karen.”

Her head popped up, and there were tear marks streaked down her face. Frank’s throat restricted—his heart sinking to his stomach. He’d made her cry.

“Fuck,” he muttered, and he was in front of her in three long strides, sitting on the edge of the coffee table and grabbing her face in his hands.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, her eyes searching his, as he let his thumbs trail over the wetness on her cheeks.

“No, it’s—” he let go, dropping his arms. “I’m sorry. I didn’t handle that well.”

“You don’t have to—” Karen started, but Frank cut in.

“Look, I’m not mad at you. I’m…I think I’m mad at myself. For making you feel like you couldn’t talk to me. You’re my friend. You should feel like we can talk.”

“It was a shitty thing to do—to not tell you as soon as I found out. I was just afraid you’d be upset.” Her voice was quiet. “That’s on me. I was thinking about myself and not you.”
“Yeah, you should have told me.” Frank nodded his head. “But I should’ve made you feel like you could have.”

Karen sniffled, then smiled.

“Why does it feel like we’re both apologizing to each other right now?”

“Because we are.”

“Well, both of us can’t be the bad guy here. One of us has to be in the right.”

“I’ve never heard that rule. So I don’t think we need to follow it.” Frank quirked a grin, though his eyes were still concerned. “I’m sorry I made you cry.”

Karen laughed at that. “Oh, this?” She gestured to her face. “I do this all the time. I once cried during an IAMS commercial where a little boy adopted a cat. I cried the first time I listened to The Mountain Goats. This is hardly a rare occurrence.” She was trying for humor.

“Still.” Frank dipped his head, forcing her to look him in the eye. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry, too.” She paused. “And that’s the last one. Nobody else is allowed to say sorry now. It’s over.”


He moved to sit next to her on the couch, leaning back into the cushions and taking a deep breath, letting out all of the tension he’d been holding in his body. He found, suddenly, that he felt very light. Unencumbered. Like a weight had flown from his shoulders. There was nothing between him and Karen now—no secrets, no hidden stories, no past.

There was a pause, in which Frank tried to slow his breathing to match hers.

“Do you want to hear about them? Maria and Lisa and Frankie?”

She turned her head to look at him, but he was staring up at the ceiling, his head pressed back against the couch.

“Yes,” she whispered, moving her hand to gently rest over his own, as it lay on the couch between them.

And the floodgates had opened. Now there was nothing holding Frank back—nothing to hide from; nothing to guard.

They talked about Frank’s family—about how he’d met Maria when he was 13 years old, how she’d refused to go out with him the first ten times he’d asked, so he’d resorted to serenading her in the middle of her biology class with his guitar. How they’d been surprised by the pregnancy, and unsure of how to handle it, but Maria had been determined to be the best mother in the world. And she was—patient and protective, but stern when the kids needed it. She’d become Martha Stewart almost overnight; sewing patches in jeans when the kids fell and scraped their knees, packing lunches every day before school, and volunteering on the PTA. Maria sounded like superwoman to Karen.

They talked about Lisa and Frankie; how Lisa had always been a daddy’s girl, while Frankie had been a rebellious little kid, just like his namesake. About how, when Lisa was a toddler, she used to run outside very time it rained and press her forehead against the drain pipes to feel the patter of the water against the metal on her skin. Or how Frankie once unscrewed all the knobs on the cabinets
and tried to flush them down the toilet.

At one point, Frank even disappeared into his bedroom to pull out a photo album, filled with the most amazing candid of his family—at the beach, on vacation in Disney World, building snowmen. Big smiles and warm eyes. Karen recognized their faces, though she had never seen them before—they were the reflection of all that was heavy and good within Frank.

Her heart felt burdened—but burdened with something she didn’t mind carrying—the weight of all of Frank’s lost hopes and dreams and love. It was an intense experience, trying to wrap her mind around the entire world that he’d had taken away from him—trying to understand how so much love could just be wrenched away in a heartbeat.

For Frank, it was healing, talking about Maria and the kids, finally. Like shining a light onto some of the darkest parts of his grief, even if only for a moment, and offering relief. He almost wished he’d done this sooner; let everything fall out of him like so many small, dark things.

As Karen lay in bed that night, Max curled up by her feet (Frank had declared the dog a traitor), she thought about the man sleeping across the hall. Closed her eyes and imagined herself crawling out of bed, creaking open his door, and slipping under the covers beside him, just to put her arms around his middle and lay her head on his chest. Part of her felt like she was already there, and could almost feel the beat of his heart against the side of her face.

In the room across the hall, Frank lay awake as well, clinging to Karen’s presence through both of their doors. Taking comfort in the fact that she would be there in the morning when he woke up.

The next day, Frank was already awake by the time Karen dragged herself from bed, groggy and weighted-down by sleep. She padded into the kitchen, yawning, to see him standing at the stove, shirtless, fresh from the shower.

_Goddamn it_, she thought, letting her eyes rove over the smooth muscles of his unbearably broad back, _it’s too early in the morning for my libido to be awake._

“Hey,” he turned around, spatula in hand, and grinned at her disheveled appearance.

“Mmm,” she replied, collapsing into a chair at the breakfast table. She made a noble effort not to stare at his chest, and the way water clung to the dark hair that trailed down his stomach. She did not succeed.

“Coffee’s in the pot,” Frank jerked his head toward the machine on the counter. “Scrambled eggs okay?”

“Mmm,” She let her head fall forward, thudding softly against the table.

“Okay,” Frank chuckled. “We’ll try this conversation later, huh?”

“Mmm.” She nodded.

They had all day to talk—all week, really. When Karen finally reached a high enough level of consciousness to speak, which was around 9:30AM, they sat over breakfast and chatted amiably. They didn’t talk about his family again; it wasn’t the kind of conversation to have over breakfast, so instead they made plans about how to while away their days until they were no longer captives of the blizzard.
Karen spent hours on the floor of the living room, writing, while Frank stretched out across the couch with a book. Karen had loaned him *The Secret History*, and he was hooked. She’d catch his attention sometimes, muttering to herself or making facial expressions to match the characters she was writing. Occasionally, she’d ask Frank to watch her pull a face, then get him to describe it to her. It was entertaining—being her helper.

Sometimes she’d need a break, and they’d talk for a few minutes, about whatever was on their minds: the book Frank was reading, the idea Karen had for a scene, stories about Maria or the kids if one popped into Frank’s head. It was still new, talking about them so freely, but it felt right. Felt good.

Or sometimes Karen would pop up from her position on the floor and do a handful of jumping jacks, or jog around the living room, just to keep herself from getting cramped up. Or else she’d chase Max around the house (the poor dog was getting cabin fever—Frank usually walked him every morning before work, but the snow prohibited it; he was even forced to do his business in the shed).

At around 5PM, Karen announced that she needed more coffee, and made her way to the kitchen, leaving Frank absorbed in Donna Tartt on the couch. He could hear her rattling around from his position, grabbing a mug and filling the coffee machine with way too many grounds. And then she was silent for a moment. Frank strained to hear in the other room.

“Uh, Frank…are you like a secret carpenter or something?”

Frank sat up, brows furrowed, and inclined his head toward the door to the kitchen.

“Huh?”

“Because I think I just wandered into your underground workshop…” Karen appeared in the living room, holding up a carving of a horse that Frank had whittled a few weeks ago.

He laughed. “Well, it’s clearly not an underground workshop, now is it, sweetheart? And secondly, it’s not a secret. I do woodworking in my spare time.”

“How did I not know that?” She held up the carved horse, squinting at it and bringing it closer to her face. “This is really good.”

“Thanks.” He got up from the couch, walking passed her to the kitchen and motioning for her to follow. “Sometimes people in town commission me to do small things for them. Music boxes or walking sticks.”

They entered his workshop, which was a dozen or so degrees colder than the cabin, and Karen shivered.

“So everything in here you did yourself?” She looked around. There was a rather ornate looking dresser in the corner, stained to a dark brown, with a pattern of roses carved into the drawers. It was high-quality work.

“Yep.” Frank leaned against his work bench.

“Seriously—how is this something that never came up in conversation, Frank? This stuff is amazing.” She put the horse down, moving to run a hand over a chest of drawers.

“You never asked.” Frank shrugged.

“Frank,” Karen dipped her head toward him with an eyebrow raised. “That’s not how these things
work. You don’t wait to be asked about something like this; you just offer it up.”

“Thanks for the lesson on how to be a human, Kare.”

“Anytime, honey.” The word slipped out before Karen could halt it. She had to stop herself from reacting visibly in surprise. Frank, for his part, jerked ever so slightly.

“Did you just call me honey?” His voice was amused.


“Uh huh. Whatever you say.” Frank fought back a grin.

“Whatever. The point stands—you are one seriously weird guy for keeping this from me.” Karen tried to divert the conversation.

“And once again, I’ll point out that I didn’t keep anything from you. It just never came up.”

“Uh-huh. See, now I’m suspicious that you’re hiding something else from me. Like maybe you’re a secret vigilante like Bruce Wayne.”

“I’m sure if I had any more secrets, you’d just go into town and find them out from someone else,” he teased. Karen cringed. “Ah, too soon?”

“Frank, it’s been less than 24 hours. Yes, too soon.”

“Sorry.” He didn’t sound sorry.

“You could make it up to me by teaching me to whittle?” Karen suggested, holding up his carving knife.

“So that you’ll have one more thing to distract you from your writing? I think not.” He shook his head, taking the knife from her hands.

“Oh, come on. I could be a great whittler. I feel it inside to me. It’s like the wood is calling my name.” She ran her hand over an un-used chunk of pine.

“Uh huh. Do you even know what kind of wood that is?” He pointed with his chin.

“It’s, uh…” she cast around in her mind. “Ash?”

“Not even close. I don’t think it’s the wood that’s calling to you. I think you’re just hearing voices.”

“Ah, well.” She turned around, wiping her hands on her jeans. “I’ve still got a few more days to convince you.”

By day four of the snow-in, Frank had finally given in, and taught her how to carve a heart in a hunk of wood—the most beginner whittling shape he knew. And she only nicked herself once.

They’d settled into a pattern so easily, it was like they’d been living together their entire lives. Reading, writing, whittling, occasionally jogging around the living room to keep the cabin fever from settling in. And talking—lots of talking. It was comfortable—it was natural.

Except for the moments when it was uncomfortable, like when Karen came out of her room to see
Frank leaving the bathroom, a towel wrapped around his waist, and had to stop herself from making an embarrassing noise. Or when she’d wake up from a dream about his hands running down her thighs, and hear him in the kitchen humming an old country song. Or when his thigh would rub against hers as they sat side-by-side on the couch, and she felt shivers run up her spine, tightening her nipples against her shirt.

Frank, too, was having a hard time ignoring his attraction to Karen. They’d spent almost a solid week together in a confined space, brushing against each other and breathing the same air. There were moments when she would toss her hair over her shoulder, or lick her bottom lip as she wrote, and Frank’s mind would go off like a fucking Tilt-A-Whirl.

But it was more than just physical attraction. Every day they spent together had his chest fit to bursting with those weighty, inevitable feelings. Sometimes it seemed like his heart had grown claws, and was trying to climb its way up his throat. And it was getting harder and harder to keep it inside, especially when Karen looked at him in that certain way—eyes wide and curious.

Like she was the moment.

“Holy shit, Frank.” She put down her laptop, staring up at him from the floor by the fireplace.

“Yeah?” He dropped his book, The Little Friend (she’d officially gotten him hooked on Donna Tartt).

“What’s today?”

“Uh…” he cast about, trying to work backwards—all the days had blurred together in a haze.” I think Tuesday? Why?”

“It’s fucking Christmas Eve!” She sounded surprised, and Frank was too. He couldn’t believe he’d forgotten.


There was a pause, in which Karen continued to stare at him until he put the book down again.

“Did you need something?”

“Uh…” she scrunched her nose in thought. “I kind of got you something. I know we didn’t talk about exchanging gifts or anything, but it’s something really small, so…”

Frank sat up, grinning lopsidedly. “Well that’s damn lucky. I got you something too.”

“Really?” Karen’s eyes widened.

“Yeah, really.” He was a little offended she’d thought he might not.

“Well…can we exchange them now? I mean, it’s almost Christmas anyway.” There was an eager little hitch to her voice. “Plus, my family always did gifts the night before anyway.”

“Sure.”

Karen was up almost before the full word was out, darting down the hallway to her room. Max, who had been napping, followed, nipping at her heels. Frank lifted the lid of the coffee table, pulling out a package wrapped in dark blue paper.

Karen almost skidded down the hallway on her socks when she reappeared, puppy in tow. She took
a moment to balance herself, arms spread, before sitting down across from him on the floor. Onto the
coffee table, she placed her package, wrapped in what looked like newspaper. Max crawled under
the coffee table, settling between his two humans.

“Okay,” Karen shook her hair back from her face. “You go first.” She nudged the package toward
him. He grinned at the enthusiastic look on her face, pulling the gift into his lap.

Karen almost had a conniption with how slowly he unwrapped it, sliding his thumb along the taped
edges one at a time.

When the paper fell away, his brow furrowed. It was a recipe book.

“Open it,” Karen leaned her elbows on the coffee table.

When he did, he felt his heart thump in his chest. Flipping through every page, he realized that they
were all the recipes they’d cooked together in the past month, transcribed in Karen’s handwriting.
And around each one, she’d written notes—reviews of how they’d turned out, tips about things
they’d changed or mistakes they’d made. And opposite each recipe, she’d written a little letter, about
what they’d talk about that night—like a scrapbook of their friendship: “We were eating this meatloaf
when you told me the story about you and David dying the school pool purple. And how you tried to
pin it on Curtis. You then made fun of me when I choke on my potatoes while laughing (thanks for
that, by the way). This was also the night you helped me figure out Nancy’s character, which was
much appreciated. I’d been feeling a little nervous about my writing that day, but I felt better after
you’d had a look and said it wasn’t half-bad (which is obviously high praise coming from you).”

It was so thoughtful—so loving—Frank felt a little overcome. He’d always felt that their dinners
together were special—meaningful—but he thought that it had just been him. He didn’t realize that
she’d been cherishing them as well.

“Do you like it?” Karen was still looking at him expectantly.

“It’s—” his voice came out as a croak, so he tried again. “It’s perfect, Kare. Thank you.” She took
the crinkle of his eyes as proof that he meant it, and felt satisfied.

“Okay, my turn.” She grabbed the blue box, ripping into it with none of the care Frank had taken.
She wasn’t a patient woman.

As soon as she opened it, she knew exactly what it was—a wooden replica of the Anastasia music
box she’d had when she was a kid. The one Kevin had thrown out the window. She couldn’t believe
Frank had remembered.

“Holy fuck,” she’d whispered, her eyes blurring with tears, as she opened it to hear “Once Upon a
December.”

“I know it’s not the real thing, but…” Frank shrugged.

“Did you make this?” Karen wiped away a tear that threatened to fall.

“Yeah.”

“Frank…” she was looking at him with something so soft. He wanted to kiss her. He wanted to kiss
her so fucking badly—and it would be so easy, too. To lean across the coffee table and capture those
pale pink lips with his own.

But he didn’t. It didn’t feel like the time, and he didn’t know if he was ready for that. So instead, he
clenched his hands into fists and held them closely to his side.

“Oh my god, here I am crying again. Twice in less than a week. Wow, I am a mess.” Karen gave a watery laugh, holding the music box close to her chest. “Thank you Frank.”

It was the best Christmas Eve Frank had had in a long, long time.

By midafternoon Christmas day, the radio was announcing that it was safe for people to leave their houses. The worst of the storm was over. Which meant that his five days with Karen had come to an end. It was a bittersweet feeling—he wasn’t ready to have her leave him just yet, but on the other hand, being able to actually go outside was amazing. They’d waited until after lunch to take Max on a two hour walk, bundling up tightly, and venturing into the forest trails beyond the tree-line. He’d taken Karen hiking along the trails several times, helping her to find inspiration for the setting of her novel, but this time it felt different. It felt like a family outing—Frank and Karen and Max. His heart squeezed in his chest, as it had done many times over the course of their snow-in.

Despite the fact that Karen could now go home any time she chose, she stayed until midnight that night, marathoning horror movies with Frank, just like she said they would.

They sat on the floor, drinking cider she’d made, taking turns with Max in their laps, watching Karen’s DVD set of all the classics, starting with The Creature from the Black Lagoon.

It was perfect.

When Karen left that night, thanking him profusely for letting her crash at his house, Frank felt empty.

Empty in a way he’d never felt before—like all the air in the room left with her. Deeply, unutterably lonely. He almost begged her to stay, just one more night.

But he didn’t.

That night, when Karen crawled into her own bed, she opened her music box and let the music play. God fucking damnit, she thought before she drifted off, I’m in love with Frank Castle.
Woah. Smut alert. Also I;m so sorry I'm shit at replying to people's comments, but I really do love each and every one! It means so much to me to read your feedback!

Karen didn’t tell anyone about her revelation concerning Frank—especially not Trish—because admitting she was in love out loud would make it real. And if it was real, it could hurt her. As long as it was something that lived inside of her head—theoretical and nebulous in shape—then she was safe. As soon as it was out in the world, however, that was another story.

But some things are worth the pain.

Trish’s voice kept bouncing around the walls of her head, buzzing like gnats; Karen couldn’t swat them away, no matter how hard she tried—couldn’t tune them out. That was the way it was with the truth; it was hard to ignore. She’d paced around her cabin for hours, picked up her writing (put it down again), talked to her mother on the phone, baked two dozen brownies. But nothing she did could get her mind off of Frank—it seemed as though she would never be free of those tumultuous, roiling thoughts.

Unless she got drunk, of course. Whiskey had the power to obliterate everything, after all—scrub the mind clean like a burning, liquid power washer. Which was how Karen found herself, halfway to tipsy, sitting at the bar at Alias on a Thursday afternoon.

“So, tell me again why we’re drinking at 2 o’clock? Have we decided to become alcoholics?” Jess poured two shots of Maker’s Mark, clinking her own glass against Karen’s before throwing her head back and letting the liquor slide down her throat. She didn’t even make a face. Karen, on the other hand, wasn’t quite as adept in the art of drinking.

“Eugh,” she frowned, her eyes squeezing shut in disgust, as they did every time she took a shot, “because I am a…a mother fucking mess.” It came out just slightly slurred.

“Hmm, okay.” Jess, whose alcohol tolerance was inhuman, sounded like she could’ve been stone-cold sober, despite being three shots into the wind. “Keeping it vague; I like it. So I’ll just have to guess, huh?” She leaned forward, palms on the bar, and dipped her head to stare at Karen intensely. “Is it the book?”

“Book’s great. Book’s coming along nicely.” Karen shook her head, resting her chin in her palm, sighing. Her elbow slipped down the bar, and she barely caught it in time to keep from face planting.

“Okay,” Jess, ignoring Karen’s sloppy tipsiness, nodded and cast about in her head. “Is it a problem with your editor—Trash?”

“Trish.”

“I know, idiot. I was being facetious. Y’know? For laughs?” Jess rolled her eyes.

“No, no. Trish is great. I think you two would get along so fucking well, by the way. Have I told you that before?” Karen pointed an unsteady finger at Jess.
“No. But that’s not what we’re talking about. I’m trying to guess why you’re getting sloshed here.” Jess pursed her lips. “If it’s not your book or your editor, then that only leaves…Frank?”

It was Karen’s reaction—the sharp little hitch in her breath—that gave her away. A slow, shrewd smile spread across Jess’s face.

“Ahh, so it’s mountain man that’s driven you to drink. I should have guessed. After the Winter Festival, you two were all the town could talk about, you know.” Jess put on an annoying, nasally voice, impersonating the local gossips. “Did you see Frank with that New York woman? I can’t believe he actually left his house—what did she do to him? And he was actually smiling—can you believe?”

“Oh god, please stop.” Karen gave in to the desire to let her head thunk against the bar.

“Hey, none of that.” Jess poked the other woman’s temple. “If you concuss yourself then I’ll never get the juicy details out of you.”

Karen lifted her head, cringing. “No juicy details to tell.”

“Oh-huh,” Jess was skeptical. “So what did he do? Something to piss you off?”

Karen shook her head.

“Did you guys finally have sex and he didn’t call you the next morning or something? Because you literally live like ten feet away from him, so that would be a really stupid thing to do.”

“No. No. We haven’t slept together.”

“So are you upset because you haven’t slept together or something? Horny enough that you need to drink to forget?”

“No.” Karen scrubbed a hand down her face.

“I’m running out of guesses here.”

“Uhhh,” Karen kept her hands pressed against her eyes, hiding. “I think…. She trailed off, trying to clear her head of the whiskey fuzz. All of the sudden, she couldn’t remember why she wasn’t supposed to say the words out loud. There was a reason, she knew, but her brain couldn’t latch onto it. So she said them. “I think I might be in love with him?”

Jess was glad she wasn’t holding a glass at that moment, because she was sure it would have dropped from her hands.

“Uhm, excuse me. Repeat that.”

“Do I have to?”

“Yes.”

“Fine.” Karen made a frustrated noise, peeking at her friend from between her fingers. “I’m in love with Frank Castle.”

“Okay, okay.” Jess nodded to herself, like she was fitting this new piece of information into her understanding of the world.

Karen watched her, with unfocused eyes, waiting for her to say something else. There was a beat of
“So,” Jess narrowed her eyes in confusion. “I know why I would be drinking myself stupid if I realized I was in love with someone, but why are you? Isn’t that traditionally, like... good news, or something?”

“Because I...” Karen dropped her hands to the bar, flexing them. She was having a hard time grasping for words in her liquored-up state. “Because it’s scary?”

“It’s scary?”

“Yeah. Loving someone. That’s scary. Like, cracking open your chest like that, yeah? Like fucking open-heart surgery, except your surgeon is... Frank?” Karen furrowed her brows, confused by her own rambling. She knew she’d had a point somewhere there, but it had gotten lost.

“Ah, I see.” Jess bit her lip to keep back a smile. “What you’re saying is you’re a fucking coward who’s afraid of love.”

Karen sputtered an indignant little noise. “That is—” she pointed between herself and Jess, “pot meet kettle.”

“Uh, no.” Jess shook her head. “I’m not afraid of love, Page. I just don’t fucking care for it. There’s a difference.”

“You are—are such a liar.” Karen’s voice was almost offended, eyes wide.

“No. Nope. We are not talking about me. We are talking about you, and how I never took you to be a fucking coward.”

“Yeah, well I am.”

“Aren’t writers supposed to be all about emotional bravery and shit? Like, exploring all the deepest parts of humanity—haven’t you said that before? Aren’t you supposed to be open to new experiences and all that kind of thing?” Jess had her hands on her hips, staring at Karen with that unrelenting, almost nagging look that she sometimes got.

“Ugh, I know. I know. I’m an embarrassment to my, uh... my profession. I get it.” She let her head drop back into her hands, as it suddenly felt too heavy to hold up on its own. “Hence the drinking.”

“You know, Karen.” Jess leaned down until their faces were about level. She waited until the blonde lifted her eyes. “Everything is survivable, except for the last thing, right?” If Karen were sober, she would have given Jess an entire load of shit for quoting a YA author. But as it was, the reference flew right over her head. “Like this shit isn’t going to kill you. Don’t know why you’re acting like it is.”

And Jess was right, of course. A moment of near-sober clarity struck Karen. She thought, for an instant, about all the unbearable things people found ways to bear every single day: about all of the grief and suffering and tragedy that they manage to carry, day in and day out. About the ways she’d seen people torn to near shreds by sorrow, only to pick themselves back up and rebuild from scratch. Like Frank—like he’d held himself together for five years, with nothing but the will to keep living.

And all of the sudden, her fears felt so small. Felt so insignificant. It was a privilege, she realized, to experience heartbreak. To have something worth breaking over—to have the most precious gift humanity had to offer in her hands, even if only for a little while.
“Fuck you, Jess.” Karen muttered. But it wasn’t a curse—didn’t have the sting of one. It was a forfeiture.


“Yeah. Okay.” Karen slid from her barstool, wobbling slightly. “Do I have to tell Frank?” She asked, holding onto the bar for support.

“I think that’s how these things work, Page.”

“Aw fuck.”

Frank didn’t see Karen for dinner that Thursday night—she’d texted at the last minute saying that she didn’t feel well. He’d offered to come over and make soup, but she’d assured him that she just needed some sleep. She was probably over-stressed from the book, he assumed. And though it had felt strange—emptying—eating alone that night, it had given him much needed time to do some thinking. About her; about his feelings; about their week together during the snow-in.

Despite the hours he spent sitting at his dining room table, staring at the bowl of tortilla soup he’d made, and thinking about Karen, he’d gotten no closer to figuring anything out. The thing between them still felt complex and terrifying and messy, which is why he immediately stiffened the moment David mentioned Karen the next night at book club.

“So I never asked—how was your Christmas with Karen?” David pretended to thumb through his book—A Visit from the Goon Squad—keeping his voice purposefully light. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Frank’s entire frame fill with tension, like he was poised to run at any moment. A small part of David was afraid he would.

“Good.”

“Hmm,” David continued perusing his book. “Good enough to justify missing out on Sarah’s braised lamb? Which was fantastic, by the way.”

“Yes.” Frank shifted in his seat.

“Not feeling talkative today, are we?” David couldn’t help the smirk that pulled at his lips. Frank’s jaw ticked at the sight.

“We’re here to talk about the book. Right, Curtis?”

Curtis looked up from his phone, with which he’d been sneakily replying to a flirty text from Claire, the woman he’d met at his small business leaders meeting. “Huh?” He’d only been half paying attention.

“The book. We’re here to talk about the book, right?” Frank held up his own copy, shaking it for emphasis.

“Well, I think the club bylaws state that book talk can be deferred for as long as necessary, if the majority of members vote to discuss another matter.” Curtis shifted forward in his seat, looking between Frank and David.

“Ha! I knew writing down bylaws would come in handy. You thought it was ridiculous for a club of
only three people, but see how it’s paying off?” David crossed his arms, leaning back in his chair with a triumphant look.

“So I guess we’ve got to take a vote, then,” Curtis shrugged. “Who wants to discuss the book?”

Frank lifted his hand, his eyes hard and intense, as they flitted from Curtis to David. Neither of whom made eye contact.

“Okay, so who wants to discuss Frank’s personal life?” David was almost too-gleeful, and both he and Curtis lifted their arms. Frank shot Curtis a look of pure betrayal, to which the other man merely shrugged.

“Hey—if the only way I can get you to talk about your personal life is by majority vote, then that’s what I’m gonna do,” he said, by way of explanation.

“I could always just leave,” Frank grumbled, making to stand up. He didn’t have to sit there with his personal life under a microscope if he didn’t want to. He was a grown man.

“Whoa whoa whoa.” Curtis’s arm shot out, gently guiding Frank back into his seat. “David and I just want to help you, Frank. We’re your friends. Every time one of us mentions Karen, you get all…tense. We just want to know why.”

“Yeah, Frank. Help us help you.” David pressed a hand to his chest, before gesturing out at Frank. Curtis shot him a look, effectively telling him to shut up and let him do all the talking.

“Look, Frank. David and I think you have feelings for Karen, okay?” Curtis started. Frank opened his mouth to speak, but Curtis cut him off. “Now hold on. We saw the two of you at the festival. We’re not blind. You do. You have feelings for her.”

Curtis paused, as if waiting for Frank to argue. When the other man didn’t speak, instead slouching down in his seat with his arms crossed over his chest, Curtis continued.

“Now, knowing you, we figured that these feelings might be…confusing. You’ve never been great at handling this kind of thing. And we’ve known you since you were shittin’ your pants, man. So let us help you.”

There was a pause, tense with expectation, in which Curtis and David exchanged glances, waiting to see if Frank was going to stay put or walk out. Two steady breaths—three—and Frank remained in his seat. A good sign.

He’d thought about getting up and leaving, maybe going to the Home Depot down the road—he really had. But when it came down to it, the guys were right: Frank was pretty shitty at figuring things out on his own. Emotional things, at least. And there had been a point in time, long ago, when the three of them used to talk about everything without restrictions. When they’d been teenagers, raging and confused, with only each other to lean on. And Frank figured he could tap into that—that he needed to.

“Karen’s, uh,” Frank cleared his throat. He wasn’t sure how to say what he wanted to say. “She’s not Maria.”

David and Curtis barely managed to keep from breathing a sigh of relief at hearing him speak.

“Well, man.” David ran a hand across his chin. “Yeah. But you know that Maria’s not coming back. You can’t wait for her, like she’s just on a trip visiting her parents or something. It’s been five years, you should’ve come to terms with that by now.”
“No, that’s—” Frank made a frustrated noise, shifting in his seat. He didn’t like the way both of his friends were leaning forward, staring at him so intensely. “She’s not like Maria.”

“What do you mean?” Curtis tilted his head to the side, inquisitive.

“Just that—Maria was,” Frank made some kind of vague gesture with his hands. “And Karen’s—she’s—this other thing.” God damn it, why were words suddenly so difficult? “Maria was, uh, she was perfect for me, yeah? And Karen—she’s…she feels…” He trailed off.

“Ah,” Curtis made an understanding little noise. “I think I get what you’re saying. Like Maria was The One for you. And Karen feels like she could be, too. But you don’t know how that can work, because they’re nothing alike?”

Frank nodded, a look of relief crossing his face.

“What? How the fuck did you get that from,” David mimicked Frank’s hand gestures.

“Because I’m more intuitive that you, robot boy.” Curtis shot back.

“Whatever.”

There was another silence, in which all three men thought about what Frank had revealed.

“Well, Frank, buddy,” David finally spoke. “You realize that you’re not the same person you were before, right? That you now, and you five years ago are…are barely recognizable as the same man?”

Frank made an ambiguous grunt.

“It’s not a bad thing, man. You’re just someone else now. Hell, we all are. I think that’s just the way aging works. You grow into something different from how you started out.” David shrugged.

Curtis nodded, picking up what David was putting down. “I think what David is trying to say is that Maria might have been perfect for the old you, but Karen seems like she’s perfect for the new you. It’s not like some zero-sum game, where you can only love one or the other—like loving Karen means loving Maria less. It doesn’t work that way, because you’re not who you were. It’s a new game altogether.”

“Exactly. It’s not like you’ve got a finite amount of love or anything, and that giving it to someone new means taking it from someone old. Life’s not a fucking math problem.” David was nodding to himself, proud of his analogy. “So don’t, y’know, feel guilty or anything.”

Frank felt momentarily dazed, staring off into nothing and taking calming breaths.

He’d forgotten, somehow, that his friends could be so fucking insightful. They were right—about it all—he knew that. The human heart wasn’t a well, with a restricted supply of love to give. It was a perpetual motion machine—without limit. It was the most infinite organ of the human body.

And of course he wasn’t the same person he had been five years ago—of course. Old Frank had needed Maria just as much as she’d needed him; Old Frank and Maria fit together like perfect little puzzle pieces. But New Frank wasn’t Old Frank; his shape had changed. He was a different creature altogether—someone transformed by sorrow and loss and time. And New Frank wouldn’t have fit with Maria, not the way Old Frank had; he couldn’t.

But Karen? Karen was the perfect shape. Karen’s was a hand he knew how to hold; Karen understood how to play with his demons—turn them to soft gentle things in her presence.
The back room of the bookstore was silent. The noise of three bodies breathing the only sound.

“Are you—are you still with us?” David’s brow was furrowed with concern.

Frank jolted—he hadn’t realized he’d been sitting there, staring off in the distance, for so long.

“Yeah,” his voice came out a bit rough. “Yeah.”

“You sure?” Curtis’s face was a mirror of David’s.

“Yeah.” Frank repeated, and he managed a quarter of a smile—just enough to reassure his friends.

“Yeah, I—thanks.”

“Any time, man.” Curtis leaned back, still watching Frank with concern. “Did that help any?”

Frank nodded.

“Good. Good.” David nodded. “So, are we ever going to get around to talking about this fucking book or what?” He held up the novel, grinning.

That night, Karen didn’t see Frank come home from his book club meeting; she was too absorbed in her writing. Or, more accurately, half of her brain was absorbed in the act of writing, and the other half was thinking about Frank.

She was sitting still, comfortable, curled up in the window nook with her laptop spread across her lap—and yet her heart was almost pounding out of her chest. It was what happened every time her thoughts turned to Frank. That anxious drumbeat of her heart, thudding against her rib cage—fear and joy and something with the distinct flavor of anticipation. It was damn near maddening.

But she blocked it out as best she could, and focused on the words in front of her. On the world she had been building for over three months. She typed a sentence—deleted it—typed it again, word-for-word. Deleted it again.

_Fuck._

Despite her best efforts, her mind kept drifting away to much more interesting places—to a world of imagination she was almost embarrassed to admit she visited often. A world in which she was brave enough to tell Frank how she felt—in which he took her into his arms, like a man with nothing else to cling to, and told her that he felt the same way.

She shoved her laptop away with a groan, staring up at the ceiling. There was no use writing when she was this distracted. She took several deep breaths, then stood up to stretch. Her back cracked in protest, and she made a resolution to get up and move around more when she was writing.

Coffee—she would grab some coffee. Downing a cup always helped her concentrate.

As Karen made her way to the kitchen, she found herself walking in the orange glow of the dimmed living room lights one second, and then it was pitch black the next.

She stopped, stark still, surprised.

“What the fuck?”

There wasn’t a single noise to be heard—not the buzzing of the overhead light or the hum of the
heater. The electricity was out.

Karen was too afraid to move—she could barely see an inch in front of her face—so she stood in place until her eyes adjusted to the slight illumination offered by the moonlight through the window.

“Motherfucker.” She held out a hand, brushing it against the doorway to the kitchen, and took a step forward. She’d have to go down into the basement, see if she could reset the breakers; walking down those rickety stairs in the pitch dark was going to be a real bitch.

She’d managed to feel her way into the kitchen, to the drawer next to the stove where she kept a flashlight, and flick it on before the sound of knocking at her door drew her attention.

“Hey Kare, you in there? Open up.”

Frank.

“Just a second.” She swung the light around, revealing the path to the front door. She tripped over an abandoned boot on her way, and just managed to keep from tumbling to the floor.

“Hey, Frank,” she threw open her door to see him standing on her porch, frowning, bundled up in the shearling coat she herself had worn all those months ago. “Your power out too?”

“Yeah. But I have a back-up generator,” he brushed passed her into the entry way, and she closed the door behind him, blocking out the howling wind. “Been tellin’ the Brynners to get one for years, but they never listen to me.” He shook some snow from his shoulders.

“This happen a lot?” Karen tried to hold the flashlight so that she could still see him, but without blaring it in his face. The feeling of security that she always felt when Frank was around worked its way into her chest, where it curled up to rest.

“Yeah. Usually only last a few hours or so. I wanted to make sure you were okay, and see if you needed help getting a fire going. Should be able to keep the whole place warm until the electricity kicks back in.” He looked around, but couldn’t see anything in the dark.

“Oh yeah—yes. That would be great.” Karen swung the flashlight into the living room, walking toward the fireplace. Frank followed her, smiling at her blue, plaid pajamas—her comfort clothes. That familiar feeling of rightness settled low in his gut as he followed her further into the cabin.

She held the beam steady for him as he crouched down and got to work, opening up the damper and stacking the kindling before striking a match. He leaned back as the fire roared to life, and suddenly the entire room was illuminated in a soft, warm light. It was such a large fire place, in such a small cabin, that things heated up very quickly.

“That should do you until the lights kick back on.” He stood up, wiping his hands on his jeans, staring into the flames.

And Karen was struck—hard—with a blooming of desire deep in her core. In the flickering light, with the golden glow casting his face in gentle shadow, he was so unbearably handsome. The curve of his lip, the sharp, straight line of his jaw, the dark brandy color of his eyes. He was every dream she’d ever had come to life.

Fuck.

Her heart was beating its way into her throat so hard, she was sure he could hear it in the quiet of the cabin.
Frank felt Karen’s gaze on him, intense and unrelenting, and looked up in question. But the question died on his lips at the look in her eyes—they were burning, consuming, bright. And trained on his own. He felt his blood begin to quicken—something dark pooling in his groin at that look. It was a hungry look, and one he’d never seen on her face before.

“Karen,” he said her name quietly, and there was a nameless quality in the way he spoke that had her stepping closer, slowly. A ghost of longing—of expectation.

“Yes, Frank?”

Her hair looked like spun gold in the light of the fire as it played across her face, accentuating the depth of those blue eyes, the hollow of her cheekbones. Like some beautiful creature from a fairy tale. His breathing grew slow, deliberate.

She took another step forward, and her front barely brushed against his chest. She inhaled sharply, her nipples puckering at the contact, sending a shock of flaring heat down to her toes.

Frank was frozen—he couldn’t move. There was a part of his brain that was desperately screaming at him to take her in his arms—to press his ravenous mouth to her own in a bruising kiss—to make her squirm and scream and cry in pleasure. But he didn’t know how. Was unsure in his body.

“Karen.” He repeated again, his voice so deep, she was sure she could feel it vibrating through her.

“Yes?” She asked again, tilting her head up until her lips softly grazed his chin, her bottom one dragging ever so slightly against his beard. Frank felt the pleasurable tightening in the pit of his stomach grow, and suppressed a shiver at the sensation.

“What are you doing?” He asked, his voice gone ragged.

“I think,” she breathed, bringing her lips up further to gently ghost against his own. “That I’m trying to kiss you.”

“Oh.”

And with that, her lips closed over his, warm and tender and soft. So soft, in fact, Frank wasn’t even sure when the kiss began, only that her mouth tasted so sweet—felt so unbelievably good. Supple and yielding.

She pulled away, her lips lingering against his own as she lifted her gaze, eyes questioning. He stared down at her, almost disbelieving; that such a small and perfect moment had even happened. That she’d stepped toward him and taken his lips with her own—not in his dreams, but in reality.

“Is that okay, Frank?”

He didn’t answer, instead wrapping his arms around her waist and hoisting her back to his body to lower his mouth to her own. She made a noise of surprise, before melting into his embrace, her hands reaching up to tangle in dark curls.

And his mouth was hot and slow and wet against her own—deliberate and strong. Frank felt a spark of a memory in his brain. He knew how to do this; knew how to kiss a woman until her head spun. He’d done it a thousand times before.

But never like this; never with Karen Page in his arms, her body thundering against him as her fingers tugged at his hair, pulling him closer. It was like holding onto a live wire.
He opened his mouth to let his tongue swipe against her bottom lip, tasting, nipping. She responded with a surprised moan, parting her lips to his exploration, and his hands gripped her hips harder, squeezing before drifting up to press her closer to his chest.

It was sloppy and animal and near-mindless, the way his mouth moved against hers. Driven by a want so pure it burned. Teeth clashing, little noises of desperation rising in both their throats, hot breath mingling. Her body rocked against him, and his hips bucked of their own accord, his hardness pressing against her apex. She made a sound of delight, and arched forward, rubbed her breasts against his chest, bringing her hands down from his hair to yank harshly at the zipper of his coat. She managed to tug it down without breaking the kiss.

But then they were separated—Frank’s arms gone from around her—as he shrugged the coat off. She watched him with burning eyes, her breathing a harsh pant.

“Frank.” She said his name like it was a gift.

He tossed the coat away, carelessly, raising his arms again to grab her face in both of his hands. His palms here warm and calloused, cupping her cheeks and tilting her head up to look him in the eye.

Her eyes were so wide and blue, so frantic and needy. But beneath the heat of her gaze there was something else—something like trust. Frank felt some of the urgency leave his body at that look, replaced with a softer, gentler feeling.

“Karen, I—” he took a deep breath. “I haven’t kissed anyone in five years.”

She jerked back at that, brow furrowed. It wasn’t what she’d expected him to say. His hands on her face kept her from pulling away completely.

“I’m so sorry, Frank, I didn’t—,” Karen stuttered. She hadn’t even thought about Maria; hadn’t thought about whether or not Frank was even ready for this kind of thing. “If it’s too soon, I totally—“

The rest of her words were cut off by a desperate kiss—fierce and needy and over too quickly. Frank’s lips left her own with a wet sound that shot something sharp into her gut.

“No Karen, that’s not what I meant,” Frank dipped his head, pressing her brow against her own, his eyes closed. “I want you to understand me, alright? In five years, you’re the only one who’s ever made me feel this way, okay?”

Karen nodded, her head still pressed against his own.

“Only you, Karen.” He repeated, his words low and deep. “So if you kiss me again, okay, that’s it. That’s it.”

Karen’s breath caught in her throat. Frank didn’t need to explain—didn’t need to say another word—she understood. She felt it too. Like every moment together pushed them closer to a precipice, and if they fell over…there was no going back. It was inevitability distilled to its most primal form.

“Do you hear me?” Frank’s lips brushed against hers, feather-soft.

“Yes, Frank. I hear you.” Karen breathed, before claiming his lips in a hard kiss.

And their bodies were tangled in a mess of limbs—Frank’s hands slipping down her back to grab at her ass, yanking her roughly against him; Karen’s palms ghosting over his pecs, sliding down to feel the ridges of his stomach under his shirt; one of Frank’s thighs pushed roughly between her legs,
which she ground down on in exquisite need.

Karen was fighting back embarrassing sounds, letting her hands roam. He was all hard muscle and strong, grasping hands. Her hips were working their way slowly against his thigh, sweet friction making her moan, even through her pajama bottoms and his jeans. Frank used his hands to guide her grinding, pushing her body to jerk and rotate against him. Letting her seek pleasure in him; grow more and more wet with every shift of her body.

Frank shivered as Karen’s fingers dipped underneath his shirt, her nails raking over the hair beneath his belly button.

“Karen, fuck.” He breathed her name, burying his head in her neck, where he latched on with his heated mouth. He licked at her tender flesh; the hot slide of his tongue sending a tremor down her spine, before biting down gently.

“Jesus Christ, Frank,” Karen’s hips stuttered in their slow grind against his thigh, as all of her concentration zeroed in on the feel of his teeth at her collar bone. Frank grinned against her skin, sucking at the same spot until her head was lolling back limply, and tortured noises spilled from her mouth.

Frank’s body was in overdrive, stimulated in ways he hadn’t felt in so fucking long. But his mind was racing, too. Pleasure is pleasure—but taking pleasure, giving pleasure, to someone you love is on another level. Like tapping into the very vein of life and drinking from its source.

He let his hands roam up, sliding around to Karen’s front, undoing the buttons of her top, one-by-one. His knuckles pressing against her soft flesh had her jolting in response. When her shirt parted, he found her bare, and he couldn’t help but stare.

Fuck, but she was lovely. All that silky, pale flesh; those rosebud nipples, straining for him. Like she was carved from marble. He noticed a blush beginning to spread down her chest, and his eyes darted up. Karen was looking at him almost nervously.

Frank smiled, and let his hands inch their way upward, over her rib cage, to cup a breast in each hand. Keeping his eyes trained to hers all the while.

“Karen, you are perfect.” His voice was quiet and low. He ran his thumbs over her nipples, and she made a choked noise, jerking against him. So he did it again. “Can’t believe you’re letting me touch you like this.”

It was the reverence in his voice that got to her—like he really didn’t trust that this moment was happening. She melted, all the hard edges of her passion softening into a more delicate feeling.

“Frank.” She brought her own hands up, sliding them up his forearms until her palms were pressed to the backs of his hands as they kneaded her breasts. “I want your hands everywhere.”

His eyes went dark—deepening as they anchored to her own. “Yes ma’am,” he muttered.

And suddenly she was in his arms, her legs wrapping around his waist for purchase, as he walked them the three steps it took to reach the couch. He pressed a kiss to the underside of her chin before lowering her onto the cushions, dropping to his knees in front of her.

He spread her legs gently, scooting forward until they bracketed his torso.

“Can I kiss you?” He asked, licking his lips.
“You’ve already kissed me, Frank.” Karen’s brow furrowed in confusion.

“No, Kare,” he chuckled. “Can I kiss your body?”

“Oh.” Karen breathed. “Oh.” She let her head drop back onto the couch. “God, yes.”

Frank smiled, leaning forward with his hands planted on either side of her hips. He blew lightly on the overheated skin where her shoulder met her throat, eliciting a satisfying shiver, then bent to let his lips drag down the column of her exposed throat, unsheathing his teeth to scrape their way to her collar bone as he went. He bit there gently, and a bubbling noise of delight burst from Karen’s lips. Slowly, so slowly, he let his tongue make a wet trail to her right breast, cold air hitting the line of saliva left behind and raising goose pimples on her flesh.

“God, Frank.” Karen breathed, as he let his tongue slide over the underside of her breast, then to her sternum, avoiding her puckered nipple. “Who knew you were such a tease?”

Frank made a grumbling noise, which vibrated against her prickled skin, before finally letting his mouth close over her straining peak. The noise she made was almost a squeak, as her torso arched up into his warm, wet mouth.

He let his tongue slide and slip, circling her nipple slowly, while his right hand came up to cup her unattended breast, pulling and plucking at her bud between calloused fingers.

The sensation was divine—the soft, warm feeling of his mouth on one side; the rough, coarse skin of his fingertips on the other. Karen lost her words, instead breathing out sounds that could possibly, in some other universe, have been his name.

He tweaked her gently with his teeth, sending her hips rocking up into his chest, her legs spreading wider and wider in need. Then he soothed with the flat of his tongue.

When he pulled away, it was with a wet pop. Karen tilted her head down to watch him, and he smirked up at her, enjoying the dazed look in her eye. He’d forgotten he was capable of doing that to a woman. He only savored the moment for a second or two, before lowering his mouth to her other nipple, swiping the soft flat of his tongue against her puckered flesh, swirling it around her bud until she moaned.

Her hands were in his hair, pulling his mouth closer. Begging him to take more; taste more; devour. And he did. It was sloppy and wet and perfect, and Karen’s hips picked up a gyrating rhythm as they arched up, bumping against the hard planes of his chest.

“Karen,” Frank spoke against her sternum. “Fuck.” He dropped a kiss to her heated flesh. “Y’make me feel human.” It was mumbled against her so softly, she almost didn’t hear it. She tugged on his hair until he looked up at her, his eyes holding every dark and beautiful thing inside of him.

“You are human, Frank.”

“Only with you.” He dropped his head again, nibbling at the bottom of her rib cage, kissing his way down to the waistband of her pajama pants.

He let his tongue dip below the elastic, and Karen shuddered, her head falling back against the couch again. Frank’s hands slid under her ass, squeezing gently, massaging, as he used his teeth to pull the fabric up from her skin—just barely.

“Can I?” His voice sounded strained, as he let his fingers dip between her cheeks, pulling gently as
he lifted her hips from the cushion.

Karen laughed—a breathless sound. “God, yes.”

And unlike the slow, patient way Frank had unwrapped his Christmas present only a week ago, there was nothing gentle about the way he tore Karen’s pajama pants away, tossing them over his shoulder.

And suddenly she was entirely bare before him. Karen felt her last scrap of modesty begging her to close her legs, but Frank saw her timid movement to bring them together and laid his hands firmly against her thighs. Staring her in the eye, he pushed, spreading her before him until she was utterly exposed, her knees pressed into the couch cushions on either side of her.

He swiped his tongue across his bottom lip, maintaining eye contact, before looking down at her: pink, wet, glistening.

“Shit, Kare.” He couldn’t remember ever being this turned on in his life. His pants were past the point of being uncomfortable; every time he twitched against his zipper, a shot of arousal blew up his spine.

Karen couldn’t take it, watching him stare down at her like that, so she threw her arms over her eyes, arching her back as she did, pressing her hips further into the cushion in an impatient movement.

“I’m going to take my time, okay?” He dipped his head low to fan hot air across her dripping core. She convulsed at the feeling.

“Okay.” The word came out as moan, as he bent his head to kiss the top of her mound, just above her clit, with an open-mouth. His hands started to glide up and down her inner thighs, his thumbs brushing gently at her entrance every time they neared it. Enough contact to have her panting, but not enough to satisfy her.

He let his nose drag across the soft, blonde curls at her apex, dropping little kisses here and there. Loving; worshipful; like little offerings to her flesh.

“Motherfucker, Frank.” Karen’s hips gyrated in small little circles, desperate for contact, and she tangled her own hands in her hair, yanking slightly. Frank looked up, blown away by the sight—Karen writhing for him. His gut tightened in need.

“Got a mouth on you, Karen.” He smiled.

“You do too, Frank; I suggest you use it.” She shot back.

The laugh that left Frank was joyous—nothing better than being able to laugh during sex. It was the best sign that you were doing it with the right partner. But he’d already known that—that Karen was the right partner.

Deciding to end her torture, he lowered his mouth to her slit, licking up the juices that had gathered there—wet and waiting. Karen’s moan sounded like relief, and her hips jerked.

Frank ate her like a man whose only job was to worship—like his hunger could only be curbed by what was between her thighs. Wet, warm tongue, laving at her and dipping into her in turns. His lips soft and pliable as they dragged over her folds. And the feeling of his beard, scraping against her thighs, leaving little red marks—fuck, that feeling had her moaning his name in wanton desire.

His tongue danced up to flick against her clit, and Karen swore she saw lights behind her eyes. He
did it against, and again, swirling his tongue in circles, then sucking gently. Karen’s sounds of wrecked pleasure spurred him on, and he found his hips bucking forward into thin air with every punctuated moan.

Karen could feel her juices—mixed with Frank’s saliva—dripping onto the couch cushions, and started moving her hips harder and harder against his face. Frank held on as best he could, letting her take what she needed from him—tongue and teeth and lips dedicated solely to her pleasure.

It was bliss that sparked off in his brain the moment he felt her contract around his tongue—a primal cry leaving her mouth. He let her come down, working her through her orgasm with tiny kitten licks, before sitting back on his heels to look up at her.

In the glow of the fire light, with sweat pricking her flesh, she was more the he’d ever imagined possible. He couldn’t fucking believe it—that he had Karen Page wasted and exhausted in front of him, spread like she existed for him alone. It was too much—too good—and his heart began to beat uncomfortably fast.

Frank couldn’t describe it—the sensation of being overwhelmed by something so wonderful. He’d been overwhelmed by pain before; by loss; by hurt. But never by joy. Unfortunately, no matter what you’re overwhelmed by, the effects are the same. Frank’s hands began to shake, and his breath came out in short pants.

Karen, who was just aware enough to notice his irregular breathing pattern, sat up suddenly, her eyes concerned. The blissful afterglow replaced instantaneously with worry.

“Frank? Are you okay?”

He was looking down at his lap, trying to regulate his breathing.

“Frank?” She leaned forward to grab his face in her hands, tilting it up so she could look in his eyes.

“I—I—” he couldn’t find the words.

“Is it…” Karen’s breath caught in her throat. “Is it Maria?”

Maria’s name hit Frank like a ton of bricks. He hadn’t even been thinking about her. Fuck, should he have? Should he have felt some kind of guilt, the first time being intimate with someone new? Should this have been more difficult? More painful? Felt like a betrayal?

No. No—he could never feel guilty for what he’d done with Karen. Never; she was kind and perfect and lovely and a thousand good things that shouldn’t be allowed to exist in one human body. To feel guilt would be a disservice to her, and she didn’t deserve that.

What was it she’d said all those months ago? To choose happiness? To be happy for himself? Well this was his choice—he was choosing to let himself feel joy. He was choosing Karen.

“No, it’s—it’s not Maria. Wasn’t thinking about her.” Frank’s voice was still unsteady. Karen let out a breath of relief.

“Here. Get up.” She stood, pulling Frank to his feet. She turned him around with her hands on his shoulders, pushing him down onto the couch. “Do you need me to get dressed? To step back? Do you need to leave?” Her voice was soft; understanding.

“No, no.” Frank shook his head. He didn’t want to leave. That’s what he always did when things got too intense; but he wouldn’t do that with her. “Come—come here.” He held his arms out, and Karen
hesitated a moment, before crawling onto his lap.

He wrapped her up tightly, tucking her head under his chin, and just tried to breath. She listened, carefully, to his heart beat against her ear. It was pounding like a wild animal. His arms were tight, anchoring her against his chest.

And Karen started humming “Once Upon a December.” She didn’t know why, but it seemed calming—seemed like the right thing to do.

And Frank felt a huge rush of tension leave his body. Karen was trying to quiet him—care for him—in her own way. It was so thoughtful—so compassionate. He almost felt like falling apart.

Slowly, his heart rate returned to normal, and Karen lifted her head, pushing off of his chest to look him in the eye.

“Wanna talk?” Her voice was kind, and Frank knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that if he said no, she would be okay with that.

But he did want to talk.

“I just, uh…” he bent his head forward, letting it rest against her collar bone. “Got overwhelmed for a minute.”

“Overwhelmed good or overwhelmed bad?” Karen brought up a hand to gently stroke his hair.

“Good, Karen. God. Really good.” His breath was hot against her neck.


“Just a, uh…a lot of emotions. All at once. Not used to that much, uh…” he trailed off. “That much happiness. Or, uh, passion.” He could feel the tips of his ears go slightly red.

“No, I—” Frank shook his head. “No, I want to be with you.”

“And I want to be with you, too.” Karen smiled. “But you make the choices that are going to be good for your heart, okay?”

Frank shook his head again. “Karen. I’m okay now. I’m fine.”

In fact, he was beginning to feel more than fine. The realization that Karen was sitting on top of him, naked, smelling like sex, was starting to cause his body to react. His hands tightened their grip on the dip of her waist.

“Frank,” Karen furrowed her brow. “Don’t feel like we have to have sex, okay?”

“Karen,” Frank’s smile was still a little bit off, but it was getting there. “I want to. I want you.” And to prove his point, he let his hips buck upward against her ass, so that she could feel how hard and ready he was.

Karen looked skeptical, but then he brought his hands down to her thighs, trailing their way slowly to her knees. He pulled, shifting underneath her so that suddenly she was straddling him, her ass pressed hard against his straining erection. She let out a little yelp, regaining her balance at the new
“Are you sure, Frank?”

“Karen. Yes.” His eyes were insistent on her own as he slid his hands up her body, pausing to flick his thumbs over her nipples. He grinned at her gasp, bringing his hands to her hair, dragging her head down to his own. He laid a deep, drugging kiss on her lips. Of their own volition, Karen’s hips shifted, and Frank let out a needy, hungry little noise.

Karen lifted up on her knees, rubbing her breasts against the front of Frank’s shirt. He let his hands rove over her back, grasping and scraping, feeling the soft dip of her spine.

When Karen drew back, she darted her eyes down to his chest—to the way his button down flannel was straining every time he took a deep breath.

She kept her eyes on his as she moved to unbutton it, slowly, tortuously, letting her fingers dip in every once in a while for a gentle brush.

Frank watched her, his eyes clear of all tension—soft and warm in the fire light.

“Oh my god,” Karen groaned when his shirt finally parted. “I’ve been dreaming about your chest for ages. Damn.” She ran her fingers from his collar bone to his abs, then back up again. She cupped his pecs in her hands, and let out a delighted little noise.

“Really?” Frank’s grin was just this side of smug. “My chest?”

“Oh god, yes.” She dipped her head to kiss at a spot just under his jaw, all the while her hands continued to roam, sending a frisson of satisfaction down Frank’s spine. “And your arms, too.”

Karen pushed the shirt off of his shoulders until he lifted his torso to remove it completely. “I mean, fuck me,” she said, grabbing his biceps and grinding her hips forward.

“I’m trying to.” Frank replied, amused. He liked that his body was pleasing to Karen—that she wanted to touch him and look at him. He’d begun to see it as simply a machine, built to do work and keep him alive. But under her gaze, he felt a bit like a work of art. “So exactly how long have you been admiring me this way?”

Karen let her hands drift down his abdomen, fingernails scratching along the line of hair that disappeared into his jeans, which had Frank shifting his hips in need.

“Too long, Frank. Too damn fucking long.” She tugged at his belt, and Frank ground up until his zipper bumped her clit, making her shiver and groan.

“We should do something about that, huh?” Frank leaned forward, capturing Karen’s mouth in a consuming kiss, as he reached down to undo his belt buckle.

Karen was so absorbed in the kiss, in that perfect way Frank seemed to know how to stroke his tongue to send shivers down her spine, that she only vaguely noticed him lifting her ass with one hand and sliding his jeans down with another. Until she sat in her previous position and felt the hard slide of his erection between her legs.

“Fuck,” Frank cursed, breaking away, breathing hard. He stared down at his lap, at were her folds were pressed against him, the head of his cock weeping a bead of precum already.

“Oh fuck, Frank.” Karen looked down as well, then shifted her hips to drag up the length of him, until his head bumped her clit. Then she backed away, sitting back down on his lap, closer to his
knees.

“Jesus, Karen.” Frank’s chest was heaving, his eyes still on the apex of her thighs.

“What?” she asked innocently, reaching out to grab his hard length in her hand. Frank hissed at the contact. “I’m just getting mine.” She smiled, before dragging her hand slowly down his shaft, then back up again.

“You’re killing me is what you’re doing.” Frank ground out, jaw clenched against the pleasure. Karen grinned, bending forward to place a series of kisses along his neck, up to his jaw. She nipped at him, then opened her mouth to suck. Frank let his head fall back, basking in the electric feeling of desire growing in the base of his skull; when she began timing her sucks to match the rhythm of her hand, Frank almost lost his damn mind.

“Kare—God.” He reached out, stilling her hand on him “Gotta stop that. Not gonna last long that way.”

Karen grinned, removing her mouth from his neck, and shifted back up onto her knees, moving forward to hover over his cock. “Then let’s not wait any longer, huh?” She moved to sink down on him, stopping moments before her wet heat could make contact. “I’m on the pill, by the way.”

And Frank was so glad she’d mentioned it, because his brain was way too far gone to think straight.

“Good. Good. I’m clean.” He flexed his fingers, placing them on her hips, waiting for her to move.

“Perfect,” she grinned. “Now make me forget my name,” she said, finally sliding down onto him.

The noise Frank made was inhuman—Karen was warm and wet and perfect around him. It had been so long since he’d felt anything other than his own hand; he’d forgotten how being inside someone could make you lose your sanity. And being inside of someone you love—well that was just beyond description. That was something elemental—fucking biblical.

Karen shuddered as he filled her, stretching her in the most pleasant way. She grabbed a hold of his hair, breathing deeply as she let herself adjust to his size. Frank’s hands rested on her hips, squeezing gently as his eyes roved her face. She looked blissed-out, which filled his chest with something that had the flavor of pride.

“Okay?” He asked, grinning.

“Oh, so much better than okay.” Karen’s eyes popped open, and she suddenly raising herself with her knees, before leisurely sliding back down again.

Frank made a guttural noise, and she did it again. Aching-slow, swallowing him in her heat, just to lift away and do it all over again.

Karen’s head was thrown back in pleasure, as every movement dragged him against her inner walls in a way that had her twitching and shuddering. “Fuck, that’s good.” Karen steadied her hands on his shoulders, circling her hips—grinding out a pattern—as she lifted and lowered; lifted and lowered.

It was an unhurried build—working herself up inch by inch—feeling her core tightening in satisfaction each time she welcomed Frank into her body.

“Karen.” He whispered her name, bringing his hands up to cup her breasts, thumbs flicking over her nipples, and burying his face in her neck.
“God.” He began to suck at her throat, and Karen picked up the pace, bucking against him faster, her nails digging into his back. Frank began to lift his hips to meet each thrust, groaning at the sensation of Karen riding him hard. The noise sent a vibration down Karen’s throat, and she choked out a whimper.

In her mind, all she heard was his name, over and over and over again. No—she realized with some measure of surprise—she was speaking it. Out loud. Calling out to him as she pressed her body closer to his own, sweat slicking the places their skin touched, hips rising and falling vigorously. She was flying—she was falling—that feeling of unutterable completion clawing its way up her back.

Frank reached down with one hand, letting his thumb rub across her clit, and Karen let out a hiss, circling her hips down even harder, grinding into his hand as her walls clenched him desperately. His thumb swiped—pressed—circled.

And suddenly, Karen was coming with a kind of force she’d never felt before, a primal scream wrenching its way from her throat. She shuddered and shook around him before collapsing forward, head buried in the crook of his neck.

Frank stroked her back, slowly, the world’s largest, shit-eating grin on his face. He was still hard inside of her, and when he shifted his hips, she made a surprised little noise. Lifting her head, she kissed him deeply—her hot and slow as it slid against his own; it was a lazy kiss, filled with contentment. When she pulled away, it was to grind gently down on him, until he hissed.

“Here,” Karen raised herself up until he slid completely free from her with a wet, sucking noise. She shifted until she was next to him, laying back down with her head against the arm of the couch.

“Come here.” She held out her arms.

Frank didn’t need to be asked twice. He was on her so quickly, his chest pressing down against her sweat-slicked breasts. He grabbed the ankle of her left leg, lifting until she bent her knee with her thigh pressed against her chest.

Frank kissed her chin sweetly before burying himself inside of her in a rush of movement, still hot and hard and needing. His pace wasn’t slow, and it wasn’t soft. He took her like desperate man, hungry and powerful. Karen’s hands scrambled for purchase on his back, and she found her head thrashing from side to side with each thrust.

She was still sensitive from her orgasm, but he felt so good inside of her—claiming, and letting her claim in turn.

“Fuck.” Frank’s pace was relentless, and Karen could feel her heart leaping into her throat. She twisted and lifted her hips, gyrating against him in a rush of limbs and sweat. His left hand still held her ankle, but his right slid down her back, cupping her ass and squeezing, pulling her body just that much closer.

And then he was making those noises—those desperate, low noises deep in his throat. The ones that had Karen shuddering as they vibrated from his chest to her own.

“I’m close.” It came out as a half-whisper, half-hiss.

His grunts grew in volume, until he buried his head in her neck and just repeated her name, over and over again. Her hips rose to meet his—once, twice, three times—and then he was spilling himself with a guttural noise, collapsing on top of her with a sigh.

Almost the second he did, a whirring noise kicked overhead, and all of the lights turned on at once.
Karen couldn’t help it—the laugh that burst from her—it was loud and joyous and full. Frank lifted his head, beaming like a fool.

“We fucked the lights back on,” Karen managed between spurs of laughter. “We literally—” she ran out of breath, “fucked the lights back on.”

“Mmm,” Frank made an amused noise, shifting forward to lay a string of soft kisses on her face.

Karen’s laughter died down, and she was looking at Frank with those gentle, caring eyes. She brought up her hands to stroke through his hair, as he laid his chin against her sternum.

“How you feeling?” She asked.

“Like I just ran a marathon,” he responded. “And happy. Stupid happy.”

“Good,” Karen nodded. “Good.” She was quiet for a moment, just looking at Frank—at the quiet tenderness in his eyes. “Frank, I—” She trailed off; part of her wanted to tell him that she loved him, and part of her was afraid to. She didn’t want to overwhelm him with her feelings so soon, especially if he didn’t reciprocate them. “I’m so lucky to have stumbled upon you. I can’t—you’re—you’re my favorite human being.”

Frank’s heart stuttered. He dipped his head down to kiss her sternum.

“You’re my favorite human being, too.”

“Good.” Karen grinned. “Are we sleeping over at my place or yours?”

Frank laughed. “Well Max gets lonely when I’m gone over night. So looks like you’re coming to mine.”

“I’ll pack some clothes.”
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Green days/green lists are a thing that my mom invented when I was a kid. Just a fun fact.
I'm a little nervous about this chapter, because it's kind of heavy on the angst? And I'm more of a fluff gal myself. But y'know.

“Kare?” Frank rolled over, pulling the comforter up to his chin and burying his face in the back of Karen’s neck, refusing to open his eyes. He inhaled deeply. She always smelled so sweet in the mornings—elemental—with the scent of her shampoo long-faded and before she put on any perfume or lotion; just her. Warm and alive.

“Mmm,” she grumbled, reaching behind herself to grab ahold of Frank’s hand, pulling it over her body and clutching it to her chest. It was her favorite way to spoon, wrapped up in him completely.

“You get up at 2AM to take Max out? Or did I dream that?” His voice was muffled through the thick cloud of her hair. Goose pimples broke out on her flesh as his hot breath feathered over her neck.

“I took him out. He was whining.” Karen lifted his hand to her mouth, kissing his knuckles.

“Thanks.” Frank snuggled closer, pressed hard and flat against her back.

Her naked back. Skin so soft and smooth against the coarse hair of his chest.

Frank was like a damn space heater; Karen would crawl into bed dressed fully in pajamas, but at some point she’d wake up, covered in sweat, and be forced to shed her layers. Last night had been almost unbearably hot.

“Are you naked?” Frank’s voice was suddenly a lot more awake, and a whole lot huskier, practically vibrating next to her ear. It was a sound that had all muscles south of her belly button clenching.

“No, Got panties on.” Karen arched her back, shoving her ass into his crotch as if to prove her point. Frank let out a deep groan, bucking his hips forward gently; he was already hard, as he was most mornings since sharing his bed with Karen.

“Wanna change that?” He asked, shifting the hair at her neck aside with his nose and kissing the sleep-warm skin hidden there. She shivered.

“I don’t know. You up for it?” There was a smile in her voice, as she slowly started to rub herself against his erection, which was pressing insistenty against the curve of her ass.

“Sweetheart,” Frank almost growled, removing his hand from her grasp and letting it trail down the front of her body, stopping to cup a breast along the way. “Always.”

He slipped his hand into her panties—slowly, slowly—dragging his fingers through soft curls before swiping at her wet slit. Just his breath on her neck had her worked up—the power this man had over her was ridiculous.
“Frank.”

He would never get tired of that—hearing his name a breathy moan on her lips. He ground himself against her, dipping his finger between her folds before dragging the wetness up to her clit, circling.

Karen began to rotate her hips—leisurely—pressing forward for more friction. Frank lifted his head just enough to nip at her ear, making her laugh.

“Is this my thank you for taking Max out?” Karen’s voice hitched when one long, thick finger entered her. She shifted to spread her legs wider, giving his hand more room to work with.

“It’s a thank you for being in my fucking bed this morning.” Frank’s voice was a growl, as he began to crook his finger ever-so-slightly, hitting that spot behind her clit that had her writhing in his arms. He tortured her for a few long, drawn out flicks of the finger, gently thrusting against her from behind all the while.

“Frank, please.” Karen’s head was thrown back to rest on his shoulder, and he bent forward to lay a wet kiss on her neck.

“Tell me Karen. What you need.”

Karen had learned, very quickly, that this was one of Frank’s kinks. He liked to hear her talk—to hear her say it, exactly what she wanted him to do.

“Frank, fuck me.”

He didn’t need to be asked twice; in seconds, his hand was gone, his boxers had been shoved down, and her panties pulled to the side. Stopping to kiss her shoulder in a feather-light brush, he entered her slowly.

Languorously—in that measured way that let her know this wasn’t about finishing, or about driving each other to that crazy edge, but rather about intimacy. About feeling the warmth of his chest against her back; about the quiet noises spilling from his throat; about the gentle way he cupped her breast, pulling her tightly against him. How it felt like they were melting into each other when they lay like this.

She had asked him to fuck her, but this wasn’t that. This was making love.

“God,” Karen arched, lifting her right arm to reach behind her, grabbing onto the back of his head and shoving his face further into the junction between her neck and shoulder.

Frank made a little growling noise before pulling out slowly, then sliding back in almost lazily. Inch by inch, rotating his hips as he went. His hand that cupped her breast tweaked her nipple, then soothed the pain with a gentle swipe from his thumb.

They moved in a rhythm that was almost like dancing—pressed to one another, bodies rolling in time as he sunk into her over and over again.

He was mumbling words into her shoulder, his lips ghosting over sensitive flesh, but Karen couldn’t decipher them. She was too far gone, feeling the languid buildup of pleasure as it feathered out from her center. Like little tingles of electricity branching all the way to her toes.

She clutched at his hair, her fingers scratching his scalp with every little twitch of her body. He was relentless, hitting her just right with those deliberate strokes, brushing over her most sensitive places again and again.
Frank felt her walls begin to flutter around him, and lowered his hand from her breast, moving to part her wet folds. His fingertips brushed against the skin of his shaft, moving in and out, as they found her clit, circling in gentle little swipes. Just hard enough to stimulate her, but not hard enough to make her come.

Karen let out a frustrated noise, and attempted to buck her hips forward for more pressure, but he pressed the heel of his hand back into her pubic bone, keeping her still.

“Hold on. Let it build,” he panted, continuing his tortuous ministrations.

And it did—ramping up at an almost painfully unhurried pace—bit by bit, until Karen was half-way surprised to feel herself on the precipice. She hadn’t realized how wound up she’d been.

Frank tapped against her clit—once; twice—and she came with a gasp, convulsing against him in a shudder. He slid his hand back up to her breast, pulled her hard against his chest, and thrust into her a little rougher.

Karen, regaining her senses, pushed herself back into him, meeting his every movement. And with a deep, satisfied groan, he spilled himself.

“Mmm,” Karen fell forward to let her face bury in her pillow.

Frank went in the other direction, tipping over onto his back with an arm thrown over his eyes, grinning.

“Good morning.” His voice was deeply, unrepentantly satisfied.

Karen lifted her head, rising onto her elbows to turn and look at him. “I’ll say.”

She leaned to the side, peppering small kisses across his chest, biting gently when he didn’t react.

“Hey,” he lifted the arm across his face, tilting his head down to send her a faux-disapproving look.

“Just making sure you’re still awake,” she grinned, nipping at him again.

“I’m up,” he brought a hand down to stroke her hair, watching as her eyes fluttered closed at his touch. She let her head fall to his chest, nuzzling her nose into the dark smattering of hair between his pecs. He continued to drag his fingers through her hair, snagging an occasional tangle along the way.

A feeling of inexorable lightness filled him as he looked down at the crown of Karen’s golden head. More and more, when he looked at her, Frank experienced these moments—these delicate moments—in which he felt like his existence shrunk down to the milliseconds in between breaths. Between heart beats; where the feeling of her lying next to him was all that reminded him gently to keep breathing, keep forcing his heart to pound. She had this way of finding all the parts of himself he didn’t think worked quite right, and whispering soft words into his grinding gears until they grew quiet. It was all a bit overpowering.

Karen’s breathing began to even out against his chest, and he chuckled. That woman could fall asleep minutes after waking up if he’d let her. He reached down, shaking her gently until she rolled off of him with a groan.

“Why are you jostling me?” Her voice was muffled by her pillow.

“Just making sure you’re still awake,” He grinned, mimicking her words from moments earlier.
“I’m up.” She did her best Frank impression, voice gruff, lifting her head to send him a half-hearted scowl.

Frank shook his head, sitting upright and stretching his back. Glancing around the room, he yawned. “What time did you want to start writing today?”

“Uh,” Karen let her head fall back down, burying her face in her pillow. “I was going to aim for 8:30. Give myself plenty of time before we have to be at David’s tonight.”

“Its 8:20,” Frank slid out of bed, pulling his boxers back up. “I’ll make breakfast; you get going—get cleaned up.”

“My body is jelly, Frank. I’m afraid I couldn’t move if I tried.”

He bit back a chuckle, reaching down to yank the comforter from the bed, exposing her to the cold air, and giving her ass a quick slap. Karen yelped.

“Up.”

“You’re a fucking slave-driver, Castle.” Karen rolled toward the edge of the mattress, sliding off of it like she was boneless, until she pooled in a slump onto the floor.

Frank watched her with a raised brow.

“You’re a professional writer, right?” He sounded skeptical.

“So they tell me,” she groaned, pushing herself up and stretching with her arms high above her head. Frank’s eyes were instantly riveted to the way her breasts rose with the movement.

_Nope—no time for that._

He walked to the closet, rifling through his clothes until he found a shirt Karen liked—a soft, grey, long-sleeve that was a little big, even on him. He pulled it from the hanger, tossing it in her direction.

“Don’t like seeing me naked, Frank?” She asked, catching it at the last second. “Trying to cover me up as soon as possible?”

“Yeah, that’s the opposite problem.” Frank shook his head, brushing passed her as she pulled the shirt over her head. “You don’t get dressed and you’ll never get to writing.”

Karen reached out quickly, pinching his ass as he walked by, headed for the kitchen.

“Hey!” He turned around, glaring sternly.

“Just testing the produce.” Karen bit her lip, one lecherous brow raised.

“And?”

“Perfectly firm. Ripe.”

“Well, you pinch it, you buy it.” Frank crossed his arms.

“Done.” She nodded solemnly.

He stared at her for a moment, with her messy halo of bedhead, pillow marks on her cheeks, and the flush of sex still crawling its way up her neck—dressed in his shirt. And he was helpless, his chest
filling with warm, devoted affection.

With love. With so much of the stuff that it felt like it was bubbling up his throat—that it threatened to make him shiver. Wiped away every painful, lonely memory from his mind until all that remained was him, Karen, and the entire world of meaning hanging between them.

The words were in his throat, fighting their way up: I love you. I love you, I love you, I love you. But he couldn’t say them. Couldn’t risk it.

So instead, he stepped forward, planting a soft kiss on her forehead, before turned around to walk away before he did something more drastic.

They spent most of the afternoon with Karen curled up on the couch, Max taking up his post next to her as she tapped away on her laptop. Meanwhile, Frank vacillated back and forth between working in his woodshop and reading in the arm chair across from her. He would go out into the shed and get a little bit of work done, until he started missing her presence, at which point he would wander back into the living room and grab his current book, The Goldfinch. (So far, he’d made it all the way up to 30 minutes out in the shed before he wound up back inside with Karen).

It was almost the same routine they’d been doing together for the past two weekends—ever since the night of the power outage—spending all day lounging around his house (occasionally giving in to the desire for some couch sex, or shower sex, or kitchen sex).

On weekdays, Karen stayed at her own cabin, usually writing in the window nook, where she could see the moment Frank turned onto their road after work.

Trish had been euphoric for the past few weeks, absolutely stunned by the sheer amount of writing Karen had been able to accomplish. At the rate she was going, she had no doubt they’d have a full draft of the novel in two months—three months, tops. Karen was simply on fire, writing all day, then spending her evenings with Frank, either talking through her latest additions or engaging in more physically-rigorous activities.

Trish had attempted, several times, to get Karen to talk about her thing with Frank—to make sense of it. But Karen always obfuscated; found a way to turn the topic of conversation to something that made her heart stutter less.

They were in a relationship—some kind of relationship—that much Karen was sure of. They spent every possible moment together, talking and laughing and making love, and as far as she knew, that meant they were in a relationship. But they hadn’t actually spoken about what was going on between them; nothing had been defined or delineated. For all Karen knew, Frank saw her as a fuck buddy. He didn’t—wasn’t the kind of man who would even use that term—but the point remained that Karen had no idea what they were. So she supposed nothing was really out of the realm of possibility.

All she knew was that she loved him, in a way that bordered on frantic; it was an absolutely mind-melting feeling, having such a huge chunk of her heart walking around outside of her body, held in Frank’s hands. And he didn’t even realize it—didn’t even know he was carrying precious cargo with him everywhere he went. Which meant he could drop it, break it, let it slip, without even realizing.

Sometimes she would look up at him, sitting in his armchair with Max’s head on his lap, and the reality of it all would hit her. How massive and indescribable and all-consuming the feeling was.
She’d never been in love before—didn’t expect it to be so physical. The ache to just press her body to his own—to feel the beat of his heart under her ear—to absorb his presence like a calming salve. She wanted to sink into him; close was never close enough.

There was a David Foster Wallace quote that kept running through her mind—a section she’d read in *Infinite Jest*, years and years ago

“*What if sometimes there is no choice about what to love? What if the temple comes to Mohammed? What if you just love? Without deciding? You just do: you see her and in that instant are lost to sober account-keeping and cannot choose but to love?*”

She remembered being a confused teenager, highlighting that passage in her original copy of *IJ*, and imagining what it must be like to love without choice. Without conscious effort. To love because it was the most natural thing in the world.

And now she knew.

But she didn’t tell Frank any of this; didn’t feel like she could. What was the protocol for falling in love with someone whose wife was dead? What were the rules about how to be respectful of someone else’s claim to him, while trying to stake a claim of her own? She had absolutely no idea.

For all she knew, Frank wasn’t even ready for the idea of love; he could still be too raw. Sure, it had been five years since Maria’s passing, but what the fuck does time mean in the face of grief?

She could imagine the scenario so clearly: her, admitting her love to Frank; him, panicking and pulling away until he completely disappeared from her life. And she couldn’t risk that—didn’t think she could survive it.

And then there was the fact that she only had about 2 months left in Alaska before she went home.

To New York. To her little loft with its view of Prospect Park.

Except New York didn’t feel like home anymore. Sometimes she would close her eyes and try to visualize it—her apartment, filled with her books and posters and obsessively-catalogued Criterion collection—but the image never quite solidified. It was like attempting to imagine a place she wasn’t quite sure existed. She would struggle to remember what it was like, to make coffee in her tiny kitchen, or run out to the bodega down the road for junk food, or jump on the subway to Trish’s office. But it felt like accessing someone else’s memories. Someone who wasn’t her; who looked like her…but wasn’t.

It was disconcerting.

So she and Frank avoided the relationship talk like they were fucking professionals, dancing around it every time the conversation veered into that kind of territory. They pretended like she was going to be in Alaska forever; like they could maintain the state they were in *ad infinitum*.

It probably wasn’t the best strategy—certainly wasn’t the most mature—but it was what she had. What she was capable of. So it would have to do.

“Hey, is this one of those fancy dinners where I have to wear, like, a dress and a fascinator? Or can I just wear jeans?” Karen called over her shoulder, digging around in the overnight bag she’d shoved under Frank’s bed the day before.
“I think jeans and a fascinator,” Frank answered from the bathroom, where he was trimming his beard over the sink. It was beginning to get just a little unruly (though Karen hadn’t complained—she liked the beard burn on her neck and inner thighs; wore them like a badge of pride).

Karen snorted. “Perfect—I’ve always wanted to look like someone who accidentally wandered into the Kentucky Derby. What an aesthetic.”

Frank huffed a laugh, putting down his clippers.

“Definitely casual. I’d be surprised if David’s even wearing a shirt when we get there.”

“Oh God, I hope he is. I don’t think I’ll be able to eat if I have to stare at his nipples all night long.”

“Just look away.”

“But what if I get hypnotized by them, Frank?” Karen found the top she had been looking for—nice enough, without being too much for a friendly dinner party.

“Then we’ll have bigger problems than you not being able to eat.”

“True.”

Karen was shimmying her way into her jeans when Frank popped up, leaning against the door jamb and observing her as she got dressed. He’d forgotten how much he loved this part—watching a woman get ready for a night out. The ceremony of it all, slowly pulling herself together into something she deemed “presentable.”

Karen’s routine wasn’t as thorough as Maria’s—she rarely even wore makeup, and nine times out of ten just ran her fingers through her hair before walking out the door. Maria had been much more of an artist about it all—painting her face and curling her hair to perfection. Frank had loved it—resting against the bathroom counter and just looking; admiring the pageantry of it all. But he found he liked this, too—liked Karen’s efficient little drill (swipe of sunscreen across her nose and cheeks; Chapstick on her lips; shaking out her hair).

He’d realized, recently, that it was easier to think about Maria when Karen was around. Didn’t hurt as much; didn’t feel like a raw and aching wound. In fact, thinking about her had begun to feel a little bit like meeting up with an old friend—comforting and natural—rather than ravaging and cruel.

It hurt just a little less every time her name came up. And Karen got him to talking about her often; she was so curious about Maria—about the woman who had been his whole world.

“I’m trying to make her a real person,” Karen had said one evening, as they’d flipped through his old wedding album. “You know. She’s just an idea to me, and that doesn’t feel right. She’s so real to you; I want her to be real to me, too. She deserves to be real.”

And that had hit him right between the ribs, in the softest part of his gut. It was such a Karen thing to say. Such a fucking…beautiful, compassionate thing.

The feeling of betrayal was starting to wear off, too. Whenever he looked at Karen and that effervescent, light-headed, soft sensation filled him up…it wasn’t followed by as much guilt as it used to be. Because Karen had been right all those months ago—of course she was right—his life was his own. And allowing himself to be happy was a choice. And he chose it, every damn day, the second he woke up and saw her face. Not for her, not for Maria, not for the memory of his kids. But for himself.
Happiness was becoming an easier choice to make.

In fact, *everything* was getting easier for him lately; the kids, too. Talking about Frankie and Lisa—it didn’t feel as much like ripping his heart from his chest every time he spoke their names. He’d even dug around in his desk drawer the other day and pulled out all of the Father’s Day cards and Christmas cards they’d ever made him. He and Karen had sat on the floor of the bedroom and looked at each one, carefully, as though handling precious objects in a museum. It still hurt, and it would always hurt, but it was a survivable kind of hurt. The kind he could carry.

“Are you just gonna stare at me all night, or are you gonna get dressed too?” Karen slipped her Chapstick from her back pocket, swiping it across her lips (and Frank made a vow that she’d have to reapply before they made it to the Lieberman’s). “I mean, I obviously enjoy you in nothing but a pair of boxers, but I think you might get a little cold.” She walked toward him, a predatory gleam in her eye, and ran her hand down his chest—lightly. She tugged at his chest hair as she went.

He barely suppressed a shudder, reaching up to stop her hand as it reached his waistband.

“Careful.” His voice was low, warning.

“Yeah, yeah.” Karen sighed, stepping back. “Get dressed. I’ll grab the pie from the fridge. I’ll be damned if we’re showing up late—Karen Page is never late.”

There were late. David was pacing around the living room, stopping every few moments to look out the front window for Frank’s headlights.

“Babe, will you sit down?” Sarah was beginning to get dizzy, tracking his path back and forth across the carpet. She lifted her wine to her lips, and shifted further into the sofa.

“But what if he chickened out, huh? What if he doesn’t show up? Do you think we pushed too hard?” David ran a hand down his stubbled chin.

“He’ll be here, David.”

“I don’t know. He’s stood us up before.”

“Karen wouldn’t let him do that.”

In fact, Karen was the only reason Frank had accepted their dinner invitation, as far as David could tell. She had some kind of sway over him that David couldn’t comprehend—months of begging and harassing from he and his wife had meant nothing, but the second Karen looked at him *that way*, all the sudden Frank was on board with dinner.

“Remember, when they get here, don’t call Karen his girlfriend. Don’t ask about their relationship. Don’t even *comment* on their relationship, okay? Just be cool.” Sarah raised her brow and pinned him with an adamant stare.

“I know. I know.” David rolled his eyes. “We don’t want to scare him off of her. I get it.”

Sarah and David were so fucking happy that Karen was even in Frank’s life; they were not going to do or say anything to put their relationship—whatever the nature of it may be—in jeopardy.

“Where do you think they are?” David glanced down at his watch.
“They’re only ten minutes late, babe. Think—” Sarah took another sip of her wine. “were we ever on time to anything our entire first year of marriage?”

“Well, no.” David stopped his pacing.

“And why was that?”

“Because we were fu—oh. Oh.” David nodded thoughtfully. “Okay, then.”

“Yeah, so sit down.”

David was halfway to the couch when the doorbell rang. He changed directions so fast, Sarah was worried about whiplash.

“Hey, hi, I’m so sorry we’re late.” The words were out of Karen’s mouth the second David opened the door. She was looking a bit flustered, her hair mussed; next to her, Frank was smug and completely unapologetic. “I brought strawberry rhubarb pie, though.” She held out a glass dish that smelled mouth-watering.

“Oh, thanks.” David took the dessert from her hands. “Come in, come in.” He stepped aside to allow them in from the cold. He noticed, almost like a proud father, how Frank helped Karen out of her jacket, hanging it on the coat rack in the entry way.

“Hey guys, welcome!” Sarah emerged from the living room, grabbing Karen in a half-hug, pressing her cheek against the other woman’s in an air kiss. In the weeks since the Winter Festival, they’d seen each other around town quite a bit, usually when Karen was on her way to the grocery store or Sarah was running to pick up the kids from whatever activity they were involved in that afternoon. And they’d struck up a kind of friendship, mostly built around small talk and town gossip. Sarah reminded Karen a little bit of Trish—all heart with a tough edge.

“Thanks so much for having us over.” Karen glanced around briefly. “Are the kids here?”

“Oh no. Leo’s at a sleepover and Zach’s at a lock-in at the skate park. There’s no way we’d be able to have a mature, adult meal with those two running around.”

“Last year we hosted a PTA dinner,” David spoke, returning from the kitchen, where he had stored Karen’s pie, “and Zach found out one of the teachers he didn’t like was going to be here. So he tried to slip laxatives into her food.”

“Huh,” Karen raised a brow, turning to look at Frank. “Why does that sound so familiar to me? Laxatives being used for evil?”

“Did Frank tell you about the Winter Festival when they were juniors in high school?” Sarah chuckled, shaking her head.

“Yep.” Karen nodded, nudging Frank with her elbow.

“Man—you weren’t supposed to tell anyone about that! It was our secret to take to the grave!” David looked faux-outraged.

“You told Sarah.” Frank gestured at the woman in question, who tried to look away innocently.

“She’s my wife. She’s my family.” David defended himself.

Frank didn’t respond—only shrugged in a vague way that had David flicking his eyes to Karen.
“Well,” Sarah tracked David’s quick glance with interest. “Let’s get everyone seated, huh? I made pork tenderloin with Cognac butter—Frank’s favorite, if I remember. Don’t want it getting cold.”

As they all shuffled into the dining room, Karen spared a glance around the house. It was cozy—filled with all of the soft touches, and the small signals of chaos (backpacks tossed into the hallway; textbooks on the living room floor), that marked a well-lived-in home. She also noticed, in a way that struck right to her heart, photos of Frank, Maria, and their kids all over the walls. There were Zach and Leo with their arms around Frankie and Lisa, posing in front of the fountain in the middle of town; Sarah and Maria wearing face masks and holding up mimosas at what looked like a spa; David and Frank standing by a barbeque, beers in hand. Infinite moments of happiness, captured and framed like messages in a bottle from better times.

And it dawned on Karen, for the first time, how much the Liebermans had lost all those years ago. Not only Maria and Frankie Jr. and Lisa, but also Frank himself. They’d lost four people who had clearly been very integral in their lives. And poor Leo and Zach, especially, to have to gain so intimate an acquaintance with death from such a young age; and then to have Frank—a man they saw as family—seemingly abandon them up in the mountains. It was a lot to carry; a lot to hold. Grief, Karen realized, was a beast with many arms—a creature that could reach out and hold entire families hostage in its grip.

“I wasn’t sure, because the only people I know who live in New York are vegetarians, but Frank said you weren’t. So I went a little meat-heavy.” Sarah broke Karen from her thoughts, gesturing at the spread on the dining room table—a veritable feast. Herb and garlic mashed potatoes, Brussel sprouts pan roasted in bacon fat, chorizo and cornbread stuffing, and the beautifully-cooked pork loin.

“Wow. Everything looks so amazing.” Karen marveled, taking the seat Frank offered her. “I’ve never been so glad I’m not a vegetarian.”

“Sarah’s the best cook in the world.” David was grinning, rubbing his hands together and eyeing the potatoes (his favorite).

“Oh, that’s not true. I just picked up everything I know from my mom.” Sarah waved a dismissive hand before reaching out to pour Karen a glass of wine. “Do you cook, Karen?”

“Oh, that’s not true. I just picked up everything I know from my mom.” Sarah waved a dismissive hand before reaching out to pour Karen a glass of wine. “Do you cook, Karen?”

“Oh, yeah. I learned from my grandmother, mostly. She was amazing in the kitchen.” Karen accepted the glass, taking a sip. “She was from Louisiana originally, but lived in Vermont most of her life, so I got this real mixed-up culinary education. A little bit of etouffee, and a little bit of tuna casserole. But always comfort foods, you know? The kind that warms you to the core.”

“Mhmm,” Sarah nodded. “You gotta have that good, hearty food up here, or you’ll never survive. That’s why I think I don’t know any vegetarians in Seward—you need that animal fat to keep you warm.”

“Maria tried going vegetarian once in high school. Lasted a week.”

It took an inhuman amount of effort for neither Sarah nor David to react in surprise when Frank mentioned Maria. He’d been doing it a lot more recently, but it was still a bit of a shock.

They’d gone for so long without hearing her name—without being able to speak it out loud, to say nothing of Lisa or Frankie Jr.—that it was a bit like a slap in the face to have it so casually mentioned at their dinner table.

The first time Frank had openly spoken about Maria, of his own volition, had been a week ago at
book club. He’d mentioned something in passing, about how she had loved *Great Expectations* in high school. Curtis and David hadn’t known how to react—getting Frank to open up about his family was normally like pulling teeth, but here he was, speaking about Maria with no prompting whatsoever. They’d played it off like it was no big deal, not wanting to draw any attention to the matter, and had continued in their discussion.

But it was a big deal. A really big deal.

It was the step Curtis had been waiting for—the next big move toward healing that Frank had been avoiding for so many years. You couldn’t learn to live with something that you never spoke about, after all.

“I think I remember that,” Sarah piped up, a little nervous; unsure if she was supposed to ignore Frank’s statement and move on, or if she was allowed to join in his reminiscing. “She came into the cafeteria one day and asked the lunch lady if she had a vegetarian option. And the lunch lady just laughed in her face. Maria was steaming mad.”

“Yeah,” Frank shook his head. “Didn’t like being laughed at.”

Sarah breathed a quiet sigh of relief.

“Why’d she decide to go vegetarian?” Karen asked, grabbing the plate of Brussel sprouts Frank offered her, dishing some onto her plate.

“Oh, I remember.” David chuckled. “Because we were watching this video in food science class about chickens being raised to be turned into nuggets, and it made her cry.”

“Sounds like her.” Frank quirked a grin, taking a bite of his potatoes.

“And didn’t she go on a hunger strike for three days to try and get the cafeteria to go meatless.” Sarah narrowed her eyes in remembrance.

“And did they?” Karen asked.

“Oh, god no. This is Seward, honey.” Sarah snorted.

“That’s why she only lasted a week,” Frank said around a mouthful.

There was a tugging at Sarah’s heart that took her a while to recognize. A buzzing; a thudding. Like all of the little parts of herself—her memories, her triumphs, her pains—that bore Maria’s mark were lit up in a warm glow. Like hearing her name spoken out loud, by Frank, brought those long-buried remembrances shuddering to life.

When Maria and the kids had passed, Sarah and David had lost so much—had lost an entire branch of their family. And then Frank…he’d just disappeared. One day he was living in the old house in town—the one he’d bought for Maria after high school—and the next, he was in a cabin in the mountains.

When he had reappeared, there was no talking about what had happened. No skirting the topic even the slightest. Frank would not hear a single word about his wife or his kids. Like never mentioning what he’d lost would make the loss go away.

Which had been painful for Sarah, because the memories Frank had of Maria and the kids weren’t his alone, to hoard and hide away. They were hers, too. And David’s. They’d all suffered so much pain at the hands of that 18-wheeler, not just Frank. But he had acted like his grief was the only grief
that mattered. Was the only grief that was real. She couldn’t blame him, of course—couldn’t imagine what losing David and Leo and Zach would do to her. But still, having Frank shut them out—having him draw a line around Maria and the kids as “off limits” had been a bitter pill.

Because Sarah had needed to talk about it, damnit—needed to let herself heal by working through, not by avoiding. And not being able to talk to Frank—to really talk to Frank—about what had happened had been rough.

Really rough.

Until recently—until Karen. And all of the sudden, Frank was finally opening up. Which meant Sarah could let all of the parts of her that bore Maria’s name live out in the world; could share all of the beautiful stories she’d been storing up—the sepia-toned memories—of the Before.

And once they started, it proved hard to stop. Everything Sarah and David had been carrying with them for the past five years—every little moment they could recollect of Maria and the kids—seemed to come pouring out over that dinner table.

“Oh my god. Remember when we caught Leo and Lisa drawing on the walls of the living room in crayon? And they both burst into tears the second they knew they were in trouble?”

“Hey, shit, I just remembered—didn’t Maria try to convince you to coach Little League one year, but Frankie begged you not to because you were too much of a hard-ass about practice?”

“Maria used to always bring me peonies on my birthday—do you remember that?”

“You know, we still have a dent in our wall from where Frankie busted his head when Zach pushed him down the stairs in that cardboard box.”

And Frank didn’t even flinch at their names—not once. He actually seemed to enjoy the conversation; became more animated the more they spoke, breathing life into all the memories he had of his family.

And Karen, too. Though she could have very easily felt left out, or tried to turn the conversation to something she could contribute to, she actually encouraged Frank to talk more. Asking all the right questions—gently prodding him to share.

Sarah had always liked Karen, since the moment they’d met at the Winter Festival. But now that she had spent an extended amount of time with the woman, she was looking at her in a totally different light. As Karen lightly brushed a hand down Frank’s forearm, or sent him a private, little grin when she thought nobody was looking.

This woman…she had done miracles with Frank. She had given Sarah and David their old friend back. Had managed, somehow, to coax him out of his seemingly-unending sorrow and put him on the path to healing. She could be it for Frank.

Could be the rest of his life. It was so easy to imagine, with the way Frank seemed to live off of the air she breathed; the way he looked at her like he couldn’t believe she existed, and was infinitely grateful for the fact.

Or, she could destroy him, a small, scared part of Sarah’s mind whispered to her. Could leave at the end of her sabbatical, go home to New York, and never look back.

Then what? Then what would happen to Frank?
Sarah shifted in her seat; it wasn’t a comforting thought.

As the conversation died down, and people began to focus on their food in earnest, Sarah decided that a little probing was in order. She’d made David promise not to prod at Frank and Karen’s relationship, sure. But she almost felt that it was her duty, as Maria’s closest friend, to vet out what was going on in Karen’s head regarding Frank. She would just have to do it subtly.

“You know,” Sarah put her fork down, using her napkin to gently dab at her lips. “It seems like you’ve really adjusted to life in Alaska, Karen. The harsh winter hasn’t turned you off?”

“No—I’m actually starting to like the cold. I was thinking about it the other day—exactly how far I’ve come.” Karen smiled. “The below-zero temperatures almost seem normal to me now. I don’t even wear three pairs of thermal underwear anymore, which is a miracle.”

“Still find a way to slip on the driveway every time it ices over, though.” Frank mumbled at her side.

“God, why are you always bringing that up? I’m not very coordinated, okay?” She smacked his arm, rolling her eyes.

“But three times in one week?” Frank shook his head, grinning.

Karen rolled her eyes again, even harder.

“You know, I find that most people tend to adjust to the cold after a few months. Doesn’t take nearly as long as you’d think it would.” Sarah nodded sagely. “It’s the tourists I feel bad for. They don’t stay long enough to get used to it. To adjust. They’re just here for skiing season, then they leave.”

“Hmm,” Karen nodded, taking a bite of her pork loin.

“We just get so many people who stop by for a little bit and don’t stick around.” Sarah’s eyes were anchored to Karen; feeling the weight of the other woman’s stare, Karen looked up. It was just a little too intense for a casual glance; a little too... pointed. Karen averted her eyes, brow furrowed. “People who like to come to town, take what they need from the place, and then leave again. Go back home. Never learn how to really adjust to Alaska—never really appreciate what it’s like to live here.”

Karen looked up again, and Sarah’s eyes were still pinned to her. There was a quality in her gaze that was almost penetrating. Like she was trying to communicate something. Karen darted her glance to Frank—then David. But both men were concentrating on their meal. If there was a sudden, slick tension at the table, they did not seem to notice.

“You know, it happens all the time—tourists come for a few months out of the year, put on a costume, and pretend they’re locals. But they always end up leaving. It’s so easy to leave a place. Much harder to stay.” Sarah’s stare was unwavering. And it began to dawn on Karen—what they were really talking about. “Especially in a place like Seward. Where the conditions are harsh, and it can be rough living. Takes backbone; guts.”

“You sound like you don’t like tourists.” Karen stared right back. They weren’t talking about tourists—they were talking about her.

“Oh no, I don’t mind tourists at all!” Sarah’s eyes softened, just slightly.

“They sure do buy a lot of books. Stuff to read on the plane, I guess.” David piped up, pointing at Karen with his fork. “I mean, they always buy shitty books, but a book’s a book, right?”

“Tourists keep this place going.” Sarah tilted her head, yet to take her eyes off of Karen. “They bring
the whole town to life. It’s just...when they leave, sometimes, it can be difficult.”

“Hmm,” David ran a hand over his stubbled chin. “Remember when Leo was a kid, and that family rented the house down the road for a few weeks in December? She started playing with their little girl every day—you know how kids become best friends so quickly? Broke her heart when she found out they were leaving.”

“Exactly.” Sarah finally looked away from Karen, staring at her hands folded in her lap. “And you know...tourism hasn’t been great for the past few years. People aren’t coming back like they should. It’s devastating the economy.” Her eyes flitted back up to Karen on the word “devastating.” “People are, uh, abandoning us out here. Can’t handle the cold; can’t handle the reality of this kind of life.”

Karen held Sarah’s eyes for a beat. I get it, she tried to communicate, I know what you mean.

“Heh,” David chuckled. “Here you are talking about tourists who can’t survive the winter. But you remember that first winter your family moved here? In 6th grade? I thought for sure you weren’t going to make it. Little California girl who’d never seen snow.”

The tension broke, and Karen stared down at her plate.

“Oh yeah.” Frank chuckled from her side. “I remember when you first moved here. Didn’t we try to get you to lick the lamp post during recess?”

“And you almost fucking did it. Hadn’t you ever seen A Christmas Story before?” David snorted, patting his wife on the arm.

With the conversation moving back to lighter topics, and Sarah’s attention on her husband, Karen took a breath.

She hadn’t wanted to think about the glaring dark spot in her relationship with Frank—the one that ached like a bruise every time her mind brushed against it—not tonight. Not ever, if she was being honest. But she had to; of course she had to. Because there were only two more weeks left in January, and she was set to return to New York in early March. Which only gave her two months to figure out what the fuck to do.

As Frank, David, and Sarah continued their conversation, Karen let herself fade into the background, quietly, thinking. The way she saw it was as follows:

1. She was desperately, painfully in love with Frank. In a way that she’d never known she could be in love before. But,
2. She didn’t know if Frank loved her back. In fact, Frank could still be terrified of the idea of love, and not at all open to the possibility of a real, serious relationship with her. So,
3. While she could feasibly extend her stay in Alaska for a few extra months, working with Trish over Skype until the book was completely finished and ready for publishing…
4. Frank might not want that.

So despite whatever Sarah had been trying to hint at earlier, the situation wasn’t really as clear cut as it seemed. There were a lot of “ifs” and “maybes” that were pretty important.

“Karen, are you ready for pie?” Frank’s gentle hand on her shoulder brought her back to the present.

“Oh,” she looked up to see both Lieberman’s staring at her. “Yeah—yes. Sorry, I zoned out. Thinking about an idea for the book.” She smiled, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes, Frank noted.

“Oh, well maybe you can talk it out over dessert?” David sounded eager. He’d managed to avoid
“book talk,” per Sarah’s instructions, for the entire meal. But dessert didn’t really count as part of the meal, right?

And talking about the book did help take Karen’s mind off of the Frank problem. Helped her regain some of the equilibrium she tended to lose every time she thought about the fact that she’d eventually have to leave Alaska. As they ate, she answered all of David’s inquiries about her process, and about plotting and characterization, until her mind was clear of everything that had worried her only moments before. Even Sarah joined in the conversation—she had finally gotten around to reading Small Dangers, and had a million and one questions. (It was, Sarah admitted, the first adult book she’d read in a long time, as she mostly picked up whatever Leo and Zach were assigned in their English classes so she could help them with their reports. David suggested, excitedly, that Karen and Sarah try to start their own little weekly book club, which Sarah seemed quite keen on). And so Karen was able to recover some of her light-heartedness from earlier.

That is, until Sarah cornered her later in the evening.

David had taken Frank out to the garage to look at a dresser that Zach had broken trying to do kick-flips in the house, leaving the women alone. Karen had been standing by the fireplace in the living room, glass of wine in hand, admiring a Lieberman family photo that sat on the mantle, when Sarah approached.

“Look, Karen. Can I be direct with you?”

Karen jolted slightly when the other woman appeared at her elbow with no preamble.

“Uh yeah, yes. Please do.” Karen gestured with her wine glass in a “go on” motion.

“I think you’re amazing. You’ve done unbelievable things for Frank; David and I owe you so, so much. You’ve resurrected a Frank we all thought was gone. And for that we are really very grateful.” Sarah reach out to quickly touch Karen’s arm. “But I’m worried about what this will mean for him when you leave.”

Karen nodded. She appreciated—respected, really—Sarah’s frankness. She much preferred it to veiled conversations about tourists.

“Me too, Sarah.”

“Well, have you——” Sarah paused, thinking. “Have you talked to Frank about any of this? Have you discussed what happens when it’s time for you to go back to New York.”

Karen wanted to laugh, but managed only a bitter little snort. “No. I’m pretty sure we’re both actively avoiding that conversation.”

“I understand.” Sarah tilted her head. And she did—she knew what Frank was like. The man was a bundle of contradictions. On the one hand, he was unwavering—in his loyalty, in his bravery, in his selflessness. But one the other hand, he was incredibly skittish. And he had every right to be, after what he’d been through. He became a bit of a flight risk when it came to talking about big, painful, uncomfortable things.

“But I…Sarah. I don’t want to hurt Frank. That would be—that would kill me.”

Sarah’s eyes softened. There was something of a desperate edge in Karen’s voice. Sharp and lost.

“Then stay. Forever. Just don’t go back.”
Sarah had been thinking it. Karen had been thinking it. And now it had been said.

Karen’s breath hitched.

“Just don’t leave. You’re so lucky you have a job you can do from anywhere. So just stay.”

Karen didn’t know how to voice all of her fears and objections in a way that would make sense.

First of all, she’d never been the kind of woman to make life choices based on men. When her high school boyfriend of 5 years had begged her to turn down her UNC acceptance and go to the University of Vermont with him, she’d broken up with him on the spot. So there was something that rankled, just a little bit, about the idea of uprooting herself for a man. (But there was a large part of her brain that wanted to know where the line between doing something for Frank, and doing something for herself was drawn, or if it even existed. Because everything within her was screaming at her to just stay. Stay, stay, stay.)

Secondly, she had to be realistic. She’d only known Frank for four months. And yes, they were four very intense months, in which they really had nobody but each other to lean on. In which she’d revealed more about herself than she ever had with anyone else in her life. In which he’d opened up to her in a way that felt, at the risk of sounding overdramatic…transformative. So maybe they’d shoved a year’s worth of relationship into a very short amount of time. But still, wouldn’t it be fucking crazy to change the direction of her life so quickly for something so new? (Since when, her brain wanted to know, was being crazy necessarily a bad thing?)

And third…she wasn’t even sure that Frank would want that—for her to stay. Had no idea what was going on in his head. Which was what she said.

“Sarah. He might not even...” she paused, cleared her throat. “Feel the same way about me as I do about him.”

Sarah’s answering look was skeptical, and just a touch irritated.

“Karen, don’t do that. No. that’s just an excuse and you know it. He does.”

“But there’s a difference between, uh…loving someone.” It was the first time she’d spoken the word out loud as a certainty. It felt complex—like a truth that hadn’t yet realized it was true. “And being ready to love someone. The former often happens way before the latter.”

“Yeah, I know,” Sarah looked down, nodding to herself. “And honestly, maybe I shouldn’t have even brought it up. It’s not my place, and—”

“No, no,” Karen cut her off. “I’m glad you felt comfortable enough to tell me what’s on your mind. That’s good.”

Sarah sighed. “I’m just worried about him. I worry about him all the time. He’s been doing so well—he’s been himself. And I just don’t want that to go away. I don’t want him to go back to the way he was.”

Karen didn’t either, and she was about to say as much.

But their conversation was cut short by Frank and David returning from the garage.

“Hey babe! Frank thinks he can fix the dresser—he can match the grain of the wood and everything.” David had a hand clapped over his buddy’s shoulder.
“Oh, excellent!” Sarah moved from her spot by the mantle, leaving Karen staring into the fire for a moment, by herself.

Frank zeroed in on her the moment they entered the living room, as he always did whenever she was around, and noticed the look on her face immediately. It wasn’t sad, but it was something. A little melancholy; a little untethered. His brow furrowed, and an immediate feeling of concern flooded him. But before he could pull her aside and ask what was wrong, David was leading him into the living room, insisting that they stay for a board game.

So he didn’t get to bring it up until a few hours later, around 10 o’clock, when they finally left the Liberman’s and were on their way home for the night. (David had insisted that they play a round of Trivial Pursuit, which he’d gotten very into recently—to the point where he didn’t even pretend to let the kids win when they played as a family).

Karen, who had been a little quieter than usual after her talk with Sarah, had her eyes closed, leaning her head against the window on the passenger side.

Her breathing was steady, but not slow enough to indicate that she was asleep. (It was strange, and also kind of beautiful, Frank marveled, that he now knew how to tell whether or not Karen was sleeping just by the rhythm of her breath).

“You doing okay over there?” His voice broke the quiet of the car, as it sped along through the dark, inky night. She didn’t respond. “Karen?”

“Yeah, I—” She jolted upright, seeming a little flustered. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

Frank shot her a doubtful look.

“Karen.” He didn’t even have to say anything else—just the tone of his voice was enough.

“I don’t know, I—” She couldn’t tell Frank what was really upsetting her; couldn’t risk getting into that conversation when her head was still such a fucking mess. So instead, she kept it vague. “Just feeling off.”

“Off?” Frank’s voice was more than a touch concerned. “Off how?”

“Just…” Karen trailed off, uncertain. Then shrugged.

“Karen. Talk to me.” He took his eyes off of the road, staring at Karen for so long that she began to get a little worried about veering into a ditch.

He was right, though. She had to talk to him. Maybe she couldn’t tell him exactly what was occupying her, but she could tell him something.

“My mom always used to say this thing when we were kids, that some days you just feel green.”

“Green? Like sick?” Frank glanced toward her again; she was gazing forward through the windshield.

“No, not sick. Like, feeling blue means you’re sad, right? And yellow means you’re scared? Well green is kind of like…both of those things, but neither of those things. It’s just…green. It was one of her many Mom-isms that we just grew up hearing.”

“And you’re feeling green?”
“Kind of, yeah.” Karen nodded.

“Any particular reason?” Frank had his suspicions; wondered if Sarah had said something to her while he had been in the garage with David. Sarah had loved Maria like a sister—could she have mentioned something about how Karen would never replace Maria in their lives? No—that didn’t sound like Sarah. Not at all.

“No, no reason.” Karen lied. But it was a small one. “Sometimes you just have green days. I’ve got a theory that green days are there for balance, you know? When you’ve been too happy for too long, your brain tries to balance it out by making you feel green.”

“You’ve been happy?” Frank couldn’t keep the little uptick of pleasure from his voice.

“Frank.” Karen paused until he looked back at her once more. “Unbearably so.”

An easy, sweet feeling filled his blood; bathed him in warmth.

“Well, did your mom have any cures? For green days?”

“Yeah. She did.” Karen nodded. “You make yourself a cup of tea, you get bundled up in something soft, and you make a Green List.”

“A Green List?”

“Yeah, it’s just a list of five things you love. Five things that can buoy you when you start to sink a little.”

“And does it work?”

“Y’know,” Karen quirked a grin, “it kind of does. Probably the placebo effect. But it hasn’t failed me once.”

“Well, we can do that.” Frank reached across the console to grab Karen’s hand. His was warm and soft and strong; it felt so right, wrapped around hers.

Almost an hour later, Karen was curled up in a fleece blanket on Frank’s couch, a cup of tea in her hand, and Max lounging at her side.

“You gonna make that list?” Frank appeared from the kitchen, holding his own mug.

“Yeah. But you have to do it in your head, or else it doesn’t count. It’s like a birthday wish that way.” Karen moved over, making room for Frank to squeeze in on her other side. He draped an arm around her shoulder and she tucked her head onto his chest.

“Okay. I’ll make a list, too.”

It was quiet—still.

Writing, Karen started her list. She always started with writing. Songs that make me cry, David Foster Wallace, Max, and Frank. Frank, Frank, Frank. She repeated his name a few times, for emphasis.

Her head rose and fell as it rested on his chest, moving in time with his breathing. She steadied her own to match his inhales and exhales. Perfectly in sync.
“You done?” He whispered, dipping his head to press a kiss to her temple.

“Yeah.”

“Feel any better?”

“Yeah.”

And she did. She always did, when Frank was around. Which was precious and beautiful and—and everything. But didn’t make him feel any less confused.

The cabin was still—the sound of the fire crackling a calming background noise.

“You know,” Karen said, turning to look up at Frank. “I’m a little disappointed that David was wearing a shirt after all.”

Frank couldn’t help the snort he made.

(Later, much later, Frank would admit that his very first “Green List” had consisted of one thing: her name repeated five times).
Yikes! I lied about there only being eight chapters. There will be an epilogue. So there’s that!

“The most remarkable thing about coming home to you

Is the feeling of being in motion again;

It's the most extraordinary thing in the world.”

“Going to Georgia” by The Mountain Goats

In the week and a half following their dinner at the Lieberman’s, Karen found herself busier than ever, her days not only filled with writing and Frank, but other, new things as well. Which was good, because staying active helped keep her mind off of all the fear and anxiety that had threatened to overwhelm her on the night of the dinner party. The more she had on her plate, the less time she had to agonize over the future.

Sarah had called her the morning after the get together, still apologetic about their little “confrontation” in the living room, though Karen kept assuring her that she didn’t view it as a “confrontation,” but rather one friend sharing a very legitimate concern with another. Even still, Sarah managed to get out enough “sorrys” to keep her covered for about a month’s worth of mistakes, insisting that she hadn’t meant to ambush Karen like she had—until Karen finally convinced her that there was no harm, no foul. The conversation had then turned to other topics, specifically David’s suggestion that they try to establish their own little weekly book club, which Sarah was eager to make a reality.

At first, Karen had been a little bit reluctant, thinking that the offer was just an attempt to mend their relationship—a relationship Karen did not see as in need of mending—but the other woman had been adamant that it wasn’t.

“I need something to do for me; something that doesn’t involve the kids in any way. Just me.” She’d explained over the phone. “I mean, the only time I get to hang out with grown-ups is at PTA meetings, and those are still all about the kids. I need some adult friends that don’t talk about fundraising and healthy school lunches all the time, y’know? Plus, I need to read more.”

So Karen had agreed—what the hell, why not? She was almost done with a completed first draft of her novel, and had more free time during the day than she’d had her entire stay in Seward. Plus, she could use the human interaction. So she had spent the next few days trying to get Jess on board, mainly by bothering her nonstop in an attempt to wear down her resolve. The other woman had refused—adamantly, and with quite a bit of explicit language—until Karen had promised there would be alcohol, and that she could pick the first book. (Jess would never admit it, but she was actually quite a bibliophile herself, but only in private, where nobody could judge her for her love of YA romance).
On top of organizing a book club, Karen had finally gotten around to doing a signing at Curtis and David’s place. It had been a huge success—people from multiple towns over had flocked to the store to hear her read a section from *Small Dangers* and answer all of their burning questions. When they began to poke and prod about whether or not a sixth book was in the works, she could finally answer “yes,” with pride. And it had been fun—genuinely fun—Karen had forgotten how much of a kick she got out of interacting with fans, especially the obsessive ones who she could see mouthing along the words with her as she read.

At the end of the signing, after all of the customers began to filter out slowly, she’d been approached by a familiar face—the mayor’s assistant.

“Miss Page,” he’d seemed a little nervous, shuffling back and forth as he stood before her. “I’m Foggy Nelson—don’t know if you remember me from the Winter Festival.”

“Of course I do, and please call me Karen,” she’d waved a dismissive hand, smiling. The man was just a bit charming, with his disheveled hair and off-center tie. Like a caricature of the harried, overworked assistant.

“Karen,” Foggy had nodded to himself. “I come with an invitation from Mayor Murdock.” The moment he’d said Matt’s name, he’d noticed Karen’s smile drop, ever-so-slightly. Not that he’d expected a different reaction, given their introduction at the Winter Festival.

“Oh?” Karen had tried—really, she had—not to let the slightest shade of contempt enter her voice at the word. She did not succeed.

“Yes,” Foggy had pressed on. “He was wondering if you might accompany him next week to February’s First Friday celebration. It’s quite the spectacle—the whole town shows up. Have you been to one in your time here?”

“No, I haven’t. Though I would like to go.” Karen had tilted her head to the side, innocently. “Just not as the mayor’s guest.”

Foggy had to hold back a snicker.

“I figured that would be your answer, but he told me to ask.” Foggy had shrugged, a little helplessly.

“Well, you’re a smart man.”

“Eh, just better at picking up signals than my boss is.”

“Clearly.”

“Clearly,” Foggy repeated. There had been a beat of silence, then: “Hey, did you read that new Paula Hawkins book? *Into the Water*?”

“Oh, yeah, I did. I quite liked it.”

“Really?” Foggy had pursed his lips slightly. “I didn’t. Thought it was too predictable, honestly.”

“Too predictable?” Karen had scoffed. “Oh no, are you one of those guys who always imagines that they’ve guessed the plot twist like five pages into the book?”

“I don’t imagine it, Miss Page. I do it.”

“Karen,” she’d corrected.
“Karen.” Foggy had grinned.

“I don’t even want to know what you think about Christine Ng, do I?”

“Maybe, maybe not.” Foggy had glanced over his shoulder at the now-empty book store. “Hey, wanna grab a bite at the diner across the street? Talk murder mysteries?”

“That depends. Are you going to tell me all my books are predictable, too?”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Then it sounds like a plan.”

They’d spent the next two hours arguing, over bowls of clam chowder, about whether or not the murder mystery genre was coming to rely too heavily on the twist ending.

It was strange, Karen had thought, sitting across from Foggy, how attached she could grow to a place in less than half a year. And it wasn’t just her relationship with Frank making her feel that way—it was everything. It was all of Seward; the community, the people, the traditions. The fact that she could meet someone like Foggy, and in less than an hour’s time feel like they were great friends, rather than utter strangers. You didn’t get that kind of thing in New York City. And she’d come to love all of it; come to feel like she belonged. Like she had a place here—friends—and a real, honest-to-god life.

Frank, of course, was a huge part of that life. Massive. There wasn’t a single evening they didn’t spend together—talking, sharing themselves with one another, falling into bed in each other’s’ arms. Every day she found herself twining more and more around him; found it increasingly difficult to separate her life from his, maybe because there was no separation. At some point, with a quiet kind of ease, it had become their life. Their inside jokes, their dog Max, their routines, their home.

But still, nothing had been said out loud yet. No attempts had been made to clarify what, exactly was going on—what they were to each other—what would happen in a few months when it was time for Karen to leave.

It still felt too touchy to approach; a part of Karen felt like Frank wasn’t ready for the big conversation. That maybe it wasn’t even on his radar. He certainly hadn’t attempted so broach the subject himself.

Karen, for her part, was so busy that she found it easy to push those kinds of thoughts from her mind, at least for a little while. She had practice—a lot of practice—in ignoring problems she didn’t know how to solve. She’d learned that from her parents. All she had to do was keep herself distracted enough with other things, and she could stave off the biting bitterness that filled her chest at the thought of ever leaving.

Frank, on the other hand, had not been faring so well. The uncertainty—the unspoken doubt and insecurity—was beginning to eat at him. He’d pushed it away in those first few blissful weeks with Karen—found ways to keep himself from dwelling on the “what ifs” too much. But now, with the reality that she wasn’t going to be Alaska forever really settling in, he was beginning to lose his grip on all that calm he’d been clinging to. As he watched Karen running around all over town, living her life as though nothing at all troubled her, the dark pit of anxiety that had been building in his stomach began to grow.

He’d been avoiding it for too long, only ever looking at it out of the corner of his eye in the hopes that it would disappear. But it didn’t—the shadowy, amorphous fear he’d been trying to ignore was
taking solid shape.

What the fuck were they going to do after Karen left? How the hell was he going to survive that? Life without her—after all she had done for him; after all he had staked on her?

He was terrified. He couldn’t go back to the person he was before—he couldn’t close up again, folding in on himself, tucking away every corner until he disappeared. Not again.

But he didn’t know how to keep that from happening—not without Karen.

And he wanted to talk to her about it all—he really did. There was a sick, nauseous feeling that bubbled up in his stomach every time she smiled at him with that softness in her eyes, and he realized that he wouldn’t get to keep her; not forever. But she seemed so unfazed by everything—so casual and carefree—that he began to doubt himself. Doubt whether or not she was as invested in this relationship as he was; began to imagine that she didn’t particularly care about what happened after she left, because she’d be gone.

But no—no—his gut told him. That was not Karen, his Karen. The Karen who had held him in her arms the first night they spent together, humming her music box song in his ear to calm him down; who drove all the way down to the lumber mill the other day to drop off some homemade meatloaf, because he’d forgotten his lunch on the counter that morning; the Karen who continued to add recipes and notes to his Christmas present, because she didn’t want them forgetting a single one of their meals together; the Karen who made him laugh whenever they made love, whispering ridiculous things into his ear until he felt like his heart was fit the burst.

There was no way that Karen was casual about what they had. So why did it seem like she was? Why didn’t the impending end of her sabbatical seem to drive her as fucking crazy as it drove him?

The answer, of course, was that it did. But she was awfully good at hiding it.

Except for when she wasn’t.

“Karen, you okay?” Sarah put down her copy of The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo—Jess’s selection for the first ever, official “Ladies of Seward Book Club” (a name given to them by David). She’d been in the middle of reading out a section she particularly enjoyed when Karen had pulled out her phone, stared for a moment, and made a surprised little noise.

“Uh, I—” Karen was still looking down at her screen, reading an email that had just pushed through. “No, hold on. Give me a minute. Can we pause the discussion for a second?”

“Yeah, sure.” Sarah watched her with a furrowed brow. There was something in Karen’s face—a tightening around the eyes—that was concerning.

“Okay, well I’m getting another drink.” Jess got up, walking the around the couch to the Lieberman’s little wet bar and pouring herself another Jack and coke. Sarah watched her all the while with a raised brow—she’d have to start stocking more liquor if Jess was going to be around once a week; they were already down half a bottle of whiskey. (Despite the fact that the two women had known each other for years—since high school, really—they had never spoken more than a few sentences to each other. Mainly because they had always run with wildly different crowds. But Karen had assured Sarah they would get along just fine—and Sarah believed her—it would probably just take a while. Jess didn’t seem like the kind of person to become your best buddy overnight.)

The sound of tinkling ice from the wet bar was the only noise in the quiet room, as Karen tried to
make sense of what she was reading—a message from Addie and Henry Brynner:

*Hello Karen. We hope your stay in our little cabin has been comfortable—Trish has informed us that you have greatly enjoyed your visit to Seward, and for this we are glad. We were just writing to inform you that we plan on selling the cabin as soon as your lease is up, so I am afraid we will not be available for any future bookings should you decide to return to Seward. We feel that we are getting too old to maintain the place, and would love to see it pass on to younger, more capable hands. Let us know if you have any questions, and have a pleasant rest of your stay in Alaska!*

Karen had intended to glance at the email quickly, then get back to their discussion of Lisbeth Salander’s characterization, as she’d assumed it was just Trish checking in. But as soon as she’d read a few lines into the message, her heart had begun to stutter in her chest, for several reasons.

First, the email was a reminder that Karen’s time in Alaska was quickly drawing to a close, which was an idea that felt like a knife in the gut every time it came up. Plus, with the cabin unavailable, her potential plan of extending her stay in Seward went out the window.

But a second thought occurred to Karen, hot on the heels of the first. For a moment—a crazy, insane moment—an idea flitted across her mind. She had quite a large sum of money invested from royalties, which had been expanding year by year. She had the funds. If the cabin was for sale, there was really nothing keeping her from buying it. Except that it was a foolish idea—buying property on a whim. She brushed the thought from her mind as quickly as it entered.

But still…was it so crazy? It’s not like she was using the money for anything else. And if she bought the cabin, then she could come back whenever she wanted to. The issue of choosing between New York and Seward would be moot, because she’d have a place in both.

But no—no. She’d been over this: she wasn’t the kind of person to make huge life decisions because of a man, right? Especially one she wasn’t sure felt as strongly for her as she did for him.

But then again…her attachment to Seward wasn’t *only* because of Frank. She’d come to love the town for a thousand and one other reasons that didn’t solely have to do with her mountain man.

Karen was so preoccupied with her internal debate that she didn’t realize how clearly all of her emotions were broadcasting across her face. Sarah and Jess, who had walked back around the couch to see what all the fuss was about, watched for a moment, fascinated, as Karen’s eyes narrowed, widened, narrowed again.

“Uh, you feel like sharing whatever it is that has your eyes bugging out of your head, or do you want Sarah and me to just sit in uncomfortable silence until you’re done with whatever it is you’re doing?” Jess collapsed back into the recliner she’d been occupying, and Sarah watched in horror as her drink sloshed dangerously-close to spilling. Maybe it was a mistake hosting the book club at her house.

“Sorry, just—” Karen gestured down at the phone in her hand, eyes still on the screen. “This email, uh, from the Brynners.”

“Oh, something wrong with your lease?” Sarah leaned to the side, craning her neck and trying to catch a glimpse of whatever it was on Karen’s screen.

“No, no.” Karen shook her head, sighing as she shoved her phone back in her pocket. “They just wanted to let me know that they’re selling the place after my lease is up.”

“Oh.” Sarah frowned, taking a moment to digest that.

Jess was cackling from her arm chair. “Oh god. So Frank’s going to have new neighbors to put up
with? That’s gonna go over well. Especially since they’ll be replacing you.”

“Well…” Karen immediately regretted opening her mouth the second that both Sarah and Jess turned to her with laser-focus.

“’Well’ what?” Jess asked, eyes narrowed.

“Nothing. Just…’well.’”

“Nobody says ‘well’ unless they have something to follow it up with.” Sarah shifted until she was cross-legged on the couch, completely facing Karen.

“Sometimes they do.” Karen shrugged.

“Nope. Never.” Jess abandoned her drink to lean forward, her elbows resting on her knees. “What were you going to say?”

Her tone brokered no argument, and Karen bit her lip, thinking.

“Just that…I mean, it was an absolutely crazy thought, and I’m not even sure why I’m saying this at all, but for a moment, I was kinda thinking, maybe that—”

“Jesus Christ, spit it out, Page.” Jess huffed impatiently.

“—that I could buy the cabin.”

It was silent for a moment—still. Then Sarah’s face split into a massive grin.

“Are you serious? You could do that?” Her voice was excited.

“I mean, I could, but like I said, it’s just a crazy idea.” Karen tried to backtrack.

“What so crazy about it? I mean, if you have the money…” Jess raised a shoulder noncommittally.

“Because I don’t know the first thing about owning a house—or owning a house in the fucking mountains! I don’t even know if it’s a good investment, either. And not to mention Frank—what if he thinks I’m some kind of crazy stalker for buying the place right next to his?” Karen shook her head. “I shouldn’t have mentioned anything, it was just a ridiculous thought.”

“First of all, property is always a good investment, Karen. Duh.” Jess rolled her eyes. “I didn’t even go to college and I know that.”

“Yeah, especially in a place like Seward with a lot of tourist potential.” Sarah piped up.

“And secondly, who cares if you don’t know shit about owning a house in the mountains? Because guess who does…”

“Frank.” Sarah completed the thought for her, and Jess pointed at her in appreciation.

“Exactly.”

“And as for Frank thinking you’re a stalker…” Sarah sighed. “We’ve been over this. The man’s absolutely head over heels for you, so I think he’d die on the spot if you promised to stay.”

“It wouldn’t be, like…staying-staying.” Karen ran a hand through her hair. “I’d still keep my place in New York if I bought the cabin. You know, for those times I absolutely need to be near my editor.”

“Trish.”

“That’s what I said.”

“It was absolutely not what you said.”

“Focus, focus.” Sarah cut in, waving her hands to get Jess and Karen’s attention. “We are talking about the cabin here.”

“And Frank.” Jess added.

“And Frank.” Sarah echoed, giving Karen a pointed look.

“Alright, alright.” Karen sighed. “But we are not, by any means, one hundred percent certain of Frank’s feelings for me.”

“Oh my fucking god, yes we are!” Jess threw her hands up in frustration. “Or, at least, everyone here but you is. For someone who’s so goddamn smart, you’re a real idiot, Page.”

Sarah shot Jess a disapproving look. She may have agreed with the woman, but that didn’t mean she had to go about it so rudely.

“Look. Frank and I have been, uh…whatever we are for over three weeks now. And he hasn’t said anything about wanting this relationship to last beyond the end of my sabbatical, okay?” Karen made a pained little noise. “Which is why, if I do decide to buy the cabin, it can’t be for Frank. Or because of Frank, okay? It’ll be for me.”

“Karen, come on.” Sarah tilted her head in what looked like disappointment. “You say Frank hasn’t said anything to you to let you know he’s serious. But this is Frank we’re talking about. He’s not great with words. He’s shown you, in a million little ways, how he feels. I mean, you’re practically living with the man, for Christ sakes. And this is a guy who won’t let David past the entryway whenever he stops by.”

“I can’t tell if you’re being purposefully thick, or if you really are just so insecure that you need the man to say the words out loud,” Jess sighed. “He fucking loves you.”

Karen would have been offended at Jess’s choice of words, but she couldn’t be. Not when they rang so true. It was all there in Frank’s actions—in the way he looked at her, the way he confided in her, the way he had invited her so fully into his life. His feelings were obvious.

So why did she so badly need to hear him say the words out loud? Why did it seem like none of it could be real until he’d said “I love you”? 

There was a part of her that felt like saying the words made them concrete—meant that he was completely ready to embrace the concept of being in love again, with all of its trials and pains and sorrows. A feeling can live inside you—sure—but does it really count if it never exists out in the world?

“I don’t know—I don’t,” Karen picked up her book, avoiding Sarah and Jess’s respective gazes by thumbing through the pages. “I don’t want to talk about it anymore. I’m just confusing myself.”

“Okay, okay.” Sarah’s tone was soothing. “Can I just say that Seward would be very lucky to have you, if you decide to buy the cabin? You fit here.”
“Thanks,” Karen bit her lip, feeling tears welling at her eyes. It was such a kind thing to say—and all this talk about Frank and love and home had Karen feeling emotional. She subtly blinked back the wetness in her eyes. “That means a lot.”

There was a silence, before Jess heaved a huge sigh.

“Okay, you dragged me to this thing to talk about this book, so let’s talk about the damn book.”

After the book club finished for the evening, Karen said her goodbyes and climbed into her rented Chevy, her mind cloudy with a thick haze of doubts and possibilities. She had a lot of thinking to do; for the first time in years she felt like her future was in complete flux—like she was a little directionless.

And it was all because of that email. And the idea it had sparked off in her mind.

She’d moved to New York when she was 24 years old—the classic cliché of bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, hoping to make it as a writer in the big city. New York had been her dream for a long time, ever since she’d read Ezra Pound’s Patria Mia in 6th grade:

“No urban night is like the night there. Squares after squares of flame, set up and cut into the aether. Here is our poetry, for we have pulled down the stars to our will.”

She’d spent her high school years, and much of college, dreaming of the great big world that seemed to converge upon New York City. Imagining herself as the kind of person who fit in strolling through Central Park, grabbing a taxi on her way to the Met, or sitting in a cramped little apartment and writing her days away, the city her greatest inspiration. The classic, idealistic dreams of a girl who’d grown up watching old movies.

So as soon as she’d finished her MFA, she’d made her way to Brooklyn. And for a while, living in New York City was everything she’d imagined it to be—frenetic, exciting, filled with the kind of diversity she’d always longed for. Like a constant adventure—every night a new opportunity to step outside of herself and experience something extraordinary. She could leave her apartment at 11 o’clock on a Wednesday night with nowhere in mind to go, and somehow end up in an Ethiopian restaurant arguing with a stranger for hours about whether or not Truffaut/Hitchcock was indulgent garbage in praise of a misogynistic, over-rated “auteur.”

Or she could leave her apartment, running late for a meeting with Trish, get on the subway at DeKalb around 3 in the afternoon, and end up with her purse stolen and a skinned knee.

New York City was a grab-bag; she never knew what she was going to get. But good or bad, every morning felt like waking up to a completely different world. And she’d loved it.

But the thing about living your life as an adventure is that, after a while, you begin to feel untethered. Begin to feel like a balloon whose string had been cut—lost. New York had been the dream when Karen was in her early twenties, yes. But she wasn’t the same bright, shiny girl that she had been in the beginning; she’d changed. And the things she wanted had changed.

Somewhere along the way, over the course of growing up, her priorities had shifted. The fast-pace and the blinding glitter of it all no longer appealed to her. She needed something real, stable—something to hold onto. She needed to feel like she could rest her bones somewhere.

Taking a good, long look at her life in New York, Karen realized she didn’t have that—a sense of
comfort and belonging. The only person she truly cared about back home (though it wasn’t really home anymore, was it?) was Trish. Everyone else she’d met had been temporary; the kind of people who flit into your life when it’s convenient, and then disappear when they please. She hadn’t realized how lonely her existence had been until she came to Seward, and felt like a part of something—a community—for the first time.

As she left the lights of the town behind and turned onto the mountainous stretch of road, she pulled out her phone and dialed Trish’s number, putting her on speaker.

“Hey Kare, how’s it going?” Trish sounded breathless, panting heavily.

“Is this a bad time? You sound like you’re running a marathon.”

“Oh, elevator’s out in my place. Had to walk up twenty flights of stairs with groceries.” Trish said between deep breaths. “Not fun.”

“Jesus. I can call back if you need a minute?”

“No, it’s okay. What’s going on?”

“Uh,” Karen sighed. She hadn’t really called Trish with anything particular to talk about—she’d just needed to hear her friend’s voice, if only for a moment. “I don’t know. Nothing. Didn’t really have a reason to call, so I guess just, uh…” she trailed off, taking a hand from the wheel to scrub down her face. “Nothing.”

“I’m not getting a whole lot of oxygen to my brain at the moment, so it’s not in top form, but it doesn’t sound like nothing, Kare.” Trish’s voice was skeptical. “Talk to me. What’s up?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Karen sighed. “My head’s a bit of a mess right now.”

“The book?” Trish’s voice slipped into editor-mode (a touch of concern, a touch of business, a touch of care).


“Oh.” Trish was out of editor-mode, back to best-friend-mode. “So Frank.”

Karen almost chuckled—the fact that Frank was her personal life was pretty telling—but she didn’t feel like she could muster it.

“Yeah. Frank.” Karen took a deep breath, pausing, as the quiet of the forest blanketed her on either side. “Trish…how would you feel if I didn’t come back? To New York?”

There was a beat of silence. And then Trish was laughing—a joyful, riotous sound piercing Karen’s heavy mood. Like a shot of sunlight right through the dark.

“What? What are you laughing at?” Karen’s brow furrowed; she didn’t see the humor in her question.

“I just—” Trish attempted to speak between bouts of giggles—failed—stopped—tried again. “I was just wondering how long it would take you to bring it up, but I thought you’d make it more than five hours, Jesus.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The Brynners cc’d me on that email they sent you—about selling the cabin? I thought for sure
you’d at least sleep on it before bringing it up. You must really be in love with this Frank guy.”

“I—” Karen started to speak, but didn’t have anything to say. She was. Really in love with Frank, that is.

“You’re thinking of buying the cabin. Obviously.” Trish still had laughter in her voice. “But because you’re you, you’re agonizing over it. And probably making a million pro-con lists in your head, right?” Trish paused, and Karen mumbled affirmation. “And the idea is just killing you, so you called me to tell you what to do? Am I on track?”

“Yeah.” Karen’s grumble was reluctant.

“Well…” Trish paused for dramatic effect. “Why the hell not, Kare? If you’ve got the money for it, why not? We can work together from opposite coasts—we’ve been doing it for months. I mean, I’ll miss you like hell, but airplanes were invented for a reason, right?”

“It really wouldn’t make work any harder for you? If I was in Alaska?”

“Kare. Come on. One of my writers lives in Marrakesh, and we make do. I swear, you are so melodramatic sometimes.”

“Hey—I’m just trying to be a good friend, checking in with you. I wouldn’t want to do anything to fuck up our ability to work together.” Karen’s tone was only half-defensive.

“Yeah, yeah. Sure.” Trish sounded disbelieving. “Or you could just be throwing up self-manufactured road blocks in your path because you’re scared. Pretending like moving to Alaska is such a big deal, even though it totally isn’t, because the idea of jumping into something good is a little overwhelming? Does that sound more accurate?”

Karen was quiet for a moment. She hated when Trish was right, damn it.

“I thought so. So listen to me, Karen. I can’t tell you what to do with your life—never have—but I do have an opinion, okay? And my opinion is that you’re being a fucking idiot. You love Frank—in a way that makes me a little nervous, to be honest. And I’ve never heard you so happy and alive and inspired. So you do whatever you have to do to hold on to that. Let all the bullshit excuses I know you’ve been mulling over just fall away. They. Don’t. Matter.” Trish’s voice was adamant. “They just don’t.” There was another silence, as Trish let her words sink in. “Was that what you wanted me to say? Because that’s what I’m saying.”

“I—I don’t know. I don’t know what I wanted you to say.” Karen let her head fall back, thudding against her headrest.

“Well just think about it, okay? You obviously called for my advice, and there it is. So think about it.” A beat, then Trish’s voice, suddenly very annoyed: “Damnit, I’ve got to go. I just remembered I left some of my groceries downstairs with the doorman.”

“Yeah, yeah. Sure thing. We’ll talk later.”

“And you’ll think about what I said?”

“Yeah, I’ll think about what you said.”

It was well after dark by the time Karen got home, bypassing her own cabin and heading straight for
Frank’s. He was already halfway through cooking dinner—wild rice risotto.

“Hey, how’d the book club go?” He asked over his shoulder as he stood at the stove, stirring. Karen dropped her purse and made a beeline for him, slipping her arms around his waist and pressing her face into his back. She inhaled deeply—despite having taken a shower after work, he still smelled like sawdust. It was nice.

“Oh, it was pretty good. Been a long time since I’ve done something like that—y’know, sat around and talked about a book that wasn’t my own.” Max trotted in from the living room at the sound of Karen’s voice, nudging his head against her legs in greeting before taking up position under the table.

“Still can’t imagine Jessica fuckin’ Jones at a book club.” Frank turned his head to drop a quick kiss at her temple. Karen released him, turning on her heel to collapse in a chair at the breakfast table.

“She did okay. Still warming up to Sarah, I think, but she had some interesting things to say about the book. She chose it—*The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*.” Karen grabbed a baby carrot from the veggie plate Frank had laid out earlier, taking a bite.

“Sounds like a book she’d choose.”

“It was nice, really. I’m glad Sarah got it all together.”

“That’s good.”

It was quiet for a moment, as Karen admired Frank’s strong, broad back. All at once, she was overcome with a realization: how easily she could imagine herself doing this for the rest of her life. Coming home to Frank, watching him stand at the stove, looking so domestic it hurt. For a moment, she felt her mind drifting back to one of her most cherished childhood memories: she and Kevin doing homework at the table while their mother cooked dinner and their father read the paper in the living room. It was one of the only memories Karen had in which her parents weren’t fighting—in which the house they lived in really felt like a home. And the people inside felt like a real, happy family.

The same feeling she’d experienced at that moment as a child—the comforting warmth of connection; the deep and meaningful ties that bind—washed over her as she watched Frank. He felt like family.

And she added another check mark to the “buying the cabin” column; anything to hold on to that feeling for as long as possible.

“So,” Frank broke the silence, turning around to dish out his finished risotto onto two plates. “I read the notes you made for the final chapter of the book.”

“Oh,” Karen sat up straighter. “What did you think?” She accepted the plate that Frank held to her. He ran a hand down her hair for a moment before taking his own seat.

“It was really fucking good.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Frank took a bite of his dinner, chewing thoughtfully. “But I don’t know if everyone else will agree with me. Y’know, about you not revealing the brother’s killer in the end.”

“I know, I know. Risky move.” Karen nodded. “But I think it’s necessary, you know? The whole
book is about Michael’s grief, and his obsession, and his inability to move beyond this particular moment of tragedy in his life. How he stunts himself by tying his very existence to this traumatic event in the past that’s never going to change. The book was never about his brother’s murder, right? So I didn’t want to focus on this climactic whodunit aspect, when really the focus should be on Michael’s healing. Or lack of healing.”

“I know, I get that. That’s why I liked it so much.” Frank’s eyes narrowed in thought. “But I just…”

“You think people will be outraged at not having all the answers at the end?” Karen finished for him.

“Yeah.”

“Well,” she sighed deeply. “I don’t write to give people what they want, I’m afraid.”

“Probably why you’re so good.”

“Flatterer.” Karen grinned, nudging his leg under the table with her foot. “And I think sometimes, in real life, there are no satisfying endings, right? People don’t get what they want all the time. Things go unsaid, and mysteries never get solved. It’s honest.”

Frank’s back stiffened almost imperceptibly at that. He’d been thinking, all day, almost to the point of distraction, about Karen. And their situation, ie. her leaving in two months.

So talk of endings, and people not getting what they want…and things left unsaid? Well, it hit a little close to home. Frank felt like he was holding on to Karen with both hands, only to have her turn to water in his grasp—no matter how tightly he held, he was beginning to feel like it would never be enough. She was going to leave, and the end was inevitable. And for all he knew, Karen didn’t want to be held—she’d yet to say anything to the contrary.

Karen, noticing Frank’s sudden, dark look, frowned.

“You okay?”

“Yes,” he jolted slightly, clearing his head. “Yeah. I was just thinking. Just because it’s honest doesn’t mean people are going to like it. It can hurt a little, I think, to go so far with a book, and then be left without a satisfying ending. Without something to hold onto. Kind of, uh…a lonely feeling?”

Karen’s heart stuttered in her chest. She got the distinct impression that they were talking about more than the book.

“Well, this way, the reader has complete power, right? They get to imagine the resolution they want. The reader, not me, is in control of where they go from there.”

Frank leaned back, arms crossed. “Sometimes readers need a little more direction from their authors. They might not know what to think with such an open ending.”

Karen took a deep breath. She was too tired for veiled conversation—too drained from all of the tortured hoops she’d made her brain jump through that day regarding Frank. She just didn’t have it in her, to have this discussion at this moment.

“So do you, uh—do you like the ending of the book or not?” Karen tilted her head to the side, waiting for his answer.

Frank noticed, for the first time, signs of exhaustion on Karen’s face. Dark circles under her eyes; worry lines creasing her forehead. He felt the sudden urge to take her up in his arms. Damn his fears
and damn his worries—all he wanted to do was hold her. Always.

But instead, he leaned forward, placing a warm, large hand over hers. “I love the book. It’s prefect.”

“Good, good.” Karen turned her hand over, squeezing his before standing up and turning to the fridge to grab a beer. She needed one. When she opened the door, however, she took a surprised step back.

“Frank…why are there, like, a hundred flowers in the fridge?”

“Oh,” Frank stood quickly from his chair, walking forward to lean over Karen as she stared into the fridge. “Those are, uhm, for Maria. And the kids.”

“What?” Karen stood up so quickly, the back of her head almost collided with Frank’s chin. He took a step back.

“Day after tomorrow. It’s the anniversary.” Frank shoved his hands in his pockets, rolling back on his heels. “I put flowers on their graves. Peonies.”

“Oh,” Karen’s voice was gentle. She closed the refrigerator door and turned around, facing Frank fully. “I didn’t realize the day was coming up.”

“Yeah.” Frank nodded, taking a steadying breath. Every year it hurt—like hell—but this was the first year he’d been able to buy the flowers without breaking down in the car on the way home. It had helped—a lot—knowing that he wouldn’t be alone that night. That he wouldn’t be sitting in an empty cabin—just he and the peonies that were Maria’s favorite—when he got back. Karen would be there.

“They’re…they’re beautiful flowers.” Karen couldn’t decide if she should hug him or not—if he wanted to be held or left alone.

“They don’t last long in this weather—sitting in the cemetery. But it’s the thought, right?” He shrugged, looking a little lost.

“Yeah, I think so.”

There was that caring look in Karen’s eyes—the one that betrayed how badly she ached to take him into her arms. The one that said “I do not understand your pain the way you feel it, but I want to try.” The look that made him turn to putty in her hands.

“Karen, I—” Frank started, stopped, paused. He’d been thinking about it for a few days; had been waiting for the right moment to ask her. “I was wondering if you’d go with me. To the cemetery.”

Karen was temporarily stunned. “You—are you sure you want me there? You don’t have to feel like you have to ask me along, if it’s private.”

“No, no.” Frank shook his head. “I think that’s the problem, Kare. All of this—” he made some vague gesture with his hands. “Has been too private for too long, yeah? I just…I’d like you to be there. To meet them.”

Karen took a few deep breaths before bobbing her head in a nod. “Yeah, yeah. I’d really like that, Frank.”

“Okay.”
“Okay.”

There was a beat of silence.

“I’m going to hold you now, and I’m not going to let go for a very long time, alright?” Karen didn’t even give him a chance to respond before her arms were around him, her face pressed to his chest, her fingers grasping at his back to draw him closer.

Frank felt every dark corner of his mind clear in her embrace, squeezing her to him just a little too forcefully. When they were pressed together like this—warmth for warmth—it was so easy for Frank to let go of all his fear and anxiety. So easy to forget that he wouldn’t get to keep Karen forever, because it felt like he would. And even if it was just his own mind playing tricks on him, he would take it.

Frank had been antsy in the days leading up to the anniversary, as he always was. He was less talkative than usual (which was saying something), and seemed to retreat a little further inside himself. It was to be expected, Karen felt; there was a lot of emotion tied to the act of visiting the dead.

But on the actual day, Frank was strangely calm. It was Karen who was a nervous wreck the entire drive to the cemetery. She couldn’t quite say why, just that it felt like a big moment—meeting Frank’s family. And the very fact that he wanted her there with him; that he was inviting her into this incredibly private, intimate ritual. That meant something. Something huge.

“Are you sure you’re—you’re okay with this?” Karen asked as they pulled into the parking lot. “I can stay in the car if you’d rather. Whatever you need from me.”

Frank shifted the truck into park, turning in his seat to look at Karen. She was chewing on her bottom lip, a sure sign that she was feeling a little anxious.

“Kare.” Frank’s voice was heavy with something she couldn’t name. Something that had her heart thudding heavy in her chest. “I want you with me. Okay? I want you there.”

Karen nodded to herself, wringing her hands in her lap. “Don’t know why I’m so nervous about this.” She gave a little self-deprecating chuckle.

Frank reached across the console to grab both of her hands in one of his own. He let his thumb stroke along her knuckles.

“I just, uh. The only grave I’ve ever been to was Kevin’s. And I know how it feels every time I visit him, you know? Like he’s there—like I could reach out and touch him.” Karen shook her head. “I get a little overwhelmed at that—and Kevin is mine. I’ve never met anyone else’s ghosts.”

Frank lifted one of her hands to his lips, brushing a kiss to her palm.

“And I’m supposed to be supporting you here, right? And now I’m making you calm me down. Jesus, I’m a mess.”

“No, you’re not.” Frank breathed warm against her palm. In fact, he found it kind of sweet—that she was getting so worked up about this. That the moment was so important to her.
“Okay.” Karen took a few deep breaths. “Okay. I’m ready.”

“Alright.”

The path to their graves was well-worn—Frank knew it by heart. In the first year after the accident, he’d visited them once a week, just to sit against Maria’s headstone and mourn. Every week, for hours, he would run his hands over Frankie’s and Lisa’s names and just fall apart. There was nothing else to do—nothing else he knew how to do in the face of what the universe had done to him. To his family.

But then Curtis had convinced him that this behavior wasn’t healthy—that he would never move on from what had happened if he couldn’t even let himself be apart from their graves for more than a week. Frank didn’t know how to say that he didn’t want to move on; that that wasn’t the goal. So instead he’d slowly started visiting less and less, trying to make the hurt of their absence dull a little more each time.

As they approached the three headstones—one large and two smaller flanking it on either side—it was still a kick in the gut. The visceral reaction of grief clawing its way up his spine—making his heart thunder in his chest. Karen reached out to grab a hold of his hand, and the sharp edges of his pain softened in just the slightest. He wasn’t alone, he had to remind himself—he wasn’t bearing it all on his back.

“Hey,” he whispered, as they drew to a stop in front of Maria. He dropped Karen’s hand to place a bouquet on her headstone, then one for Lisa and little Frankie. “Been a while.” He squatted down, brushing away the snow that had covered up Lisa’s name. Every time he visited, it almost felt like tearing open an old wound again and again. Like reliving that moment in the hospital when the doctor came out with the grim look on his face.

This time, however, that feeling was mixed with something else—something different. With a sense of comfort—connection—like he could feel the love he had for Maria and the kids washing over him in waves, if he just closed his eyes and concentrated.

He’d never felt that before, and as he trailed his hand over Frankie’s name in stone, he found that he could remember the sound of his laugh a little bit clearer than he ever had. It occurred to him, suddenly, that every time he’d visited them before this moment, it had been with a closed heart. Closed against pain and sorrow and anger—in defense against everything he had been made to bear without his consent.

But now, for the first time, he was coming with a new kind of openness. Vulnerable—ready to feel whatever came. He’d learned to talk about them—to let their memories live out in the world, rather than trapped inside the pit of his grief—he’d learned to let other people in. And it turned out that kind of openness changed the way you grieved. Made it a little more complex—allowed you to mix the beautiful in with the ugly.

He looked up at Karen. “Brought someone with me. This is Karen.” He held out a hand to her.

She took it.

“Hi.” She kneeled down as well, running a hand over Maria’s headstone. “Is it strange I feel like I’m meeting an old friend?” She turned to look at Frank.

“No.” He shook his head.

“I brought, uh—” Karen broke off, letting go of Frank’s hand to dig in her purse. She pulled out a
little toy race car, and a plastic dinosaur figure. “Brought something for the kids. Remembered how you said Frankie liked cars.” She placed the car on top of his tombstone. “And Lisa liked dinosaurs.” The little T-Rex found its home as well. “Hope that’s okay.”

Frank stared at her—hard—for a long time, his chest expanding with a feeling of awe so deep he couldn’t breathe for a moment. This woman—with her endless compassion and quiet thoughtfulness; with a gentleness of spirit he couldn’t begin to comprehend—she was wrecking him. Completely.

“It’s—” his voice broke slightly, and he tried again. “It’s perfect. Thank you.” Karen smiled, her eyes watery, and nodded.

“Your dad said the T-rex was your favorite,” she spoke to Lisa. “Mine too. My brother preferred the triceratops, but she’s a little too flashy for me.”

It took all the effort in his body to keep from breaking down at that moment—there was so much tumbling about in his chest at once. Grief, sorrow, regret, love, connection. All of it a little overwhelming—like experiencing the entire gamut of human emotion in one go.

But he reached out to grab Karen’s hand once again, and the world grew just a little more quiet. A little more manageable.

They sat there for two hours, talking to the graves. And Frank shared stories about his family—mostly the happy ones that Karen had heard before. But also some of the sad ones; memories of what it had been like in the months following the accident, how he’d tried to swallow all of the pain by himself until it had threatened to consume him.

It was cathartic, being able to talk to someone at their graves. Having a real, living ear to bend as he processed some of the hurt. At the end of their visit, Frank felt lighter than he had in a long time. Like just that much more of his burden was gone—or not gone, but shared.

The drive home was silent—not an uncomfortable silence, but rather a thoughtful one. The kind of quiet that descends on two people who are entirely inside their own minds. There was a lot to think about.

Frank was calmer than he’d ever felt upon leaving the cemetery—grounded. Like the visit had brought him closer to his family, rather than reminded him how far away they were. There was a sense of absolution in every breath he took; a feeling like poison being drawn from his veins. And as he thought about Maria and Lisa and Frankie, he felt none of the bitterness and agony of grief—only the impressions of love left behind.

Karen let Frank revel in the feeling, leaning her head back against the headrest of the passenger seat, her eyes closed, listening to his steady breathing. And she remembered the first time she’d ever climbed up into his truck, the day she got caught on the mountain in the snow storm. How she’d not known a single thing about her mountain man, only that she trusted him—beyond all logic and reason.

She’d never been one to believe that the universe cared a whit for humanity—but rather believed that it was entirely indifferent to the wants and needs of man. Fate was an imaginary set of rules created to impose a sense of order on an orderless world. But thinking about how far she had come with Frank—how beautifully their lives had twined together from that first moment of meeting, she began to feel a little more sympathetic to the idea of Fate. That maybe, one some level, there was a purpose
—that there was something out there with a plan.

Because how else could she explain the fact that Frank had shown up in her life at the exact moment she needed him, without even knowing there was a need? How else could she explain the fucking miracles they’d worked in each other’s lives—the extent to which they had both been changed by finding each other. Two hands reaching out across an impossible sea of hurt and fear and loneliness, grasping for each other with clawing nails, finding a life raft in the body of someone else.

As they pulled into Frank’s driveway, he circled around to help Karen step down from the truck. She had a pensive look on her face, staring down at her feet. Frank watched as she tilted her head to the side and made a thoughtful little noise.

He stilled, gently closing the passenger side door. “What are you thinking about?”

“I just—” Karen’s brow furrowed in thought. “I was just thinking about that conversation we had about grief all those months ago. Do you remember that? When you helped me cut the wood for the fireplace?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“And remember how I’d said that grief was self-centered—that it was an inward-looking attempt at healing that focused on the self?”

“Yeah.”

“I still think that. But it might have been a little simplistic.” Karen looked up at him with those blue eyes, shaded by a touch of sorrow. “I have a new theory about grief, Frank. Want to hear it?”

He made a grunting noise that Karen knew meant “yes.”

“It’s from this book I was reading earlier—Kate Brasetrup. She says that ‘grief is just love squaring up to its oldest enemy. And after all these mortal human years, love is up to the challenge.’” Karen quoted, her eyes anchored to Frank’s. “And I agree with her.”

And that feeling from earlier—the mixture of love and compassion and tenderness—that had filled him as he watched her place the toys on his children’s graves—consumed him whole. He was drowning in it; head absolutely and helplessly under water.

And before he could stop it, the words were out of his mouth.

“I fucking love you, Karen.”

Her eyes went impossibly wide, and Frank could hear his own pulse spiking in his neck.

He hadn’t meant to say it—not at all. It was true, yes, but he still hadn’t meant to say it.

Not like this—not when everything was still so damn confusing, and his mind was half-focused on grief. This wasn’t how it was meant to come out.

And suddenly he was panicking—blood gone cold, vision growing dim, heart racing impossibly fast. He opened his mouth to speak, but before he could get a word out, Karen’s body slammed into his own, and her arms were around him, anchoring him to her.

“I love you too, Frank.” She was mumbling into the breast of his coat, her voice heavy with tears. “I fucking love you too.”
The world went still—perfectly still—and Frank felt as though he was moving in slow motion. It took his brain a few moments to catch up to his ears, but when it did, it was like all of his synapses firing off at once. Like a thousand tiny explosions lighting off in the base of his skull.

*She loved him.*

She was in his arms, holding him to her like a life-line, and she *loved him.*

“Jesus Christ.” Frank sounded absolutely ragged, as he finally brought his own arms up to engulf her in an embrace. He buried his face into her neck, taking several deep, calming breaths.

“I love you so much.” She kept repeating it, face smashed against him, her voice muffled. Frank pulled back, placing his arms on Karen’s shoulders to hold her away from him, so that he could get a good look. There were tears streaming down her face, but a beaming smile on her lips.

“Fuck, Karen.” He lowered his head until they were brow to brow. The small sounds of her sniffles, and their breathing intertwined, were the only noises filling the quiet afternoon calm. “Fuck. Are you—are you sure? Because don’t you say that to me if you don’t mean it.” There was a touch of insecurity in his voice, and Karen couldn’t stand to hear it.

“Oh course I mean it. More than I’ve ever meant it in my life. I didn’t—I didn’t want to say it, because I wasn’t sure how you felt, but I—”

Frank cut her off before she could get another word out, shifting back so that he could look her in the eye.

“You weren’t sure how I felt? Jesus Christ, Karen. How could you not be sure how I felt about you?” His voice was frustrated, but undercut by something with the flavor of euphoria.

“I don’t—I didn’t know if you were ready for, y’know, to be in love with me.” Karen stuttered, holding up defensive hands. “You never said——”

“Karen, what did you think I meant that first night we spent together? When I told you this was *it* for me?”

“I thought that—I thought you meant that if we went any further, there was no going back to being friends!” Karen ran a shaking hand through her hair.

“No, Karen. No.” Frank was incredulous. “I meant…more than that.”

“Well I didn’t know that! You’re not a great communicator, Frank!” She sounded exasperated, but she was smiling.

“You—” he pointed to her, eyes wide. “You’ve been walking around for the past few weeks like you don’t even care that you’re leaving here in a few months. I thought you didn’t give a fuck. *You’re* a shitty communicator.”

“I’ve—Frank—” Karen grabbed the lapels of his coat for emphasis. “Frank, I’ve been losing my goddamn mind over the idea of me leaving. I’ve been a fucking mess. I didn’t know how you felt, or if you even wanted me to stay, so I—”

“Oh course I want you to stay.” Frank’s voice was heavy with emotion. “I want you—I want you forever, okay? I don’t—I don’t know how to be without you now, I—”

They were both trying to talk over one another—all the things they’d left unsaid over the past few
weeks bubbling to the surface in an uncontrollable surge. Like once they’d started talking, they couldn’t stop.

“God damnit, Kare.” Frank growled, before grabbing her head and lowering his lips to hers in a consuming kiss. The kind that stole her breath away and made her knees weak. Everything she had—everything she was—was in that kiss. Every stored up emotion she’d been torturing herself with for the past few weeks came out in the slide of her tongue against his. And Frank swallowed her like he couldn’t get enough.

When they pulled apart, then were both breathing heavily, a little lost for words.

It was quiet—still—then Frank spoke.

“What are we going to do? When you leave?” He tried not to let the question sound as panicky as it was. “How are we going to—” He broke off.

“Well…” Karen bit her lip, and Frank’s eyes zeroed in on the movement.

“Well what?”

“Just that…” Karen trailed off. In the days between her book club meeting and now, she’d been thinking a lot about that cabin. And the possibility of it being hers—really hers. And the only thing really holding her back from putting in a bid was Frank; not knowing how he felt about her. And now that she knew, that changed things. “The Brynners are selling the cabin at the end of my lease, and I was kind of thinking…”

She didn’t even get to finish before Frank’s eyes were lighting up in something hopeful.

“You’re thinking about buying it?” His voice had just a touch of breathlessness.

“Yeah, I’m thinking about buying it. Keep my place in New York for business trips and stuff, but… yeah. I’d like to have a place here.”

“You’re fucking serious?”

“Dead serious.”

“When were you going to tell me about this plan? Jesus—I’ve been out of my mind for days over you leaving.” Again, the frustration was mixed in with joy.

“Well, like I said, I wasn’t sure if you’d want me here.” Karen shrugged. “I was waiting for a sign from you, I guess.”

“God damn it.” Frank chuckled. “God damn it.”

And she was in his arms again, their lips pressed together in fervent need. Her hands buried in his hair, fingernails scraping down his scalp. Frank held her with a newfound appreciation for the feeling of her, warm and alive against him—he got to keep her. Insomuch as anyone could keep a woman like Karen.

When they pulled away from each other, it was because Karen was laughing too hard for them the continue kissing.

“What?” Frank couldn’t help the smile that slipped onto his face. “What’s so funny?”

“I don’t know,” Karen shook her head, almost doubled over, shoulders shaking. “I’m just such an
idiot, I guess. Jesus.”

Frank rubbed Karen’s back until she straightened, then he took her face in his hands, his palms warm against her cheeks.

“I think we were both idiots, sweetheart.”

“Yeah, I guess we were.”

They stared at each other for a good, long while. The way you look at something precious, with everything you have, trying to make sense of its beautiful existence.

Then Karen was fumbling in her pocket, pulling out her cellphone. Frank tilted his head in confusion as she started punching in numbers. Strange time to make a phone call.

She held her finger up to him as she brought the phone to her ear. A moment of silence.

“Hi, Mr. Brynner? This is Karen Page. I’d like to make a bid on the cabin.”

And in her voice, Frank heard his future. All of it, coming home to rest at last.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

So this epilogue is really like a series of snapshots from the future, all lined up in a row.

Sincerely sorry for any typos—I didn’t get to edit this one as thoroughly as I’d like to, because I’m visiting family and am constantly being interrupted while trying to write, lol.

Leave me some feedback! I live for it!

April 2018 –

“You sure you got that, sweetheart? Looks heavy.” Frank’s voice was a touch skeptical—and a touch concerned—as he held open the door of the cabin with his foot. His arms were piled high with shoeboxes, each overflowing with an assortment of Karen’s eclectic knick-knacks.

“Yep, yep. Got it.” Karen panted, squeezing past him as the large crate in her hands began to slip, ever-so-slightly. She brought her thigh up quickly to catch it, pausing for a moment, before hobbling further into the entryway. Frank shook his head.

“Told you to leave the heavy stuff to me,” he grumbled, letting the door close as Karen dropped her box to the floor in a huff. “What’s in there anyway?”

“Books,” she grinned over her shoulder at him, rubbing sweaty palms down her jeans.

“More books?”

“Babe.” She raised a wry brow. “There are at least six more boxes of books out there. There are always more books.”

Frank chuckled, setting his own armful on the floor to join the rapidly-increasing stockpile that was beginning to block almost the entire hallway. Straightening with his hands on his hips, he glanced around the cabin—formerly the Brynner’s, now Karen’s. It was strange, seeing the place completely empty—all of the plaid drapery and overstuffed furniture and watercolors of ducks long gone. Bare floors; naked walls; echoing hallways. Just waiting for Karen’s belongings to fill them up—belongings that were currently sitting in a shipping container parked in the driveway, freshly delivered from Brooklyn, care of Trish Walker.

“Did you leave anything at your place in New York?” Frank asked, scratching the back of his neck as he eyed the massive stack of boxes that was beginning to reach chest-height.

“Hey—these are just the necessities, Castle.” She gestured at her things. “If I’m going to be using this place as my writing sanctuary, I’ll need all the comforts of home.”

“Including an…” he waved a hand at the framed painting propped up in the hallway, “oil portrait of a cat dressed as Freud?”

“Yes!” Karen nodded adamantly. “I’ve had that painting since my freshman year of college. It was a gift from my Aunt Ellen—the loopy one with the six cats. I need it.”
“Whatever you say.” Frank’s grin was filled with amusement, his eyes glittering. He’d never imagined that helping someone move could be so enjoyable. But when it was Karen, and she was moving in right next door…well that was just damn fine. He’d lift boxes all day long for that.

“Just keep in mind that the furniture is coming tomorrow, so this isn’t even all of it.” Karen stepped forward, and Frank opened up his arms to accept her into his embrace. “You gotta save your strength for all the really big stuff.”

“Oh joy.” He leaned down to press a kiss to her forehead.

“Remember—you love me, Castle.” Karen’s voice was playfully-stern, as she twisted her hands into the front of his shirt, pulling him down toward her. “You said it and now you can’t take it back.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” he whispered, before lowering his lips to hers in a warm, soft kiss. And like she always did, Karen felt herself sinking into him, losing her head to that sweet, gentle place where everything was Frank. His fingers slipped under the hem of her shirt, grasping along the small of her back and pulling her closer. Karen had just reached up to tunnel her fingers into his hair when the sound of a delicate throat clearing broke her concentration. She pulled back to see an amused Trish standing in the doorway, lips pursed and hands on her hips.

“Don’t you two start that again. You’re going to make me regret offering to come up and help you unpack.”

Frank and Karen unwound from each other, and he took a step back to put some respectable distance between them (but his hands lingered on her hips just a touch too long for respectable).

“Sorry, sorry. Won’t happen again.” Karen, to her credit, looked sheepish as she shoved her hands in her pockets.

“Uh huh. Sure. This is the third time I’ve walked in on you two playing tonsil hockey, and I’ve only been here for 4 hours.”


“No, but you two are, apparently. With your hormones and your making out everywhere.”

“Sorry,” Frank shrugged, looking not at all sorry. He brushed past Trish on his way out to grab more boxes, throwing a wink at Karen over his shoulder.

Trish waited until he was out of ear shot before turning to Karen, grinning.

“Have I said yet how much of a catch that man is? Seriously.”

Karen shook her head with a smile, beginning to open up boxes and remove all her tchotchkes wrapped in tissue paper. “You don’t have to tell me.”

“But I will anyway. I mean, a man that good-looking who is absolutely obsessed with you? I would move to Mars for something like that.” Trish’s voice was dreamy. “And that ass?” She fanned herself with a hand. “Like a ripe peach.”

Karen snorted in laughter, and Trish joined in.

“I even wanna know what’s so amusing to you two?” Frank asked, coming through the front door with another box of books.
“Just talking about produce, Frank.” Trish wiggled her eyebrows (not at all subtly) at Karen, who snickered. “Do you happen to know when peaches are in season around here?”

“Nuh-uh.” Frank looked between the two women, shaking his head. “Nope. Not gonna ask.”

“Probably for the best.” Karen stepped forward to take the box from his arms, kissing him on the cheek.

As he turned to walk out the door again, Trish leaned forward to stare at his ass until Karen swatted her on the arm.

They spent the entire afternoon, and much of the evening, unpacking. Filling the living room shelves with Karen’s extensive (some might say too-extensive) collection of books and knick-knacks, and hanging her assortment of posters and paintings. Trish, who’d taken an online interior design class at the Learning Annex, kept trying to convince Karen to paint the walls something bright—teal or Kelly green—spouting off HGTV buzzwords she’d picked up from *House Hunters*. Frank, meanwhile, kept taking Karen’s Freudian cat painting off of the wall and hiding it, while Karen kept finding and re-mounting it, moving it to places of greater prominence each time. It was dark by the time they took a break, settling on the living room floor, picnic-style, to eat leftovers Frank had grabbed from his fridge (roast chicken, mashed potatoes, and stuffed bell peppers).

The dinner conversation was easy—effortless. Trish and Frank were fast friends, just as Karen knew they would be. They’d heard so much about each other prior to meeting that they felt a bit like old friends rather than brand new acquaintances. As they ate, they talked about books—Trish’s interest in magical realism and Frank’s recent obsession with Zadie Smith.

There was a feeling of fullness—spiritual fullness—that made its home in the pit of Karen’s stomach as she watched two of the most important people in her life getting along so well. The warm glow of the fireplace; the sound of Frank’s deep, dark voice twining with Trish’s laughter; the knowledge that this was her future, stretching before her in the sweet, boundless distance—it was a moment that felt like home. Frank, seeing the dreamy, faraway smile on Karen’s face, felt his heart stutter in his chest. He slid his hand across the floor to cover her own, giving it a gentle squeeze.

And that touch was everything. He was everything.

More moving trucks arrived the next morning, promptly at 7AM, carrying all of Karen’s spare furniture; everything but the few pieces she’d left behind in New York. It was another full day of unpacking, and Karen pulled out her record player to blast Marvin Gaye as they all worked together to set up the cabin just as she wanted it. (Frank had refused to be Karen’s duet partner during “Ain’t No Mountain High Enough,” so Trish took on the task, with great flair).

There was still a lot to do—unpacking the kitchen; setting up Karen’s office; putting together her brand new bedframe—but they stopped at 8 o’clock that night to pile into Frank’s truck and head into town. To *Alias*, to be specific, for the “Welcome (Officially) to Seward” party that Sarah had been planning for weeks. It was originally intended to be a surprise party, but David had let it slip a few days ago, when Frank and Karen had stopped by for dinner, so now it was just a regular party.

It was fun, driving into town with Trish and pointing out all the sights. Karen felt strangely proud, showing off her favorite places like a certified tour guide—the coffee shop that made the best latte she’d ever had in her life; the diner that had been serving the same menu for 50 years, cooked by the
same old man in a hairnet; David and Curtis’s book store, with its human-sized cutout of Kurt Vonnegut in the window; the giant anchor statue in the middle of town that the seniors at Seward High covered in gift wrapping paper every year on senior skip day.

Trish was charmed by Seward—could see why Karen had fallen so in love with it. It was the kind of place that just felt familiar, even though she’d never set foot there before. Comfortable; homey.

But she was even more charmed by Karen’s new friends, who flocked to her the second she set foot inside of Alias, the gritty bar that Karen insisted was one of Seward’s hidden treasures.

“So lovely to meet you. I’ve heard so much about you from Karen.” Sarah was the first to snatch Trish up for introductions as soon as she passed the threshold, shoving a drink into her hand like the consummate hostess she was. “We’re so lucky we’ve managed to steal her from you, and I’m afraid we don’t plan on giving her back.”

Trish chuckled, accepting the drink—a glass of red wine. She wasn’t able to get a single word out before another body was crowding her from the opposite side.

“David Lieberman,” he held out his hand for her to shake. “Big fan of what you do—any word on when Jackson Mier’s next book is coming out? I heard you work with him as well.”

Sarah reached out and smacked her husband, frowning. “That is no way to greet a guest, David. Save the book talk until she’s had a seat at least.”

“Me?” David scoffed. “You’re the one who practically jumped on her the second she walked through the door!”

“To give her something to drink—to be hospitable!”

“Oh, that’s such a lame excuse. You’re just trying to sink your claws into her before anyone else can.”

“David!”

From the bar, Karen threw her head back and laughed, watching Trish’s eyes snap back and forth between the Liebermans, looking a little overwhelmed.

“You gonna save your friend from Tweedle-Dee and Tweedle-Dum over there?”

Karen turned to see Jess watching her from behind the bar, eyebrows raised.

“Oh, I think she can handle herself.”

“We’ll see. Before the night’s through, I bet Sarah’s somehow going to convince her to join to Seward PTA.” Jess rolled her eyes before turning to open a new bottle of Johnny Walker (she’d need it to get through the party).

“Well well well, if it isn’t the lady of the hour. Our very own Karen Page.” Foggy Nelson suddenly appeared at Karen’s elbow, his tie already having migrated from around his neck to be worn around his head.

“Hey there!” She pulled him into a big hug, grinning. “How’s the only male member of the Ladies of Seward Book Club doing?”

“Now listen here, good madam,” he straightened in mock noblesse, throwing his shoulders back in a
pompous gesture. “I know you’re trying to get a rise out of me every time you say that, but I am a proud lady of Seward, thank you very much, and I always will be!”

“Don’t I know it.” Karen shook her head, taking the beer that Jess offered from behind the bar. She nearly choked on her first sip as Foggy flipped the fat end of his tie over his shoulder as though it were his hair.

He had joined the fold about three weeks after the creation of the book club; he’d been wanting to take part in a book club for years, but was too intimidated to ever approach David and Curtis about theirs. Intimidated by Frank, that is. (Now that he knew the man, though, he realized there wasn’t much to be intimidated by; but it was still easier to join the ladies than try to force his way into the thing that David and Curtis and Frank had together—that impenetrable friendship).

“You know, I still think we should try to tackle House of Leaves sometime this year. It’s a good book!” Foggy slapped an adamant hand on the bar.

“Ugh, no!” Karen rolled her eyes. “You keep suggesting that and we will kick you out. That book’s only value is making whoever is holding it look pretentious.”

“Oh that’s rich, coming from the woman who looooves Infinite Jest.”

“Tread lightly, my friend. We’re talking about David Foster Wallace here.”

Foggy’s next sentence was cut off abruptly as Marci Stahl, his fiancé, collided roughly into his side, holding a pool cue and a beer. “Hey guys! I snagged us a table. Wanna play?” She held up her cue.

“I don’t know…” Foggy put his arm around Marci. “You up for it, Page?” He inclined his head toward her. “Maybe grab that lumbering hulk you call a boyfriend and let’s make it a team thing, huh?”

“Only if you’re ready to get your ass kicked.” Karen raised a challenging brow, gesturing at Frank from across the room to join her. (He immediately extricated himself from his conversation with Curtis the second she looked his way; Curtis would have been offended at how easily his friend dropped him for Karen, but he was used to it. Frank just couldn’t help it—not when it came to her.)

“It is you who will get your ass kicked, my good friend.” Foggy playfully jabbed Karen in the shoulder.

“That so?” Frank’s deep, rumbling voice, sounding suddenly in Foggy’s ear, had him jumping in surprise. Marci reached out to steady him, giggling.

“Jesus, man. For someone so huge, you’re quiet as a damn ninja!”

“I know, right?” Karen threw up her hands. “He does that to me all the time!”

Frank shrugged, slinging his arm around Karen’s shoulders.

“You need to put a bell on him. Like a cat,” Foggy grumbled.

“Hmmmm,” Karen pulled back from Frank with an appraising look, as though trying to picture it in her mind. “Not a bad idea.”

“Don’t even think about it.” He rolled his eyes before turning to look at Marci, who was still holding her cue. “We playing pool?”
“That’s the idea. If you think you can handle it.” Foggy crossed his arms in a gesture of overconfidence.

“Oh, I think I’ll manage.” Frank downed what we left of the beer in his hand before pulling Karen toward the pool table.

After their game (which they won, thanks to either Karen’s skill. Foggy’s incompetence, or more likely some mixture of the two), Frank switched places with Trish, and the two women took on the team of Sarah and Marci. There was heckling, there was ample beer, and there was even a little bit of singing (mostly on Trish and Karen’s part) when Third Eye Blind started blaring over the speakers.

Frank, David, and Curtis found themselves huddled in a corner, playing darts. Frank was a killer—bullseye after bullseye, even when he was four beers into the wind. David, on the other hand, almost impaled Curtis after his second Bud Lite.

Foggy, meanwhile, had somehow convinced Jess to engage in a game of shells (which she was surprisingly good at). He was doing his best shyster impression, riling her up every time he began anew.

Alcohol was flowing, music was pounding, and everyone seemed to be having a blast. Sarah stopped the festivities at one point to get a round of toasts going, in which everyone present gave an embarrassing speech about how much they loved Karen, and were thankful to see her become an official member of the Seward community. She’d barely—barely—resisted the urge to hide her face in Frank’s shoulder during that portion of the evening, not a huge fan of the attention. Then, of course, she’d been cajoled into giving a speech of her own, which she was too tipsy to even attempt to make coherent. Jess had brought out bottles of champagne for the occasion, to great applause.

By hour three of the party, things were in full swing. Everyone seemed to have reached the most delightful point of inebriation, where everything is a riot and inhibitions go out the window.

David was dancing Sarah around the bar, weaving in and out between tables in a waltz, despite the sound of Guns ’n Roses playing overhead. Jess and Trish were deep in conversation—about what, Karen couldn’t even begin to guess—stacking up glasses into a pyramid on the bar. (Just as Karen had suspected, the two women were surprisingly fast friends). Curtis and Foggy were, as far as Karen could tell, trying to recount the entire plot of *Die Hard 2* to a confused, but amused, Marci.

And Karen was just watching it all, her heart full, as she leaned against a table in the back corner, where things were a little quieter.

“Happy?”

She looked up as Frank approached, his eyes heavy with gentleness. He took his spot next to her, standing with his side pressed to hers. He was warm, as he always was, and it sparked that feeling of perfect contentedness in her chest.

“Deliriously happy.” She turned her head slightly, dipping her chin to lay a kiss on his shoulder, then nuzzle her nose against it.

“Good.” Frank nudged her with his elbow. “Good.”

They stood in silence, watching their friends laugh and talk and make fools of themselves.

“You know something, Frank?” Karen paused, waiting until he turned to look down at her.
“What’s that, Karen?”

“I heard you laughing earlier, with David, and I realized something.”

“What did you realize?”

“I think I’ve memorized your laugh.” Karen’s smile was soft, and it had Frank melting just a little. “I think I could conduct an entire orchestra with that laugh if I tried.”

Frank didn’t speak for a moment—didn’t know how. It was the loveliest thing anyone had ever said to him, and sometimes he still found himself frozen in the face of such perfect sweetness.

“And that’s a beautiful feeling, Frank. Real beautiful.” Karen nodded to herself.

“Yeah, it is.”

July 2018 –

Karen was warm—warm and comfortable—in the middle of the kind of vague, delightful dream that leaves one feeling contented upon waking, but without quite knowing why.

When suddenly her phone rang. Loud and piercing, like a shriek cutting through the quiet darkness of the bedroom.

“Wha?” Karen tried to sit up, but fell back against the mattress, Frank’s limp arm thrown over her rib cage, trapping her. The phone continued to ring, and Karen gently nudged Frank until he rolled over onto his stomach, grumbling quietly to himself all the while.

She tripped getting out of bed, legs tangled in the sheets, and groaned as she fell into a lump on the floor. Frank made a soft, sleepy noise, but remained unconscious.

“Fuck.” She stood up slowly, groggily, and reached for the phone on her bedside table. “Hello?” She whispered, slipping out of the bedroom and closing the door behind her, leaving Frank to sleep (he’d pulled an extra-long shift at the lumber mill the day before, and was dead tired).

“Karen, did I wake you up?” Trish’s voice was practically buzzing in excitement over the phone.

“Uh, well… it is 5AM, Trish.” Karen wandered into the living room, turning on a lamp before plopping onto the couch with a yawn.

“Sorry, but I knew you’d want to hear this. The pre-publication review from The New York Times…it’s up.”

Karen was immediately alert, more awake that she’d thought possible before noon on a Saturday.

“What?”

“Yeah. Grab your laptop. The review—it’s on the website.”

Karen was scrambling for her computer before Trish had even finished her sentence.

“Is it good?”

“Just read it, Kare. I can’t—” Trish broke off with a laugh, which Karen took as a good sign. “I can’t
tell you. You just have to read it for yourself.”

“Hold on, give me a moment.”

As soon as her computer booted to life, she was typing in her own name, followed by the title of her book—*Frozen Places*. The NYT review was the first link to pop up. She steeled herself, heart racing, and clicked.

Her eyes flew across the page too quickly for her mind to keep up, and it was snippets, not full sentences, that snagged her attention:

*a quiet, gentle probing at the effects of unprocessed grief... an eerie but tenderly detailed examination of the cold, empty Alaskan landscape that, like all landscapes, is part reality and part remembrance... Page asks us to understand that grief is a landscape as well—a map transposed on our more vulnerable, interior parts. Altered by time and the hands of man, but ultimately a part of nature itself, outlasting and outliving those it haunts.*

“Trish...” Karen’s voice came out as a whisper. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but this is good. This is really good.”

“Really, *really* good.” Trish sounded giddy. “Want to know my favorite part?” There was a moment of silence, while she searched for the line. When she found it, she cleared her throat and read, “Page plays with the thriller genre in exciting ways... her aims are sweeter, softer, more delicate than one would expect from a typical tale of dread, illuminating the most human parts of the hurts that haunt us. *Frozen Places* is a love letter to the internal struggle of overcoming grief. Here is an author who understands that there are things writing can approach, tangentially, but must not reveal. That we, as readers, must pass over in silence. She risks those silences; it is our job to listen.”

“Oh man,” Karen ran a hand through her hair. “This is... is this a rave review?”

“I’d certainly call it a rave review.” Trish let out a noise that sounded disconcertingly like a squeal. “I mean, I always knew it was a great novel. Like a *really* great novel, but this is... this is career-making, Karen.”

“I know. Jesus.” Karen scrolled back to the top of the article, re-reading it again, slower this time, sentence-by-sentence.

“Is Frank up? He’s going to want to read this. He had a part in it, too.”

“No, no. He’s still sleeping.” Karen shook her head, grinning to herself. “But he knows the review is coming out today—I’m sure it’s the first thing he’s going to ask about when he wakes up.”

“Well you two better celebrate tonight, you hear me?” Trish’s voice was adamant. “Career-making, Karen,” she repeated. “A masterpiece.”

After hanging up with Trish, Karen was far too buzzed on excitement to go back to sleep. So instead she wandered around the house for a little while, stopping and pinching herself every few moments just to make sure she was properly awake, and not dreaming.

After three dark years of writer’s block—after all of the self-doubt and insecurity and the fear that she would never write again—she had a hit on her hands. She had something to be genuinely proud of. It was almost too perfect; too unbelievable to be true. And the unreality of it all had her so hyped that she could hear her heart hammering in her chest.
To work off the excess energy, Karen brewed a pot of coffee, took Max out to do his business, and re-read the review...three times. By 8AM, she was out of things to occupy her, and almost gave into the desire to wake Frank up. But she didn’t—the poor man had been dead on his feet when he’d come home the night before, and he deserved his rest.

So she decided to take a shower, hoping the warm water would kill some of her buzz, even just a little bit. As she stepped under the hot spray and reached for her body scrub, she grinned at the shelf of products—95% hers, 5% Frank’s. (She was still in the process of trying to convince him that a 3-in-one shampoo, conditioner, and body wash was absolutely ridiculous, but he refused to listen).

When she’d first moved to Seward, officially, most of her stuff had stayed in the Brynner cabin; she had still been trying to keep up the pretense of having her own place. Partially because she didn’t want to be the crazy woman who moved in with her boyfriend after two months, and partially because she liked the idea of actually owning her own house—just for herself. Slowly, though, over the course of three months, more and more of her belongings had begun to migrate to Frank’s place: her toothbrush, her Tempur-pedic pillow, her lotion, her clothes.

Until one day, Frank had sat her down at the breakfast room table and said “sweetheart, why don’t you just move all your stuff here, huh?” And she did—most of it, at least. She still kept the old Brynner cabin furnished, using it during the day, while Frank was at work, as her little writing sanctuary. A place to go when she needed to focus and buckle down (she’d begun writing a collection of short stories after finishing *Frozen Places*, which was coming along quite nicely). But it wasn’t her home; that much was clear. Frank’s place was her home; their place was her home.

Shortly after finally admitting to herself that she was living with Frank, she’d decided against renewing her lease in New York. She’d thought keeping her old place around for business trips would be a smart idea, but she’d not spent a single moment on the East Coast since making the move to Seward. So mostly it was a waste of money.

It had felt freeing, actually, to let go of her old Brooklyn loft. Like the last thing tying her to her life before Frank was finally turned loose. She didn’t need it anymore; everything she wanted was right here, in Seward.

As she rinsed the scrub from her body, she smiled at that thought. For the first time in her life, she felt completely settled, and she loved it.

She was reaching for the shampoo when the shower door opened, and Frank stepped in behind her. She glanced at him over her shoulder, a little surprised. She’d assumed he would stay in bed until the afternoon, at least. He looked sleepy—groggy—but beginning to perk up as the hot water hit him.

“Morning.” He mumbled, sliding his arms around her, pulling her closer until her back was pressed up against his chest. He bent his head to nuzzle at her neck briefly, kissing her shoulder.

“Morning,” she replied, turning to brush her lips along his temple. “Didn’t expect you up so early.”

“Couldn’t sleep anymore without you there.” Frank squeezed her for a moment, before releasing her to run his hands through wet hair, letting the water wake him up.

Karen shifted forward, allowing Frank to step further into the spray. She grabbed her shampoo, pouring some into her hands and working it through her hair.

Frank reached up to swat her hands away, taking over the task himself, and Karen almost moaned at the sensation of his fingers massaging her scalp. He had a thing about washing her hair—he absolutely loved it, for some reason. Not that she was complaining.
“Read your review. Soon as I woke up.” He tilted her head back gently, rubbing in small circles. Her eyes drifted shut in complete relaxation.

“You did? And?” Her voice took on a little hitch of expectation. Frank grinned.

“You deserved every word of it, Kare.” He ran his fingers through her hair, gently working through tangles as he went. “The book’s fucking brilliant.”

“All thanks to you.” Karen sighed, as Frank continued to work magic with his hands.

“Nope,” he gave a soft little tug to her hair for emphasis. “All you. I didn’t do anything at all.”

“Not true.” Karen frowned, as Frank walked her backwards under the showerhead, giving her a good rinse. “Without you there would be no book. You gave me the inspiration to write again.” Her voice was slightly garbled by the water running down her face.

“Refuse to take any credit, Kare.” Frank shook his head, watching as Karen wheeled around to face him, tugging her hands through clean hair.

“Well, I refuse to not give you credit.” She countered, raising a challenging brow. And she looked adorable, standing there wet, naked, and defiant.

“You want to fight me this early in the morning, Karen? Really?” He raised a brow back at her, biting back a smile.

“No,” she shook her head, grinning a mischievous little grin. “I don’t want to fight you.” She took a step toward him, until she was brushing against his front. “I want to kiss you.”

“Oh,” Frank reached out to take her into his arms, her wet body slick against his own. “That’s much better.”

And his mouth was on hers, warm and wanting.

Hours later, as they crawled back into bed, damp and naked and sated, she lay her head on his chest and closed her eyes.

“You know it doesn’t matter whether or not you want the credit, right Castle? Because I’m going to sing your praises in the acknowledgements, and there’s nothing you can do to stop me.”

He laughed, kissing the top of her head and holding her close. Impossible woman.

September 2018 –

“That was just…I mean, it was beautiful. Just so beautiful.” Karen was tipsy—very, very tipsy. “Like a…uh. Like a beautiful flower. Or something.” She shook her head, blinking in confusion at her own words. Scratch that. She was more than tipsy—she was officially drunk.

Frank took his eyes off the road to shoot her a quick glance, and nearly laughed out loud. Her head was lolling on her shoulders almost comically, bumping against the passenger side window every once in a while. In her black cocktail dress, with her fancy hairdo tumbling down her shoulders and her red lipstick smeared, she looked like a debauched debutante.
“Yeah, it was.” He agreed, grinning. “Very beautiful.”

“I just, I love weddings, you know?” Drunk Karen apparently spoke with her hands, and she almost smacked herself in the face as she gestured adamantly. “It’s the, uh—the love and stuff? And the happiness. I love…happiness.”

“Mmhmm.” Frank nodded sagely. “I think most people love happiness, Kare.”

“But not…” she trailed off for a moment, as if forgetting what she was talking about. Suddenly remembering she was in the middle of a sentence: “…like I do.”

“Uh huh.”

They were on their way back from Foggy and Marci’s wedding— which had been an extravagant affair, the likes of which Seward had never seen before. Almost the entire town had shown up to support Foggy, who was likely the most well-loved member of the Seward community by far, meaning that the guest list ended up numbering in the hundreds. And with Marci’s expensive taste and flair for the dramatic, the nuptials had something of the flavor of a Gatsby party. They’d completely taken over the luxurious Seward Windsong Lodge, filling the space with long, golden, tapered candles, gardenia centerpieces, and frothy white table cloths; an eight piece outfit that specialized in Bandstand music, a champagne pyramid taller than Frank, twinkle lights strung from every rafter, and a cake in the shape of a massive heart.

The reception had struck a delicate balance between being a sophisticated affair and a pure rager. Alcohol everywhere and dancing until the bar closed down at two in the morning. And Karen had enjoyed herself—really enjoyed herself.

“Did I—I don’t remember,” Karen held up a hand, brow furrowed in confusion. “Did I cry when they said the vows? I feel like…well, I guess I always cry at weddings. Did I cry?”

“A little bit.” Frank glanced at her again, still grinning. He’d seen tipsy Karen—plenty of times. She mostly sang ABBA and liked to dance. But drunk Karen was something else—it was a little bit charming, how confused she seemed to be (and talkative).

“Good, good.” She bobbed her head. “It’s good to cry at weddings. It’s, uh—it means you have a, what’s the word? A soul. I think.”

“I’m sure it does.”

“It was beautiful, really. But y’know, Frank,” Karen reached out an unsteady hand, plopping it down on his thigh unceremoniously. “Y’know, when we get married it’s gonna…well, it’s not gonna be big, right? It’s—we’ll have it small. Just…” She made a gesture with her free hand, pinching her thumb and pointer finger together. “Just real small.”

Frank squeezed the steering wheel until his knuckles went white, just to keep from reacting in utter surprise. His heart took up a rapid beating in his chest. It was the first time she’d ever brought up marriage, and he was completely blindsided.

Sure, he’d been thinking about it for a while now—ever since that day nine months ago at the cemetery, if he was being completely honest. But he’d never brought it up in conversation before. He hadn’t exactly known how. He didn’t have practice with it; his proposal to Maria, after all, had been a panicked response to her getting pregnant. It’s not like they had sat down in advance and talked through the idea of marriage beforehand. He didn’t know the procedure—the rules about that kind of thing.
He took a deep, steadying breath.

“Uh, when we—” he darted his eyes to Karen, still facing forward. “When we get married?”

“Well yeah.” Karen nodded to herself. “We don’t have all those friends Foggy has, right? He’s a—uh—a real nice guy. So we are gonna have small small wedding, right?”

“You plan on marrying me, Karen?”

“Oh yeah,” Karen was nodding again. “Big time. You marrying me back?”

Frank paused, worried about the idea that Karen might not remember this entire conversation in the morning.

“I—yeah. Yeah, I plan on marrying you back.” As soon as he spoke the words out loud, he knew they were right. They had the ring of something good—honest.

“Good. Good.” Karen ran a hand down her face, yawning. “I’m just—I’m gonna go to bed now, okay? It’s—t’s just bed time now. Okay? Good night.” And with that, she was almost instantly asleep, mouth gaping, head leaning against the window.

Frank was frozen at the wheel for a moment, flabbergasted by the turn that conversation had taken. And he couldn’t decide if he hoped she’d remember it in the morning or not.

(She did. The moment she woke up with a headache the size of K2, it was the first thing that came flooding back to her. She’d downed three cups of coffee and two Tylenol before forcing Frank to sit on the couch with her and talk about it. And they did—for hours—deciding that of course they were going to get married someday. There were no other options—not when it felt the entire world hinged on the love they shared. It had been a happy conversation—one for the books).

November 2018–

“Alright, we’ll take a few more questions for Ms. Page, and then we’ll start the signing.” Trish stood behind the podium that had been placed in the dead center of Brooklyn’s Greenlight Books, staring out into the crowd. “How about you—in the purple shirt.” She pointed to the back of the store, which was packed with bodies, to someone Karen couldn’t see.

She shifted in her seat, leaning toward the microphone in preparation as a man at the back of the crowd stood up. No, not a man; he looked more like a boy. NYU t-shirt, Life is Good ball cap, jittery hands—kid probably wasn’t a day over 19. Karen smiled in encouragement as he shuffled back and forth on his feet.

It was her third book signing in of the day, and she was beginning to feel the exhaustion weighing on her. She was in desperate need of a coffee, and maybe a nice long nap. But in spite of the fact that her feet were aching in 4-inch heels and her caffeine levels were dropping dangerously low, she was happy. Happy to finally have her book published; happy to be on the circuit again meeting fans and signing autographs; and even happy to be back in New York, if only for a little while.

She and Frank had flown out of Seward two nights ago, and had spent the weekend exploring New York City, sight-seeing together before Karen’s time got eaten up by author obligations. They’d done the classics: visited the Statue of Liberty, taken a walk in Central Park, eaten at numerous pizzerias, and wandered around the MoMA for an entire afternoon. She’d even taken him to the hole-in-the-wall bar on West 79th where she’d played barback for a year while writing her first book.
They’d woken up in Trish’s guest bedroom at 7AM that morning to begin a full day of author appearances. Frank had accompanied her to her first book signing, standing at the back of the crowd and giving her a thumb’s up every time she looked over at him (such a dad move), but had run off to do his own thing as she and Trish made their way to the second book store. He had promised to meet up with them at Greenlight, but Karen had been keeping a keen eye on the door the entire time, and hadn’t seen him slip in yet.

But it wasn’t the time to think about Frank, Karen reminded herself. She needed to focus on the nervous-looking kid with the question.

“Hi, Miss Page. Big fan,” he started, and Karen smiled magnanimously. “I was just wondering—I read an interview you did a few years back in the LA Times where you talked about your brother, Kevin, and how his death had such a huge impact on you. With Frozen Places being so focused on grief, and the main character losing his brother, I was wondering if maybe your own tragedy was inspiration for the plot?”

“Uh, good question.” Karen slipped into her “thoughtful author” pose, with her hands folded neatly on the table in front of her. “I think maybe a little bit, yeah, I pulled from my own experience of grief. It was definitely on my mind the entire time I was writing—how could it not be? Writing is such an intensely-interior exercise, you can’t help but revisit all the worn-down paths in your mind, right? But I wouldn’t say that the book really came from the experience of losing my brother—nothing so personal as that.” Karen shook her head. “I think I was more inspired by the grief of others, and how it felt so similar to, but also so different from, my own. By seeing the myriad ways that experiencing trauma can turn people inward, twisting them upon themselves until they’re tied in knots. I think the book came out of my attempts to understand how different people process grief, which feels like this huge, universal feeling, but is so incredibly private.”

“So,” the boy spoke up again, “you spent a lot of time around others who were grieving while you wrote?”

“Yeah, I suppose I did. I think anyone who wants to write about the human experience with any real honesty has to first spend a lot of time around humans, y’know?” She shrugged, slipping her chin into the palm of her hand. “Spend a lot of time watching others—studying them—thinking intensely about what makes them tick. If all you know is your own experience, then your writing won’t be worth shit. That’s what a diary is—an exploration of the self, right? A novel should be more than that, I think.”

The boy nodded, as though Karen had said the most profound thing in the world (when in reality, most of the time during these Q&A sessions, she was talking on the fly).

“Well I just—,” the boy stopped, looking down at his feet, before raising his gaze again. “I just wanted to say thank you, I guess. I lost my father a year ago, and I really connected with your book. It, uh—it made me feel a little less alone. So thank you.”

Karen felt the telltale prickling of tears building up in her eyes, and blinked them away rapidly. It wasn’t the first time a fan had thanked her for her work—told her how her writing had helped them deal with their own personal traumas. But it was still damn affecting every time. It was the most magical thing about her profession—that it gave her the ability to touch, and to help heal, thousands of people whose names she’d never know.

“Thank you for saying that. I’m so glad that you were able to find a little bit of peace in my book. It means the world to me, really it does.” She tried to keep the waver from her voice, but didn’t quite succeed. The boy bobbed his head, a small smile on his face, and sat down again.
It was quiet for a moment—that special kind of quiet you can only find in a book store—then Trish spoke.

“Alright—let’s take one more question.” She looked out into the audience, pointing at a lady in a floral dress. Just as the woman stood up to speak, Karen caught Frank slipping in through the front door. He shot her a quick glance, grinning with his hands shoved deep in his pockets, and Karen felt her heart stutter the way it did every time he looked at her. God, but he was unbelievably handsome, with his hair tousled by the wind and the collar of his coat turned up, brushing along the underside of that devastating jaw. And he was hers. Jesus. She had to forcibly remove her gaze from him and pay attention to the woman speaking.

“Miss Page, I had a question about the character of Michael,” she said, clutching her copy of *Frozen Places* like a prize.

“Go ahead,” Karen spurred her on with a dip of the head.

“I love all the characters you write, I really do. But Michael felt so real to me—like someone I could reach out and touch, you know? And I was just wondering, where did the idea for his character come from?”

Karen bit back a smile as she let her eyes dart to Frank again. He was leaning against a book shelf and watching her in that private little way—like they were alone in the store, rather than surrounded by people.

“Well,” Karen inclined back in her chair, breathing deeply. “Some of you may know that I recently relocated to Alaska after being based right here in Brooklyn for so long.” There were a few murmurs of affirmation and nodding heads in the crowd. Her sabbatical had been the hottest gossip on all the Karen Page fan blogs for quite a while. “Well, I first went out there in this big, last-ditch effort to fight off a terrible case of writer’s block that I’d been struggling with for quite some time. You know—get out to nature to get the creative juices flowing.” Karen chuckled. “And while I was out there, I met the most incredible person.” Her eyes flicked to Frank again, quickly. “This complicated, mysterious, unbelievably intense guy, who kind of changed my life in all these subtle—and unsubtle—ways. Got me to write again; got me to think about these big questions of loneliness and heartbreak and healing. Michael was based, in large part, off of him. So I think that’s why Michael feels so real, to me at least—because he came out of my very real love for someone special to me.”

“So Michael is someone who actually exists?”

“No, not quite.” Karen shook her head. “He’s just…inspired by a real person. All of the best parts of Michael—the quiet thoughtfulness, the strength or spirit, the overwhelming capacity to feel pain and sorrow and love—that all came from a real person. But the rest of Michael is fiction. He’s someone who had been living in my head for a long time, waiting for a story of his own, I guess.”

Frank’s eyes were glued to Karen the entire time she spoke, his gaze filled with a profound sense of awe for the woman she was. The kind who could hold entire audiences captive in her thrall, who could talk about hurt and beauty and humanness with such empathy and passion, who could look at Frank with those wide, blue eyes and make him feel like a fucking ocean—deep and dark and moved by her tides.

As the Q&A section of the signing ended, and people began to line up for her autograph, Frank reached down into his coat pocket and ran his fingers over the small velvet box it held. That’s where he’d gone, during her second book signing—to a little jewelry store Curtis had helped him find online that made custom rings. Including the one he’d ordered a month ago for pick-up: white gold pounded out to look like twining leaves, cradling a central diamond with small rubies flanking either
side. Both Curtis and David had agreed that it was perfect, and had given him the go-ahead to put in
the order, knowing that he and Karen would be flying out to New York soon. And now it was in his
possession—solid and real and waiting, giving off an air of anticipation.

He closed his fist around the box as he watched Karen interacting with her fans, all graciousness and
kind smiles. And he knew that he wouldn’t be able to wait much longer—that he’d have to find
some way to propose to her before it drove him crazy.

February 2019–

“Oh man, Leo was amazing as Millie, wasn’t she? Who knew that girl had such a set of pipes on
her?” Karen held her hands in front of the heater, rubbing them together for warmth, as Frank jacked
up the temperature in his truck.

“I remember her wailing for her mama when she was baby—blew out my ear drums every time she
opened her mouth. Always knew she had some lungs.” Frank snorted, shaking his head.

It was 9 o’clock on a Friday night, and they were on their way home from Seward Middle School’s
winter production of *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, to which Leo had acquired reserved, front row
seating for her Uncle Frank and Karen. It was the fourth school production they’d attended in the
past year or so; they were becoming quite the theater-goers, thanks to Leo. Karen liked to joke that
she’d traded Broadway for Seward Middle’s theatre company—and it wasn’t a bad trade.

“I can’t believe how talented some of these little 8th graders are, I swear.” Karen gave up on the
heater, blowing on her fingers to warm them up. “I could never have gotten up in front of my whole
school when I was their age. I actually panicked walking across the stage at my eighth grade
graduation and tripped on my robes. Face planted in front of everyone. All the kids called me Klutzy
Karen for months afterwards.”

“Not a very creative nickname.”

“They were middle schoolers, not writers for the *Harvard Lampoon*.” Karen rolled her eyes. “It was
devastating at the time.”

“I’m sure it was.” Frank nodded. “Surprised you managed to recover from such a blow.”

“I still bear the emotional scars to this day.” Karen sighed dramatically.

As they turned onto the familiar mountain road (which Karen was *finally* beginning to see as a road,
rather than a not-road), the snow that had been lightly falling all evening began to pick up, coming
down in heavy droves.

Karen felt an overwhelming sense of déjà vu as she leaned forward, squinting in an attempt to see
through the windshield.

“How can you even tell if we’re still on the road in all this, Frank?”

“Intuition. And practice.”

“I can’t even see two feet in front of the truck. Jesus Christ.” Karen shook her head, collapsing back
into the passenger seat.

“Exactly why I do all the driving, sweetheart.”
Karen was about to scoff and make some comment about how her driving was perfectly adequate, when there was a sudden thudding noise from the engine—loud and abrupt; almost a clang. She turned to look at Frank, eyes wide, to see him staring through the windshield with a frown, brow furrowed.

“What was—,” she didn’t even get the question out before the truck gave a lurch, the chassis rumbling beneath them; then another clang.

Frank’s frown was beginning to turn grim; he eased off of the gas slowly, bringing the truck to a stop.

“I don’t know,” he answered Karen’s unfinished question.

“Sounded bad.” She worried her bottom lip between her teeth.

“Certainly didn’t sound good.” Frank unbuckled his seatbelt. “Let me get out and look at the engine.” He shifted the truck into ‘park,’ reaching beneath the steering wheel to pop the hood. “You stay here—it’s freezing out there.” Leaning over quickly, he gave Karen a reassuring peck on the cheek, then slid out into the snow.

She sat for a moment, eyes tracking him as he jogged his way to the front of the truck—a dark blob moving through the growing snowfall—until he disappeared behind the raised hood. Without the heater on, it began to grow very cold very quickly, and even rubbing her hands up and down her arms wasn’t enough to keep her warm.

Karen watched her breath turn to fog in the frigid air, wiggling back and forth in her seat to keep moving. She kept an eye out for Frank’s head, which would appear from over the hood every once in a while before bobbing back down again.

“Ah, fuck this.” She pulled her woolen hat low over her ears before opening her car door, bracing herself to step out into the snow. If Frank was out there freezing, she would be too.

He had his head bent so low over the engine that he didn’t even notice her leaning over him until she spoke.

“What’s it look like, doc?”

Her voice sounding suddenly in his ear had him jerking up quickly in surprise, wheeling on his heels to see her standing at his side, arms crossed, fingers tucked into her armpits for warmth. “Jesus Christ. Snuck up on me, Kare.”

“See? Now you know how it feels! Not good, huh?” She was grinning, in spite of the fact that her lips felt like they were freezing in the biting wind.

“Yeah, yeah.” Frank grumbled. “Didn’t want to sit in the car?”

“Not if you’re out here freezing your ass off. Can’t let you turn into an icicle alone, now can I?” She shoved her hands into the deep pockets of her coat, bouncing back and forth from one leg to the other, keeping her blood circulating.

Frank couldn’t help but stare at her for a moment—his Karen, with her doe eyes and her crooked grin and her halo of golden hair, falling out from where she’d tucked it into her hat. She was every beautiful impossibility he’d ever wanted for himself—all of the hopes that felt so far out of reach; the future he didn’t think he deserved—come to rest in one person.
And all at once, with the wind whipping little snow flurries around their faces and his hands covered in grease, Frank realized how fucking remarkable it was that Karen was standing in front of him at that moment. That a person like her not only existed—wonderous and flawed and complex in the ways only she could be—but that she was standing there. With him. Smiling like the air between them was the only air worth breathing.

And he remembered the first time he’d seen her—bent over her rented Chevy on the side of this very road—and how, for a wild moment, he had thought that she was a hallucination. How she’d appeared, perfect and lovely even when freezing in a snow storm, like a daydream.

God, how far they’d come together—how much they’d grown into each other! It was astounding; it was mind-blowing. She’d gone from a kind of mirage that he couldn’t touch, to the most solid thing in his life—the tether that tied him to the earth. The center that held him steady—held him together—in spite of everything that threatened to rip him apart.

Her name filled his mind like a benediction. 

Karen. Everything was Karen.

“Frank, are you okay?”

He jolted suddenly—he hadn’t realized he’d been staring at her, silently, for so long.

“Yeah, I—,” his heart was thudding heavily in his chest. There was a lightheaded feeling working its way into his brain—something akin to delirium. A beautiful sensation, electric, like the buzzing of a thousand fireflies flickering on and off in the base of his skull. Now, something in the back of his head whispered. Do it now.

The words had been on the tip of his tongue for so long—waiting impatiently to live out in the world—rattling behind his teeth like wild animals straining to be set loose. And then suddenly, before he could fully process what he was saying…they were free.

“Marry me, Karen.”

The words hung bright and heavy in the air between them.

In another lifetime, another version of Frank would have been nervous—would have been panicked at letting the words just slip out, unpremeditated. But this Frank—the one who was certain and confident of the love he shared with Karen—only felt a giddy sense of anticipation.

Karen’s eyes were impossibly-wide, and almost instantly began filling with tears.

“Frank, are you—”

“Hold on. Wait. Don’t say anything.” He held out his hands for a moment, before turning on his heels and jogging to the passenger side of the truck. Karen watched him, confused, as he yanked it open, then was digging the glove compartment.

There. His fingers wrapped around the velvet box, which he’d been storing in his truck to keep Karen (the snoop) from discovering. He opened it quickly, tilting it forward until the ring fell into the palm of his hand.

He approached Karen, slowly, holding up the ring, and watched her hands fly to her mouth. The tears were coming in streams now—cutting icy trails down her cheeks.
“I can’t—” Frank stopped, took a breath, started again. “I don’t have the words, Karen. I’m not great at those. But you—you have to know. What you mean to me. What you’ve done for me. You have to know.” She nodded, wiping at her cheeks. “I’m yours. All of me. Every—,” he broke off with a hitch of the breath. “Every confused, strangled, broken part of me. All of it.” His voice was heavy—ran deep with emotions he didn’t think had names. “Marry me.”

And Karen was in his arms in an instant, flying at him so quickly he had to act fast to keep the ring from dropping into the snow. Her arms were around him, her face buried in his chest, and she was speaking. It took him a moment to tune his ears to her frequency.

“Yes yes yes yes.” She was repeating—almost a chant—nodding her head up and down rapidly, her face rubbing against the breast of his coat. And all of the air left Frank’s body in one whoosh; he didn’t even care that it was freezing, and that they were standing on the side of the road with a broken down truck in a snow storm. All he cared about was Karen, telling him that she would marry him, over and over and over.

“Sweetheart.” The grin in his voice was obvious. He put his hands on her shoulders, pushing her gently until she took a step back, allowing him to look at her properly. Tear-stained and smiling, she was beautiful.

“Yes, Frank. Put the damn ring on my finger.” There was a kind of euphoria in her voice that felt a bit like sunshine.

“Yes ma’am.” He watched her slip her glove from her left hand, holding it out to him delicately. He took it in his own—warm and calloused—and slid the ring home. She stared at it for a moment, her face a picture of awe, and then she was kissing him. Hungrily, greedily, like a woman taking what was hers. Her hands were in his hair; his gripping her back, pulling her closer. It was a long while before they parted, and when they did, it was Karen who spoke first.

“Now fix the damn car so we can go home and celebrate properly.”

“Yes ma’am.”

**Real Books the Characters Discuss:**

*Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn

Jeffrey Eugenides (*The Virgin Suicides, Middlesex, The Marriage Plot*)

*Into the Water* by Paula Hawkins

*The Goldfinch* by Donna Tartt

*The Secret History* by Donna Tartt

*A Visit from the Goon Squad* by Jennifer Egan

*White Noise* by Don DeLillo (Frank mentions for a millisecond)

*Little Fires Everywhere* (the Christine Ng book)

*The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* by Stieg Larsson

*Mia Patria* by Ezra Pound
Karen’s style of writing is based off of Tana French (my favorite author, period). You should 100% check out her books if Karen’s writing sounded at all interesting to you!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!